

The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction

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Review

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Neely, Mark E., Jr. *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction*. Harvard University Press, \$27.95 hardcover ISBN 9780674026582

The Destructive War?

Mark E. Neely, Jr., McCabe-Greer Professor of the History of the Civil War Era at Pennsylvania State University, has written numerous books, primarily on political, cultural, and legal aspects of the period. As a senior figure in the field, he has unquestionably read extensively and thought deeply. While he has done so for the most part on topics other than military history, he always has something significant to say.

This writer's new book questions how destructive and brutal the war was. Since a T. Harry Williams essay in 1960, the literature has emphasized the quantity of lives and property lost. Recently, the increased attention given to atrocities and guerrilla warfare only underlines this theme. Neely's thesis is that the two sides, as a whole, did not want a merciless or pitiless war, and generally were willing to wage a long, determined struggle by the traditional means associated with civilized belligerents (58). Consequently, Neither side fought without restraint (59). Whole sentences are not quoted here because Neely occasionally writes big generalizations that would distort his argument, if taken out of context. Each of his chapters tests the thesis in a different way and with careful qualifications.

Neely starts by comparing the Civil War with the Mexican War. The record shows that American volunteer soldiers did a lot of looting and unnecessary killing of Mexicans. They justified their misdeeds by condemning the enemy as racially inferior. After the Mexican War the United States army's discipline program improved, and during the Civil War the racial commonality of most troops worked against brutality. White Confederates did massacre black Federals on several occasions; white Federals massacred surrendered Indians in 1863 at Sand Creek, the first such incident with Native Americans to draw substantial

public criticism. The author recognizes that some dehumanization of whites by whites did occur in guerrilla warfare and in the prisoner of war camp systems. Another comparative analysis considers the Mexican Civil War of the 1860s, especially Emperor Maximilian's 1865-1867 policy of denying quarter to all insurgents and those who aided them. The resulting 11,000 to 40,000 deaths are far more than the probable number of civilians and prisoners killed in the U.S. Civil War.

Neely devotes several chapters to the American Civil War's aspects that most likely would provoke brutal behavior. He examines guerrilla and anti-guerrilla warfare in Missouri, probably the worst case for atrocities. The author finds that Guerrilla war was *sui generis* (59) and did not affect conventional warfare. It goes without saying here that this part of the war was not the main part. In addition, when the related brutalities became public, both sides condemned the unnecessary killing of soldiers and civilians.

William T. Sherman's March to the Sea and Phillip H. Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley campaign have reputations as highly destructive. Recent studies by professional historians have greatly discounted the actual damage in the first case, and Neely contends that the second case deserves the same appraisal. The contemporary primary sources referred only to the burning of barns, mills, and less than a square mile of corn fields. Dwellings and all fields were not targeted; enough food was left for civilians to survive but not to feed a Confederate army.

Finally, the Confederates' release of emaciated prisoners of war in 1864 stirred up a debate about retaliation in the North. President Abraham Lincoln made threats of action but did nothing (rhetoric often exceeded reality during the war). In the end, those who considered revenge wrong or counterproductive won by default. Once again, the desire for restraint won out.

The entire controversy about the Civil War's level of destructiveness fits into a larger argument about the war's place in the history of warfare. Neely points out that many preceding wars in Western Civilization were bloodier. He rejects James M. McPherson's view that the Civil War was a total war, one involving a nation's entire society, technology, and resources in an all-out effort to break an opponent. Instead, the war belonged to a distinct transitional phase, which included mass armies and industrial technology (He argued this very effectively in a *Civil War History* article in March, 1991). An important and related

development, often referred to in the book but not fully explored, was the increasing concern about war ethics. It led in 1863 to the first written national war code, which influenced a number of subsequent ones. Still, while both sides officially opposed attacks on civilians or prisoners, such attacks did occur. To Neely, they were exceptional; inevitably critics will disagree. The impossibility of calculating the damage to civilian lives and property in the war blocks resolution of the debate.

Neely presents a strong case for his position. Although more discussion of the Confederate policy and practices would help, his points apply equally well to both sides. He correctly observes out that in ranking the wars of the United States, it is unfair to count both sides' casualties for the Civil War. Still, if one counts only the Federal side, the Civil War just changes place with World War II and slips to the nation's second bloodiest conflict.

The book's research is substantial and up-to-date. A dozen pictures illustrate the issues. The writer has a very readable style, and the book shows much thought. A seminal work on a big issue, *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* should stir up much productive discussion.

John Cimprich, professor of history at Thomas More College, has written Slavery's End in Tennessee, 1861-1865 and Fort Pillow, a Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory. He can be reached at cimpricj@thomasmore.edu.