

David Silkenat. *Raising the White Flag: How Surrender Defined the American Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 368 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-4972-6.

Reviewed by Jack R. Verhayden

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Commissioned by G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

Twenty-first-century Americans have valorized the image of the defiant American soldier refusing to surrender. Books, movies, and video games have glorified the efforts of soldiers fighting on despite seemingly insurmountable odds and governments refusing to allow “any man left behind.” However, while today’s popular image of submitting to the enemy is often associated with cowardice or even immorality, nineteenth-century Americans had a different understanding of surrender. David Silkenat’s *Raising the White Flag* shows how common the act of surrender was during the Civil War, when Americans did not see surrender as a “sign of weakness but as a hallmark of humanity” (p. 297). Silkenat argues that surrender was one of the war’s “most common military experiences,” as more than 673,000 soldiers, or one out of every four soldiers, surrendered during the war (p. 2). Over the course of ten chapters, Silkenat contends that surrendering was not only a common experience, but “that American ideas of surrender at the beginning of the Civil War grew out of inherited notions that surrender helped distinguish civilized warfare from barbarism” (p. 3). Surrender was a prerequisite for civilized warfare, and without the ability to surrender, war devolved into atrocities. During the Civil War, both the Union and Confederacy challenged this understanding of surrender as the

Union enlisted black soldiers, Southerners used guerilla warfare, and commanders demanded “unconditional surrender.” Like Drew Faust’s work on death during the war, Silkenat shows how imperative studying surrender is to our understanding of the Civil War and its legacy. Surrender was a common experience that deeply impacted the lives and mindsets of many Americans. Silkenat shows that mass surrender, just like the war’s mass death, challenged American conceptions of warfare and civility.[1]

Silkenat argues that Civil War generals like Winfield Scott inherited their ideas of surrender and proper conduct during previous American conflicts. The act of submitting to the enemy was common but not always honorable or acceptable. During the War of 1812, for example, General William Hull surrendered Detroit without firing a shot. British forces marched continuously through an open clearing in sight of the American forces and tricked Hull into believing he faced a much larger enemy. Hull’s force of two thousand men held a defensible, fortified position but did not resist the British assault. General Hull’s surrender horrified Scott, who observed that “the disgrace of Hull’s recent surrender was deeply felt by Americans” (p. 6). Surrender was acceptable after fighting honorably but not usually before then. After Hull’s defeat, Scott’s force attacked Queenstown

Heights. His men fought bravely but became pinned down between enemy fire and the Niagara River after British reinforcements arrived. Scott surrendered his force to the British and they spent the next five weeks as prisoners of war. During these weeks the British forces kept Scott and his men well fed, clothed, and housed while also protecting them from Native Americans. Silkenat points to Scott and his fellow Americans' experiences during the War of 1812 as key to understanding their preconceived notions of surrender during the Civil War. Surrender was honorable if, after bravely fighting, the odds were too high and raising the white flag would save lives. After surrender, the enemy was expected to accept his opponent's submission and properly care for his prisoners. For Silkenat, this coexistence is what made surrender so unique and humane. Surrender was a two-way street, as honor mandated an opposing force to both accept that surrender and treat its enemies fairly and respectfully.

In many ways, the Civil War challenged these preconceived ideas of civilized conflict and surrender. Union and Confederate forces did not accept surrender when they portrayed the enemy as fighting improperly. One example that Silkenat cites is the Union enlistment of black soldiers after the Emancipation Proclamation. The proclamation was immediately condemned by Confederate leadership as a barbarous Republican ploy to undercut the Southern way of life. Confederate anger did not stop at condemning the Lincoln administration but led to the Confederate policy of not taking any United States Colored Troops (USCT) or their commanders as prisoners. This policy not only led to the wanton killing of black soldiers at places like Fort Pillow, but had other frightful consequences, too. Since USCTs received no quarter, they often fought with ferocity and, at times, desperation to secure victory and their own lives. Another result of the Confederate policy was that USCTs sometimes refused to take Confederate prisoners, which led to the revenge killing of Con-

federate soldiers attempting to surrender. Massacres at places like Fort Pillow also led General Ulysses S. Grant to suspend prisoner exchanges with Confederate forces. Prisoner exchanges had been common during the early years of the war, and they were a good way to return soldiers and officers while also keeping prison occupation reasonable. However, suspending prisoner exchanges allowed prisons in both the North and South to become overcrowded, disease-ridden, and undersupplied. According to Silkenat, when Union and Confederate forces took away the enemy's ability to surrender, they took away civilized warfare.

Silkenat's book is a welcome addition to Civil War historiography, as it converses with a thriving field on civilized warfare.[2] Silkenat shows that while the war had horrifying episodes, soldiers and their commanders' desire to fight a civilized, humane war limited the conflict. This book will be great for upper-level undergraduate courses and graduate colloquia as well as for professionals interested in the connections between the Civil War and Americans' understanding of proper warfare.

Notes

[1]. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008). Faust argues that death and dying during the Civil War created the modern United States. Mass death led to fundamental changes in American religion and personal beliefs, while the extraordinary number of dead changed the responsibility of the state to the people. In contrast to previous wars, helping the families of dead soldiers and memorializing those who fell now became the responsibility of the nation. For Faust, mass death changed the American mind-set and led to an expansion of the American bureaucracy.

[2]. Debates over the war's destructive or limited nature have been especially influential in Civil War historiography over the past twenty years.

See, for example, Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Glenn David Brasher, *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Williamson Murray and Wayne Hsieh, *A Savage War: A Military History of the Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Andrew Lang, *In the Wake of War: Military Occupation, Emancipation, and Civil War America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017).

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