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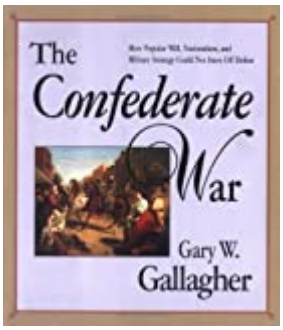


**Gary W. Gallagher.** *The Confederate War.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. viii + 218 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-16055-2.

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A great pastime among Civil War historians has been the composition of epitaphs for the Confederate States of America. Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, Jr. assembled a number of them in *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (1986). Overlooking Georgia soldier-politician Robert Toombs, who anticipated that the Confederacy's tombstone would read, "Died of West Point"–a swipe at the professional officers he thought were ruining the southern cause–their list includes Frank Owsley's suggestion, "Died of States' Rights;" Bell I. Wiley's "Died of Big-Man-me-ism," attacking men like Robert Toobs; and David H. Donald's "Died of Democracy." Beringer and his co-authors had their own candidate: "Died of Guilt and Failure of Will" (Beringer, et al., pp. 6-7, 34).

Gary W. Gallagher's version of the epitaph would read, "Killed by the North, After a Mean-Fought Fight." All things considered, he thinks the Union won the war more than the South lost it, and he thinks the Confederates hung pretty tough. It is a fresh presentation of an old thesis. White southerners embraced it in the years after the Civil War, the work of many Confederate military historians assumes it implicitly, and Richard N. Current pressed the case for it in "God and the Strongest Battalions," his contribution to David Donald's classic *Why the North Won the Civil War* (1960). Pointing to the North's advantages in population and economic resources, Current argued, "If wars are won by riches, there can be no question why the North eventually prevailed. The only question will be: How did the South manage to stave off defeat so long?" (Donald, p. 15). Outlining a response to that question is the chief concern of *The Confederate War*.

To lay the groundwork for his response, Gallagher first takes on the view that the Confederacy met defeat because of intractable internal divisions. He speaks as if this view has attracted near-universal assent among historians, and he lays most of the blame for that development on social historians. True, their scholarship has exploded "the tenacious Lost Cause myth of a united Confederacy," he writes, "but in doing so it has created new distortions. Historians employing the analytical prisms of class, gender, and race have focused almost exclusively on sources of divisions" (p. 27) and have thereby failed to account for the strength and tenacity of Confederate resistance. He strongly implies that these distortions arose all the more easily because most social historians are ignorant and contemptuous of the military dimension of the Civil War.

He may be correct, at least about the contempt. As a military historian, I confess that I bridle a bit at comments like one in the current *American Historical Review*. Rightly celebrating the achievements of social and

women's historians in Civil War scholarship, Nina Silber gratuitously contrasts this happy state of affairs to "(t)wenty years ago, (when) Civil War history seemed hopelessly mired in the minutiae of military lore," quite as if the work of Bruce Catton, Bell Wiley, or T. Harry Williams was valueless (AHR, Feb. 1998, p. 3). Still, contemptuous or not, are the new social historians *principally* engaged in explaining why the Confederacy lost the Civil War? True, their concentration on gender, race, and class is bound to highlight societal fissures, and occasionally it is suggested that these played a role in Confederate defeat, but a sustained argument to that effect is seldom made.

For example, Gallagher quotes the following lines from Drew Faust's well-known article, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War," in the *Journal of American History*: "Historians have wondered in recent years why the Confederacy did not endure longer. In considerable measure…it was because so many women did not want it to…. It may well have been because of its women that the South lost the Civil War" (JAH, March 1990, p. 1228). He calls this the article's conclusion, but it is not. The thrust of the piece is the way in which Confederate society proved unable to recognize and honor the hardships that white southern women endured on behalf of the Confederate cause. The result, Faust writes, was alienation. That is the conclusion. The rest is speculation–provocative speculation, but speculation. And it is not a speculation that Faust chose to pursue in her later book, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (1996), which focuses on how elite slaveholding women struggled to maintain their status amid the stress of war and reconstruction. Indeed, I think that social and women's historians are, at best, only tangentially interested in why the Confederacy lost the war.

