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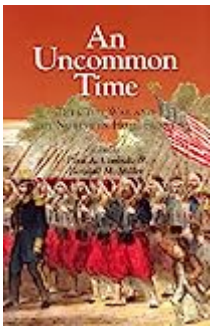


**Paul A. Cimbala, Randall M. Miller, eds.** *An Uncommon Time: The Civil War and the Northern Home Front.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2002. xxii + 362 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2195-0.

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## Remaking the Union

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Representatives of several philanthropic and medical organizations gathered in New York about a month after the fall of Fort Sumter to discuss ways of mobilizing "the already active, but undirected benevolence of the people toward the Army." They composed a letter asking Secretary of War Simon Cameron to charter the United States Sanitary Commission, which would organize the efforts of the northern civilians on behalf of the Union. The coming clash between the North and South, the letter predicted, would be "essentially a people's war. The hearts and minds, bodies and souls, of the whole people and of both sexes throughout the loyal States are in it."[1] *An Uncommon Time*, the latest anthology of essays related to the northern home front edited by Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, shows a number of the ways in which the Civil War did, indeed, become "a people's war," even in northern states relatively untouched by the sharp end of the conflict.

In their preface, Cimbala and Miller repeat Maris Vinovskis's 1989 warning that social historians were in danger of "losing" the Civil War. They also mildly chide historians for focusing almost exclusively on the southern home front. Although Confederates clearly suffered more in a material sense than Yankees, Cimbala and Miller rightly argue that "the South had no monopoly on a civil war striking the values and lives of people at home, and it ought not to have such a monopoly in histories of what the war meant to American values and lives" (p. ix). A number of historians have written about the war in the North; Grace Palladino, Phillip Paludan, and J. Matthew Gallman (who adds a useful afterword to this volume) come to mind. Cimbala and Miller's previous anthology, *Union Soldiers and the Northern Home Front: Wartime Experiences, Postwar Adjustments* (2002), as well as the other new and reissued volumes in Fordham's The North's Civil War Series (edited by Cimbala), have helped to fill this historiographical gap. Much remains to be done, but the present volume continues the headway made in recent years to fill that gap.

The editors modestly describe the present volume, comprised of a dozen essays by junior and senior scholars (all of whom have written or are in the process of writing books about the topics introduced here), as an

introduction to "some ways in which northerners experienced the war, some ways in which the war seeped into northern institutions, and some ways in which the war shaped the perceptions of northerners concerning themselves, their politics, and their government" (p. xx). It should be noted, however, that the book's subtitle is far too broad for the essays it contains. Indeed, although in their introduction the authors emphasize individual responses to the war and the vast human investment in the Union war effort, the essays tend to emphasize ideas over individuals. Each essay is a fairly narrow case study of an issue related to the war, not necessarily an analysis of how real people responded. One learns more about institutions, ideologies, and cultural assumptions than about the grass-roots war effort or the experiences of widows and orphans. This is not a bad thing; indeed, this is a very good book about important topics. But a little more thought to the presentation of the essays–a more accurate introduction and a division of the essays into three or four categories of change or experience–would have been welcome.

All in all, however, the editors did a fine job. They no doubt insisted on the crisp thesis statements, clear writing, and truly impressive research that are reflected in all of the essays–not to mention the presence of footnotes rather than endnotes! *An Uncommon Time* is an uncommonly useful anthology whose primary contribution–again, a product of the editors' vision of what home-front history should be–is its largely successful effort to bridge the gap between ante- and post-bellum history, situating the northern home front in the contexts of nineteenth-century American history.

Although the essays are all useful in their own ways, some work better than others. The only essay that does not seem to fit the anthology is Michael F. Conlin's fascinating piece on Joseph Henry, the Copperhead-leaning director of the Smithsonian; Henry's controversial activities are not made relevant to larger issues in the same ways that the other essays are. Bryon C. Andreasen's original work on church trials in mainstream Protestant denominations in the Midwest argues that such disciplinary actions were smoke screens for stamping out political dissent. While a great introduction to an unexplored topic, the essay relies a little too much on ambiguous and often incomplete records to make its point.

A few essays deserve special mention. Rachel Filene Seidman shows that northern women did not use the Civil War to confront the notion of female "dependence" in just one way. At least some working-class women challenged the idea by forming unions, while middle-class women accepted their dependent role but demanded that the government support them while husbands and sons were absent in the army. Melinda Lawson takes a pretty dry topic, namely the funding of the war through the sale of government bonds, and makes it relevant by showing how Jay Cooke's marketing strategy democratized the idea that "the nation might directly serve its citizens' material interests" (p. 119). In an essay covering a generation of New England racial attitudes and politics, Lex Renda shows the difficult road to equal suffrage in Connecticut, where opponents of black voting rights managed to hold off the extension of the franchise until the state was finally "reconstructed" during the Grant administration.

The other essays in the collection fit into two or three categories. Alice Fahs (on popular literature and the war), Earl J. Hess (on media representations of the war), and the late Peter J. Parish (on the evolution of religious justifications for the war) offer examples of the ways that the Civil War fit into and, in turn, altered antebellum cultural forms and assumptions. Michael S. Green (on Republican Party ideology) and Adam I. P. Smith (on the growing connection between partisanship and patriotism) take a look at how the war affected practical politics in the North. Finally, John Syrett (on the passage of the Confiscation Acts) and Kyle S. Sinisi (on Kentucky's war claims against the U.S. government) examine ways in which the war reflected attitudes about the federal government.

A common thread in many of these essays is the politicization of the northern home front. In some cases, politics expanded into previously rather apolitical arenas such as religion, gender relations, and investment. In others, politics were reshaped to meet the demands of the times, especially in the contexts of race, party structure, and even scientific research. As the authors suggest in their introduction, these essays "reveal several civil wars on the northern home front," and show "that in saving the Union, the war was also remaking it" (p. xx). That theme–that the war would significantly alter even as it preserved the Union–is the most pressing message to emerge from this important book.

Note

[1]. Henry W. Bellows, et al., *U.S. Sanitary Commission Report No. 1: An Address to the Secretary of War*, May 18, 1861. Posted at =`http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/lib/docs/686.htm`, accessed May 18, 2003.

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