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Waging Just Warfare During America’s Civil War: An Interview With Dr. D.H. Dilbeck

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Abstract
Over the course of this year, we’ll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming 2018 CWI conference about their talks. Today we are speaking with Dr. D.H. Dilbeck, an historian of 19th-century American legal and religious history. Dr. Dilbeck received his Ph.D. in American History from the University of Virginia. His first book, A More Civil War: How the Union Waged a Just War (UNC Press, 2016), was a finalist for the Gilder-Lehrman Lincoln Prize. His most recent book, Frederick Douglass: America’s Prophet is forthcoming from UNC Press in 2018. A former Assistant Professor of History at Oklahoma Baptist University, Dr. Dilbeck is currently pursuing his J.D. at Yale Law School. [excerpt]

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Waging Just Warfare During America’s Civil War: An Interview With Dr. D.H. Dilbeck

By Ashley Whitehead Luskey

Over the course of this year, we’ll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming 2018 CWI conference about their talks. Today we are speaking with Dr. D.H. Dilbeck, an historian of 19th-century American legal and religious history. Dr. Dilbeck received his Ph.D. in American History from the University of Virginia. His first book, A More Civil War: How the Union Waged a Just War (UNC Press, 2016), was a finalist for the Gilder-Lehrman Lincoln Prize. His most recent book, Frederick Douglass: America’s Prophet is forthcoming from UNC Press in 2018. A former Assistant Professor of History at Oklahoma Baptist University, Dr. Dilbeck is currently pursuing his J.D. at Yale Law School.

Image courtesy of Bill Pope and Oklahoma Baptist University

CWI: How did nineteenth-century Americans define what it meant to wage a “just war?” Were there any noticeable differences between Union and Confederate conceptions of “just warfare?”

Dilbeck: Civil War Americans disagreed about what it meant to wage a just war—at times, quite bitterly. Still, the prevailing fundamental principles of “just warfare” in nineteenth-century America appear in two articles in the Union’s 1863 code of military conduct (known informally as the Lieber Code). First: “The more vigorously wars are pursued, the better it is for humanity. Sharp wars are brief.” The idea here is that the most humane and just thing to do in a war is to end it as quickly as possible—even if that means resorting to “vigorous” means. (For a 20th-century parallel, think of America’s use of the Atomic bomb at the end of World War II). Second: “Men who take up arms against one another in public war do not cease on this account to be moral beings, responsible to one another and to God.” The point here being that limitations on warfare must remain even in the “vigorously” waged war. Many Confederates would
have generally agreed with these ideas. But the real challenge—and source of controversy—came in translating those broad principles into concrete military policies, strategies, and tactics.


**CWI:** How did northern conceptions of “just warfare” influence Union military strategy and tactics? How did these conceptions shape Federal governmental policies with regards to both Union citizens and Confederate civilians during the war? How did notions of “just warfare” evolve throughout the Civil War or change in response to the realities of what it would take to wage a successful war during this time period?

**Dilbeck:** There does appear to be a rough overlap between prevailing northern conceptions of “just warfare” and Union military strategies and tactics. That is, more often than not, the underlying assumptions at the heart of prevailing nineteenth-century conceptions of just warfare are widely evident in specific military strategies and tactics. The logic of the “vigorously waged war” as a humane war can be found in Union policies on guerrillas, southern civilians, and even emancipation; in each case, Union armies unleashed great (though not limitless) violence in the hopes of hastening the war’s end. There was far more continuity than change in notions of just warfare during the Civil War. The four years of war did not noticeably alter the fundamental principles of just warfare commonly held by northerners. However, it’s certainly true that as the war progressed, Union armies applied those principles in ever-more destructive ways—engaging in acts of violence and destruction in 1865 that would have been less readily justified in 1861.
Colorized engraving by Alexander Hay Ritchie entitled “Sherman’s March to the Sea” (1868) which depicts the Union army’s swath of destruction across the southern landscape in late 1864. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress and Britannica.com

CWI: Why are debates about “just warfare” still relevant or important to today’s society? What lessons might we take away from 19th-century debates and attempts at waging a “just war?”

Dilbeck: Military tactics and technologies change, but the underlying moral dilemmas of warfare remain. Twenty-first-century Americans—like nineteenth-century Americans—still face a perennial question: What is a just war? Civil War Americans might not offer any neat or tidy answers to that question that we can easily apply to our day. But the generation who lived through the Civil War gave serious thought to first-order questions about the morality of warfare. Whether we ultimately agree or disagree with their visions of just war, there’s a certain wisdom to be won in struggling with these questions alongside Civil War Americans.