**For God and Country: Why Men Joined Up for the US Civil War**

By [Susan-Mary Grant](http://www.historytoday.com/author/susan-mary-grant)

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Susan-Mary Grant looks at the motivations of ordinary citizens to fight their fellow Americans under either the Confederate or the Union flags.



Union soldiers entrenched along the west bank of the Rappahannock River at Fredericksburg in the Battle of Chancellorsville.The World Wars of the twentieth century prompted many individuals to reassess one of the most decisive wars of the nineteenth century, the American Civil War of 1861-65. Speaking in 1924, the Scottish writer John Buchan drew a clear parallel between the Civil War and the First World War when he argued that superior manpower and resources were useless unless a nation knew how to mobilise these effectively. The problem facing the Union in 1861, Buchan concluded, was 'exactly the problem of the Allies in 1914'.

Buchan was addressing an audience of Americans when he drew this conclusion, and it was perhaps in deference to them that he presented the Civil War in romantic terms as 'a conflict of great men, leaders on the heroic scale' and; most significantly, as 'a clash of honest ideals'. For the South, Buchan argued:

The vital thing, the thing with which all its affections and sentiments were interwined, was the State. The North, on the other hand, had for its main conception the larger civic organism, the Nation.

The Second World War, and particularly the psychological studies of American GI's in combat that were produced after that war, inspired the historian Bell Irvin Wiley, in The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy (1943) and The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union (1952, both reprinted 1989) to turn the spotlight away from great men and heroic leaders and examine the Civil far from the common soldier's perspective.

Wiley, like Buchan, detected parallels between the Civil War experiences of American soldiers and the GI experience in the Second World War. Specifically, he argued that the typical Civil War soldier was untouched by idealism, honest or otherwise. In his analysis of why ‘the men in blue’ went to war, Wiley cited initial war enthusiasm, ‘the example of friends and associates’, financial need (or greed), a fear of future conscription, a sense of duty and a vaguely-defined but strongly-felt love ‘of country and hatred of those who seemed bent on destroying it’. As early euphoria gave way in the face of the harsh realities of fighting a protracted war, Wiley uncovered no evidence of idealistic sentiments on the part of Union troops. ‘One searches most letters and diaries in vain,’ Wiley suggested, ‘for soldiers’ comment on why they were in the war or for what they were fighting.‘ For Billy Yank, Wiley argued:

Although as fond of drinking, women and gambling as his Union counterpart, the Confederate soldier had a similarly limited understanding of 'the Constitutional issues at stake'.

He did, however, have a 'deep-seated hatred of the North' to sustain him. John Brown's Body' and 'Hail Columbia' were stirring songs,' Wiley observed, 'but neither possessed the emotional tug of the Rebel favourite 'The despot's heel is on thy shore, Maryland! My Maryland!' Emotion aside, Wiley conceded, the 'American soldiers of the 1860s appear to have been about as little concerned with ideological issues as were those of the 1940s.'

The last two decades have seen a growing interest in the motivation of Civil War troops. What was once considered to be the ‘private Civil War’ is becoming ever more public, as soldiers’ letters, diaries and memoirs are probed by historians in search of an answer to the question of ‘what did they think they were fighting for?’ Many have questioned Wiley’s assertion that ideological issues were largely irrelevant to the Civil War soldier. The evidence presented by, among others, James McPherson and Joseph Allan Frank suggests that political and ideological factors played a large part in sustaining the Civil War soldier’s will to fight, while others continue to argue that he was more likely to fight for community and comrades rather than for cause. In part, the differences stem from the fact that some historians are more concerned with the actual combat experience of the Civil War soldier, rather than why he chose to be there in the first place. But the two are inseparable. In the Civil War, the reasons why a man fought reflected to a great degree how he fought.

