

The Calculus of Violence: How Americans Fought the Civil War

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Review

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Historians walk two tight ropes when they write about the past: one rope divides generalization from particularization and the other divides continuity from change. If a scholar falls off the rope and lands on one side or the other, the result is a book that oversimplifies and distorts the portrait of the past. Historians must find a way to identify broad patterns without losing variations and local nuance; they must explain change over time without losing sight of all that remained the same. It is a difficult balancing act, but when done well tight-rope walking produces an interpretation of the past that most effectively captures its complexity. Aaron Sheehan-Dean's mastery of those skills has produced a must-read study of the American Civil War that explains better than any existing book in the field how Americans deployed violence during the conflict. Unlike scholars who proffer generalizations that the war was *either* a restrained or an atrocious conflict, or that it changed from a limited to total war in a linear trajectory across time, Sheehan Dean argues that the war was *both* restrained and violent, and that local patterns varied across time and space. In a study that considers both the regular and irregular aspects of the war, and places it in a comparative context with other global civil and national conflicts of the 19th Century, he identifies the factors that escalated and the factors that restrained violence during the war.

In order to consider when and why Americans acted with restraint or unleashed destruction, Sheehan-Dean examines their antebellum legal and social traditions regarding violence and their concern with adhering to the customs and laws of war in order to claim a place in the international body of civilized nations. Northerners and Southerners agreed that only states could legitimately wage war, but they proffered a range of opinions about the civilized rules of conduct for combatants. To justify their positions, Americans consulted European writers on the customs of war and compared their situation and behavior to other conflicts in

world history, with the Indian Rebellion of 1857 serving as a widely-used reference. Military and civilian authorities negotiated the rules of war, changed behavior based on those negotiations, and defined themselves in opposition to the other's position. Sheehan-Dean identifies four key areas that created dispute between the Union and Confederacy over proper behavior in war: guerrillas, emancipation, prisoners of war, and occupation.

The commitment to state-sanctioned warfare and rules of conduct provided one important restraint on the violence of the conflict. The global context of the Civil War – the need to conform to international standards – moderated behavior. Sheehan-Dean argues that the Union and the Confederate governments set meaningful boundaries to violence. The most destructive wars of the 19th century, he points out, involved actors with no aspiration to statehood. In the American Civil War, in contrast, central governments enforced codes of behavior that ensured the battles of the war contained its violence. In the regular campaigns of the war, both sides generally adhered to the rules that restrained them: targeting uniformed soldiers for lethal violence, respecting flags of truce, taking wounded men from the field, allowing soldiers to surrender or be captured, and treating prisoners as non-combatants.

An important insight of this book is the role that African Americans played in containing the violence of the Civil War. Historians now recognize that slaves instituted a rebellion that undermined the power of masters and destabilized the institution. Sheehan-Dean does not dispute that interpretation; rather he offers a necessary caveat. The slave rebellion of the American Civil War was not similar in nature or scale to the slave rebellion in Saint Domingue. Rather than rise up *en masse* to murder their owners in a race war that southern whites had predicted and feared, enslaved people sought freedom rather than revenge. Sheehan-Dean argues that the “absence of such emancipation-related violence is the single most important factor that limited the bloodshed of the Civil War (152).”

Three main factors escalated violence: the guerrilla conflict, emancipation and enlistment of black men in the Union Army, and nationalistic rhetoric that demonized the enemy. The Confederate decision to sanction guerrillas and the Union response to irregular war caused a pronounced increase in the war's destructiveness and created enormous suffering for non-combatants. Sheehan-Dean believes the Confederacy's failure to bring guerrillas under state control was a major failing of the regime. The Confederate leadership knew that the actions of guerrillas violated the laws of war; their lack of protest when Union officials executed guerrillas,

considering that they launched formal protests for nearly every other Union action, was their tacit acknowledgment. When Sheehan-Dean compares the conduct of both sides to the global standards for just behavior, he finds that most of the war's unjust violence was related to the problem of guerrillas. Southerners viewed emancipation as the most immoral act of the war and responded with extreme violence toward black soldiers and civilians. The consequent breakdown of prisoner exchange ended the lives of tens of thousands of prisoners. Confederate soldiers committed racial massacres on the battlefield in 1864 that ultimately made the war deadlier for everyone.

Sheehan-Dean avoids the binary categories of restraint and atrocity in his discussion of the violence perpetrated against black soldiers, which most historians use as evidence to advocate for the atrocious nature of the conflict. Escalation and atrocities occurred; but restraint is evident as well. Sheehan-Dean convincingly argues that the fear of retaliation, an internationally recognized process designed to allow combatants to hold each other accountable to the laws of war, held the Confederacy in check to an important degree. What the Confederacy did not do must be considered alongside what it did. Initially, Confederates intended to systematically execute black soldiers and their white officers, but they never implemented their original plans after the Union issued official threats of retaliation. The global context Sheehan-Dean presents throughout the book helps him make the case. The ad-hoc and inconsistent Confederate treatment of black troops, and the reluctance of high-level authorities to admit to killing prisoners, contrasts with the British treatment of Sepoy soldiers in the 1857 Indian Rebellion, where the British organized public executions and waged a war of extermination.

Sheehan-Dean considers a variety of campaigns and geographic regions when he assesses the conduct of the war. His discussion of specific military practices – such as sieges, artillery bombardments of cities, hostage taking, banishment of civilians, foraging, and planting sub-terra torpedoes – is incredibly useful for understanding how combatants decided what options to pursue and how they justified their actions. *Calculus of Violence* provides the most comprehensive discussion in the scholarly literature of the ubiquitous practice of retaliation. Where some historians conflate retaliation with revenge, Sheehan-Dean explains how it functioned to “end breaches of the customary laws of war (333).” Sheehan-Dean argues that both sides committed violence that was lawful under contemporary rules of war but that was also unnecessary. Adeptly walking the tight-rope in a section on Sherman's campaign for Atlanta, for

example, Sheehan-Dean explains that the controversial Union general followed the laws of war during his bombardment of Atlanta and expulsion of civilians, that his practices had been in long use by other Union generals in other theaters, and that his actions produced fewer non-combatant deaths than should be expected given a comparative context. However, such lawful actions enormously increased civilian suffering. The campaign for Atlanta in 1864 was simultaneously “restrained” and “awful (303).”

Although Sheehan-Dean complicates the limited to hard-war trajectory that dominates previous scholarship, and supports his claim that there was not a steady growth of violence over time, he depicts a surge in violence in multiple regions and aspects of the war in 1864. Armies improved control over soldiers so battlefield clashes were more lethal and deserters faced execution more often, frustration caused both sides to resort to unjust violence that they had rejected earlier in the war, thousands of POWs lost their lives during the deteriorating treatment and conditions of the year, atrocities against black troops increased in number and scale, and Confederates detonated a clockwork torpedo at City Point, Virginia that was the war’s only effective deployment of an “indiscriminate mass-casualty weapon (260).” The “sharp break” between the destruction of 1864 and the end of regular combat in April-May 1865, however, illustrated how 19th century nation-states facilitated restraint, in this case through the ability of Confederate armies to surrender. Contrary to the behavior of combatants at the end of many 20th century conflicts, Northerners did not unleash a “paroxysm of violence” in 1865 (337). The violence of the irregular war, however, continued across time and in multiple localities. As he does throughout, Sheehan-Dean in his concluding chapters offers thoughtful analysis of how the conflict varied across space.

Calculus of Violence lives up to its sub-title. Historians who seek to understand “how Americans fought the Civil War” should start with this fascinating book.

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