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Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War

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Reviewer:	Anna Koivusalo

A renowned historian of the American Civil War era, Elizabeth R. Varon draws on her expertise in her new book *Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War*. It is both a comprehensive narrative of the Civil War and a new interpretation of northern war policy. Varon's study—which interweaves military, social, personal, and political history—is extensive, illuminating the complexity of the issues that shaped the course of the war. Most importantly, she offers a new perspective of the Union's war politics and the Confederate response to it. Northerners, Varon argues, fought the Civil War to liberate Southerners from 'Confederate falsehood and despotism' (p. 2).

To answer the much-researched and elusive question of what motivated Northerners to fight, Varon does not settle for oft-heard reasons such as saving the Union or the growing antislavery feeling. Instead, she builds her argument upon the notion of 'deliverance', which drew upon biblical references. Deliverance, for Varon, is an all-embracing concept that she employs to explain northern military, political, and social actions. She shows that the idea of deliverance, heavily laden with religious meanings and built upon 'the bonds of affection' between the North and the South, contributed politically, materially, and ideologically to the advance of northern war aims (p. 7).

According to Varon, deliverance encompassed both the salvation of white Southerners and the emancipation of the enslaved people. First used by abolitionists in connection with black liberation, at the beginning of the war deliverance was adopted by northern preachers and politicians. They argued that most Confederates were deceived by the upper-class slaveowners and lured, if not forced, to fight by empty promises and threats. Soon, Varon shows, northern leaders, soldiers, and

civilians saw the war as a chance 'to deliver the South from the clutches of a conspiracy and to deliver to it the blessings of free society and of modern civilization' (p. 2). In hindsight, that belief was not correct, as most Southerners were committed to secession and the Confederacy. However, at the time, the idea of saving the deluded masses in the South did mobilise Northerners and help the Union to win the war. By using 'soft war incentives and hard war punishments,' Varon argues, Northerners attempted to persuade the erring Southerners to return to the Union, which had not stopped loving them despite their rebellion (p. 2). On the contrary, the Northerners believed that, by winning the war, the Union would save both white and black Southerners from their subjugation by the southern elite and bring them freedom.

In just a little over 500 pages, the single-volume book maps the four years of the war from the First Battle of Bull Run to Abraham Lincoln's assassination and concludes with a chapter on Reconstruction. As her sources, Varon uses newspapers, pamphlets, speeches, sermons, and (mostly published) diaries and letters by men and women, civilians and soldiers. The wide array of texts by not only pro-war Northerners and Confederates but also northern Peace Democrats and southern Unionists illustrates the northern war policy, the Confederate response to it, and the opposition in both sections.

The book does not map the road to secession and disunion, or even the events at Fort Sumter: at the beginning of *Armies of Deliverance*, the blue and grey troops are already positioned against each other at Manassas. The book proceeds chronologically, portraying the events of the war on the battlefield and home front, from the viewpoint of politicians, soldiers, and civilians; nonetheless Varon discusses a different theme in each chapter, through the lens of deliverance. All chapters offer descriptions of battles, leaders, and other military matters such as hospitals, prison conditions, and black Union troops. Major battles are described with much detail and illustrated with battle maps. By portraying, for example, the contraband policy and draft riots in the Union, Varon also shows how the conflict affected civilian life. Simultaneously, she illustrates the politics of the Union; its foreign diplomacy; emancipation; different political groups such as Copperheads and Unionists; and blacks as political actors.

Varon highlights certain individuals, most notably Abraham Lincoln, whose actions she closely follows throughout the war to explain his political decisions and the reasons behind them. She explores how, facing the dual challenge of uniting Northerners and emancipating slaves, Lincoln performed a political high-wire act. Much of the text is dedicated to less-trodden paths such as Lincoln's 1864 presidential campaign and the process of reconstruction in the border states. Lincoln's deliverance rhetoric, Varon argues, helped build a 'broadly Unionist' coalition that encompassed not only Northern politicians but also such groups as loyalists in the border states and anti-Confederates in the South. According to Varon, these groups found deliverance a 'shared vocabulary for battling disunionism' that helped bring freedom to the South, which the slaveholders held captive (p. 13).