The Civil War was, in Abraham Lincoln’s phrase, ‘a people’s contest’ fought largely by volunteer troops – citizen-soldiers. Some 2.5 million civilian volunteers (about one in twelve of the total population) joined the Union army; for the Confederacy the figure was 1.6 million (about one in three of the white male population). Even after both sides had introduced conscription, volunteer troops continued to make up the bulk of the armies. The regular army, which numbered some 16,000 men in 1861, was mostly deployed along the Western frontier, and during the war remained separate from the volunteer forces. Given the largely volunteer nature of the Civil War, it is difficult to see how ideological factors could have failed to play a part in sending men to war, and then in keeping them there, but it is important not to confuse the ideal behind enlistment with the reality of the military experience.

Regiments were raised locally, and preferred to replenish their ranks with local men rather than with recruits from other states, a preference which caused obvious problems. Having raised a regiment and sent it into the field, local interest frequently shifted to a wholly new regiment, since this offered more opportunities for those wishing to be made officers. Robert Gould Shaw, later to become Colonel of the North’s showcase black regiment, the Massachusetts 54th, complained to his future wife about the organisation of the Union army in 1862:

It is almost impossible to enforce discipline in a volunteer army raised as ours is; but the government has shown itself too weak to do even what it had the power to do: desertion, straggling, and cowardice have all gone unpunished; and in all cases of disaffection in the army, the government has yielded... They have shown the same weakness in the matter of drafting; having ordered a draft, they were powerless, in most cases, to carry it out. In Pennsylvania the drafted men were ordered to be sent to the old regiments; but they refused to go, and the difficulty was 'satisfactorily adjusted,' as the papers say, by the government consenting to their demands to form new regiments and elect their officers. So the old regiments; which it is of vital importance to fill up, have mostly only two to three hundred men apiece.

Initially, both North and South experienced an upsurge in patriotic sentiment for their respective causes. Both would-be combatants and those who were not expecting to fight exulted in the outbreak of a war that seemed to have been a long time coming. In a letter of April 1861, Shaw asked `Was there ever so much enthusiasm seen in the country? Of course it will die out somewhat in time and still it will do a great deal of good.' Shaw's own enthusiasm took some time to die out. A full year later he described it as `a blessing that we happened to be born in this century and country!' Jacob Cox, the former governor of Ohio and a major-general in the United States Volunteers, recalled the `wonderful outburst of national feeling in the North in the spring of 1861' as `a thrilling and almost supernatural thing... the work of a national divinity rousing a whole people, not to terror, but to a sublime enthusiasm of self-devotion.'

Many troops on the eve of the war held rather more aggressive views: ‘We are all impatient to get into Virginia and have a brush with the rebels,’ one Rhode Island soldier announced, while his southern counterpart declared his desire ‘to let the Enemy know what kind of men they have to fight’. Of course, at the outset both sides expected the war to be brief. The story of how civilian onlookers had to be asked to move out of the way of advancing troops at the battle of First Bull Run/Manassas is indicative of the kind of war many believed they were embarking on. It soon became clear that it was not going to be concluded in a single afternoon, and men whose initial enthusiasm had been based on vague notions of honour or glory found that something more was required to sustain them in the face of battle.

What, exactly, that ‘something’ was varied. Civil War regiments represented a wide cross-section of the American populace, especially in the North. Those known as ‘Copperhead Regiments’ were primarily composed of Democrats who regarded the war as one fought primarily to save the Union, others were predominantly Republican, and often more radical on matters such as the nature of the Union they were fighting to save, and on the question of emancipation. The northern author Nathaniel Hawthorne summed up the problem:

We... have gone to war, and we seem to have little, or, at least, a very misty idea of what we are fighting for. It depends upon the speaker, and that, again, depends upon the section of the country in which his sympathies are enlisted. The Southern man will say, we fight for states' rights, liberty, and independence. The middle and Western states-man will avow that he fights for the Union; whilst our Northern and Eastern man will swear that, from the beginning, his only idea was liberty to the Blacks, and the annihilation of slavery. All are thoroughly in earnest, and all pray for the blessing of Heaven to rest upon the enterprise.

Certainly the impulse to fight in defence of one's immediate comrades, what psychologists and military analysts term `primary group cohesion,' played a large part in troop motivation over and above the ideological factors. As one southern corporal explained:

a soldier is always nearly crazy to get away from the army on furloughs, but as a general thing they are more anxious to get back. There is a feeling of love - a strong attachment for those with whom one has shared common dangers, that is never felt ... under any other circumstances.

