

# The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction

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## Review

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**Baggett, James Alex** *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Louisiana State University Press, \$55.00 ISBN 807127891

Against the Tide

Traitorous veil lifted from Southern Unionists

For decades following the American Civil War individuals who opposed the Reconstruction policies of the Republican Party portrayed scalawags negatively, utilizing terms such as traitor or Judas Iscariot. Historian James Alex Baggett has attempted to rescue this most vilified group of Southerners from the inaccuracies and generalizations of history. He has succeeded. Utilizing a method of collective biography Baggett presents historians with a better understanding of this group of Southerners that helped shape political policy during one of the most tumultuous times in American history.

In an attempt to rescue the scalawags from their traitorous image, Baggett examined 742 scalawags through categories such as family background, education, religion, military service, and economic condition. This group of scalawags was not chosen at random, rather Baggett carefully selected his subjects from among the most prestigious, best-salaried, highest ranking officeholders. The author analyzed the motivations and contributions of these scalawags by placing them into geographic regions — the Upper South, the Southeast, and the Southwest. One of the most common methodological mistakes that historians have made concerning scalawags is to group them simply into the South. As Baggett points out throughout **Scalawags'** ten chapters, the backgrounds and motivations of the scalawags differed from region to region and state to state. For example, the author notes that ninety percent of Tennessee's scalawags served in the Union army or supported the Union during the war, whereas a majority of South Carolina scalawags fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War.

Chronologically the author begins in the 1850s and ends in the 1870s. The book's first three chapters examine the scalawags prior to the fury of the Civil War and the remaining seven examine the scalawags during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Perhaps the book's opening three chapters are the most crucial to understanding the remainder of the book as Baggett sets out to understand what influenced white Southerners to become scalawags and support the Republican Party. Most scalawags either supported the Whig Party or the Union wing of the Democratic Party prior to the Civil War. Also in the book's first three chapters the author points out that scalawags received decent educations and many of them enjoyed success in law and local politics. This conclusion counters the myth that scalawags rose to power by circumstance alone. Baggett has revealed that many scalawags did not actively support secession and with the advent of the war, they did everything that they could to stay out of the service of the Confederacy. Former Confederates such as General James Longstreet and noted Rebel guerilla John Singleton Mosby joined the Republican Party after the Civil War; however, men like Longstreet and Mosby were in many cases the exception. Many of the scalawags supported the Union government before Fort Sumter, through the war, and after Appomattox.

Baggett has consulted the majority of primary and secondary literature associated with this topic; therefore his bibliography is valuable in itself. Prior to the release of **The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction** this most important group that helped to shape Southern political policy has been given limited attention. Only a handful of books, such as Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins's *The Scalawag in Alabama Politics, 1865-1881*, have appeared to provide an objective resource for studying this group. Baggett's work will undoubtedly help to reshape the historiography of Southern loyalists during the Civil War and Reconstruction and is essential reading for scholars of that troublesome era of our history.

*Jonathan A. Noyalas is chief curator of manuscripts and photographs for the McCormick Civil War Institute at Shenandoah University and is part-time faculty in the history department at Virginia Tech. His first book, Plagued by War: Winchester, Virginia, and the Civil War, will be released early in 2003.*