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– *Professor James M. McPherson, author of* Battle C[illegible]

CIVIL WAR SOLDIERS

THEIR EXPECTATIONS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

REID MITCHELL

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Praise for *Civil War Soldiers*

"Reid Mitchell portrays the human side of this war through the experiences and perceptions of the men who fought it—their hopes and fears, courage and cowardice, idealism and savagery, endurance and despair, triumph and tragedy, life and death."

—Professor James M. McPherson,
author of *Battle Cry of Freedom*

I read *Civil War Soldiers* with unusual pleasure. It is refreshing to find a book which throws new light not only on the Civil War, but also, by implication, upon countless other wars."

—Professor Richard Holmes,
author of *Acts of War*

for
E. T. Mitchell
and
Joseph G. Tregle, Jr.

Preface

This is a book about the soldiers who fought during the Civil War. It uses the most personal of documents, their letters and diaries, to re-create their wartime experiences. It is also a book about the meaning of the Civil War, written in the belief that establishing what the war meant to that generation will help us decide what it means for us. The war is central to our past; we can turn to it as an image of what it means to be American, what it means to live within the dreadful rigor of history—what it means to be human.

I have been called a "post-Vietnam" historian, the implication being that my perception of the Civil War has been shaped, maybe distorted, by the moral questions generated by that later war. I don't know why it would take the Vietnam War to raise issues inherent in the tragedy of Americans killing Americans in a conflict over the meaning of democracy and freedom. In any case, if I am a "post-Vietnam" historian, I am also a "post–Civil Rights" historian—let me be exact: I am a post–desegregation-of-the-New-Orleans-public-school-system historian; I am a Southerner fortunate enough to have gone to school with my fellow Southerners, white and black.

So I come to the letters and diaries left by Civil War soldiers with the questions I would have asked the writers if they had been alive. Why did you fight? What did you think of your enemy, your American enemy? How did you feel about slavery and race and all the unfinished business that means in some way the war you fought is still not over? What was it like to be in battle? Were you frightened; how did you overcome your fear? How did you face death—how did you give meaning to violence and destruction? How did

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I dedicate this book to the two men most responsible for my decision to study history: my father, E. T. Mitchell, and my professor and dear friend, Joe Tregle.

My greatest debt is to Martha Reiner.

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ONE

Wars for Freedom

During a scout near Cheat Mountain, Virginia, in the fall of 1861, a squad of federal cavalry approached a group of mounted men. The men turned and fled. The Union soldiers fired and one man fell off his horse, struck by four balls. The Union soldiers rushed toward him and he—in accordance with his rebel "brutish instincts"—pulled his revolver but was too weak to fire. With his last words, he begged for water. The Union soldiers tended him but he soon died. Examining his corpse, the soldiers learned he was Lt. Col. John A. Washington, "the great-nephew of George Washington *Shot in the back* in the very act of treason against the government his great ancestor constructed."[1]

That same autumn Maj. Paul Joseph Revere was taken prisoner by Confederate soldiers and confined in Richmond. He and his brother were among the officers held hostage for the crew of the ship *Savannah,* who were being threatened with execution as pirates by the U.S. government. Revere wrote home that should they be executed, they would die "as becomes *Christians and gentlemen.*" Major Revere was not executed, but exchanged. Upon his death in 1863, his regiment delivered him a tribute; they proclaimed him a "cheerful and dauntless christian soldier," one worthy of the name of his grandfather, the Revolutionary hero Paul Revere.[2]

The Civil War proved curiously filled with echoes of the American Revolution. The patriotic past and the Biblical past were the two great historic memories by which Americans measured their present. The events and the very places of the Revolution reappeared in men's memories throughout the war years. The Revolutionary War had created the American nation. It also created American

nationalism, for a sense of national identity is dependent on history and myths. A people require symbols to bind themselves into a nation; the Revolution provided them. Thus the men who fought the war for the Union—the nation that the Revolutionary generation had founded—believed that they embodied the principles of 1776.

