

The

How Popular Will, Nationalism, and  
Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat

# *Confederate*



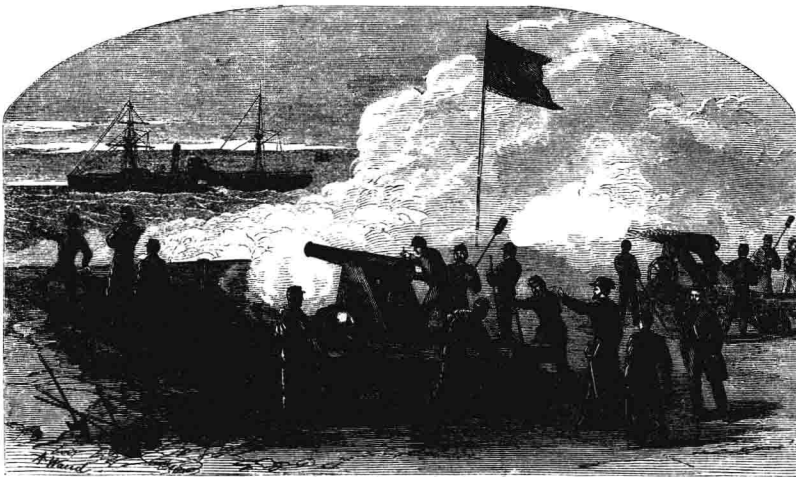
# War

Gary W.  
Gallagher

# The Confederate War

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GARY W. GALLAGHER



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Title page illustration: Charleston harbor battery during the Civil War.

*For Barnes F. Lathrop,  
a master graduate teacher who pointed out  
the delights and responsibilities of studying the past*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The invitation to give the 1995–96 Littlefield endowed lectures at the University of Texas at Austin came as a wonderful surprise. It afforded an opportunity to focus my thinking about several major themes relating to the Confederacy—especially the ways in which those themes have been addressed by historians over the past several decades. The lectures also allowed me to return for a brief time to the Department of History at Texas, where I spent my graduate career. I believe in the adage that you can’t go home again, but the visit to Austin and the University could not have been more pleasant.

I was fortunate to have Barnes F. Lathrop as my major professor at Texas. His astonishing grasp of the materials relating to Confederate history, unflinching refusal to tolerate sloppy thinking or writing, and willingness to lavish attention on the work of his students set an impressive standard of graduate teaching. Many decades of support from the Littlefield Fund have given Texas a breathtaking array of manuscript and printed materials on the mid-nineteenth-century South, and I have fond memories of roaming the stacks of the library (then housed in the tower of Old Main) to track down obscure items Lathrop mentioned

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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in our many long conversations about southern and Confederate historiography. This book's dedication attests to my continuing debt to a treasured mentor and friend.

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Eileen Anne Gallagher displayed her habitual tolerance for my testiness as the deadline for completion of the project drew near. She insists that years of work on Jubal A. Early have taken their toll on my own personality. If that notion helps her cope with a sometimes difficult spouse, I suppose I should nod approvingly in Old Jube's direction.

# THE CONFEDERATE WAR

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# CONTENTS

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Introduction: The Challenge of the Confederate Experience	1
1 Popular Will: “Many years yet I fear, we are to endure these severe trials”	15
<i>A People’s Will · following page 60</i>	
2 Nationalism: “The Army of Northern Virginia alone, as the last hope of the South, will win the independence of the Confederacy”	61
<i>Bonds of Nationhood · following page 112</i>	
3 Military Strategy: “The Southern populace clamoured for bloody battles”	113
<i>A People Defeated · following page 154</i>	
4 Defeat: “What else could we do but give up?”	155
Notes	175
Index	211



## INTRODUCTION

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# THE CHALLENGE OF THE CONFEDERATE EXPERIENCE



Scholarship on the Confederacy over the past several decades has yielded a paradoxical result. Historians have exploited a variety of sources and approaches to illuminate many facets of the Confederate experience, but the overall effect of much of this work has been to distort the broader picture. Moving beyond traditional emphases on military events, politics, and prominent leaders, many recent scholars, concentrating on the analytical categories of race, class, and gender, have highlighted social tensions and fissures to create a portrait of Confederate society crumbling from within by the midpoint of the Civil War. All too aware that the Confederacy failed in its bid for independence, many historians have worked backward from Appomattox to explain that failure. They argue that the Confederates lacked sufficient will to win the war, never developed a strong collective national identity, and pursued a flawed military strategy that wasted precious manpower. Often lost is the fact that a majority of white southerners steadfastly supported their nascent republic, and that Confederate arms more than once almost persuaded the North that the price of subduing the rebellious states would be too high.<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

