

Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves During the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Brundage, W. Fitzhugh (2006) "Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves During the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss2/7>

Review

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Spring 2006

Levine, Bruce *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves During the Civil War*. Oxford University Press, 29.95 ISBN 195147626

Desperate Measures

The Southern Plans of Emancipation

Sparked by a proposal by Major General Patrick Cleburne in late 1863, Confederates spent the final year and half of the Civil War debating and eventually implementing plans to offer slaves freedom in return for military service on behalf of the southern nation. The curious turn of events that compelled a nation founded to defend slavery to adopt a policy of emancipation has puzzled scholars and latter-day partisans alike. For some, it demonstrates the desperation of the Confederate nation after defeats at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga. For others it underscores the devotion of Confederates to independence first and foremost, and refutes claims that slavery was the cornerstone of the southern rebellion. Bruce Levine has now weighed in with a deeply researched, crisply written, and exceptionally cogent investigation of Confederate emancipation. He transforms the topic from a historical curiosity into a revealing and essential chapter in the Civil War. Simply put, Confederate Emancipation will be the foundational study for all future discussions of plans to free and arm slaves in the Confederacy.

The rough outlines of Confederate emancipation have been told previously. As the military reverses in the western theater mounted and the manpower shortage in the Confederate army worsened, Cleburne and several other officers recognized that the prospects for southern military victory were rapidly evaporating. Cleburne's proposal provoked strenuous debate in the Army of Tennessee, enough so that Jefferson Davis and his administration dismissed the proposal and suppressed further discussion of it. But by the late fall in 1864, after Sherman's march through Georgia and Lincoln's decisive election victory, Confederate leaders reconsidered their earlier opposition to arming slaves and

vigorous discussion of the proposal erupted across the South. Eventually in March 1865, after General Robert E. Lee endorsed the proposition and the soldiers of the Army of Northern Virginia voted on it, the Confederacy adopted legislation to recruit and arm black slaves. The war, however, ended before the tiny number of slaves mobilized under the new policy could be mustered into service on behalf of the slaveholders' republic. At this late date, the adoption of Confederate emancipation in 1865 had no tangible impact on the outcome of the war.

So what historical significance should we attach to this tardy and wholly ineffective plan to free and arm southern slaves? Confederate Emancipation provides a masterful and persuasive answer. Levine brushes aside the claim that Confederate emancipation demonstrated that the defense of slavery was not the central aim of the Confederate nation. In two especially powerful chapters (Four and Five), he demonstrates that Cleburne's proposal (as well as earlier suggestions of emancipation) were intended either to preserve the institution of slavery, or, failing that, to perpetuate white economic and political control over the South. Imagining a South that would come to be after Appomattox, Cleburne, Lee, and other advocates of arming slaves anticipated that white privilege could be maintained even in the absence of slavery. As long as whites retained political power and ownership of land, blacks would be landless, impoverished and presumably tractable laborers, regardless of whether they were slave or free. Of course, if slavery could be preserved by arming a small percentage of the Confederacy's bondsmen, so much the better. But the alternative for Cleburne and his ilk was too dire to be accepted. The combination of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and Sherman's plans to distribute land to former slaves along the Georgia coast threatened to simultaneously abolish slavery and establish the economic autonomy of former slaves. Therein lay the profound possible challenge to the white South that Cleburne and others most feared.

Despite the rationale behind Confederate emancipation, its opponents stalled it for more than a year. They did so because some apparently remained convinced, even as late as 1864, of the likelihood of Confederate victory. Others, including many prominent pre-war secessionists, recoiled from the possibility that the Confederacy itself would infringe on the rights of slaveholders. Drawing on an impressive array of private correspondence, newspapers, speeches, and official sources, Levine shows that substantial numbers of Confederates, especially from those areas of the South well behind Confederate lines, were

unwilling to contemplate any experimentation with the peculiar institution. Yet other white southerners who may have been sympathetic to the aims of Confederate emancipation nevertheless were skeptical about the policy's implementation. It was poorly thought out and rested on the voluntary participation of slaveholders. Given that the Confederate government had to resort to coercion to pry slaves from masters who were reticent to rent them to the military, what likelihood was there that masters were going to be any more eager to emancipate their slaves on behalf of southern independence? In the end, Confederate slaveholders were at least as wary of emancipation — whether compensated or not — as their counterparts in the border states that remained in the Union.

Both in its conception and execution, Confederate emancipation was a testament to the reactionary nature of the Confederacy. Although scholars in recent decades have dwelled on the flexibility and durability of the institution of American slavery, Levine reminds us that in its death throes southern slavery was remarkably brittle. It could not survive the combination of northern military might, slave resistance, and slaveholder stubbornness. Perhaps no other episode during the Civil War illustrates the crippling stranglehold that slavery had on the white southern imagination than the failed plans for Confederate emancipation. We have Bruce Levine to thank for clarifying the import and complexity of the white South's attempt to mobilize slaves to defend white liberties.

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