



Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South

Stephanie McCurry

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The story of the Confederate States of America, the proslavery, antidemocratic nation created by white Southern slaveholders to protect their property, has been told many times in heroic and martial narratives. Now, however, Stephanie McCurry tells a very different tale of the Confederate experience. When the grandiosity of Southerners' national ambitions met the harsh realities of wartime crises, unintended consequences ensued. Although Southern statesmen and generals had built the most powerful slave regime in the Western world, they had excluded the majority of their own people--white women and slaves--and thereby sowed the seeds of their demise.

Wartime scarcity of food, labor, and soldiers tested the Confederate vision at every point and created domestic crises to match those found on the battlefields. Women and slaves became critical political actors as they contested government enlistment and tax and welfare policies, and struggled for their freedom. The attempt to repress a majority of its own population backfired on the Confederate States of America as the disenfranchised demanded to be counted and considered in the great struggle over slavery, emancipation, democracy, and nationhood. That Confederate struggle played out in a highly charged international arena.

The political project of the Confederacy was tried by its own people and failed. The government was forced to become accountable to women and slaves, provoking an astounding transformation of the slaveholders' state. "Confederate Reckoning" is the startling story of this epic political battle in which women and slaves helped to decide the fate of the Confederacy and the outcome of the Civil War.

Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South Details

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From Reader Review Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South for online ebook

Zach says

Great piece of scholarship on the Confederacy, and how it was a doomed project from the start.

Bob Harris says

Fascinating feminist evaluation of the changing attitudes towards women in the South during the Civil War and their effects on the post-war years.

Samuel says

In Stephanie McCurry's eyes, the Confederate States of America was explicitly and fundamentally a nation founded upon a pro-slavery agenda (no indirect language or way around it: consequently no complexity about it either apparently). Slavery not only enslaved Africans but it also oppressed women of both races as paternalism placed white men at the top of the societal (and political) hierarchy. Slavery, by alienating the majority of the South's population, led to its own demise, as subversive acts by slaves and women during the Civil War, which caused the whole system and the rebelling nation along with it to defeat. While she does bring up some very interesting points about women in rebellion for bread and slaves who headed across enemy lines into free territory (the latter pretty well-understood and documented by other historians), her overall grouping of these two groups is a little contrived. While she does not explicitly state that they were one in purpose, lumping black slaves and white women together as subversive agents detrimental to the Confederate cause somewhat sloppily suggests a unity of purpose and tactics when they were both very distinct undertakings with diverse motives: Confederate women had no desire for their men to lose the war whereas the vast majority of slaves were welcoming of a Union victory.

There is a lot of interesting and important historical arguments throughout McCurry's book that are a huge boon to Civil War scholarship, but the overall framing of the argument as a "reckoning" seems a little more sentimental than substantiative. Clever and seductive in its claims, it falls a little short of fully convincing the reader that this is the definitive interpretation of why the Confederacy lost the War to the Union.

pp. 85-309

Kelly says

Overall, a strong piece of history. The author makes a compelling argument about the effect of the internal dilemma of the confederacy- that the demands of war forced it to make concessions to women & slaves, the two groups that were purposely excluded in its founding. Her use of international conflict works well for slave rebellions, but less so for the argument about women. A definite read for a full understanding of the civil war (and not just the military aspects)

John says

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(four stars for the content; three stars for the writing, which is too dense and academic)

Bfisher says

Some very interesting comments here on the empowerment of slaves and white women (especially soldiers' wives) during the war.

AskHistorians says

Provides fresh interpretations of how the underpinning power structures of the South were subverted by the Confederate government, and the failure of the government to deal with the stresses the war caused to these power structures led to its own demise.

Ben says

McCurry describes the Confederacy as something unique: a modern, anti-democratic, pro-slavery, state. The seeds of the destruction of the Confederacy were present in its making. A state founded on the belief in and perpetuation of inequality, that did not consider slaves or women to be citizens, was forced to engage with both as political actors during the course of the war, ultimately eroding their foundational principles.

Sue says

A fantastic history of the Confederacy that includes race and gender in its analysis.

Kidada says

I loved the book and will be assigning it this fall term. Favorite parts--argument about the need to treat the CSA as a country in its own right (and to explore its objectives, challenges, and limitations) and analysis of soldiers' wives (working class white women's engagement of the politics of subsistence to resist CSA policy) and the war the CSA fought (against enslaved people seeking freedom) from within.

Keith says

Confederate Reckoning tells the little known story of the effect southern women and slaves had on the outcome of the Civil War. While most histories recount in detail the military strategies and battles, Stephanie McCurry looks behind the Confederate lines to show how women and slaves shaped the outcome of the war and eventually forced Confederate leaders to reconsider the very reasoning behind succession and the war.

McCurry does an outstanding job outlining the southern reasons for war. Their goal was to build a “modern proslavery and antidemocratic state, dedicated to the proposition that all men were not created equal.” They wanted to redefine “We the people” as “We the white people” – and if they could have, they would have disenfranchised poor white southerners. McCurry clearly sets out the motives that, for over 100 years, have been muddled by conciliatory histories, southern sympathies and ignorance: The Confederate nation was built on the idea of slavery and antidemocratic policies – in direct opposition to what they saw as the trend in the northern states.

McCurry then focuses on the disenfranchised in the southern nation – women and slaves. Neither was recognized as enfranchised citizens by the Confederate government; they were either partners or property of white males. Each group, though, profoundly shaped the course of the war and the Confederate defeat.