The book mostly concentrates on the northern perspective of the war; the Confederates' responses to northern deliverance ideology is explored in less detail. However, Varon depicts the expressions of southern leaders and newspaper editors who persistently claimed that it was the intent of the North to subjugate the South. Depicting white Southerners as victims and Northerners as barbarians, they argued that the North wished to free black Southerners and thus establish a reign of terror in the South. As a mirror image of the slaveholders' conspiracy against the lower classes as perceived by the Northerners, Southerners believed that an abolitionist conspiracy had taken over northern politicians and civilians. To them, returning to the Union—which they deemed as an oppressor—was never an option.

An area that Varon touches upon that would have benefited from a more detailed discussion is the

relationship between deliverance and emotion. Despite illustrating the ubiquitousness of the deluded-masses theory, she does not fully explain how it originated and why individual Northerners so readily accepted it. She states that individual Northerners subscribed to the theory expressed by many politicians and newspapers, seeing Southerners as erring brothers rather than as the enemy. She argues that deliverance rhetoric 'served for soldiers as a counterweight to feelings of bitterness, vengeance, and despair' even to the point that 'retributive rhetoric never supplanted' it (p. 12). Varon uses anecdotes to argue that wounded Confederates were tenderly nursed after battles and fallen Southerners mourned as brothers. In a well-known account of the battle of Gettysburg, for example, Lieutenant Frank Haskell 'lamented that the rebel dead were buried unceremoniously in trenches', wishing 'better for his "brave, though deluded, countrymen"' (p. 269). However, Varon allows elsewhere, some Union soldiers 'dismissed talk of misguided brethren' as nonsense (p. 300). As a historian of emotions, I am intrigued by the connection between the ideology of deliverance and feeling. Deliverance, it seems, was an instrument that helped Northerners strive to see Southerners in a positive light, despite their adverse experiences and feelings that pushed them towards retribution. To me, it would seem logical that Northerners—especially soldiers who witnessed the cruelty of war daily—did not so firmly believe in the deluded-masses theory. Rather, they likely struggled to express appropriate emotions such as grief and pity, to fight the bitterness and despair. A more thorough discussion on the emotional motives and experiences of both Northerners and Southerners would yield a more comprehensive outlook on deliverance.

Indeed, the fluctuating nature of the notion of deliverance renders the conclusion, which traces its meaning to the Reconstruction period, less persuasive than the other chapters. The conclusion argues that, in the post-war period, radical Republicans were still promoting deliverance and the deluded-masses theory, albeit unsuccessfully. The deluded-masses theory persisted throughout the war in the North, although many Southerners remained loyal to the Confederacy until the very end of the war (and some long afterwards). After the war, Northerners learned that there were not as many anti-Confederates in the South as they had imagined. Neither did all Northerners support black equality, or even freedom, making it possible for the South to enact legislation that—in all but name—re-established black bondage. According to the conclusion, radical Republicans regarded Andrew Johnson, who granted pardons to former Confederates and opposed black equality, as having 'betrayed deliverance' (p. 430). Johnson's actions, certainly, can therefore be seen as a betrayal of black deliverance that signified freedom and equality. His lenient attitude to white Southerners, however, was welcome and not seen as a betrayal. In this context, the fact that Northerners used the same broad definition to encompass both the enslaved blacks—who desired deliverance and, in many cases, actively advanced it—and the 'deluded' whites—who did not see themselves as victims, had not wanted Unionist deliverance, and now voted the same men into office who had been in power before the war—is somewhat perplexing. Thus, Varon's conclusion would have benefited from a more precise definition of deliverance—a term many Southerners also used in connection with their war efforts—and its ideological background, to help the reader understand why it remained at the heart of Republican attempts to reconstruct the Union, despite its rejection by the ex-Confederates.

Overall, I believe that, as she promised, Elizabeth Varon has successfully written 'a new history of the Civil War'. Her innovative theory broadens understanding of the American Civil War and will stimulate further discussion. Admittedly, the space available in a single-volume book makes the reader at times feel rushed, and the focus on many matters is limited. Nevertheless, Varon's masterful narrative and her fresh insight make it a highly readable book of considerable quality.

I found Varon's highlighting of subjects that have received less attention in many overviews of the Civil War particularly delightful. Although battlefield descriptions can be tedious to read, Varon has managed to write them in such a captivating way that they were, in fact, among the most enjoyable

parts of this book, along with her astute analysis of Lincoln's politics. In sum, this is a book that I would warmly recommend as a broad introduction to the Civil War to any reader interested in the subject. Furthermore, because of its original approach on the Civil War, it is also a compelling, important read for professional historians.

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