

Review Article: American Civil War

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The struggle to understand the meaning of the American Civil War continues, and doubtless it will become more contentious as its 150th anniversary approaches. The triumphal, celebratory and exclusively white centenary ceremonies of 1961 and beyond have been replaced by a much more sombre, mournful, if not mawkish tone. Dramatic accounts of great battles that emphasized their spectacle have been replaced by detailed studies of their cost. Historians have also focused on the messier side of the Civil War, such as its irregular dimension, and discovered that women participated in it – as they always have in violent, revolutionary upheavals since ancient times. But the human cost of the war transfixes the most recent

generation of its historians; 'major engagements routinely produce casualty rates that rival Waterloo', bemoans Mark Schantz at the outset of his elegant, fascinating and well researched study of the Civil War era's attitude to death. Having made this bold claim, he struggles for the rest of the book to register his own inability to comprehend these figures, later referring to them as 'staggering', 'unprecedented' and 'limitless carnage' (pp. 64, 91, 106), though such losses were well within the mean of 19th-century warfare. They were, alas, not average for American wars and are larger than all the fatalities of the rest of American wars combined. How men endured such levels of sacrifice has become the question uppermost in historians' minds, and both these books advance stimulating answers.

Costa and Kahn admit frankly that their book is history written by economists. Although it evinces tendentiousness and an overrely schematic approach to the evidence and an excess of jargon, they have brought a refreshingly sceptical perspective and reveal interesting insights in all sorts of areas. 'Life under pressure brings men's worst or best characteristics to the fore', they affirm. Costa and Kahn focus on the soldiers of the Union Army and unlike other books in 1865 they follow the soldiers home, for 'their wartime choices and experiences continue to shape their lives'. They exploit the 41,000 computerized soldiers' records in the National Archives in searching out the reasons why some units were good and others mediocre. They argue that 'loyalty to comrades trumped cause, morale and leadership. But loyalty to comrades extended only to men like themselves – in ethnicity, social status and age'. This is in some important respects a return to an earlier approach to the study of morale – 'small group cohesion' – and one that developed out of the study of the Second World War (pp. 2, 5–6).

As economists, it is not surprising that Costa and Kahn focus on soldiers' choices. They concede that the limited evidence available only permits them to infer motives, but they argue convincingly that the motives that prompted men to enlist were different from those that kept them in the ranks. 'By comparing the actual choices that thousands of similar men made in different peer environments', they contend, 'we can tease out the importance of peer effects' (p. 33). Or to put it another way, shorn of management jargon, historians can compare the behaviour of soldiers in effective regiments with those in unreliable regiments.

The issue that the authors must confront is the degree to which Union soldiers were motivated by ideology. The important books by James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, and Earl J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle* (1), that gave this topic very firm analytical direction, both stressed the supreme importance of ideology in shaping a positive experience for both officers and men. It also offered a handhold in adversity that enabled both Union and Confederate soldiers to withstand the trials of war, and in the latter case aided the advance to ultimate victory. I have sometimes expressed doubt as to whether 'ideology' is the right term to describe the general notions cherished by the majority of Union soldiers, as they do not represent a body of doctrine. But the term can be justified in the sense imparted by the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* definition: 'the manner of thinking characteristic of a class or individual' that also includes 'visionary speculation'.

Costa and Kahn's research in some ways supports the approach of these earlier studies. As soldiers' mail was not censored, their communities quickly discovered who had brought glory or disgrace to their hometowns. They are also at pains to emphasize the religious dimensions of the war. Consequently, they argue that it is not just the individual ideology or outlook of a soldier that counts, 'but also the ideology of the his hometown', for morale was sustained or weakened by opinion at the home front' (p. 95). They also postulate that dedication to the cause, and an ability to adapt presumptions about their cause (such as a readiness to embrace the destruction of slavery) were determined by the duration of service. The longer soldiers remained in the Union Army the less likely they were to desert; the better soldiers they became, with a broad as well as wide sense of unit loyalty, the more likely they were to adapt their political views to the changing dimensions of the war. Yet no aspersions of dishonour were cast on those who decided not to re-enlist in 1864, but when this did occur, entire units (either companies or regiments) tended to re-enlist as one. As battle is a disciplined, corporate activity, it is not surprising that men preferred to serve in existing units rather than join new ones that had to start from scratch in building up discipline under fire and tactical proficiency; or that veteran units developed a powerful sense of *corps d'elite*. It is more controversial to claim that 'men from a higher social class were better soldiers' (p. 100), an argument that denotes an

excessive reliance on misleading statistics. The complexities of industrialized warfare certainly demonstrate that the more intelligent make better soldiers, and such men are not tied to class, although it does depend on what tasks soldiers are asked to carry out; some are so hazardous that an inability to think too hard about them constitutes a positive advantage.

