

A Savage War: A Military History Of The Civil War

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Review

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Murray, William and Wei-Siang Hsieh, Wayne. *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War*. Princeton University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780691169408

A Savage War and the Foundations of American Military Power

It is nearly a truism that the American Civil War attracts more writers and readers than any event in United States history. Amateur “historians,” professional scholars, veterans, social commentators, and journalists have produced some 50,000 volumes or pamphlets, at least one book per day, since 1861. America’s addiction to “the crossroads of our being” perpetuates an immense historiography. In one of the most recent additions to Civil War literature, titled *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War* (2016), two military historians argue in support of the war’s contribution to a uniquely American way of war (1,11-12). For Williamson Murray and Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, the Civil War represents the first major event in which the confluence of the Industrial, French, and military revolutions affected the conduct and policies of a nation at war. Out of civil conflict, the United States fashioned a way of war that projected military might over continental and global distances with resolute force.

A Savage War represents a synthesis of military, political, and cultural histories; it draws heavily from scholarship of the past two decades, including James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom*, while retaining some measure of originality. The book is largely chronological, touching on the causes of the war then following the harrowing conflict through Appomattox and the beginning of Reconstruction. At times the authors diverge from chronology and commit a chapter to a thematic concern, like joint operations in Chapter 5. Though intimidating, this 600-page study reads with ease and clarity. Murray’s and Hsieh’s treatment of complex strategy and operations makes this military history accessible to anyone. They also strike an impressive balance of examining larger

concepts, like the creation of unique army cultures or logistical innovations, and delving into battlefield tactics.

What this volume lacks in depth, it accounts for in scope and creativity. Hsieh and Murray offer fresh interpretations of grand strategy, politics, and operations that have long rested at the center of historical debate. One of these interpretations includes an assertion that the first year of the war politically and strategically favored the United States. From the firing on Fort Sumter through the summer of 1862, the Confederacy enjoyed a series of battlefield successes. Nevertheless, President Jefferson Davis and other Confederate officials made crucial strategic mistakes that eventually would cost them time and resources that they could ill afford to waste. The most disastrous of these proved to be the South's intransigent focus on the eastern theater of operations. As a result, the Lincoln Administration and the United States military exploited the Confederacy's mistakes and successes of 1861 to attack the river systems in the West, adjust to the embarrassment of Bull Run, and keep Europe out of the war. These decisions laid the foundation for eventual Union victory.

A Savage War's driving argument is that the United States won the Civil War through its efforts in the western theater. After a series of leadership blunders, indecisive operations, and embarrassing defeats in 1862, the United States turned 1863 into the decisive year of the war, principally with Grant's victories at Vicksburg and Chattanooga. Despite the popular argument that the Confederate victory at Chickamauga represented a northern setback, Murray and Hsieh contend that this southern "triumph" was a strategic defeat, or at best a pyrrhic victory, because it further shifted the North's attention westward. Once fully invested in the West, the United States launched the conclusive campaign of the war under General William T. Sherman in 1864. The capture of Atlanta by September of 1864 secured Abraham Lincoln's second-term election, and Sherman's campaign to Savannah and into South Carolina wrought devastation upon the South. Murray and Hsieh argue that the hard war policies of 1864-1865 secured victory for the United States and demonstrated a uniquely American form of war, characterized by a relentless projection of military power over great distances.

Another great strength of this work is its clarification of the war's cause and its dismissal of popular myths which have long betrayed the historical record and distracted from the war's resonance in our own time. In the chapter on "Origins," Hsieh and Murray establish that the unequivocal, overarching cause of hostilities

was the institution of chattel slavery. Without diverging from their central themes and arguments, the authors make a series of literary gestures to historians of southern memory, praising their efforts to toss the argument of “states’ rights” into the “garbage dump” (11,522-25). They contend that *A Savage Wa* will help to further diminish the remnants of Lost Cause mythology that *still* inform popular understandings of the Civil War.

Despite the merits of this study, *A Savage War* is not without shortcomings. The most glaring flaw is the authors’ meager discussion of emancipation. As Hsieh and Murray illustrate, myriad factors contributed to the flow and tempo of the war. Union victory and Confederate defeat weighed heavily upon the outcomes of military and political leadership, battlefield success, and skillful diplomacy. But the key to understanding Union victory is recognizing that emancipation was the decisive political strategy of the war. The Emancipation Proclamation, paired with the inclusion of black men (former slaves and free men of color) into the United States military, aimed to disrupt the South’s center of gravity and to force the Confederate Government to commit to a war for slavery’s survival. Though the authors mention the Emancipation Proclamation in passing and seldom comment on the USCT regiments, there is no thorough discussion of emancipation’s role in the war.

Beyond the preceding foible, *A Savage War* represents a fine military study. Hsieh and Murray illuminate the broader political and cultural forces that shaped the war’s course while also giving due credit to the impact of contingency and human action. The confluence of the these forces, decisions, and actions helped to form an American way of war, one principally characterized by resolute military force projected over vast distances. This way of war followed the United States military through the 20th century and informs the war-fighting methods of the armed forces today. *A Savage War* will appeal to both academic and popular audiences with its resonance, accessible prose, and fresh treatment of the events that still captivate America’s public consciousness over 150 years later.

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