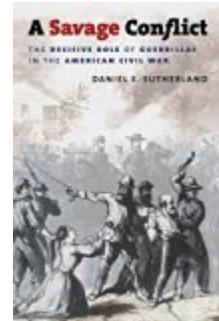


Daniel E. Sutherland. *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War*. Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 440 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3277-6.

Reviewed by Sam C. Hyde (Southeast Louisiana University)

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Rethinking the Relevance of Irregular Operations in the American Civil War

It seems as long as there has been war, politicians, military officers, and others have debated the value of guerrilla warfare. In many cases, the guerrillas have been held in contempt, regarded as little more than a lawless rabble if not outright criminals. Regular army officers especially have looked upon guerrillas as undisciplined enemies of civilized warfare, while the civilian population, both friend and foe, have frequently feared the very notion of a guerrilla war. Such concerns, of course, have proven well justified. Gangs of men operating outside the parameters of established authority, often answerable to virtually no one, connote a descent to anarchy and potentially limitless suffering for all in the affected areas.

Yet another vision of guerrilla warfare offers that such unorthodox warriors provide a great equalizing mechanism. Much like the Afghan guerrillas who made life hell for the British army, or the Spanish irregulars who created a “bleeding ulcer” for the Napoleonic French, guerrilla operations have long proven that they can bring a powerful regular army to its knees. Most poignantly for Americans, the simplest review of Western involvement in twentieth-century Indochina reveals the power guerrilla operations can hold over regular forces.

One of the liveliest debates concerning the value of guerrilla operations centers on their effectiveness in the American Civil War. Few dispute the value of irregular forces during the American Revolution. Indeed, the daring exploits of Francis Marion, the “Swamp Fox of the

Revolution,” and others like him have become the stuff of legend. In sharp contrast, far from being celebrated, the vast majority of guerrillas who operated in the Civil War are regarded as little more than thieves and murderers. Indeed, despite the approving portrayal offered by some Confederate sympathizers, few modern scholars find much positive to say about them.[1] The obvious answer to the contrast in treatment is that most Civil War era irregulars fought in support of the Confederacy. And, as with most such conflicts, the losers do not enjoy the same sympathetic postwar evaluations afforded the victors. Not surprisingly, though fewer in number, irregular forces that supported the Union are generally regarded as heroic. The double standard applied in modern popular culture is easily revealed when one compares, say, the current treatment of reputed Mississippi unionist Newt Knight to that afforded Missouri Confederate guerrilla chief William C. Quantrill.[2]

Unfortunately, the political inclinations evident in popular culture distract attention from what many regard as the more relevant questions. Specifically, were Civil War era guerrillas effective? And would the war have been different if the Confederacy had been more aggressive in promoting irregular forces? This new volume from the University of North Carolina Press forthrightly confronts such questions. Author Daniel E. Sutherland provides what may be the closest thing we have yet to a definitive assessment of guerrilla operations during the Civil War. Sutherland has clearly done his homework.

His meticulous research, as evidenced in his notes, reveals a thorough command of the literature on the subject. Moreover, unlike most previous studies that focus on one individual or region, this volume offers a comprehensive view of the war. The author provides comparative analysis of the forces that motivated guerrilla operations, along with analysis of their effectiveness, in a chronological timeframe that is inclusive of virtually all regions of the nation.

Sutherland expands the popular understanding of the areas affected by irregular operations to include regions north of the Mason-Dixon Line, just as he uncovers little-known guerrilla fighters in regions previously thought to be at best on the periphery of such contests. This book is simply a banquet for Civil War buffs eager to learn more about events that remained separate from the large field force contest. Readers are treated to exciting details of guerrilla actions from the uplands of Florida to the cornfields of Illinois. Poignant portraits of guerrilla leaders provide rationale for understanding their behavior as well as insight into the motives of the men who followed them. By focusing on the effectiveness of irregular operations, rather than their morality, Sutherland offers an answer to the question of the guerrilla's ultimate relevance.

Existing literature reveals that most studies of irregular operations have been limited to the implications they carried for the immediate region where they were practiced. Through the broader interpretive approach he applies, Sutherland concludes that in the end guerrilla warfare weakened the Confederacy by compromising the trust citizens put in their government officials to protect them. In some regions of the South, Confederate offi-

cialists relied on guerrillas and partisan fighters as the only viable option available to them. Sutherland's study suggests that in the early years of the conflict irregular forces in some areas did prove valuable to the Confederate war effort. Yet as the war continued, irregular forces came to include men more eager to settle personal scores, or simply engage in criminal activity. These men and their gangs operated beyond the confines of military necessity and accordingly became as much, or more, of a burden to government officials than they were an asset. As such the guerrillas ultimately contributed to the defeat of the Confederacy.

Written in engaging prose abundantly sprinkled with exciting anecdotes, this book will be useful to the scholar just as it will entertain the general reader. Skillfully constructed to educate, rather than pontificate, Sutherland's study raises the bar of Civil War scholarship. Though everyone will not agree with all of his conclusions, few will dispute the value of this study for interpreting the cause, and effectiveness, of guerrilla operations during the American Civil War.

Notes

[1]. See, for instance, Walter B. Cisco, *War Crimes against Southern Civilians* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 2007).

[2]. Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer, *The State of Jones* (New York: Knopf-Doubleday, 2009); and James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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