

Review of *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* by Chandra Manning

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* by Chandra Manning.

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Article:

Chandra Manning finds evolving thought about slavery central to the experience of Civil War soldiers. This book's chapters follow Confederate and white and black Federal soldiers, charting their changes in morale and purpose while they were buffeted by events and confronted by new realities. Union soldiers. Manning notes, recognized slavery as the cause of the war and believed that God demanded slavery's violent demise to atone for national sins and to secure future national virtue. This revelation did not come easily to white Union soldiers. Many were disgusted at the horrors of slavery, and some even forged strong bonds with black soldiers. Union servicemen were determined to continue their crusade, yet they often resented slaves and freedmen in the waning years of the war. Of course, African Americans in Federal ranks never doubted the purpose of the war—freedom for the enslaved—and they entered Reconstruction confident that their military service qualified them for full rights as American citizens.

Readers of this journal will be interested in Manning's findings regarding Confederate soldiers. Southerners supported a racial hierarchy not for economic purposes, she argues, but to maintain cultural formulations of racial and sexual identity—based upon the privileges and obligations of white men. Those strictures hound together men (and women), regardless of their status as slaveholders, and compelled them toward secession and war. Common Southern soldiers understood that the racially leveling Republicans and Federal army sought to destroy slavery, and throughout the war, they fought to maintain their position in this society.

The work's narrative tracks the peak-and-valley responses to events on the battlefield and on the home front. Manning fully embraces the scholarship of recent decades that describes the rapid disillusionment of Confederates with their own cause because of inflation, shortages, conscription, military defeat, and disappointing government. She acknowledges class antagonism and a minority's consideration that slavery proved more a curse than a cause. Disaffection is a common and current theme in studies of Confederate society. Some scholars, like Richard Beringer, author of *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, describe a populace deflated by war and morally confused over slavery. Others, such as Victoria Bynum and Paul Escott, see a common people's rebellion averted only by the war's end. Manning follows the latter theory—to a point. Despite the human toll of the war, she argues. Southerners refrained from deserting the cause because they saw submission to the Union and its racial crusade as the worst calamity possible. All whites—slaveholders or not—feared this outcome. As the war progressed and Federal policy reflected the North's changing attitude about slavery and emancipation, Confederate soldiers strengthened their resolve. On the bulwark of racial inequality, Southerners placed their last loyalty to the Confederacy.

Manning documents this consensus—that Southerners supported the Confederacy to preserve slavery and maintain white supremacy—with perhaps the largest bibliography of enlisted men's primary sources ever assembled. The statements of Confederate soldiers regarding slavery and the war are stunning. Manning's discovery that large numbers of Confederate enlisted men rejected black enlistment proposals is a revelation. In *What This Cruel War Was Over*, Manning makes a compelling case for situating racial thoughts alongside the traditional factors of military and political events at the center of Civil War soldiers' experiences. This book is important. Slavery did not disappear after Fort Sumter, and it was not just a prelude to the war. Its presence and survival throughout the war remained central to how common people on both sides of the conflict viewed the national struggle.

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