

Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South

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Reviewer: Paul Quigley

Confederate Reckoning is a ‘political history of the unfranchised’ (p. 7). It joins a significant body of scholarship that has sought to expand the category of ‘the political’ by taking into account the behaviour and ideas of those who, in formal terms, were excluded from politics. The American South has been an especially fruitful place to do this because of the historical coexistence of democratic politics with glaring inequalities of race and gender.⁽¹⁾ Stephanie McCurry re-examines the two most prominent unfranchised groups in the Civil War South – slaves and ordinary white women – exposing not only their changing status but also the weighty political consequences of their attitudes and behaviour.

The book’s first major concern is with mid 19th-century definitions of ‘the people’: the politically legitimate community. Unsurprisingly, McCurry finds that southern leaders bounded their community with theoretically rigid lines of race and gender, excluding white women and the enslaved of both sexes. The two groups were not excluded on the same grounds or in the same ways, though. Whereas slaves were completely excluded from political life and any direct relationship to government, white women did enjoy a kind of partial citizenship status. They were not permitted the same rights of citizenship as men – the vote, for example – but they were afforded some status. McCurry herself seems a little unsure as to whether women were in fact citizens, using the term citizen while acknowledging that almost all of their connections to government ran through their male relatives. But her ambiguity nicely reflects the actual uncertainty of women’s citizenship status in both the law and the culture of the time.

The majority of the book explores the immense stresses that secession and mobilization for war placed on pre-war understandings of the boundaries of ‘the people’. After an informative state-by-state account of the practical politics of secession, which sheds fascinating new light on the extent of division within white society even in the Deep South, McCurry turns to the wartime period. Her overarching narrative will sound familiar to anyone who knows this period – the Confederacy’s mobilization for war revolutionized southern society, driving rapid state formation, unsettling social relations, and creating new possibilities for marginalized groups – but *Confederate Reckoning* adds fresh perspectives and interpretations that together breathe new life into the existing story.

Confederate mobilization forged for white southern women ‘a radically changed and far more direct relationship to the state’ (p. 88). At the outset, men and women alike clung to longstanding convictions that

women ought to be insulated from the effects of war. At first, this gender immunity led to near-comical situations in which Confederate women demanded the protection of invading Union forces at the same time as they professed their allegiance to the Confederacy. As the war progressed, however, such niceties became less and less tenable. Female spies on both sides raised intriguing questions about the political status and allegiance of women: if women were outside formal politics, if they enjoyed no direct relationship with national governments, how could they be treated as traitors? To be a traitor, surely one first had to be a proper citizen. (This is exactly what Mary Chesnut had in mind when she wryly commented, 'It is delightful to be of enough consequence to be arrested' (p. 102)) Likewise, the prominence of southern women in networks of Unionist dissent exposed with new urgency the fact that, no matter how much women were excluded in theory, their wartime activities had a direct impact on formal politics and governance. McCurry also rehearses the well-worn tale of Benjamin Butler in New Orleans to reinforce her argument that the existence of war rendered women's behaviour more politically consequential than ever.

It is with her chapters on soldiers' wives that *Confederate Reckoning* really moves our understanding of Confederate women forward. Soldiers' wives, she demonstrates, emerged as an entirely new 'political constituency' (p. 203), especially during the second half of the Civil War. In part, this grew out of the common conviction that in return for their service soldiers were owed some measure of government protection for themselves and their families. Those familiar with Civil War scholarship already know that ordinary white women were increasingly likely to contact government officials as the war went on, demanding their assistance in coping with the absence of their male relatives and the material hardships of war. We already know that these demands stemmed from the assumption that the Confederacy owed women something in return for their sacrifices. But what McCurry reveals for the first time is the importance of 'soldiers' wives' as a label women used to describe themselves. When they wrote their letters and signed their petitions, they often identified themselves by their relationships to soldiers. On some petitions they even used the shorthand 'sw' – a sure sign of widespread recognition of soldiers' wives as a political interest group. Throughout all of this, McCurry is careful to make clear that women's active political interventions – in violent food riots as well as letters and petitions – were not always instigated by the women themselves: as she perceptively explains, 'It was not so much that white women emerged incisively out of the recesses of the household into public life during the war as that the state came barging in their front door, catapulting them into a relationship they had never sought but could hardly refuse' (p. 156).

For slaves as well as white women, war brought with it new and often violent collisions with government. Here, the problem stemmed from the theoretical distinction between masters' power over slaves and master's connections with government – which were thought to exist in separate spheres. Yet once again the demands of mobilization upended old arrangements. From the earliest months of the Civil War, Confederate efforts to utilize slave labour threatened the stability of slavery. Perhaps the most radical new departure of all was the direct connection this created between slaves and government. No longer was masters' claim on slaves' labour absolute, as old power structures gave way to a 'peculiar triangulating of power – between slaves, masters, and the state' (p. 268). This opened up the space not only for disagreements between slaveholders and government officials, but for slave volition, too: once the state began to call on slaves to perform manual labour on behalf of the Confederate war effort, slaves themselves grasped the opportunity to resist or to reshape their connections with government.

