

Alabamians in Blue: Freedmen, Unionists, and the Civil War in the Cotton State

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Review

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Christopher M. Rein. *Alabamians in Blue: Freedmen, Unionists, and the Civil War in the Cotton State.* Louisiana State University Press, 2019 \$47.50 ISBN 9780807170663

The tumultuous years of the 1860s continues to fascinate Americans long after the truce between Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox. Historians and scholars have not slowed in their production of works about the apocalyptic event. *Alabamians in Blue* by Christopher M. Rein is a recent offering that enriches the literature on the Civil War. It should be noted that this volume is endorsed by the Alabama Bicentennial Commission. This beautifully crafted book is a detailed analysis of the anti-Confederate movement in Alabama during the war. By the time the conflict was over, nearly 8,000 black and white men had joined the Union army in order to help liberate their state from Confederate domination. Masculinity is on full display in this military study. In a real sense, this work is about the men who were officers, soldiers, politicians, and planters. The occasional appearance of women does not fully illuminate their contributions to the war effort.

Rein's careful examination of the sectional contentions of the antebellum period reveals that they had set the stage for the disintegration of the country. The inability of northern and southern politicians to settle their differences pushed the nation into secession and war. This book makes it crystal clear that many in Alabama, and indeed across the South, were against secession and preferred to remain in the Union. However, fire-eaters were determined to sever the bonds that held the nation together. William L. Yancey of Alabama was among the most vocal advocates for southern independence. On January 9, 1861, delegates to the secession convention in Montgomery decided to follow South Carolina's lead and voted to take Alabama out of the Union. Rhetoric slipped into conflict on April 12, when the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor. Rein accurately notes that during the war, Alabama paid a heavy price for its political transgression with the loss of lives, property, and resources. And of course, the egregious institution of slavery, the engine that drove Alabama's economy.

The presence of the Union army in the Cotton State inspired the slaves with hope. They believed that President Abraham Lincoln had a plan to free them. The Civil War, with all its carnage, was the vehicle by which the enslaved segment of the American population would enjoy a new birth of freedom. As Federal soldiers marched through Alabama, slaves left the plantations and attached themselves to the United States Army. These contrabands found themselves living in refugee camps established by the military. Rein points out that the freedmen provided valuable service to the Union army as spies, scouts, teamsters, cooks, laundresses, and fortification builders. Chandra Manning posits in her book *Troubled Refuge* that the slaves did not exit from years of bondage and immediately enjoyed the benefits of American political democracy. As the emancipated slaves of Alabama moved along the freedom road, they quickly learned that it was fraught with danger and uncertainty.

The centerpiece of this volume is the military operations of the Unionist regiments from Alabama in the western theatre. Their contributions to the success of the United States Army in the West went far beyond Alabama's borders. Rein maintains that the anti-Confederate soldiers performed admirably in skirmishes and battles not only in the Cotton State but in Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida as well. This monograph devotes a great deal of attention to the recruitment, training, and performance of Alabama's units of African Descent. Although the War Department relegated black men to segregated regiments, they were a part of the whole army. According to Rein, the time has come to "reintegrate their experiences back into the larger narrative" (3). The African American regiments of Alabama were fighting not only for the preservation of the Union but also for the freedom of men, women, and children who had languished in captivity for many years. It was perhaps fitting that black troops were part of the invasions, as once powerful Confederate cities fell to the Union army. White southerners could not hide their irritation at seeing black troops marching into Charleston, Richmond, Montgomery and other cities as the Confederate experiment came to an end. The author missed the opportunity to include the reaction of Union soldiers to Lincoln's assassination. The death of the president was a devastating blow to them, especially the men of the black regiments.

On page 135, Rein writes that by the start of 1865, "Alabama stood isolated from the rest of the Confederacy and loyal Alabamians, black and white, had played an important role across the state in the defeat of Confederate arms and the destruction of the resources that sustained them."

Looking through the telescope of retrospect, the soldiers of the black and white units could take pride in what they had accomplished in Alabama and beyond. Rein contends that the exigency of the war caused Alabamians in blue to foster biracial cooperation in order to achieve a specific objective. The symbiosis among the races, however, was short-lived. White Alabamians were dissatisfied with how the war had turned out. Despite defeat, they were determined to return to a position of power in the Cotton State. White supremacists used widespread violence as their weapon of choice. The Ku Klux Klan was the most notorious subversive organization to emerge after the war. Their members carried out a reign of terror in Alabama for the expressed purpose of subjugating the state's black citizens. Rein clearly demonstrates in the epilogue that Alabama's legacy of racial polarization and intolerance remains deeply rooted in the state.

Alabamians in Blue rests on a solid foundation of archival collections, which includes the records of African American regiments, the Compiled Service Records of Union Soldiers, and the papers of veterans and civilians. His extensive research leaves no doubt that anti-Confederates were instrumental to Union victory in Alabama. A valuable addition to this monograph is the Appendix that details the military record of the Alabama regiments. This section allows the reader to follow the movement of the units during the conflict. The rich anecdotal material of this volume gives it a special human quality. Rein concludes that the Union soldiers of Alabama's black and white regiments "made the final, victorious campaigns possible and eased the transition from wartime to peacetime" (212). This is a compelling study, which shows that ordinary citizens of the Cotton State played an important role in the liberation of Alabama from Confederate control.

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