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Although class tension, unhappiness with intrusive government policies, desertion, and war weariness all form part of the Confederate mosaic, they must be set against the larger picture of thousands of soldiers persevering against mounting odds, civilians enduring great human and material hardship in pursuit of independence, and southern white society maintaining remarkable resiliency until the last stage of the war. Part of the problem stems from a failure to place the Confederate people's wartime behavior within a larger historical framework. If historians choose to label Confederates as lacking in will and national sentiment, they should do so with an eye toward how white Americans have responded to other major traumas.

Academic historians have led the way in positing an absence of strong national will in the Confederacy, but popular writers have joined in the chorus. In this vein, Robert Penn Warren observed in 1980 that Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and many of their fellow Confederates failed to embrace secession with any enthusiasm. A horrific war soon exposed the absence of both solid ideological underpinning for their republic and widespread common purpose among its people. By the later stages of the conflict, noted Warren, "Merely some notion of Southern identity remained, however hazy or fuddled; it was not until after Appomattox that the conception of Southern identity truly bloomed—a mystical conception, vague but bright, floating high beyond criticism of brutal circumstances."<sup>2</sup>

More often than their academic counterparts, popular writers have veered toward a romantic conclusion that the Confederacy fought

gallantly against hopeless odds. In the pictorial history of the Civil War that accompanied Ken Burns's film documentary, for example, Shelby Foote pronounced the Confederate bid for independence doomed from the start. "I think that the North fought that war with one hand behind its back," observed Foote. If the Confederacy ever had come close to winning on the battlefield, "the North simply would have brought that other arm out from behind its back. I don't think the South ever had a chance to win that war." Foote also claimed that white southerners knew their cause was hopeless well before the end of the conflict. Heavy casualties, shortages of goods behind the lines, and loss of faith in European recognition promoted a "realization that defeat was fore-ordained." As so many historians over the years have done, Foote turned to South Carolina diarist Mary Chesnut for a summary quotation to clinch his points: "It's like a Greek tragedy, where you know what the outcome is bound to be," wrote Chesnut. "We're living a Greek tragedy."<sup>3</sup>

Wartime testimony contradicts both Foote's assessment and the prevalent scholarly image of a Confederate populace only weakly committed to winning independence. Letters, diaries, and newspapers reveal a widespread expectation of Confederate success and tenacious popular will rooted in a sense of national community and closely attuned to military events. In March 1864, a point in the war when many modern scholars describe a Confederacy enveloped in despair and defeatism, Lucy W. Otey penned a letter that evinced common sentiments. Alluding to contributions of clothing for soldiers in Lee's army, Otey

## INTRODUCTION

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observed that “they are raised through the energetic and persevering efforts of *Southern Women* who can never faint or tire, in animating and sustaining the brave Soldiery of this Confederacy, while struggling for our Independence!” So long as the men remained in the field, stated Otey, “there are loving hearts and busy hands *at home*—praying and toiling, for their preservation and success!” Eight months later a young woman in Milledgeville, Georgia, lamented the fall of her city to Federal troops but expressed undiminished loyalty to the Confederacy: “The yankee flag waved from the Capitol—Our degradation was bitter, but we knew it could not be long, and we never desponded, our trust was still strong. No, we went through the house singing, ‘We live and die with Davis.’ How can they hope to subjugate the South. The people are firmer than ever before.”<sup>4</sup>

A pair of letters from the summer of 1864 illuminate the optimism and willingness to fight on for months or years characteristic of many Confederates. “I used to think I could see some end to the War,” wrote a sailor in the Confederate navy from Savannah, Georgia, adding, “I don’t see any chance for it to close at all.” Still, this man remained optimistic and committed for the long term: “I know the Yankees cannot, nor never will, whip us. I do think it depends entirely on the election of the next President of Yankeedom whether we have peace for the next five years to come.” From the trenches near Petersburg, Virginia, Luther Rice Mills of the 26th Virginia Infantry anticipated a resounding Confederate success. “I am expecting Lee to take the offensive,” wrote Mills to his father on June 6. “Perhaps he will allow

