

Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia

Aaron Sheehan-Dean

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Interview

WHY CONFEDERATES FOUGHT: FAMILY AND NATION IN CIVIL WAR VIRGINIA

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron

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Interview with Aaron Sheehan-Dean

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): You stress that Virginians demonstrated a true sense of Confederate nationalism that underlay the will of soldiers and civilians to fight the Union for independence. How did this sense of nationalism coalesce so quickly?

Aaron Sheehan-Dean (ASD): In relative terms, this sense of nationalism did develop quickly — it had taken several decades of vigorous work to build a coherent sense of American nationalism in the years after the constitution was ratified, as David Waldstreicher, among others, has shown — but I try to stress the extent to which it took time during the war to create a sense of collective purpose. A chief aim of my book is to distinguish between the impulses that spurred secession and the immediate mobilization of troops in mid-1861 and the longer commitment that kept soldiers in the army through four years of brutal warfare. Building on the work of many others, I argue that secession and mobilization in the Upper South proceeded from the binary nature of America's political system in 1861. With the Lower South already gone, the choice of staying in the Union (and being compelled to participate in contributing troops to an army that would invade the South) or joining the Confederacy became no choice at all for most white Virginians. Similarly, in the immediate rush of enthusiasm after the firing on Fort Sumter and, more importantly, Lincoln's militia call, men volunteered with no thought of a four year war that would kill nearly two-thirds of a million people. Southern nationalism was an inchoate phenomenon in 1861; in the Upper South, the more immediate fears revolved around the uses to which Lincoln might put his new army.

The sense of nationalism that I describe emerged as white Virginians came to understand that the war would be fought in earnest. Most white people, north or south, did not anticipate emancipation at the outset of the conflict, but the stakes of the war changed dramatically after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. At that point, white southerners saw that Union victory meant the destruction of the central institution in their society. More than any single act, this helped build support for Confederacy. In Virginia, defense of home played an important role — soldiers were often fighting in or near neighborhoods in which family members lived — and this meant that support for the Confederacy was support for one's community and home. Judging from the letters and diaries I read, neither Virginia soldiers nor their families adopted the attitude advanced by some historians that the best way to protect one's family was to desert or otherwise encourage the end of the war. To the contrary, most of the material I looked at indicated that Virginians understood the necessity of a collective response. They defined remaining in the army as an act of loyalty to their families as well as the state. I lean heavily here on David Potter's argument that loyalties to family, community, and region usually underlie and strengthen national loyalty rather than weaken it. The nature of the war in Virginia — involving invasion and occupation — also created deep animosities among most white residents and this bolstered their commitment to independence. People were by no means happy with all of the government's policies or its leaders — it was not a blind loyalty that I describe — but on the underlying issue of independence or reunion, most whites strongly supported fighting for independence.

CWBR: Do you agree with Drew Gilpin Faust that the nature of Confederate nationalism brought about its own demise?

ASD: While I think that Faust is right that Confederate nationalism generated forces that proved hard to control as the war progressed, I believe that the Union military effort played a greater role in Confederate defeat than did the intellectual or social tensions within southern society. I recognize that deep conflicts — along racial, gender, regional, ethnic, and class lines — hampered the Confederacy's effort to fight. These forces were real and were powerful, but the evidence I've seen suggests that most white Virginians were willing to accept what they viewed as temporary problems in the interests of defeating the North. As Faust and others have shown, Confederate nationalism was beset by paradoxes, but so too was the northern variant of American nationalism.

Likewise, northern society suffered from serious class, ethnic, and racial tensions. To a certain degree, the war's outcome encourages us to look for explanations of Confederate defeat — "their people were divided so they couldn't have won" — and northern victory — "their cause was just and they couldn't have lost" — that would be treated much differently by historians if the war's conclusion had been different. The tension between state rights and a strong nation-state in the South did consume the Davis administration in long arcane debates with obstructionist governors, but I don't think the South "died of democracy" as David Donald famously put it. As George Rable has shown in his book on Confederate politics, Lee and Davis, both strong nationalists during the war, effectively marshaled the resources they needed to resist the Union for four long years. This conclusion creates an interesting point of departure for considering how Confederate nationalism gives way to a post-war southern nationalism, an issue that Anne Rubin explores perceptively in her recent book.

