For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War

The Civil War was the most deadly and devastating war in American history. For four long and grueling years, men from both the Union and Confederate armies experienced the brutality of combat and suffered the hardships of vigorous campaigning. Under these bitter circumstances millions of ordinary men, most of them volunteers, encountered indescribable affliction. Faced with death, mutilation, disease and separation from home, these men valiantly fought and continued to give up their lives throughout the war. Much of the fascination behind the legacy of the Civil War comes from this willingness of common Union and Confederate soldiers to fight a war that was so ferocious and horrible that today's Americans cannot imagine engaging in such a struggle. Many have often asked, "What prompted these men to give up their lives in this war that killed almost as many American soldiers as the rest of the wars this country has fought combined?"

It is this question- Why did they fight?- that inspired one of America's preeminent Civil War historians, James M. McPherson, to examine what it was that motivated Civil War soldiers to engage in such a horribly bloody and brutal conflict. The awe of his students as they walked over the fatal route of "Pickett's Charge" at Gettysburg, the wonder of he and his cousin as they stood at the Bloody Angle of Spotsylvania, and the comment of a former Vietnam military leader that he found the devotion of Civil War soldiers to their cause "mystifying," were the experiences that "planted and watered the seeds" of McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades:* Why Men Fought in the Civil War. Finding that he could not give a satisfactory answer to the question of what motivated Civil War soldiers to fight, McPherson set out in this well-researched and powerfully written book to learn and examine what inspired Union and Confederate soldiers to go forward despite the high odds against coming out alive.

Pouring over more than 25,000 letters and 249 personal diaries of Civil War soldiers, McPherson undertook the daunting task of articulating the reasons why three million soldiers enlisted and fought in the Union and Confederate armies. He asks himself, "How does an historian discover and analyze the thoughts and feelings of three million people?" Faced with this difficulty, McPherson compiled a representative portrait of the war's soldiers, explaining

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¹ James M. McPherson, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1, 5.

² Ibid., xii.

that "[t]he best I can do is to select a quasi-representative group of soldiers whose letters or diaries have survived and read those documents with a discerning eye toward answering the questions posed in this book." Thus, his sample of 647 Union and 429 Confederate soldiers comes as close as possible to representing the age, marital status, geographical distribution, and branch of service of the fighting soldiers of the Civil War. Nevertheless, McPherson points out that since the purpose of his book is to explain the motives of Civil War soldiers for fighting, his sample "is skewed toward those who did the real fighting." As a result, there is a bias in the sample toward native-born soldiers from middle- and upper-classes who enlisted early in the war. These groups, McPherson explains, are overrepresented because they did a disproportionate amount of the fighting, suffered the highest casualty rates, and were more likely to write letters or keep diaries. From this sample, McPherson effectively uses these letters and diaries to answer the questions of what Civil War soldiers fought for, how they coped with the fear and stress of combat, and why both armies could sustain a far higher level of casualties than any other army in American history and still keep on fighting.

Many historians have previously used such sources to explore the thoughts, emotions, and actions of Civil War soldiers. However, as McPherson explains, "none has read their diaries and letters with the same questions [and conclusions] about why they fought as I have done." After reading and analyzing these unrevised and uniquely candid sources, McPherson not only feels that he has "come to know these men better than I know most of my living acquaintances," he also comes to the conclusion that the Union and Confederate soldiers possessed deeply held ideological, political, and patriotic convictions, which were the major reasons they enlisted, fought, and remained in the ranks. Contrary to many modern scholars of the post-WWII and Vietnam eras, McPherson shows that the soldiers of the Civil War remained powerfully convinced of the ideals for which they fought throughout the conflict.

Until recently, as historian Russell F. Weigley explains, many historians and scholars have believed that Civil War soldiers did not often fight out of political and ideological motives. Instead, they argued that volunteer soldiers enlisted out of economic and social pressures, and that men in the Civil War only fought because of loyalty to their units and friends. Furthermore,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., ix.

⁵ Ibid., xii.

