

Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War

Colin Woodward

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Woodward, Colin (2007) "Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 4 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss4/15>

Review

Woodward, Colin

Fall 2007

Burkhardt, George S. *Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$37.95 hardcover ISBN 9780809327430

Wartime Atrocities: The Civil War Experience

Americans will mark the Civil War's sesquicentennial in a few years, but the subject of wartime atrocities is a relatively new field of study. Recent books, such as *Black Flag over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War*, edited by Gregory Urwin (2004) and John Cimprich's *Fort Pillow, a Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory* (2005) examine wartime massacres and how Americans have remembered them. George S. Burkhardt, a former newspaper editor and journalist, apparently spent twenty years examining wartime atrocities, and his time was not misspent. Anyone examining the subject of no quarter during the Civil War should consult his study.

Prolonged wars produce atrocities, and the Civil War was no different. But Burkhardt believes that such incidents were not isolated ones: they comprised part of a disturbing pattern of behavior. He takes a chronological approach to his subject, examining battles from the June 1863 fighting at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, where African American troops took part in Grant's Vicksburg campaign to the fighting at Mobile and Selma in 1865. In his chapters, the author examines the war's most infamous massacre, the one Nathan Bedford Forrest's men committed at Fort Pillow, Tennessee; perhaps the worst massacre of any kind during the war—the killing of African Americans at Plymouth, North Carolina; and the worst battlefield massacre, which occurred at the July 1864 Crater battle. Some of the battles Burkhardt describes are well-known to historians, others, such as the fighting at Olustee, Florida, in February 1864, and Fort Blakely, Alabama, in April 1865, are less famous. The battle at Fort Blakely, one Confederate wrote, resulted in the Yankee Fort Pillow (239), a Union victory that gave African Americans the chance to show no mercy toward

their white enemies. Even in the last days of the war, soldiers continued to take no prisoners.

The book's title suggests that the North and South proved equally willing to show no quarter, but the battle of Fort Blakely aside, massacres mostly stemmed from Confederate animosity toward African Americans. Confederates, Burkhardt makes clear, were fighting for slavery, and because of their intense hatred of black troops—a hatred that had its origins in slave culture and Southern racism—they usually greeted African Americans with shouts of no quarter. Clashes between black and white soldiers, therefore, made worse an already bitter and bloody war, and neither the North nor South could do much to stop such killing.

Burkhardt's study makes a long overdue contribution to Civil War studies by examining the Union's and Confederacy's response to atrocities within the larger framework of their military policy. In the days before the Geneva Convention, the North and South did not follow rules by which its commanders must act or face punishment. On the Confederate side, notions of gentility and honor often meant little in the face of racial hatred for black troops. On the Union side, black soldiers found they often could not restrain themselves when avenging fallen comrades or those who remained enslaved. The Union and Confederate governments might have done more to restrain their men, but troops received mixed messages from their leadership.

The Confederate government, Burkhardt shows, had at best an ambivalent attitude toward the mistreatment of black troops. It did not officially endorse no quarter tactics, but it did not discipline commanders who employed them either. Thus, the Confederate armies operated using an unofficial no quarter policy. In response to Confederate misconduct, the United States investigated and issued stern warnings, but little more. After Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the Confederacy declared it would not recognize black soldiers as prisoners of war; and in the summer of 1863, the North said it would respond in kind to any Union soldier executed or forced to labor for the South. The Davis government withdrew its pledge, but atrocities continued. After the butchery at Fort Pillow, the U.S. Congress created the Committee on the Conduct of War to investigate what happened. The committee, however, had no judicial power. The North never tried Forrest or anyone else for what we would today call war crimes.

Burkhardt, however, argues that it could have. Not just Forrest, but also Joseph Wheeler, William Mahone, and John Singleton Mosby, bore responsibility for the murder of Union soldiers. The author sees Forrest, however, as the guiltiest of all. If any Southerner deserved a speedy trial and swift punishment, he concludes, it was Nathan Bedford Forrest. (245) Burkhardt does not claim Forrest planned the Fort Pillow massacre—Confederates there needed no prodding to butcher the black and white garrison—but he blames him for failing to control his men's conduct at Fort Pillow and at Brice's Cross Roads and Selma, where murders also occurred.

