

CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: Unionism

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Feature Essay

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Unionism in the Slave States in Wartime

Two key facts about wartime Southern Unionism stand out. First, the largest numbers of Southern Unionists were black. Second, most Southern whites were not Unionists. Let us address these two essential truths.

The enslaved peoples of the South understood that war might end their bondage and carry them, like the children of Israel, to a promised land of freedom. From the war's beginnings, they regarded the Union army as an instrument of emancipation, and so they overlooked frequent instances in which Union soldiers treated them badly. Sometimes the tables were turned. Union soldiers who managed to escape from Confederate prisons quickly learned that black folks were the only ones whom they could trust, as they attempted to return North.¹ In sum, black Southerners did all they could to aid the Union war effort, most conspicuously during the war's last two years when 150,000 volunteered to fight. They thereby became "actors on the stage of American history in a way that they had never been before."²

By contrast, the preponderant majority of whites in the eleven seceding states were ardent Confederate patriots who gave their all to the cause. And they gave far more than any comparable cohort of Americans ever has given, including their Union counterparts. Over 75% of the white men of military age in the seceding states fought for the Confederacy—probably 850,000—of whom fully one-third (280,000) died. The Union mobilized about half its eligible manpower, and it thereby generated around 2.2 million soldiers. Of these, 360,000 died—one-sixth of those in uniform. So the Confederate South sent proportionately larger numbers of its men to fight, and they were twice as likely to die as Union soldiers.³

We therefore must leave aside the stereotype promulgated by Howard Zinn and his admirers. In their view, the South's large slaveholders held the Confederacy in thrall because they could cow and manipulate and deceive and browbeat the masses of ordinary white folk, whose hearts always were in the right place.⁴ Even if superficially plausible, this is make-believe history—what we might like the past to have been, so that it would better square with our values. We imagine that right-thinking Americans never would embrace such a retrogressive social order as the Old South's. But we need a more clearheaded guide—such as Aaron Sheehan-Dean. He reminds us that the Confederacy was a “popular democracy” rather than some sleight of hand “foisted on people by elites.” Ordinary white southern nonslaveholders overwhelmingly embraced the doomed quest “to build a slave republic,” and “the harder the North fought, the more vigorously [they] resisted.”⁵

But having established that Southern whites weren't likely to be Unionists, let us consider exceptions to the pattern. Until the fighting started, opposition to secession had been widespread across the Upper South. Only when forced to choose sides in a war did most whites in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas suddenly embrace the Confederate cause.⁶ This massive reversal generated long-lasting misconceptions and wishful thinking—Northerners from Lincoln on down were slow to recognize what they were up against, because they assumed that majorities of white Southerners remained loyal to the Union.

After the war started, most slave state whites who rejected the Confederacy lived along the border. Their allegiances had multiple roots: the slave system wasn't holding its own along the border, which had stronger economic interconnections with the free states than with the Lower South, and leading border politicians refused to sanction disunion. Service in the Union army constituted the most unmistakable form of Southern Unionism. 200,000 white men from the four non-seceding slave states (Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri) fought on the Union side. They far outnumbered border whites who enlisted for the Confederacy.⁷ Another 100,000 whites who fought for the Union came from Confederate states, principally from East Tennessee and northwestern Virginia.⁸

In these distinctive regions of the border South, unconditional Unionism was reinforced by the arrival of the Union army.⁹ But Union authority was far from absolute: a pro-Confederate minority persisted and it longed for military rescue from Union occupation. That briefly happened in parts of Kentucky and West

Virginia in 1862. Modern scholars have carefully studied the ugly spiral of violent disorder that wracked the wartime border. Union and Confederate campaigns to quash guerrillas in their respective domains became increasingly ferocious. Eventually bands of bushwhackers and deserters, subject neither to political nor military control, nor to ethical constraints, terrorized civilian populations.¹⁰

But some surprising pockets of Unionism did exist deep inside the Southern nation. Directly under the noses of Confederate authorities in Richmond, Elizabeth Van Lew masterminded a Union underground that combined succor for Union POWs with outright espionage. A nucleus of Union supporters, revealed in the journals of Cyrena Stone, also persisted in wartime Atlanta. A pro-Union underground even lurked in Montgomery, the original Confederate capital.¹¹

