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Abstract

Just hours before the Army of Northern Virginia raised the white flag at Appomattox Court House, Confederate Colonel Edward Porter Alexander approached his commanding officer, Robert E. Lee, with what he hoped was a game-saving plan. Rather than suffer the mortification of surrendering, Alexander begged Lee to scatter his men across the countryside like “rabbits & partridges” where they could continue waging war, not as regular Confederate soldiers, but as elusive guerrilla fighters. Lee listened patiently to his subordinate’s reasoning for irregular warfare. Before Alexander finished, he reminded Lee that the men were utterly devoted to their commanding general, and that such loyalty would continue to inspire the sacrifice of more blood, even if it meant taking to the woods and fighting like common outlaws. When Alexander concluded his impassioned plea, Lee asked his subordinate to imagine what would happen if he turned Alexander’s suggestion into official policy. But before Alexander had a chance to respond, Lee reminded him that virtually every Southern community had been overrun by Union armies, that farms were in disarray, and that crops were ruined. Lee feared that his veterans, upon returning home, would have no choice but to plunder and rob for survival. It would take no time for his disciplined army to descend into a demoralized mob that would take the rest of the South into a downward spiral of unending and unrestrained violence. “As for myself,” Lee concluded, “while you young men might afford to go to bushwhacking, the only proper & dignified course for me would be to surrender myself & take the consequences of my actions.” [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Civil War, High Water Mark, social history, historical interpretation, Civil War Memory

Disciplines

History | Social History | United States History

THE HIGH WATER MARK OF SOCIAL HISTORY IN CIVIL WAR STUDIES

Peter S. Carmichael

Joseph T. Glatthaar. *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse.* New York: Free Press, 2008. xv + 600 pp. Maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00.

Barton A. Myers. *Executing Daniel Bright: Race, Loyalty, and Guerrilla Violence in a Coastal Carolina Community, 1861–1865.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. xii + 193pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$32.50.

Daniel E. Sutherland. *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009. xvi + 435 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00.

Just hours before the Army of Northern Virginia raised the white flag at Appomattox Court House, Confederate Colonel Edward Porter Alexander approached his commanding officer, Robert E. Lee, with what he hoped was a game-saving plan. Rather than suffer the mortification of surrendering, Alexander begged Lee to scatter his men across the countryside like “rabbits & partridges” where they could continue waging war, not as regular Confederate soldiers, but as elusive guerrilla fighters. Lee listened patiently to his subordinate’s reasoning for irregular warfare. Before Alexander finished, he reminded Lee that the men were utterly devoted to their commanding general, and that such loyalty would continue to inspire the sacrifice of more blood, even if it meant taking to the woods and fighting like common outlaws. When Alexander concluded his impassioned plea, Lee asked his subordinate to imagine what would happen if he turned Alexander’s suggestion into official policy. But before Alexander had a chance to respond, Lee reminded him that virtually every Southern community had been overrun by Union armies, that farms were in disarray, and that crops were ruined. Lee feared that his veterans, upon returning home, would have no choice but to plunder and rob for survival. It would take no time for his disciplined army to descend into a demoralized mob that would take the rest of the South into a downward spiral of unending and unrestrained violence. “As for myself,”

Lee concluded, "while you young men might afford to go to bushwhacking, the only proper & dignified course for me would be to surrender myself & take the consequences of my actions."¹

Imbedded in this exchange are some of the most contested interpretive points in the field of Civil War history: Did the Confederacy possess sufficient nationalism in its quest for independence? What did Lee symbolize to the South? Was Confederate strategy doomed to failure, since its military and political leaders were largely committed to conventional fighting with professional armies? How did military operations affect the Southern home front? And what enabled the Southern soldier to continue the fight long past the point when final military success seemed realistic to those outside the army? These questions crisscross two extraordinarily important books on the Confederate experience—Joseph Glatthaar's *General Lee's Army* and Daniel Sutherland's *A Savage Conflict*. Barton Myers' *Executing Daniel Bright* is micro-history at its finest, for it too engages these big questions of Civil War historiography in a focused study of a local guerrilla conflict in North Carolina's Great Dismal Swamp region. Although the authors look at radically different forms of warfare—one fought by a regular army and the other waged by partisan forces—their work signifies an important turning point in Civil War scholarship, for they have taken the methodology of social history as far as it can be taken to pursue these lines of inquiry. For more than twenty years, the contours of the field have been broadly outlined by questions into the common experience of both civilians and soldiers, the relationship between the battlefield and the home front, how political loyalties were created and contested, and why the North won and the South lost. These questions, for the most part, have been and continue to be pursued primarily from a social history perspective. The results have been extraordinary, especially in showing how people of different social groups occupied the same historical space but made very different meanings of their experiences. We possess a kaleidoscope of patterns of a Northern and Southern society at war, always shifting, always looking different, and always variegated, depending on how the historian reflects the relationships of a particular place and people between the two glass planes of the military and the home front.