If this book has a weakness, it is an excessive literalness in interpretation. The authors seek to categorize or classify soldiers' conduct as one thing or another, when it is often both 'We cannot explain', they complain, 'why any given soldier was a hero or a coward' (p. 98). But the great majority were neither. 'Does cohesion produce military effectiveness, or does military effectiveness produce cohesion?' they ask (p. 92). There is a dispute admittedly, but the two are interdependent.

The strengths and weaknesses of the book are most evident in its most original parts, Costa and Kahn's reconsideration of desertion and the prisoner of war (POW) experience. Until comparatively recently, desertion has been a subject neglected by Civil War historians. As Costa and Kahn point out, for most soldiers, the likelihood of catching a deadly disease (half of all fatalities were the result of illness) rendered the camp a more deadly place than the battlefield - and the majority spent more time in the former than on the latter. Deserters faced only a 40 per cent chance of being caught and a negligible chance of being shot if arrested. Some could also call on the support of their communities if they were Democrat-leaning. Married men were one and a half times more likely to desert than single, and younger soldiers had about a ten per cent likelihood of deserting. Costa and Kahn conclude that 'individual characteristics, company diversity, ideology, and morale affected desertion probabilities'. But surely unexpected defeat and opportunity were equally important? The statistical evidence also leads them to fallacious conclusions, such as, 'A good soldier was older' (p. 100). This is spurious: armies have grown younger not older, as men over 25 cannot stand the physical strain of intense combat.

Yet they have many sensible things to say about desertion. It was more likely if 'company desertion rates were high', as new men followed the disreputable example of the older hands; desertion resembled an infection and could spread quickly. Before November 1863 most deserters simply travelled home by the best routes they could find. A number of states sought to disenfranchise deserters (as they were deemed to have relinquished their citizenship), but only three - Kansas, Wisconsin and Vermont - had a strict code of enforcement: three states that supported Lincoln strongly in the 1864 Presidential Election. After 1865 64 per cent of deserters in the sample moved westwards from their native states. But the whole system was remarkably informal and flexible by later standards. If an absentee returned to the ranks to fight, he would be welcomed back and then honourably discharged. The exception to these high desertion rates were black regiments. By 1865 there were 135 regiments, and of these 35 sustained 75 per cent casualties; even so, the desertion rates were less than 8 per cent; that is, whites were one third more likely to desert than blacks.

In summing up a complex matter, Costa and Kahn claim that group loyalties were the main elements that held in check the temptation to desert. Like other scholars (such as McPherson, who now concedes that it was an error), they underestimate the importance of leadership. Costa and Kahn argue on statistical grounds that group loyalty was twice as important as ideology and six times more important than leadership in reducing desertion. Yet I am unconvinced, not least because like many American authors they undervalue the importance of non-commissioned officers in the creation of viable units - a source of leadership more immediately effective than that furnished by officers.

The other novel approach of Costa and Kahn is to integrate POW experience with an analysis of combat. In total 211,411 Union soldiers were taken prisoner. Of these 16,668 were paroled, and of the remainder 30,218 died. The chance of surviving a Confederate POW camp was determined by when prisoners were taken and where they were sent. 40 per cent of all Union POWs were captured after July 1863 and of these 27 per cent died (as opposed to 4 per cent before that date); 17 per cent of all Union prisoners were sent to Andersonville, and of the 45,000 men who entered its gates 40 per cent did not pass out of them. How and why did men survive this experience? Costa and Kahn posit two essential reasons: the size of the camp, as the larger it was the more disease-ridden it became, and 'social networks' (p. 133), that is, friendships. As prisoners were responsible for creating their own accommodation, and food was always in short supply, a

social Darwinian survival of the fittest operated; but the weak and the sick were helped by their friends, especially from the same 'outfit'. Rank also helped; officers and NCOs fared best.

Costa and Kahn are primarily concerned with the more mundane but crucial choices that might determine death or survival. Schantz aims to study the 'wider cultural matrix in which the war was fought', and especially those attitudes that Americans entertained about death. His book has been anticipated by Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2) but he still makes his own contribution. He focuses on the 'cluster of assumptions' that conveyed to soldiers 'messages about death that made it easier to kill and be killed'. Schantz argues that this wider background – a 'culture of death' – 'facilitated its [the war's] destructiveness' (p. 3). Schantz sees his approach as having wider historiographical implications. He considers that he is advancing 'an implicit argument for the unifying power of death in America'. Death rubs a soothing balm over the scars resulting from 'the deep divides of race, class and gender' – a 'shared body of cultural assumptions and attitudes' that 'helped sustain a war that fractured a nation' (p. 4). Schantz thus challenges 'a fundamentally optimistic view of the war' that argues that it had positive results for all the loss. Schantz also wants to place a dividing line between our experience and that of the Civil War which he suggests is fundamentally 'alien to our own time'. He makes a strong case that it should be venerated less and instead taken on its own terms (pp. 5, 210). These asides are revealing in another way: Schantz assumes that only Americans will read his book.