⁶ Ibid., x.

many historians have traditionally believed that as the war went on, soldiers became embittered by combat and continued to fight only to get the war over with. Thus, these views, influenced by the experience of twentieth-century conflicts, have become the widely accepted analyses of Civil War soldiers' motivations.

In For Cause and Comrades, James McPherson challenges the modernist arguments of his contemporaries that the experiences of Civil War soldiers paralleled the disillusionment and war-weariness of twentieth-century soldiers. "This book challenges the conventional wisdom about the motives and mentalite of Civil War soldiers," claims McPherson. "It offers some interpretations that differ from those of other historians." In particular, his revisionist views directly challenge those of noted historians and scholars, Bell Irvin Wiley and Gerald Linderman. As Heather C. Richardson of MIT explains, Bell Irvin Wiley, reflecting the war of his time, argued in The Life of Johhny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy (1943) and The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union (1952) that Civil War soldiers enlisted because of economic or community pressures, and stayed in the ranks out of loyalty to their comrades. While McPherson agrees that men in the Civil War battlefield were motivated to fight for their comrades, he disagrees with Wiley that most of the soldiers enlisted for purely economic and social reasons. He explains, "They did not fight for money. The pay was poor and unreliable . . . most volunteers and their families made economic sacrifices when they enlisted."

McPherson also challenges the ideas of Gerald Linderman, author of *Embattled Courage:* The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War (1987). According to historian Christopher Waldrep, Linderman concluded that the Civil War hardened soldiers on both sides, stripping away whatever patriotic, ideological motives they had in the first years. Although McPherson agrees that the experiences of combat did shock and temporarily disillusion many soldiers, he maintains that the vast majority of them stayed and faced the slaughterhouse of combat, both for their cause and their comrades. Furthermore, he argues that their deeply held

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⁷ Russell F. Weigly, *Courage of Their Convictions* [article on-line] (New York Times, 23 March 1997, accessed 18 Sept. 2011); available from http://www.nytimes.com/books; Internet.

⁸ McPherson, ix.

⁹ Heather C. Richardson, Review of Joseph M. McPherson For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War in Historian (1999): 399.

¹⁰ McPherson, 5.

¹¹ Christopher Waldrep, Review of James M. McPherson For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War in Journal of Abraham Lincoln Association (1999): 88.

ideological convictions did not wither away. In fact, he contends, they actually grew stronger as the war dragged on and as the men became more determined to see the fight for their cause end in victory. McPherson maintains that the Civil War principles of ideology and patriotism were "not the last refuge of the scoundrel," but the "credo of the fighting soldier."

In all, McPherson does not completely reject the arguments of Bell Irvin Wiley, Gerald Linderman, and others. As Russell Weigley points out, the letters and diaries in *For Cause and Comrades*, reveal "a wide variety of motivations in addition to duty and honor, including those economic and social pressures that our 20th-century sensibilities have prepared us to expect." Thus, McPherson does not accuse his colleagues of being totally wrong. Instead, he believes that their emphases have been misplaced. McPherson explains: "It is impossible to understand how the huge volunteer armies of the Civil War could have come into existence and sustained such heavy casualties over four years unless many of these volunteers really meant what they said about a willingness to die for the cause." 14

While McPherson's main contention is that Civil War soldiers' deeply held ideological beliefs encouraged them to enlist and fight, his analysis of their motivations and experiences is not one-dimensional. McPherson knows that soldiers had many different opinions, emotions and pressures; and the immense variety of soldiers' experiences is evident throughout his book. As historian Carl J.Guarneri notes,

"McPherson's title announces his thesis but disguises the variety of topics his judiciously argued book discusses." Nevertheless, while McPherson skillfully interweaves the complex range of motivations and experiences among Civil War soldiers, he repeatedly returns to a sense of commitment of Union and Confederate soldiers to their "cause and comrades."

By dividing the motivations of Civil War soldiers into three categories- initial motivation (or enlistment), "sustaining" motivation, and combat motivation- McPherson argues that that there is a close relationship between the ideals that motivated them to enlist, to stay in the army, and to fight. He suggests that for Civil War soldiers, "the group cohesion and peer pressure that were powerful factors in combat motivation were not unrelated to the complex mixture of

¹² McPherson, 103.

