

## Civil War Book Review

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### A People at War: Civilians and Soldiers in America's Civil War

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## Review

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**Nelson, Scott and Sheriff, Carol.** *A People at War: Civilians and Soldiers in America's Civil War*. Oxford University Press, \$25.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195146547

Surveying the Civil War

The War's Impact on Soldiers and Civilians

This is not your parents' Civil War textbook. Indeed, Scott Nelson and Carol Sheriff, historians at the College of William and Mary, likely would shy away from the word textbook to describe their study of Civil War civilians and soldiers. This book differs from even the least conventional Civil War surveys in that little mention is made of battles, generals, or even civilian leaders. Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant are noted, but not, for example, in the context of the battles of the Wilderness or Spotsylvania Courthouse. As the authors make clear, their Civil War unfolds away from the battlefields and seats of power (ix).

The book is divided into five parts. The first, composed of two chapters, focuses on the period from 1854 to 1861. While it discusses the events before the Kansas-Nebraska Act, it largely does so only to provide general context. The next three parts of the book, roughly two-thirds of the entire text, cover the war years. The three chapters of the second part look at the war largely from the soldiers' perspectives. The three chapters of the book's third part examine the political, military, and diplomatic aspects of the conflict. The four chapters composing part four trace how the war shaped the homefront. Finally, in the book's fifth part two chapters are devoted to examining Reconstruction.

By far the most valuable contribution of *A People at War* is its inclusion of up-to-date secondary sources. Each chapter not only includes valuable endnotes, but the authors have compiled an annotated bibliography listing 126 suggested sources for further reading. Nearly one-fourth of these books and articles have publication years since 2000, and some as recent as 2006. For that reason alone,

this study is worth consulting. In addition, the book also cites hundreds of primary sources, many directly from their archival holdings, to communicate the words of contemporaries.

Even the most avid readers of the Civil War era will find some new details of interest in this book. For this reader the study's discussion of the role of the Wide-Awake clubs of the Republican Party in the 1860 presidential election is particularly noteworthy. The authors explain how the term Wide-Awake was stolen by the Republicans from the American Party and how the Republicans adopted a more military-like uniform which hundreds of supporters donned as they marched through the streets. They also stress how the Republican Wide-Awakes cast off the nativism of the American Party as their organization contained numerous immigrants in its ranks.

By far one of the book's most interesting chapters is Chapter Five, Facing Death. The authors evaluate the scholarship on the number of Civil War deaths and then differentiate between those caused by the battlefield and those resulting from disease. The chapter then shifts into the subject of how civilians reacted to the staggering death rates both in terms of working in hospitals and particularly the Union's emerging ambulance corps. In *Redefining the Rules of War*, Nelson and Sheriff tackle another interesting topic, contending that the development of new rules of war began in 1862 when Union gunboat raids responded to Confederate guerilla activities. This culminated in Union Commander-in-Chief Henry Halleck bringing Professor Francis Lieber to Washington in December 1862, to develop a new code of war which criminalized Confederate raids on Union supply lines and legalized Union raids on civilians (154). The Lieber Code, the authors explain, was adopted by President Abraham Lincoln in General Orders No. 100 in April 1863 which, they argue, turned the last two years of fighting into a war of captivity (156).

Another interesting aspect of the book is its coverage of Union manpower, especially the importance of immigrants. The authors argue that there was a strong link between the Homestead Act and immigrant contribution to the northern military effort in two ways. One, attracted to the United States by the Homestead Act, not only would a half a million of these foreign-born men serve as soldiers, but their wives, children and those immigrant men who avoided military service clearly contributed to the civilian manpower needs both in the industrial and agricultural sectors. Two, many immigrants who declared their intent to become citizens in order to qualify for the homestead provisions by

doing so also subjected themselves to the draft.

One additional positive component of the book is its generally equal balance between the Union and Confederate sides. There clearly is a strong effort to strike this balance not only for the sake of balance alone but also to compare how each side dealt with various aspects of the war on the battle and homefronts.

Despite the book's many strengths, the section on Reconstruction has some problems. The authors' use the experiences of the carpetbagger Albion W. Tourgee and the African-American political leader Wyatt Outlaw in North Carolina as a means to explain the Republican coalition. However, this narrative focuses too much of their discussion of southern Reconstruction on the conditions of the upper South, where blacks formed a minority of the total population. While Nelson and Sheriff are not insensitive to this fact, there simply is not enough attention on the states of the lower South, where African Americans equaled and in some states surpassed the white population. Further, given the valuable scholarship during the last two decades on the impact of Reconstruction in the North, surprising little is devoted to that topic. In addition, the book needs to relate the role of the depression of the 1870s to the economic difficulties that both hindered the success of southern Republicans as well as caused the northern Republicans to abandon their allies in the South in order to maintain electoral viability in the North.

The final issue that needs to be considered is this book's potential audience. If the authors intend their study for scholars and the large Civil War reading audience, they clearly have succeeded. Such individuals will have read enough war-related narrative, battle accounts, and biographical works of the major figures of the era to appreciate the alternative focus provided by this work. However, this study surely will not serve as a sufficient textbook on its own for an undergraduate Civil War course as students will need a complementary book revealing the war's basic narrative as well as the military and civilian decision-makers. Indeed, the authors' assertion that they try to present the war in a way that would have been recognizable to the people who lived and died in the midst of it needs to be reconsidered if not directly challenged (x). While there is no question that traditionally there has been far too much focus by Civil War writers on the battles, generals, and presidents, surely those events and individuals were on the minds of the common residents of both the Union and Confederacy. In other words, it is not so evident that the war which Nelson and Sheriff present would have been more recognizable to the people of this era.

That observation should not detract from the important contribution this book makes. Rather, it is a reminder that in our attempt to understand aspects of the war that have not received their just coverage, we may run the risk of omitting topics which people of the era felt especially important to their lives.

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