Above all else, it was the Confederacy's need for labour that changed the relationship between government and slaves. At first government called on slaves to perform supporting tasks: digging fortifications, for example. But as the Confederacy became more and more desperate for soldiers, leaders found it more difficult to sidestep the glaring fact that some 40 per cent of their military-age men were not liable for military service because they were enslaved. This became even more conspicuous a problem during the second half of the war, once the Union military began to use black men, many of them escaped southern slaves, as soldiers. By 1864 and 1865, Confederate leaders were beginning seriously to consider doing so themselves, and eventually legislated for it during the waning days of the conflict. McCurry deftly analyzes the political debate over this issue, showing once again the major influence that the 'unfranchised' had on Confederate politics and the Confederate war effort.

Throughout, McCurry's challenges and enhancements to existing interpretations are subtle yet important. Most students of the Civil War will be familiar with the narrative of rapid state formation driven by wartime exigencies, a model associated most notably with Emory Thomas and Richard Bense. (2) McCurry does not so much overturn this interpretation as augment it, pointing out that previous iterations overlooked the active influence of women and slaves. Women's wartime activities, McCurry gently insists in another particularly enlightening argument, should not automatically be slotted into American historians' usual narrative of liberal citizenship rights being slowly but surely opened up to previously excluded groups. Southern women rarely advanced their claims in the language of liberal rights or citizenship status; their strategies shared more with the 'politics of the governed' in rural societies across the world than with, say, abolitionists in the antebellum United States who overtly deployed the language of citizenship. In the case of slaves, finally, McCurry redirects our attention from slaves' influence on the evolution of Union policy to their influence on politics in the Confederacy itself. None of these are the kind of radical historiographical breakthrough that fundamentally transforms our understanding of the subject in question. But separately and together, they do enhance our appreciation of the significance of social and political change in the Civil War South.

My main reservation concerns the way McCurry approaches the process of wartime state formation. Put simply, her use of the concept of state formation – and indeed her use of the term state – lacks precision. State formation is a driving force throughout *Confederate Reckoning*, but we get little sense of who, or what, was directing this process. Most problematically of all, the book is often unclear about the referent of the term 'the state'; about *where* state formation was taking place. Was it in the national capital of Richmond or in state capitals like Raleigh or Columbia? McCurry uses the same terms to describe both levels of government, and only occasionally explains which she is actually referring to. Confronting state-federal relations as another kind of power dynamic in Confederate politics could have deepened McCurry's account of the political processes in which women and slaves were now intervening.

In her eagerness to draw our attention to these political interventions, McCurry occasionally goes a little far. At one point she describes slaveholders as being 'insane enough to take a region and all its people into a perilous war, but not patriotic enough to do what it took to fight it' (p. 285). Slaveholders' judgment is questionable, to be sure – especially when viewed through the hindsight of Union victory – but does that really mean they were 'insane'? Furthermore, McCurry too often implies that the 'Confederate architects' were a monolithic, self-conscious team marching in lockstep towards a clearly defined utopia. For all her adroitness in exposing the shifting fault lines of southern society McCurry is little interested, with one or two exceptions, in exploring uncertainties and divisions among the slaveholding class itself. Presenting southern leaders as being unified and self-aware renders them archetypal villains, helping McCurry to ennoble the marginalized with whom her sympathies so clearly lie. From here it is but a short step to the idealistic, perhaps quixotic vision of the Confederacy as a place where 'history opens up, resistance prevails, and the usually powerless manage against all imaginable odds to change the world' (p. 10).

These words capture the great strengths of *Confederate Reckoning* as well as its small excesses. They capture, that is, its author's fervent commitment to viewing Confederate history from new angles; to excavating the complex workings of power in a regime in crisis; to exposing the cracks in southern society

and governance, cracks that were exacerbated by war, cracks that enabled slaves and ordinary women a measure of influence in areas of life from which they were supposedly prohibited. *Confederate Reckoning* will force even specialists in this area to rethink basic assumptions about power and politics in the Civil War South.

Notes

1. See, for example, Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Chicago, IL, 1997); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Jane Dailey, Glenda Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton, NJ, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1971); Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation, 1861-1865* (New York, NJ, 1979); Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877* (New York, NJ, 1990); Bensel, 'Southern leviathan: the development of central state authority in the Confederate states of America', *Studies in American Political Development. Volume 2* (New Haven, CT, 1987), pp. 68-136.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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