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## THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE U.S. CIVIL WAR

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In 1989 an article appeared in the *Journal of American History* that asked rhetorically, “Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War?” It observed that when historians analyzed social developments within the United States, they tended to focus on pre-Civil War America or the post-Civil War period. The Civil War itself was considered a sort of watershed, vaguely important but not well studied in its own right. Actually this bit of hand wringing was overblown, for historians of Civil War soldiers had been doing social history--much of it of a high order--for decades. In the years since, the social history of the Civil War era has exploded. We have new studies of the war's effects on white Northern women, white Southern women, Northern white laborers, and even children. Of particular importance, we have rich new studies of the social impact of emancipation upon African Americans. The experience of Civil War soldiers, though, still provides an excellent window into many of these social issues.

### MANPOWER

A good place to begin is by looking at the three main manpower pools from which Civil War armies drew most of their strength: white volunteers, African American volunteers, and white conscripts. In 1861-62, both the Union and Confederate forces were almost exclusively of white volunteers. African Americans offered their military services to the North, only to be spurned on the basis that this was “a white man's war.” A few African Americans offered their services to the Confederacy, but with the exception of the Louisiana Native Guards, a militia unit

composed of well-to-do Blacks living in New Orleans, these offers were also spurned (although for propaganda purposes Southern newspapers sometimes trumpeted the offers themselves). Even the Native Guards were used as window dressing. They could participate in parades but were not allowed to perform any significant military duty, not even the guarding of Union prisoners of war. Small wonder that after the Union capture of New Orleans in April 1862, the Native Guards switched sides, and became a Union regiment for the rest of the war.

Beginning in July 1862, and expanding rapidly after the issuance of the final Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863, the North actively began recruiting African American troops. Eventually some 186,000 Blacks served in the Union ranks and by 1865 comprised about 10 percent of the Union army. But with almost no exceptions, these regiments of U.S. Colored Troops were officered by whites. In late 1864 the Confederate government belatedly began exploring the possibility of recruiting and arming Black troops, but this experiment came to little before the war ended in spring 1865.

Finally, both sides resorted to conscription--the first time in U.S. history this had been done. In the Confederacy, beginning in April 1862, conscription was accomplished more or less directly. In the North, conscription was mainly a threat, a resort to be implemented if Northern communities failed to provide their quota of volunteers. This resulted in such expedients as the payment of bonuses, called bounties, to each recruit who joined the colors. While many of these “bounty men” fought well, as a group they had a poor reputation, and the bounty jumper--a man who enlisted to collect the bounty, then deserted, then enlisted elsewhere to collect another bounty--was a common phenomenon.

Actual recruitment of white troops in 1861-62 took place at the local level. The national government lacked the administrative authority and span of control to do this on its own, so it assigned quotas to the states. Most of the actual recruitment occurred at the community level, with community leaders relying upon a variant of the sort of civic associations that commonly had been used to spearhead reform movements during the antebellum period. Typically a local community leader would announce that he was raising a company of troops; that is,

about 100 men. If he had sufficient standing and leadership ability, he soon got them. Because of the liberal use of alcoholic beverages in the process, and because the troops then elected him captain, he was sometimes called the "beer captain." Once companies were raised, the state governor organized ten of them into a regiment and placed it under command of a colonel. At that point, the governor handed control of the regiment over to the federal government. Some colonels were veterans of military service in the Regular Army or the War with Mexico--Ulysses S. Grant, for example, began as a colonel of an Illinois regiment. But many owed their rank purely to political connections and to the widespread assumption that the same qualities of character, patriotism, civic-mindedness, and leadership that made for success in civilian life would also make for success in military life.

This assumption was so widespread that it was common for politicians to become generals. Nathaniel P. Banks had been Speaker of the House before the Civil War broke out. Such "political generals" often displayed limited combat skill and therefore have a poor reputation today, but in fact many served effectively in other ways. They frequently had greater interest and expertise in the issues of emancipation, military occupation, and wartime reconstruction. Banks, for instance, played a pivotal role in Louisiana, and ultimately did more than any single individual to recreate a loyal state government there by 1864.

Why did soldiers enlist? Until a couple of decades ago, most responses emphasized defense of homeland, particularly among Southerners; the call of adventure; and the widespread belief that war was the ultimate test of manhood. Certainly an important factor that motivated many Civil War soldiers to endure the terrors of combat was the knowledge that they served alongside men from their own community. A man who shirked his duty in battle literally could not go home again. Whatever the emphasis, these interpretations downplayed the importance of political motivations. In *Embattled Courage* (1989), for example, Gerald F. Linderman argues that courage was the preeminent ethos for both Northern and Southern volunteers. To the Civil War generation, courage meant not just bravery but a constellation of values involving "manliness, godliness, duty, honor, and knightliness."

Beginning in the mid-1990s, however, a number of historians began registering a strong dissent from this view. Noting that Civil War soldiers came from one of the most politically active and aware societies then in existence--voter participant rates of 80 percent were common, and newspapers were little more than extended editorial pages--they emphasize the role of political ideology in motivating soldiers both to enlist and to remain in the ranks despite years of hardship, disease, and death. The foremost proponent of this viewpoint is James M. McPherson. In two books--*What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (1994) and *For Cause and Comrades* (which won the Lincoln Prize in 1998)--McPherson reports the result of having studied literally thousands of letters and diaries kept by Union and Confederate soldiers, and notes the frequency with which they express strong political

sentiments as validating their military sacrifice. Northern soldiers understood that they were fighting to defend a noble experiment in republican self-government that might perish if the country were permanently disunited. Southern soldiers also fought for a vision of republican government, but one predicated on the assumption that, as in Roman times, slavery must undergird any successful republic.

## BLACK MILITARY EXPERIENCE

Central to any study of the social dimensions of the Civil War is the impact of emancipation. War has a way of exerting a breaking pressure on long-held societal institutions. The Civil War was no exception. From the outset, Blacks were deeply involved in the conflict. Their efforts buttressed the Confederate war economy and enabled a very high percentage of able-bodied white men to enter the Confederate army. Blacks served the Confederate army in a variety of support roles, among them personal body servants, teamsters, cooks, and laborers. Thousands of slaves helped to construct Confederate field fortifications. Most of this labor was no more volitional than slavery had been, but it was substantial enough to give President Lincoln ample reason eventually to regard the destruction of slavery as a military necessity, a decision that took the form of a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation issued on September 22, 1862, which threatened to liberate slaves in areas still in rebellion on January 1, 1863, and a final Emancipation Proclamation which actually did so.

In recent decades, an increasing number of historians have begun to emphasize the role that Blacks took in propelling Lincoln toward this policy. The initial Union policy of neutrality toward slavery was viable only if slaves remained passive once the war began. They did not. On the contrary, they flocked to Union lines whenever the chance arose. Their actions made neutrality a non-option. Union officers either had to return the slaves, in which case they buttressed slavery, or harbor them, in which case they undercut slavery. The war was scarcely a month old before Union general Benjamin F. Butler, a Massachusetts politician who was a lawyer by training, came up with an ingenious formula that undercut slavery while adroitly sidestepping the thorny political issues involved. To a Confederate major who smugly insisted upon the return of certain runaway slaves under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850), he argued that slaves might be property, but if used in support of the Confederate military effort they became "contraband of war." And once in Union hands, they could not only be kept, but could also be put to work for the Union cause.

Although many Blacks served voluntarily, even eagerly, some were understandably more interested in taking care of their families and friends. Yet the voracious hunger of the Union war effort for labor--to load and unload ships, to drive wagon trains, to build and repair railroads--meant that hundreds of Blacks were forced into service against their will. A common Union tactic was to surround an African American church during Sunday worship service, then seize able-bodied African American men as they emerged. In some instances, Union soldiers entered the

sanctuary itself to take the Black laborers required. Once in service, the mortality rate of Black laborers could be as high as on the battlefield. During the construction of a spur rail line from Nashville to the Tennessee River, for example, about 25 percent of the Black labor force perished from illness and exposure.

Experiments with Black troops began as early as mid 1862. They got seriously underway after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. Free blacks in the North enlisted in disproportionately large numbers. In Ohio, for example, over 5,000 African American men joined the Union army out of a *total* free black population of 36,000. Most African American troops, however, were recruited from Confederate states, particularly in the Mississippi River valley, where from March 1863 onward the U.S. government conducted an intensive, protracted campaign to enlist Black soldiers.

Nearly 40,000 black soldiers died over the course of the war--30,000 of infection or disease. Black soldiers served in artillery, cavalry, and infantry and performed all non-combat support functions that sustain an army, as well. Black carpenters, chaplains, cooks, guards, laborers, steamboat pilots, surgeons, and teamsters also contributed to the war cause. Nearly eighty Blacks became commissioned officers. Black women could not formally join the Army but nonetheless served as nurses, spies, and scouts, the most famous being Harriet Tubman, who scouted for the Second South Carolina Volunteers.

Because of prejudice against them--many whites persisted in believing that African Americans would not make good combat soldiers--black units were not used in combat as extensively as they might have been. Nevertheless, they served with distinction in a number of battles, including the famous battle at Fort Wagner, SC, in July 1863, immortalized in the film *Glory*, and Petersburg, VA.

Black soldiers served despite the fact that initially they were paid \$10 per month, from which \$3 was automatically deducted for clothing, resulting in a net pay of \$7. In contrast, white soldiers received \$13 per month from which no clothing allowance was drawn. When Frederick Douglass complained about this to Lincoln in August 1863, Lincoln defended this practice as a necessary concession to white prejudice. Not until June 1864 did Congress grant equal pay to the U.S. Colored Troops and made the action retroactive.

The African American military experience included numerous atrocities at the hands of Confederate forces, most famously in the Battle of Fort Pillow in April 1864, when cavalry under Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest massacred Tennessee loyalists and particularly black soldiers even after their surrender. While it was later claimed that Forrest ordered the massacre, the evidence suggests that he only did nothing to stop it. Most large-scale atrocities are "crimes of obedience." That is to say, they occur only because of orders given. But among Southern whites, the loathing for Blacks who would stand up to whites was so deeply ingrained that most of these actions were spontaneous.

Despite Black cries of "Remember Fort Pillow!" there

were almost no instances of African American atrocities against Confederates. In part this was because the psychodynamics were different: the self-image of Black troops emphasized assertion of their own new status as men, not racial hatred against whites. But it was also a function of the way Union commanders tended to employ Black troops. Gen. William T. Sherman, for instance, absolutely refused to allow any Blacks to serve in his field armies. Instead he parceled them out to garrison small posts (like Fort Pillow). This had the unintended effect of making African American troops more vulnerable to massacre while depriving them of the opportunity to do anything similar.

Another common use of Black troops was the performance of fatigue duty. The emphasis on fatigue duty was an extension of the belief that Blacks were not well suited for combat. White observers were constantly amazed when Blacks did perform well. The racist mindset conditioned them to think of this as an aberration rather than the norm, despite numerous instances of superior Black battlefield performance.

The war ended before Black combat troops could fully prove themselves in the eyes of whites. If the war had lasted longer than August 1865, however, the three-year enlistments of the last great wave of white volunteers would have expired. Blacks, who already made up 10 percent of the Union army, would then have become even more important, perhaps vital--and possibly with lasting societal effects.

## CONSCRIPTION

Conscription had been practiced during colonial times, and after U.S. independence militia service was theoretically compulsory. But by 1840s militia service was so heavily derided and so easily avoided that the de facto militia consisted primarily of volunteer companies. The Civil War saw the first real conscription in U.S. history. Its importance is hard to overstate. In a republic based on limited national government, national authority reached right through state and community authority, snatched up individuals, and placed them in lethal danger.

This expedient was made necessary by the limits of volunteering. By early 1862 many white Southerners were already in the Confederate army, while Southern defeats dampened the recruitment of new volunteers. Worse, most Confederate enlistments were for 12 months and on the verge of expiration. The Conscription Act of 1862 effectively told Confederate soldiers that if they reenlisted they could remain in their current units. If they did not, they could be drafted and sent anywhere. It was a strong inducement for soldiers to reenlist so that they could serve with neighbors and kinsmen.

Supplemental legislation permitted men to pay a substitute to serve in their stead. A so-called "Twenty Negro Law" exempted one able-bodied white man for every twenty slaves, in order to maintain stability on plantations. Both measures contributed to the perception that it was "a rich man's war but a poor man's fight." And in 1864, when additional laws tightened exemptions and extended age limits to 16 and 45, the Confederate government was

accused of robbing the cradle and the grave.

Confederate conscription was profoundly resented as an intrusion into state authority. Georgia governor Joseph Brown and North Carolina governor Zebulon Vance were both noteworthy for their efforts to resist the draft, for example, by exploiting exemption provisions as aggressively as possible. It was also resented at a community and individual level. Entire areas--for example Jones County, Mississippi, known as the "Free State of Jones"--resisted Confederate authority.

Ultimately, Southern conscription furnished about 11 percent of Confederate army strength, but it also exacerbated strains in Southern society. Indeed, many historians believe that internal divisions stemming from conscription and other actions by the Confederate government (like bad fiscal policy) fatally undermined the South's will to resist.

Union conscription fared no better. The Militia Act of 1862 gave the president the authority to draft 300,000 men, but it operated chiefly as a spur to greater volunteering, contributing to a successful drive for 300,000 additional three-year volunteers as well as numerous nine-month enlistments.

The Enrollment Act of March 1863, which applied to all men aged 20-35 and to unmarried men between 35-45, was also designed to prompt additional volunteers. Like its Confederate counterpart, it contained a provision for hiring substitutes and permitted a man selected by a draft lottery to avoid service by paying a \$300 commutation fee. Both provisions fed resentment. The implementation of the draft in New York in July 1863 prompted the worst riot in U.S. history (about 150 dead), and during the war 38 provost marshals were killed while attempting to enforce the draft. It was also not very effective, yielding only about 6 percent of Union forces plus an indeterminate number of men who enlisted because of bounties and other incentives.

## LEGACIES

The Civil War was and largely continues to be remembered as a contest between valiant white volunteers. This is true enough, but the perception also reflects a memory of the war consciously shaped by Union and Confederate veterans and by proponents of the ideal of the citizen soldier. It created a real tension when the Regular Army in the postwar era tried to expand and professionalize. For example, Illinois congressman and former Union general John A. Logan in *The Volunteer Soldier of America* (1887) argued that citizen soldiers did better than professionals and that good West Point

generals like Grant and Sherman were good *despite* their West Point educations. The dual manpower tradition would probably have prevailed in any event, but this memory cemented the view that citizen-soldiers were effective even as the Civil War also gave an impetus to military professionalization.

The contributions of the African American volunteers, for their part, were largely forgotten and did not return to mainstream awareness until the release of the film *Glory* in 1989. This phenomenon illustrates the suppression of what historian David Blight has called the "emancipationist memory" of the conflict in favor of a white supremacist memory that assisted the sectional reconciliation of the North and South at the expense of Blacks.

Civil War conscription was used in World War I as a perfect example of how *not* to conduct a draft. Instead, every effort was made to make the implementation of the draft appear as equitable as possible. There would be no substitutes or exemptions, no commutation fees, and local draft boards were created to give the appearance that there was local legitimacy, that it was not the national government swooping men up.

A final legacy is that for decades after the war, the sight of men with amputated limbs was common in both the North and South. The war killed 620,000 Americans: 2 percent of the total population and 8 percent of men of military age. Hundreds of thousands more were wounded; many of these were scarred for life. Those maimed by the war were reminded every minute of every day what they had sacrificed to save the republic. But had they saved it? Had they won anything permanent? In the North, Union veterans formed the Grand Army of the Republic. They tried to teach a new generation of Americans that had grown up after the war, to press their interpretation of American values on the public, and above all to convey the message that the veterans, through their self-sacrifice, had saved the republic. Southern veterans attempted to create their own message of a worthy cause gallantly defended.

It is worth closing with the words of Union veteran Jacob C. Switzer, who lost a leg at the battle of Winchester in September 1864. Although disabled and unable to pursue his prewar dreams, he wrote that he was not disheartened. "I came home fully satisfied with the results of my service with regards to its effects upon myself; glad that I could say I served until the cause for which I gave so little, compared with the sacrifice made by so many, was won honorably, the Union saved, slavery dead, and treason made odious."