

McPherson, James M. (1997). *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*. New York: Oxford U. P.

5—Most Union & Confederate soldiers were neither long-term regulars nor draftees, but wartime volunteers from civilian life. What prompted them to give up several of the best years of their lives—indeed, to give up life itself? What enabled them to overcome that most basic of human instincts—self-preservation?

This is a vital question in all wars, for without such sacrificial behavior by soldiers, armies could not fight. Two psychiatrists who studied American G.I. s in World War II put it this way: “What is the force that compels a man to risk his life day after day, to endure constant tension, the fear of death...the steady loss of friend?” What can possess a rational man to make him act so irrationally?

Eight years earlier the novelist and Civil War veteran John W. DeForest asked the same question and offered an implicit answer. “Self-preservation is the first law of nature,” he wrote in summing up his combat experience. “The man who does not dread to die or to be mutilated is a lunatic. The man who, dreading these things, still faces them for the sake of duty and honor is a hero.”

20—“The vandals of the North are determined to destroy slavery. We must fight, and I choose to fight for southern rights and southern liberty.”

This pairing of slavery and liberty as the twin goals for which Confederates fought appeared in many volunteers’ letters. As Lincoln sarcastically put it, “the *perfect* liberty they sigh for” is “the liberty of making slaves of other people.”

Samuel Johnson had asked in 1775: “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?”

But most Southern volunteers believed they were fighting for liberty as well as slavery. “Our cause,” wrote one in words repeated almost verbatim by many, “is the sacred one of Liberty, and God is on our side.” A farmer who enlisted in the 26th Tennessee insisted that “life, liberty and property (i. e., slaves) are at stake” and therefore “any man in the South would rather die battling for civil and political liberty, than submit to the base usurpations of a northern tyrant.”

21—Southern recruits waxed more eloquent about their intention to fight against slavery than for it—that is, against their own enslavement by the North. “Sooner than submit to Northern slavery, I prefer death,” wrote a slave owning officer in the 10th South Carolina. The son of a Mississippi planter dashed off a letter to his father as he rushed to enlist: “No alternative is left but war or slavery.” Subjugation was the favorite word of Confederate recruits to describe their fate if the South remained in the Union or was forced back in to it.

“If we should suffer ourselves to be subjugated by the tyrannical government of the North” wrote a private in the 56th Virginia to his wife, “our property would all be confiscated & our people reduced to the most abject bondage and utter degradation.” Thus “every Southern heart” must “respond to the language of the great Patrick Henry in the days of ’76 & say give me Liberty or give me death.” He met death at Gettysburg.

This invocation of the Founding Fathers was as common among Confederate volunteers as among their Union counterparts—for an opposite purpose. Just as the American Patriots of 1776 had seceded from the tyrannical British empire, so the Southern Patriots of 1861 seceded from the tyrannical Yankee empire. Our Fathers “severed the bonds of oppression once,” wrote a twenty-year-old South Carolina recruit, “now (we) for the second time throw off the yoke and be freemen still.”

The American Revolution established “Liberty and freedom in this western world,” wrote a Texas cavalryman in 1861, and we are “now enlisted in ‘The Holy Cause of Liberty and Independence’ again.”

40—The first impulse of men under fire is an overwhelming desire to flee the danger. Many soldiers do run away, or cower into frozen immobility. But if discipline or willpower or some other factor nerves them to overcome the impulse to flight, when they go into action the flood of adrenalin turns many soldiers into preternatural killing machines oblivious to danger and fear. This hyped-up behavior has been variously described by psychologists or by soldiers themselves as combat frenzy, fighting madness, or battle rage.

47—The comparison of a private’s lot to that of a slave was a common one—especially among privates. “We are just like Negroes,” wrote an Ohio soldier in 1861, a sentiment echoed by a Mississippi private who had first-hand experience with slavery, for his father was a planter. The major of his regiment ordered the men around “as if they were a lot of negroes. I am in favor of discipline but not of tyranny.”

50—Describing Jackson’s famous flank attack on May 2, this lieutenant wrote home that “at 5 p.m. we commenced our advance upon the enemy. The sharpshooters were deployed about a hundred yards in the rear of the brigade, with order to shoot every one who fell to the rear, unless wounded.”

This policy seemed to work, if a Northern soldier’s letter to his father is reliable evidence. “I will tell you how the Rebels fight so well,” he wrote in January 1863 at a low point in Union fortunes. They have File Closers behind the Regts. Of Infantry, & if a man falls out of the ranks they shoot him on the spot. Now if our men did the same we should not meet with so many defeats.”

