Jonathan M. Steplyk brings a sharp focus to a question perpetually raised by Civil War historians: how did the Americans in this bloodiest of wars feel about killing. Using the framework and terminology provided by Dave Grossman in his book On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society (1995), Steplyk investigates why, how, and when soldiers killed each other in combat. By limiting his scope to the process of killing, Steplyk adds to the ever-expanding literature on the motivations and reactions of Civil War soldiers (usually killing is a topic for a chapter or two, not an entire book).

Steplyk begins his work by exploring the views of antebellum society toward fighting and killing. He notes that both North and South "overwhelmingly endorsed the war in spiritual terms," thus making it easy for soldiers to believe that their faith sanctioned killing in war (p. 27). Furthermore, many men felt it was their "duty" to serve and be willing to die—or kill.

In the next chapter, Steplyk dives into the topic of combat and participation. While agreeing with Grossman’s argument that many Civil War soldiers might have avoided killing by not taking aim (“posturing” in Grossman’s terms), he splits with him when discussing a specific battle. The US Army found that 43.5 percent of the weapons recovered from the field at Gettysburg had been improperly loaded. Where Grossman sees evidence of unwillingness to kill, Steplyk argues that nervous or poorly trained soldiers frequently forgot to prime a weapon and put too many rounds into a rifle. Overall, Steplyk finds that undertrained soldiers "could indeed shoot to kill." They simply “fought as duty demanded” (p. 75).

In the middle chapters, Steplyk examines euphemisms employed for the act of killing, and the rarity of hand-to-hand killing, especially through the use of the bayonet. The primary reason that veterans wrote so passionately about the intensity of hand-to-hand combat was owing to its infrequency and intimacy.

Steplyk’s most incisive chapter examines attitudes toward sharpshooters. Diverging from the mainstream view that most soldiers resented and despised sharpshooters, Steplyk argues the opposite, that "many in both military and civilian circles recognized theirs (sharpshooting) as a legitimate part of play on the battlefield" (p. 141). Men vied to join sharpshooting units, and every regiment tried to have its own group of sharpshooters. The sharpshooters themselves were not fanatics but marksmen who enjoyed the hunt. Sharpshooters had their own code of killing they tried to follow. Soldiers on both sides greatly feared sharpshooters.

The next two chapters explore the divergent themes of mercy and murder. Though murder of white prisoners was rare, no such mercy was shown to black prisoners. Indeed, the entire structure of truce, parley, and capture broke down when the subjects shifted from whites to whites to Southern whites and Northern black soldiers. At Milliken’s Bend, Fort Pillow, Saltville, and the Crater, no quarter was given to black soldiers who surrendered. The few who were not killed were enslaved.

Steplyk concludes his book by arguing that a “great
many" soldiers “accepted killing as part of their martial duty.” He carefully points to a "spectrum of response to killing,” from enthusiasm to reluctance to avoidance (p. 231). But kill they did, in numbers larger than in any other American war. Through a judicious use of primary and secondary sources, Steplyk contributes to the discussion of the motivations and recollections of Civil War soldiers and provides an in-depth examination of the attitudes toward killing in combat.

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