

A Warring Nation: Honor, Race, and Humiliation in America and Abroad

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Review

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War and Honor, but not Honorable War

At first blush, Bertram Wyatt-Brown's posthumous publication, *A Warring Nation: Honor, Race, and Humiliation in America and Abroad*, is an odd book. For starters, Wyatt-Brown admits that the book is divided between civilian and martial honor, with the bulk of the material dedicated to the latter. This is strange only because the culture of honor that he outlines in his 1982 tour de force *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* explains honor as a vital element of the antebellum South. Honor, for white antebellum southerners, was a deeply regarded cultural construct that made a man's worth reliant upon the community's estimation of his character. In *Warring Nation*, Wyatt-Brown complicates the idea of honor by connecting its intricacies to race and humiliation in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Although the three interlocking themes propel the narrative forward, racialized honor is perhaps the most significant component introduced by Wyatt-Brown. By serving in the military, blacks could seize honor for themselves. However, as Wyatt-Brown admits, military service and black honor worked "in both advancing and holding back African American self-respect" (6). For starters, blacks did serve in the United States military, which allowed them an elevated status in their community, yet, upon their return home, whites often reacted violently against perceived threats to the racial order. The use of violence to maintain white honor in the face of black encroachment on the ideal were also within the realm of the honor culture, for humiliation was antithetical to the concept of honor. Post-Civil War lynchings of blacks, then, was not just physical intimidation, but "the point," argues Wyatt-Brown, "was to humiliate African Americans and to drive them from the political arena" (122).

Yet most of *Warring Nation* focuses on military conflicts that the United States engaged in the 20th century. Wyatt-Brown creates the bifurcated categories of “civilian” and “military” honor, and appears to be playing fast and loose with an analytical concept that he painstakingly traced three decades ago. Though the author generally refers to civilian honor as a cultural construct, he also employs the phrase “national honor” as a means of justifying war. While closely related to the antebellum sense of honor, national honor more or less meant national reputation. It did not necessarily mean “military honor,” a definition of which remains elusive. He points to Paul Robinson’s *Military Honour and the Conduct of War*, but fails to provide a summary of that author’s argument or an explanation of how he is drawing on that work to inform his own. At its most basic, military honor points to acquitting oneself admirably in battle. Military honor, in theory, begets civilian honor. The danger in developing these distinct categories, of course, is that by following American military adventures into the 21st century while using an antebellum concept to analyze those conflicts, he risks divorcing the vital nature of honor from the historical context that lent it its potency. Indeed, he begins his introduction by declaring that the use of honor in the United States has declined since its peak in the Civil War. Google n-gram also shows that the usage of words related to honor is also on the decline (though there has been an increase in the late 20th century). What Wyatt-Brown makes clear, however, is that honor is a complicated term that has taken on different meanings that he parses throughout the monograph.

Wyatt-Brown still finds plenty of instances in which honor, especially national honor, was called by politicians to justify conflict. Thomas Jefferson’s willingness to fight the Barbary pirates stemmed from his desire to maintain national honor, and the War of 1812 had to be waged, argued Henry Clay, to avoid “shame and indelible disgrace” (74). Of course Americans during the Civil War era called on honor to justify their cause, but as the United States propelled itself onto the international stage, its leaders used honor to justify military involvement. The Spanish-American War and entry in the Great War were imperative to national honor. Perhaps the defense of national honor as a justification for warfare is stretched too far; after all, economics and politics factored into these decisions. What’s puzzling, though, is Wyatt-Brown’s exclusion of the various Indian Wars in which antebellum America was ceaselessly engaged. Perhaps the author knows the conduct of those conflicts made any claim at national honor impossible. That did not stop Americans from using honor as a veil for abysmal behavior in warfare later on.

As his discussion reaches conflicts well into the twentieth and early twenty-first century, Wyatt-Brown focuses more on that atrocious wartime behavior by analyzing American actions, specifically the notion of humiliation. What he finds is not surprising: white soldiers and civilians resented black involvement in the armed forces because it allowed them to claim honor and the rights and protections owed to citizens. Much of Wyatt-Brown's analysis of American warfare after the Civil War is notable because he discusses the very dishonorable conduct of whites towards blacks in uniform and enemies. "If racism applied in the army to the treatment of black soldiers, so too were the native Filipinos subjected to humiliation," he writes (135). In the South, World War I draft boards filled their quotas with black soldiers (146), while African American soldiers returning from the WWII had to contend with white Citizens Councils, intent on using humiliation as a means of limiting integration (167).

Wyatt-Brown also provides comparative discussion of honor, first with German troops in World War I, then the Japanese code of *bushido*, and lastly the sense of honor encountered by American troops in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, *ihitiram* (and the defense of a woman's honor, *ird*). Perhaps it should come as no surprise that as America shrugged off its culture of honor, cultural interactions with places that still relied upon honor as a means of social organization would be fundamentally misunderstood.

In spite of the fact that the culture of honor that was pervasive in the antebellum South no longer exists, Americans still rely upon key words of the honor culture in order to justify warfare as an intrinsically necessary aspect of the national interest. Perhaps what Wyatt-Brown wished to convey in *A Warring Nation* is cautionary tale about how Americans justify wars. The detachment from a culture of honor does not necessarily mean that Americans can rely upon it. Far from it. Perhaps the United States, when it does declare war, should be more open and honest about the costs associated with its military action and treatment of veterans. Perhaps, in order to retain its national honor, the United States needs to account for its actions lest the reckoning is too terrible.

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