The American War: A History of the Civil War Era

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Review

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Gallagher, Gary W. and Waugh, Joan. *The American War: A History of the Civil War Era*. Spielvogel Books, \$29.95 ISBN 9780991037513

Surveying the Civil War

Brief histories of the Civil War abound, but *The American War: A History of the Civil War Era* will surely gain the attention of scholars due to its high profile authors. Readers will find therein exactly what one might expect from a book authored by the prolific historians Gary Gallagher and Joan Waugh: a well-written and comprehensive synthesis of the war and its aftermath.

Gallagher and Waugh have followed a traditional outline for narrating the war, with key chapters focusing on the coming of the war, the major military operations, slavery and emancipation, the idea of the citizen-soldier, and the role of women. Most recent texts address these same topics. The chapter on the antebellum era narrates the coming of the war at breakneck speed. Successive chapters take a more methodical approach toward analyzing the social, political, and military aspects of the war itself. The authors include two chapters on Reconstruction that hew closely to the traditional periodization of the era, whereas some historians are now pushing the boundaries of the Reconstruction era beyond 1877. The final chapter offers a marvelous account of Civil War memory, in which students and professors alike will find a much-needed brief synthesis of scholarship in this relatively new field. A brief bibliographical essay guides readers to classic as well as recent scholarship.

For the most part, readers will find few surprises in how Gallagher and Waugh have structured their survey. *The American War* distinguishes itself from other brief surveys, however, in its clear and concise presentation of a familiar story. The book also addresses a wide range of topics that have shaped Civil War studies in recent years. Readers will find traditional military history alongside newer approaches to understanding soldiers and the lives they led in the field. The treatment of the war's effect on civilian populations informs students of the

effect of war on the Union and Confederate citizenry. Gallagher and Waugh have found a way to offer their own judicious interpretation of Civil War historiography without losing the authoritative narrative quality of a well-written survey. They have succeeded in distilling their own considerable work, as well as that of other scholars, into a readable format.

As one would expect, *The American War* bears the hallmarks of Gallagher and Waugh's previous work in Civil War studies. It holds to Gallagher's contention, which has provoked a spirited debate amid a wave of new scholarship, that the North went to war in 1861 to preserve the Union; only with the strengthening of Confederate resolve and the extension of the war beyond initial predictions did emancipation become a "military necessity" and a "moral imperative" of the conflict itself (83). Likewise, the book's discussions of memory, the pivotal role of women, and the leadership of Ulysses S. Grant draw from Waugh's wide-ranging work on the history of the war.

In sum, Gallagher and Waugh have written a concise survey of the Civil War era that outlines our understanding of the war in light of current scholarship. Students especially will benefit from this brief and lucid introduction to this pivotal period of American history.

Christopher Childers is assistant professor of history at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. He is the author of The Failure of Popular Sovereignty: Slavery, Manifest Destiny, and the Radicalization of Southern Politics (University Press of Kansas, 2012), as well as articles and essays published in journals and essay collections. He is currently completing a book on the Webster-Hayne Debate and its meaning to American nationalism. Childers is a former editor of Civil War Book Review.