

The Union War

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Review

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Gallagher, Gary W. *The Union War*. Harvard University Press, \$27.95 ISBN 978-0-674-04562-0

Analyzing the Importance of Union

In 1997, Gary Gallagher's *The Confederate War* invigorated scholarly debates by arguing that recent historiography had underestimated the popular will, nationalism, and military strategy of the Confederacy. Harvard University Press published the book, which was too long to be an article (an introduction and four chapters) and too short to be a thorough treatment of its enormous subject. According to Gallagher, historians who worked backward from the knowledge of Confederate defeat inflated southern failures and misrepresented why Confederates fought. Basically, Gallagher sought to revive an older argument that a determined Confederacy succumbed to external forces instead of internal divisions. With long passages that scolded others' works, Gallagher's book read like a manifesto against the abuses of historical hindsight. *The Confederate War* had a major impact on subsequent scholarship that deepened analysis of Confederate nationalism and rebel experiences of the war. In *The Union War*, Gallagher offers a companion volume that extends his manifesto against hindsight, what Gallagher calls the "Appomattox syndrome," to histories of the Union (79). According to Gallagher, scholars who work backward from emancipation and Reconstruction have inflated northern attention to race, slavery, and abolition while obscuring loyal Americans' primary war aim, the Union.

Relying on a variety of primary sources, Gallagher tries to answer three major questions about the Union war: what did the Union mean to loyal Americans, how did emancipation relate to reunion as a war aim, and what role did federal armies play in defining and achieving both of these goals? By devoting a single chapter to each huge inquiry, Gallagher has sufficient space to criticize historiography and sketch an alternative approach but not enough room

to build the methodical research and analysis that wins scholarly arguments. The book's central aim, "to recover what Union meant to the generation that fought the war," requires more work and deeper analysis than *The Union War* provides (3). Gallagher admits that his reading of 350 soldiers' writings relies on a "small sample," but nonetheless insists (in the same paragraph) that "this triumphal interpretation of Union must be taken seriously as representative of very widely held attitudes" (62). His creative use of patriotic envelopes and valuable exploration of wartime regimental histories supplement the book's thesis, but much more work is required to prove what the Union meant to the generation that killed for it. The same is true for Gallagher's answers to the other two questions he poses. He may be correct that most loyal Americans supported emancipation as a war measure subordinate to the higher cause of the Union. For good reasons Republicans renamed themselves the Union party in 1864 instead of the Emancipation party. But slavery and Union had interwoven the national fabric from the founding through secession, and many Americans adopted abolition as a moral crusade to cure the Union cause. To separate and rank emancipation and Union within the turmoil of the war is an academic exercise that obscures the complexity of the situation. If provoked by Gallagher's book, emancipationist scholars can marshal equivalent evidence and construct a counter narrative of equal weight. Finally, Gallagher gives the United States Army primary credit for emancipation and reunion. He bases this claim on the idea that all progress during the war, even political, social, economic, and cultural gains, depended upon the military success of citizen-soldiers on battlefields. Here Gallagher borrows James McPherson's notion of contingency to assert that emancipation and black military service were not inevitable but dependent upon the military fortunes of overwhelmingly white armies that could have won or lost. Instead of relying on McPherson's older concept of contingency, Gallagher could have adopted Edward Ayers' more recent and complex idea of deep contingency. Whereas McPherson focuses on chance and military events, Ayers looks beyond luck on the battlefield to grasp the interdependency of factors and the folly of trying to rank them.

While Gallagher criticizes the abuses of historical hindsight, he commits another sin among historians, overgeneralizing and self-selecting to push a thesis. Some of the biggest generalizations mar Gallagher's treatment of historiography, which is a serious problem for a volume meant to blaze new research. Although Gallagher admits that "there are many different ways to approach the era of the Civil War," he reduces the extensive scholarship of the

period to dueling methodologies: histories that explain what mattered to Civil War Americans versus works that highlight what matters about the Civil War to current Americans (41). Gallagher tries to separate the second category into two classes, books that resonate today without resorting to ahistorical exercises and work that indulges contemporary moral outrage. This self-serving taxonomy gives the impression that Gallagher studies what mattered to Civil War Americans, while most of the field panders to political correctness or current events. Because these categories are fashioned to support Gallagher's thesis, they do not illuminate deeper, broader problems of interpretation and theory, such as how Civil War historians balance human agency versus impersonal forces, narrative versus analysis, or macro versus micro history. Examining any of these issues could have yielded a more productive, persuasive assessment of historiography and methods. In the chapter that elevates citizen soldiers and military history, Gallagher reduces Civil War scholarship into a different binary to build his case. Here he claims that "two very different Civil Wars await readers": battle front narratives written by amateur historians who ignore the home front, and home front monographs written by professional historians who neglect the battle front (121). Ironically this simplification ignores the field where Gallagher has been successful throughout his career, professional military history that enriches American history while also contributing to military science.

Gallagher might have produced a deeper exploration of the Union (and avoided sweeping generalizations) if he had scrutinized primary sources as thoroughly as he criticizes secondary literature. Beyond finding blind spots in historians' treatment of his subject, he might have uncovered misunderstandings and contradictions in Civil War Americans' thoughts about the Union. Gallagher offers a single meaning for Union, but many definitions of this ubiquitous term coexisted and contested for supremacy during the Civil War. Some Americans imagined themselves *preserving* an *imperiled* Union, while others were *restoring* a dissolved Union. The chasm between these viewpoints affected wartime diplomacy, Reconstruction politics, and postwar memory, but Gallagher does not examine the distinction. Citizens who supported the first concept could imagine emancipation as a tool to maintain the Union, as Gallagher insists that most loyal Americans did. But people who fought to re-establish a disbanded Union could see emancipation as a necessary precondition for the return of American democracy. Deeper primary research might also uncover how a host of elements, including gender, politics, class, age, religion, region, and ethnicity, shaped

individuals' understandings of the Union. It would be fascinating to compare the Unions of Boston Brahmins and Bowery boys, Wide-Awakes and Know-Nothings, Protestants and Catholics. Finally, beyond generalizing how loyal northerners defined the Union, Gallagher could have scrutinized how they romanticized it. Unionist boasts about American exceptionalism had merit in a time when democracies were so rare. The fact that the United States held a national election and retained its constitution during a civil war is extraordinary. But democrats do not settle political differences by killing each other. Regardless of which side triumphed, the Civil War signified a breakdown of American democracy. Accomplishing reunion at gunpoint did not set a shining example for other republics. How did Unionists whitewash these failures of their political system?

Much of this review criticizes *The Union War* for being too provocative in an attempt to forward its argument, but Gallagher intended this approach to invigorate scholarly discourse. This strategy worked for *The Confederate War* and, despite its flaws, *The Union War* is on to something: hindsight is a major obstacle in our understanding of the Union cause. The Union meant much more to Civil War Americans than it does to us. A keyword in the political vocabulary of the nineteenth century, Union signified many things including liberty, progress, and the precious gift of republican government that Americans inherited from the founders. The Union also kindled hope that aristocratic Europe might follow America's example. Today Europe has a Union, while the United States has relegated the term from the front page to the sports page. Instead of symbolizing democracy, Union represents professional athletes, lockouts, and collective bargaining agreements. Until we rediscover what Union meant to Civil War Americans, we cannot understand why millions sacrificed and thousands died for something that seems arcane. Gallagher does not accomplish this feat in one slim volume, but as with *The Confederate War*, he has opened a fresh discussion of a vital, misunderstood dimension of Civil War history. You can almost sense graduate students adjusting their dissertation prospectuses this summer.

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