Gallagher's real target lies elsewhere. It is, of course, *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, that brave, useful, and vulnerable book. It is curious that Gallagher would imply that the "internal divisions" thesis has swept the field, for the principal vessel of that interpretation has absorbed a lot of hits over the years. Robert K. Krick thought it "unfailingly interesting and provoking," but maintained that "not all of it is convincing and…some of it will strike many readers as palpably foolish" (JAH, Sept. 1987, pp. 523-24). David Donald thought that while it succeeded in repudiating the idea that northern superiority in numbers did not account for Confederate defeat, it was "less effective" in showing that "the real culprit was the weakness of Southern nationalism, guilt over slavery, and failure of will" (AHR, June 1987, pp. 748-49). Emory M. Thomas chided the book for "several very questionable assumptions and assertions" (JSH, May 1987, pp. 336-38). Pointing to the devastation that gripped the Confederacy by 1865, the commanding Federal military posture, and the decline of the southern resource base, William C. Davis scoffed at the "failure of will" thesis in *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy* (1996). "Like Peter Pan trying to revive Tinkerbell," he wrote, "Southerners were to close their eyes, clap their hands, and ʾÃwish ral hard' for something to happen" (p.124).

Indeed, I would not have thought that the "internal divisions" thesis, in modern form, has gained wide acceptance among historians who are closely interested in the question of Confederate defeat. My candidate for the current orthodoxy is the interpretation advanced in James M. McPherson's deceptively brief 1992 essay, "American Victory, American Defeat," in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Why the Confederacy Lost* (1992). Among the barrage of points made by McPherson was the observation that the wartime North had internal divisions at least as serious as those in the South, so an explanation for Confederate defeat could not rest on that factor alone. Noting that Beringer and his co-authors tended to conflate "lack of will" and "loss of will," he argued that the second formulation was the correct one. The Confederates had the will to begin and sustain the fight, but they eventually lost it. And what caused them to lose it? Military reversals.

That explanation, McPherson continued, "introduces external agency as a crucial explanatory factor–the agency of northern military success, especially in the eight months after August 1864" (p. 34). Superficially, this resembled Current's argument that the North won because it had the stronger battalions. But that argument was highly deterministic, whereas McPherson emphasized the element of contingency, the possibility that key events, especially the battles, might have gone differently: "To understand why the South lost, in the end, we must turn from large generalizations that imply inevitability and study instead the contingency that hung over each military campaign, each battle, each election, each decision during the war" (p. 42).

So much for "Died of Guilt and Failure of Will." But give Beringer, Hattaway, Jones, and Still credit: They sparked a dialogue that has remained lively for over a decade, and set an agenda that most of their challengers have faithfully embraced. That goes for Gary Gallagher, too. Three of his four chapters deal with "popular will," "nationalism," and "military strategy,"–themes prominent

in *Why the South Lost the Civil War*. The bulk of each chapter is devoted to skewering the opposition, and Gallagher does it about as well as anyone.

Gallagher most directly engages the "internal divisions" thesis in the first two chapters. While not denying that this portrayal of the Confederacy contains some truth, he believes it is badly overdrawn. To prove it, he offers a salvo of quotations from letters and diaries that suggest the strength of white southerners' fidelity to their cause. These quotes are not always convincing. Some of them have a "whistling through the graveyard" quality, and they seem more plentiful for the first half of the war than the second half, but overall they demonstrate Gallagher's basic point. It makes as much sense to explore the reasons for Confederate unity as it does to look for rifts. This view harmonizes well with George Rable's recent *The Confederate Republic* (1994), which argued that the Confederacy's political institutions and culture privileged a politics of national unity over that of localism and division.

