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Violence and Restraint: An Interview with Aaron Sheehan-Dean

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Abstract

Today we are speaking with Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Fred C. Frey Professor of Southern Studies at Louisiana State University and the Chair of LSU's History Department. He teaches courses on nineteenth-century U.S. history, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and southern History. He is the author of *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia* (UNC Press, 2007), *Concise Historical Atlas of the U.S. Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 2008), and is the editor of several other volumes. His most recent book, *The Calculus of Violence: How Americans Fought the Civil War*, was released by Harvard University Press in Fall, 2018. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Calculus of Violence, CWI Summer Conference

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Violence and Restraint: An Interview with Aaron Sheehan-Dean

*Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2019 CWI Conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Fred C. Frey Professor of Southern Studies at Louisiana State University and the Chair of LSU's History Department. He teaches courses on nineteenth-century U.S. history, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and southern History. He is the author of *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia* (UNC Press, 2007), *Concise Historical Atlas of the U.S. Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 2008), and is the editor of several other volumes. His most recent book, [The Calculus of Violence: How Americans Fought the Civil War](#), was released by Harvard University Press in Fall, 2018.*



Dr. Aaron Sheehan-Dean

CWI: Your most recent book, The Calculus of Violence: How Americans Fought the Civil War, is fresh off the press. What were the main interpretive questions that motivated you to research and write this book? What was the primary methodological framework that you used when writing this book?

SHEEHAN-DEAN: Initially, I wanted to answer what I thought would be a straightforward question: Who could be lawfully killed in war? I wanted to explore how people made ethical decisions about who could be subjected to violence. In the process of researching what was supposed to be a stand-alone essay, I realized that we don't have a clear sense of who was killed, never mind how people justified that killing. So, I spent a long time studying regular battles, guerrillas, occupation, sieges – basically, all the places where violence existed. What I found was that an easy dichotomy between either a bloody harbinger of the twentieth century or a restrained gentleman's war failed to capture the reality. The war was both bloody and restrained, filled with both malice and charity (to paraphrase Lincoln). I then spent a long time piecing together how people understood and explained their behavior (to themselves and the world at large). So, the book is partly intellectual history but, in the nineteenth century, that means religious history, cultural history, and legal and political history. Last, I felt it was important to capture the attitudes of both sides. We have a number of excellent books on how northerners thought about war but because war is a dynamic process, our vision should encompass both North and South.

CWI: How has your research into the violence of the Civil War changed or enriched your previous understanding of 19th-century warfare? How might your research influence the way everyday Americans remember the Civil War?

SHEEHAN-DEAN: Participants in the Civil War drew on older models of warfare, both European and American, and innovated. The role of slavery created a new problem. The US Army had encountered slavery before – in the Seminole Wars, among others – but the federal government had never turned decisively against it, which created a whole new role for the army, something more akin to the efforts demanded of it in the 20th and 21st Century, when we anticipate that soldiers will interact with enemy civilians and that every military action has political consequences. Emancipation entailed both the seizure of personal property (belonging to the slaveholder), a shift of manpower from the Confederate to the Union side of the war, and the social and political consequences of liberating enslaved people. When the US Army operates today, in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, we know that confiscating property or jailing suspected enemies can shape the political support for or against an American presence. Imperial armies of the 18th century didn't have much concern to this issue. I was also surprised by the pervasive respect for the laws of war, not just among soldiers but among citizens as well. Although few people had read Grotius (the 17th-century Dutch jurist who wrote the basic compendium of the laws of war for Europe), they knew roughly what lawful conduct looked like and they expected their armies to practice it. This reminds us that in a democracy, the army is the people and vice versa. We have responsibility, as citizens, for ensuring that our military respects the values we hold,

which can be hard to articulate and enforce in the midst of conflict. I anticipate that readers will find stories that discourage them – some episodes in the war demonstrate that wartime Americans were no better behaved than anyone else when it came to war and sometimes people used the law of war itself as a cover to commit unnecessary violence. Other stories might inspire them by revealing the ways that laws curtailed excessive violence and in general, the power of people to choose wisely about how to conduct war.



Confederate and Union dead lying side by side at Fort Mahone, April, 1865.
(Image courtesy Library of Congress.)

CWI: According to this new research, how did the violence of the Civil War influence Reconstruction and both its short-term and long-term legacies?

SHEEHAN-DEAN: I didn't carry the story into Reconstruction, which is a weakness of the book, though it took a lot of pages to reach the war's end... As readers will see, there was a lot in the war that left bad legacies and alienated southerners from northerners and black people from white people. But it also left legacies of peace and mercy. As with almost everything in history, it becomes a question of interpretation. It was easier for white southerners to mythologize Sherman's destructiveness and paint themselves as victims and it was easier for white northerners to take credit for ending slavery and believe their conduct was flawless. Neither of these stereotypes is true but they played an important role in shaping postwar politics.