But the Revolution did not simply create a new nation; it sundered an existing empire. Southerners did not repudiate the Revolution in 1861; they did not renounce the legacy of 1776. Confederates saw themselves as the true Americans. The sectional conflict and the Civil War were in some ways a conflict over the meaning of a shared past.

Whatever caused the Civil War, it was fought in the name of freedom. The generation of 1861 regarded liberty as their heritage. This liberty, bequeathed to Americans by the fathers of 1776, was a fragile thing, always embattled, always threatened by a hostile world. By the time rebels fired on Fort Sumter, Americans North and South believed their liberties were most threatened not by the despots of Europe or the Indians on the frontier but by one another. The men who marched away to war in 1861 did so to preserve freedom as they understood it.

In 1861 the differences between North and South were many and profound. An economy largely dependent on slavery was radically different from one that relied on free labor. The defense of slavery had led to an ideology in the South that attempted to reconcile democratic and liberal values with racial hierarchy. But whatever the differences between Northern and Southern economy, ideology, and culture, they had a common history that united them, a history that influenced them even as they made war on one another.

This history was a potent force. It was not, however, the only thing North and South shared. Both sections had the same political institutions—whatever their ideological differences they both participated in a common political culture. And it is easy to exaggerate their ideological differences. Furthermore, Northerners and Southerners often shared the same evangelical Christianity. Providence was seen in human events. A great revelation of their common

history and culture was the willingness to use war as an instrument of policy—and to see the Hand of God in war itself.

In short, the men of 1861 went to war as Americans. Literal cases of "brother fighting brother" were rare, but the war revealed that shared national identity does not always prevent conflict—and conflict of the deadliest sort. Loyal to their political institutions and beliefs, thousands of men volunteered to defend Southern rights while thousands of others volunteered to preserve the Union. The decision to become a soldier could represent long thought and the most deep-rooted convictions. On the other hand, it could be the result of popular pressure or even a mere moment's indiscretion. But whatever a so-called blundering generation of politicians may have done, no matter what Southern conventions decided or Northern governors proclaimed, the Civil War could not have taken place without widespread popular commitment. Neither the United States nor the newborn Confederacy possessed the power to force the American people into large armies or to gather the taxes necessary to support them without mass support. Nor were politicians in the two democratic societies, North and South, able to create war simply from their own ambitions and prejudices.

In one sense the story of American men at war in the 1860s is an old story told once more; some aspects of war are near-universal. And the Civil War experience encompassed far more people than those men who made up the armies. What that conflict has meant to the United States may never be fathomed to its depths. Nonetheless, an understanding of why men, North and South, went to war, how they fought and killed and died, and what happened to them is crucial to understanding the war's meaning for America.

Confederate volunteering went hand in hand with Southern secession. Even as politicians predicted a short war or no war at all, Southerners joined local military companies and prepared to be heroes. There was a heady quality to the days between Lincoln's election and Fort Sumter. Secession probably generated far less enthusiasm among the mass of Southern whites than the war itself did. The prospect of Yankee invasion united the white South. The Northern army was real and concrete, compared to the phantoms

that the fire-eaters had raised. Furthermore, while a Southern white man might deplore secession as a policy, he resented any attempt on the part of the North to tell the South—tell him—what to do. The invasion was a threat to his community, and he quickly rose to meet it. Even though Southerners tried to dissolve the nation their forefathers had helped to create, they still insisted they were loyal to the founders' vision. Confederates cast themselves as the true heirs of the generation of 1776. In particular, they saw themselves as defenders of the Constitution, a document that protected Southern rights. One soldier expressed the sentiment that motivated the majority of Confederate volunteers when he wrote, "I reather die then be com a Slave to the North."[3]

The reasons that men gave for enlisting in the Confederate army reveal some crucial aspects of the Southern mind during the crisis of the Union. Racism and the fear of slave insurrection motivated some volunteers. Others fought to defend a South they saw as a land of opportunity; their motivation was in part, and perhaps indirectly, economic. Still others thought the South possessed a culture so distinct from the North's that it required a separate nation. And a great many went to war because they hated Yankees.