## INTRODUCTION

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Grant to butt his head a few more times & destroy more of his men and then pitch into him. I think Lee will attempt to capture Grant's whole army. His chance for it seems to be quite good."<sup>5</sup> These letters, together with countless others voicing comparable sentiments, contrasted sharply with the profound disenchantment with the war expressed by many northern soldiers and civilians during the same period. Had the North lost the war, historians doubtless would have used its people's literary record to prove a lack of will that helped explain Confederate success.

Far from being a loosely knit collection of individuals whose primary allegiance lay with their states, a substantial portion of the Confederate people identified strongly with their southern republic. Wartime writings frequently employed language that revealed a sense of national community. A North Carolina soldier touched on often-repeated themes in a letter of March 1864. "I feel that the cause is a just one and am willing to spend the balance of my days in the army rather than give up to a relentless foe that shows no mercy and will give none," stated Rufus A. Barrier. "Let us stand firm by our country's flag and we are bound to succeed." Barrier went on to castigate the "little souled mercenaries who are croaking so loudly and are willing to sell their country for filthy lucre and let their names be handed down to posterity branded with the curse of being traitors to their country." A Georgian in Lee's army, writing to his wife on his twenty-fourth birthday in the spring of 1864, echoed Barrier's feelings of national loyalty. "When we consider the great duty we owe our country in the struggle for independence, I cannot be but content with my fate, although it be, indeed,

## INTRODUCTION

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a cruel one,” affirmed Daniel Pope. “I am determined to do anything and everything I can for my country,” he continued. “If it should be my misfortune to fall in the glorious struggle, I hope that I shall go believing that I have contributed my mite and that you and my little boy will be entitled to the great boon of freedom.”<sup>6</sup>

As the war progressed, Confederate citizens increasingly relied on their armies rather than on their central government to boost morale, and Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia eventually became the most important national institution. This phenomenon has received far too little attention—perhaps because of a tendency in the scholarly literature to slight the vital ways in which military events influenced the home front. Comments by the deputy executive director of the American Historical Association in 1990 typify the inclination among academic historians to play down the military side of the conflict. Addressing a congressional committee on the topic of battlefield preservation, James B. Gardner claimed to speak for the broad historical community in remarking that “historians today have redefined the study of the Civil War, shifting attention from military action to the diverse experiences of individual groups, the impact of emancipation,” and the ways in which the war exacerbated old social divisions and created new ones. In calling for a shift away from “narrow, antiquated views” of history represented by undue attention to Civil War battles and generals, Gardner manifested a stunning innocence of the ways in which military events helped shape all the dimensions of American life he considered important. (In fairness, it must be acknow-



ledged that military historians interested primarily in battles and campaigns similarly have slighted the impact of the home front on the armies.)<sup>7</sup>

Whatever subsequent generations of historians thought, people living through the war understood the centrality of military events to national morale and, by extension, to the outcome of the war. In June 1863, a Georgia newspaper printed a letter that clearly tied the spirit behind the lines to the actions of Confederate armies: “In breathless but hopeful anxiety, the public are awaiting the result of Lee’s movements at the North and [Joseph E.] Johnston’s at the South,” commented the author. “Upon their success hang momentous interests—no less to our mind than an early peace or the continuance of the war for an indefinite period.” Edward A. O’Neal, Jr., an Alabamian whose father commanded a brigade in Lee’s army, wrote in October 1863 that offensive victories would bolster civilian morale buffeted by the battles of the preceding summer. O’Neal believed “our existence as a nation depends on it. Forebearance is no longer a virtue with us. The people are gloomy, and weary of this ‘never ending—still beginning’ strife, and victory alone will revive their drooping spirits.” The war’s most famous instance of linking home front and battlefield came from north of the Potomac River when, in March 1865, Abraham Lincoln spoke in his second inaugural address of “The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends.” Well might Lincoln remind northerners of this linkage, for he almost certainly would have been defeated for re-election had William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip H. Sheridan