Damn Yankees: Demonization & Defiance in the Confederate South

Review Number: 1986

Publish date: Thursday, 8 September, 2016

Author: George C. Rable

ISBN: 9780807160589

Date of Publication: 2015

Price: £26.71

Pages: 216pp.

Publisher: Louisiana State University Press

Publisher url: <http://lsupress.org/books/detail/damn-yankees/>

Place of Publication: Baton Rouge, LA

Reviewer: Patrick J. Doyle

‘We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies’.⁽¹⁾ These famous lines from Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address serve as a stark point of contrast in the introduction of *Damn Yankees! Demonization and Defiance in the Confederate South*. For whilst Lincoln implored the nation to avoid violent confrontation, the war of words had already begun. As George C. Rable vividly demonstrates in this study, some southerners had poured scorn on northern society before the outbreak of the American Civil War, and this demonization would only become more pronounced as the conflict progressed. The locus for much of this criticism was the figure of the Yankee, an epithet which served as a stereotype and amalgamation of various strands of anti-northern thought. Unsurprisingly, the detested Yankee was often contrasted with the virtuous and upstanding southerner. For Rable, these tropes, though typically overblown and overstated, merit serious consideration because they reveal important insights into Confederate identity and morale during the conflict. This book, which is based on the 2014 Walter Lynwood Fleming Lectures at Louisiana State University, delineates the demonization of the North by the South and attempts to make sense of its wider implications for Civil War America.

Damn Yankees! begins by outlining the various ways in which southern newspaper editors and other commentators vilified the northern free states at the start of the war. The Yankee, according to this literature, was guilty of a litany of sins. He was, to name but a few shortcomings, meddlesome, pompous, cowardly and money-grubbing. The antithetical nature of the North and South in this discourse was given credence by their supposed different historical lineages. The Yankee, it was claimed, had descended from Puritan stock whereas southerners traced their origins to the Cavaliers. The symbol of the puritanical Yankee was especially significant, and it 'acquired an elastic meaning in Confederate discourse' (p. 16). Puritans were contradictorily constructed as excessively orthodox by some and as dangerously unorthodox by others, meaning that this heritage imbued northerners with both fanaticism and infidelity. Evidently, historical accuracy and intellectual consistency meant little when it came to denigrating one's foe. The Yankees, according to this logic, had not only erred from the 'true' word of God through their association with various religious and social 'isms', from Mormonism to abolitionism, but they were fervently determined to spread their profane beliefs. The various defects present in the Yankee national character generated considerable early confidence in a Confederate victory amongst southerners who believed God was on their side. After all, how could the South not beat this weak, cowardly and godless opponent?

Confederates soon found out that Yankees were less cowardly on the battlefield than they had been in their imaginations. As the war grew bloodier, southern soldiers had to accept that their northern counterparts could fight hard. Responding to this indisputable fact, Confederates increasingly portrayed the Yankee as lacking common decency instead of courage. Having filled their army with the societal dregs of the North and Europe, and later with degraded blacks, the Union was seen as being intent on desecrating southern property and society. These intentions were believed to have become manifest when the Union military hierarchy took a harder approach to the war, which the South interpreted as an abandonment of civilized warfare. Atrocity stories detailing plunder, rape and murder committed by northern soldiers in the South proliferated in southern newspapers and the letters of Confederate soldiers. The veracity of these reports about barbarous Yankee behaviour was often questionable as they blended truth, exaggeration and blatant falsehoods, but this is neither here nor there according to Rable. 'The key here is perception and emotion rather than reason or ideology' (p. 49). The word 'subjugation' served as a shorthand for these myriad southern fears, as the idea took hold that the North did not want to simply defeat the South but utterly destroy and ruin it. 'Despotism or freedom, extermination or independence' (p. 127) were the stark terms in which Confederates came to understand the war.

In telling this story about the ways in which Confederates demonized their opponents, George Rable makes two fundamental points. First, this hatred of the Yankee was an important part of Confederate nationalism. Indeed, although Rable tries to avoid the debates about the relative strengths and weaknesses of Confederate nationalism (p. 4), it is often implicit in this book that nationalistic sentiment in the Civil War South was real and robust. The author's logic is simple, reasoning that shared enmities can be just as significant as shared values or ideals in forging a sense of unity, particularly during a period of warfare. In some respects, Rable's conclusions in *Damn Yankees!* reinforce and expand upon his earlier work. *The Confederate Republic*, for instance, construed the Confederate national vision as a quest for republican purity that sought to 'quarantine the southern world from the plague of northern radicalism, infidelity, and abolitionism'.⁽²⁾ Similarly, Rable's landmark religious history of the Civil War noted how southerners drew on civil religion to reaffirm their belief that they were fighting a just and righteous war.⁽³⁾ This book demonstrates how these fears about the North coalesced with the South's belief in divine sovereignty to sustain Confederate morale, even though the course of the war increasingly turned against them. Hatred of the Yankee came to serve as an emotional and psychological crutch for some southerners. 'To imagine that the dastardly enemy might ultimately triumph just did not fit in with pervasive ideas about virtuous Confederates who would eventually prevail over evil Yankees. Clear-eyed assessments of the Confederate military and political situation became difficult if not impossible when looking through the clouded lenses of sectional chauvinism and righteous anger' (p. 117). Such animosity was not always productive, and Rable discusses how the growing obsession of Confederates with vengeance and retribution could serve as a distraction from reality, but it did buttress their identification with the cause.

