

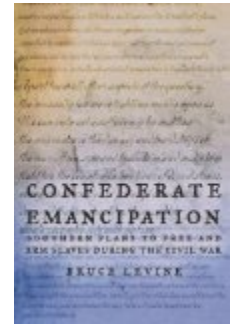
H-Net Reviews

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Bruce Levine. *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves During the Civil War.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. viii + 252 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-514762-9; \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-531586-8.

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To Free or Not to Free?

In an interview with Dan Wakefield of *The Nation* in January 1960, Karl Betts, executive director of the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, made it clear that awkward facts would have no part in the upcoming commemoration of America's greatest trial. When asked if any effort would be made to mark the centenary of emancipation, Betts responded,

"We're not emphasizing Emancipation. You see there's a bigger theme—the beginning of a new America. There was an entire regiment of Negroes about to be formed to serve in the Confederate Army just before the war ended. The story of the devotion and loyalty of Southern Negroes is one of the outstanding things of the Civil War. A lot of fine Negro people loved life as it was in the old South."^[1]

Half a century ago views like this were unremarkable. What was, for white supremacists, the comforting myth of black loyalty to the Confederacy held firm in spite of growing awareness inside the academy that, given half a chance (or less), enslaved southern blacks were willing to abandon their masters and, in the case of two hundred thousand adult males, enlist in the armed services of the United States to defeat the aspirant proslavery republic whose forces were arrayed against it. Half a century on, it is depressing to report that views akin to those of Karl Betts are still alive and kicking. Visitors to the Georgia Heritage Coalition website will find a recent 32-part series by Bill Vallante (a Confederate battle reenactor currently "living 'behind enemy lines'" in New York

state) attempting to detail the military support given to the Confederacy by southern blacks and to debunk the efforts of "liberal" historians to undermine "the truth."^[2] Like it or not, historians of the American South are in the front line of the modern culture wars. What we need urgently, however, is not crusading history (for that will be dismissed or ignored by those without an attachment to the crusade), but good history that can be diffused effectively across the country. We are fortunate, then, that Bruce Levine is an accomplished historian and that he has fashioned a coherent and accessible analysis of the tortured Confederate debate over the military mobilization of slaves.

Levine's argument has several core strands. He contends that Rebel proposals for the emancipating and arming of slaves were the product of military necessity, that they were always fiercely contested, that they produced few concrete results, and that they were actually designed not, as some historians have suggested, to reorder southern race relations but to maintain as far as possible the unequal status quo. On each of these points Levine's evidence is generally persuasive.

Belated suggestions that the Confederacy should follow the Union policy of enlisting slaves emanated from the hard-pressed Army of Tennessee. Shortly after the demoralizing defeat at Chattanooga in late 1863, one of the South's most able fighting men in the western theater, General Patrick R. Cleburne, broached the subject in the form of a lengthy memorandum to the army high

command. Although discussion of this “abolitionist” document uncovered minimal support among Cleburne’s fellow officers and was quickly suppressed by the Confederate cabinet, thoughts of a major policy shift exercised growing numbers of southern whites as the Yankee noose continued to tighten. Most of those who expressed an opinion were virulently hostile to the plan, not least because it challenged white supremacist assumptions about black capabilities and seemed a negation of everything the South was fighting to preserve. As one irate critic put it, the very idea of freeing and arming the slaves, “surrenders the great point upon which the two sections went to war” (p. 55). The loss of Atlanta in September 1864, however, imparted greater urgency to the debate.

Levine notes that by the desperate winter of 1864-65 (and partly as a result of the Lincoln administration’s decision to muster blacks into the Union armies and navy), the South had only a quarter as many combatants in the field as the North. As a result, Confederate leaders such as President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee finally came to recognize that recruiting black soldiers en masse offered the only hope of national salvation. Yet even this recognition did not stir the masters. The slaveholder-dominated Confederate Congress passed a slave-enlistment bill just days before the fall of Richmond, but neither this statute nor a subsequent order from the Adjutant and Inspector General’s Office guaranteed the freedom of recruits, still less that of their families. Karl Betts was not entirely wrong. A handful of black companies were being mustered into the Confederate service at the close of the Civil War. But Bruce Levine is entirely right: the vast majority of southern blacks knew that a Union victory offered them the prospect of a better future and ignored what was clearly the last-ditch recruiting drive of a doomed insurgency.