The Confederates seemed to devise harsher punishments. “This evening our Brigade is ordered out to witness a horrible sight,” wrote a private in the 1st Virgini,

part of Pickett's division. "One of the 24th Va. Infantry being tried by court martial for cowardice at the battle of Sharpsburg is condemned to be whipped publicly and then dishonorably dismissed." The whole brigade stood at attention to watch the 'wretched creature' get thirty-nine lashes on his bare back. It was not lost on these Southern soldiers that thirty-nine lashes was a typical punishment for slaves."

72—The italicized phrases explain how these soldiers overcame their inhibitions: it was a just war, a holy cause against an evil enemy. Both sides believed that God was on their side and that they were doing their duty to God and country by trying to kill the godless enemy." The letters and diaries of Confederate soldiers contained many such expressions. "We look to God & trust in him to sustain us in this our just cause," wrote a Florida cavalry captain in 1863. "Surely the God of battles is on our side," thought a soldier in the 37th Mississippi as he read the 91st Psalm before going into action at Vicksburg.

73—In the hot blood of combat it was a question of self-defense, of kill or be killed. "You would think it was a cruel thing to (shoot) a man at ten rods distance," an Illinois corporal wrote, "but just think that your life is at stake if you don't and it will encourage you in this cruel business."

77—Civil War soldiers wrote much about courage, bravery, valor—the three words meant the same thing. The quality they described as the mark of honor. But soldiers wrote even more about cowardice—the mark of dishonor. Many soldiers lacked confidence in their courage. But most of them wanted to avoid the shame of being known as a coward—and that is what gave them courage. Civil War soldiers went forward with their comrades into a hail of bullets because they were more afraid of "showing the white feather" than they were of death. The soldier who visibly skulked out of combat could never hold up his head again as a man against men. S. L. A Marshall wrote of soldiers in WW II: "Personal honor is the one thing valued more than life itself by the majority of men." Civil War soldiers would have agreed. "Death before dishonor" is a phrase that occurs in their letters and diaries more times than one can count.

85—Perhaps the only achievement that could eclipse the honor of taking enemy colors or retaking one's own was to plant the national flag on a captured enemy position. Regimental rivalries to be the first do so help explain the reckless courage of many Civil War assaults. In 1864 an officer in the 12th New York described a successful attack on Confederate lines defending the Weldon Railroad near Petersburg:

"When the American flag appeared above the battle smoke on the enemy works, it is impossible to describe the feelings one experiences at such a moment. God, Country, Love, Home, pride, conscious strength & power, all crowd your swelling breast...proud, proud as a man can feel over this victory to our arms—if it were a man's privilege to die when he wished, he should die at such a moment."

**“And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof thro' the night that our flag was still there.”**

86—“For the key to what makes men fight,” wrote one modern student of combat motivation, “we must look hard at military groups & the bonds that link the men within them.” The answer, according to another analysis, lies in “the intense loyalty stimulated by close identification with the group. The men are now fighting for each other & develop guilty feelings if they let each other down. This spirit of self sacrifice, so characteristic of the combat personality, is at the heart of good morale.”

In WW II the soldier “became increasingly bound up with his tiny fraternity of comrades. In the last analysis, the soldier fought for them and them alone.” Or as William Manchester put it in his memoirs of service in the American Marine Corps during World War II: “Those men on the line were my family, my home. They were closer to me than my friends had ever been or ever would be. They had never let me down, and I couldn’t do it to them. Men, I now knew, do not fight for flag or country, for the Marine Corps or glory or any other abstraction. They fight for one another.”

Soldiers’ letters contain many references to the “band of brothers” theme—literal as well as metaphorical. “We feel like the kindest of brothers together” (10th Virginia Cavalry). “You would not believe that men could be so attached to each other: we are all like brothers” (1st Ohio Heavy Artillery). “We love each other like a band of brothers” 11th Georgia). We all “seem almost like brothers. We have suffered hardships and dangers together and are bound together by more than ordinary ties (8th Texas Cavalry).

87—A corporal in the 9th Alabama returned to his regiment in October 1862 after convalescence at home from a wound in the battle of Glendale. “A soldier is always nearly crazy to get away from the army on furloughs,” he observed, “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 for any one else, or under any other circumstances.”

87—The experience of combat did more than strengthen existing bonds; it also dissolved the petty rivalries and factions that existed in some regiments and forged new ones among men who saw the elephant together. “Those who had stood shoulder to shoulder during the two terrible days of that bloody battle,” wrote an officer in the 54th Ohio after Shiloh, “were hopped with steel, with bands stronger than steel.” After the 83rd Pennsylvania suffered 75% casualties in the Seven Days battles, a private commented that “It seems strange how much the rest of our company has become united since the battles. They are almost like brothers in one family now. We used to have the ‘aristocratic tent’ and ‘tent of the upper ten,’ but there is nothing of that kind now. We have all lost dear friends and common sorrow makes us all equal.”

