

### The Weaker Sex in War: Gender and Nationalism in Civil War Virginia

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## Review

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**Brill, Kristen.** *The Weaker Sex in War: Gender and Nationalism in Civil War Virginia.* University of Virginia Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$75.00 ISBN 9780813947716 pp. 199

Kristen Brill argues that the wartime actions and relationships of white Southern middle-class and planter-class women demonstrated dedication to the Confederacy without advancing a progressive understanding of women's personal rights like their first-wave feminist sisters in the North. During the war, the Confederate government harnessed women's public and private labors for Southern independence as a potent nationalist symbol, and Confederate women themselves "were knowing and keen participants in shaping and circulating a gendered nationalist narrative" (5). Just as Confederate women merged their household identities with wartime enterprises, Brill convincingly merges social, political, and intellectual history with women's and gender history to illustrate how Southern white women embedded themselves in the political culture of Confederate nation-making. As numerous books about Southern women in the Civil War era have detailed, they experienced the war in a series of interlocking identities such as race, class status, age, kinship network, marital status, physical location, and education. The most presiding commonality among women in the Confederacy, Brill argues, "was that each individual had to decide, sometimes to others and sometimes just for herself, would she support the Confederacy?" (5) Brill admirably roots Southern women's power not only in the domestic world of the household, but also demonstrates how ably they transferred that power into the political world around them.

Confederate women of financial means were best equipped to politically support Confederate nationalism, Brill contends. They also had the most to gain by Confederate victory. Such women actively pushed Confederate national policy to defend their physical safety and household power. They forged new relationships with the state by directly strengthening nationalist sentiment with their material production and participation in political culture. This female participation in Southern politics challenged the traditional gendered concept of women's

weakness and male protection, but did not utterly undermine it, especially as Confederate women often encouraged the defense of propertied women. To illustrate her argument, Brill provides numerous examples of how Confederate women participated in and influenced the political culture of the Southern nation at war.

Perhaps no finer example of Confederate women's nationalism can be found than their direct military aid. Because of her unflagging medical service to the Confederacy, Sally Tompkins—the Florence Nightingale of the Confederacy—became an emblem of individual sacrifice, but endorsements from the Confederate government and repeated praise in the Southern print culture elevated her personal work to a symbol of Confederate nationalism. Ladies' gunboat associations across the South and the Ladies' Defense Association (LDA), a Richmond-based women's collective that worked directly with Confederate leaders, provided opportunities for Confederate women to shape Southern nationalism. Even if their participation in the LDA was couched in gendered language about women's subordinate social position, their activity directly connected the home front to the front lines and served the practical function of protecting their own homes. Fundraising to create the CSS *Virginia II*, which launched in June 1863, was the LDA's greatest accomplishment.

The Confederate government also recognized the political capital involved in protecting white women of means from slave insurrection and social discontent. Brill illustrates this concern in the governmental response both to the Conscription Act, which might expose women on the home front to slave rebellion, and the Richmond Bread Riots, which threatened domestic tranquility and national resolve. Ultimately, Brill contends, the safety of middle- and upper-class women was of paramount political importance to the Confederacy. Confederate women of means and political influence also “harnessed their conservative sociopolitical consciousness to publicize—and humanize—the Confederate cause abroad” (76). Confederates at home and abroad, as well as pro-Confederate foreigners like James Spence, routinely depicted the South in terms of female vulnerability and called for manly European intervention. In this respect, Confederate women were emotional representatives of an embattled South in need of support in the face of an unjust, inhumane Union war.

Even when Southern women were neutral, they still fostered political relationships. The Mount Vernon's Ladies' Association (MVLA), though made up of women who were nominally secessionist in their private lives, actively pursued an image of neutrality in preserving the first

president's historic household, which was a national landmark not to be sullied with partisan rancor. To physically protect the property from occupation and to preserve the national sentiment surrounding Mount Vernon, the MVLA established new relationships with Union leaders. More than personal sentiment, neutrality was realpolitik for survival, which signaled how politically wise Southern white women had grown in the antebellum era.

Historians will find much to consider in Brill's brief but cogent book. Brill illuminates how middle- and upper-class Southern white women actively participated in a nineteenth-century political world that denied them traditional liberal rights, even as they fostered a conservative vision of their own political capacities and obligations. This is Brill's most significant contribution to the historiography of the Civil War and moreover to American women's and gender studies, for she artfully explains how Southern white women could transcend their traditional household roles without sacrificing those roles. "These women did not see themselves as full citizens," Brill argues, "but they did see themselves as more than mothers" (51). Nationalism, not enhanced individualism, was their foremost aim—but even though the Confederacy lost the war, Southern women gained a victory by successfully extending their own political presence.

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