The book’s most controversial thesis is that Confederate efforts to free and mobilize the slaves were intended to bolster rather than undermine the established racial order. Supporters of the policy, he argues, understood like other propertied reactionaries across the nineteenth-century globe that slavery and serfdom were not the only ways to keep a dependent labor force in check. Blacks in a post-emancipation Confederacy flush with victory would enjoy not political and legal equality with whites. Instead they would receive “a minimal amount of personal liberty,” their lives severely constrained “by both the planters’ monopoly of land and their control of the state apparatus” (p. 109). Levine may not have quite the weight of evidence to nail this thesis (which counters the more generous appraisal of Confederate emancipa-

tion plans advanced by scholars such as Robert F. Durden and Ervin L. Jordan Jr.), but the actions of Davis, Lee, and other Rebel leaders during Reconstruction do nothing to suggest that these men were capable, like many abolitionists and radical Republicans in the North, of envisioning a postwar polity that safeguarded the rights and personal security of former slaves.

It is always possible to quibble. The book is a relatively slim volume and Levine’s argument would have benefited at certain junctures from greater elaboration. This is true, for example, of his assertion that most support for the emancipation and enlistment plan inside the Confederate Congress came from members who represented areas occupied or threatened by the enemy or in which slavery was already on its way out. Statistical documentation would have proven beyond reasonable doubt what looks on the surface to be a plausible argument. Levine’s comparative assessment, moreover, certainly yields dividends in terms of explanatory power. However, the book skates over alternative examples such as American and British enlistment of slaves during the Revolution and, perhaps more obviously, the black emancipation and enlistment policy of the Union. Both the British and U.S. comparisons involved, at some stage, the coupling of emancipation with colonization, and one is tempted to ask why transportation was not offered up at least as a rhetorical solution to the thorny racial dilemma posed by southern plans to free and arm the slaves. (Obviously getting rid of African Americans would have portended disaster for the region’s labor supply, but this did not stop some former Rebels in the late 1860s and 1870s dreaming of a world in which black laborers would be supplanted with white immigrants.) And while it might be supposed that a comparison of Confederate and Union policy could only redound to the benefit of the latter, the controversial compulsory labor system inaugurated by General Nathaniel P. Banks in Louisiana must surely have offered food for thought to some Confederates. Finally, given the importance of his subject to modern-day culture wars, Levine could have devoted more space to the combustible topic of black Confederates. Bill Valante is not a professional historian, but he marshals enough information on the Georgia Heritage Coalition website to indicate that some free blacks did fight for the Confederacy and that at least a few body servants who accompanied their masters into battle were allowed to carry rifles and take potshots at the Yankees. It would have been useful if Levine could have shown conclusively what most H-South readers will suspect—that their numbers paled into insignificance compared with the legions

who fought for the Union.

But these are minor points. This is the most reliable and convincing book ever written on a fraught topic of lingering significance. We are just five years away from the sesquicentennial of the Civil War and the contending forces are already rallying to contest the event. Mr. Vallante and other like-minded conservatives will not be persuaded by Levine's argument (for proof just check out some of the hostile reviews of *Confederate Emancipation* on the Amazon website). However, all conflicts have their middle ground to be fought over and the modern American culture wars are no exception. If we are not to see a resurgence of the pernicious half-truths peddled by Karl Betts, this excellent study must have an influence far beyond the groves of academe.

Notes

[1]. Dan Wakefield, "Civil War Centennial: Bull Run with Popcorn." *The Nation*, January 30, 1960, p. 97.

[2]. Bill Vallante, "Black History Month & 'Civil War Memory:' The 32 Part Series," Georgia Heritage Council, [http://georgiaheritagecouncil.org/site2/black\protect\unhbox\voidb@x\bgroup\def,{history}\let\futurelet\@let@token\let\protect\relax\protect\edefn{it}\protect\xdef\EU1/LinuxLibertine0\(0\)/m/it/10{\EU1/LinuxLibertine0\(0\)/m/n/10}\EU1/LinuxLibertine0\(0\)/m/it/10\size@update\enc@updatehistory\egroupmonth_series.phtml](http://georgiaheritagecouncil.org/site2/black\protect\unhbox\voidb@x\bgroup\def,{history}\let\futurelet\@let@token\let\protect\relax\protect\edefn{it}\protect\xdef\EU1/LinuxLibertine0(0)/m/it/10{\EU1/LinuxLibertine0(0)/m/n/10}\EU1/LinuxLibertine0(0)/m/it/10\size@update\enc@updatehistory\egroupmonth_series.phtml).

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