Burkhardt has written an impressive work of scholarship, but in some respects, it is too comprehensive and not comprehensive enough. On the one hand, he provides repeated descriptions of close quarter fighting and killing: massacre follows massacre until the repetition renders the reader somewhat numb. On the other hand, the scope of his study does not extend to the frontier regions, such as Kansas and Missouri, where some of the war's worst massacres and bushwhacking occurred. One wonders why a man such as William C. Quantrill is not included in a book that examines Civil War atrocities.

Burkhardt's narrative of various battles and analysis of military policy are cogent and informative, but he makes some inaccurate statements. He states one reason for the Republican Party's losses in the fall of 1862 was the detested draft (17). The Union, however, did not institute conscription until March 1863. Perhaps he is referring to the opposition in some states to Lincoln allowing governors to draft from militias if volunteer quotas were not met. He also claims, Black soldiers first fought Confederates in late October 1862 (44). Some African Americans—who took advantage of the July 1862 Second Confiscation Act, which allowed them to fight—battled Confederates before then. In August 1862, for example, one Confederate wrote of a good many Negroes (northern cavalry) engaged in a fight in Arkansas. (see John Q. Anderson, ed., *Campaigning with Parson's Texas Cavalry Brigade, CSA*, 62-63)

Burkhardt's exhaustive use of primary sources gives his book a sense of immediacy and provides vivid battlefield details. His study, however, is less impressive in engaging the relevant secondary literature. The book feels particularly deficient in its analysis of the relationship between southern slaveholders and non-slaveholders. At times, the author makes it seem as if the detested planter elite duped or forced into secession the southern yeomanry. When he says Southerners often held the aristocracy responsible for starting the

war in the first place (33), he does not make it clear whether he believes such a statement or merely is summarizing the views of those he quotes. And when it comes to the relationship Confederates had with slavery, he makes the sweeping claim that every Southerner had a direct and vital interest in the institution because slavery fashioned the region's social, cultural, political, and economic fabric.... [F]rom poorest white to wealthiest aristocrat, slavery strongly influenced mores, defined the class structure, and drove the economy (36). Yet, in 1861, many areas of the South had few or no slaves. Some Southerners seemed to get along fine without African Americans, and they resented slaveholders and the secession movement. Burkhardt is not necessarily wrong in his assertion that slavery dominated the South's politics and the economy, but he might have discussed—at least in his footnotes—more of the many works on Southern society produced in the last generation. The South, politically or otherwise, was not monolithic.

Burkhardt makes the convincing case that Confederates committed atrocities at Fort Pillow, but it is a case that historians have made for decades. In 1958, Albert Castel wrote an influential article that argued a massacre occurred there. Burkhardt needs to be clearer about what new claims he is making. And in his chapter, *The Plymouth Pogrom*, about the killing at Plymouth, North Carolina, in April 1864, the author might have further addressed Weymouth T. Jordan, Jr. and Gerald W. Thomas's 1995 article, *Massacre at Plymouth* on the subject of how widespread the killing was there. Burkhardt mentions the article in his footnotes, but Jordan and Thomas have reached a different conclusion concerning the number of victims. Burkhardt claims Confederates probably slew between three hundred and four hundred (141), while Jordan and Thomas cite the number at least 50 (*Black Flag over Dixie*, 191). Again, this is not to say Burkhardt's conclusions are wrong, but he could have compared his findings with those of other historians. Furthermore, some scholars might find uncomfortable the term pogrom to describe the killing at Plymouth, considering the term usually refers to the pogroms that Jewish communities have suffered throughout history.

Such criticisms aside, Burkhardt has written a very readable and well-researched book that some readers might find shocking. Those who are not familiar with the no quarter fighting in the years 1861-1865 might not look at Civil War soldiers the same way again.

Colin Woodward received his Ph.D. from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He is an associate project archivist at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond.