

Reid Mitchell, Civil War Soldiers(1988)

1. Wars for Freedom

Makes pt. that some soldiers grandfathers fought in the American Revolution. Case of Major Paul Joseph Revere who was captured, exchanged, then died in 1863. Revere fought for the Union but his situation was reflected in the lives of Johnny Reb as well.

The evnts and very places of the AR reappeared in men's memories throughout the war years. The Rev. War had created the nation t also created American nationalism. The Rev. provided symbols to attach men to their war. The men who fought was the war for the Union--the nation the Revolutionary generation founded--believed they embodies the principles of 1776.

By the end of the war the South had created a mythology of sectional nationalism that was not present at the beginning. It had its heroes--Lee, Jackson, Stuart, etc. the stereotypical loyal slave, the superior Confederate soldier, the dashing calvalry, the high-spirited Yankee-hating southern belle. And of course all those defenders of southern freedom who did not return. By the end of the war the South had a history that bind it together, a history distinct from the North's to sustain a regional mythology of strength and longevity. And of course the "Lost Cause", the deated high idealism of the South's struggle for independence.

The legacy of the AR was ambiguous, upholding both Union and Rebellion. The sections were two regions seperated by a common culture, to paraphrase G. B. Shaw.,

The issues of 1861 were real issues: secession and Union, slavery and freedom. No issues were more fundamental to the Republic had been raised since the Revolution. Issues that convinced men to go to war to kill fellow Americans.

2. Enemies and Savages

Mutual regard for each other as savages when the war started. The folklore of this was pervasive on each side.

Northerners were all hellish abolitionists intent on sparking slave uprisings, etc. On the other side, Rebs were regarded as poor benighted poor whites who were coerced into service by the blandishments of the slaveocrats. The South was a despotism of a handful of slaveholders who wanted to impress their

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slave ssystem on the North.

Some mutual and grudging respect for the bravery of the other side.

An aside on the prison camps. Being a POW was more lethal than combat in this war.

4. The Landscape of War: Union Soldiers View the South

Southland was strange and generally regarded as backward with its ramshackle homes, plantations, and backward agrarian methods. For many Unions it was like a foreign country.

Unions confront the slave institution. Northern impression was right: slavery curses man, the land, and its produce. Some Yanks became abolitionist when they saw the institution up close. Others saw slavery as the fit situation for "darkies" and did not see anything abominable about the practice.

In either case, Northerners came to hate the institution. There was a common sentiment among the Yankees that what was needed was for northerners to immigrate to the South and transform the section into a version of the free, prosperous, and civilized North. One conclusion Yankees in the South reached was that the planter class simply could not be trusted. Soldiers thought them guilty of arrogance and selfishness. Then there was the white southern attitude regardless of class. White southerners had an "attitude problem." They did not seem to realize that Northern ways were superior, or that the Union cause was just and secession was immoral. They forgot they were both powerless and traitorous. Women in particular seemed intent on maintaining Southern dignity and property rights.

Soldiers were equally turned off by the hypocrisy of whites who took the Union oath when Yankees were in the area or flew the Union flag over the homestead.

In short, southern whites no matter what their class and no matter what their attitudes, did not please the Northern soldier. Their way of life seemed too different, too bizarre. The poor ones looked too poor and the wealthy were too rich. He could not understand them.

As far as blacks were concerns--they were regarded as exotic people. There was not one single Northern attitude toward blacks; if there was one attitude, it was an ambivalent compound of pity, affection, disgust, and hatred.

*Feelings of sympathy
as from sides -
shooting POWs -
digging up the
bones of the dead
to bury them*

The average Yankee had not gone South w/ a great sympathy for its slaves. It was not the case that meeting the blacks of the South firsthand necessarily diminished the racism of the Northern soldier. This trip to the South could bring racism to the surface. Some of this was a factor that whites did not see that slavery was the malfactor in the conditions of blacks--ignorance, uneducated, dirty, and ragged. But even though who saw the connection might still irrationally hold the slave's misery against him.

When the EP turned the war into an anti-slavery war, some soldiers were jubilant, others horrified, and still more accepted the war's transformation w/ troubled minds. The EP satisfied most NS that the Union must be a war against slavery. They saw that what Lincoln meant: that to end slavery would save the Union and to keep slavery would certainly doom the Union. That emancipation was not only a legitimate war measure, it was a necessary one. Soldiers who loved the Union and hated rebels would support emancipation as a means of attacking Southern whites, even if they were indifferent to the rights of Southern blacks. They were like the Puritans in the joke who opposed bear baiting not because of the pain it brought the bear but because of the pleasure it gave the spectators.

Unfortunately, the accuracy of the argument for emancipation as militarily necessary, and the readiness w./ which the soldiers accepted it, the very efficacy of Union sentiment and wartime fervor as an inducement have obscured other reasons for emancipation. Presenting the issue in pragmatic terms made emancipation possible; in view of the resistance of the NS and the Northern public(soldiers mirrored civilian sentiment)at large to emancipation the appeal to victory was necessary. But by avoiding the issue of black rights, the proclamation did little to change the minds of soldiers and it did less to prepare them to meet future demands for black civil liberties.

Abolitionists in arms were a minority. Ex. Robert Gould Shaw, etc. But NS regardless of their views about the black race were the ones who liberated the blacks while abolitionists in the North made speeches.

NS and "total war:"

Those who attribute "total war" to Sherman and Grant ignore the fact that unleashing soldiers against civilian population would not have been successful if the NS were not willing to forage and burn. They were. Many Union soldiers had advocated destructive war long before the autumn of 1864. If the CW was the world's first total war, the decision to fight it that way was the soldiers' as much as it was the generals'.

Union soldiers could not understand the early regime imposed that they were to protect Southern property. Vandalism was regarded as war acts against those responsible for the war. Homes and plantations that were abandoned in anticipation of the arrival of Union troops were regarded as fair game for looting and incendiarism. The very fact of abandonment meant that the owners were disloyal rebels, etc. Those Southerners who stayed to protect their property had a better chance of saving it from vandalism and worse. Union officers were not powerless to stop these practices but they found it difficult. As the war went on, and the notion that the will of the South must be broken became more acceptable, officers did not try.

Vandalism was a symbolic victory over a corrupt and foreign society!!!!

5. The Confederate Experience

Myriad of reactions: Some were impressed with the neat, tidy farms, and the brick houses in the small Pennsylvania towns.

Amazed at the sight of so many young men who were still at home and had not been called up for service as was the case with Virginia. Earlier, 1862, when Lee first entered Maryland the Rebs were somewhat dashed by the failure of the state citizenry to come out in great numbers celebrating their "liberation" by the Army of Northern Virginia. MD. was a slave state and had been "coerced" by Lincoln's "despotism" was the concept held by the Rebs.

In 1863, the reception in Pennsylvania was no warmer. But Lee's orders were not to destroy property. Lee's orders and the soldiers' determination to prove their superior virtue over the vandalism exhibited by Union soldiers in the South, assured that Rebs did behave themselves well in Penna.

Mitchell contends that this "soft" policy was merely part of the mythology of the "Lost Cause." The Rebs forged off the country. They burned Thaddeus Stevens' foundry and stole items like matches, money, and clothing much in the same manner later associated w/ Sherman's bummers. Then there was Jenkins' cavalry (see Nolan) gathering up runaways and free blacks and shipping them back southward into slavery. Jenkins drove blacks like cattle--men, women and children. Some of them were free peoples. He notes the strategic/political differences btw. Lee and Sherman's marches. Lee's policy of respecting civilian rights made sense. The Rebs could not conquer the North. The South needed to persuade the North and foreign nations to respect the South, to treat it as a nation. Good behavior was a step to earning respect. . .

in 1864 the North did not need to prove its respectability; it needed to demonstrate its power. . . the North simply wanted the South to fear it enough to surrender. The March to the sea was a conscious act of total war to terrorize the South. Sherman's march was to promote defeatism. . . while Southerners needed only to get the North to leave the South her way.

There was another difference. Sherman's March freed blacks from slavery. Lee's invasion included a policy of rounding up blacks and returning them to slavery. Except for a few days, the Rebs were never an army of occupation; it escaped the burdens of such duty and the temptations of systematic looting and burning the enemy's towns and countryside. The Gettysburg campaign reveals that had they had the chance, Confederates would have rivaled Yankees in the work of destruction.

The Confederate Soldier and the Crisis of the South

Mitchell deals with the paradoxes and inequities inside the Confederacy. The terrain is familiar.

The idea of the Confederacy was to throw off Union efforts to stymie the autonomy of the South and impose majority decisions on South's love of freedom and independence. Early into the war Richmond emerged as a centralizing power that was more threatening to vaunted Southern freedom than the d readed and maligned Yankees.

