

More Damning Than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army

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Review

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Dereliction of Duty

Confederate Soldiers going AWOL

In the final months of the Civil War, with Union victory imminent, Confederate soldiers deserted in droves. Most historians agree that desertion undermined the Confederate war machine to some extent, but they tend to see it more as a gradual effect of military setbacks than as a principal cause for defeat. In *More Damning than Slaughter*, however, Mark Weitz emphasizes desertion as an important causative factor in the demise of the Confederacy. Having previously studied the phenomenon in his first book, *A Higher Duty: Desertion among Georgia Troops*, Weitz asserts that desertion proved more detrimental to the Confederacy than battlefield attrition. Moreover, he stresses that desertion, like a fatal illness, infected the South almost from the outset and only worsened with each passing year.

In presenting his argument, Weitz examines desertion in its broadest context. To him, Confederate deserters were not merely those men who quit the ranks (officially 103,000 in the course of the war), but virtually anyone who deliberately avoided military service: soldiers who exploited their furloughs; who straggled behind on the march; who malingered in the hospitals; who took the oath of allegiance as prisoners; who evaded conscription. Weitz explains that these various forms of desertion combined to produce an epidemic that many Confederate generals referred to as absenteeism, where thousands of soldiers were somewhere other than where they should have been whenever real fighting commenced. Based on this expanded definition, Weitz claims that the actual number of Confederate deserters can never be known, but is undoubtedly much higher than the official tally.

In determining why so many Confederates deserted, Weitz offers a compelling thesis. He asserts that white southerners, as members of an agrarian democracy, generally ranked the needs of their farms above their duties to the army. For these farmer-soldiers, desertion was always an option. Weitz elaborates that this fixation on the soil militated against the emergence of a unifying nationalism that could endure the storms of total war regardless of the sacrifices. Instead, southerners remained a parochial people whose true devotion was to the local community or to a particular state at best. As long as the Confederate government could guarantee the safety of this home front, then the farmer would fulfill his combat obligation. But as Union forces conquered vast areas of the South beginning in early 1862, and as Confederate authorities proved incapable of ameliorating the growing plight of the civilian populace, thousands of Rebel soldiers found it both imperative and justifiable to leave the army in order to protect their families. In reversing the traditional view of desertion as a crime, Weitz aptly states on page 276 that it was the reaction of men who had been loyal and felt betrayed by their government.

According to Weitz, desertion adversely affected the Confederate war effort in manifold ways. Most obviously, it deprived the already numerically inferior Rebel armies of much-needed manpower. For example, Weitz speculates that the Confederacy might have prevailed at the battle of Antietam had some ten thousand able-bodied soldiers not been willfully absent from Robert E. Lee's army. Similarly, the dearth of sufficient manpower often compelled Confederate armies to trade space for time, particularly in the Western theater. But as the author states on page 171, retreat drove desertion, for it not only exposed still more communities to enemy occupation but further eroded the social contract when promises of recovery went unfulfilled.

Its deleterious impact on military performance notwithstanding, Weitz argues that desertion proved more ruinous to the Confederate interior. Those deserters who could not escape to their home counties fled in alarming numbers to the hills and swamps of the South where they preyed on their own countrymen for survival. Confederate authorities wasted precious manpower in fruitless attempts to hunt down these bandits. Weitz explains on page 208 that these roving deserter bands had literally become the third army in the American Civil War, turning the conflict into a two-front war for the Confederacy. Compounding the problem was that news of deserter depredations prompted still more soldiers to desert in an effort to protect loved ones. On page 290 Weitz draws the provocative conclusion that Confederate deserters undermined morale

more than the Union army.

More Damning than Slaughter is an impressive piece of scholarship. Weitz provides ample coverage of desertion in all eleven Rebel states. In the process, the author draws on a wide array of primary sources. An insightful feature of the book is Weitz's discussion of Union desertion policy. In pacifying the South, Union commanders evidently encouraged enemy desertion through promises of amnesty. Weitz calculates that over thirty thousand Confederates accepted the invaders' terms, a figure which lends credence to his claim that many Rebel soldiers simply wanted security for their families, even if that meant submitting to Yankee rule.

Mark Weitz ably presents his arguments, but there are noteworthy shortcomings. Despite its caveats, the book gives the unmistakable impression that the South was literally overwhelmed by highly destructive and increasingly uncontrollable desertion, yet somehow the fledgling Confederacy managed to sustain a full-scale war effort on multiple fronts with minimal resources for four years. The author's forceful prose distorts the fact that a majority of Confederate soldiers from all parts of the South fought honorably through the end of 1864. This kind of dedication suggests that Confederate nationalism went beyond mere defense of the home. Weitz would have done well to offer some comparative analysis of Union desertion. Approximately 200,000 Union soldiers officially deserted during the war. Regardless of whether Weitz's thesis has any relevance to the northern story, the Yankee invader experienced a comparable loss of manpower; one that helps put Confederate desertion in better perspective.

To be sure, the northern home front was not overrun, nor did it suffer the demoralizing instability of deserter armies, but there are unaddressed contradictions in Weitz's reasoning on certain issues. While speaking at length on the anti-Confederate activities of deserter armies, Weitz barely mentions Rebel guerrillas. Surely many deserters participated in the widespread Rebel insurgency, one that would allow them to stay near their homes and still fight the enemy. By neglecting this aspect of the war, Weitz presents a misleading picture of relative quiescence in the occupied areas of Tennessee, where he exaggerates military governor Andrew Johnson's success in converting deserters into a reliable nucleus around which to begin Reconstruction. Many Tennesseans may have taken the oath of allegiance, but rather than cooperate, most continued to aid the Confederate cause whenever possible. Why else would the Union army station tens of thousands of soldiers in conquered sectors long after the

conventional war had moved elsewhere?

A final criticism of Weitz is his peculiar objection to Confederate leniency toward deserters. Although about 230 deserters were executed, most Confederate officers were unwilling to shoot their own men. Weitz makes the valid point that such leniency only invited more desertions, but his contention that Rebel leaders might have curbed desertion had they consistently and immediately executed offenders is dubious. According to his own thesis, harsh punishments would not have halted desertions because court-martials failed to address the main reason for why soldiers were deserting in the first place, namely the Confederacy's inability to defend the home land. Execution may serve a useful disciplinary function in a professional army, but in an army of citizen-soldiers it could well have replaced desertion with mutiny.

Despite these reservations, **More Damning than Slaughter** is an excellent, thought-provoking study of an overlooked aspect of the Civil War. Weitz's overall thesis for Confederate desertion is fresh and original. Furthermore, his discussion of deserter armies sheds new light on the complicated story of the battered Confederate home front. Though he may be overstating the impact of desertion, Weitz clearly demonstrates that it played a significant role in Confederate defeat. But like so many explanations for why the Confederacy lost, the arguments in this book might instead make readers wonder how the Rebellion survived for as long as it did.

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