

Citizen-Officers: The Union and Confederate Volunteer Junior Officer Corps in the American Civil War

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Review

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Bledsoe, Andrew S. *Citizen-Officers: The Union and Confederate Volunteer Junior Officer Corps in the American Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, \$47.50 ISBN 9780807160701

Citizen Soldier Ethos Held Civil War Armies Together

Civil War historians describe the armies of the Union and Confederacy as “volunteer armies”; it was a war for the destiny of the nation fought by the people of the nation. Andrew S. Bledsoe’s book *Citizen-Officers: The Union and Confederate Volunteer Junior Officer Corps in the American Civil War* explores the leaders of those volunteer soldiers. Bledsoe argues that there was significant change in the officer corps over the course of the war, including a great deal of impatience and unpreparedness in the early part of the war, replaced by sage veterans near the end of the war who knew how to motivate and, at times, temper the enthusiasm of their hardened men. Bledsoe’s contribution is valuable to all who study Civil War soldiers, providing numerous primary sources as evidence to sustain an argument that shows how junior officers were the mortar that held together both armies in the American Civil War.

The most important concept from Bledsoe’s book - one that he does not let readers easily forget - is that of the “citizen-soldier ethos.” By this, Bledsoe describes soldiers’ backgrounds in revolutionary ideology and their interpretation of the republican tradition (x). These soldiers volunteered to fight for their cause because they believed that it was their duty, wrapped up in language of citizenship. It mattered, too, that they were volunteers and not conscripts. Bledsoe writes, “voluntary consent was the essence of civic virtue, and a citizen’s choice whether or not to render military service was the difference between ‘subjectship and citizenship,’ or put another way, between liberty and tyranny” (6).

In order to make his convincing argument about the evolving experience of war for junior officers, Bledsoe puts forth 221 pages of text followed by another

seven appendices of various data. The appendix data appears in other places throughout the book to support Bledsoe's primary points. For example, Appendix 1 explores the antebellum professions of the junior officers (with skilled artisans and agriculture unsurprisingly at the top of the list). A few of the other appendices look at the attrition and casualty rates of both armies as well. None of the statistics were shocking, instead revealing much of what historians of Civil War armies already knew. It was helpful to have a sustained sampling of junior officers from both the Union and Confederate armies to illustrate both similarities and differences of the two sides.

What makes *Citizen-Officers* such an important book, though, is that it gives unequivocal legitimacy to concepts that seemed merely ideological. Other historians, such as James McPherson, have argued the importance of patriotism as a motivating factor for Civil War soldiers. But here Bledsoe carves out a particular subset of the soldier population and shows that it was extremely important for these soldiers that they were acting as citizen officers. It was their republican duty to do so. The qualitative comments in the form of excerpted soldier sources provides flesh and humanity to the statistical data provided in the appendices. It all comes together for a tangible, accessible, and interesting take on an underappreciated group in Civil War scholarship.

Quote after quote gives the reader the sense that junior officers, Union and Confederate alike, experienced an incredible transition throughout the course of the war. Initially they were idealistic and nervously unprepared. Later in the war, they had learned how to survive and how to help their soldiers survive. But what held them together with their men, even when it felt uncomfortable to lead, was the fact that they were all free citizens of a democratic nation. In the chapter on the making of the junior officer corps, Bledsoe explains that in the early part of the war officers were chosen by their men via democratic election. That caused dramatic moments in the early days of training, but after the baptism of fire at places like First Bull Run and Shiloh, soldiers quickly realized the importance of having officers who were best in combat situations, regardless of their personal popularity.

Tucked away in the middle of the third chapter of the book is a description of the officer corps that deserves to be highlighted here. The junior officers, "...formed the sinews and tendons that held the armies together and provided the emotional spark necessary for their respective armies to endure the ordeal of the Civil War" (71). Bledsoe explains many wrinkles of this sentiment, talking about

character and behavior, as well as the burden of learning new strategies and techniques. These officers had to motivate their soldiers, control them, feed them, keep them alive, and do all of this while dealing with the ordinary pressures of life as a soldier. Very few of them had any military background before joining to fight in the Civil War.

This book has its greatest value for scholars of soldiers and command in the Civil War. It would not be a good book for teaching at the undergraduate level and should be treated as a serious academic monograph for the purpose of advancing research. The book helps historians grasp the weight of command that rested on the shoulders of these officers; they felt the demands to live as a virtuous example to their men, all while directing their citizen volunteer soldiers into life-endangering combat. It is a book that engages readers in the heart of the Civil War, preferring to allow the voices of the soldiers to drive a narrative of significance to both national and regional history.

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