

The Future of Civil War Era Studies:

Military History

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In April 2011, I spent three days walking Gettysburg National Military Park in the rain. This particular trip to the battlefield was an exciting opportunity for a historian to get out of the office and perhaps see the field in a new way, accompanied by seventy international officers, students from the U.S. Army's Combined Arms Center, in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. These officers—from twenty-five countries, places as diverse as Great Britain, Pakistan, France, Mexico, and the Philippines, many with recent combat experience in faraway places like Chad, Columbia, and Afghanistan—were there for a few days of leadership and combat study at America's most prominent Civil War battlefield. As we marched the field, soaked to the bone, I spent a significant amount of time talking with a Nigerian military intelligence officer about Civil War history at Devil's Den. The more I reflected on this conversation and the entire trip, the more I thought about the formative impact that recent military history has had on Civil War historiography and will almost certainly continue to have in the near future. A variety of new subfields in Civil War military history have developed or regained prominence over the last decade and suggest a range of possibilities for innovative work.¹

The field of military history within Civil War studies is probably the healthiest it has ever been in terms of the diversity and quality of the research published by major university presses. Publishers, even ones in financial distress, have continued to crave books addressing the intersection of war, culture, and society during the middle period of nineteenth-century U.S. history. Recent trends in the historiography collectively demonstrate the necessity of carefully

reconsidering the traditional line between battlefield and home front that has long dominated and impeded creativity in Civil War military history. As we approach the midpoint of the sesquicentennial, recent work suggests that the future of military history will be scholarship that considers the military experience broadly, away from the symmetrical, conventional battlefield and places the soldiering experience in fuller context before, during, and after armed hostilities by large field armies.²

Just as the Vietnam War prompted historians of the 1970s and 1980s to ask new questions about the Confederacy's defeat, many scholars over the last decade, with an eye toward events in Afghanistan and Iraq, have turned their attention increasingly to two areas: occupation studies and guerrilla warfare. The most recent volumes in this field suggest a plethora of new creative angles for military historians. Daniel Sutherland's *A Savage Conflict* stands out as the most comprehensive study of guerrilla warfare. This book addresses Confederate irregulars, Unionist guerrilla bands, and U.S. Army counter-irregular efforts in regions as diverse as Arkansas, Iowa, and western Virginia. Ultimately, Sutherland argues that this savage conflict of guerrilla warfare was decisive in both prolonging the war by several months and increasing its devastation by sowing chaos in many parts of the Confederacy. This chaos convinced many loyal Confederates that their government could not protect them by 1864. The breadth of Sutherland's work opens doors for numerous local studies. Similarly, Judkin Browning's *Shifting Loyalties* (Carteret and Craven Counties in North Carolina), Robert McKenzie's *Lincolmites and Rebels* (Knoxville, Tennessee), Victoria Bynum's *The Long Shadow of the Civil War* (East Texas, Central North Carolina, and Piney Woods of Mississippi), and Michael D. Pierson's *The Mutiny at Fort Jackson* (New Orleans, Louisiana) point us in important new directions in the history of military occupation. Browning's study demonstrates the importance of examining the Union

army's role in shaping and impacting loyalty among southerners by pushing southern unionists to convert to confirmed Confederates. McKenzie uses the community of Knoxville as an urban window into many dimensions of military occupation. While Bynum's work flips military occupation on its head by examining Confederate military involvement in dissident regions of the South, Michael Pierson's book utilizes community-studies methodology and a focus on loyalty and ethnicity to examine the causes of a mutiny south of New Orleans in 1862.³

Guerrilla warfare has reemerged as a dominant area of military historiography, and the mapping of local guerrilla conflicts and armed resistance within the South will be a major project for military historians' energy and attention over the next few years. This project presents perhaps the single best possibility for adding new answers to the question of why the Confederacy was defeated. New digital databases and geographic information systems technology will enable the next generation of historians to begin this painstaking work. Where Gerald Linderman, James McPherson, Chandra Manning and others have given us brilliant studies of the reasons Civil War soldiers in large armies fought, we have no equivalent Confederacy-wide quantitative or broadly comparative studies of motivations for Confederate and unionist guerrillas. Military historians will work to fill that void.⁴