Such seemingly disparate individual reasons, however, formed a reasonably coherent ideology; no one factor could realistically be divorced from the others. Economic opportunity and the South's distinctive culture both rested on the fact of slavery. The Yankee was feared because he threatened to destroy the South's prosperity by restricting slavery. But Southern whites hated the Yankee primarily for racial reasons—first, because they believed he might encourage the slaves to rebel, and, second, because he might try to impose equality of the races on the South.

North Carolinians, for example, grew excited as their state neared secession. Men flocked to join the volunteer companies being raised. Some companies apparently functioned as vigilantes as well. In Shelby the vigilance committee hung a man "for giving a runaway negro a free pas, and playing the Devil generally." The slave himself was not hung. The company was after abolitionists. One Georgian decided to enlist after hearing of a slave insurrection scheme, said to be led by white men in the area of Kingston. A slave, who was later hanged, revealed the details of the plan, which, as was always

the case when whites recounted black plots, included the selection of wives for the slaves among the white ladies of the community. Another Georgian, who had supported the Union until his state's secession, proclaimed himself "ready to Start any time to fight Abolitionists." He would not see the South "governed by a negro." Mansfield Lovell, a Democrat and a Southerner who lived in New York City at the outbreak of the war, thought that Unionism was simply a cover-up for Black Republican goals. In April 1861, as troops left New York for Washington, he commented, "The 'nigger' has been rolled up in the Stars and Stripes until he is completely hidden."[4]

Southerners exaggerated the immediacy of the threat to slavery—the Republicans had promised only to put slavery on "the road to ultimate extinction," not to abolish it the day after Lincoln's inauguration. One cannot accuse an entire society of paranoia, but it is hard to avoid concluding that the events of the 1850s, particularly the unsuccessful slave revolt led by John Brown, had created a great fear in Southern whites. They were ready to believe the worst. It is not clear how secession would eliminate all Northern threats—antislavery propaganda and even the next John Brown could be smuggled into the South; runaway slaves would now find haven in a North no longer bound by the Fugitive Slave law; the Western territories would be forever denied to the South—but secession at least defied the Northern enemy. It was a panacea that would not bear much scrutiny.

Examples of racism and Confederate loyalty are straightforward and easy to understand. Men who desired the perpetuation of slavery and who wished to keep blacks under white control withdrew from the Union when the North became increasingly hostile to slavery. But racism can operate in more complicated ways. In some men it twisted and deformed even their greatest virtues. For men like William Johnson Pegram, Confederate loyalty was compounded of admirable qualities and the worst brutishness.

After the war Pegram would become one of the boy heroes of the Lost Cause. The bespectacled, shy student was one of Lee's finest artillerists; his death in the arms of his adjutant satisfied all the demands of Victorian notions of friendship. "I bent over and kissed him and said, calling him by his name for the first time in

my life, 'Willie, I never knew how much I loved you until now.' He pressed my hand and answered, 'But I did.'" Those who watched Pegram in battle agreed that the reserved and pious young man came to life in those moments.[5]

During the months after Lincoln's election, Pegram reluctantly supported secession, even though he found the prospect of disunion terrible and feared civil war. The Constitution had proved worthless to protect the South; Lincoln was the South's enemy; and the vice-president, Pegram thought, was half-black. The peculiar degradation of a black vice-president was symbolic—it mattered little what Hamlin *did* as compared to what he *was*, a black man who would preside over the Senate. And, of course, Hamlin was not black except in Southern imagination.[6]

Pegram's ferocity in battle was matched by the ferocity of his racism. He approved, unreservedly, the wholesale slaughter of black prisoners at the battle of the Crater as a matter of policy, and he welcomed the Northern use of black troops precisely because it refired the combativeness of the weary Confederate soldiers in the trenches around Petersburg. Even after witnessing the murder of one prisoner, Pegram, whose piety was quite real, described the battle of the Crater as "a very brilliant day," given to the South by the "merciful kindness of an all & ever merciful God."[7]

Racism and fear of abolition were in some ways negative expressions of the Confederate vision. The slave system demanded a South free from Yankee interference. Secession had a positive content as well. The progress Confederates preached was not always easy to distinguish from the dominant American dream of economic prosperity. But as the future Confederate economy would be based on black slavery, the man who dreamed of prosperity inevitably was threatened by the nightmare of emancipation or insurrection. Some Confederate volunteers were fearful visionaries.

