

---

**Cowardice: A Brief History.** By Chris Walsh. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. 304. Cloth, \$27.95; paper, \$21.95.)

Few labels arouse more contempt than that of coward. It is “the most insulting word known to man” (2). So says *Urbandictionary.com*. Chris Walsh, associate director of the College of Arts and Sciences Writing Program at Boston University, explores, in a wide-ranging chronological and transdisciplinary monograph, the origins of this loathsome aspersion. In a sweeping, highly readable and accessible study on cowardice, Walsh employs a broad brush, so while the lion’s share of discussion focuses on cowardice in the military—from the Seven Years’ War to the wars in the Middle East—he also examines treatments of cowardice in literature, philosophy, and popular culture. Walsh moves effortlessly among works of fiction (Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage* figures prominently), film (*The Execution of Private Slovik* and *Wizard of Oz*), and classic philosophy texts by ancient (Plato and Socrates) and modern (Søren Kierkegaard) philosophers alike. But it is the military’s rendering of cowardice in time of war that occupies much of Walsh’s attention. Military leadership requires obedience in order to ensure success of mission. Ancient military tacticians who made use of the phalanx well understood that one cowardly soldier jeopardized the entire formation, and hence operation, if he refused to hold his position. But soldiers, being human, often challenged military authority by malingering, deserting, and committing acts of self-injury as ways to avoid battle, acts that, in the eyes of many, were *prima facie* evidence of putting self-interest above the common good. Punishment for acts of cowardice during wartime could be severe; courts-martial yielded prison time, corporal punishment, or even death. Fellow soldiers and the larger community on the home front could exert stinging rebukes as well, shaming disgraced and fallen soldiers by openly questioning their manhood and honor.

Historians will recognize as familiar the threads of Walsh's discussion of cowardice in the American Civil War. Cowardly behavior—fleeing under fire, for instance—was defined in military codes and punishable by death. But Walsh makes the point—as has Gerald Linderman in *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (1987)—that cowardice during the Civil War encompassed even mere thoughts of fear. So odious was the label that many soldiers were propelled into action by fear of the shame that would result if he behaved in a cowardly way. Fear of shame often trumped fear of dying and thus acted as a powerful deterrent against acts of cowardice. And just as Linderman shows how acts of cowardice early in the war—seeking safety behind fortifications or trees, for instance—eventually came to be viewed as practical survival techniques, thus altering definitions of cowardice, Walsh observes how changing warfare technology, notably the threat of nuclear weaponry, rendered futile the cowardly acts of running and hiding in the face of enemy fire. Walsh also traces “the rise of the therapeutic,” the relatively recent development of greater tolerance of questionable soldier conduct. Rather than judging a soldier's emotional collapse, for example, as a moral failing, we are more likely today to view it diagnostically as a clinical or medical symptom. Because an increasing amount of soldier behavior is now viewed medically, not morally, the word “coward” has steadily declined in print usage, as evidenced in a Google Ngram that, interestingly, shows an uptick in the use of the word following the terror attacks of 9/11.

The most useful contribution to the literature on cowardice is Walsh's definition of cowardly behavior. It is not fear, but rather *excessive* fear, that defines cowardly actions. More specifically, “A coward is someone who, because of excessive fear, fails to do what he is supposed to do” (7–8). I wish to underscore the importance of this definition, because as Walsh demonstrates throughout this slim book, the term is both elastic and elusive. And while this straightforward definition of cowardice has been parsed and debated, Walsh contends, the core understanding of what constitutes cowardice has endured over the last 250 years.

One irksome if minor feature of the book is the inexplicable failure to identify accompanying images. While in all cases Walsh properly cites the source or repository from which images are taken, there are no object labels or explanations of the importance or relevance of the images that appear throughout the work. Nor are there parenthetical directional cues in the nearby text to steer the reader to the appropriate image. For example, on page 29 there is an etching of what appears to be a battle between Redcoats and American soldiers from the Revolutionary War. Perhaps this is a representation of Bunker Hill, which is discussed on page 28. But

maybe it is meant to convey the Battle of Long Island. Or is it a generic battle scene from the Revolutionary War? The reader just does not know and is left to figure it out alone. The author's intent behind the many illustrations is not made explicit. The importance and meaning of some are clear, but not for others. I suspect this was an editorial decision, and so the editor, not Walsh, should be chided.

Unlike its counterpart, courage, cowardice has attracted little scholarly attention. This engaging book, therefore, serves as an important addition to an important topic. It should appeal to any social, cultural, or military historian of war in American history.

*Diane Miller Sommerville*

---

DIANE MILLER SOMMERVILLE, associate professor of history at Binghamton University, SUNY, is author of the forthcoming *Aberration of Mind: Suicide, Suffering, and the Civil War-Era South*.

---

\*\*\*\*\*End of excerpt\*\*\*\*\*

**If you are not already a subscriber, please visit our subscription page.  
The Journal of the Civil War Era also is available electronically, by  
subscription, at Project Muse.**