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Why the Union Soldiers Fought

The Union War

by Gary W. Gallagher

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Allen Mendenhall

Nearly every Southerner was raised studying the Civil War, or, as some here call it, the War Between the States. By the time I entered the public school system in Marietta, Georgia, in the 1980s, the War had long been a cornerstone of the curriculum, although Lost Cause mythology had dissipated and the Confederacy was hardly treated with tones of admiration. It became clear, however, that the War was more complicated than my teachers let on, that the events leading to and following this great conflict represented more than a morality play between competing forces of good and evil. There was, for example, the case of the Roswell Mill. Decades and decades ago, at this mill, the wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, and young sons of Confederate soldiers labored while the soldiers were off at war. One day Sherman's Army showed up at the mill and absconded with the women and children. When the Confederate soldiers returned home, their women and children were gone. No one knows exactly what happened to the women and children of the mill, which is why they are still, to this day, called "The Lost Women and Children of Roswell."

Recently trends in scholarship about the War have been uncritical in their assessments (or lack of assessments) of Union ideology as a contributing factor to the War. Gary Gallagher's recent *The Union War*, a companion text to Gallagher's earlier book *The Confederate War* (Harvard University Press 1997), corrects this trend.

This book is a restorative history, and a timely one at that. The year 2011 marks the 150th anniversary of the War, and for the last four decades, Gallagher notes, scholarship on the War has neglected to emphasize the ideology of Unionism.

Unionism is central to any understanding of the War. As Gallagher explains, “[T]he focus on emancipation and race sometimes suggests the War had scant meaning apart from these issues—and especially that Union victory had little or no value without emancipation.” Although Union soldiers may have understood that issues related to slavery precipitated fighting in 1861, for them that is not what the war was “about.” Gallagher adds that a “portrait of the nation that is dominated by racism, exclusion, and oppression obscures more than it reveals,” not least of all because it ignores the vast influx of immigrants and the relative receptivity toward different cultures that Americans championed to varying degrees, even at that time.

Gallagher’s goal in this book is to disabuse readers of the notion that the War was, for the typical Union citizen-soldier, “about slavery.” The book asks three fundamental questions: “What did the war for Union mean in mid-nineteenth century America? How and why did emancipation come to be part of the war for Union? How did armies of citizen-soldiers figure in conceptions of the war, the process of emancipation, and the shaping of national sentiment?” In answering these questions, Gallagher’s focus is on “one part of the population in the United States—citizens in the free states and four loyal slaveholding states who opposed secession and supported a war to restore the Union.” Gallagher concludes that the War was, for the aforementioned citizens, one for Union, and that it only *happened* to bring about the emancipation of slaves. Emancipation was never the goal; it was a result.

“From the perspective of loyal Americans,” Gallagher explains, “their republic stood as the only hope for democracy in a western world that had fallen more deeply into the stifling embrace of oligarchy since the failed European revolutions of the 1840s.” According to this reading, Southern slaveholders of the planter classes represented the aristocracy that was responsible for the creation of the Confederacy. The Southern elite seemed like a throwback to monarchy. Citizen-soldiers of the Union Army believed that by taking on the Confederacy, they were restoring democratic principles and preserving the “Union,” a term that contemporary readers who lack historical perspective will have trouble understanding. Miseducated by Hollywood fantasies and adorations—consider the films *Glory* and *Gettysburg*—the average American today has lost all constructive sense of Unionism as it was understood to mid-nineteenth century Americans, especially in the North.

In five short chapters totaling 162 pages—notes excluded—Gallagher repeatedly identifies problems in the recent historical record, and then reworks and revises those problems, improving the record. He criticizes the tunnel-vision of scholars who write about The Grand Review as an exercise in racial exclusion, for instance,

and he suggests that instead nineteenth-century descriptions of this procession indicate that “Unionism” meant something like “nation” and “America,” signifiers that stood in contradistinction to oligarchy and that were only tangentially related to racial ideology. By systematically picking apart various histories while summarizing and synthesizing a wealth of recent scholarship, Gallagher has produced what could be called a prolonged bibliographical or historiographical essay with extended asides about what is wrong in his field.

What is wrong, he suggests, is imposing contemporary preoccupations with race onto the mindsets of nineteenth-century Americans. Against this tendency, Gallagher reminds us of forgotten facts—for instance, that the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment had more to do with political unity than racial enlightenment, or that, over the course of the War, concerted military action by ordinary individuals (not the acts of rebel slaves, Abraham Lincoln, or congressmen) determined which black populations in the South became free. Gallagher interrogates the difference between Lincoln the “Savior of the Union” and Lincoln “The Great Emancipator.” He supports the study of military history, which other academics have scorned. All of this plays into Gallagher’s claim that although “almost all white northerners would have responded in prejudiced terms if asked about African Americans, they were not consumed with race as much of the recent literature would suggest.”

The take-home point from this book is that devotion to Union had greater currency for most Americans than did any contemporary understanding of a commitment to race. “Recapturing how the concept of Union resonated and reverberated throughout the loyal states in the Civil War era,” Gallagher submits, “is critical to grasping northern motivation.” This motivation was rooted in the belief that Union would preserve rather than jeopardize liberty, and had little to do with slavery, except in that an important side result was liberty for all.

Gallagher has reminded us of the importance of Unionism to the War and to the psychology of the average Northerner. He has reminded us that race was hardly a chief concern to the typical Northern soldier, and that retrospective imposition of our concerns onto theirs is poor scholarship and bad history.

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