Unionists clustered here and there in peripheral regions of the Confederacy marked by intense localism and hostility to central authority, or by religious traditions that could not be squared with a pro-slavery nation. The uplands of northern Alabama and the piney woods of southeastern Mississippi harbored plain people whose anti-Confederate actions sometimes reached the extent of guerrilla resistance. So too, common whites living in the “Quaker Belt” of piedmont North Carolina and the “Big Thicket” of East Texas did their best to avoid military service and obstruct Confederate rule. In September 1864, one young Quaker woman, Rebecca Wright, surreptitiously informed Phil Sheridan that Jubal Early had thinned his forces around Winchester, Virginia; this intelligence prompted Sheridan to attack and thereby set in motion the final devastating Union conquest of the Shenandoah valley.¹² Wright’s actions remained secret until long after the war ended, but other Unionists were not so fortunate. Espionage and fifth-column work, whether actual or imagined, could subject their often-isolated communities to horrific Confederate reprisal.¹³

Ties of family, kinship, and community created the most powerful determinant for wartime allegiances. During a time of trouble and complexity, it was axiomatic for most white Southerners to align with those to whom they were physically proximate and emotionally closest—with friends, neighbors, and kinfolk. Very few white Southerners ever pondered the abstract merits of Union versus Confederacy, to arrive at a purely individual decision.¹⁴ Occasionally, however, individuals bravely swam against the current—Nelly Gordon, who came from Chicago, refused to share the Confederate loyalties of her Savannah

husband; Horatio Hennion, a northern-born ironmaker, estranged himself from his wife's South Carolina-Georgia family; David Hunter Strother, native to the Confederate-leaning Shenandoah valley, became a topographical staff officer for the Union army.¹⁵

Judkin Browning's recent book on two North Carolina counties (Cartaret and Craven) shows that wartime Unionism cannot be easily defined. He depicts an opportunistic Unionism that could be "quite fluid and driven by practicalities." When Union forces occupied parts of tidewater North Carolina in early 1862, significant numbers of whites proved ready to profess Union allegiances. But their loyalties proved to be "flexible" and "contradictory." White Unionism atrophied once the federal government opted for emancipation. Browning's findings pose a challenge to Wayne K. Durrill, who depicted a more robust and class-conscious Unionism among white yeomen in Washington County, also in eastern North Carolina. Durrill contended that less prosperous plain folk wanted the federal government to help them undermine the power of local slaveholders.¹⁶ More broadly, Browning's work converges with a heightened awareness that Southern Unionists necessarily engaged in "deception and role-playing" as they attempted to navigate through "dangers and pressures" that alternately "intensified and subsided."¹⁷ And it was a rare white Southerner indeed, however partial to the Union, who welcomed the redefinition of Union war aims to include emancipation.

Southern Unionism remains challenging to assess because it may easily dazzle the scholar, and blind him or her to the larger reality. I write from experience. One might expect to find a monolithic white South that favored secession and independence. When one encounters, instead, an unexpected Unionist nugget or vein, it becomes tempting to exaggerate—to see a Confederacy so honeycombed with pro-Union rot that it might almost have toppled of its own accord. And therein, of course, is the problem: never forget that it took four years of relentless warfare, waged by the most formidable army on the planet at that time, to grind the Confederate nation into submission. So the big story in the end is not Southern Unionism; it is instead the dogged, die-in-the-last-ditch tenacity of the pro-Confederate white South.

1 John C. Inscoe, "'Moving Through Deserter Country': Fugitive Accounts of the Inner Civil War in Southern Appalachia," in Kenneth W. Noe and Shannon H. Wilson, eds., *The Civil War in Appalachia: Collected Essays* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 158-86.

2 Adam Goodheart, *1861: The Civil War Awakening* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 345.

3 Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 28-30.

4 Howard Zinn, *A Peoples's History of the United States, 1492-Present*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 236-38; David Williams, *A People's History of the Civil War: Struggles for the Meaning of Freedom* (New York: The New Press, 2006); David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

5 Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1, 7, 195.