Rufus W. Cater of Louisiana, a Breckinridge Democrat, believed the widespread rumors of abolitionist incendiarism in Texas, thought the South had done everything possible to prevent war, and welcomed secession, as he loved liberty more than the Union. Its Northern enemies, he wrote in June 1861, were motivated by no virtuous desires, but by "sensualism and rapine." Abolitionists were godless fanatics who wished not simply to end slavery but to exterminate

the Southern people. Against his visions of the ruin that would overrun the South if it did not resist Northern encroachment, Cater erected a vision of the great nation that the Confederacy would become if it successfully prosecuted its war for independence. His letter to his doubting cousin Fanny grew as rhetorical as a Fourth of July oration as he celebrated the nation to be:

> Have we not all the elements that go to constitute a great nation. A soil that yields a hundred-fold to the hand of industry a climate which none can surpass in salubrity resources that might well be compared to the wealth of a Croesus, all this is ours. What an extensive Sea and gulf coast indented with safe and capacious harbors! What great facilities for transportation in the deep and broad rivers that irrigate our beautiful country. And what is better than all this a brave and enlightened people. A people who with amazing rapidity change a wilderness to a smiling garden, who maintain themselves with one hand and with the other clothe the world. A people who build fair temples to science and decorate them with a Knowledge which is the experience and the results of the labors of age.

Clearly this son of the planter class entertained no purely agrarian visions. He looked forward to Progress as blissfully and as confidently as any Yankee millowner. Nor were the virtues of the Southern people that he chose to celebrate aristocratic. Cater prided himself on his people's industry, commercial enterprise, and science—stereotypical Yankee virtues. His dream of the future left out the slaves whose toil clothed the world. The Confederacy he predicted was as much an enterprising region as the New South for which Henry Grady would later call.[8]

Some men's loyalties to the South were based on appreciation of its economy; some men's loyalties to the newfound Confederacy were based on hopes of an even wealthier future. The South had provided white men sufficient opportunities for social mobility that even nonslaveholders might fight for slavery. No other agricultural region of the United States had matched the prosperity of the antebellum South. If a man wished to farm and to earn wealth and

had no objections to slavery, the South offered the best return on his investment of labor and capital. And this was accomplished without undue concentration of wealth in the short-staple cotton regions. To some, this alone made the South and its political embodiment, the Confederacy, worth defending. Robert Patrick, a Confederate soldier, expressed his feelings for the South by quoting a song: "To the South, to the South, to the home of the free. . . . Where a man is a man if he is willing to toil/ And the humblest may reap the fruits of the soil."[9]

Nonetheless, during the decade immediately preceding secession, the South began to show signs of an economic and political crisis. Its social structure was growing increasingly rigid. In parts of the South good land was getting difficult for poor men to acquire, and farms were becoming fewer and larger. Slaves were relatively more expensive, and the proportion of the white population that held slaves was decreasing. Indeed, some historians have explained secession as an attempt by slaveholders to protect slavery before nonslaveholding whites became an overwhelming majority in the South. In any case, it was getting more difficult for "the humblest" to work their way to wealth.[10]

Southern men turned to expansion to solve the economic predicament of their region. Cheap lands lay to the west. If Southerners could spread their institutions westward, the chances for prosperity and upward mobility would not be lost. But there, at the borders of the land desired by Southern society for its very existence, stood the Yankee. The Yankee would prevent the expansion of the slave society and doom the South to stagnation and worse. Secession seemed to be the answer. As one Confederate volunteer explained it, the South could not be part of a government "where cotton was not king."[11]

The Yankee was the symbol of all that the South hated. He was, of course, the abolitionist. Even the nonslaveholder, who may have resented the planter, very rarely had love for the slave. He too could be stirred by tales of abolitionist incendiarism. For those Southerners who saw the future of the South in terms of prosperity and economic development, the Yankee was a villain who resisted Southern progress. At the same time, ironically, the Yankee also embodied the capitalistic values that those troubled by economic