

# The Limits of Loyalty: Ordinary People in Civil War Mississippi

Erik Mathisen

*University of Kent*, [e.mathisen@kent.ac.uk](mailto:e.mathisen@kent.ac.uk)

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## Review

Mathisen, Erik

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**Ruminski, Jarret.** *The Limits of Loyalty: Ordinary People in Civil War Mississippi.* University Press of Mississippi, \$65.00 ISBN 9781496813961

The study of loyalty in the Civil War has a long history in its own right. Whether in the revolutionary work of Ella Lonn, the rich literature on the Border South, or the most recent work by historians like William Blair, the history of loyalty has long served as an interpretive focus, and the reasons are not hard to understand. The centrifugal force in Civil War historiography remains the question of why the United States succeeded and the Confederacy collapsed. But at no point in the conflict was loyalty so simple or such a one-way street. What Jarret Ruminski argues in this rich book is that we ought to view the question of loyalty and disloyalty in the Confederacy not as a binary choice, but as an overlapping set of forces; magnets that pulled individuals in several different directions and at different times. The contribution that Ruminski's book makes is to emphasise loyalty's complexity. By uncoupling it from the question of why the Confederacy lost the Civil War, Ruminski points to the messy, inconclusive, fragmentary experience of common people, where little was certain and destruction was everywhere.

At the core of Ruminski's argument is a tension between what he calls "protective nationalism," or the Confederate aim of urging all citizens to see their wartime labours as contributing to national independence, and the "micro loyalties" that directed people in their day-to-day lives. Ties between the individual and home, family, community, friends and more, all worked against the smooth transference of loyalty from citizens to nation-state when the Confederacy was founded, and would sap that nation-state of the unalloyed loyalty of its populace once the war was underway.

Fundamentally unstable, macro and micro loyalties constantly competed for space and supremacy. At times, this analytical framework reads as too inflexible for the kind of argument being made. It also places a lot of pressure on the structure of the study itself. Without a clear narrative arc, *Limits of Loyalty* moves back and forth across the same ground, offering insights aplenty but never offering up the satisfying summations that would allow readers to apprehend the broader importance of the book and its argument. For Ruminski, though, this is exactly the point. All wars force difficult questions about loyalty to the forefront for the people caught in its midst. Of

course it is messy. *Limits of Loyalty* is very much about the untidy way in which people experience war, and of the wrenching choices they face along the way.

The five chapters that make up this study move forward and backward across the Civil War, pulling at different threads of a wartime history of Mississippi to show how loyalties of all kinds ebbed, flowed and coloured both the experiences and choices of ordinary people. The first chapter details how Mississippi secessionists attempted to lay a nationalistic loyalty over top of a complex knot of loyalties which had formed the core of life in the state for decades. As Ruminski claims, this was hardly a success. While support for secession was evident in the state, its influence was momentary. In a second chapter, the author takes up the much larger history of Mississippi's Civil War experience, to show how both Union and Confederacy attempted to turn the messy ties of loyalty into something simple: patriot or traitor. Here too, the results were inconclusive. As the privations of war bore down on communities throughout the state, common people reverted to micro loyalties, not simply out of a pragmatic desire to keep body and soul together, but to gibe pride of place to individual loyalties and ties of familial allegiance.

The third chapter takes up the world of wartime trading, to make the point that common people viewed trade across Union lines "as simultaneously treasonous, patriotic, or of little nationalist consequence altogether" (75). Ruminski's argument here is that while historians might attempt to divine some broader political intention from the actions of Confederates, trading in a war zone reveals not some binary of loyalty, but a muted set of choices in flux. "Human loyalties are multidirected, multilayered, and influenced by circumstances," writes Ruminski. "These circumstances drove Mississippi contraband traders to act on different allegiances, which at different times and different reasons could both help and hinder the Confederate war effort" (106).

The fourth chapter of *Limits of Loyalty* suggests just how much overlapping loyalties influenced the decision of so many whites in Mississippi to either seek exemptions from military service or take their leave from the military through desertion. Here too, Ruminski is keen to issue a word of caution to those who would imbue the actions of deserters and the Free State of Jones with political importance. Moreover, the author is keen to complicate the idea that the Confederate state was anywhere near as powerful as some writers might claim. In Ruminski's hands, the Confederate military and the apparatus of state power more broadly is blunted at best is at worst ineffectual, at least when viewed from the ground. A fifth and final chapter looks at the African American experience. Here, the author argues that while questions of loyalty or disloyalty worried Mississippi slaveholders to the point of distraction, enslaved peoples were rarely one thing or the other. On a sliding scale, African Americans took advantage of opportunities when and where they could, but settled only for a freedom from the system that kept them in chains, nothing more. If anything, what

Ruminski argues is that enslaved peoples merely wanted to act on the same micro loyalties of home, family and community that white Mississippians took for granted.

There are many things to like about this book. The research is rich and deep, the stories are well-chosen and the writing throughout is both clear and nuanced. Ruminski's command of not only the archival sources but the literature on the Civil War is admirable. This aside, there are some nagging questions that remain. While the book makes much of micro loyalties like home, family and fictive kin, these loyalties are pointed to but never adequately analysed as analytical categories in their own right. Ruminski underscores that they are important, but how people defined these loyalties, whether their definitions changed, or whether white and black Mississippians thought differently about what these micro loyalties meant to them, is unclear. Ironically, for a study that emphasises chaos, the only thing stable in this history are the micro loyalties themselves.

That said, what makes *Limits of Loyalty* a worthwhile contribution to the literature on the Civil War is the fine-grained insights it offers about the complex, contradictory, flawed and therefore deeply human reaction of common people to a cataclysm that changed their lives. Contingency hangs over this study and seeps into every crevice of the argument. Building on a rich literature that includes the work of William Blair, Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Victoria Bynum and more, Jarret Ruminski makes it clear that when seen through the eyes of ordinary people, wars looks like nothing more than chaos; conflicts that throw up impossible choices and agonising decisions. For this reason alone, Ruminski's book is well worth the time of any Civil War historian. It should stand the test of time.

*Erik Mathisen is a Lecturer in U.S. History at the University of Kent ([e.mathisen@kent.ac.uk](mailto:e.mathisen@kent.ac.uk)). His book, *The Loyal Republic: Traitors, Slaves and the Remaking of Citizenship in Civil War America*, was published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2018. He is currently at work on a history of emancipation and free labor in the Atlantic World.*