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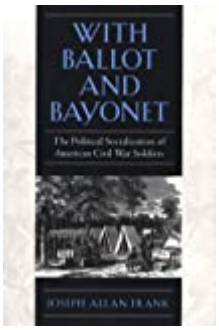

Joseph Allan Frank. *With Ballot and Bayonet: the Political Socialization of American Civil War Soldiers.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. xi + 304 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1975-9.

Reviewed by Jonathan Atkins (Department of History, Berry College)

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Modern historical efforts to understand what motivated common soldiers during the American Civil War began with the publication of Bell I. Wiley's two studies of life in the Southern and Northern armies, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (1943) and *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (1952). Through detailed descriptions of the experience of battle and camp life, Wiley concluded that political issues and the war's larger goals had little influence on most soldiers. Instead, Wiley contended, "original impulses of individuals ranged from material considerations and a mere craving for excitement to profound idealism and hatred of traitors. It seems clear, however, that the great bulk of volunteers responded to mixed motives, none of which was deeply felt."[1]

Wiley's works remained the standard accounts until the late 1980s, when military historians–inspired by new approaches in social and cultural history–began to take a new look at the man at the front. Books by Gerald F. Linderman[2] and Reid Mitchell[3] refined Wiley's presentation by emphasizing respectively the importance of courage and of conceptions of self, home, and family for the troops. Both Linderman and Mitchell reinforced the image of soldiers motivated more by their comrades' and kinsmen's expectations than by either political issues or the war's larger aims. Others, most notably James McPherson, followed the lead of antebellum political historians who contended that political issues were central to the coming of the war and that ideological and cultural perceptions of these images could themselves serve as motivating forces. In two books, *What They Fought For: 1861-1865* (1994) and *For Cause and Comrade: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997), McPherson challenged Wiley's description of war-hardened, disillusioned veterans by arguing that their letters reflected a strong sense of duty and honor that undergirded an ideological commitment to the war's stated aims. "[L]iberty and republicanism formed the ideological core of the cause for which Civil War soldiers fought, Confederate as well as Union," McPherson concluded. "The profound irony of the Civil War was that Confederate and Union soldiers ... interpreted the heritage of 1776 in opposite ways."[4]

Motivation, of course, is perhaps the most slippery object for historians to try to grasp. We have enough difficulty discerning what complex motives might influence the behavior of our contemporaries; how can we with any certainty demonstrate what caused those long dead to take the actions that they did? Still, motivation presents a vital historical subject, particularly when addressing an ordeal as momentous, consequential, and horrific as the Civil War. Why did more than 600,000 people sacrifice the "last full measure of devotion"? More

puzzling, why did more than a million young men continue the fight for three long years, after the initial experience of modern warfare showed them that battle was not the glorious, ennobling experience they expected it to be?

These are the questions that Joseph Allan Frank takes on in *With Ballot and Bayonet: The Political Socialization of American Civil War Soldiers*. Frank, a professor of political science at the University of Ottawa in Ontario, completed the manuscript for this book before the publication of *For Cause and Comrades*, but his argument supports McPherson's contention that the soldiers were politically conscious and understood their participation in the war as part of an important cause. Like McPherson, Frank based his research on soldiers' letters and diaries, analyzing those of 1,013 veterans "who reflected on broader political questions and the military issues of the war" (p. viii). Frank's contribution is that he interpreted these writings through studies of military organizations in revolutionary societies to argue that the Northern and Southern forces were "people's armies" composed of "volunteer citizen-soldiers" who "responded to a national political crisis and were motivated by the issues associated with the confrontation" (p. 1). The result is a compelling case for the significance of ideology for the Civil War armies, and for Frank's conclusion that "mass mobilization" released a "revolutionary impulse" that permeated war-time politics and society on the homefront.

Frank does not claim that all Civil War soldiers had a sophisticated understanding of what they fought for. He acknowledges that his selection of the letters and diaries used as his principal sources depended on whether their letters contained comments on the war's meaning and significance. Among these soldiers recording their thoughts, only a little more than one third expressed what Frank considers an advanced level of political sophistication, which he defined as comments including not just references to "inchoate patriotic symbols" but also "judgments about political or military issues" with "coherent and reasoned explanation for their views" (pp. 33-34). Northern soldiers, who comprised about 60 percent of Frank's sample, were "only slightly more articulate than the Southerners" (p. 34); not surprisingly, officers were twice as likely as enlisted men to show a high degree of political awareness. Three quarters of the letters and journal entries studied were written after 1863, when the realities of war had shattered romantic images of the conflict and when the reasons for continuing the fight had to be the most compelling. Still, only 19 percent of Frank's subjects combined political sophistication with an interest in a broad range of political issues and a sense that their service could help determine the war's outcome or was part of an unfolding of history decreed by fate or providence. This "highly articulate subgroup" (p. 39), the author suggests, represented probably on 5 to 6 percent of all soldiers in the war.

