

### The View From the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers

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## Review

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**Sheehan-Dean, Aaron , ed.** *The View From the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers*. The University Press of Kentucky, \$40.00 hardcover ISBN 9780813124131

### Common Men in Combat

What was it really like to be a common soldier in the American Civil War? Scholars from Bell I. Wiley to James M. McPherson have studied this question over the decades, as have legions of Civil War buffs. A new collection of essays titled *The View From the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers* discusses the discussion with nine stimulating articles from the next generation of Civil War historians. In total these are a very interesting guide to current trends in the scholarly literature on the titanic struggle that defined America.

Chandra Manning leads off with a look at how Union soldiers dealt with the issues of slavery, race, and emancipation. Her thesis, now expanded into a significant new book, is that Yankee troopers had little idea about what role the slaves would play in the struggle. In time and after the heat of combat and tours of duty in the South, many became convinced that the peculiar institution had to be destroyed in order to preserve the Union. The boys in blue, in Manning's view, were the first Americans to deal with the question of race in the mid-1860s, and that they had at least the potential to lead a reunited nation into some form of racial equality. That this did not happen seems to be the war's greatest missed opportunity.

Two essays follow up on the theme of armies and their connection, and impact, on the home front. Lisa Laskin examines how civilian Confederates may have degraded the morale of the Army of Northern Virginia. She concludes that by 1865 the folks at home were often the most capable of weakening soldier resolve and causing desertion. Laskin sees the lack of will to continue the fight as almost a rebel stab in the back that depleted Lee's army as the war reached its climax. On the northern side, Timothy J. Orr sees Pennsylvania troops as being

so hostile to anti-war Democrats behind the lines that political violence was a frightening possibility. Partisan politics in the Keystone State and the rest of the North did not end with the firing on Fort Sumter. Ongoing friction between the home front and the front line, according to Orr, could have indeed turned into another civil war.

The religious life of soldiers blue and grey has attracted the interest of an increasing number of historians in recent years, and *The View From the Ground* presents two such studies. Kent T. Dollar discusses Christian soldiers in both armies in the early months of the war, and finds that camp life tended not to diminish the faith of the devout. Clinging to religious traditions in the forms of church services or bible study became an important coping mechanism as civilians became soldiers. These men set the stage for the wave of revivals and religious activity that swept through both Union and Confederate forces by the beginning of 1863. David W. Rolfs analyzes how Union troops had to reconcile their religious ideals with the hard realities of life in the ranks and in the crucible of battle. Christian soldiers were pressed to become members of a very secular army and, in theory, kill their fellow man on command.

The motivation to smite such enemies is the theme of Jason Phillips's piece on Confederate perceptions of the Union foe. In his view the struggle was far from being a war without hate between the combatants. Rebel troops in many cases truly despised what they considered to be hordes of invading Yankee barbarians. Such abhorrence only increased after the Emancipation Proclamation and the North's adoption of a hard war strategy. These veterans, contrary to popular belief, carried this rancor in their hearts after Appomattox and on into the post-war South.

The meaning of the War Between the States and its place in American memory is not neglected in this volume. Charles E. Brooks uses the experience of a luckless colonel in the Confederate Fourth Texas Infantry Regiment to argue that rebel soldiers insisted on being led by officers they respected but not driven into battle. He sees southern enlisted men as true Jacksonians with ambivalent attitudes toward members of the elite who might command them. These soldiers were fighting, according to Brooks, for a republican society far more than for the interests of the slaveholding aristocracy. Such wartime conflicts continued on into Reconstruction and often centered on conflicting claims of battlefield credit. Kevin M. Levin looks at competing memories over which troops, Virginians or South Carolinians, did the most to repel the Federals in the 1864 battle of the

Crater at Petersburg. Such veterans' feuds, according to the author, helped the ex-Confederates deal with the reality of defeat by focusing on past military valor.

These essays are well-written and succinctly argued, and make a contribution to our understanding of the greatest war in American history, and how it was influenced by those who fought in it. However, nothing appears on the experiences of African-American soldiers, and here the editor missed an opportunity for a more comprehensive volume. Such an omission is hard to understand considering how much work has been done, and is being done, on the black experience in the Civil War. This criticism aside, *The View From the Ground* helps the modern reader to understand what motivated and sustained these brave men as they faced the greatest challenge of their lives.

*Robert A. Taylor is Associate Professor of History and Chair of the Humanities and Communication Department at the Florida Institute of Technology. His latest book is Florida: An Illustrated History.*