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Interview

ALL IS FAIR? LONNIE R. SPEER SHATTERS MYTHS WITH TALES OF MISTREATED POWS

Jewett, Leah Wood

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Lonnie R. Speer is a historian and lecturer whose expertise lies in the history of Civil War prisons and prisoners of war. He is the author of Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War (Stackpole Books, 1997). His latest book, War of Vengeance: Acts of Retaliation on POWs in the American Civil War, has just been released (Stackpole, 2002).

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): The Civil War has been portrayed as a romantic adventure. Memoirs, letters, and diaries from 1861 illustrate many soldiers' own vision of the war as heroic. How and why have the brutal details, such as the mistreatment of POWs, been left out of the story?

Lonnie Speer (LS): This war has been romanticized as farback as 1895 when Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* was published. The volunteers who eagerly marched off to war, however, realized warfare was horrible by 1862 and began to reflect as much in their writings. By then a few letters sent home did mention brutal acts that were committed by others. Understandably such occurrences were not something to be proud of. Those who committed atrocities were not apt to brag about it, talk about it, or dwell upon it. Additionally, most soldiers who witnessed such episodes preferred not to worry their families and chose to protect them from such unpleasantness. So it wasn't unusual for these fighting men to routinely omit from letters, journals, and even private diaries the morbid details in an effort to protect their families and perhaps to put it out of their own minds. Unfortunately what was left, in many cases, was a sanitized version of the events, which were researched years later. Those few soldiers who did write of witnessing such events were often accused of exaggeration or were regarded as such later by some historians. Another reason such events have been left out: it seems we went through a period that lasted at least through the 1950s in which the atrocities, the morbid details, and sometimes even the complete

truth about our history remained unwelcome without some effort to clean up the unpleasant details. After all, much of the information about the atrocities and mistreatment of which I write has remained in plain view, documented in the official records for over 135 years, but most historians stayed clear of it. No one cared to research it any further, similar to how the situation with the POWs and prisons themselves were ignored for many years.

CWBR: As you point out in your introduction to War of Vengeance, the public is unaware and historians are hesitant to accept the atrocities committed against POWs during the Civil War. What impact do you expect this book to have in both public and professional communities?

LS: In general, I hope the book will bring an awareness that these atrocities did in fact occur and that such acts were much more prevalent than previously thought. Specifically, I hope the book generates additional research and leads to the publication of more studies much like I think my book *Portals to Hell* did with inspiring individual studies of the different prison facilities.

CWBR: You write that acts of retribution were sanctioned at the highest levels of both the Union and the Confederacy. Why was this war reduced to a war of retaliation?

LS: The war had already lasted longer than anyone had originally imagined. I think both sides, out of desperation, eventually resorted to retaliatory acts looking for some kind of leverage, any kind to subdue the other side or to force them to comply with their demands, to somehow bring this war to a close.

CWBR: In War of Vengeance, you quote a Parisian correspondent reacting to news of the mistreatment of POWs: It seems incredible that Americans can today forget their boasts about the land which was to serve as a beacon-light to humanity. Did the public (both Union and Confederate) buy into the notion that the killing of prisoners was justified? How can we reconcile the treatment of Civil War POWs with our national values of freedom and justice?

LS: I think without much thought and in a fit of anger a great percentage, to some extent, did temporarily think so. I also believe the major newspapers of both sides eagerly fanned the unrestrained emotions among the public for a time. However, it seems a number of papers from both sides often encouraged the

notion one month and condemned it the next. The whole ordeal seems so devastating today because it was Americans executing and abusing Americans. But the simple fact that the people of this nation were able to come together and reunite after such devastation, after such treatment, is itself a prime example of why this country serves as a beacon to all of humanity.

CWBR: The Lieber Code was an attempt to distinguish civilized from savage war. When was the code implemented, and when was it considered inappropriate?

LS: The Lieber Code was used most often in the Union's dealings with partisan rangers, irregulars, and guerrilla warfare in general and in establishing martial law and military rule in the occupied areas. As near as I can tell, based on my research, it seems to have been implemented when it most benefited the Union and was considered inappropriate whenever its implication might serve the Confederacy. It stands to reason, however, that the team that makes the rules will slant them to their advantage.

CWBR: In your research, did you find one particular story or incident to be more compelling than any other?

LS: I have come across so many individual stories of courage and survival against unbelievable odds and have seen evidence of the remarkable resilience of the human spirit. Of course, there are just as many disheartening accounts of others who simply gave up and died when faced with less. I have developed some of both into magazine articles that will begin appearing soon, but I have finally realized that a collection of these accounts will lead to another book.

CWBR: Can War of Vengeance shed light on modern wars and the recent issue of POW status and treatment of captured al-Qada members in Cuba?

LS: Yes. I think it does. *War of Vengeance* attempts to dispel this idiotic notion that the Civil War was some romantic, colorful adventure. It was not romantic to over 56,000 men who died as POWs nor was it a colorful adventure for the more than 618,000 others who were killed or died of disease. It was a war as vicious as any other. People were killed and people were mistreated. At the same time, it parallels many events of our more recent wars. In WWII, American troops of Company I, 3rd Battalion, 157th Infantry, liberating thousands of Jews at the Dachau prison camp, lined up about 60 German prison guards, who had

come out with their hands up to surrender, and coldly shot them down as the newly liberated prisoners cheered. At No Gun Ri during the Korean War American troops of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, opened fire on a group of refugees in the dark. At daybreak all that was found were unarmed old men, women, children, and babies huddled together in lifeless piles. And more recently, former Senator Bob Kerrey acknowledged that during the Vietnam conflict on the night of February 25, 1969, he and his team of Navy SEALs opened fire on a group of civilians at Thanh Phong when they heard gunfire, and again only women, children, and babies were found dead afterward. Of course just as many documented cases can be attributed to the enemy. Germans lined up and shot surrendering Americans during WWII, the most infamous being the massacre at Malmedy, Belgium, and some Japanese soldiers are known to have killed simply for fun during the Bataan Death March. Evidence can always be found to prove that atrocities are committed by both sides in every war. But regarding the members of al-Qada now being held in Camp Delta at Guantanamo Bay, one could argue that any treatment that they receive is better than what they provide. The al-Qada do not take prisoners. Actions against U.S. soldiers, the murder of the passengers on the commercial airlines on September 11, 2001, and the treatment of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, are all prime examples.