Despite the rich and diverse outpouring of Civil War books, nonspecialists continue to parrot the academic party line that Civil War history is preoccupied with locating regimental flanks, obsessed with battlefield heroics, and infatuated with the most obscure and irrelevant tactical minutia. It is hard to imagine a greater distortion of the state of the field. Civil War scholars since the late 1980s have embraced the philosophical approach of social history, answering the call of Maris A. Vinovskis in his now-famous *Journal of American History* article, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War?" Not only did social historians find Civil War history, they have devoured it. Glat-

thaar, Sutherland, and Barton are products of this intellectual tradition. They exemplify new military history, which, like new social history, is not so new anymore. Their reliance on social history methodology gets the reader to the ground level of military operations, where they show how ordinary people, stuck in the muck of daily life, tried to make meaning of a vast and terrible conflict. Their analysis of what soldiers were thinking and how they were motivated to commit certain political acts follows a historiographical trajectory established by Gerald Linderman, James McPherson, and Reid Mitchell, all of whom made distinct contributions to the study of what the rank-and-file thought. While Glatthaar, Barton, and Sutherland reinforce our fundamental understanding of soldier motivation, they are more successful than previous scholars in explaining how Civil War soldiers—whether they were guerrillas terrorizing the Missouri countryside or Lee's soldiers charging at Chancellorsville—could act with incredible political solidarity at one moment and in the next instance they could turn against their government, the people back home, and each other.

General Lee's Army is a masterpiece of historical scholarship. It is inconceivable that anyone will ever write again about Lee's army with the same analytical complexity of Glatthaar, for his findings draw from a staggering array of archival material that has never seen the soft lights of a reading room. Such a claim might seem hyperbolic, but anyone who looks at Glatthaar's bibliography will find more than twenty pages of cited manuscript collections. The massive empirical foundation of *General Lee's Army* sustains Glatthaar's insightful statistical analysis of the Army of Northern Virginia, which enables him to conclusively demonstrate that slavery infused the lives of ordinary soldiers, that military service never resembled a rich man's war and a poor man's fight, that desertion cut across social-economic lines, that Lee's officers gave themselves physically to the cause, and that the vast majority of Lee's veterans were deeply committed to the cause. While these conclusions are hardly new, they are conveyed with such power and persuasiveness that the publication of *General Lee's Army* feels like final judgment on some of the most contested debates in Civil War historiography.

Glatthaar has written a smooth but analytically gripping narrative, far exceeding the intellectual complexity of Douglas Southall Freeman's enduring *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command* (1942). He accomplishes this by reconstructing the multiple ways that the Confederate high command, Richmond authorities, Southern civilians, slaves, and those serving in the rank-and-file engaged one another. No one is studied in isolation. Unlike Freeman, whose traditional narrative intertwined military campaigns with mini-biographies of Lee's most prominent officers, Glatthaar structures his book around how the Army of Northern Virginia functioned on a daily basis. It is his sensitivity to the details of operation—whether it be the election of officers, the implementation

of conscription, or the running of administrative departments—that gives us new angles to look at familiar subjects such as enlistment patterns, the ordeal of combat, civilian-military relations, problems of discipline, religious matters, and the role of Confederate slaves. Rarely are questions of power and authority removed from his discussions of the army's organization and management. When officers ran for election in the wake of the 1862 Conscription Act, for instance, Glatthaar discovered how power largely flowed from the bottom up in Confederate regiments. Once members of the rank-and-file were given the opportunity to have a say in who would rule over them, they cleaned house of officers who were deemed incompetent in camp or cowardly in battle. Some good men lost their commission to be sure, but Glatthaar's research demonstrates that the election system gave promising soldiers a chance to rise in rank. Throughout the book, Glatthaar recovers how soldiers existed in a range of overlapping networks that could, at one moment, push a man to join comrades in disobeying military authority while, in another instance, he might feel compelled to join his buddies in a doomed assault.

Glatthaar suggests that the great paradox behind the Army of Northern Virginia's military prowess lies in the relentless desire of every soldier to have independence in the ranks. Their inflated sense of individualism weakened discipline, especially in camp; but when officers were able to channel this fiery spirit of independence into an assertion of manly behavior on the battlefield, Glatthaar believes that Lee's rank-and-file coalesced into a unified fighting force that had no equal during the war. Careless readers might misconstrue the author's argument as a modern spin on the Lost Cause tale of Confederate invincibility. In no way does this book romanticize the experience of Lee's veterans. Glatthaar tells a range of individual stories, including those of men who did not live up to accepted standards of courage, who found themselves punished by comrades for failing to face enemy fire, and who returned home with the stigma of cowardice. In fact, Glatthaar is unmistakably clear about the role of coercion as a decisive factor in forging unit solidarity, though at the same time he acknowledges that a powerful esprit de corps took hold of Lee's men, inspiring them to make amazing physical sacrifices. By the end of the war, Lee's veterans were living on a diet that lacked the caloric substance to sustain muscle and body mass. They were literally starving in the trenches of Petersburg in the months preceding Appomattox.

Explaining what kept the Army of Northern Virginia together leads Glatthaar into the murky world of group consciousnesses. This might be the least satisfying section of *General Lee's Army*, for Glatthaar uses the concept of culture in a highly nebulous way. It comes to represent the center of the Army of Northern Virginia, explaining a range of behaviors from recognition of military authority to soldier dissent; but Glatthaar never gives culture a concrete function so that we can understand the distinct ways of seeing and feeling in the

ranks. Culture, in *General Lee's Army*, is largely an invisible force that permeates thought and controls behavior. Glatthaar rounds up the usual suspects when defining manly culture in the South—beholden to honor, eager to use physical aggression, a craving for independence—and he believes this cultural baggage from the civilian world was too much of a burden for professional armies to carry. The author is correct that the transition to military life was difficult for men accustomed to having mastery over their own households. Yet, the fact remains that Union armies contended with the same problems of discipline that ensnared Confederate forces. Neither Northerners nor Southerners were disposed to accept orders from a military regime, especially from men whom they knew as social intimates in the civilian world. Thus the cultural exceptionalism of the South appears less exceptional. The analytical softness of culture in *General Lee's Army*, moreover, obscures what Glatthaar does better than any of his predecessors who have written about the Civil War soldier experience. He shows how the clash between the authoritarian nature of military life and the irrepressible desire for survival pushed soldiers to challenge authority, not as some cultural reflex, but because they were caught in a web of practical and political demands in trying to meet the needs of home, community, the army, and the national government. To be sure, Glatthaar's reliance on culture does not take away from his impressive strengths as a social historian. He is at his best when focusing on the intersection between material reality and ideas to explain how Lee's veterans coped with the stress of living away from home while confronting the everyday threat of psychological ruin and physical annihilation.

The terror of war was not confined to the battlefields of conventional armies but spilled into the countryside, where civilians, runaway slaves, Unionists, partisan rangers, bands of deserters, and common criminals engaged in some of the most ruthless fighting of the Civil War. Both Sutherland and Myers capture the chaos of the Confederate home front without engaging the impoverished scholarly debate about whether the Civil War foreshadowed twentieth-century warfare of total destruction. They pursue more fruitful lines of inquiry that examine how guerrilla warfare influenced Union and Confederate military strategy, how it shaped the experience of the home front, how it figured into the process of emancipation, and how it forced Southerners to subordinate political loyalties to the immediate reality of who wielded power in their communities. On both sides, professional military men attempted to harness the violent excesses of guerrilla warfare to advance national strategy, but they had little success, as policymakers could not control local populations in the countryside or in remote regions without large bodies of troops. As soon as portions of the Confederacy fell into Union hands or were simply abandoned by Southern forces, guerrilla bands materialized—in most states this was as early as 1861. Sutherland is the first scholar to demonstrate that the Southern

people were not conflicted by the prospect of guerrilla warfare. In fact, they immediately pressed Southern officials to organize partisan troops, a demand that took on more urgency in the wake of the Conscription Act of 1862, when scores of able-bodied men were shipped into Confederate armies, leaving communities feeling more exposed to enemy invasion and more vulnerable to the breakdown of law and order. The guerrilla bands shielded communities and disrupted the operations of Union armies; but they also became increasingly ungovernable as the war progressed, their unrestrained tactics intensifying a Union hard-war policy that devastated Southern civilians, many of whom wished that they had never looked to men like partisans John Morgan and John Mosby as liberators.

