

Men is Cheap: Exposing the Frauds of Free Labor in Civil War America

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Review

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Luskey, Brian P. *Men is Cheap: Exposing the Frauds of Free Labor in Civil War America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. Hardcover \$34.95 ISBN 9781469654324 pp. 279

Over 2 million men, including African Americans, served in the U.S. army during the Civil War. But questions remain about what may have (or not) motivated men to join the U.S. Army. Recent scholarship moves the historical conversation beyond discussions of military tactics and prominent figures to an important, but often marginalized topic—U.S. Army recruitment's financial logistics. Brian P. Luskey argues in *Men is Cheap: Exposing the Frauds of Free Labor in Civil War America*, that capitalism, class dynamics, and labor speculation is critical to understanding both the successes and shortcomings of U.S. Army recruitment. Luskey places U.S. Army labor brokers as the central figures of his study. He emphasizes their usage of the free labor system, made famous by the Free Labor Party (and later the Republican Party), to boost enlistment numbers through monetary enticements. Furthermore, Luskey asserts that labor brokers' willingness to apply capitalist elements of the free labor system allowed some U.S. Army representatives (and occasionally potential substitutes) to profit from wealthy northerners' unwillingness to serve financially. (2-6)

Brian P. Luskey is an Associate Professor of History and the Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of History at West Virginia University. He previously authored *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America*. Luskey also has numerous published essays in various academic journals, including the *Journal of the Early Republic* and the *Journal of the Civil War Era*.

Men is Cheap, which primarily focuses on Northeastern cities, provides fascinating points on the U.S. Army, the federal government, and prominent white male figures quickly realized that patriotism and notions of white masculinity did not lead to high turnout for enlistment. Luskey denotes that, as early as 1861, the establishment of federal and state bounties highlight soldiers were wage laborers who sought and received economic restitution for

soldiering. (78-79) As a result, this led to divisions amongst early volunteer U.S. army soldiers, who did not acquire bounties, who viewed enlisted men earning bounties as “soldiers for hire.” (83, 86, 109) The division amongst U.S. Army soldiers illustrates an inner civil war that rested on an individual’s perception of nationalism, military service, capitalism, and gender ideology.

Luskey’s work does an exceptional job examining the experiences of African Americans. For freedpeople, Luskey notes, their transition from enslavement gave them, and the U.S. Army, a new understanding of race and capitalism as ending slavery, eventually led to protecting white laborers. While enslaved people gained their freedom, whites benefitted from no longer facing direct employment competition with enslaved people. On the other hand, freedpeople could now, theoretically, control their laboring destiny. (97) Such idealistic interpretations ignore the pervasiveness of occupational racial discriminatory policies (informal and formal) in Free States and territories. Luskey’s focus on labor brokers’ connection to United States Colored Troops (USCT) mobilization is a refreshing analysis that only reveals recruitment among various states to enlist black men (to fill state quotas) became a highly competitive endeavor. It also leads instances of fraud, theft, and coercion to (sometimes forcibly) enroll black men. Luskey demonstrates that scholars should not solely focus southern impressment on understanding intimidating (and often illegal) tactics northerners applied to boost USCT enrollment.

Brian P. Luskey’s *Men is Cheap* proves that capitalism and wage laboring are essential to learning why men did and did not join the U.S. army. *Men is Cheap* is a must-read and cite for Civil War scholars and history enthusiasts of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Furthermore, USCT scholars will find this book very insightful for discussions of reticence among northern black men to enroll. *Men is Cheap* convincingly argues that money and military service mattered to Americans during the Civil War.

Holly A. Pinheiro, Jr., is an Assistant Professor of History at Augusta University. His book, *The Families’ Civil War!*, is under contract with The University of Georgia Press in the UnCivil War Series.