Slaves, to focus on one, played a critical role in the downfall of the south. Before succession and the war, southerners thought their slaves would be a valuable asset to fighting a war, and help offset the much larger population of the North. Their African American slaves proved them wrong. By escaping in droves to the U.S. troops, spying and sabotage, African Americans created a second battle front for southerners that weighed down their war effort and made their defeat inevitable.

It's ironic that by the end of the war, southern leaders were talking about ways to persuade slaves to be loyal. Slaves were no longer non-human automatons to be led by plantation owners, but men and women that the southerners had to win over to their cause. (However futile and delusional the idea seems.)

In fact, by the end of the war, many southern leaders openly advocated offering freedom to slaves who would fight in their army, and a law was passed late in the war to make it happen. Some even discussed general emancipation for all slaves. As McCurry states, “Enslaved men and woman had managed to make their foundational political exclusion unsustainable, to make their political consent count, and to force the Confederate government to contend for their loyalty with emancipation.” (p. 351)

This is a very interesting book and one I'd recommend to people interested in American history. The book does, however, repeat itself often. (I think this could have been a long article rather than a short book.) Additionally, McCurry has a strange habit of contradicting herself. For example, she says that southerners thought that slavery would strengthen their war-making ability ... except those who didn't think that. Southerners wanted to enlist slaves in the army ... except those who didn't. Granted, there wasn't any polling then, so it is difficult to understand the mindset of the majority and differing opinions always abound.

Nick Mariner says

Really. Really. Good.

Emily says

Read it for a rousing feminist defense of "Beast" Butler's infamous Gen. Order 28, if you're into that sort of thing.

McCurry's argument that the rise of poor white women in the Confederacy against the oppressive policies of their governments was singular is a profoundly ahistorical reading of her chosen texts. Any reader of the trashy Outlander series can explain how the highland immigrant society valued deep kinship networks and looked to battle lords for economic support of the families of fighters. It's bizarre to argue that some kind of unprecedented political epiphany happened there.

Andrew says

WOW! What a complex, challenging, and intriguing book! McCurry's history sets out to examine the Confederacy with depth and perspectives not often considered elsewhere.

The book starts by examining the process and structures of secession, and the formation of the Confederate government. McCurry lays bare both the thoroughly undemocratic machinery of secession, and also the unabashedly slavery-based reasoning for it, mostly through the words of leading participants. To be sure, if anyone has any doubt that the call of "states rights" or "property rights" was anything other than a cover for protecting slavery, they need to read this book. While the slavery question is the main issue for the politically powerful planter class, they still needed to persuade the rest of the white male population that couldn't be excluded through electoral tricks. To this end, McCurry explores the exploitation of gender roles, and masculine and patriarch archetypes in explaining the appeals to non-slaveholding citizens (white male voters, liable to military service).

Next, the role of women, particularly poor white women, in Southern society and its evolution during the war is covered. The domestic and civic roles (or lack thereof) in antebellum society are explored, and then the way that they gradually changed. The intrusive demands of the government for the service of their men, and the agricultural produce of their households, the author argues, forced these women into the public political sphere in ways they never had been before. Poor white women petitioned government officials with growing frequency, boldness, and efficacy as the war progressed and demands on themselves and their households grew. Women also took direct action in the form of threats and attacks flour mills, and in food riots in several major cities. The author delves into the level of organization and involvement these women these women resorted to in order to extract what they thought they were due from the government.

Lastly, the role and experience of African Americans in the Confederacy is examined. McCurry again explores cultural and gender themes here, but her main argument is that like the women, the slaves made political influence for themselves through their actions, despite not having official political power in the form of voting (or really any other civic) rights. African American slaves actions in actively and passively resisting the war, the author argues, made (some) Confederate officials eventually recognize that the consent and will of the slaves mattered to the preservation of the Confederate state. The theme of tension between state demands for access to slaves as material to support the war effort, and slaveholders attempts to preserve their property even at the expense of the state that existed to guarantee their right to own slaves.

All in all, Confederate Reckoning has some momentous things to say. It delves into the structural problems of the Confederacy on basic political and societal levels, and with a depth and honesty that is refreshing to read. That said, it's not a perfect book. The book is densely written, with long chapters that could really do with some breaking up to make absorbing the material presented easier. I also felt that the author could have done a better job tying together the broad spectrum of subjects she covered. The book read more like a series of related essays, than a cohesive body of work, to me.

Ashley says

Despite the Confederate States of America's (CSA) efforts to enshrine an exclusively white, male citizenship in its founding documents, southern women and slaves emerged as powerful political actors during the course of the Civil War. Stephanie McCurry's well-researched, easily readable Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South, traces this development and argues that military necessity often augmented the growing political power of slaves and women. As "soldiers' wives," poor women embraced an identity that bound their "politics of subsistence" to the state's obligation to its citizen-soldiers. Slaves, who formed their own understanding of the war long before emancipation, employed a variety of tactics to negate the instrumental view of slave labor enshrined in the CSA Constitution. Even though soldiers' wives and slaves did not consider themselves allies, the persistence with which both groups entered the political sphere raised similar sets of complex questions about citizenship, consent of the governed, and the reciprocal obligations between a state and its citizenry. The CSA's response to soldiers' wives and slaves eventually undid the very logic of the state itself. It was precisely the official recognition of women and slaves as political actors, coupled with the implicit acknowledgement of the Confederate political system's failure, that constitutes the "reckoning" at the heart of McCurry's text.

McCurry's book will appeal to Civil War buffs and folks interested in women's or African American history.
