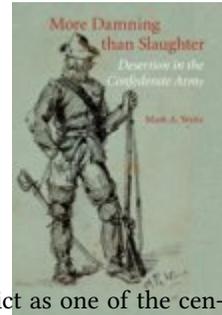


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark A. Weitz. *More Damning than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xix + 346 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4797-0.

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The Confederacy's Desertion Problem ... From the Bottom, Up

Oftentimes, historians avoid the inglorious subjects in preference of those that offer stories of heroism and redemption. Mark A. Weitz is not one of this number. Throughout his career, he has put his legal and academic training to work tackling underexamined issues such as the Confederacy's piracy and sequestration cases, malpractice among American clergy, and desertion among Georgians in the Civil War. This offering is an expansion of his *A Higher Duty: Desertion Among Georgia Troops during the Civil War* (2005) and hopes to further the various studies of desertion, most notably, Ella Lonn's *Desertion during the Civil War* (1928). In *More Damning than Slaughter*, Weitz tackles the question of what motivated Confederate soldiers to desert their units and, ultimately, if this desertion had a negative impact on the Southern war effort.

In his examination of the phenomenon of desertion from the Confederate Army, Weitz writes the most expansive and thorough treatment since Lonn's terribly dated study. Employing previously unused or underutilized sources, he crafts a narrative illustrating the dazzling complexity of desertion and paints a broad picture of the myriad reasons for leaving Confederate service. Identifying pressures varying from family members to outright rejection of the Confederate cause, Weitz attempts to write a comprehensive examination of desertion. Despite the ambition of his work, it is plagued by some basic flaws which call into question some important elements of the author's argument.

Indeed, the author has undertaken a grand task. On the one hand, Weitz approaches desertion from a directly Marxian standpoint. He looks at the issue from the bot-

tom up and clearly sees class conflict as one of the central forces behind the men's dissatisfaction. However, he seems to jump into the middle of the argument by identifying deserted soldiers and retracing their motives, then examining the results of their decision. Perhaps starting with the concept of dissent as an impetus rather than desertion as the result would have led readers toward the larger issues surrounding the soldiers' abandonment of their duty and given readers a more direct and satisfying approach to this complex topic. Readers will also find that, although he places class dissatisfaction at the forefront of his study, pragmatism could serve him equally as well and might also offer a broader understanding of the desertion phenomenon. On the other hand, he tries devotedly to blend the social and martial aspects of the individual soldier with the political and logistical demands of the Confederate government and army. This is where Weitz makes his greatest contribution.

Regarding the Confederacy's reaction to desertion, Weitz makes a compelling case that the government did not properly identify nor adequately respond to the crisis. He cites numerous opportunities that the Confederate government and military officials had to fix the fundamental flaws that enabled and even encouraged desertion which they allowed to pass. Weitz paints the picture of a government that provided lip-service to the problem, but never really felt compelled to take firm action to change its approach to the culture of desertion. Additionally, as the war dragged on, much of the upper South became a no man's land which all but encouraged desertion and hiding out. This environment made extracurricular violence easy and provided the privacy needed to operate as an outlaw. On a philosophical level, one can argue that the dissent illustrated by the deserting soldier was a logical extension of the dissent shown by the secession of the

southern states; just as Protestants re-evaluated their belief system after the Reformation, so did the Confederates as the war continued.

With these things said, Weitz is fighting a valiant but difficult battle by dealing with the nature of pragmatism and its manifestation among Confederate soldiers. At least one reviewer has taken the author to task for suggesting that Southern elites used the poor whites for their own purposes.[1] Indeed, William Blair's *Virginia's Private War* (1998) does make a convincing argument along these lines, but the ceaseless military activities and the ongoing threat of activity in the Old Dominion does not make for the perfect exemplar. Studies of the shifting South and the borderlands have shown a different interpretation. However, the reading of Michael Fellman and Philip Shaw Paludan clearly illustrates that not only could private citizens not provide protection and security for their self-appointed charges, state militias and national armies could not do so either. In the end, the pall mall pragmatism of individuals wins out against systematization.

The questions that swirl around much of Weitz's argument are not helped by his moments of carelessness and confusion. In a ridiculous assertion, he writes, "At the outset of the war ... Confederate leadership rejected the option of fighting a guerrilla war and instead chose to confront the North with a conventional army" (p. 34). In examining his sources for the statement, one finds much about the process of establishing an official apparatus of warfare, but no mention of guerrilla warfare as a viable alternate plan. This example is particularly troublesome because it gives off a false impression that the Confederacy was preparing for such an eventuality and therefore fundamentally setting itself up for failure in the matter of retaining soldiers within a formal army. What one might call a "straw man," another might call an intentional falsehood used as a basis on which to build a substantial part of his argument. Weak foundations invariably produce weak books.

Regarding Weitz's research, he consulted an impressive array of primary and secondary sources. The strength of his primary research is in official records from both federal and state levels; however, one would hope

for more in the way of personal papers. While more than a dozen such collections were utilized, they all came from one archive, the Center for American History in Austin, Texas, thereby undermining the belief that this is an evenly researched and broad-based study of desertion throughout the whole of the Confederacy. It is also somewhat surprising to see no newspaper sources listed. Many scholars of Civil War borderlands have mined invaluable information from local newspapers, particularly in those regions where deserters tended to congregate.

Within the text, several other notable mistakes appear. Weitz persistently misidentifies James Chesnut (a notable Southern legislator and, more importantly, the husband of the Confederacy's great diarist) as James Chestnut (pp. 40, 51). An excellent story of a deserter's execution is told twice (pp. 99-100, 152). And, a poem is abruptly included that desperately needs an introduction within the text (p. 260). Such attention grabbing *faux pas* often give the impression that fundamental problems lurk just beneath the surface.

By the time one reads Weitz's last word, the feeling arises that, despite his extensive research and marshalling of evidence, the book falls short. This is not completely surprising considering its ambitious scope. Weitz never reveals conclusive evidence that desertion harmed the Confederate war effort—although most historians would agree that it did. Nor is his class-based approach to desertion among the common soldiers fully convincing. Adding to the aforementioned problems is the book's chronological approach to a topical subject.

While some historians may condemn this book because of its weaknesses, Weitz must be commended for his bold attempt to tell such an important story. Hopefully, his work here will drive other scholars to revisit desertion as a topic of study and, in time, a collection of literature befitting such an important aspect of the Confederate war effort will emerge.

#### Note

[1]. Peter S. Carmichael, review of *More Damning than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army*, by Mark A. Weitz, *American Historical Review* 111 (June 2006): 840.

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