The book's second key claim is that this vilification of the Yankee served to elongate the conflict. As Rable explains in the introduction, this rhetoric 'undoubtedly lengthened the war (and southern suffering) by making so many Confederates so reluctant to give up the fight or indeed make any concessions to their seemingly barbarous foes' (p. 6). Reaffirming the conclusions of Jason Phillips, Rable asserts that, during the final years of the conflict, surrender and peace became almost unimaginable with an enemy that had expended so much effort to subjugate the South.⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, this study claims that the Yankee-bashing that the Civil War fuelled in the South also embittered the peace that came after it. The figure of the meddlesome and corrupt Yankee would persist long beyond the Confederacy's four-year existence, serving as a useful tool for southern opponents of the government's reconstruction policy to attack its legitimacy.

Both of these points are well taken. Certainly, the sheer weight of evidence that Rable presents in this deeply researched study demonstrates the pervasiveness of anti-Yankee sentiment in the Civil War South. The intellectual linchpin here, though, is to what extent was all of this mere rhetoric? Put another way, how far did this imagined construct of the Yankee shape the actions and reactions of Confederates towards the war? As others have noted, making sense of the complex relationship between words, thoughts and deeds is an important challenge to understanding loyalty and identity during the Civil War.⁽⁵⁾ Rable himself acknowledges this issue, observing how 'better death than subjugation was easy enough to say' but, in reality, 'how seriously to take such calls presents any number of interpretative problems' (pp. 129–130). Despite this caveat, as the premise of *Damn Yankees!* and the arguments contained within it make clear, Rable generally interprets much of this rhetoric as being in earnest. Yet there are moments in the book that suggest that personal enmity towards northerners never quite reached the vitriolic highs (or lows perhaps) that southerners' linguistic flourishes did. For instance, Rable cites the atrocities committed against African-American troops by Confederate soldiers as evidence of a growing Yankee hatred and southern thirst for vengeance (pp. 111–2). But the fact that such violence was disproportionately aimed at black rather than white Union soldiers does somewhat suggest that claims about the Yankees being racially 'other' or even subhuman were never fully internalised. And, on the home front, one can find other patterns of behaviour that might also problematize some of this book's conclusions. A prime example, and one neatly illuminated in Jarret Ruminski's recent work, is the common practice of illegal trading across the lines in areas close to Union occupation. Often driven by necessity, such behaviour elicited criticism from staunch Confederates in Mississippi who construed it as disloyal and fretted that it bred dependence on the hated Yankees. Nonetheless, many engaged in this trading, and some even claimed their actions were rooted in the

Confederate cause because they helped to alleviate material shortages.⁽⁶⁾ In short, Rable is absolutely right to take this demonization of the Yankee seriously but the question of how seriously we should take it, especially when this nationalist paradigm became impractical or problematic for ordinary Confederates, remains open to debate.

Understanding the complex relationship between rhetoric and reality is in many respects a historians' chimera and, as such, it is inevitable that some might interpret George C. Rable's plentiful evidence in this book differently. Few, however, would refute its principal claims that Confederate castigation of the enemy was widespread and that detailed analysis of these diatribes can help us understand how Southerners reacted and related to the American Civil War. As insightful works often do, this book does not merely address old questions but pose new ones. Did a similar anti-southern rhetoric develop in the North and shape their ideas about the war? The work of Eric Foner and Susan-Mary Grant would certainly suggest that the raw ideological materials were there to construct a stereotypical Southron or planter figure that might play a similar role in the northern states as the Yankee did in the Confederacy.⁽⁷⁾ And how has the vitriolic defamation of the opposition, these veritable words of war, shaped the experience of other nations who have looked to recover and move on from violent conflict? If and when scholars come to answer these questions, *Damn Yankees!* is sure to provide both a useful building block and point of comparison.

Notes

1. 'First Inaugural Address – Final Text, March 4, 1861', in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy C. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1954), vol. 4, p. 271.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. George C. Rable, *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution against Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994), pp. 120–1.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen People: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Jason Phillips, 'A brothers' war? Exploring Confederate perceptions of the enemy', in *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers*, ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean (Lexington, KY, 2007), pp. 67–90.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See, for example, Aaron Sheehan-Dean's observations on class identity and Confederate loyalty among southern soldiers. Aaron Sheehan-Dean, 'Justice has something to do with it: class relations and the Confederate Army', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 113 (2005), 340–77.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Jarret Ruminski, "'Tradyville': the contraband trade and the problem of loyalty in Civil War Mississippi', *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 2 (2012), 511–37.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, NY, 1970) and Susan-Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence, KS, 2000).[Back to \(7\)](#)

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