

Civil War Military History on the Eve of the Sesqui-Centennial

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April 2, 2009

I'd like to begin tonight with a confession. Like so many of my graying peers, I am a child of the Civil War Centennial. Some of my earliest memories involve a family trip to the Manassas battlefield, the highlight of which involved my father illegally hoisting me onto the Stonewall Jackson statue now lovingly referred to by some as "Stonewall on Steroids" while the rest of the family kept a sharp look out for rangers. I came away from Henry House Hill that day with a technical book on the artillery I had climbed all over, a book that I absolutely never understood, as well as an appreciation for cheaply made souvenirs that dogs me to this day. At one point after I got home I even taped a Texaco road map to my bedroom wall and attempted to follow the war day-by-day. Forty-five years later, I am still trying to understand the war's progress, my career still shaped by that formative event.

Lately, of course, the Centennial has not looked so good. Robert Cook's recent book *Troubled Commemoration* amply documents the infighting, confusion, cross purposes, and racism that followed the Centennial, especially early on in my native South. Apparently, all of those Confederate flags on sale at the five-and dime in Christiansburg weren't there just for us Civil War buffs. Taking a different tack, the influential Civil War blogger Dimitri Rotov has made "Centennialist" all but an obscenity out in the ether, referring to literature in his estimation that highlights narrative over analysis, familiar interpretations over revisionism, and Abraham Lincoln over George B.

McClellan. Given that context, one cannot help but wonder how a future generation will look back someday on the events and the historiography of the looming Sesqui-Centennial and we Sesqui-Centennialists. But it's part of that historiography, the military history of the war as it now stands, that I've been asked to discuss briefly this evening.

For me, the obvious place to begin any consideration of current works and trends was with my Civil War seminar's syllabus. From the first time I taught the course, the goal of my seminar has been to acquaint students with the current state of the field, even when that meant passing by classic works of previous generations. There are a lot of books about the Civil War, as you may have heard, and something has to give. Even narrowed down to that focus, there are still about 300 books on my now-dreaded list, one we use first for the course and then in preparation for preliminary exams. Over the years, I've constantly tinkered with it, adding new and noteworthy books regularly while retiring familiar old friends. Many of the subsequent changes, notably involving the causes of the war, the home fronts, and Reconstruction, are beyond my purview tonight.¹ There is still much to note about the war on the battlefield.

Traditionally, Civil War military history meant "battles and leaders." In regard to the latter, first-rate biographies continue to appear in print and on my syllabus, such as Rod Andrew's new biography of Wade Hampton, Elizabeth Pryor's life of Lee, and Ethan Rafuse's McClellan biography. Each of those works and others offer fresh new looks at familiar faces while employing new approaches designed to help the reader make more sense of the subject. To be sure, no one has followed the fascinating post-modernist approach embodied in Paul Christopher Anderson's study of the Virginia cavalryman Turner Ashby, yet the publication of biographies shows no sign of letting up.

¹ Those subjects were discussed by fellow panelists Joan Cashin and Wilson Greene.

As for battle narrative, the story generally remains as it was forty-five years ago when I was climbing around on Mighty Stonewall. The week on the syllabus labeled simply “Battles” hasn’t changed much over the years. At another conference four years ago, I did suggest that works such as William Garrett Piston and Richard Hatcher’s *Wilson’s Creek*, George Rable’s *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!*, and even my study of the battle of Perryville might prompt other authors to begin to consider Civil War battles in new ways, breaking themselves free of the formula first crafted by the veterans themselves. But that hasn’t happened yet. To be sure, new histories of battles continue to fill the shelves of my local Books-a Million, but with rare exceptions—I’m thinking especially of Michael Pierson’s *Mutiny at Fort Jackson*—battle narrative still hasn’t changed a lot. It remains, well, narrative, usually viewed from the top down, focusing on commanders with a smattering of quotations from common soldiers, and frankly much of it seems to exist in a vacuum that suggests that the American Civil War was the only war fought in the nineteenth century. Indeed, as I’ve maintained elsewhere, one of the biggest problems with Civil War history today remains the sad fact that most of its practitioners and readers are totally innocent of the surrounding context of nineteenth century world military history, and that lack of interest and knowledge shows up nowhere in starker terms than in battle narrative.

Not all of them are guilty, however. Indeed, one of the fastest growing parts of my syllabus is a relatively new weekly topic I’ve added called “Tactics and Strategy.” In years past, my discussions of tactical, operational, and strategic topics apart from specific battles usually involved no more than Edward Hagerman’s *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare*, Paddy Griffith’s *Battle Tactics of the Civil War*, Thomas

Connelly and Archer Jones' *The Politics of Command*, and perhaps Grady McWhiney and Perry Jamison's *Attack and Die* if I was in the mood to debate the Celtic thesis. As one might suspect, the discussion always devolved upon the hoary question of whether the Civil War was the last of the Napoleonic conflicts or the first modern war, a question that in itself suggests both Americanist exceptionalism and a lack of appreciation for events in the Crimea, southern China, and along France's border with Prussia.

Lately, however, we've seen a barrage of new literature on this topic. In different ways, Brent Nosworthy's encyclopedic *Bloody Crucible of Courage* and Earl Hess's concise *Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat* have lain to rest any notions of the Civil War's modernity. Both also deflate old assumptions, notably the war's special bloodiness, the dramatic effect of the rifle on combat, and the confident assertion that those Europeans could've avoided the horrors of the Western Front if only the dunderheads had paid attention to what happened at Petersburg. Nosworthy suggests that aside from the hasty entrenchment, there really wasn't anything to learn anyway that would have remained relevant after the Prussian army took up the needle gun and abandoned line of battle. Meanwhile, Hess, always a stimulating historian, also has completed two of three projected volumes on field fortifications, works that are forcing Civil War scholars to revise what they previously thought about the construction of works in the field, and to especially jettison the notion that armies evolved linearly from fighting in the open to behind fortifications.

