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“When This Cruel War Is Over”: The Blurring of the Confederate Battlefield and Homefront During the Civil War

Abstract

The line dividing the Confederate battlefield and homefront was always extremely blurred, and this blurring, though initially a source of strength, contributed significantly to the South losing the Civil War. While fighting the war, the Confederacy faced a terrible handicap which the Union did not: the vast majority of the war's battles happened on its own soil. At first, this situation galvanized Southerners. But as the war dragged on, concern for their families as well as the very real costs of war—Confederate soldiers were nearly three times as likely to die as Union soldiers—encouraged a total of around 103,000 Confederates to desert. And the Yankee waging of total war intensified the effects of the divisive Southern class structure and of the collapse of Confederate patriotism, compounding the dejection of the South. This paper explores Confederate psychological suffering at home—as told through letters, songs, memoirs, and Union military court records—in order to understand the demoralizing effects of total war and how they led to Union victory.

Keywords

Civil War, Confederacy, Confederate Army, Union Army, United States, William Tecumseh Sherman, women, total war, Confederate women, slavery, patriotism, desertion, gender

**“When This Cruel War is Over”:
The Blurring of the Confederate Battlefield and
Homefront during the Civil War**

Sophie Hammond

While fighting the Civil War, the Confederacy faced a terrible handicap: the vast majority of the war’s battles happened on its own soil. Despite General Robert E. Lee’s attempts to transition to an offensive war, very few significant battles took place in the North. At first, this situation galvanized Southerners. They strongly felt the moral imperative to defend their homes and families, and men enlisted in the Confederate Army in droves. By the end of the war, 90 percent of the South’s white men of eligible age had served.¹ Women on the homefront began the war invested in the patriotic ideals propagandized by the South’s new wave of pro-war literature and music, but soon many pleaded with their men to return home. As the war dragged on, concern for their families as well as the very real costs of war—Confederate soldiers were nearly three

¹ LeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long, “Introduction”, in *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War*, edited by LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 1.

times as likely to die as Union soldiers²—encouraged a total of around 103,000 Confederates to desert (Alice Baumgartner, email message to author, November 18, 2019). The Yankee waging of total war intensified the effects of the divisive Southern class structure and of the collapse of Confederate patriotism, compounding the dejection of the South. I argue that the line dividing the Confederate battlefield and homefront was always extremely blurred, and that this blurring, though initially a source of strength, contributed significantly to the South losing the war. To this end, I will examine early Confederate propaganda and espionage, letters between soldiers and their wives, and the experiences of women subjected to the depredations of total war.

At first, Confederate propagandists succeeded in uniting the homefront by promoting a vision of Confederate solidarity—and especially of Confederate female solidarity—which elided the South's tremendously divisive class system.³ Confederate women nearly universally rose to the occasion, sewing uniforms and flags, raising funds, and writing their own patriotic songs and poetry.⁴ The early songs of the Confederacy praised the Southern desire for revenge on the Yankees—

² Drew Gilpin Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War", *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March 1990), 1201.

³ Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice", 1201.

⁴ Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice", 1206.

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examples include the lyrics “Avenge the patriotic gore / That flecked the streets of Baltimore” from the song “My Maryland”—as well as the courage of soldiers and their loved ones.⁵ These songs were sung at home and on the march, and their ideals reflected those of the martial Southern society at large. With their women’s exhortations to fight bravely ringing in their ears, soldiers marching from home to the battlefield left a world which idealized war for a world which would require them to actually fight in one.

The homefront connected to the battlefield in other ways, too; actions taken at home could determine the outcome of a skirmish. Female spies for the South like Rose O’Neal Greenhow—a Washington, D.C. socialite whose circle included high-level Union officers in addition to high-level Confederates—were mythic figures. Their countrymen lauded them as true Confederate angels, ladies whose beauty could only be matched by their fiery passion for their new nation. Even scholars skeptical of Greenhow’s achievements credit her with helping to secure the Confederate victory at the First Battle of Bull Run, the first major battle of the war.⁶ Her betrayal of Union General Irwin

⁵ Steven Cornelius, *Music of the Civil War* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 42.

⁶ Michael J. Sulick, “The Spy in the Union Capital: Rose Greenhow”, in *Spying in America*:

McDowell's troop numbers, movements, and plan of attack allowed General Beauregard to reinforce his army and win.⁷ Beauregard attributed the triumph to Greenhow, and Colonel Jordan wrote to her that "[o]ur President and our General direct me to thank you. We rely upon you for further information. The Confederacy owes you a debt".⁸

The womanhood of these Confederate spies, and therefore the initial Yankee assumption that they were not engaged in battle-related military espionage, aided the Confederate war effort. One of Greenhow's messages to Beauregard was carried by Betty Duvall, another socialite, who hid it in her chignon and then unpinned her hair once she stood safely before Beauregard's aide.⁹ Greenhow herself took advantage of societal ideas about the sanctity of a woman's body. When Allan Pinkerton arrested her in August 1861 outside her home on suspicion of collaborating with the Confederacy, she was permitted inside to change clothes in the privacy of her boudoir, which allowed her to swallow her cipher code, to hide incriminating information in her skirt, and to take out the pistol she was hiding.¹⁰ Despite

Espionage from the Revolutionary War to the Dawn of the Cold War (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 82.