6 Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989); Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

7 William W. Freehling, *The South vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Richard Nelson Current, *Lincoln's Loyalists: Union Soldiers from the Confederacy* (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 1992). James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 295, contended that at least two-fifths of Kentucky soldiers enlisted as Confederates. This appears to be one of the few errors in this deservedly influential volume. Kentucky did have more slaves than the other Union slave states, but probably three-quarters of Kentucky's white soldiers fought for the Union: Kenneth W. Noe, *Perryville: The Grand Havoc of Battle* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 9.

8 A shelf of useful books by Stephen V. Ash, Robert Tracy McKenzie, W. Todd Groce, Kenneth W. Noe, Gordon B. McKinney, and Noel C. Fisher, along with biographies of Andrew Johnson and William G. "Parson" Brownlow, plus *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, address the situation in wartime East Tennessee. For a convenient overview, see Aaron Astor, "The Switzerland of America," in

the *New York Times* Disunion blog, 7 June 2011, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/07/the-switzerland-of-america/>. More could be done on wartime West Virginia: start with books by John Alexander Williams, Richard O. Curry, and John W. Shaffer.

9 East Tennessee was the only predominantly Union area that remained behind Confederate lines after the early stages of the war.

10 See Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Kenneth W. Noe, "Exterminating Savages: The Union Army and Mountain Guerrillas in Southern West Virginia, 1861-1862," in Noe and Wilson, eds., *The Civil War in Appalachia*, 104-30; Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). A useful up-to-date summation may be found in Andrew L. Slap, "A New Frontier: Historians, Appalachian History, and the Aftermath of the Civil War," in Andrew L. Slap, ed., *Reconstructing Appalachia: The Civil War's Aftermath* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 23-48, esp. 36-39.

11 Elizabeth Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, A Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Thomas G. Dyer, *Secret Yankees: The Union Circle in Confederate Atlanta* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); William Warren Rogers, Jr., "Safety Lies Only in Silence: Secrecy and Subversion in Montgomery's Unionist Community," in John C. Inscoe and Robert C. Kenzer, eds., *Enemies of the Country: New Perspectives on Unionists in the Civil War South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 172-87.

12 Margaret Storey, *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Victoria E. Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Victoria E. Bynum, *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and its Legacies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); William T. Auman, "Neighbor Against Neighbor: The Inner Civil War in the Central Counties of Confederate North Carolina" (PhD. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1988); William T. Auman, "Bryan Tyson: Southern Unionist and American Patriot," *North Carolina Historical Review* 62 (July 1985), 257-92; William T.

Auman, "Neighbor Against Neighbor: The Inner Civil War in the Randolph County Area of Confederate North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 61 (January 1984), 59-92, William T. Auman and David D. Scarborough, "The Heroes of America in Civil War North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 58 (October 1981), 326-64; Jay Worrall, Jr., *The Friendly Virginians: America's First Quakers* (Athens, Georgia: Iberian Publishing Company, 1994), 426-27, 433-34.

13 Philip S. Paludan, *Victims: A True Story of the Civil War* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981); Richard B. McCaslin, *Tainted Breeze: The Great Hanging at Gainesville, Texas, 1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); see also John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

14 Martin Crawford, *Ashe County's Civil War: Community and Society in the Appalachian South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

15 Jonathan M. Berkey, "Fighting the Devil with Fire: David Hunter Strother's Private Civil War," Keith S. Bohannon, "They Had Determined to Root Us Out: Dual Memoirs by a Unionist Couple in Blue Ridge Georgia," Carolyn J. Stefanco, "Poor Loving Prisoners of War: Nelly Kinzie Gordon and the Dilemma of Northern-Born Women in the Confederate South," all in Inscoe and Kenzer, eds., *Enemies of the Country*, 18-36, 97-120, 148-71.

16 Judkin Browning, *Shifting Loyalties: The Union Occupation of Eastern North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 4-5; Wayne K. Durrill, *War of Another Kind: A Southern Community in the Great Rebellion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

17 Inscoe and Kenzer, eds., *Enemies of the Country*, 13.