While studies of this sort now appear with enough regularity to suggest a trend, more still needs to be done. We need more books along the lines of Gerald Prokopiwicz's *All For the Regiment*, for example, which sought to understand why Civil

War armies moved so ponderously at any unit level beyond the company and regiment. And as Wayne Hsieh suggested at a conference two years ago, the field desperately needs studies of army staffs, chains of command, and the day-to-day functioning of larger units, topics familiar to military historians who study other periods and conflicts.

Another topic that continues to draw interest is the common soldier. At the time of the Centennial, Bell Wiley's *Life of Billy Yank* and *Life of Johnny Reb* comprised the conventional wisdom regarding the experiences of Civil War soldiers and why they fought. In contrast, the Sesqui-Centennial will present readers with a lengthy list of works on the topic. Most somehow revolve around the question of whether men enlisted, endured, and fought for socio-cultural reasons, as Wiley suggested, or for ideological reasons such as cause, Union, and the preservation of slavery. In regard to the former, one can point to Gerald Linderman's *Embattled Courage*, which argued that soldiers enlisted to prove their courage to themselves, and more recently Steven Berry's *All That Makes a Man*, which modifies the thesis by maintaining that soldiers really wanted to prove themselves to the women in their lives. Another important work, one that deserves more attention, is Russell Johnson's *Warriors Into Workers*, a study of soldiers from Dubuque, Iowa, that points to local pressures and the simple need for a living wage as key factors.

There is no doubt, however, that the ideological school currently holds the field. After early works from Earl Hess and Randall Jimerson, and especially Reid Mitchell initially suggested that unlike the GIs of World War II, Civil War soldiers really did fight for ideals, James McPherson captured readers' imaginations with his celebrated book *For Cause and Comrades*. Borrowing from John Lynn's equally celebrated *Bayonets of the*

Republic, McPherson argued a strong case for the primacy of cause and camaraderie as the war's two main motivators. He also placed slavery back near the center of causes, an assertion recently argued with even more force by Chandra Manning in her book *What This Cruel War was Over*. Jason Phillips, meanwhile, considers the power of religion and rumor as sustaining motivators. Some historians have gone so far to suggest that the question of motivation has become tired, a statement that I disagree with, especially since I have a book coming out next year on the topic. Without undertaking a sales pitch here, I would suggest that much of the literature involving soldier motivations consciously or unconsciously focuses on men who enlisted at the beginning of the war and who fought in one of the celebrated 300 "fighting regiments," exactly the soldiers one would expect to be most ideological. What about the others? One welcome trend has been the extension of this literature to previously disdained groups. Michael Bennett and Dennis Ringle, for example, apply the familiar questions to Union sailors, and conclude that for them, ideology was hardly a concern. Civil War navies have always been afterthoughts to most historians of the period, and one hopes that these two books indicate a trend. Keith Wilson, meanwhile, takes a sophisticated look at African-American soldiers in his book *Campfires of Freedom*. Steven Ash's new book *Firebrand of Liberty* suggests that we will see more on this important topic.

Aside from Mark Weitz, however, few modern scholars have attempted to understand deserters. Lesley Gordon has tentatively begun to examine so-called "cowards," while my manuscript deals with Confederate soldiers who enlisted after 1861. Moreover, we still need studies of conscripts and substitutes, works that will require new approaches due to the apparent lack of traditional sources, at least on the Confederate

side. I was quite pleased to see a session on conscripts scheduled for this conference. Here are new perspectives that should allow us to better understand the soldier experience. Aaron Sheehan-Dean's anthology entitled *The View From the Ground* offers hints of the direction those new studies may take, with essays devoted to identity, religion, soldier-civilian relations, and memory among other topics.

Ah, memory. A few years ago, one of my Auburn University colleagues exclaimed during a departmental hiring meeting, "Good God, aren't we done with memory yet?" Not really. The week entitled "Memory" may be the fastest growing section of my 7150 syllabus. Most of that growing literature, however, concerns how Americans interpreted the war as a whole, the majority of them according to David Blight choosing a "reconciliationist" path that focused on battles and leaders instead of divisive issues such as cause and slavery. Few scholars have followed the path of Carol Reardon in attempting to understand the military memory of the war specifically, as she did in *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory*. One exception is Timothy Smith, who has followed up his history of the Shiloh battlefield with a larger study on the establishment of the first five military parks. My own experiences as a dissertation director announce this as a trend, as with my student Jennifer Murray's forthcoming work on Gettysburg under the National Park Service. My colleague had better brace himself for more memory studies.

To conclude, George Rable once described Civil War history as two parallel streams that never touched, popular history and academic history. The popular stream of Civil War history at the Sesqui-Centennial essentially continues on much as it did through the Centennial fifty years ago, past battles and leaders, but the more scholarly

stream is branching off in new directions, notably involving sophisticated analyses of tactics and strategy as well as the soldiers who fought the war. How we remember the war is another critical concern. As always, the great hope is that scholars can find a way to bridge those two streams for all of those Civil War historians-to-be who spent yesterday or today on some battlefield climbing around on field pieces and statues.