Like no other book on the Confederate experience, Sutherland's *A Savage Conflict* shows how guerrilla warfare destabilized the entire Southern home front—not just Missouri, Kansas, and East Tennessee, where murderous bushwhackers roamed in large numbers. In so doing, he reconfigures how we conceptualize the relationship between the military and Confederate civilians. No longer can we assume that Southern morale hinged upon the success or failure of great armies. No longer can we isolate civilians from the physical and emotional terror of war, even if they were removed from the direct path of major armies. And no longer can we frame the perspective of a people at war around abstract questions of political loyalty or Confederate identity. Throughout Sutherland's richly detailed narrative, he reminds us that most white Southerners, whether dealing with Union or Confederate guerrillas, were not inclined to take a certain course of action because they had a strong or weak sense of Confederate identity. They acted in a highly spontaneous way, depending on the ever-changing conditions on the ground and on who was holding the gun barrel.

Sutherland excels in revealing how Southerners trapped in an isolated region of the Confederacy preferred the protection of local defense troops, even if that meant sacrificing the priorities of the national government in Richmond. Thankfully, he does not frame this important conclusion within the debate over whether the Confederacy possessed sufficient nationalism or not. Neither does Myers in *Executing Daniel Bright*, a focused community study that surpasses Phillip Shaw Paludan's classic *Victims* (1981) in analytical sophistication, making it one of the finest books we have on localized guerrilla warfare and one that would be a terrific fit for an undergraduate classroom or graduate seminar. Just as Sutherland found common outlaws, deserters, and other misfits joining the guerrilla ranks after 1862, Myers also detected taking to the woods a range of people whose motivations ranged from slave control, resistance to Confederate conscription, and defense against the Union army. With the Emancipation Proclamation, the war turned savage near Elizabethtown, North Carolina, and a bloody cycle of retaliation and counter-retaliation

spurred atrocities on both sides. Barton shows how questions of power inspired horrific acts of killing and physical destruction. He wisely rejects the universal and unsatisfying explanation that violence begets more violence. Everyone knew that their very existence was at stake with the collapse of slavery, the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the employment of black troops. Barton shows how difficult it was for Federal authorities to determine political allegiance in rebel-controlled areas, since the people there were perfect chameleons in the ways they revealed their loyalties. This is a critical finding, for it helps explain why the Union military escalated the war against Southern civilians throughout the Confederacy.

The policy of extermination in North Carolina and elsewhere in the South did not result in significant civilian casualties, but the rise of a savage war had a powerful impact in changing political behavior. In the most surprising finding in *Executing Daniel Bright*, Barton discovered that leaders of both the Confederate guerrillas and the Unionists near Elizabethtown were so weary of Federal military operations that they sometimes actually joined forces to promote peace, protect property, and preserve social stability. Whether this happened in other regions of the Confederacy remains to be seen, but Barton concurs with Sutherland that when we destabilize the Southern home front by acknowledging the ubiquitous presence of irregular warfare, we find that most white people possessed a more fluid and contradictory conception of loyalty than scholars of Confederate identity have long suggested. Barton's study is especially effective in showing how the traditional framework of nationalism and Confederate identity does not often address how ordinary people crafted everyday strategies of survival in a revolutionary war that often demanded pragmatism more than idealism.

How ordinary people come together to engage in collective political action is a shared line of inquiry that Glatthaar, Sutherland, and Myers all handle with remarkable skill. They refuse to invoke the timeless, placeless, and essentialist language of identity as an explanation of group solidarity. Their success in revealing general patterns of behavior through a bottom-up approach of individual stories exemplifies the power of micro-history. Yet, all three books expose the methodological barrier confronting Civil War historians who, for the most part, are firmly entrenched behind the bunkers of social history. The goal of recovering the historical reality of past persons and how they made meaning of their lives through the lenses of race, class, and gender is the modus operandi of most Civil War historians and academic scholars.

Sutherland, Glatthaar, and Myers are masters of this hybrid methodology of social and cultural history. Their books represent the best of this well-established and fruitful approach, perfectly positioning us to think about the next step so we can ask fresh questions about the soldier experience. We are in need of a new way, one that digs below the meaning of language

and behavior to explore *how* people thought and not just *what* they thought. This would not only explain what they did during their military service—destroy, kill, desert, disobey, and act dutifully—but how they decided or were disposed to commit such actions and why. If we complicate social history's emphasis on recovering historical reality through a materialist approach, we might gain even deeper access to the very thought processes of soldiers who endured an ontological crisis of epic proportions while trying to survive an incomprehensible violent Civil War.

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1. Edward Porter Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (1989), 532.