



Fighting Means Killing: Civil War Soldiers and the Nature of Combat

by Jonathan M. Steplyk.

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Nathan Bedford Forrest, the infamous Confederate cavalry commander and later Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, famously commented, “war means fighting, and fighting means killing.” In the case of the Civil War, the butcher’s bill was enormous. For many years, scholars placed the number of casualties at six hundred thousand, but J. David Hacker recently revised that number upward to seven hundred fifty thousand.¹ To be sure, not all of these casualties were sustained in battle, but many were.²

That we are sometimes reticent about this truth is hardly surprising, for the nature of killing in war is a sensitive subject. In interviews and question-and-answer sessions with veterans, members of the public are often advised to avoid bluntly asking, “Did you kill anybody?” We advise against the question not only because it may prove painful or embarrassing to the veteran but also because the question is so common, especially among children and young adults, because it is a question many of us deeply want to ask. For nonveterans, especially Americans living in the peace and security amid twenty-first century prosperity, war—and killing in war—poses a great mystery. (5–6)

Military historian Jonathan Steplyk (Univ. of Texas–Arlington)³ explores and documents the spectrum of attitudes toward the experience of killing in combat. He cautiously avoids positing a simple killing vs. not killing dichotomy, focusing instead on readiness, willingness, and enthusiasm to place soldiers on a scale extending from prolific to reluctant killers, and even those who tried *not to kill* in battle. He finds that “the majority of Union and Confederate soldiers positively affirmed and accepted killing the enemy as part of their military duty and a necessity for their respective causes to prevail” (7). Though some soldiers harbored doubts or objections about killing in battle, “even among the ambivalent combatants, most tended to fight just as purposefully (and potentially lethally) as their more bellicose comrades” (7).

The first three of this volume’s seven chapters survey the factors that influenced soldiers, their experience of combat, and the language of killing. Neither Union nor Confederate soldiers came to their units as blank slates, having “been steeped in numerous ideological, cultural, and societal influences that informed their attitudes toward the war at hand” (13). These included religion, politics, notions of martial prowess, and ideas about killing. Once forged into armies, Civil War soldiers had to decide whether they would fight and kill their enemy when it came down to it.

1. “A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead,” *Civil War History* 57.4 (2011) 307–48.

2. On noncombat deaths, see Brian Steel Wills, *Inglorious Passages: Noncombat Deaths in the American Civil War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2017).

3. Steplyk’s previous work includes “Killing at Franklin: Anatomy of Slaughter,” in *The Tennessee Campaign of 1864*, ed. S. Woodworth and C. Gear (Carbondale: S Illinois U Pr, 2016) 81–104, and “Nothing But Sharpshooting: The Sharpshooters’ War in the Siege of Vicksburg,” in *Vicksburg Besieged*, ed. Woodworth and Gear (id., 2020).

Steplyk shows that most soldiers overcame their reservations or fears and plunged into the thick of battle.

Through adept use of his sources, Steplyk reconstructs what combat felt like to soldiers and how they fought. He denies that soldiers did not fight to kill—a claim made by some historians that would have surprised the soldiers themselves, most of whom stood and returned fire “as duty commanded, doing their best to kill the enemy” (75). Steplyk notes that the soldiers’ language of killing furnished many words and phrases denoting the taking of another human being’s life; these, he believes, gave soldiers a way to shield themselves “from any guilt or anxiety they might feel in regard to killing in combat” (76).

The remaining four chapters concentrate on various types of fighting: hand-to-hand combat, sharpshooting, the extremes of killing, and racial atrocities. Hand-to-hand combat was an extreme and very rare form of fighting, and, Steplyk points out, many soldiers assumed it would play a larger role than it actually did. A good thing it did not, since their training ill-prepared them for such combat. Scholars and the general public tend to see sharpshooters as aberrant figures. Steplyk quashes this long-held view, observing that “many in both military and civilian circles recognized theirs as a legitimate part to play on the battlefield” (141); soldiers often celebrated and tried to emulate the sharpshooter’s feats.

The author’s view that combat was not always a simple matter of kill vs. do not kill leads him to a discussion of what he calls “extremes of killing.” Soldiers sometimes exceeded the limits of legitimate killing and sometimes stopped short and showed mercy. Hence, they experienced a “gamut of personal attitudes toward killing in combat” and acted “on those feelings along a wide spectrum of lethal and nonlethal behaviors” (188).

The book’s final chapter concerns racial atrocities, building on the recent work of George S. Burkhardt.⁴ Steplyk finds a consistent pattern of Confederate racist barbarities, best exemplified by the massacres at Fort Pillow and the Crater at Petersburg. These “seem significantly to have motivated a collective desire to retaliate among many USCT [United States Colored Troops]” (221). The weight of the evidence, Steplyk concludes, “indicates that the great many accepted killing as part of their martial duty” (231).

Jonathan Steplyk has produced a salutary, lucid, and absorbing contribution to the scholarly literature on his subject. It does have a few shortcomings, however. One wishes the author had widened his purview to include more on soldiers killing guerrillas and bushwhackers. Irregular warfare claimed the lives of both soldiers and civilians. How did soldiers think about such engagements? Similarly, he might have included something on the campaigns against Native Americans in the trans-Mississippi theater. These cavils aside, *Fighting Means Killing* will strongly appeal to anyone interested in the military history of the Civil War and of warfare more generally.

4. Viz., *Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War* (id., 2007).