Operational, leadership, and battle history will continue to be a mainstay, but this subfield will also take on new angles, like counter-guerrilla warfare, smaller western theater battles, and engagements that mattered little or not at all to campaigns. Civil War historians have not produced even one major comparative study of American Civil War guerrillas in the context of irregulars worldwide and/or a general history of how irregulars and counter-irregulars planned raids and attacks. Until recently, the majority of guerrilla studies have tended toward biography of individual leaders like John Mosby and William C. Quantrill. For this reason, Daniel

Sutherland's work is a refreshing departure in both its scope and the implications of his argument. Military historian Donald Stoker has recently produced a new assessment of strategy that plots a course for understanding the conflict by applying a twentieth-first-century conceptualization of military definitions to the Civil War. A study of military strategy that takes into careful consideration the limits of nineteenth-century military education and concepts would be an important work. Historians need to connect questions about Civil War military training to soldiers' experiences and utilize that information to help understand battlefield outcomes. Earl Hess's recent *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat* provides the single best example of what tactical and combat studies of our field should do. Riverine, brown-water warfare, and smaller naval engagements fought against the Confederate mosquito fleets remain an area of battle history understudied. A combat history of the Civil War's naval warriors that integrates the use of new military technologies during the period like those produced by Hess for the large land armies would also be a welcome addition. Battle histories written from the perspective of the private soldier, who was not privy to the larger strategic or even tactical challenges, may present opportunities for scholars. Sabotage, both during battle and surrounding campaigns, could be the focus of an excellent monograph. Soldiers in many battles were jaded, lost, disaffected, and nihilistic. Understanding the meaning of these topics should be our focus. So many of our battle histories present each engagement as a possible "turning point" or an important setback, and we need more military histories that address pointlessness, imbecility, futility, and frustration.⁵

Soldier studies will continue to expand as well over the next few years. Mutiny and resistance in the ranks are topics that deserve further treatment, especially among black soldiers. New histories of basic weapons training, volunteer recruitment, and general studies of specialized units like sharpshooter battalions and signal corps units would also be helpful. Lesley

J. Gordon's research into the history of cowardice among soldiers is suggestive of an excellent future project. Work on material culture will be an area of future expansion and ingenuity among military historians. A history of collecting battle relics would provide an important window into areas like atrocity and the meaning of the war to soldiers. Peter Carmichael's research into how Civil War soldiers thought (as opposed to what they thought) opens up a potential new world for future soldier studies to explore. The work of Megan Kate Nelson, who examines the intersection of soldiers and the built environment in her work *Ruin Nation*, also presents an area for future work.⁶

Biographies and unit histories of less well-known civil warriors will emerge. Brian McKnight's *Confederate Outlaw*, which examines the life and execution of guerrilla leader Champ Ferguson is just one example, but Gordon Rhea's *Carrying the Flag*, which presents a microhistory of South Carolina private Charles Wilden's experience during the 1864 Overland campaign, is another. Unit history remains largely deficient in several areas, including the experience of black and Native American soldiers. Richard Reid's recent group regimental history of North Carolina's black soldiers and Andrew Slap's recent work on the intersection of desertion, occupation, and loyalty in the 3rd U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery push us to think in new ways about the role of African American soldiers. Even work on well-studied commanders, when cast like Wallace Hettle's *Inventing Stonewall Jackson*, can bring a new dimension to biographical study. A history of a female soldier, who dressed as a man and served in the ranks, similar to Alfred Young's Revolutionary-era study *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier*, is also needed. While ethnicity, race, and identity have become popular areas of focus, with histories of Irish American and German American soldiers and soldiers from other regional, national, and ethnic backgrounds, the field has not produced the

same quality and depth of scholarship on black and Native American units. The Eastern band of Cherokee would make for a fine scholarly study, as would a variety of black units recruited in the Midwest, Northeast, and the Confederacy, which were stationed in the South postwar.⁷