The chapter on popular will is more effective than the one on nationalism, in large measure because Gallagher seems a bit impatient with the various theories of nationalism that abound. Of the possibilities, his version seems to accord most closely with Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities," but this is never made explicit. The communal bond was strongest in the army, particularly Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, which, like George Washington's Continental Army, symbolically carried the hopes of the nation on its bayonets. Indeed, although historians of the Confederacy's western armies may take exception, Gallagher may be on to something here. It is no accident that the battle flag of the Army of Northern Virginia gained a place on the "Stainless Banner," the Confederacy's national flag; nor that southern pride (and regrettably, racism) found expression in the "Stars and Bars." True, Gallagher's case is vulnerable to the criticism that the symbolism of Lee's army may be read just as easily as evidence of the weakness of southern nationalism, in the same way that Charles Royster argued that the nationalistic spirit of the Continental Army underscored the weakness of nationalism among the civilian population. But far more of the available manpower pool served in the Confederate army than ever served in the Continental Army, and the level of logistical support was much higher.

After taking on the social historians, Gallagher squares off against a number of military historians, particularly those who believe that (a) the Confederacy should have pursued a more purely defensive strategy; (b) that Robert E. Lee's chronic aggressiveness bled southern manpower inexcusably; and (c) the South could and should have pursued guerrilla warfare as an alternative to conventional resistance. On the contrary, he argues, the "offensive-defensive" strategy adopted by Jefferson Davis was appropriate and effective, while Lee's offensives did more than any other factor to undermine the North's will to continue the struggle. A guerrilla conflict, for its part, would not have been appropriate for the kind of nation Confederates hoped to establish; it would probably have spun out of control, as the example of Missouri suggests; it would have jeopardized control over the slaves; it would arguably have been more difficult to recruit manpower for such a venture; and it would necessarily have been conducted without outside support, a virtual *sine qua non* for successful guerrilla warfare. The discussion of the guerrilla option is a bit artificial, given that most historians think in terms of resort to such resistance only in 1865, after conventional resistance became impossible. But taken as a whole, Gallagher's section on military strategy is vigorous, sensible, and lucid.

The same can be said for the entire book. One might wish it were longer. *The Confederate War* contains just 171 pages of text, and these have generous margins, and it is heavier on answering the proponents of the "internal divisions" thesis than with advancing positive arguments of its own. That is understandable: the book began life as the 1995-1996 Littlefield endowed lectures at the University of Texas at Austin. And although it merely sketches the outlines of a new interpretation, it does suggest some new ways to explore the perennial issues surrounding the Confederacy's struggle.

Among Gallagher's suggestions are the following: Historians should revisit the notion that "northern incursions into the Confederacy dampened southern enthusiasm for the war. In fact, the Union army probably had the opposite effect on many Confederates, acting as a catalyst for muting grievances about issues such as the tax-in-kind, impressment, and the draft" (p. 58). They should pay greater attention to the immense symbolic importance of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, which Gallagher calls "the single greatest factor engendering Confederate hope after the midpoint of the war" (p. 58). Instead of looking for evidence of southern nationalism primarily among civilians, historians should take a closer look at the values of soldiers, particularly the generation of young slaveholding men who came to maturity on the eve of the war. These, Gallagher reports, "may have been among the most ardent Confederates,

a cohort whose enthusiasm and fiery example probably enhanced feelings of nationalism within the armies and among civilians" (p. 72).

These potential projects, and others, all support what Gallagher sees as a key task for the next wave of Civil War scholarship: to set aside the stale exploration of the factors underlying Confederate failure in favor of "the more complex and fruitful question of why white southerners fought as long as they did. The interplay among popular expectations, national strategy, performance on the battlefield, and Confederate nationalism and will offers rich opportunities for investigation" (p. 153).

This interplay hearkens back to McPherson's emphasis on contingency. All of these factors and others, such as the enslaved black southerners and southern unionists, operated synergistically, in sometimes unexpected ways, to produce the Confederate experience. Even more importantly, the study of these factors has much to say about the southern experience, before and after the war. The new social historians reached their conclusions about the fault lines in Confederate society not by concentrating on 1861-1865 alone but by tracing antebellum patterns through the Civil War and into the postwar era. Historians persuaded of Gallagher's thesis should do the same. The popular will and nationalist spirit he identifies had to come from somewhere, and surely they did not just vanish once the guns fell silent.





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