

The Dogs of War: 1861

John M. McCardell

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

Recommended Citation

McCardell, John M. (2011) "The Dogs of War: 1861," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.4.07

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss4/29>

Review

McCardell, Jr., John M.

Fall 2011

Thomas, Emory M. *The Dogs of War: 1861*. Oxford University Press, 14.95
ISBN 978-0-19-517570-0

Re-examining Southern Commitment to War

“The dogs of war,” writes Emory Thomas in this provocative little book (a “nonfiction novella,” he calls it, “Clio laconic”), “once loosed, seldom go where we want them to. Once slipped, they run wild” (92). Thomas is, of course, a prolific scholar of the Civil War era. His many publications, focusing on the Confederate experience, have shed new light on the revolutionary nature of the Southern government, the qualities of Confederate military leadership, and the life of Robert E. Lee. With this latest effort, he plays the provocateur once more, and he does not disappoint.

Thomas’s subject is the secession winter, that period leading up to the firing on Fort Sumter. The simple question he poses, and seeks to answer, is as vexing as it is direct: “what were they thinking?” (ix). Time after time, those who, at least in our retrospective judgment, ought to have known better, miscalculated. The result was the bloodiest war in American history.

How could it have happened? Thomas makes clear that war was a matter of choice. But choices must be informed, and to a remarkable degree those made by Union and Confederate leadership were not so much uninformed as misinformed. Abraham Lincoln and much of his cabinet did not believe that, when pressed, the Confederacy would actually take up arms, thus woefully underestimating the depth of support for secession and independence in the South. Jefferson Davis and much of the Confederate leadership did not believe that Yankees possessed the determination to sustain a fight. Lincoln, who had never experienced war himself, even after Sumter, did not grasp the nature of the impending conflict. Hence, his call for 75,000 volunteers envisioned a maximum 90 days of service. Davis, a veteran of the Mexican War, was much more

clear-headed, and yet believed that, in the end, the Confederacy would prevail in a test of wills.

Only General Winfield Scott, the most distinguished military man of the first half of the nineteenth century, fully understood what lay ahead and offered four policy options to Secretary of State William Seward: accept a compromise extending the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific and thus guarantee new territory into which slavery might expand; do nothing to provoke conflict, and even attempt to collect tariff duties offshore; allow the southern states to secede peaceably; or go to war. Scott knew the consequences of that last option. War would require at least 300,000 troops, would last at least three years and would result in "fifteen devastated provinces! ... held for generations by heavy garrisons, at an expense quadruple the net duties or taxes which it would be impossible to extort from them" (47). Lincoln viewed this advice as "too political" (47).

As Thomas's narrative winds down to its inevitable, tragic denouement, it also discovers timely analogies. Scott, too familiar with the reality of war, is Colin Powell in 1991, urging restraint. Davis, after the Confederate victory at First Manassas, essentially announces "mission accomplished." Lest there be any doubt, Thomas concludes, "I believe that the American Civil War offers insight and enlightenment about the human condition to inform the present.... Perhaps there is a parable here. I believe in redemption" (92).

Such present-mindedness, off-putting when wielded as a blunt political instrument, is rather more instructive in Thomas's skilled hands. The author cautions against the familiar, dangerous words, "History teaches us" General Robert E. Lee himself used such a formulation, noting that History's lesson is one of hope. Perhaps. And yet ... in this brief, lucid, and challenging extended essay, a fine historian embraces what the great Herbert Butterfield describes as the "tragic" mode. Policy makers could do worse than to read the tragedians – or to learn from Emory Thomas.

John M. McCardell, Jr., is currently Vice-Chancellor and President at the University of the South. He is the author of The Idea of a Southern Nation as well as numerous essays on the Civil War era.