Still, this small core of true believers exerted a significant influence on the armies because the Civil War armies were "people's armies." Unlike the professional forces of earlier European conflicts, or the conscript armies of the twentieth century, the Civil War forces depended overwhelmingly on volunteer citizen-soldiers whose status and values largely reflected those of respectable members of their parent societies. Like the troops in the field for revolutionary France, Union and Confederate soldiers came from a civic culture that stressed the citizens' responsibility in a democracy. In the United States, democratic values had already been internalized and ingrained among soldiers through attendance at common schools and churches, reading of political newspapers, and participation in elections–teachings and practices all deeply grounded in democratic assumptions and rhetoric. For soldiers reared in a culture that triumphed popular sovereignty, service in the war was an extension of their duty as citizens; coercion or material reward provided less persuasive inducements to face death than would the conviction of the legitimacy and justice of the cause. In this type of army, a "nucleus of highly politically aware soldiers" was essential "to keep up morale and define the issues that were at stake in the struggle" (p. 2). The idealist subgroups in both armies thus "defined the political ideas for the rest of the soldiers," Frank concludes. "They read and interpreted the news for their illiterate comrades. They led discussions around the campfire. They were the political backbone of a people's army" (p. 39).

Obviously, Frank finds the two sides' combatants presenting conflicting justifications for the war. Southern soldiers "believed they were victims of the North's determination to interfere in their institutions," while Union troops saw themselves "defending democracy against a section of the country whose civic culture was alien to the North's democratic principles" (p. 62). Yet Frank highlights the different views of politically aware soldiers in both armies by stressing the common characteristics of the "people's armies." The loyalty to the cause of their commanding officers, for example, was a persistent topic in the soldiers' writings, and the ranks did not hesitate to criticize their leaders if their poor quality threatened the

prospects of success. Soldiers likewise tried to maintain close ties with friends and family on the homefront while keeping watch on civilian politics at home and behind enemy lines. Most troops expressed satisfaction with their commanders but offered perceptive assessments of their characteristics; Northern soldiers came to appreciate generals like Grant and Sherman who "matched the ideal of the unpretentious democratic-republican soldier" (p. 46), yet Southerners' universal dislike of Braxton Bragg presaged the condemnation of later historians. Homefront conditions and politics, however, helped to sustain the morale of the Union forces while frustrating and aggravating Confederates. Self-serving political rivalries, battlefield reverses, economic hardship, regressive tax policies, and class-based conscription laws convinced many Southerners that their government "was in the hands of an oligarchy, a regime devoted to bestowing privileges on the few while conferring only obligations on the many." Northern soldiers, meanwhile, retained confidence in civilian political affairs and continued to assume that "their government worked for the general interest" (pp. 84-85).

Most striking, Frank finds the experience of the war and the popular character of the armies contributed to a radicalization of the soldiers' political outlooks. "[W]ars between peoples could only be justified if great issues were at stake," he contends, and "once the people took up arms, the conflict could never be limited" (p. 142). Blaming the war on the rapaciousness of the South's ruling planter class, Northern soldiers came to advocate "unrestricted violence" to "sweep aside the old social structure of the South and build anew on the wreckage" (p. 50). Witnessing first-hand the realities of slavery reinforced the notion that the war was a crusade against "an evil people" (p. 152). Union soldiers thus came to view the fight as a punitive expedition against the civilian population; after the war, Northern veterans became leading proponents of a harsh reconstruction policy. Confederates had less opportunity to take the war to the Northern people, but Frank finds among Southerners a similar demonization of the enemy that found expression through the brutal execution of blacks on the front and the activities of local guerilla bands at home.

Uncompromising attitudes also required political conformity on the homefront. Because dissenters might undermine the morale of a popular army, the soldiers' demands for conformity encouraged civilians to adopt measures for suppressing dissent that ranged from informal ostracization to the formation of paramilitary groups to hunt out and, sometimes, torture suspected subversives. Also, because the troops recognized that the war was permanently changing the union as it was, soldiers in both armies accepted more quickly the enlistment of black troops for combat. More than 70 percent of the Union soldiers in Frank's study endorsed arming the black population, initially because black soldiers would help provide the manpower needed to crush the enemy, and later because they realized that black troops would undermine slavery and the planter oligarchy it supported. Southern soldiers, aware that offering emancipation for armed service would implicitly acknowledge blacks' "equality as fellow soldiers" (p. 54), expressed more reluctance and were divided over the suggestion. By 1864, however, "Southern soldiers came to support the idea" (p. 75). While government officials and high commanders hesitated to act on General Patrick Cleburne's proposal to arm slaves, lower grade and younger officers joined enlisted men in the realization that "desperate times called for desperate measures… " (p. 75).

