

True Blue: White Unionists in the Deep South during the Civil War and Reconstruction

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Review

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Butler, Clayton J. *True Blue: White Unionists in the Deep South during the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$45.00. ISBN 9780807176627 228 pp.

Traitors and Tories

Clayton Butler has breathed life into a phenomenon that seems counter-intuitive. In the very heart of Dixie, the originally seceding states of the Deep South, lived a number of white unconditional Unionists who volunteered to fight and die for the stars and stripes. Derided as traitors or Tories, their motivation was straightforward: Just like those from the free states who wore the Union blue, they wanted to preserve a government that promised its white citizens opportunity and equal rights. They did not set out to end slavery but were “willing to ally with African Americans during the war to save the Union” (9). This wartime alliance fractured during Reconstruction, because white Southern Unionists for the most part could not endure the stigma of upending racial hierarchy.

Butler focuses primarily on two Union regiments, the First Louisiana Cavalry (USA) and First Alabama Cavalry (USA). The former included many German and Irish immigrants who lived in New Orleans, which was occupied by Union forces after April 1862. Louisiana supplied 6,000 soldiers for the Union army, more than any other Deep South State. Many fought at Port Hudson, a key Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi. Butler’s assessment of the situation in Alabama builds on the work of Margaret Storey and William W. Rogers. Parts of the hill country in northern Alabama, partially penetrated by the Union army in the spring of 1862, also supplied white loyalist recruits, who had been forced to choose sides by hated Confederate conscription. In 1864 the Alabama unit became part of the Seventeenth Corps of William T. Sherman’s western army as it rampaged across Georgia.

Butler is careful not to exaggerate the extent of Deep South Unionism. Loyalists were a “tiny minority” engulfed in a pro-Confederate sea (166). They disappeared from cultural

memory as the postwar white South embraced the heroic myth of the Lost Cause, and the loyalists themselves chose to shield their record of racial apostasy. As Butler notes, historian Anne Marshall found comparable patterns in postwar Kentucky, a slave state that sent a majority of its soldiers to the Union army. Thomas Dyer's fascinating study of wartime Unionism in Atlanta and Elizabeth Varon's compelling identification of a clandestine Unionist circle in Richmond anticipate key qualities of Butler's volume: diligent research that yields unexpected insights.

True Blue also includes a grim chapter on the notorious Fort Pillow Massacre in April 1864, when vengeful Confederates murdered hundreds of black and white soldiers, rather than allow them to surrender. In Confederate eyes, the defeated whites, members of "Bradford's Battalion," the Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry (USA), were racial turncoats, complicit in trying to attract slaves into the Union army and thereby risking the apocalypse of slave rebellion. The white loyalists, many of whom came from pro-Union pockets along the Tennessee River in West Tennessee, had enjoyed the support of family and kin in their home communities. Butler persuasively reviews the historiography that long downplayed Confederate brutality at Fort Pillow and erased the memory of the white victims there.

The two concluding chapters of *True Blue* focus on Reconstruction. Butler recapitulates the astonishing course of events that drove Republicans in Washington to embrace black voting. For most white loyalists in the South, that was a bridge too far. Without black votes, they had no chance to gain political control in their states, but white racial phobias undermined efforts to build a biracial Republican party, and the loyalists proved receptive to the blandishments of former Confederates. Butler quotes the pithy summary offered by historian Michael Fitzgerald: The loyalists "preferred the rebels as their masters to freedmen as their allies" (160).

Butler's capable and welcome monograph challenges a well-intentioned modern tendency to celebrate the Civil War as a triumph of moral principle. Americans today find it difficult to believe that emancipation always was, as historian Adam I. P. Smith has written, "subsidiary to the overarching cause of Union," or that many supporters of the war never enlisted in the struggle for racial justice. Instead, we crave a story in which those who fully shared early twenty-first century values led the way. We want to believe that enlightened white Americans saw that holding slaves and practicing racial discrimination was inconsistent with national

values. Alas, the embattled Unionists at the center of this volume cannot be squared with sugar-coated interpretations of the Civil War era.

Daniel W. Crofts' book, Lincoln and the Politics of Slavery: The Other Thirteenth Amendment and The Struggle to Save the Union, was awarded the University of Virginia's Bobbie and John Nau Book Prize in American Civil War Era History. He has recently published essays about Sidney George Fisher in The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography and The Journal of the Civil War Era. Crofts is Professor Emeritus of History at The College of New Jersey and can be reached at crofts@tcnj.edu