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*Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War*, by Elizabeth R. Varon, is an ambitious book. Famously—or infamously, perhaps—the novelist Shelby Foote has summed up the combat motivation of the Confederate soldier as little more than “I’m fighting because you’re down here.”[1] More recently, academic historians have refocused Confederate studies around the defense of slavery, even for non-slaveholders, and the perpetuation of white supremacy. But what common cause did Northerners and Unionists fight for? What united disparate segments of the Union coalition across regions, social classes, races, genders, and often profound areas of disagreement? This is the question Varon seeks to answer.

Ultimately, she argues, Northerners “imagined the Civil War as a war of deliverance, waged to deliver the South from the clutches of a conspiracy and to deliver to it the blessings of free society and of modern civilization” (p. 2). This belief, she contends, had its roots in the volatile decade of the 1850s, populated early war newspapers with fevered tales of persecuted Southern Unionists, smoothed the pathway toward emancipation, and continued to shape Northern policy through the end of the large-scale combat in 1865.

These multivalent beliefs in the possibilities of Southern redemption served several purposes. The United States had advantages, to be sure, as it undertook the reconquest of the Confederacy. But those advantages did not mean that the task would be remotely easy. A Unionist coalition had to be consolidated—one that did not necessarily support emancipation as a war aim. Something else would have to motivate them to fight the war or to support the warfighters. Eventually, “nervous whites” would have to be persuaded that slavery could—and must—be safely done away with without fear of social disorder or economic collapse (p. 10). Foreign nations had to be persuaded that the struggle against the breakaway Confederacy did not represent the suppression of a heroic clique of “nationalists seeking self-determination” but only a police action against usurpers and despots (p. 7). Confederate rhetoric, which, unsurprisingly, portrayed US forces not as a force for deliverance but as a scourge from which they required deliverance, in turn, would have to be countered. Ultimately, she argues, the politics of deliverance carried out the heavy cultural and political work required and helped the United States to win the war.

In crafting her argument, she challenges—successfully—the school of thought, associated perhaps most strongly with Mark Grimsley’s *Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (1995), which holds that a belief that white Southerners wanted or needed
liberation from rebel tyranny died out relatively early in the conflict, forcing a reevaluation of Union war aims and rules of engagement. Rather, according to Varon, a broadly shared belief in the necessity—and possibility—of Southern deliverance lasted through the end of the war. But did that belief reflect the reality of conditions on the Southern ground? Not necessarily. Varon is careful to point out, citing historian Martha Hodes, that most Yankees underestimated the complexity of white Southern social class, aggregating all middling and poorer folks into the same category of “deceived masses” in a way that they themselves would have rejected (p. 4). Moreover, they exaggerated the extent to which Southerners—particularly Deep South Southerners—retained their commitment, secretly or in the open, to the Union.

For a book that manages to be both this dense and this sweeping in its scope, an evaluation of all of Varon’s major points is neither necessary nor possible. Accordingly, three significant moments will need to suffice. In the first summer of the war, Varon argues in an early chapter, Unionists struggled to identify that special “combination of force and incentive” which would “break the spell of secession” and end the rebellion (p. 23). The concept of redemption would prove the key on multiple fronts, both military and political. The newly promoted Major General George B. McClellan, for example, articulated his redemptive policy on the ground in a series of public announcements directed at the people of western Virginia. Armed rebels were the enemy, he declared, while reasonable people would be protected in all of their rights and liberties as citizens of the United States. In Congress, the war undertook a seismic shift as the battlefield horrors and mortifying Union defeat at Bull Run intensified the felt need to punish high-ranking Confederates while still holding the door open for the wavering to return to their American allegiance. Among other measures, this entailed the passage of the First Confiscation Act, which stripped rebel masters of those military assets that also happened to be human beings. Varon surveys the various competing scholarly interpretations of the Confiscation Act, which are respectively supported by contradictory evidence and at the time lay open to “divergent readings,” and ultimately concludes that the act won necessary support from conservative and moderate Northerners, unlikely to be abolitionists, who saw it as a precision tool, one that might have a battlefield impact and one that was free from the taint of dangerous social ideologies (p. 36).

The summer of 1863, with near-simultaneous campaigns in Pennsylvania and Mississippi and rising extremism on the Northern home front, tested the Unionist consensus that the redemption of the South was possible. Robert E. Lee’s 1862 hopes that he himself might deliver border state residents from Yankee tyranny had faded, Varon writes in her eighth chapter, “Under a Scorching Sun.” But this did not mean that there was no strategic value in another invasion of the North. Varon’s discussions of the Gettysburg and Vicksburg campaigns are suitably harrowing, nicely balancing the perspectives of high-ranking officers, the men at the tip of the spear, and each region’s beleaguered civilians. Grant’s remarkably lenient surrender terms for the half-starved and wholly miserable Vicksburg garrison had an explicitly redemptive purpose—to render these men “‘less dangerous foes during the continuance of hostilities, and better citizens after the war was over’” (p. 265). His magnanimity, coupled with the personal generosity of federal troops who emptied their haversacks to feed Vicksburg’s hungry civilians, as well as the apparent abandonment of the Mississippi stronghold by the Confederate authorities in Richmond, all supported a self-satisfied Northern narrative of deliverance. At Gettysburg, sentimental “stories of surrendered, captured, and wounded rebels,” generally all grateful for the kind treatment they received from medical professionals and civilian volunteers, further added to the discourse of redemption (pp. 268-69).
As late as the spring of 1865, as Varon demonstrates in her final chapter, Northern newspapers—including both the New York Times and the New York Herald, on more or less opposite sides of the partisan divide—continued to report optimistically that federal military advances, including the capture of Charleston, had liberated untold numbers of Southern civilians from Confederate oppression. Were these accounts accurate? Perhaps not, as they directly contradicted reports from the Confederate press, which continued to celebrate civilian resilience and to call for resistance until independence had been achieved. But the discourse of deliverance, plainly, was not a relic of the early war. Its endurance would even be mobilized to generate support for the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, as Republican advocates insisted that they had no intention of subjugating the South but rather liberating it and protecting misguided ex-Confederates even as the men who had led them astray faced punishment. The arguments of those Northern Democrats and border state conservatives who had chosen to support the amendment differed, of course, but still hinged on the concept of deliverance. Slavery was dying, they declared. Missouri and Maryland had gotten rid of it already, and even some Confederates were considering limited emancipation schemes. Striking the final blow would undermine the secessionists, who had mobilized a nation for war over the issue (and had the added effect of freeing men like themselves from strident Northern abolitionists). Thanks in part to their votes, the amendment passed.

Varon embeds her argument in a lucid, informative synthetic overview of most of the war’s major military, social, and political developments. At times, the thrust of her book risks getting lost. “Fire in the Rear,” her seventh chapter, covers such disparate topics as the battles of Stones River and Chancellorsville, the ongoing campaign aimed at Vicksburg, the Richmond bread riots, the problem of civil liberties, the Union Leagues, the Women’s National Loyal League, and the Lieber Code.

It is an engaging and insightful chapter, useful to the scholar and student alike, but loses sight of the overall themes of the book almost entirely. This is a shame, as she has made an important contribution to our understanding of how Northerners and Unionists across the land felt, thought, and remained (mostly) motivated during this titanic struggle, and why it matters that they did.

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