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Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. 215. ISBN 978-0-674-04562-0.

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Gary Gallagher (Univ. of Virginia) has written or edited twenty-seven books on the Civil War. Most of them fall into one of two categories: traditional histories¹ and studies of how scholarly works and popular art have framed our knowledge of the conflict.² *The Union War* belongs to the latter group. There are no muskets or cannons here or extended battle narratives. Instead, Gallagher critiques much of the work produced by academic and popular historians during the past half century. His principal thesis is, put simply, that the soldiers in blue fought to save the Union, not to free the slaves.

Beginning in the 1970s, historians embarked on a massive reevaluation of emancipation and black military participation as elements of the Union war effort. This development reversed a longstanding and pernicious tendency to treat African Americans as powerless pawns in a great sectional bloodletting waged by white people. More broadly, it served as part of a cultural imperative to frame a more expansive view of race in the United States around black people as agents of their own improvement and participants in the long national effort to forge a more just democracy. Within the field of Civil War history, it aligned perfectly with the concomitant tendency to dismiss or lament devotion to Union as the most powerful animating factor among the loyal white population. This literature took up fundamental questions such as what drove the process of ending slavery, whether emancipation joined Union as a major goal for the United States, and the degree to which white racial attitudes in the North evolved. The scholarship did not speak with one voice, but an overarching consensus stood largely unchallenged: anyone hoping to understand the trajectory and meaning of the conflict must look primarily to slavery, emancipation, and race. The effect has been to illuminate many hitherto hidden dimensions of the war while at the same time creating a new set of distortions. (78)

The “new set of distortions” particularly engages Gallagher. He both challenges what many historians have written and lays out his own case that most Northern leaders and soldiers fought to preserve the Union. One of his principal concerns is correcting errors caused by hindsight: it has seemed obvious to historians since 1975 that freeing the slaves and integrating blacks into American society—politically, socially, and economically—was the paramount reason for fighting the Civil War. And the failure of the United States to accomplish this more than a century after Appomattox has weighed heavily on some historians. But none of this goes to prove that the men of the Army of the Potomac in 1865 had any such feelings or motivations.

Gallagher contends that present-day Americans do not sufficiently appreciate just how important the Union was to the people of the North in the Civil War era. The United States offered both democracy and economic opportunity in ways unparalleled elsewhere in the world. This was especially attractive, Gallagher observes, to the thousands of German and Irish immigrants who enlisted in the Union cause. All of them had experienced the tyranny of aristocratic rule, and most had faced religious discrimination, too. For them, as well as for native-born Americans who idolized the Founding Fathers and the constitution they had written, the Union—the best government on earth—was worth dying for.

The significance of emancipation and attitudes toward slaves and black soldiers are murkier issues. Gallagher, in discussing race and racial attitudes in the 1860s, stresses that most Northerners lived far from African Americans, and many Union soldiers had never seen a black face until they served; given the poverty and ignorance of the slaves and contrabands they encountered, they did not have an exalted opinion of black people, much less see them as their equals and future fellow citizens. They did, however, immediately

1. E.g., (ed.), *Three Days at Gettysburg: Essays on Confederate and Union Leadership* (Kent, OH: Kent State U Pr, 1999).

2. See, e.g., *Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1997) or *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2008).

understand the advantages of putting black men into blue uniforms. First of all, members of the US Colored Troops could do the endless road building and trench digging necessitated by the war. Secondly, black men could stop Confederate bullets as well as whites could.

Gallagher confronts a fundamental problem in arguing with other historians when he characterizes the attitude of white Union soldiers toward the idea of the Union and the role of freed slaves. For, just how, in the absence of opinion polls, do we know what these men thought? The only national referendum on Union policy was the election of 1864, when Lincoln defeated the Democrat, Gen. George B. McClellan, who had been extremely popular with his troops and had held out hope that a compromise could end the war. But Lincoln did very well among the men in uniform.

Thanks to the press and mass literacy during the war, historians have access to countless newspaper articles, soldiers' letters home, and personal memoirs. To some extent, Gallagher draws on quotations and statistics from such sources in disputing the claims of other historians.³ This is true of his rejection of Garry Wills's popular book on the Gettysburg Address.⁴ He counters Wills's emphasis on the speech's significance for the nation's future by demonstrating that soldiers, politicians, and the public at the time mostly ignored it.

To his credit, Gallagher is forthright in his opinions, carefully citing his opponents in both the text and excellent endnotes. Some readers will be persuaded, others outraged, by his disparagement of the work of their own favorite authors. But anyone interested in how the history of the Civil War has been created and recreated should read this terse, trenchant, well written book.⁵

3. E.g., Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (NY: Knopf, 2007).

4. *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

5. The controversy it addresses, however, seems destined to endure: see—published just three months ago—James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (NY: Norton, 2012).