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The outbreak of war not only spurs armed forces into bloody clashes but also sparks changes in embattled societies’ cultural and political fabric. Historian Kristen Brill explores developments of the latter sort in *The Weaker Sex in War: Gender and Nationalism in Civil War Virginia*. This well-defined study sheds light on women’s material and symbolic roles in the formation of Confederate nationalism. Focusing narrowly on middle-class and planter-class white Virginian women who backed the Confederacy enables the author to range across the home front, Atlantic world, and postwar era, all in a slim, efficient volume.

Brill contends that middle- and planter-class white women’s support for the Confederacy supplied valuable material for political leaders seeking to generate a Southern nationalism that could sustain their war effort. When elite women raised money for new gunboats, served in hospitals, or spied out vital intelligence in Washington, DC, Jefferson Davis’s administration responded. The Confederacy dispatched female supporters as emissaries to Europe, gave nurses military commissions, and passed laws that protected plantation households. Brill concludes that the Civil War allowed Southern women to forge new relationships with the state and gain unique access to the public square. Well-to-do ladies also became symbols of Confederate nationalism when male leaders drew attention to them. The close ties between women and state power endured into the postwar era as Virginia funded care for Confederate soldiers’ “widows, wives, sisters, and daughters” (p. 99).

*The Weaker Sex in War* presents these arguments through episodes that elaborate the author’s thesis across several contexts. The first two chapters highlight organizations: the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union (MVLA) and the Ladies Defense Association (LDA) in Richmond, Virginia. Though Maria Clopton and other planter women helped lead both groups, the MVLA cultivated a neutral identity to prevent the US government from interfering with their control of George Washington’s ancestral plantation, while the LDA leaped into the Confederate military mobilization effort. Paying for an ironclad to
assist with the defense of Richmond, for example, brought the LDA into the traditionally masculine military and political sphere. The third and fourth chapters shift from institutions to events, digging into the Richmond Bread Riots and debates in Great Britain over recognizing the Confederacy. In both cases, an image of vulnerable, virtuous Southern damsels proved important. Davis's government justified jailing poor white women by proclaiming the need to protect noble planter women from violence. Confederate newspapermen emphasized female suffering caused by the sectional struggle when calling for European intervention. The fifth chapter carries the story into the twentieth century: another organization, Virginia's Home for Needy Confederate Women, survived as a comfortable domestic space for female lineal descendants of Confederates. The symbolic power these women wielded within Lost Cause rhetoric secured funding for the home into the 1980s.

The author relies on diaries, letters, and newspapers as sources and effectively engages with the abundant scholarship connected with her topic. While historians from Frank Owsley to Stephanie McCurry have stressed that insufficient nationalism hampered the Confederate war effort, Brill traces the importance of women's activities to the emergence of even an imperfect political culture of Confederate nationalism. She also builds on the work of Thavolia Glymph, Nina Silber, Drew Gilpin Faust, and others who have examined women and the US Civil War. Brill adds a useful methodological wrinkle by connecting their scholarship with diplomatic history, describing Southern women's importance to debates in Britain over whether to recognize the Confederacy. This fresh insight elevates an otherwise straightforward volume.

_The Weaker Sex in War_ concisely completes a narrowly tailored task: illuminating the important roles played by women in entanglements between bottom-up and top-down construction of Confeder-
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