

What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War

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Review

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Manning, Chandra *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$26.95 hardcover ISBN 9780307264824

Why They Fought

Civil War Soldiers and Slavery

Chandra Manning opens her enlightening and important book with three quotations. The first is from the regimental newspaper of the Thirteenth Wisconsin Infantry Regiment in February 1862: The Fact that slavery is the sole undeniable cause of this infamous rebellion, that it is a war of, by, and for Slavery, is as plain as the noon-day sun. The second is from the regimental newspaper of John Hunt Morgan's Confederate Brigade in November 1862: [A]ny man who pretends to believe that this is not a war for the emancipation of the blacks . . . is either a fool or a liar. The third is from the camp newspaper of the Fourteenth Rhode Island Heavy Artillery, a black regiment, in May 1864, on the black soldiers' obligations: [U]pon your prowess, discipline, and character; depend the destinies of four millions of people and the triumph of the principles of freedom and self-government of this great republic. For Manning, such samplings of soldiers' writing represent the fundamental fact that right from the beginning soldiers knew that the war was about slavery, which they understood not as an abstraction but, rather, as the actual enslavement of human beings in the United States based on race (3).

Manning makes a compelling case that the war was fought with pens as much as guns in a democratic society with few constraints on soldiers' writing home. Civil War soldiers wrote profusely not only about themselves but for themselves, so that reading their accounts of life in camp and battle promises rare insight into the real war as the soldiers understood it. To discover that understanding, Manning read widely in numerous archival collections of soldiers' diaries and correspondence and in runs of regimental newspapers (a source Civil War historians have surprisingly ignored). She includes a wide array

of ordinary soldiers in her canvas—native-born and immigrant Union enlisted men, non-slaveholding and slaveholding Confederate soldiers, and black Union troops (mostly former slaves), and spreads her reach to embrace soldiers from the western theater in equal measure to the more studied armies in the eastern theater. In her research she found that soldiers wrote often and unabashedly about slavery. Rather than being ancillary to matters of states' rights, republican ideals, faith, and family, slavery went to the marrow of soldiers' thinking about the war's cause and consequence.

White Union enlisted men, Manning argues, opposed slavery from the beginning, even as they viewed blacks as inferior. They tried hard to separate the issues of slavery and black rights, but the more they saw of slavery in fact, the more they came not only to detest the institution but to empathize with the slave. White soldiers found the break-up of slave families and sexual abuses of slavery especially obnoxious and proof of slavery's corrupting effects on a supposedly Christian people who would tolerate such outrages. Seeing slavery up close made palpable all the antislavery images of a slave power and intensified soldiers' commitment to rid the country of the scourge and punish the slaveholders who had brought on the war with their arrogance and avarice. Significantly, by Manning's reckoning, Union soldiers marched in advance of their officers, political leaders, and civilians—save abolitionists—in pressing for a war of emancipation. They believed there could be no salvation of the Union without the elimination of slavery. Indeed, many soldiers thought that God was punishing America with war because of the sin of slavery.

In the fulcrum year of 1861 to 1862, before Antietam and Lincoln's announcement of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Union soldiers used their letters home and their camp newspapers to lobby for emancipation that would liberate America by freeing it from all that slavery represented. Support for emancipation ebbed and flowed depending on battlefield fortunes (it was most ardent after Gettysburg), and Union soldiers from border slave states generally opposed emancipation and the use of black troops. Some soldiers also doubted the constitutionality of emancipation by executive order. But, overall, in Manning's estimation support for emancipation remained strong and sustained the Union war effort. Although Manning does not say so, the soldiers' push for emancipation no doubt helps explain their continued support for Lincoln as war president, a support that proved critical in 1864 when emancipation and the war's progress threatened Lincoln's re-election. Also, though Manning does not press the matter, such commitment to ending slavery likely also distanced soldiers

from the home front, where emancipation was a more contentious issue. Gerald Linderman, among others, has argued that the hardening of soldiers to the horrors of war and demands of fighting alienated soldiers from the people at home who could not understand new definitions of courage and country forged from battle experience; perhaps, too, the soldiers' hatred of slavery made them different men than what their communities had sent off to war. If the Union soldiers did not agree on the extent of freedom to be accorded to blacks, they did agree that slavery was wrong and had to go. Many were willing, in the words of one soldier, to fight till hell freezes over, and then . . . cut the ice and fight on if necessary to end slavery in America (49).