Studies of military policy and its impact on civilians during the war will be an important area for future scholars. Military historians no longer use the phrase “total war” to describe the American Civil War; instead they favor more nuanced explanations of the escalation of military policy toward civilians. Scholars do, however, need to be careful not to forget that the relationship between the active military and civilians should remain a fundamental area for military historians to contemplate. The present historiography lacks a systematic study of military policy toward northern civilians by southern leaders or even a careful South-wide study of Confederate military policy toward its own civilian population. Paul Escott’s recent *Military Necessity* is the closest we have come to addressing this issue. In the years to come, we will see new studies of atrocity, torture, and execution as well. My own new piece on torture and the American Civil War is suggestive of future work in this area. Studies of the impact of military policy on northern communities, when examined as Robert Sandow has in *Deserter Country*, will be important, as will urban, industrial areas of the North that still deserve an examination from this angle. We have clearly become too insular as a field, and more comparative history between the American Civil War and other wars of the nineteenth century would also be welcome in nearly every subfield of military history.⁸

Studies that examine the demobilization period, early military history of Reconstruction, and postwar readjustment of veterans to home communities offer fruitful paths for new work. The scholarship on veterans has grown in recent years and presents one of the best areas for future study. Barbara Gannon’s book, *The Won Cause*, on the white and black soldiers of the

Grand Army of the Republic, relates an important story of veteran race relations growing out of the wartime experience. Dianne Miller Sommerville's recent article on the psychological state of veterans, when coupled with Eric Dean's work *Shook over Hell*, a comparative study of PTSD following Vietnam and the American Civil War, also suggests a fruitful area for new work on veterans. Brian Craig Miller's article on amputees and the women who loved them looks at physical damage in a new way and is also evocative. *After the Glory*, Donald Shaffer's work on black veterans, presents an excellent examination of the black veteran experience, and state-level studies would offer a fuller understanding of this experience. Now that the field has produced good general histories of the prison system, North and South, prisoner-of-war memory will be an area of fruitful new research. Studies that continue to investigate the small-war violence of Reconstruction as a continuation of the war's central issues will also be important.⁹

Military histories will remain the most popular works Civil War historians produce for a general audience. Placing a strict definition on military history as a field, however, probably hurts historical creativity and thinking more than it helps. Embracing the role and influence of other scholarship on military history is the future of this field, and innovation depends on our willingness to think hard about the value of new scholarly techniques and approaches to military history. Visualizing the broadest possible boundaries for the military genre pushes us closer to a more holistic understanding of the military and soldiering experience during the war. Future military historians can and will push their readership to grapple with more than just the traditional field of battle as the entire experience of warfare in Civil War America.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Ricardo Herrera, historian at the Combat Studies Institute (the U.S. Army's premier military history think tank) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for the invitation to

accompany his staff ride of Gettysburg National Military Park in April 2011, and David Moltke-Hansen and Stephen W. Berry for the invitation to present a first draft of my thoughts on the future of Civil War military history at the Historical Society's 2010 conference in Washington, D.C. I would also like to thank my former colleague Barry Strauss of Cornell University for making my year as the Jack Miller Center postdoctoral fellow and visiting assistant professor in military history a very productive one of writing, teaching, and thinking about the history of warfare.

2. American Civil War military historians continue to expand the boundaries of both military history and Civil War studies. While this piece is focused not on defining military history but on forecasting new creative prospects for the field, my analysis of the Civil War historiography embraces both the "new military history" and the "post-new military history" or new cultural history-turn reading of the field. There remains opportunity for creative new work in the older operational military history as well, but I see the most opportunity for growth in the first two areas. Scholars interested in the history, definitions, and development of the field should consult Robert M. Citino, "Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (October 2007): 1070–90.

