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The Poor Man's Fight: Mercenary Soldiers in the Civil War: An Interview with William Marvel

Ashley Whitehead Luskey
Gettysburg College

Roles

Assistant Director of the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College

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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 William Marvel, an independent scholar of mid-19th-century American History. Marvel is the author of eighteen books, including most recently, *Lincoln's Mercenaries: Economic Motivation among Union Soldiers*, which is due for release by LSU Press in the early fall of 2018. Some of Marvel's additional publications include: *Lincoln's Autocrat: The Life of Edwin Stanton* (UNC Press, 2015), *A Place Called Appomattox* (UNC Press, 2000), and *Andersonville: The Last Depot* (UNC Press, 1994), for which he won a Lincoln Prize, the Douglas Southall Freeman History Award, and the Malcolm and Muriel Barrow Bell Award. He has also written a four-volume history of the Civil War that was published by Houghton Mifflin between 2006 and 2011. Mr. Marvel is currently working on a biography of Fitz John Porter. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CWI Summer Conference, Mercenaries, William Marvel, Civil War

Disciplines

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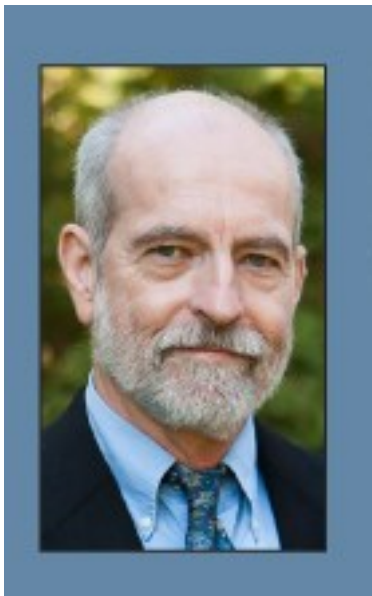
THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Poor Man's Fight: Mercenary Soldiers in the Civil War: An Interview with William Marvel

By [Ashley Whitehead Luskey](#)

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William Marvel. Image courtesy of the Conway Historical Society

CWI: Tell us about your most recent work on mercenary soldiers. How does this project build upon the work of other scholars of soldier motivation and the soldier

experience during the Civil War? What commonalities and differences does your work on mercenary soldiers reveal about Union and Confederate soldier experiences and motivation?

Marvel: Over the course of several years, while writing a four-volume history of the Civil War, I found abundant evidence that large numbers of Union soldiers were suffering financially when they enlisted. The financial benefits of enlisting seemed to exert an influence not only during the bounty era, but even in the earliest days of the war. In fact, the earliest volunteers included the heaviest proportion of economically distressed recruits. Historians seem to have forgotten that sectional antagonism following the election of 1860 precipitated an abrupt and virulent recession that wrought widespread unemployment, underemployment, business failures, and commercial stagnation from the Gulf of Maine to the Missouri River. As might be expected, the victims of that recession were very heavily represented among those who answered the first calls for troops—as were the chronically poor.

My research in that regard therefore does not so much build upon the work of others who have been examining the motives of Union soldiers as it competes with them for what might be called market share of motivational probability. There has been a great deal of attention paid to patriotic impulse, the adventurous spirit, a desire to prove one's manhood, and the altruism of Union volunteers, including abolitionist fervor, but no one has specifically examined or even really considered that many enlisted because they needed the money. I'm sure patriotism was a significant factor, given the hysteria following the attack on Fort Sumter, and support for the Union was probably first among the patriotic ingredients. More personal reasons also figured prominently, and to some extent so may have antagonism to slavery—at least as a competitive economic institution if not as a moral abomination. The extent to which economic desperation drove men into uniform necessarily diminishes the influence of each of those incentives. In most cases, more than one factor probably brought soldiers to enlist, but if a man had not worked in months, his family was hungry, his debts had piled up, and there seemed no other prospect for earning money, then it seems reasonable to question how much patriotism moved him, regardless of what he said then or later.



Photo depicting the camp life of a soldier from the 31st Pennsylvania and his family who has followed him to war, taken outside Washington, D.C., 1862. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Unlike those who have considered other enlistment motives, I have been able to buttress my anecdotal testimony and circumstantial evidence with statistical analyses of the economic status of those who enlisted. Thanks to a new survey of the 1860 census by the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series at the University of Minnesota, I was able to find median-wealth figures for each of the Northern states, against which I matched the family wealth of thousands of Union soldiers. Overall, two-thirds of the men I surveyed came from families in the poorer half of the population, and the proportion was much higher at the beginning of the conflict: In some units the proportion exceeded 80 percent, and even approached 90 percent.

However, historian Joe Glatthaar's census research indicates that the Confederate soldier was far less likely to be attracted by pecuniary gain, and that seems perfectly logical for several reasons. The Confederacy was being invaded before the conflict was six weeks old, and as much as Confederate soldiers are demonized today for defending slavery, they were also defending their homeland. Confederate money depreciated faster than currencies in the loyal states, making the Confederacy's lower army pay and smaller bounties an even less inviting reason to enlist. Neither does there appear to have been as great an effort by the Confederate civilian population as by Northern communities to raise funds for the support of soldiers' families. And then there was the earlier and more comprehensive Confederate conscription, which raised troops directly, by compulsion; this obviated the need for the exorbitant bounties that had to be raised in the North, where the war and the draft enjoyed far less popular support and the threat of conscription was mainly a means of encouraging volunteers.