¹³ Weigley, 2.

¹⁴ McPherson, 28.

¹⁵ Carl J. Guarneri, Review of James M. McPherson For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War in Journal of American History (Dec. 1997): 1069.

patriotism, ideology, concepts of duty, honor, manhood, and community or peer pressure that prompted them to enlist in the first place."¹⁶

As Christopher Waldrep explains, McPherson uses the first six chapters of his book to acknowledge the experiences that Northern and Southern Civil War soldiers shared with each other and with all other combatants. ¹⁷ In the first three chapters, McPherson explores the Union and Confederate soldiers' commitment to duty and honor; the patriotic fervor that both Northern and Southern soldiers exuded in the first months of the war; the Union ideology to fight against "the essence of anarchy" and the Confederate defense of their homeland; and the themes of manhood, adventure, and "combat narcosis." In the next three chapters, McPherson examines the soldiers' combat experience, the relationship between soldier and officer, the religious convictions of the soldiers, and "primary group cohesion." Thus, his first chapters on "the initial impulse to fight, soldiers' first combat, officers' need to appear brave, religion, and primary group cohesion all show how Civil War soldiers shared universal attributes with all soldiers, at all times, in any war." Nevertheless, any person with even a superficial knowledge of the Civil War knows that the Union and Confederate soldiers were unique and unlike most modern-day soldiers in many ways. For McPherson, the most striking difference lies in ideology.

The heart of McPherson's book, declares Waldrep, is in chapter seven. ¹⁹ Entitled "On the Altar of My Country," this chapter is where McPherson makes the argument that despite such universals, Civil War soldiers fought for ideological motives. McPherson maintains that the fact that most American soldiers in WWII and Vietnam were draftees or professional soldiers while most soldiers in the Civil War were volunteers who chose to fight made a huge difference. He quotes Bell Irvin Wiley as saying, "American soldiers of the 1860's appear to have been about as little concerned with ideological issues as were those of the 1940's." ²⁰ But he then contends that careful research in the letters and diaries of Civil War soldiers would lead "the attentive historian" to a contrary conclusion. McPherson declares: "Ideological motifs almost leap from the pages of these documents. A large number of those men in blue and grey were intensely

¹⁶ McPherson, 13.

¹⁷ Waldrep, 93.

¹⁸ Ibid., 94.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ McPherson, 91.

aware of the issues at stake and passionately concerned about them. How could it be otherwise? This was after all, a *civil war*."²¹

In addition, McPherson also explains in this chapter that the deeply held political principles were also an important driving force in the soldiers' motivations to enlist and fight. Both Union and Confederate men were active and knowledgeable about the politics of their time, and even in the military camps they continued to avidly read newspapers and participate in political debates. McPherson makes the case that in the world's most politicized and democratic country of the mid-nineteenth century, Civil War soldiers "had come of age in the 1850's when highly charged partisan and ideological debates consumed the American polity. . . When they enlisted, many of them did so for patriotic and ideological reasons- to shoot as they had voted, so to speak."²² In other words, these men did not stop being passionately idealistic citizens and voters once they had become soldiers.

Furthermore, McPherson also defines the ideology of the Confederate and Union soldiers and argues that as the war progressed, their commitment to ideology became stronger, not weaker. In defining ideology in general, McPherson uses historian Eric Foner's definition of "the system of beliefs, values fears, prejudices, reflexes, and commitments of a social group."²³ For McPherson, this broad definition embraces patriotism and other more complex and systematic ideas about the meaning and purpose of war. In the South, Confederate nationalism compelled many men to volunteer and fight for "their country." As one Georgia sergeant told his family in 1861, "... I will sacrifice upon the alter [sic] of my country." Although this soldier spoke of his feelings early in the war, this "dedication to defend home and heart that had impelled so many Southerners to enlist in 1861," argues McPherson, "took on an even greater urgency when large-scale invasions became a reality in 1862."²⁵ Contrary to Gerald Linderman's assertions, McPherson points out that these kinds of words and feeling remained with most Confederates throughout the war. The words of one captain that his men "were now more fully determined than ever before to sacrifice their lives, if need be, for the invaded soil of their bleeding Country" showed that they lived and died by this creed of Confederate nationalism until the end.