Reflecting on the battle of Shiloh in April 1862, an officer with the 54th Ohio concluded that those `who had stood shoulder to shoulder during the two terrible days of that bloody battle were hooped with steel, with bands stronger than steel'. Shaw expressed the combination of enthusiasm and revulsion shared by many when he described the effect that the battle of Antietam in September 1862, the bloodiest day of the entire Civil War, had on him:

I never felt, before, the excitement which makes a man want to rush into the fight, but I did that day. Every battle makes me wish more and more that the war was over. It seems almost as if nothing could justify a battle like that of the 17th, and the horrors inseparable from it.

Such sentiments are common to soldiers in all wars, but in the Civil War they were bound up with nineteenth-century notions of manhood, courage and honour and the desire to avoid, at all costs, the charge of cowardice. Numerous soldiers expressed the desire to die on the battlefield rather than be deemed a coward, and expressed the hope that they might face the enemy `like a man'. Given the local focus of most of the regiments, an individual's honour was inextricably linked with that of his regiment and, by extension, his state. One northern lieutenant summed up the importance of unit pride when he observed that none `but soldiers can know how sensitive the men of a good Regiment are of its reputation'.

For many Civil War soldiers, however, the personal and proximate factors that sustained them on the battlefield were frequently linked to wider issues related to the war’s meaning and possible outcome.

Some, like the Union Brigadier General William Haines Lytle, identified themselves not just with their immediate ‘brothers-in-arms’ but with the country as a whole. ‘I feel it my duty as long as I can,’ Lytle wrote, ‘to share with my generation its heavy burden and to stand along side of my brave comrades in arms to the last gasp’. For Lytle the only acceptable outcome of the conflict was ‘the restoration of the supremacy’ of the federal government, the re-establishment of the Union.

Religion also played a larger part in the motivation of Civil War soldiers, North and South, than it did for GIs in the Second World War. The Crusades aside, Civil War armies were perhaps the most religious in history. Troops who were not especially religious prior to the war often found comfort in religion when faced with the horrific reality of combat. Those who had held strong religious beliefs before they went into battle usually found their faith strengthened. One southerner reflected that ‘we are feeble instruments in the hands of the Supreme Power’, while his northern counterpart believed that he was ‘under the same protecting aegis of the Almighty here as elsewhere… It matters not, then,’ he concluded, ‘where I may be the God of nature extends his protecting wing over me.’

Religion, specifically the Protestant religion, went to the very heart of the American experience in the nineteenth century. Both northerners and southerners were used to expressing themselves via religious metaphors and Scriptural allusions. Once war broke out, both sides saw themselves as Christian armies, and the war itself served to reinforce this.

The Confederate soldier, in particular, was encouraged to equate the cause of the Confederacy with the cause of Christ, by the efforts of religious journals such as The Army and Navy Messenger and The Soldier’s Friend, many of which began publication after 1863. The Messenger advised southern troops as late as 1864 that the Confederacy was ‘fighting not only for our country but our God. This identity inspires our hope and establishes our confidence. It has become for us a holy war, and each fearful and bloody battle an act of awful and solemn worship.’ In the same year, The Soldier’s Paper reminded its readership that ‘the blood of martyrs was the seed of the Church, the blood of our heroes is the seed of liberty.’ According to the Mississippi Messenger, the Civil War was no more nor less than ‘the ordering of God’s Providence, which forbids the permanent union of heterogeneous nations’. The southern soldier responded to such arguments, and took them to heart. Even after the fall of Atlanta, an artillery lieutenant from Alabama could not ‘believe that our Father in Heaven intends that we shall be subjugated by such a race of people as the Yankees’.

Northern soldiers, too, were encouraged to find Scriptural justification for the Union cause, particularly over the matter of slavery. After Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Julia Ward Howe composed the words to the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’, which was set to the tune of ‘John Brown’s Body’. Union troops needed little encouragement to sing ‘Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord’, nor to reassure themselves that as Christ ‘died to make men holy, let us die to make men free/While God is marching on.’

