

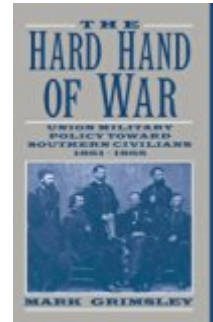
H-Net Reviews

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Mark Grimsley. *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xii + 244 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-46257-0.

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Students of the Civil War are quite familiar (or so they think) with the subject of this book. How many of us have thoughtlessly described the Civil War as the first “modern” or even “total” war? Mark Grimsley will make us revise those old lecture notes.

Historians, Civil War buffs, and the public generally hold powerful images of the Civil War’s destructiveness. The two most common examples would be the burning of Atlanta and Sherman’s March to the Sea. Many historians have long realized that the devastation wrought by northern armies has been greatly exaggerated, but Mark Grimsley argues that severity and pleas of military necessity were also tempered by a sense of moral justice. For the first fifteen months of the war or so, federal authorities adopted a conciliatory policy toward southern civilians. Beginning in the summer of 1862 they turned toward what Grimsley has termed a more “pragmatic” approach that included both confiscation and emancipation. By 1864-65, this policy had given way to “hard war” based on the idea of demoralizing Confederates through the seizure and destruction of civilian property.

Grimsley refutes the commonly held assumption that the conciliatory approach grew out of a naive sentimentalism doomed to fail. For sure, Lincoln and his military advisers rather blithely assumed that all the seceding states (with the exception of South Carolina) had Unionist majorities, but historical precedent from the American Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, and the Mexican War also pointed toward conservative treatment of belligerent peoples. A policy of restraint toward civilians and their property might prevent the outbreak of a brutal and potentially disastrous guerrilla conflict. That sturdy exemplar of a cautious approach to war, George B. McClell-

an, favored defeating Confederate armies while protecting civilian property. However sound this was in theory, Confederate guerrillas and, even more important, ordinary soldiers in the federal armies undermined the conciliatory policy.

Enlisted men resented the defiance of southern civilians, but Grimsley slights the theatrical aspects of many confrontations. One wonders how many privates were shocked or surprised by the attitudes of southern civilians, and although officers may have tired of stock acts of defiance by “secesh females,” they often found them amusing if not charming. Grant and other commanders, however, had to wrestle with the consequences arising from civilian encouragement of guerrilla depredations and with the difficulties of distinguishing between loyal, actively disloyal, and passively disloyal southern whites. The result was a pragmatic policy (followed even by the notorious Benjamin F. Butler in New Orleans) designed to keep civilians out of the war while punishing open acts of resistance.

To Grimsley’s credit, he examines the evolution of northern policy in all the major theaters and usually notes exceptions to these general patterns of conduct. Early in 1862 when the conciliatory approach still prevailed, for instance, a brigade in Ambrose E. Burnside’s army set fire to the town of Winton, North Carolina. Likewise, Grimsley avoids playing off conservative generals against more radical ones to push his story relentlessly forward toward the inevitable adoption of more destructive practices. Thus, in Kentucky and Tennessee, Don Carlos Buell consistently tried to conciliate southern civilians, but so did William T. Sherman.

Calls for the abandonment of such a cautious ap-

proach and for the adoption of both confiscation and emancipation intensified as McClellan's army stalled on the Virginia Peninsula. At this point, Grimsley might have explored an interesting paradox in the Army of the Potomac: a body of soldiers who greatly admired McClellan but had little use for his efforts to safeguard rebel property. He presents considerable evidence showing that McClellan's troops dismissed posting guards for farms and plantations as nothing but foolishness. That was "all played out," as they enjoyed telling Confederate women who begged for special protection. Western soldiers in particular, as Grimsley observes, were eager to forage more freely, and in the East, John Pope's notorious orders seemed to justify a new and harsher kind of war.

But here Grimsley masterfully weighs contradictory evidence to draw ingenious conclusions. The northern public appeared satisfied that Pope's orders had been issued and did not seem to care that they were not carried out. And the soldiers themselves often remained ambivalent about pillaging. The Emancipation Proclamation marked the abandonment of conciliation as a policy even though conservative attitudes hardly disappeared. Officers remained reluctant to encourage unrestricted plundering, but officially sanctioned foraging spread rapidly. As Grimsley notes, the seizure of civilian property often grew out of logistical necessity as federal armies penetrated deeper and deeper into hostile territory. Union commanders also increasingly held Confederate civilians accountable for guerrilla raids. The generals tried to clear out the guerrillas so that conventional war could proceed and throughout 1863 were quite ready to bring the war home to civilians. But even then restraint still often prevailed, though Grimsley stretches this insight to its breaking point by trying to fit Sherman's burning of Randolph, Tennessee, into this pattern of controlled severity.

If historians have often oversimplified the evolution of northern military policy, their analysis of emancipation has been equally slipshod. Most military men regardless of rank tried to avoid the slavery question and generally waited for Lincoln to act. Indeed, pleas of military necessity, Grimsley contends, had little to do with the Emancipation Proclamation. The army remained deeply ambivalent, and aside from the eventual use of African-American troops, warring against slavery brought few immediate strategic advantages.

During the important campaigns of 1863, the Lincoln administration encouraged armies to live off the land – especially in the western theater. The Vicksburg cam-

paign marked a transition between more pragmatic policies and "hard war." Grant and Sherman authorized their soldiers to seize vitally needed supplies and at the same time found it increasingly difficult to prevent wanton destruction. Building on the strategic insights of Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, Grimsley locates the real and sustained appearance of "hard war" in the "raids" of the 1864-65 period. From Philip Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley to Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas, the destruction of civilian property became a legitimate military objective quite apart from conventional battles. But even Sherman and Sheridan issued orders against burning private homes, and plantations were much more likely to be ransacked than small farms. Thus a kind of restraint based on a delicately balanced moral calculus persisted even in the midst of destructive raids that demoralized Confederate civilians. Grimsley argues that the politically sophisticated Union soldiers could distinguish between various class of southern civilians and generally targeted wealthy secessionists, but he also documents in a somewhat contradictory fashion the Federals' often expressed contempt for poor whites.

In examining the evolution of policy toward southern civilians, Grimsley offers a closer reading of the pronouncements made by generals and politicians than any other historian. In nearly every chapter, his careful comparison of words with deeds shatters long cherished myths and assumptions. But his revisionism is fair-minded, sensible, and readable; nor is it based on the all too common practice of cannibalizing other scholars. Creativity and judiciousness characterize the arguments. Comparative insights from both earlier and later wars provide a broad context; arguments grounded in "just war" and other philosophical traditions makes the analysis morally sensitive without being preachy. Grimsley intersperses his account of official policy with perceptive and fresh quotations from lower-ranking officers and enlisted men. In fact, the book might have been (and probably should have been) longer had he used this common soldier material more frequently. In some theaters of the war and for some periods treated in this book, the perspective from the ranks mysteriously disappears. Grimsley recognizes inconsistencies and exceptions even as he clearly outlines the evolution of northern policy. He sometimes slights the importance of renegade behavior in various regiments (and even brigades) and no doubt pushes his arguments for restrained behavior too far. But these flaws are minor ones, and these rather specific criticisms actually highlight the larger achievements of this path-breaking study. Indeed, *The Hard*

Hand of War along with Stephen Ash's excellent new book, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865*, should change both scholarly and popular conceptions on several contentious issues. After reading Grimsley's book, modern war theorists, neo-Confederates, and students of the Civil War

in general should revise their shopworn notions about "hard war."

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