99—It is perhaps true that Northern nationalism was more “abstract & intangible than its Southern counterpart. But it was nonetheless just as real & as deeply felt. “If we lose in this war, the country is lost and if we win it is saved,” wrote a New York captain in 1863. “There is no middle ground.”

Another captain, in the 12th New Jersey, spelled out this idea in more detail in a letter to his brother & sister in January 1863: “I would rather live a soldier for life than see this country made a might 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 & shameful peace.”

Again & again one finds similar phrases in the letters of Northern soldiers: “Home is sweet & friends are dear, but what would they all be to let the country go to ruin.” “I do not want to live if our free Nation is to die or be broken by the foul hand of treason.” “Far better would it be if the war should continue until every home should be made desolate than to surrender to those miserable despots who are trying to destroy our country.”

Sometimes the Victorian idioms in which soldiers expressed their patriotism became almost cloying. One wonders what the mother of a Pennsylvania cavalry corporal thought of a letter from her son in 1863 that listed his duties in the following order: “First my God, second my country, third my mother. Oh my country, how my heart bleeds for your welfare. If this poor life of mine could save you, how willingly would I make the sacrifice.”

Enlisted men in two renowned regiments, the 1st Minnesota & the 5th Iowa, used phrases that by 1862 had become clichés: “Thousands of precious lives will have to be sacrificed” to “support the best Government on God’s footstool...the best Government every made.”

A fifty-four-year-old captain in the 85th New York, a farmer from the dairy belt, wrote his wife in 1863 that “if I never get home you will not say my life has been thrown away for naught. My country, glorious country, if we have only made it truly the land of the free...I count not my life dear unto me if only I can help that glorious cause along.”

100—Glorious cause. Lives sacrificed on the country’s altar. Hearts bleeding for the country’s welfare. Some modern readers of these letters may feel they are drowning in bathos. In this post-Freudian age these phrases strike many as mawkish posturing, romantic sentimentalism, hollow platitudes. We do not speak or write like that any more. Most people have not done so since WWI which, as Ernest Hemingway & Paul Fussell have noted, made such words as *glory, honor, courage, sacrifice, valor, and sacred* vaguely embarrassing if no mock-heroic. We would justly mock them if we heard them today. But these words were written in the 1860s, not today. They were written not for public consumption but in private letters to

families & friends. These soldiers, at some level at least, *meant* what they said about sacrificing their lives for their country.

What seems like bathos or platitudes to us were real pathos & convictions to them. Perhaps readers will take another look at the expressions by soldiers quoted two paragraphs above when they learn that all four of them were subsequently killed in action. They were not posturing for public show. They were not looking back from years later through a haze of memory & myth about the Civil War.

They were writing during the immediacy of their experiences to explain & justify their beliefs to family members & friends who shared—or in some cases questioned—these beliefs. **AND HOW SMUGLY CAN WE SNEER AT THEIR EXPRESSIONS OF A WILLINGNESS TO DIE FOR THOSE BELIEFS WHEN WE KNOW THAT THEY DID PRECISELY THAT?**

104—The Patriotism of Civil War soldiers existed in a specific historical context. Americans of the Civil War generation revered their Revolutionary forebears. Every schoolboy and schoolgirl knew how they had fought against the odds to forge a new republic conceived in liberty. Northerners & Southerners alike believed themselves custodians of the legacy of 1776.

The crisis of 1861 was the great test of their worthiness of that heritage. On *their* shoulders rode the fate of the great experiment of republican government launched in 1776. Both Abraham Lincoln & Jefferson Davis appealed to this intense consciousness of parallels between 1776 & 1861.

That is why Lincoln began his great evocation of Union war aims with the words: “Four score & seven years ago our fathers brought forth a new government, conceived in Liberty & dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Likewise, Davis urged his people to “renew such sacrifices as our father made to the holy cause of constitutional liberty.

The profound irony of the Civil War was that, like Davis & Lincoln, Confederate & Union soldiers interpreted the heritage of 1776 in opposite ways. Confederates professed to fight for liberty & independence from a tyrannical government. Unionists said they fought to preserve the nation conceived in liberty from dismemberment & destruction. These conflict impulses which had propelled many volunteers into the armies at the war’s beginning, became more intense as the fighting escalated.

106—White supremacy and the right of property in slaves were at the core of the ideology for which Confederate soldiers fought. “We are fighting for our liberty,” wrote a young Kentucky Confederate, “against tyrants of the North who are determined to destroy slavery.”

108—A New York corporal wrote: “I know enough of the southern spirit that I think they will fight for the institution of slavery even to extermination.”