²¹ Ibid., 91.

²² Ibid, 92. ²³ Ibid, 94.

²⁴ Ibid., 95.

²⁵ Ibid.

McPherson also points out that patriotism and nationalism were also powerful initial and sustaining motivations for Union soldiers. While Northern ideology may have been more "abstract and intangible" than in the South, McPherson reveals that it was nonetheless just as real and deeply felt. This can be seen in the letter of a Pennsylvania cavalryman to his mother in 1863, which stated, "Oh my country, how my heart bleeds for your welfare. If this poor life of mine could save you, how willingly would I make the sacrifice."26 Thus, McPherson effectively shows through the powerful letters and diaries of the soldiers themselves that, contrary to what many scholars believe, the soldiers of the Civil War remained powerfully convinced of the ideals for which they fought for throughout the conflict.

In the last few chapters of the book, McPherson goes on to study how the rhetoric and the legacy of the Revolution, the issues of slavery and emancipation, support from home, and the expressions of vengeance and revenge influenced and encouraged soldiers to keep fighting the increasingly atrocious battles of the Civil War. In the last chapter, titled "The Same Holy Cause," McPherson once again comes back to his main contention that for the fighting soldiers who enlisted in 1861 and 1862, the ideological, political, and patriotic convictions that were the major reasons for enlistment, remained a crucial component of their sustaining motivation to the end of the war.

While McPherson admits that the grim experiences of combat, disease, exhaustion, and death made many soldiers war-weary and disillusioned, he directly challenges Gerald Linderman's belief that this harsh disillusionment caused them to abandon their initial tenets. McPherson shows through his examples that the language of duty and honor that persisted in the writings of many soldiers offers proof that these ideals remained "alive and well" for many soldiers until the end. McPherson also suggests that the fact that more than 136,000 veterans reenlisted although most of their terms ended in 1864 proves even further that "the persistence of ideological convictions and a determination to finish the job were crucial factors for many soldiers."²⁷ An Irish-born sergeant from New Jersey wrote towards the end of the war, "We are still engaged in the same holy cause. . . we have yet the same country to fight for."²⁸ In fact, McPherson ultimately implies it was this kind of persistent and unfailing devotion of Northern soldiers to "cause and comrades" that eventually turned the tide of the war in their favor. In all,

²⁶ Ibid., 99. ²⁷ Ibid., 173.

²⁸ Ibid.

McPherson successfully uses the letters and diaries of the soldiers themselves to demonstrate the validity of his title, and to suggest that "cause and comrades" were not alternate reasons to fight.

The most powerful element of McPherson's argument in *For Cause and Comrades* is his usage of the original letters and personal diaries of the Civil War soldiers themselves. By speaking through the writings of the men who did the fighting, McPherson is able to offer more valuable insights into the minds and experiences of the soldiers of the Civil War. In the opening of his book, McPherson remarks that it would be closer to the truth to say that "Civil War soldiers wrote it." He says that "they articulated their motives for fighting far above my poor power to add or detract. . . their uncensored letters and diaries provide fuller and more candid explanations for their decisions to enlist and fight than we have for soldiers in any other war." Furthermore, McPherson explains, the personal letters written to family members, sweethearts, and friends, and the unrevised diaries that the soldiers kept are "rich and in some ways almost unique" sources. Untouched by censorship and revision, these soldiers' uniquely blunt and detailed personal writings tell their own stories in their own words. Heather Richardson sums it up best when she says that the "soldiers' voices carry the narrative, giving an extraordinary immediacy [and validity] to the material." **30**