Aside from the book's principal themes, *With Ballot and Bayonet* offers several observations that further illuminate modern understanding of Civil War soldiers. Volunteers supported the draft as a way to force every available man into service, but they distrusted conscripts and bounty men as "fair weather patriots who avoided their duty" (p. 18). Among Union troops, men from the more recently settled and presumably more racist western states expressed less respect for their commanding officers, aside from Grant and Sherman, and a greater willingness to support emancipation. George McClellan, who retained his popularity when removed as commander of the Army of the Potomac, lost credibility with the troops when he challenged Lincoln's re-election in 1864 on a Democratic party peace platform. Frank notes that his work expands, rather than contradicts, Linderman's notion of *courage* by showing that it was "a politically defined idea" involving service for "transcendental ends like saving freedom and republican government in the world" (p. 21). On the other hand, the author contends that the soldiers' determination to fight to the bitter end, their belief that the conflict involved questions of good and evil, and their desire to reconstruct the enemy produced a "total war," despite Mark Neely's suggestion that the term should not be applied to the Civil War.[5] Similar observations supplement Frank's case for the political awareness of the soldiers, and the overall result is an insightful and significant contribution to the literature on the era's military history.

Notwithstanding the book's contributions, some questions remain. Frank's analysis relies heavily on his

judgments about the political sophistication of the soldiers as revealed through their writings and quantifying their responses into specifically defined categories. The author clearly lays out his categories in the text, but the reader is given few specific examples of how Frank determined what type of statement would go into which category. Many of these statements are quoted directly when explaining his conclusions, but without briefly taking the reader through the author's analytical process the support for his conclusions remains somewhat vague. Also, much more space is devoted to the political outlook of Northern rather than Southern soldiers. This imbalance is to be expected, because of the predominance of Union authors of his sources, and because "by 1863 the North had to address more issues than the South did" (p. 32). At times, however, Frank's generalizations about the experience of soldiers in both armies is largely based upon his Northern sources. For example, when discussing the significance of elections as "solemn political festivals that affirmed republican government" (p. 93), Frank presents four pages of quotations from Northern soldiers on the importance of participating at the polls. For the South, one paragraph describes the opportunities for Confederate soldiers to vote in several state elections by proxy.

Electoral politics among Confederate soldiers touches on what this reviewer found most disturbing, the contradictory portrayal of Southern political culture. Paralleling contemporary social historians, the author describes Southern politics as "oligarchical" (p. 92), with wealthy, slaveowning planters exerting an inordinate influence on political, social, and economic affairs. While "the common people had gained political importance since the Jacksonian era" (p. 92), their participation reflected the shadow rather than the substance of power, for their "sense of political relevance had been fostered by the upper class's political flattery and by the development [of] the yeomanry's own sense of self-reliance and social competence ..." (p. 93). Thus, in contrast to the North's "participant" political culture, the South constituted a "passive 'subject' civic culture" (p. 81). Frank acknowledges that the expressions of political acuity among nearly the same proportion of Southern as Northern soldiers calls into question "the presumption that the South's inferior school system had made Confederate soldiers less politically articulate" (p. 34) and that "there was an atrophied party system in the South after the collapse of the Whig party" (p. 35). Yet the author does not build on these conclusions to challenge his basic presumption: maybe Southern political culture was not so passive and vacuous after all. If it was, then his contention for the vitality of political outlooks of soldiers in both Civil War armies seems less convincing. Frank could reconcile this apparent dilemma by discussing his findings in light of recent works in Southern social and political history, but the work is unfortunately not well grounded in the historical literature. Fine studies by Fred A. Bailey[6] and Paul Escott[7] are cited, but unconsulted are Eugene Genovese's sophisticated case for planter hegemony[8], Bertram Wyatt-Brown's analysis of an honor-bound Southern culture[9], and the works by J. Mills Thornton, III, William J. Cooper, Lacy K. Ford, and William W. Freehling[10] that describe a South in which democracy actually mattered. Until Frank's evidence is considered in light of the contrasting arguments of studies like these, his conclusions regarding the political consciousness and motivation of Southern soldiers will, for many scholars, remain suspect.

Nevertheless, *With Ballot and Bayonet* is an important work that deserves wide readership. Those skeptical of the continuing influence of the "revolutionary impulse" will most likely not be convinced because of the author's small sample, but they will find a clear, concise presentation of the case for the role of political ideology in the conflict. Scholars who contend that these ideals permeated in varying degrees throughout American society, meanwhile, will gain from this book a deeper understanding of why Civil War soldiers thought their cause worth fighting and dying for.

Notes:

[1]. Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (1952), 39.

[2]. Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (1987).

[3]. Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (1988); Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (1993).

[4]. James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For: 1861-1865* (1994), 6-7.

[5]. Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Was The Civil War a Total War?" *Civil War History* 37 (March 1991): 5-28.

[6]. Fred A. Bailey, *Class and Tennessee's Confederate Generation* (1987).

[7]. Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (1985).

[8]. Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of*

Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South (1967); Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (1969).

[9]. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (1982).

[10]. J. Mills Thornton, III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (1978); William J. Cooper, Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (1978); Lacy K. Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (1988); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (1990).

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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