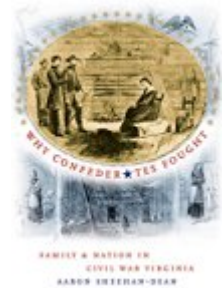


Aaron Sheehan-Dean. *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xvi + 291 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3158-8.



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How was it possible that the vast majority of Confederate soldiers did not own slaves? This remains one of the perennial questions asked by college students of the American Civil War. With their limited exposure to the causes and origins of America's greatest national tragedy, most undergraduates arrive on campus unable to conceive that an army of nonslaveholders would fight for a nation dedicated to protecting the peculiar institution. Aaron Sheehan-Dean's *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia* offers insights into why these nonslaveholders sacrificed so much to preserve a slave republic. Yet, the author digs deeper to understand the factors that influenced white Virginians from the beginning of the war until its conclusion. The result is a fine study of a society at war, and it offers much to our understanding of motivation, morale, and community in the Old Dominion's Confederate population.

One the principal aims of *Why Confederates Fought* is to trace the changing motivations that inspired the war and prolonged it. Sheehan-Dean begins by explaining the impulses that pushed

white Virginians into secession. He points out that they did not enter the war out of a sense of deference to the slaveholding elite who held political power. Instead, they supported secession and enlisted in the Confederate ranks for myriad reasons, including defense of home, belief in states' rights, and protection of slavery. Initially, the majority of white Virginians hoped to remain in the Union. The attack on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's subsequent call for volunteers to invade the Lower South, however, left most with no choice: no Southerner would wage war against a fellow Southerner. At the outset, then, Virginians seceded to defend their home.

Sheehan-Dean next explores motivations for continuing the struggle as the war drags on and Virginia becomes one of the chief battlegrounds. He finds that because Virginia soldiers often fought near the homes of family and friends, they voiced a strong commitment to defend their homeland from invading armies. Moreover, the combat prowess of Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia kept Southern hopes for independence alive until Appomattox. As other histo-

rians have noted, Lee and his army embodied the Confederacy toward the end of the war in much the same way as George Washington and the Continental Army embodied the United States. Additionally, when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, white Virginians, like all Confederates, realized that Union victory meant the destruction of a key economic institution in their society. Finally, the nature of the war in Virginia involved invasion and occupation, and as the Union adopted a "hard war" policy of foraging, and in some cases sacking farms and villages, anger and revenge fueled greater devotion to the Confederate cause. The destruction and violence visited on their homes convinced most Confederate Virginians of Yankee barbarism. While it is undoubtedly true that Union hard war policies may have quashed the South's ability to wage war, they also generated deep animosities among most white residents, bolstering their commitment to prolong the war.

Sheehan-Dean's contention that white Virginians strengthened their dedication to independence over time defies the current perception that white Southerners, especially lower- and middle-class civilians, gradually but inexorably lost faith in the Confederate cause. The author maintains that this was not the case in Virginia because of several factors: a political attachment to liberty and the belief that this liberty was threatened by the Union; the economic prosperity of the 1850s and the subsequent desire to protect the status quo, especially the institution of slavery; and, as previously stated, a desire to protect family and community.

The author goes on to challenge historians such as Drew Gilpin Faust who have argued that the Confederacy imploded. For Faust and others, a variety of internal socioeconomic tensions based on race, class, and gender eventually ripped apart the fragile republic. Sheehan-Dean does admit that antagonisms existed among the various groups comprising the Confederate States. For ex-

ample, class tensions appeared with the 1862 draft law and the food shortages of 1863. Certainly, issues such as these demonstrated deep reservations about the course of the war and Confederate leadership. Sheehan-Dean challenges, however, the notion that middle- and lower-class Southerners gradually withdrew their support for the Confederacy because their interests were unmet. Instead, the author found that none of the purported problems broke the commitment to independence, especially as Confederates sacrificed more and more for their cause. Indeed, Sheehan-Dean contends that the hardships of war actually united the various classes in a shared sense of suffering and dedication.

On the issue of desertion, Sheehan-Dean's argument is at its weakest. He tends to ignore the statistics by insisting that deserters simply were going home to protect their families and had not given up on the cause of independence. He claims that most white Virginians did not desert because Virginia was a constant battle front, and, therefore, support for the Confederacy was the same as support for one's community. Ultimately, he asserts, loyalty to one's family, community, and region *strengthened* national loyalty rather than weakened it.

Why Confederates Fought is well written, convincing, and, most importantly, thoroughly researched. The author's assault on the internal collapse of the Confederacy is reasoned and on the mark. For far too long historians have ignored the simple fact that if the Confederacy's armies succeeded more on the battlefield, especially in the western theater, the home front would not have faced disruptions and pressures to the degree that it did. While the collapse on the home front or battlefield is much like the chicken-or-the-egg argument, social historians of the conflict have dismissed the clash on the battlefield too easily. Sheehan-Dean offers a chance to redress that imbalance. Moreover, his study should serve as a model for other state studies. The author is aware that

Virginia may be a special case. The state served as a battlefield for the entire war, and, therefore, the experiences of its soldiers and their families might not hold true elsewhere in the South. Without further study, however, that argument is based on supposition and not fact. In sum, this is a fine book and an excellent example of how much we still have to learn about the most studied topic in American history.

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