

### **Straight From The Source's Mouth: Document Compilation Reflects Beliefs And Fears Of Wartime Americans**

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## Review

### STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE'S MOUTH

#### Document compilation reflects beliefs and fears of wartime Americans

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**Seidman, Rachel Filene** *The Civil War: A History in Documents*. Oxford University Press, 2000-11-01. ISBN 195115589

This is history as it should be read: history as told by the people who lived it. Not a listing of facts and figures. Not the words of distant observers-academic scholars, romantic revisionists, or popular storytellers. This history is not difficult, sentimental, or incomplete.

In **The Civil War: A History in Documents**, the past is totally in focus-relevant and overpowering. We cannot help but be affected. Rachel Filene Seidman, who teaches history at Carleton College and writes on northern women during the Civil War, introduces us to all kinds of people and encourages us to get to know them personally. And in presenting and discussing their diaries, letters, documents, prints, and photographs, she asks readers to interpret the wants, beliefs, prejudices, fears, and pain embedded therein.

Seidman advises, "Primary sources cannot be viewed simply as containing the truth. We need to ask questions about sources as we read them. What message is the author trying to get across? Who was the intended audience? How does that affect the way the author wrote?" Needless to say, history not only springs alive, but *readers* also come alive and take a creative role in it. Seidman reminds us as historians to try to have a clear mind and to be sensitive to our own biases.

The book's purpose is to acquaint us with an in-depth look at the Civil War, which is far from an easy task. Seidman's selections sweep from the war's early rumblings to its long and disappointing aftermath. But the text does not follow the daily path of the battles, because military history is actually only a small part of the story. For Seidman, the "core of the conflict" is slavery. It is what split

America in two and affected not just the soldiers, officers, and people in government-the voices we tend to know-but women, blacks, Native Americans, and observers off the battlefield. All these people struggled with the meanings of the war, government, and country-and, perhaps most of all, humanity.

While carefully selected photographs and prints are interspersed throughout the book, one chapter is entirely devoted to the images of war. Here, Seidman addresses how artists handled the limitations of the media as well as the incredible power of their creations. An extensive reading list, time line, text credits, and index are also included.

This work is part of a series intended for students at the high school level and above that includes volumes on the New World, the Depression and New Deal, imperialism, the Gilded Age, and the Cold War, with more to come. Don't be dissuaded by the dry title or textbook look; **The Civil War: A History in Documents** will cause you to pause, consider, and question this "wrenching, triumphant, and tragically flawed event."

*Carolyn P. Yoder is the senior editor of history at Highlights magazine.*