3. On the influence of the Vietnam War on American Civil War scholarship, see Richard E. Beringer et al., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); Philip Shaw Paludan, *Victims: A True Story of the Civil War* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981); and Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); in the field of occupation studies, see Judkin Browning, *Shifting Loyalties: The Union Occupation of Eastern North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Robert McKenzie, *Lincolmites*

and Rebels: A Divided Town in Civil War America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Victoria E. Bynum, *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Michael D. Pierson, *The Mutiny at Fort Jackson: The Untold Story of the Fall of New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

4. Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1989); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: A. Knopf, 2007). For a small sampling of recent studies in the guerrilla field, see Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Clay Mountcastle, *Punitive War: Confederate Guerrillas and Union Reprisals* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); Barton A. Myers, *Executing Daniel Bright: Race, Loyalty, and Guerrilla Violence in a Coastal Carolina Community* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009); Mark W. Geiger, *Financial Fraud and Guerrilla Violence in Missouri's Civil War, 1861–1865* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Brian D. McKnight, *Contested Borderland: The Civil War in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006); Michael Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country: Reconsidering Terrorism in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); and Robert R. Mackey, *The UnCivil War: Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861–1865* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).

5. James Ramage, *Gray Ghost: The Life of Col. John Singleton Mosby* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009) and Duane Shultz, *Quantrill's War: The Life and Times of*

William Clarke Quantrill, 1837–1865 (New York: St. Martin's/Griffin, 1997); Donald Stoker, *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); on strategy, an updated study similar to Herman Hattaway's classic *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983) would be welcome; Earl J. Hess, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat: Reality and Myth* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Kenneth W. Noe, "Jigsaw Puzzles, Mosaics, and Civil War Battle Narratives," *Civil War History* 53, no. 3 (September 2007): 236–43, is suggestive of future work in the field and a nice general guide to the problems of writing battle history.

6. Lesley J. Gordon, "Ira Forbes's War," in *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges*, ed. Stephen W. Berry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Joan E. Cashin, "Trophies of War: Material Culture in the Civil War Era," *Journal of the Civil War Era* vol. 1, no. 3 (September 2011): 339–67, and Michael E. DeGruccio, "Letting the War Slip through Our Hands: Material Culture and the Weakness of Words in the Civil War Era," in Berry, *Weirding the War*, have started the field's thinking down this path, as has Peter S. Carmichael, "Soldier Speak" in Berry, *Weirding the War*. Carmichael's work *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) is also suggestive of a possible field of research for soldiers in other states of the Confederacy; Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the Making of America in the Civil War Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

7. Brian D. McKnight, *Confederate Outlaw: Champ Ferguson and the Civil War in Appalachia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Gordon C. Rhea, *Carrying the Flag: The Story of Private Charles Wilden, the Confederacy's Most Unlikely Hero* (New York: Basic, 2003); Richard M. Reid, *Freedom for Themselves: North Carolina's Black Soldiers*

in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Andrew Slap, “The Loyal Deserters: African American Soldiers and Community in Civil War Memphis” in Berry, *Weirding the War*; Wallace Hettle, *Inventing Stonewall Jackson: A Civil War Hero in History and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); Alfred E. Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

8. Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007) are two excellent examples of nuanced military policy studies; Paul D. Escott, *Military Necessity: Civil-Military Relations in the Confederacy* (Greenwood, Conn.: Praeger, 2006); Barton A. Myers, “Dissecting the Torture of Mrs. Owens: The Story of a Civil War Atrocity,” in Berry, *Weirding the War*; Robert M. Sandow, *Deserter Country: Civil War Opposition in the Pennsylvania Appalachians* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

9. Barbara Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Diane Miller Summerville, ““Will They Ever Be Able to Forget?”: Confederate Soldiers and Mental Illness in the Defeated South,” in *Weirding the War*; Eric T. Dean, *Shook over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Brian Craig Miller, “Confederate Amputees and the Women Who Loved (or Tried to Love) Them,” in Berry, *Weirding the War*; Donald R. Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Charles Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press,

2005) provides one of the best general histories of the prison experience; one scholar working on the issue of prisons and memory is Brian Matthew Jordan; see his “Captive Memories: Union Ex-Prisoners and the Work of Remembrance,” *Civil War Monitor* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 52–61. Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006) and Stephen Budiansky, *The Bloody Shirt: Terror after the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2008) are two books that examine the violence of early Reconstruction as a continuation of the war.