

Review of *Military Necessity: Civil-Military Relations in the Confederacy* by Paul D. Escott

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book *Military Necessity: Civil-Military Relations in the Confederacy* by Paul D. Escott.

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Article:

Military Necessity: Civil-Military Relations in the Confederacy. By Paul D. Escott. (Westport, Conn.; Praeger Security International, 2006. Series foreword, preface, illustrations, maps, notes, selected bibliography, index. Pp. xv, 215. \$49.95.)

This book is one of a larger series by Praeger Security International exploring how "changing threats that America has confronted throughout its history have tested its revered traditions of civil-military relations" (p. xii), particularly civilian control of the military. In *Military Necessity*, Paul D. Escott examines that American tradition in the Confederacy, providing a useful survey of current thinking on the Confederate high command. Readers familiar with Emory Thomas's *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience*, Thomas Connelly and Archer Jones's *The Politics of Command: Factions and Ideas in Confederate Strategy*, Stephen Woodworth's many studies of Confederate leadership, and Escott's own *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* will recognize the general narrative direction. Escott argues that the Confederacy adopted a strong civilian authority based on Jefferson Davis's own experience as the U.S. secretary of war and because the new constitution vested a powerful executive. Davis fully dominated Confederate military policy, and the Confederate Congress either blandly supported his decisions, futilely opposed them, or failed to offer viable alternatives.

The Confederacy faced urgent military problems, and the Federal government's advancing armed forces required the rapid militarization of Confederate society. Escott charts the progress of conscription, impressments, and the military boost to Southern industrialization and urbanization. He also smartly relies on Mark Neely's *Southern Rights: Political Prisoners and the Myth of Confederate Constitutionalism* to demonstrate the surprising extent to which the

Confederate government enacted or allowed extensive constitutional abuses. Politicians and other civilians who were once principled opponents of U.S. government encroachment proved adept at accepting these fundamental changes in the Confederacy.

Officers in the Confederate army were occasionally eager to exert military control over threatened—or disloyal—municipalities, but they generally complied with civil authority. State authorities and judiciaries provided the only effective (if occasionally opportunistic) opposition to the increased militarization of Confederate society. Escott devotes one chapter to the unique case of the Trans-Mississippi Department—isolated from the Richmond government—and its commander, Gen. E. Kirby Smith, who became “an American proconsul on his own soil” (p. 118). “Kirby Smithdom,” however, proved an exception. Ranking generals often had no scruples about forming alliances with politicians to advocate favored military policies such as the “western concentration bloc.” But even the most self-aggrandizing officers demonstrated admirable restraint when civilians frantically urged military control of the Confederate war effort in 1864 and 1865.

Throughout the book, Escott focuses on how Confederates worked to forestall change. But he makes this particular reading current by examining how Southerners' core political and social values were tested by war and their disintegrating nation. “The Confederacy's politicians and editors revealed through their actions what their principles were made of, how they viewed themselves, and what they truly valued” (p. 161). Chandra Manning recently asked the same questions of common southerners in her work *What This Cruel War Was Over*. Here, Escott considers two of the Confederacy's major proposals to preserve its crumbling nation and stave off defeat. First, the government proposed a variety of schemes that would place Gen. Robert E. Lee in the role of military governor of the Confederacy, thoroughly smashing constitutional provisions. None of these plans was realistic, but politicians' willingness to consider them is revealing. (Neither Lee nor the Confederate army supported the idea.) Second, the executive department proposed a plan, reluctantly supported by Lee, to enlist enslaved black men into the Confederate army. Escott probably overestimates the support for the idea by common soldiers, but he is correct to note that politicians and other civilians vehemently opposed this disruption of the social order. That Southerners would consider a political revolution when events soured but would not countenance a social revolution is a conundrum that reveals the fundamental nature of the Confederacy.

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