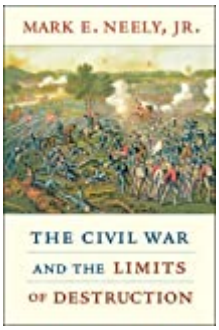
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Mark E. Neely. *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. 277 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02658-2.

Reviewed by Robert M. Citino

Published on H-CivWar (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason (Brigham Young University)

Compared to What? The Brutality of the Civil War

Let me begin my review of this very fine book with a small confession: as a European military historian and university professor, I sometimes take a certain pleasure in puncturing my studentsâ boundless enthusiasm for the U.S. Civil War (always within the boundaries of fun, respect, good taste, and classroom decorum, the need to preserve their youthful âself-esteem,â etc., etc.).

Alright, alright ... I know itâs unprofessional of me, but I just canât *help* it. They are so earnest, so in love with the war, or better yet so in love with a particular vision of it. They love the generals, or at least Grant and Lee. They love the heroism and the common folksiness of the soldiers. They love the uniforms. They love the belt buckles and the gear. To many of my students, the Civil War is still the biggest war of all time, and the baddest, and the bloodiest. The better students even know that itâs the first âtotal war,â the first âmodern warâ–whatever those slippery phrases are actually supposed to mean. It is, in other words, nothing less than the best war ever, and even minor professorial criticisms of the generalship or fighting qualities of the troops on either side always leads to some in-class brouhaha. As a scholar of German military history, for example, I might mention in lecture that the Austro-Prussian battle of KÃ¶niggrÃ¤tz (1866) was more than twice the size of the battle of Gettysburg in terms of numbers of men engaged. Incredibly, this simple statement of fact, given merely to lend scale to the event under discussion by reference to something the student already knows, almost always leads to a certain amount of student spluttering, of the âYeah, but ... â or âSo what?â variety. Apparently, Gettysburg was the biggest battle of all time, and to hint that there may have been a bigger one just a few years later actually seems to many young Americans to be an insult.

And this is one of the many reasons why Mark Neelyâs *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* is so fascinating. It marks a culmination point of sorts in a new strain of civil war historiography–with nods to previous research by Joe Glatthaar, Mark Grimsley, and others–that questions the widely accepted notion of an unrestrained Civil War. Now enshrined in American history textbooks at all levels, the traditional narrative goes

something like this: in the course of the war, the military gloves gradually came off until all-out âbrutalâ or âhardâ war on civilians became the norm on both sides, either in vicious guerrilla fighting in Missouri, or in Phil Sheridanâs destruction of the Shenandoah Valley, or, of course, in Shermanâs infamous march to the sea.

Neely is unconvinced of all this. In six tightly written and well-researched chapters, he searches for a comparative dimension to the American Civil War. After all, the warâs brutality can only be a relative thing, and one can only judge it in the context of other wars, preferably civil wars, of the nineteenth century. Neely gives us a scholarly *tour d'horizon*, moving back and forth in time and space: from the Mexican War to guerrilla war in Missouri, then back to Mexico for Maximilianâs âblack decree,â back up to Sheridan in the Valley, out west to the Sand Creek Massacre (one of the first and only times that white-on-Indian violence received the designation âmassacreâ), then to the debate in the North over whether to âretaliateâ for the horrors of Andersonville. Finally, the conclusion contains a particularly brilliant discussion of the fraught issue of Civil War casualties.

When analyzed in this manner, it turns out that the American Civil War was not a particularly brutal one, that its violence was never quite as unrestrained or brutal as many modern historians make it out to be. Volunteer troops in the Mexican War, for example, routinely visited depredations on the local civilians that their counterparts in the later war would never have dreamed of doing. The guerrilla war in Missouri, which has become an obsession of present-day civil war historiography, is here cut down to size as one of a series of âsideshowsâ (p. 71) to the larger war; sure, generals were more likely to make hard war on guerrillas, but much of the fighting in Missouri (Priceâs Raid, for example) was of the conventional, force-on-force variety. The civil war in Maximilianâs Mexico was far more brutal than anything witnessed in the U.S. Civil War, with tens of thousands of *liberales* killed by the imperial government, their bodies hung upside down to rot as a warning to others who were loyal to Juarez. Sheridanâs alleged âburningâ of the Shenandoah Valley was actually a much more surgical operation than usually portrayed, destroying anything that the Confederate Army could use, but leaving civilian supplies, provisions, and dwellings untouched (which is why all the wheat was burned but almost none of the corn). A historian who wants a *real* burning should look not to Sheridan or Sherman, Neely tells us, but to the conflagration initiated on the Great Plains by the Union Army during the war, with Colonel Robert Livingston actually setting fire to the âprairie south of the Platte River Valley ... burning the grass in a continuous line of 200 miles as far south of the Republican Riverâ (p. 147). As bad as it was, however, it had little to do with the alleged brutality of the Civil War. Another awful event, the revelation of horrific abuses against Union prisoners at Andersonville, complete with photographs that still shock the viewer today–with Union prisoners looking for all the world like inmates at Dachau or Buchenwald–led to some loose talk among Northern legislators about deliberately starving, shooting, or working to death Confederate prisoners in the North. But again, this is precisely what did not happen. Cooler and wiser heads prevailed, especially President Lincolnâs, and none of these dreadful scenarios came to pass.

