

Raising the White Flag: How Surrender Defined the American Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Zombek, Angela (2020) "Raising the White Flag: How Surrender Defined the American Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.22.1.10

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol22/iss1/10>

Review

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Winter 2020

Silkenat, David. *Raising the White Flag: How Surrender Defined the American Civil War.* The University of North Carolina Press, 2019 \$39.95 ISBN 9781469649726

David Silkenat's well-written and ambitious book blends cultural, social, and military history to illustrate how Civil War Era-Americans understood surrender, an action seemingly rife with negative connotations. Silkenat, a senior lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, captures how numerous Civil War soldiers, from individuals to large armies, decided to surrender and, in so doing, contends that the action was not always shameful. Rather, nineteenth-century contemporaries believed that surrender was key to distinguishing between civilized and uncivilized warfare, an idea shaped by early Americans' relations with Native Americans, whom whites did not trust to uphold surrender terms (10-11). Surrender also had implications for honor, both national and individual. The new Confederate republic suffered significant setbacks fairly early in the war at Forts Henry and Donelson, among other locations, and these surrenders called into question the Confederacy's leadership ability. However, while enlisted soldiers were inclined to question commanders who surrendered unnecessarily, they rarely criticized fellow soldiers who surrendered since the act was borne from bravery: Individual surrender made soldiers come face-to-face with the enemy.

Surrender terms required officers to discuss the treatment of prisoners of war, and prisoners' treatment indicated the moral constitution of the victorious side. Prisoners of war receive the lion's share of scholarly attention when it comes to experiences in Civil War prisons, but Silkenat also highlights the plight of soldiers in parole camps, like the 12,000 Union soldiers sent to Chicago's Camp Douglas following the surrender of Harper's Ferry in late 1862, and other U.S. soldiers detained by their own government at Union parole camps at Annapolis, Columbus, and St. Louis. Silkenat reminds us that parolees faced the same physical conditions and demoralization as POWs while they were held captive.

Surrender was a seemingly straightforward concept, and an accepted convention among Civil War soldiers, but Silkenat notes that the experience of surrender varied according to rank and that some men surrendered multiple times during the war. Surrender provided enlisted men with a rare moment of agency on the battlefield as individuals decided whether or to accept or demand surrender. Men who considered surrender carefully, albeit briefly given the time available to make a decision, took into account their probable fate after surrender. Soldiers' decisions revolved around the enemy's treatment of prisoners of war and the probability for exchange which, while the Dix-Hill Cartel was in effect, gave Union and Confederate soldiers incentive to surrender because of its liberal parole policy (99). Upon the breakdown of the exchange cartel, however, Northern and Southern soldiers feared surrender as it likely meant indefinite terms in a military prison. Silkenat contends that in 1864, African-Americans, Southern Unionists, and guerillas bore the brunt of suffering as these captives faced a likely death sentence as a result of surrender (175). At this point, Silkenat highlights the paradox of surrender, shifting from an analysis of its civility to that of the abject brutality that it could inspire, the most notorious having occurred at Fort Pillow in April 1864.

Silkenat unsettles accepted conventions about surrender generally and about the surrender at Appomattox specifically. He notes that Appomattox has been accepted as the de facto conclusion of the war, thus casting into the shadows the surrenders that followed. At Appomattox, the spotlight was on Lee and Grant but, in subsequent surrenders, Silkenat notes that Confederate officers' decision to surrender was largely driven by actions of their subordinate soldiers, turning the military hierarchy on its head and evincing how enlisted men could prompt surrender and influence its terms (221). Ultimately, Silkenat's study contributes to scholarship on the transition to hard warfare, imprisonment, honor and shame, historical memory, and soldier motivation: That is, soldiers' motivation to lay down their arms or, after the Dix-Hill Cartel collapsed, to retain them, both for the sake of self-interest and preservation.

Angela Zombek is Assistant Professor of History at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She is the author of *Penitentiaries, Punishment, and Military Prisons: Familiar Responses to an Extraordinary Crisis during the American Civil War* (Kent State University Press, 2018) and "The Power of the Press: Defining Disloyalty at Old Capitol Prison," (forthcoming, *Journal of the Civil War Era*). She is currently working on a book project entitled *Stronghold of the Union: Key West Under Martial Law*.

