

### Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia

John C. Inscoe

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## Review

Inscoe, John C.

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**Sheehan-Dean, Aaron** *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia*. University of North Carolina Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9780807831588

### Understanding the Relationship Between Homefront and Battlefield

One of the most durable debates regarding the course of the Civil War is whether or not a loss of will among the southern populace was central to Confederate defeat. Aaron Sheehan-Dean enters that fray by examining a crucial constituency — Confederate troops from Virginia. Having originated as a dissertation under the direction of Gary Gallagher at the University of Virginia, Sheehan-Dean's study not surprisingly argues against any such deterioration of support for the war or for the nation that it upheld. Through a meticulous analysis of soldiers' shifting morale and commitment over the course of the war, he argues that white Virginians entered the war fairly united and that the combatants among them continued to embrace the cause for which they were fighting, though their reasons for doing so changed considerably over the war's duration.

Sheehan-Dean suggests that the longer the war lasted and the greater the sacrifices demanded of the state's civilians and increasingly battle-scarred troops, the stronger the commitment among the latter to see it through to a successful conclusion. They remained optimistic at least through the summer of 1864 — the high tide for Confederate nationalism — based on both the military realities at the time, and on an ever evolving sense of patriotism and their own vested interests in the aims of the southern nation. Setbacks such as emancipation, military defeats, and high casualties merely intensified the will to fight. Sheehan-Dean concludes that Virginians supported the Confederacy not in spite of the hardships of war but because of them (191), noting a strong sense of honor, a reinforced sense of camaraderie and increased democratic practices within their companies and regiments, and an ever-growing hatred of Union troops for the

destruction and death inflicted not only on their own military ranks but on the property of civilians

Sheehan-Dean uses sophisticated sampling techniques to trace early mobilization, trends in enlistment and desertions, and the shifting nature of regimental and company leadership—the latter another vital factor in the continued commitment of Virginia troops, he argues. He uses these tangible measures very effectively to make his case. High desertion rates do not deter Sheehan-Dean from his thesis. He notes that many troops approved the executions and other harsh punishments meted out to deserters, and draws on several communications that suggest that those leaving the army were motivated far more from concern for the welfare of family back home than by a lack of commitment to the Confederacy.

On issues where his argument must rely on more fleeting and anecdotal evidence, his claims are sometimes less convincing. Despite the book's subtitle, the nature of home front attitudes and behavior is more inferred than demonstrated and Sheehan-Dean sometimes strains credibility in linking such sentiments to military morale, as when he suggests that the mere writing of letters to distressed family members somehow bolstered soldiers' morale. All of this emotional work helped stabilize soldiers amid the uncertainty and violence of the war (60), he writes, without considering that communications could well have had the opposite effect. On the other hand, among the most compelling sources on which he draws are a series of resolutions drawn up by Virginia regiments late in 1864 and early 1865 that expressed their resentment of the wavering will power of civilians and how it contrasted with their own.

Sheehan-Dean is sensitive to the specific context of the war for Virginians, noting that the sheer constancy of military action in the state made for an exceptional situation that impacted both soldiers and their families in ways not necessarily true elsewhere in the South. Within those bounds, his book proves to be a fresh and forceful contribution to our understanding of why these Virginians fought and how the very course of the war served to create new rationales for their resolve in doing so for so much of the Confederate nation's four-year lifespan.

*John C. Inscoe is University Professor at the University of Georgia. His books include Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South (forthcoming), and co-edited essay collections on Unionists in the Civil War*

*South and on Confederate nationalism.*