Finally,the conclusion to Neely's book sums up his argument nicely by taking on the classic Civil War trope: that it was the âbloodiest war in American history.â Maybe it was and maybe it wasnât, but the phrase only makes sense by adding up all the casualties on both sides into one total–a very bizarre way to count casualties, indeed. Taking into account a war fought before there was a germ theory of disease, and therefore subtracting the more than two-thirds who died from disease rather than battle, the previously staggering number of 620,000 dead *in toto* becomes 135,000 killed in battle for the North, and 66,000 for the South (compared, for example, to 407,000 Americans killed in World War II). None of this is to belittle the sacrifice on both sides, but rather, Neely argues, âto show that the claims of âbloodiestâ conflict can be qualified so as not to make the Civil War exist in some unfathomably violent category all by itselfâ (p. 213). Indeed, compared to some other countries plunged into civil war, America has been âluckyâ in its history (p. 214), and American historians need to come to terms with that fact:

Repeated assertion of the destructive nature of the Civil War may, in fact, serve only to remind readers of the provincial nature of American history-writing, since the world perspective from the Crimea to the end of the twentieth century would call into question the magnitude of the losses. The regular assertion of the death rate in the Civil War serves no end whatever. Rather than a deeper understanding of the conflict, historians are in danger of substituting âan empty cult of violence,â perhaps the latest manifestation of Civil War sentimentalism (pp. 215-16).

Finally, Neely manages to go beyond a mere accounting of the destruction in order to discuss the âwhy.â Why

was the violence limited? His thesis echoes the findings of earlier historians: good discipline and high motivation among the armies, Grimsleyâs useful notion of a âFederal citizen soldierâ still guided by âthe light of moral reason,â Lincolnâs moderation, ties of common religion, and more. In the end, however, Neelyâs answer boils down to race: when U.S. troops were fighting Mexicans, or Indians, or when C.S.A. troops captured African American soldiers at Ft. Pillow, then things really could get brutal. But when they were facing fellow white troops–and with their image of whiteness being reinforced constantly by the omnipresence of blacks in both North and South–they were much less likely to do something shameful.

Here, I must confess to a certain unease. While the answer he gives certainly seems plausible in the context of American history, I found it asserted in the text more often than proven (âIn other words, the true story is this: U.S. soldiers decided not to apply the lessons learned in the Indian wars to the enemy in the Civil War largely because the enemy in the Civil War appeared to be of the same raceâ [p. 153]; âMore important, the United States did not really want to do such things to white peopleâ [p. 167]; and again, on p. 219, âHonor and Christian charity had their place, all right, but it was a place reserved in that era mostly for white and âcivilizedâ belligerentsâ). To be fair to the author, however, he is aware of the problem. Indeed, these sorts of deeply rooted presuppositions are among the most difficult things for a historian to establish, as anyone who writes cultural history soon finds. The historical actors rarely find the need to articulate them. After all, why write about an idea that one simply assumes to be true?

Beyond that, however, Neelyâs emphasis on common race as the primary limiting factor in Civil War violence is problematic from the very comparative perspective that he employs here. There is another trope about civil wars, after all: that they are inherently the most brutal of all conflicts. In virtually all of them, the contending sides are of the same race, and yet they manage to slaughter each other with enthusiasm. Caesarâs Rome comes to mind, as does Leninâs Russia, Pol Potâs Cambodia, and a host of others. Why would notions of common race work to *limit* violence in the American conflict, but fail to do so (and indeed, possibly even promote violence) in so many others? It is one of the many questions this fine book raised in my mind.

The Civil War: American tragedy, American fate, a god-awful mess? Absolutely. âThe bloodiest war in American historyâ? Perhaps not.