

Confederate Conscription and the Struggle for Southern Soldiers

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Review

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Sacher, John M. *Confederate Conscription and the Struggle for Southern Soldiers*. Louisiana State University Press, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$45.00. ISBN 0807176214 pp. 268.

For all their fabled commitment to states' rights, Confederates created an extraordinarily powerful central government in Civil War Richmond. Even before the war, white southern leaders' states' rights rhetoric had been belied by an enthusiastic use of federal power when it suited their purposes—witness, for example, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The exigencies of war further intensified this tendency. Between 1861 and 1865, as they waged an existential war against the United States, President Jefferson Davis and the Confederate Congress wielded unprecedented national power.

At the centerpiece of Confederate governmental power was the national conscription system, the subject of John Sacher's *Confederate Conscription and the Struggle for Southern Soldiers*. Initiated in April 1862, this was the first national conscription in U.S. history, predating Lincoln's national draft by almost a year. Sacher rightly terms Confederate conscription "revolutionary": "It put national priorities ahead of states' rights, put the Confederacy's needs ahead of individual liberty, and sharply prescribed a single path—army service—for southern men to show their loyalty to the cause" (19).

Sacher takes a genuinely fresh approach to the subject. Starting with the knowledge that the Confederacy was ultimately defeated, previous historians have looked to conscription primarily as a measure of dissent—a way to understand why the Confederacy lost and how consequential internal discord was. It has typically been interpreted one-dimensionally as an unpopular policy that exposed and deepened sociopolitical divisions. Sacher considerably deepens our understanding of conscription. He does not ignore states' rights critics of the draft like Georgia Governor Joseph Brown, and nor should he. But he digs much deeper, creating the space for new insights by asking new kinds of questions. Rather than limiting himself to the basic questions of whether or not Confederates opposed conscription, and how much opposition

harmful to the war effort, Sacher investigates complex public debates over the *implementation* of conscription to explore differing interpretations of what the Confederacy really meant. Almost all Confederates accepted conscription, he shows, although they engaged in revealing fine-grained debates over who should be eligible and how, exactly, it ought to work. Even the controversies around the so-called “Twenty Negro Law,” which exempted white men to control enslaved people, can be interpreted not just as the spark for class-based “Rich Man’s War, Poor Man’s Fight” opposition to Confederate authority, but also as an example of Confederates carefully navigating the competing claims of homefront and battlefield.

Sacher grounds his analysis in specific stories of real people and communities, struggling with the implications of the draft in their lives. Responses to conscription were much more complex than simply whether or not a given individual supported the Confederacy. They typically involved men and women collectively debating the balance between support for the Confederate war effort and commitments to family and community survival. These examples are nuanced, richly documented, and illustrative of the many variables involved in attitudes toward the draft. Sacher also takes into account how the details of conscription changed over time. The age span incrementally expanded from 18-35 to 17-50. The categories of exemption were also modified, reflecting evolving attitudes toward the contending needs of the military versus businesses, government, and communities at home. Even in the face of the army’s need for more and more troops, military-aged men were needed to perform countless other roles off the battlefield—and determining where the balance rightly lay is what occupied the minds and pens of so many Confederates.

One of the most interesting chapters looks at enrolling officers, the men charged with implementing conscription policy and signing up recruits. In a period before standardized documentation like birth certificates and passports, it could be difficult for officers to ascertain even the age or nationality of a possible conscript. Evaluating an individual’s health, their loyalty to the Confederacy, or their suitability for an exemption could be more difficult still, frequently involving extensive investigation and sensitive conversations with community members who were often adversarial. Enrollment officers performed a challenging, often thankless job, sometimes in outright competition with businesses or even army units attempting to circumvent the process and secure much-needed manpower for themselves.

Confederate Conscription and the Struggle for Southern Soldiers is thoroughly researched and carefully argued. Some readers may question a few of the author's choices. The term "southerner" is used throughout the book when "white southerner" or "Confederate" would be more accurate. The few pages devoted to late-war efforts to draft enslaved men could have been expanded and connected more fully to wider debates over Confederate purpose. Comparisons with President Lincoln's conscription system—not to mention those of other countries—could have led to a sharper evaluation of Confederate peculiarities. But these are minor quibbles that do not detract from the value of an important book by a skilled historian. *Confederate Conscription and the Struggle for Southern Soldiers* deserves immediate status as the standard work on Confederate conscription. It will be read with appreciation by anyone interested in Confederate identity, governance, and war-making.

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