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## Review: Calculus of Violence

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## Review: Calculus of Violence

### **Abstract**

It seems counterintuitive to imagine the bloodiest conflict in American history being worse, but Sheehan-Dean argues that the death toll could have been dramatically higher without both sides' emphasis on restraint, as dictated by the laws of war. Most of the book is spent examining "how people on both sides justified the lethal violence of conflict and when, how, and why they balanced cruelty and destruction." Despite the rules of war, however, Civil War participants, like all humans, were contradictory. Sometimes they acted instinctively and spontaneously, while at other times, their actions were the result of deeply seated ideology. The participants contradicted themselves and their responses to events continually changed. Sheehan-Dean expertly places himself in participants' shoes to analyze the exercise and restraint of violence. [*excerpt*]

### **Keywords**

Aaron Sheehan-Dean, CWI Summer Conference

### **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

### **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

### Review: Calculus of Violence

By [Cameron Sauers '21](#)

*The Calculus of Violence: How Americans Fought the Civil War*

Aaron Sheehan-Dean

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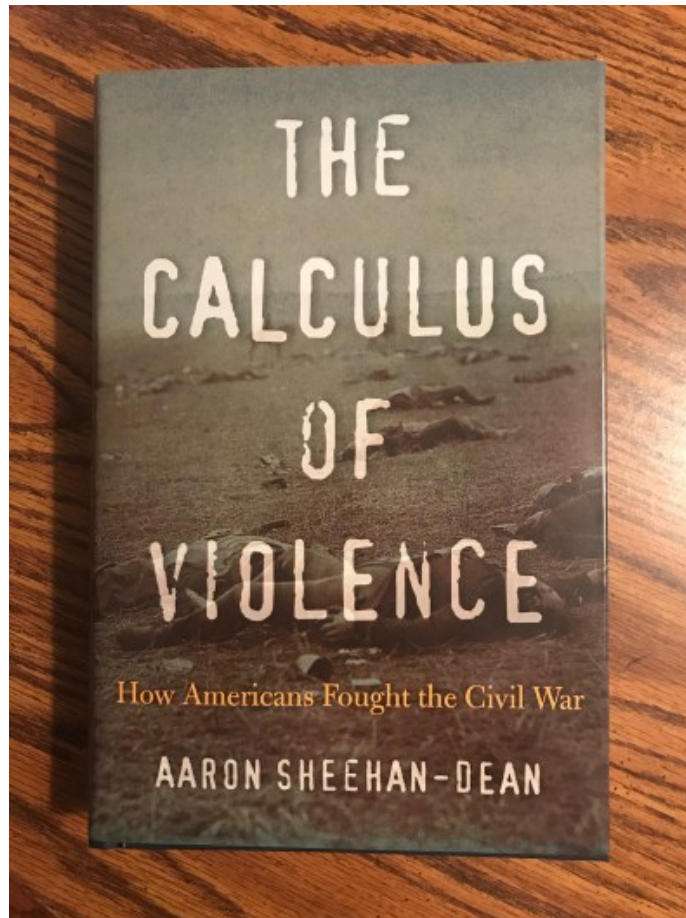
It seems counterintuitive to imagine the bloodiest conflict in American history being worse, but Sheehan-Dean argues that the death toll could have been dramatically higher without both sides' emphasis on restraint, as dictated by the laws of war. Most of the book is spent examining "how people on both sides justified the lethal violence of conflict and when, how, and why they balanced cruelty and destruction." Despite the rules of war, however, Civil War participants, like all humans, were contradictory. Sometimes they acted instinctively and spontaneously, while at other times, their actions were the result of deeply seated ideology. The participants contradicted themselves and their responses to events continually changed. Sheehan-Dean expertly places himself in participants' shoes to analyze the exercise and restraint of violence.

Sheehan-Dean focuses on four aspects of the conflict: Guerilla warfare, emancipation, imprisonment of soldiers, and occupation. He tracks how Federals and Confederates engaged each other on each of these issues, all of which could have easily produced unchecked lethal violence. Guerillas, North and South, both engaged in violent actions and provoked violent backlash. Confederates, too, exercised brutal retaliation while engaged in violence against black soldiers after the federal government's mid-war adoption of emancipation as a war aim. The fueling of nationalistic sentiments by outspoken newspaper editors, politicians and ministers also stoked each side's aggression, both on and off the battlefield, by further strengthening participants' political resolve and casting the enemy as a dangerous force to be immediately suppressed through both violence and non-violent means. But what might appear as unremitting violence was actually largely governed by official rules of war which tempered that violence with great restraint. Henry Halleck, eventual General-in-Chief of the Union army, authored a massive volume on the rules of war and Francis Lieber's influential Lieber Code was adopted by the Federal government in 1863 as a framework for governing the prosecution of the war. These guidelines helped set boundaries for soldiers and the public, noting when violence was acceptable and in what forms, and thus limiting the overall amount of bloodshed.

The best example of the application of these rules of war is General William Sherman's Atlanta Campaign. While many people label Sherman as cruel and unjust to the people of Atlanta, Sheehan-Dean argues that Sherman acted appropriately. Lieber wrote "warfare was not unrestricted violence, but violence limited by an end," meaning that all of the violence committed had to serve the purpose of bringing the war to the end. Sherman had to engage in a certain level of violence against a core of war-enabling civilians during the siege of Atlanta to achieve his ultimate objective: the war's end. However, Sherman did not give his soldiers a blank check for violence against civilians. Those who acted outside of the rules of war and committed unlawful spontaneous acts of violence against civilians were punished for their crimes. The Atlanta Campaign serves as a microcosm for the contradictions apparent throughout the war, that it was "at times a restrained conflict and at times a bloody, savage struggle. In some places, both of these statements were true at the same time."

What amazed me most was Sheehan-Dean's disagreement with the concept of the Civil War as following a "limited to total war" Trajectory. Many historians have proffered that the Civil War began as a limited war (one of much restraint) that slowly evolved into a total, all-encompassing conflict. By moving past this assumed trajectory of "limited to total war," we gain a deeper understanding of the ways people perceived actions as immoral or just. The lack of a clear evolution of violence seemed foreign to me and I initially did not agree with Sheehan-Dean, but his rationale made sense. During the Civil War, violence and peace occurred in different communities at different moments. For example, Missouri saw more violence in 1862 than did Atlanta, but in 1864 Atlanta witnessed more violence than Missouri. In some places, the war was nearly "total" in 1861 but "limited" in 1865. For Sheehan-Dean, the "limited to total" war paradigm is a gross overgeneralization of the war's violence which conceals the more nuanced complexities and contradictions of the conflict.

Aaron Sheehan-Dean's *The Calculus of Violence* is a perspective-altering piece of Civil War scholarship. It is wonderfully researched, but also accessible. I constantly found myself rereading passages, trying to absorb as much of the book as possible. Sheehan-Dean encourages readers to look beyond analyzing actions as right or wrong, moral or immoral. Instead, we should seek to understand how and why historical actors arrived at the decisions they did. Sheehan-Dean closes with the reminder that conflict, and its inherent costs, is occasionally necessary if prosecuted according to accepted rules and necessities. In revealing the complexities and contradictions behind individuals' decisions to exercise and restrain violence during the American Civil War, *The Calculus of Violence* provides a valuable window into both the on-the-ground operations during the conflict, as well as the human faces behind stories of bloodshed and salvation.



*Aaron Sheehan-Dean will be speaking at this summer's [2019 CWI Conference](#).*