CWBR: Your description of camp life emphasized the democratic nature of Confederate military life, particularly in the popular election of officers. Some historians cite this as a weakness of the Confederate military structure. But in what ways did it represent a strength?

ASD: It represented a strength because it empowered the men to feel involved in the institution that determined their fates. I see this process as parallel to the expansion of voting rights in southern states in the decades before the Civil War. Some scholars argue that universal white manhood suffrage meant very little because elites still controlled the political process. This argument hinges on defining meaning mostly through representation in office and class-based issues such as tax policy. While policies are obviously crucial for determining the responsiveness of government — and citizen's faith that that government is protecting their interests — most sources reveal that participation in the system was enormously important. By 1850, the country was at the end of a very long rearrangement of power relationships that stemmed all the way back to the American Revolution and while southern slaveholding elites continued to dominate political offices, the political system required the support and participation of common men. In Virginia, the slow erosion of policies that favored Tidewater slaveholders and the gradual empowerment of non-slaveholding voters and western counties demonstrated that policies too would shift as politics itself opened up. Southern men at the time regarded their right to vote as both important in its own right and as a symbol of the equality among white men (though officeholding elites may well have disagreed). That

sense of autonomy shaped how yeomen whites responded to the election of Lincoln and the ensuing secession crisis. Once in the army, maintaining that sense of autonomy was crucial to keeping men in the ranks. The Confederate army, like all armies, was a hierarchical institution and supercilious officers ran the risk of alienating those men upon whom the army relied. The popular election of officers carried over a familiar democratic mechanism from pre-war days that reinforced the sense of common purpose among white soldiers. In terms of significance, this feature of Confederate army life — coupled with the generally effective leadership provided by the army's junior officer corps — outweighs the incidents of incompetent officers sustained in office because of their popularity.

CWBR: The complex and variable relationship between the military and civil society in Virginia constitutes one of the major themes of your book. As you argue, the presence of Union soldiers and their use of hard war tactics tended to strengthen the resolve of soldiers and civilians to resist. But how did the presence of Confederate soldiers strain the civil-military relationship?

ASD: Usually, Virginia civilians were as unhappy to see the arrival of the Confederate Army in their town as they were Union forces because they put enormous strain on the infrastructure of towns, consumed already scarce food and medical supplies (to say nothing of firewood), and generally created havoc with civilian life. Few people knew this better than soldiers, who well understood the impact they had on the regions through which they traveled. A great piece of evidence to this effect came from a Confederate soldier who wrote to his mother that he hoped the army would not come near her home, for fear the soldiers would eat up her food. My argument here draws on the many excellent community studies of Virginia locales that provide ample evidence of the destabilizing influence of the army. Steven Tripp's study of Lynchburg reveals the problems of policing and regulating large numbers of mostly idle soldiers. Daniel Sutherland's book on Culpeper shows how effectively the army absorbed the supplies of a region. Although most white civilians knew that the army needed supplies to function, they still resented the impunity with which quartermasters seized foodstuffs and other goods. This dynamic put great strain on the relationship between civilian and military relations

CWBR: In the antebellum southern society, racial unity among whites tended to alleviate social and class tensions by making whiteness an equalizer of free people. Yet in the book, you cite examples of how racial unity did not

facilitate social unity. Did the war cause this change?

ASD: I tried to take account of the full spectrum of factors that shaped the relations among white people. Race was undeniably central and the advantages of being white did much to alleviate the other forces that worked to separate people. But people at the time did not think solely in terms of race. For instance, in Virginia, regional identity exercised significant influence on relations among whites. In the antebellum period, regional antagonisms û built on generations of unequal allocation of power and resources within the state û had seriously undermined white unity within the state. Efforts in 1830 and again in 1851 had reduced tensions but did not equalize politics or diminish the resentment of western voters. Accordingly, at the war's start, easterners and westerners distinguished themselves within the army and frequently derided each other's martial abilities. One of the interesting effects of the war in Virginia was to dilute this feeling over time. Setting aside those die-hard Unionists along the Ohio River and in the panhandle of western Virginia, many western Virginians abandoned their animosities and endorsed a new definition of Virginian that revolved around loyalty to the Confederacy.

