

The Business of Civil War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861-1865

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Review

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The Economics of the Civil War

Mobilizing Soldiers and the Homefront

It seems hard to believe there is anything left to say about the Civil War that has not already been stated and restated, chewed and digested, and finally spat out for consideration by those interested in the most cataclysmic period in American history. By my reckoning, there is at least one book about the Civil War published each day. And yet here, Mark R. Wilson says something new and vital about the war by illustrating the role of war and the military in American business and politics.

Nothing like this has ever been published. In a clearly written and informative fashion, the author examines the North's wartime economic mobilization within the political, cultural, and democratic forces that shaped it. The process of making contracts for war material is the central theme of the book as portrayed in the ongoing clash between the new creation of large-scale businesses and manufacturing and Thomas Jefferson's outmoded concept of the sole proprietor and individual farmer.

In his Proclamation of April 15, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers for three months, without Congressional approval. As a basis for the new army, every northern state had a volunteer militia force, of which none were well-officered, supplied, or drilled. Company officers were elected by the men, while regimental and general officers were appointed by the state governor. When the regiment was reasonably complete and at least partially equipped, it was forwarded to a training camp and placed under federal control. These regiments had to be supplied. As Commander-in-Chief of the Army and

Navy, Lincoln called for the enlistments, appropriated money for the purchase of arms and munitions, again without Congress's approval. Many Confederates believed that northern industry would collapse when cut off from its southern markets and its supply of cotton. However, just the opposite happened. Northern merchants and industry grew fat during the war. War demands stimulated production: for example, in Philadelphia alone 180 new factories were built during the years 1862-64. Generous government contracts and lavish expenditures helped to create a new aristocracy of profiteers, who became masters of capital after the war. Paper money and a high protective tariff that Congress imposed as a counterweight to internal taxation brought a sharp rise in prices, which the government made no effort to control.

The needs of supplying vast armies were great. As Wilson points out on the first page: In four years, the Union supplied its soldiers with roughly one billion rounds of small arms ammunition, one million horses and mules, 1.5 million barrels of pork and 100 million pounds of coffee, six million woolen blankets, and ten million pairs of trousers. Given such figures, it is not difficult to conclude that the million-man Northern army was, as one scholar has put it, the largest, best equipped, best fed, and most powerful war machine ever assembled in the history of the world to that date.'

Business and manufacturing became the behemoths of the economy, causing controversies. Greed and temptation led to jurisdiction of contractors being placed under military law, as well as prosecution of several by courts martial for attempts to defraud the government. As Wilson describes it, more profound than a series of complaints against individual criminal acts, Northerners' campaign against middlemen raised difficult questions about the legitimacy of commercial profit taken during a national emergency (149).

The initial chapter, quite naturally, describes mobilization for war and how little prepared the North was in providing for Abraham Lincoln's initial call for 75,000 troops up from a peacetime army of 16,000. The Lincoln administration initially looked to the states, as it did for troops, to acquire supplies as well as manage the wartime economy that flowed therefrom, until it was assumed by the United States government.

As the responsibility and jurisdiction fell on the federal government, the author describes the officers within the Quartermaster's Department who had the ultimate responsibility in determining the success or failure of this part of the

war effort. By describing the problems they faced, Wilson provides the backgrounds of the members of the Quartermaster's Department that did so much to maintain a level playing field. A first-hand view of the evolution of the Quartermaster's Department prior to 1860 under the attenuated tenure of Thomas S. Jesup is given. The men who ran the North's war economy were shaped by the logistical challenges associated with managing the army's operations prior to the war.

An excellent discussion follows about the efforts to balance government and private enterprise. Debates concerned maximizing efficiency while trying to equitably distribute contracts; government manufacturing; and the employment they provided communities struggling with the loss of manpower to the military.

By the book's end, it becomes apparent that notwithstanding the demobilization of the North's military economy after Appomattox, the methodology used for wartime mobilization became the rule in transforming the nation in the decades after the war. While the Civil War reader follows the movements of armies and decisions of generals, it is refreshing to see an examination of what made the Northern armies operate and function.

If Wilson's book feels unlike most Civil War books and sounds contrary to the usual military rhetoric, it is not because it affirms that war is hell. There is never any doubt in this book that the country needed to fight this war and that it was necessary; but it is the cost of such necessity that defines *The Business of Civil War*.

Frank J. Williams is Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island and Founding Chair of The Lincoln Forum. His latest book The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views û Political, Social, and Pictorial, which he wrote with Harold Holzer and Edna Greene Medford, was published by Louisiana State University Press in April 2006. He is a member of the U.S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.