

A Savage Conflict: the Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War

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Review

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Civil War Guerrillas

Most of the history that has been written about the American Civil War concerns the great armies, Union and Confederate, which waged that terrible conflict. Daniel E. Sutherland suggests that this longstanding emphasis on famous generals and battlefields, however justified, often obscures the importance of irregular warfare during that struggle. With his superb new work, *A Savage Conflict*, Sutherland convincingly demonstrates that the Civil War cannot be fully understood without recognizing the critical part that guerrillas played in shaping its course and outcome.

Sutherland sets himself to an ambitious task, documenting the scope, ferocity, and complexity of guerrilla fighting across the United States. He organizes his lively chronological narrative into four sections, each of which devotes a chapter to explaining the unique history of guerrilla warfare in three regions, the Trans-Mississippi West, the Upper South, and the Deep South. At the beginning of the war, many Southerners embraced irregular combat and even advocated a broad "people's war," inspired by tales of Francis Marion and other heroes of the American Revolution. Ambivalent Confederate officials acknowledged the military usefulness of guerrillas, who could harass, distract, and tie down thousands of Union troops, but looked upon such vicious and unpredictable allies as a danger to southern honor and military cohesion. Rebel leaders, Sutherland writes, "hoped to reap the benefits of partisan service without its messy complications" (54). The Partisan Ranger Act, passed in the spring of 1862, extended official recognition to many irregular fighters, who were in turn expected to abide by army regulations and to coordinate their actions with local military commanders.

With only a portion of southern guerrillas entering the government's service as partisan rangers, a great many others prowled the countryside of their own accord, sowing terror and confusion among foes, civilian and Federal, and threatening to unleash a popular conflagration that might rage beyond the authorities' control. Sutherland does a masterful job of sorting through the sprawling and tangled guerrilla ranks; his careful explication of historical labels is particularly good. *Guerrilla*, he writes, generally indicated those who participated in irregular combat, including self-styled *scouts*, *rangers*, and *raiders*. Many southern guerrillas identified themselves as *partisans*, especially near the start of the war, but after 1862 the term largely came to indicate those who rode in the service of the Confederate government. *Bushwhacker* often referred to lone gunmen but carried connotations of cowardice or extraordinary meanness and thus came to apply to many deserters, ruffians, and outlaws. Sutherland notes that many Union soldiers referred to all guerrillas as bushwhackers. Unionist guerrillas, on the other hand, included *Red Legs*, *buffaloes*, and *jayhawkers*.

Confederate expectations about the possibilities and perils of irregular combat soon proved correct. Guerrillas did indeed become principal antagonists of the Union army throughout much of the West and South. Irregular activity brought Federal soldiers any number of intractable headaches during the military occupation of border states like Missouri and Kentucky. Protecting river and rail traffic and maintaining relative order were the troops' primary responsibilities, but they generally struggled to engage and defeat local guerrillas. Union leaders responded by adopting an increasingly forceful approach that targeted not only guerrillas but also the civilian population that sheltered and supported them. Perhaps the most famous and far-reaching example of this strategy was Order Number 11, which called for the depopulation of several western Missouri counties following the massacre of more than 150 men and boys in Lawrence, Kansas, in August 1863.

Sutherland persuasively suggests that these events signified a dramatic shift in the broader guerrilla war. He writes, "Some sort of ethical dam, if leaking before 1864, seemed to burst after the Lawrence raid" (210). The kind of total war that had engulfed the Missouri-Kansas border soon spread throughout the South. Union and Confederate leaders seemed unable to keep the guerrillas in check; in time, officers in both armies came to endorse summary executions of captured guerrillas. As the war dragged on, a growing number of deserters, draft

dodgers, and ordinary criminals joined the fray and exploited the chaos to prey upon vulnerable civilians. By 1865 public support for the Confederate war effort waned, and many Southerners blamed the government for failing to protect them against the anarchy that consumed many areas. Following the surrender of Lee and Johnston's armies, some Southerners urged the guerrillas to fight on, even as the Confederacy's leaders rejected last-ditch calls for a "people's war."

With *A Savage Conflict*, Sutherland has produced an incisive, well-written, and thoroughly-researched synthesis of guerrilla fighting during the American Civil War. He makes good use of an impressive body of primary sources, including manuscripts, military records, and newspapers. One might reasonably question whether guerrillas played the *decisive* role in the war's outcome, as the book's provocative subtitle suggests, but this remains a study that deserves to be read by students who seek to understand the wide influence of guerrillas during the Civil War.

Jeremy Neely, who received his Ph. D. from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2004, lives near Lockwood, Missouri. He is the author of The Border between Them: Violence and Reconciliation on the Kansas-Missouri Border (University of Missouri, 2007).