CWBR: The national culture of sacrificeùas you describe itùseems to have a close link to the concept of southern honor. How did honor fit into the war for both soldiers and civilians? How did the presence of Confederate deserters and stragglers challenge the notions of national sacrifice and honor?

ASD: I am elaborating here on work done by other scholars who seek to explain the larger cultural practices and beliefs that underlay white Virginians' willingness to keep fighting despite such high costs. The scale of suffering and death in the Civil War was enormous and it is crucial that we understand how individuals and societies processed that loss. Several recent works have explored how people of both sections accomplished this after the war û John Neff's excellent study on commemoration of the dead, for example, reveals the social, cultural, and political complexities of grieving. I wanted to explore how people accomplished this while the war was going on. Civil War deaths were awful experiences so it will not surprise most people to learn that the Confederate government encouraged civilians to view soldiers' deaths not in their horrible particulars but as a glorious sacrifice for the nation. Confederate leaders connected battle deaths with the pre-war ethos of honor, which emphasized the necessity of physical sacrifice to the integrity of one's family and community. I was interested to see the extent to which civilians undertook this process of

creating meaning on their own, without direction from elites. One of the examples I give is of Fredericksburg, which suffered invasion and looting by Union soldiers in December 1862. After the battle, citizens from all over the Confederacy sent donations to the town's mayor and lauded the victims, as they saw them, of Union barbarity as exemplars of Confederate sacrifice. Because this sort of cultural practice sustained individuals and communities through experiences of great trauma, it played a crucial role in prolonging the war.

Deserters can be thought of in two ways, as I believe they were during the war. Some men who deserted probably would have claimed (because we have so few first-hand explanations of the experience of desertion there are few clear generalities we can draw about this process) that they were continuing to fulfill the dictates of honor by going home to protect their families. Others, whose motivations for deserting may have been less clear, can be seen as rejecting the ethos of honor altogether. Honor was one of many value systems operating in antebellum America and it never universally adopted, even in the South. Those men who deserted the Confederacy to serve in Union armies may well have never subscribed to notion of honor before the war or may have decided that self-preservation or what they perceived as an unfair war invalidated the system as most white men understood it.

CWBR: Virginians witnessed so many pivotal battles of the war from within their state, including some stunning Confederate victories that galvanized both soldiers and civilians. How did the news of the war in the western theater—hardly as promising as the eastern theater—influence the opinions of soldiers and civilians?

ASD: Virginians tended to stay focused on their theater of war. They had good reasons for regarding the eastern theater as the more important one—the presence of both federal capitals convinced most northerners and most foreign observers that this was the case as well. That said, they followed events in other regions very closely. Generally, they lamented the erosion of Confederate control in Tennessee, Union control of the rivers, and, throughout 1864, the progress of William T. Sherman's army into Georgia. Though depressed by the inability of Confederate commanders to mount an effective defense of the region, this only made most Virginians cherish still more the success of Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. The contrast between the two sections probably made most Virginians overconfident in the ability of Confederates to continually resist Union advances in their own region. This attitude can be seen in the

reaction of Shenandoah Valley residents to the successful Union invasion in late 1864 led by Philip Sheridan. Confederates were of course angry and concerned about their fate, but their initial reaction was one of shock. Most seem to have believed that Union victory in the East was impossible. Grant's effectiveness at forcing Lee back to Petersburg and initiating a siege, precisely what Lee had worked for years to avoid, likewise stunned residents in the eastern part of the state.

CWBR: By late 1864, the Confederacy seemed destined to lose the war. You describe how soldiers and civilians recognized this and ought to assign blame for failure—in no small part by soldiers blaming civilians. How did this civil-military rift affect the Confederate nation? Did it persist after the defeated Confederate soldiers came home?