But while many readers agree with McPherson's choice of sources for his narratives, critics like historian Daniel E. Sutherland reason that McPherson could have gained even more insight into the mind of the nineteenth-century soldier had he broadened his sample by considering sources other than letters and diaries. McPherson states his case for purposely omitting memoirs, reminiscences, and other postwar writings by claiming that they have the potential of being distorted by hindsight or faulty memory and that they "suffer from a critical defect: they were written for publication." Sutherland points out, however, that although McPherson gives his reasons for not using these postwar documents, he also acknowledges that when subjected to "critical standards" they can be very much useful. Furthermore, Sutherland also reveals that McPherson refuses to use postwar statements from Civil War vets, yet he frequently relies on postwar statements made by veterans of twentieth-century wars for the sake

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²⁹ Ibid., xii.

³⁰ Richardson, 400.

³¹ Daniel E. Sutherland., Review of James M. McPherson For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War in Civil War History (1997): 333.

³² McPherson, 11.

³³ Sutherland, 333.

of comparison. Moreover, although he states he is not interested in skulkers who avoided combat, Sutherland surmises that "much could be learned from those men, if only for contrast." 34

Other reviewers also question McPherson's selection of Civil War soldiers' writings. Christopher Waldrep, for example, brings up the point that the intentional biases in McPherson's sample serve to prove the thesis of the book. He explains that "for the researcher, whether McPherson is right depends in part on which soldier's words are encountered."35 Waldrep maintains that ideology does "leap off the pages" of many of the manuscripts in McPherson's book, and he agrees that there is plenty of support for McPherson's convincing ideological explanation. But, he also reasons that "one can read others' writings and find evidence that Civil War soldiers cared not a whit for flags, patriotism, and great causes."³⁶

It should also be pointed out that important subgroups in both the Union and the Confederacy which are underrepresented could also have enabled McPherson to peer farther into the minds and motivations of Civil War soldiers. Mark Grimsley notes that "two important groups are greatly underrepresented: immigrants and African Americans, who comprised, respectively, 24 percent and 9 percent of the Union armies."³⁷ These biases were unavoidable, as McPherson points out, because the letters of native-born white soldiers were more likely have survived and most of the immigrants and blacks who fought in the war were illiterate. In addition, non-slaveholding farmers are also underrepresented in the Confederate sample. But, since the purpose of his book was to explain the motives of Civil War for *fighting*, the tendency toward white, native-born soldiers from middle- and upper- classes was necessary for McPherson to answer the question of why they fought, since it was these men who participated in most of the combat.

Nevertheless, despite minor objections from its critics, James McPherson's For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War is a highly readable book that offers a balanced but somewhat revisionist interpretation of why so many men fought the nation's bloodiest and most destructive war to its bitter end. Through the candid writings of Civil War soldiers, McPherson persuasively argues his thesis that "Civil War soldiers willingly made extraordinary sacrifices, even of life itself, for the principles they perceived to be at stake in the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Waldrep, 94.

³⁶ Ibid., 97.

³⁷ Grimsley, 183.

war."38 All of his critics and reviewers agree that McPherson's brilliantly researched book provides an excellent analysis of the state of mind and motivations of the Civil War soldiers. Based on impressive research and powerful excerpts from soldiers' letters and diaries, McPherson, in the words of Heather Richardson, "has managed to combine his usual excellent scholarship with the intensity of a good novel." Thus, McPherson's For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War is an excellent source that scholars as well as general readers can appreciate and enjoy. Furthermore, by presenting a broad portrait of Civil War soldiers and their experiences, For Cause and Comrades contributes to the ongoing historical debate over why men fought in the Civil War. Grappling with the questions of what Civil War soldiers fought for, how they coped with the stress of combat, and why Civil War armies kept on fighting despite sustaining such devastating casualties, McPherson's For Cause and Comrades, concludes Mark Grimsley, "ably sets forth what is likely to become the new orthodoxy on the question of Civil War motivation, namely the importance of political ideology."⁴⁰

³⁸ McPherson, 178. ³⁹ Richardson, 400.

⁴⁰ Grimsley, 186.

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