The Emancipation Proclamation prompted several northerners to reassess their feelings toward both the Union that they were fighting to save and the nation that would result if their efforts proved successful. For African-American troops, some of whom had already seen their fair share of action even before their combatant status was officially sanctioned, the Emancipation Proclamation was long overdue. After 1863, both former slaves and northern free blacks responded enthusiastically to the Union’s call to arms. The white response to such enthusiasm, however, was not always positive. Even Robert Gould Shaw, who was later to command a black regiment, reacted negatively at first:

For my part, I can't see what practical good it can do now. Wherever our army has been, there remain no slaves, and the Proclamation will not free them where we don't go. Jeff Davis will soon issue a proclamation threatening to hang every prisoner they take, and will make this a war of extermination... the condition of the slaves will not be ameliorated certainly, if they are suspected of plotting insurrection, or trying to run away; I don't mean to say that it is not the right thing to do, but that, as a war measure, the evil will overbalance the good for the present.

Some northerners were overtly hostile to the idea of arming blacks. One soldier reminded his wife that ‘I came out here to help support the Constitution and Laws of our land, and for nothing else, and if it is turned into some other purpose – then those that do it may do the fighting for me.’ He was especially concerned that the war not be turned into a battle against slavery. When it became just that, another soldier complained to his father that ‘when I enlisted I came to defend the flag and to keep the union as it was but they have turned this war into a nigger war and I want to get out now as soon as posable [sic].’ Many Union troops shared these sentiments, declaring their unwillingness ‘to fire another shot for the negroes’. As a private in the 19th Indiana put it, ‘if emancipation is to be the policy of this war…I do not care how quickly the country goes to pot’.

The Emancipation Proclamation exacerbated, rather than initiated, the morale problem facing the Union armies in 1862-63, and it is important not to exaggerate its impact. James McPherson concludes that of all those troops who expressed an opinion about emancipation in 1862-63, 'more than twice as many favoured it than opposed it.' Nathan W. Daniels was one such northerner. He wrote in his diary:

Thank God it hath been my fortune to be a participator in the grand idea of proclaiming freedom to this much abused & tortured race. . . Thank God my Regiment [is] an African one, that I have been permitted to assemble them under the banner of freedom to do and die for their country & liberty.

Other white troops concurred. William Augustus Willoughby expressed the hope that 'the Proclamation of the President will Inaugurate a new System of Laws and customs among the people in abolishing old ideas and establishing new ones among our Northern people which will encourage our arms and weaken the Rebels...' He concluded that `The first day of January 1863, should be classed with the fourth day of July 1776 as commencing a new Era, or rather as completing what our Forefathers began 87 years ago next fourth of July.'

Clearly, fundamental questions over the value of the Union and the future of the American. nation, particularly for northerners, only became pertinent in the context of the Civil War. Recounting how his regiment celebrated July 4th, 1863, William Haines Lytle found himself reflecting on the war's implications for the nation:

The band this instant before my tent strikes up 'Hail Columbia' and the thunder of a national salute from my battery, mingled with the grand reverberations of the artillery of heaven has just died away among the mountains, but alas how the day awakens memories of the past when our dear country stood forth united before the nations and was the admiration of the world. God help the old flag! In no nobler or holier cause can a man's life be offered up.

Even before the first shot had been fired at Fort Sumter, Robert Gould Shaw’s feelings for the Union had undergone a change. As he explained to his sister,

I have been a Disunionist for two years; but, as there seems to be no way of making a peaceable separation without giving up everything, I am glad, for the credit of the country, that they will probably act now with some firmness.

Like Lytle, Shaw found himself inspired by his regimental band's rendition of patriotic tunes to consider America's future. 'We hear the national airs,' Shaw told his parents, 'and look at the stars and stripes, with new emotions in an enemy's country.'