ASD: The humiliation of defeat manifested itself even before the war ended. By late 1864, Virginia soldiers recognized that they were trapped in Petersburg, a condition that would likely end with their eventual defeat. Recriminations and blame flowed in several directions. Infantrymen lashed out at artillery units that maintained fixed (and usually comfortable) positions along the safe high approaches to Richmond. Men from both branches derided cavalymen, who seemed to use their mobility mostly to obtain better food. And soldiers of all sorts criticized civilians for failing to sacrifice enough on behalf of the war effort. This was preposterous — most Virginia civilians suffered enormous hardship and loss during the war — and soldiers knew it, but frustration seems to have overwhelmed them. This process indicates how easy and dangerous it is for either civilians or soldiers to abandon their ability to empathize with the experiences and attitudes of each other. My research doesn't go far enough into the post-bellum period for me to make very sound generalizations but from what I can tell, the attitudes described above disappear quickly after Appomattox. Although some people spent years (sometimes decades) identifying who (other than themselves) was to blame for Confederate defeat, the reality of reunion and more importantly, emancipation, forced white southerners to look ahead rather than back in the immediate aftermath of the war.

CWBR: In ways reminiscent of the work of distinguished historian David M. Potter, you utilize hindsight—the historian's chief asset and liability, as he put it—to inform your work. How has hindsight led us to incorrectly understand the Confederate war effort?

ASD: The Civil War is one of the events more thoroughly confused by hindsight than almost any other in American history. Although I think this problem is in some ways more acute with regard to understanding the North, hindsight certainly offers both perils and promise for understanding the Confederacy. The most obvious interference hindsight produces is with projecting our knowledge of the war's outcome back into the conflict. I'm guilty of this as well, suggested by my answer just above. We know that Confederates lost; surely they must have been able to see that outcome before it actually happened. This sort of problem is inescapable in history and it is crucial that historians be able to use hindsight carefully to achieve a better understanding of the period or event under consideration, but the proper frame of reference for considering how Confederates were thinking about the war in late 1864, for instance, is not what happened in April 1865 but what came before it. In the East, Confederates had succeeded in holding off Grant's efforts to take Petersburg since early summer and this gave many the belief that they could continue to do so. The losses in Atlanta and Savannah and Lincoln's reelection forced them to reevaluate the future of the Confederacy, but immersing ourselves in their moment *not* ahead *is* the most reliable way to understand how they saw their position.

Another peril is misperceiving nonslaveholding Confederates as somehow similar to ourselves. Both because there has been less scholarship devoted to nonslaveholding whites before the war than either slaveholders or slaves and because nonslaveholders occupied a strangely liminal place in the antebellum South, we have a shallow appreciation for the complexities of their lives. Despite not owning slaves, most supported a war to protect the institution. This decision strikes many contemporary minds, fully habituated to a nation without slavery, as a bizarre one. The nature of life in the post-war South likewise complicates the story. The Populist Movement, in both its social and political forms, demonstrated a deep dissatisfaction among poorer southern whites and blacks with the organization of their world. A search for "origins" in this case inevitably turns to the ancestors of these agents of change. Given how their descendants acted in the 1880s, this line of thinking goes, perhaps these actors recognized that the antebellum and war-time South was organized and managed by slaveholding elites in ways that worked against the interests of nonslaveholders and their families. Populism, a seminal movement and moment in American history, must be held at bay while we sort through the attitudes and experiences of southerners before and during the war.

On the other hand, hindsight (and good archives!) gives us the ability to see aspects of southern society that were mostly invisible to participants at the time. A good example of this is the quantitative analysis of Virginia's enlistment and desertion patterns that I incorporated into the book. Aside from a few people in the War Department, no one actually knew how many men enlisted from each region and what their demographic profiles looked like. Like all good methodological tools, however, this one really only opens up more questions. Having data that correlates wealth and slaveholding with enlistment does not answer the question of whether the Civil War was a "poor man's fight," but it does provide historians with a better sense of context from which to evaluate the qualitative claims that this was the case made by participants themselves.

CWBR: Thank you.