⁷ Sulick, "The Spy in the Union Capital", 82.

⁸ Sulick, "The Spy in the Union Capital", 83.

⁹ Sulick, "The Spy in the Union Capital", 83.

¹⁰ Sulick, "The Spy in the Union Capital", 84.

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her often “atrocious” blunders when it came to safeguarding information later in the war, Greenhow used Washington, D.C. high society as her own battleground, capturing information and passing it on to Confederate officers.¹¹

However much propagandists touted Greenhow as a sterling example of Southern womanhood, the self-denials and sacrifices the Confederacy demanded from its women would eventually exact too much, “alienating” women both “from that rendition of their interests [and] from the war”.¹² The songs of the war turned more melancholy and less bombastic as the death toll rose and it became difficult to maintain the same enthusiasm as before. The song “Weeping Sad and Lonely; or, When This Cruel War Is Over” was first published in Georgia in 1862. Popular in both “army camps and domestic parlors”, the anguish in the lyrics transcended the division between the battlefield and homefront. The song often created such a longing for home in soldiers that some regiment commanders banned it from being sung.¹³ Though Confederate propaganda advised women not to write letters focused on their own suffering and instead cheer on their fighting men, women followed this advice less and less as life at home became

¹¹ Sulick, “The Spy in the Union Capital”, 85.

¹² Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice”, 1201.

¹³ Cornelius, *Music of the Civil War*, 60.

increasingly lonely and, for many, financially difficult.

Women used their letters to communicate the pains of the homefront to those on the battlefield. In December 1861, Livonia Cooper of Tennessee wrote a heartbreaking letter to her husband. He was stationed near enough that she was able to mail him a load of bread, but they were unable to visit each other. Living alone with their first child and dreading a Christmas without him, she wrote, “[Y]ou said to kiss the baby every time that I think of you if I did I would do nothing else for I am thinking about you all the time and when I am asleep I am dreaming about you”.¹⁴ She did not encourage him to desert, but she was eager to see him any way she could: “Come home if you get sick [. . .] write soon write soon”.¹⁵

Later in the war, as the battles became increasingly deadly, women did sometimes encourage their men to desert, with growing vehemence. By spring 1862, the wife of Colonel Tully Graybill, of Georgia, urged him to do so with every letter.¹⁶ The no furlough policy prevented him

¹⁴ Thomas C. Mackey, “‘When You Eat the Loaf Think of Me’: A Tennessee Woman’s Civil War Letter December 1861”, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 295.

¹⁵ Mackey, “‘When You Eat the Loaf Think of Me’”, 295.

¹⁶ Mark A. Weitz, *A Higher Duty: Desertion Among Georgia Troops During the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 99.

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from returning home for a visit, which devastated them both.¹⁷ He agonized over whether his highest duty was to his country or to his wife, and feared that his marriage would crumble entirely if he remained away.¹⁸ Many men abandoned Graybill’s scruples and deserted when their families assured them that they would lose no honor by doing so.¹⁹ Soldiers often feared losing the affections of loved ones by a prolonged absence, and this could compound soldiers’ desire to desert for other reasons. Desertion, of course, weakened the Confederacy militarily, but some soldiers already accepted that the Cause was lost. Infantryman Peter Dekle, also of Georgia, wrote to his family in September 1863 of his sense of hopelessness due to “see[ing] no possible chance of this war ending in our favor”, as well as his terror that one of the men who had stayed home would seduce his wife.²⁰ A poor white of low rank who no longer believed in the war, Dekle did not have the same social prestige or faith in duty that kept Colonel Graybill at the front. Dekle also wanted the ability to more directly protect his family: “You and the child is all I care for now [. . .] if I have to fight I will come home and do my fighting there.”²¹

¹⁷ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 100.

¹⁸ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 99.

¹⁹ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 98.

²⁰ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 99.

²¹ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 99.