Lytle and Shaw were in no sense atypical. Their education and beliefs barely differed from the sentiments of a great many northern troops for whom the importance of Union was a constant throughout the Civil War. Shaw and his generation had grown up at a time when sectional animosity between North and South was becoming increasingly virulent. They might have dismissed southern threats to leave the Union prior to 1861 on the grounds that such threats had been issued with depressing regularity over the previous decades, but once that threat was finally carried out they had no hesitation in rallying to the Union’s cause. As one wrote:

I would rather live a soldier for life, than see this country made a mighty sepulcher in which should be buried our institutions, our nationality, our flag, and every American that today lives, than that our Republic should be divided into little nothings by an inglorious and shameful peace.

Justifying his decision to enlist in the army to his father, Samuel Storrow described the American nation as ‘equal in magnitude and power’ to ancient Rome, and argued that if it ‘and our nationality is to perish, better that we should all perish with it and not survive to see it a laughingstock for all posterity, to be pointed at as the unsuccessful trial of republicanism.’

Both Union and Confederate troops turned to their common Revolutionary past to provide the justification they needed for their present actions. There were differences of interpretation, certainly. A captain in the 5th Alabama Infantry, for example, felt prompted to consider how ‘trifling were the wrongs complained of by our Revolutionary forefathers, in comparison with ours.’ Whereas an officer in the 101st Ohio recalled how ‘our fathers in coldest winter, half clad marked the road they trod with crimson streams from their bleeding feet that we might enjoy the blessings of free government.’

Many northerners had long believed that the influence of the southern slave power had been detrimental to the nation as a whole, and saw the Civil War as an opportunity to rectify this. Frequently, therefore, when they invoked the nation’s revolutionary heritage, it was to bemoan the fact that the nation had departed from its first principles, in part because it had suffered from southern dominance. As one northerner complained:

The deeds & words of our Revolutionary fathers are the principles on which our govt was founded, & on which theRepublic has reached its present prosperity. Since the days of Jackson, those principles have been gradually yielding to a pro-slavery aristocracy.

Southerners, too, saw the Civil War as an opportunity to return to the nation's founding principles, and free themselves from what they saw as northern oppression. It was, indeed, far easier, as Drew Gilpin Faust noted, for Confederates to declare:

Rebels before

Our fathers of yore,

Rebel's the righteous name

Washington bore.

Why, then, ours be the same

By contrast, Union troops faced the problem of invoking the Revolutionary heritage in such a way as to refute the Confederacy’s claim that the precedent offered by the Revolution justified the act of secession. Nathaniel Hawthorne pinpointed the difficulty that the Union faced. ‘There never existed any Government against which treason was so easy, and could defend itself by such plausible arguments as against that of the United States.’ It came down, he realised, to the problem of conflicting loyalties within a federal system in which the state as a whole represented little more than an ‘airy mode of law’ and had ‘no symbol but a flag’. Many southerners, he realised, ‘have joined the Rebels, not from any zeal for the cause, but because, between two conflicting loyalties, they chose that which necessarily lay nearest the heart.’

Each side depended, to a great extent, on the same motivational factors to see it through the horrors of combat. Both Union and Confederate troops relied on the support offered by their immediate comrades-in-arms and on that provided by the home front; both found personal solace as well as justification for their cause in religion; both turned to the precedent of the nation’s Revolutionary heritage to support their stance; both fought for liberty and for their country, although these words held different meanings for each side.

It would be unrealistic to argue that all Civil War troops were motivated by ideological factors. Nevertheless, a great many, both white and black, knew what they meant when they described the war, as William Haines Lytle did, as the ‘great war for Union and Liberty’.

A combination of distance and diplomacy might have prompted John Buchan to describe the Civil War as 'a clash of honest ideals,' but his description is perhaps not so far off the mark. Civil War soldiers, although fighting against each other, to a great extent fought in parallel, and many - although by no means all - sought after the war to implement William Haines Lytle's injunction to his troops

To heal up the sores and scars, and cover up the bloody footprints that war will leave; to bury in oblivion all animosities against your former foe; and chivalrous as you are brave, standing on forever stricken fields, memorable in history, side by side with the Virginian, the Mississippian, or Alabamian, to carve on bronze or marble the glowing epitaph that tells us of Southern as well as Northern valour.

Susan-Mary Grant is Lecturer in US History at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. She is the author of North *Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Kansas University Press, 2000).