He certainly has a point though. He explores how families in the mid 19th century were all too familiar with death. The widespread prevalence of disease, high infant mortality rates and poor medical treatment carried off many loved ones of all ages. Because it was such a common experience, mourning and funerals developed a strong level of ritual, beginning with the redemptive power of deathbed symbolism, especially the 'last words' (that could be invented, as with the case of Robert E. Lee if medical reasons prevented the ultimate utterance), followed by mourning eulogies, memorials and lithographs that could confer gentility on the rising middle class. Schantz offers much interesting information on the rural cemetery movement and its preference for Greek revival styles. Such rituals offered the departed the possibility of posthumous memorials and thus their own modest 'place in history'. There was also the phenomenon of the increased attention given to the cult of the glorious death, especially of 'the young, and those cut down in their prime' (pp. 18–19, 33). Schantz explores the submissiveness behind these attitudes and the enormous significance attached to resurrection – the passage of the dead to a serene, heavenly paradise; death was thus beautiful and pleasing.

It is the consequences of this preoccupation with death that are Schantz's main concern. He concedes that historians lack evidence 'that soldiers consciously risked their lives ... because they knew that that they would be fully restored in heaven' (p. 60), yet he does suggest that the acceptance of death enabled Americans 'to endure such a grisly conflict' (p. 61). They could do so, he argues, because their familiarity with death had trained, in effect, an entire generation 'to see it not as something to be avoided, but as the inevitable destiny of humanity' (p. 9). There are undertones here of the sort of rhetoric that has been applied to the later British experience on the Western Front in 1914–18. It also evokes images of willing mass suicide satirized in Gore Vidal's novel *Messiah* (1955).

Schantz pushes an interesting argument to untenable extremes. It is one thing for soldiers to accept death, quite another to expect it, let alone look forward to it. Schantz offers some stimulating thoughts on the sympathetic views expressed in the black press on suicide, but surely this is a special case. The willingness of soldiers to sacrifice themselves, that is, risk death and mutilation, depends on the cause that engages their loyalty. It is striking that the authors of both these studies fail to address this issue. Schantz's comments on soldiers' motivations are vague or indirect. And black soldiers showed a willingness to die, and deserted less frequently, not out of any suicidal wish but because they embraced the positive outcomes they expected from the war, not least citizenship and the vote.

Furthermore, Schantz's argument is one dimensional. Civil War soldiers often took their fate into their own hands and either deserted or 'straggled', that is, were absent from the ranks. In February 1865 Union absentees totalled 338,536 and Confederate absentees were approximately 194,494. These figures suggest

that a significant number of Americans in uniform had decided that the 'culture of death' was not for them.

Schantz also has difficulty explaining away the long term impact and significance of the casualty figures. Even if it is unconscious, the imported symbolism of 1914-18 that has seized the imagination of many current Civil War historians raises certain problems. Scantz is content to show that Matthew Brady's exhibition of photographs taken on Civil War battlefields did not traumatize the home front; on the contrary, it fortified Northern resolve and helped it to come to terms with high casualties. This theme strengthens Schantz's view that attitudes to death helped sustain the war effort. But he also develops an argument that the Civil War 'took a terrible physical and emotional toll on America' (p. 120). This seems more difficult to sustain; there is nothing comparable in American history in the later 19th century to the mood of 'disenchantment' that gathered strength after 1929 in Britain, despite her victory in the Great War. Even in the states of the old Confederacy defeat was transmogrified into a moral victory.

These points highlight a significant cavity, namely the book's failure to take into account any comparative dimension. It assumes that the Civil War was a singular, exceptional, unique American event and thus the forces that shaped it were exclusively American. Yet many of the features of the supposed American 'culture of death' could be found in other Western societies, especially in Britain. Given the British cultural sway in the 19th century, the degree of British influence on American attitudes to death would have been an illuminating theme. The ultimate literary expression of beautiful, futile, military sacrifice is Lord Tennyson's poem, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' (1854). Moreover, the important role of sentimental females in connection with the reassuring beauty of death is given its fullest artistic expression in John Everett Millais, *Orphelia* (1852). Some indication of the contribution of the work of the Pre-Raphaelites in popularizing such imagery would have been welcome.

These comments should be construed as evidence of how much I have enjoyed these two books and the degree to which they have stimulated thought as well as dissent. Both books have made a worthwhile contribution to the long-running, indeed perennial, discussion of the Civil War's meaning and legacy.

Notes

1. James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades* (New York, NY, 1997) and Earl J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1997).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, NY, 2008).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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