Desertion was often the only option for soldiers desperate to go home to their suffering families. To prevent soldiers' furloughs from extending into desertion, furloughs were rare. In the Army of Northern Virginia, furloughs were only granted for "meritorious conduct", and only to less than 2% of the men (Alice Baumgartner, email message to author, November 18, 2019). By the end of the war, desertion was so prevalent that furloughs became a reward for apprehending a deserter. In April 1865, a month before the war ended, the Army of the Tennessee agreed that any enlisted man who helped to capture a deserter would get a 40-day furlough (Alice Baumgartner, email message to author, November 18, 2019). Deserters had a mixed reputation among their fellow Southerners. One Virginia planter saw deserters as traitors of the worst kind, "men of the low class [. . .] [who] get their living by pilfering from those who have gone to do battle".²² In contrast, poor whites, who suffered greatly during the war, did not always look down on men who left what was increasingly seen as a rich man's war and a poor man's fight. One disillusioned Louisiana deserter even defected to the Yankees because of the strength of his disgust at how Confederacy mistreated poor whites like himself:

²² Steven V. Ash, "Poor Whites in the Occupied South, 1861-1865", *The Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 1 (February 1991), 49.

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“[T]hey press Cattle and hogs and take the last feed of corn from a mans Wife and Children”.²³

When the Union Army embraced total war tactics in the South in 1864, the battlefield and homefront truly collided since civilian homes became casualties of war. Yankees plowed through the Southern states, scattering families, and destroying land, most famously in Sherman’s March to the Sea through the fertile heartland of Georgia. For some Unionist Southern women, and many enslaved women, the coming of the Yankees meant liberation.²⁴ For Confederate women, it meant unmitigated disaster. Historian Lisa Tendrich Frank points out a common error she sees other historians making: “[T]hey often neuter the home front by using the ungendered term of civilians to describe a region dominated by women”.²⁵ Sherman’s March to the Sea, therefore, involved psychological warfare mainly directed at Confederate women of all classes. Sherman specifically wanted to “demonstrate the vulnerability of the South”²⁶, as he said, and invading families’ private spaces became “an

²³ Ash, “Poor Whites in the Occupied South, 1861-1865”, 51.

²⁴ Whites and Long, “Introduction”, 5.

²⁵ Lisa Tendrich Frank, “Bedrooms as Battlefields: The Role of Gender Politics in Sherman’s March”, in *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War*, edited by LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 34.

²⁶ Frank, “Bedrooms as Battlefields”, 36.

integral aspect of the campaign”.²⁷ Union soldiers in the March routinely dispensed with traditional deference towards women. They raided women’s bedrooms, demonstrating their ability to force their way into the most carefully guarded domestic spaces of the Confederacy, while women looked on in helpless rage.²⁸ Confederate women saw “the lost sanctity of female space” and the targeted destruction of their most prized possessions as an unconscionable violation—especially since it called to mind the ever-present threat of the violation involved in sexual assault, as it was meant to.²⁹

The threat and the reality of sexual assault made Confederate women feel in danger in their own homes, a powerful tactic for blurring the battlefield and homefront. Though Frank asserts that “very few white women were raped during the march”,³⁰ E. Susan Barber and Charles F. Ritter discuss many instances of Yankees’ brutal rape of both white and black women, pushing back against a prevailing scholarly consensus that the Civil War was a “‘low-rape’ war”.³¹ They examine assaults tried in Union

²⁷ Frank, “Bedrooms as Battlefields”, 34.

²⁸ Frank, “Bedrooms as Battlefields”, 33.

²⁹ Frank, “Bedrooms as Battlefields”, 33.

³⁰ Frank, “Bedrooms as Battlefields”, 44.

³¹ E. Susan Barber and Charles F. Ritter, “‘Physical Abuse...and Rough Handling’: Race, Gender, and Sexual Justice in the Occupied South”, in *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War*, edited by LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P.

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military courts, assaults which included the rape of Susan, a slave, while nine months pregnant, and the rape of the white Harriet Smith while on her deathbed.³² While the United States discouraged the use of rape as a military tactic, certain soldiers took Sherman’s March to the Sea as a chance to commit “opportunistic crimes” directed at their enemy.³³ Many Union soldiers considered Confederate women, though noncombatants, to be as guilty of secession as Confederate soldiers—another way the battlefield and homefront overlapped. One of Sherman’s army chaplains argued that Confederate women should be “spare[d] our pity”, since they were “the worst secessionists”.³⁴ “Why should *they* not suffer?” he said.³⁵ Yankees also thought that through hurting Southern women, they could hurt the men who cared for them, deflating the Southern war effort. Union Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah W. Jenkins, provost marshal of the invaded city of Columbia, South Carolina, announced, “[T]he women of the South kept the war alive—and it is only by making them suffer that we can subdue the

Long (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 51.

³² Barber and Ritter, “Physical Abuse...and Rough Handling”, 58.

³³ Barber and Ritter, “Physical Abuse...and Rough Handling”, 60.

³⁴ Frank, “Bedrooms as Battlefields”, 42.