CWI: How does an understanding of Civil War soldiers as mercenaries reshape our understanding of the relationship between soldiers and the state during the 1860s? Of the relationships between soldiers and officers on the battlefield? In what ways did the Civil War conform to or deviate from previous patterns in the American military tradition?

Marvel: I should point out that I don't really consider most Union soldiers mercenaries in the popular, pejorative sense of the word, although men who enlisted because they needed the money met the technical definition. If, however, we recognize that many who enlisted in Lincoln's army might never have done so had they not been financially embarrassed, it might modify the common perception of the Union soldier as morally superior to his less-patriotic modern counterpart. Family income has been identified as "an important predictor" in whether an American enters military service today, and quite likely it always has been. In his *People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn noted that the opportunity to improve one's economic condition and social status drew men into the army at least as early as the Revolution.

ATTENTION, RECRUIT

LOOK AT THE BOUNTIES!

\$177 IN BOUNTIES & ADVANCE PAY

United States Advance Bounty,	\$ 25
United States Advance Pay,	13
United States Enlistment Fee,	4
New York State Bounty,	50
Sixth District Committee Bounty,	10
Total, Advance Pay and Bounties, \$102	
United States Bounty when Discharged,	75
	\$177

The Ninth Ward Recruiting Committee, auxiliary to the Sixth Senatorial Committee, offer the above EXTRA TEN DOLLARS BOUNTY to each Volunteer who shall enlist at either of their Recruiting Stations, viz.:

389 HUDSON ST. NEAR WEST HOUSTON ST.
303 BLEECKER ST. NEAR GROVE ST.

The Committee recommend the following Commands as offering extra inducements to Recruits:

HARRIS LIGHT CAVALRY,
 COLONEL

4th N. Y. LIGHT ARTILLERY,
 CAPTAIN JAMES E. SMITH,

51st N. Y. VOLUNTEERS,
 COLONEL FERRERO.

NINTH WARD COMMITTEES' FINANCE COMMITTEE.

ANDREW HOOGLAND, 39 Bank Street, JOHN W. THORNE, 30 Bank Street,
 HENRY W. SMITH, 117 West 10th Street, LINUS SOUDERN, 23 Perry Street,
 ENLISTMENT COMMITTEE.

A. J. CAMPBELL, 121 Hammond Street, SINCLAIR TOUSEY, 40 Charles Street,
 WILLIAM H. VAN VALER, 456 Hudson Street, WILLIAM DODGE, 120 Perry Street,
 J. C. HART, 172 West 14th Street.

Civil War bounty poster. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Statistics now suggest that the poorer elements of society were disproportionately represented in the ranks of the Union army, and some well-educated officers and noncommissioned officers observed that most of the enlisted men were unsuited to more complicated tasks than manual labor. That portrait is not very compatible with the traditional concept of the Civil War soldier as the equal of his officers in every way save authority, and a greater social distance probably separated most enlisted men from most officers than we who were weaned on the imagery of Bruce Catton grew up believing. It may not have mirrored the class divisions of the British army of that same period, but I think it was more pronounced than we have been inclined to admit.

CWI: What new insights does your work provide on the postwar soldier experience and the war's lasting impacts on government-civilian relationships? On the evolving nature of the American military system?

Marvel: I deal only briefly with the postwar years. Much further statistical analysis would be required to support a more definitive assessment—but, having shown that the Union armies were filled mainly from the poorer classes of society, I would suggest that so heavy a proportion of poor veterans helped fuel the postwar demand for pensions. That was especially true for the later service pensions, which were granted even to those without service-connected disabilities. In the 19th century, men from chronically poor families, as a significant percentage of Union soldiers were, usually had to rely on their own labor to earn a living. Most veterans were approaching late middle age and were developing the physical infirmities that often interfere with manual labor by the time the pension eligibility requirements were relaxed enough to allow virtually all of them to apply. Most of them did apply, too.



Unidentified Maine infantry private, ca. 1862. Image courtesy of www.MaineMemory.net

The economics of Civil War volunteering may also have contributed to an increase in the popularity of public-sector employment. Veterans whose federal, state, and local governments had provided them with short-term economic relief in the form of

bounties, military pay, and support for their families often seemed predisposed to seek more permanent income through public employment after the war. Quite a few young men who had sought military commissions as their best (or only) available opportunity for employment in 1861 undertook careers in the army after the war. Veterans also swarmed into civilian government service—and particularly federal government service. In Washington alone, the number of federal employees tripled from 1861 to 1871, and grew twenty-fold between the eve of the Civil War and the dawn of the new century; there were also two and a half times as many post offices in 1890 as there had been in 1860, with the number of postal employees ballooning far more than that despite a great deal of postwar consolidation. Veterans enjoyed preferential selection for many of those new jobs, and tens of thousands of them secured federal appointments in the postal service, the Pension Bureau, and the Treasury Department. Veterans' organizations provided the personal associations that led to such jobs for many men who, before the war, would never have been able to marshal the political connections necessary for government employment.

The relative economic disadvantage of the average Union soldier may not illustrate an aspect of evolution in our military system so much as it reflects an enduring phenomenon. Military service in 1861 offered more incentives and opportunities for recruits from the lower classes than it did for the more affluent, and the same appears to be true today. Increased demand for sophisticated technical expertise may change that, but a 2008 study concluded that military service was then still primarily the choice of those from the lower economic strata.