

CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: A CWBR Retrospective

Zach Isenhower

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Isenhower, Zach (2015) "CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: A CWBR Retrospective," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.2.02

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss2/2>

Feature Essay

Spring 2015

Isenhower, Zach *CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: A CWBR Retrospective*.

The past few years of the Civil War's Sesquicentennial have produced a mountain of exciting works that improve our understanding of the United States' period of deepest crisis. *Civil War Book Review* has done its part by keeping our readers up to date on the latest scholarship with our Sesquicentennial series of columns. Each column, featuring an historian of note discussing themes such as secession, leadership, war in the borderlands, memory, and economics, outlines the state of the field as well as new possibilities for future work. Our series is not finished yet. In the Summer issue, Professor Gregory Downs will examine Reconstruction and the legacies of the Civil War. Yet, as the Sesquicentennial series draws to a close, we offer here all of our columns in one place.

Moving chronologically from the war's origins, Christopher Childers examines the long debate over whether or not the war constituted an "irrepressible conflict" in his Summer 2014 column, "The Political Crisis of the 1850s and the Irrepressible Historians." Though the election of 1860 represented what Childers calls a "shattering blow" to Southern hopes for preserving the union, he notes that historians should take care to keep historical contingency in sight. Willingness for compromise had survived *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, Bleeding Kansas, and Harper's Ferry, and indeed lingered even after the first shots erupted.

Taking up the watershed 1860 election year is Randall Miller. His Winter 2013 column, "The Election(s) of 1860," outlines Democrats' inability to overcome sectional discord, Lincoln's problematic status as "a minority president who gained the Electoral College victory on a regional vote," and Republicans' moves to control national government following secession. Miller calls for more work on the election in "local terms," approaching 1860 not in terms of eventual disunion, but rather in terms of the expectations of voters—North and South—who turned out in record numbers.

Of course, disunion did follow the election of 1860, which Russell McClintock addresses in "Checking the Pulse of Secession Historiography," from our Summer 2011 issue. McClintock offers an impressive survey of secession scholarship ranging from Henry Adams to work on the horizon. Though McClintock sees a remaining need for a comprehensive study of the overall crisis, he finds the prognosis good.

Secession and war a reality by 1861, unionism remained a force in the South, if greatly diminished. Daniel Crofts' Fall 2011 column, "Unionism in the Slave States in Wartime," demonstrates the varied and conflicted nature of Southern Unionism. Some areas rejected the Confederacy because they were simply close to Union territory and the Federal army. Still others rejected secession on religious, economic or, despite the Confederacy's status as a popular white democracy, on political grounds. Offering a strong argument against historical perceptions of a monolithic South, Crofts also cautions readers against notions that the South was so internally conflicted that it was destined to crumble.

Anticipating the clash of Union and Confederate armies and continuing throughout the war in border states East and West, irregular and guerrilla warfare challenged notions before the war, as well as in memory, of martial romance and gallantry. Christopher Phillips' Winter 2015 column, "Unfurling the Black Flag in Civil War History," offers a fascinating look at what Daniel E. Sutherland called the "desperate side of the Civil War." Far from marginal or mere "loose cannons," recent scholarship has revealed these fighters as effective practitioners of political violence. Significantly, that violence did not end with the surrender of regular Confederate armies.

With the war underway, commanders on both sides failed to grasp the devastating new technological advances in artillery and rifled musketry, employing outdated tactics that cost thousands of lives, or did they? In "Strategy, Tactics, and Fighting the Civil War," from the Spring 2013 issue, Earl Hess highlights important work debunking that stubborn narrative. Hess calls for a return to the primary sources, so as to avoid repeating overused assertions, reminding readers that military history—properly reinvigorated with primary research—is vital to our understanding of the war as it happened in its own time, not as its tactics appear in the twenty-first century.

As the war wrought changes in tactics, strategy, and soldiers' experiences, science and medicine struggled to keep pace. Unsanitary conditions, butcher-like amputations, and a lack of understanding of disease and infection all entered the historiography as hallmarks of Civil War medicine. Alan Hawk explains a more complex reality of medicine during the war in his Summer 2013 column "Medicine and the Civil War." Recent work has demonstrated that although Civil War doctors and surgeons were slow to accept germ theory, they recognized the limitations of their practices and significantly improved rates of survival over the course of the war. More importantly, their efforts laid the foundation for a systematic approach to medical care by the turn of the twentieth century.

Not to overlook why individual soldiers were in the field implementing the tactics and hazarding hardship, injury, and death, Chandra Manning's Winter 2012 column, "State of the Field: Where are Union Soldiers Now, and Where in the World Should they Go Next?" surveys the tremendous amount of work done on soldiers' experiences in the past half-century. Manning succinctly outlines the debates over soldiers' ideological motivations (or lack thereof), as well as the roles religion, race, and gender. Work on the role of African American soldiers, who represented ten percent of the Union army, has made considerable headway. Manning also notes the need for more scholarship on veterans; something readers will be pleased to find has arrived in time for this issue of *CWBR*.

Returning to a wider lens, Barbara Hahn engages the argument that the North's economic and industrial might relative to the agrarian South rendered the eventual outcome of the war all but inevitable. "Did Economics Dictate the Outcome of the Civil War?" from the Summer 2012 issue, shows just how uncertain such an assertion would have seemed in 1861, or indeed 1864. A growing body of research illustrates a portrait of two sections equally unprepared for a lengthy war through at least the first two years. The possibility of European intervention, battlefield results, and the efficacy of naval blockade all shaped the war's outcome and all represent points of considerable historical contingency. Despite its disadvantages, "the Confederacy maintained the second largest army in the world for four years of extended warfare over half a million square miles," a significant feat hardly characteristic of a rebellion doomed from the start.

Once Southern independence did fail and the war ended however, the Confederacy seemingly only loomed larger in American memory, even as the war grew further removed from the present. In his Fall 2013 column, "The Lost Cause," Gaines Foster reviews ongoing and compelling work on the

Confederacy's place in American memory. Chief among the challenges Foster highlights is that the Lost Cause—often invoked to understand the Southern psyche or in context of white resistance to Civil Rights in the 1960s—exerts less a hold on American imaginations than often thought.

We hope readers will rediscover arguments and titles in these columns that they might have forgotten, or catch up on columns they may have missed. This work represents not an end, but an important starting point to a new wave of Civil War scholarship. *CWBR* is proud to have been a part of it.