³⁵ Frank, “Bedrooms as Battlefields”, 42.

men.”³⁶ Jenkins saw a direct connection between demoralizing the homefront and succeeding on the battlefield.

Dolly Lunt Burge experienced firsthand the kind of economic devastation, privacy invasion, and threats of sexual assault to her slaves that Frank, Barber, and Ritter write about. Before her marriage to Thomas Burge, a Georgia planter who owned over 100 slaves, Burge was Dolly Sumner Lunt, who grew up in Maine and was closely related to Radical Republican senator Charles Sumner.³⁷ Her Northern connections barely helped when Sherman’s army passed through her plantation on November 19, 1864. According to Burge’s diary, Union soldiers stole important possessions from slave cabins, including slaves’ life savings, as well as sentimental valuables from the plantation’s “dwelling-house”, including her young daughter’s doll.³⁸ Burge expressed both condescending patronization and real affection for her slaves, and felt especially angry at the soldiers who forced “[her] boys from home at the point of a bayonet” to fight for the Union.³⁹ She

³⁶ Frank, “Bedrooms as Battlefields”, 42.

³⁷ Dolly Lunt Burge, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal: An Account of the Passage over a Georgia Plantation of Sherman’s Army on the March to the Sea, as Recorded in the Diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt (Mrs. Thomas Burge)* (New York: The Century Co., 1918), vii.

³⁸ Burge, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal*, 28.

³⁹ Burge, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal*, 24.

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wrote, “Jack came crying to me, the big tears coursing down his cheeks, saying they were making him go. [. . .] [A] man followed in, cursing him and threatening to shoot him if he did not go; so poor Jack had to yield. [. . .] My poor boys! My poor boys! [. . .] [The boys’] parents are with me, and how sadly they lament the loss of their boys”.⁴⁰ (She did, however, class the loss of her slaves with the loss of her livestock: “There go my mules, my sheep, and worse than all, my boys”.⁴¹) She crowded some of her remaining slaves into her room, since “my women could not step out of the door without an insult from the Yankee soldiers”.⁴² Burge’s diary presents counterevidence to the prevailing historical narrative that Union soldiers were always a force of liberation for the slaves they encountered.

Burge leveraged her womanhood and her Northern relatives to plead for safety for her family. She turned to “[a] Captain Webber from Illinois”⁴³ who said he knew her brother, “claim[ing] protection from the vandals who were forcing themselves into [her] room”.⁴⁴ He promised her to let her brother know of her situation, to prevent her dwelling-house from being burned, and to give her daughter a new doll. Burge differentiated between Union soldiers

⁴⁰ Burge, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal*, 24-6.

⁴¹ Burge, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal*, 24.

⁴² Burge, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal*, 32.

⁴³ Burge, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal*, 27.

⁴⁴ Burge, *A Woman’s Wartime Journal*, 29.

who became opportunistic raiders and those who tried to limit their comrades' destruction: "[Captain Webber] felt for me, and I give him and several others the character of gentlemen. I don't believe they would have molested women and children had they had their own way."⁴⁵ But Captain Webber was able to do little to help her. By the next day, the vicious ruin wreaked by Sherman's army, which included setting fire to many of her outbuildings, "le[ft] [her] poorer by thirty thousand dollars than [she] was yesterday morning. And a much stronger Rebel!"⁴⁶ Though her dedication to the Cause remained more powerful than that of many other women in the same situation, she was left near-destitute and in no position to put up any further resistance against the Yankees.

In the Civil War, Southerners fought for the continued existence of their entire world. Whether they were wealthy planters and part of the "thoroughly wholesome, happy, and joyous life [. . .] among the privileged '4,000' under the peculiar civilization of the Old South" which planter's daughter Eliza Frances Andrews looked back on with such fondness as an old woman⁴⁷, or poor whites barely able to scrape a living—whether or not they even believed in the Confederacy—for all four years

⁴⁵ Burge, *A Woman's Wartime Journal*, 29.

⁴⁶ Burge, *A Woman's Wartime Journal*, 34.

⁴⁷ Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl*, 2.

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of the war, the Union was invading their land. This eventually badly damaged Southern morale. The concern of those on the homefront for those on the battlefield, and vice versa, only increased as the two fronts became increasingly intertwined. If the Civil War was both won and lost on the homefront as much as on the battlefield, how much easier it was for the Union to conquer a Confederacy demoralized at home and riven by class conflict, where women feared sexual assault and families lived in terror of losing all they owned in addition to losing their fighting relatives. General Lee insisted on respecting Union property during the March to Gettysburg and later refused to turn to guerrilla warfare, despising these tactics as cruel and dishonorable. The Union Army bringing the battlefield directly to the homefront through the tactics of total war may have been morally questionable, but it crushed the spirit of the Confederacy and was a major reason why the South lost the war.

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