Blacks provided much of the impetus in converting antislavery sentiment into demands for emancipation. Slaves who encountered Union soldiers witnessed against slavery by the scars on their bodies, the stories of many abuses while in bondage, and their willingness to serve the Union cause. By joining the Union army, blacks showed their mettle. They found common cause in fighting to save the Union and redeem it from the sin of slavery. But blacks also came to expect more from freedom than did white soldiers, and such expectations proved soon enough more than the Union generally, could, or would, provide. For them, emancipation meant more than freedom from bondage; rather, it meant equal rights before the law, education, and voting. Manning does not follow the soldiers into Reconstruction to chart how they worked to realize the promise of freedom—a topic needful of more study—but she does imply that Union veterans were sympathetic to black aspirations even if they did not endorse them fully or do much directly to translate emancipation into freedom.

Confederate soldiers, Manning insists, were bound together by the shared belief in the dangers of abolition, which powerfully united Confederate soldiers and motivated them to fight, even when they shared little else (31). Defending slavery was at the root of the Confederacy's reason to exist and the common soldier's commitment to the cause. Even as onerous conscription policies, inflation, and impressment of farmers' produce and livestock eroded popular support for the Confederate war effort and led to many desertions, the common soldiers' fears of the consequences of defeat and the freeing of slaves kept them from quitting altogether. The chants about a rich man's war and a poor man's fight notwithstanding, white nonslaveholding southerners stood up for slavery. To their mind, the Union advance heralded their world turning upside down, much like Haiti, with rape and pillage following emancipation. When they fought to protect their hearth and home, it was not because Union armies were

invading in a literal sense—though that came to be as the war progressed—but because Union armies invaded white privilege and racial hierarchy with the threat of abolition and all its attendant evils. For them, God demanded their defense of what they believed was a divinely sanctified way of life. For them, Manning writes, black slavery was vital to the protection of their families, interests, and very identities as men, and they relied on it to prevent race war (39). Thus, Manning concludes that slavery, [f]ar from splintering Confederates along class lines, provided the cement that held Confederates together even under almost trying circumstances (6). The Union's resort to using black troops further hardened white southerners' in the conviction of a diabolical abolitionist North bent on the complete destruction of southern society and Christian order. Simply put, whites of all classes feared a loss of mastery should slavery end.

Anyone who has read soldiers' diaries and letters to any extent—that is, the soldiers' immediate thoughts and concerns unfiltered by memory and postwar experience—will likely agree with her emphasis on slavery as what this cruel war was over. Her use of regimental newspapers should make even doubters agree that slavery superseded all other reasons for why soldiers fought. Indeed, because the question of slavery stood at the center of mid-nineteenth-century Americans' efforts to define what the republic was and ought to be, and even of what God expected of them and their country, the surprise is not that soldiers fixed on slavery but that so many students of the Civil War have not. Manning's book might not persuade the most rabid advocates of states' rights as the cause and rationale for the war to rethink their conviction in light of what the soldiers actually wrote, and it might not convince those who insist that soldiers fought on because of comradeship rather than commitments to ideas about liberty, republicanism, or even God's favor. But her book should cause every student of the war to read the soldiers' words on their terms, as she has done, and let them have them have the last word.

Randall M. Miller, a Professor of History at Saint Joseph's University, has written on various aspects of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Among his many books, he has forthcoming, co-edited with Paul Cimbala, a collection of essays on the unfinished Civil War.