He notes the Conscription Act of 1862. The vast and heavier burdens placed on the plain peoples of the South in the draft. The control of Southern agriculture. .. impressment of food stuffs and taxes. The Conscription Act clearly favored the wealthy over the poorer and non-slaveholding whites. The so-called "twenty nigger" law, the most notorious, provided exemptions for planters owning 20 or more slaves and for overseers of plantations. This law revealed the class-ridden nature of the Confederacy and did not sit easy with the poorer classes.

Another provision of the law that favored the wealthy was that which permitted the draftee to hire a substitute in his place. The purchase of subs. allowed wealthier men who had no right to exemption to avoid service. This provision caused so much dissension that it was dropped in December 1863. Still the lasting impression from the Con. Act was the war was a rich man's war and a poor man's fight. The conscription laws affected almost all white men. Their inequity in a society that faced such severe burdens of privation and bloodshed were more bitterly felt than was the case in Northern society.

Even more unjust in application were the impressment policies of the Confederacy. Impressment of food, horses, and slaves for labor purposes. Impressment was to serve the needs of the armies in the field. But the practice came down unevenly on the South. Farmers and families in areas where the war and campaigning was close by were the ones who were visited by impressment parties and random forayies by CSA cavalry. Sometimes this was over and over again. Confederate impressors were as ruthless in taking supplies as were the Union forces in the South.

Confederate soldiers were aware that impressment was even a greater failure than conscription.

The CSA rail system was forever breaking down. Food and supplies that were impressed might just as readily end up rotting away in box cars that were unable to deliver as they were to get to the troops in the field. Taking food from a soldier's family did not necessarily mean it would get to the troops. Nothing more could demoralize a soldier than to hear that his family was starving on short rations due to impressment when he and his unit was also suffering from a shortage of rations. This convinced the CSA soldier of the incompetence of the Confederacy.

There were the stories of those behind the lines who grew rich on the war. The so-called "rotten aristocracy" who built huge fortunes by trading w/ the enemy, hoarding, or running the blockade and speculating in commodities and money changing.

Confederate authority had failed the mass of the white people. As the war dragged on, and as evidence of Confederate incompetence, corruption, and class bias mounted, there was a gradual withdrawal of support on the part of many white Southerners. This withdrawal, according to Paul Escott, was "the quiet rebellion of the common people," defeated the attempt to establish a Southern Confederacy.

Mitchell raises the question of why the Con. soldier for the most part stuck the war as long as they did. Since the Confederate authority failed them as much as the plain people of the South where most of the fighters came from in Southern society. The fact that most soldiers remained loyal to the CSA cause long after large numbers of their class had abandoned it suggests that the military experience itself was involved in the formation of Con. loyalties. Of course, at the end the desertion rates in the last year of the war increased exponentially.

Mitchell speculates on reasons for abiding loyalty:

Loyalty to his unit and men he served with; personal belief in salvation of an evangelical religion. Betrayal of a moral obligation could compromise personal salvation; hatred for blacks or racial solidarity. Notes the Rebs' hatred for black troops. Rebs took no black prisoners (battle of the Crater and Ft. Pillow) were just more spectacular episodes of their virulent racial hatred; the alternative was Yankee rule; love of family and need to defend same against the invading Yankee who was capable of any crime (including rape).

The Confederate soldier endured the crisis of the Old South w/ more loyalty than the Confederacy deserved. The Con. defeat left behind a legacy of bitterness. This bitterness could have been directed at the Southern upper class who bore the main responsibility. More often it expressed itself in hatred of blacks and of Yankees. After the war southern whites developed a myth of Con. unity and nobility of purpose transcended the reality of their experience. In the sanctioned memory of the war, the Con. soldier achieved an odd kind of victory. Defeat itself became glorious.

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6. The End of the War

Deals w/ the early assumptions on both sides that the war would be short.

The view shared by Blue and Grey that the war was a visitation from God and when He was satisfied that it had served his purpose it would end.

A section on black Union troops and the war.

Also that by 1864 most Union men were for Lincoln and that meant that they supported the war to the end. Many in the ranks who had adored McClellan now turned against him and his candidacy as a Peace Democrat. The fact that soldiers were allowed to vote in 1864 was testimony to the vitality of the Northern democracy. For it was likely that Union troops could have decided against Lincoln and an end to the war.

Last is the Union reaction to Lincoln's assassination.