

# H-Net Reviews

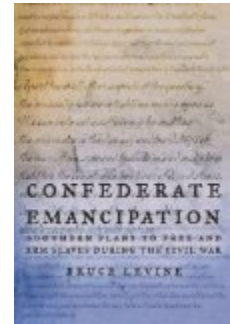
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Bruce Levine.** *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. vii + 252 pp.

**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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## Confederate Emancipation: An Oxymoron?

With Union armies marching to victory throughout the South and with the Confederate capital at Richmond besieged at the end of 1864, the slave republic belatedly considered enlisting slaves in the armed forces. Bruce Levine, the James G. Randall Professor of History at the University of Illinois, examines the internal debate that preceded the eventual decision to employ black Confederate troops, a decision that came too late to rescue the Confederacy from destruction. Levine found that the debate revealed a great deal concerning the true motives behind secession, and he also punctures a number of Lost Cause myths along the way.

Patrick Cleburne, a fiercely effective general in the Army of Tennessee, had broached the idea of arming slaves in exchange for emancipation in a memo that he read to an officers' caucus in early January 1864. Cleburne's suggestion received no support from Jefferson Davis's administration; indeed, Cleburne was ordered to drop the matter. Yet by the fall of 1864, the Confederate government reconsidered the proposal in the face of battlefield setbacks, particularly William Tecumseh Sherman's devastating march through Georgia and subsequent conquering of South Carolina, Abraham Lincoln's reelection, and growing desertion from even Robert E. Lee's army and consequent manpower shortages. The ensuing debate over emancipating and arming slaves took place in letters, newspaper editorials, and speeches

from Confederate luminaries, such as Judah P. Benjamin, and Levine artfully mines these sources.

The proposal to enlist black slaves in the army excited considerable criticism, and that criticism, Levine points out, illustrated the contradictions inherent in the entire enterprise of the slave republic. Critics charged that in enlisting slaves the central purpose for which the Confederacy had been created—to preserve a slave-based society—would be abandoned. Further, for decades, Southern quack intellectuals had argued that black slaves were docile and content with bondage, even loyal and devoted to masters. The plan to arm slaves directly contradicted the myth of docility, while the necessity to offer freedom as an incentive to fight vitiated the myth of contentment.

Levine correctly notes the slaves' own agency in their eventual freedom from bondage, for the debate within the Confederacy on arming the slaves was strongly influenced by wartime acts of slaves themselves. To those who argued that slaves would not fight, advocates pointed to the thousands of escaped slaves who had enlisted in the Union army and fought with valor and distinction. Further, Levine argues that growing black resistance on Southern plantations and farms prompted some to insist that home front safety demanded clapping slaves into the army. Just as the reality of thousands of escaped

slaves crossing into the lines of the Union army forced the Lincoln administration and Congress to act, so, too, did the subsequent distinguished service of black Union troops force reconsideration of old assumptions regarding slave behavior in the South.

Perhaps most important, Levine dismisses a number of the arguments of Lost Cause adherents. After the war's conclusion, Confederate devotees suggested that the willingness to abandon slavery proved that a desire for liberty from Northern tyranny and oppression motivated the formation of the Confederate government, not a desire to preserve slavery. Further, so the argument went, Cleburne, Lee, and Davis had all endorsed black Confederate troops and emancipation because slavery had never been central to their struggle. Yet Levine convincingly argues that only the exigencies of a failing war effort compelled the Confederate government and

its principal officials to embrace emancipation as a tool to entice slaves into the army. Men like Lee and Davis continued to maintain that slavery worked for blacks and whites, and indeed intended to create a social and labor system as close to *de facto* slavery as possible in the post-emancipation South. Although J. D. B. De Bow and others initiated and perpetuated the "loyal slave" myth, Levine notes that the slaves' evident thirst for freedom forced the Southern government to reluctantly offer emancipation as incentive to military service. Even then, few slaves took up arms for the Confederacy at the end of the war.

Levine's study of the Confederate struggle with emancipation is an outstanding treatment that deserves a wide audience. He has provided a window into a hitherto largely unknown debate in which the participants unwittingly revealed the animating principles of the Confederacy.

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