

The Shattering of the Union: America in the 1850s

George C. Rable

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Rable, George C. (2004) "The Shattering of the Union: America in the 1850s," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.6.4.18

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss4/18>

Review

Rable, George C.

Fall 2004

Storey, Margaret M. *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Louisiana State University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 807129356

Forgotten dissent

Detractors of Confederacy in the Civil War South

In the past several years, the long ignored Southern Unionists have suddenly attracted serious attention. Margaret Storey's useful new book on Alabama Unionists during the Civil War and Reconstruction is the latest addition to a growing literature that attempts to recapture the neglected voices and perspectives of an often abused and misunderstood group of dissenters. Like many recent studies of Unionism, this book defines politics broadly enough to encompass a good deal of social history. Women and slaves thus become political actors in the internal conflicts of a Deep South state.

Not surprisingly, Storey discovers a great diversity in Unionist motivations and experiences, mostly notably in the contrast between the poorer folk in the hill country and the more prosperous loyalists in the Tennessee Valley. Yet because she relies heavily on material from some 400 allowed claims that came before the Southern Claims Commission, we learn much more about the latter group and than the former. Given the often capricious behavior of the commissioners, the author seems hardly justified in ignoring material from the barred or disallowed claims. A larger problem is the generally uncritical use of material found in affidavits of obviously self-interested persons seeking compensation from the government. This source material is valuable and revealing but can it simply be accepted at face value? The possibility of exaggeration, distortion, and fabrication deserves at least some attention.

Although hard data is scarce, Storey estimates the number of unconditional Unionists at about ten percent of the 1860-61 voters. To these ardent defenders of the old Union, secession seemed both illegitimate and foolhardy. The braver

souls faced intimidation at the polls and ostracism at home but also developed strategies of resistance. Storey emphasizes the role of kinship and neighborhood in forming Unionist networks of men and women who could not only withstand public pressure but in many cases defy Confederate authority. This was especially true of military-age men who avoided service by hiding out in the woods and swamps. The resulting Confederate raids drew more and more people into a nasty series of attacks and reprisals that brought a terrifying insecurity to several Alabama counties. The relationship between white Unionists, slaves, and Federal soldiers became by turns cooperative, wary, and antagonistic. With full acknowledgement of the influential scholarship of Mark Grimsley and Steven Ash, Storey presents a case study of Union occupation, civilian response, and social fragmentation. Women seeking to protect their families, slaves fleeing into Federal lines, and Union soldiers foraging the countryside all played important roles in a complex tale of loyalty, betrayal, and revenge.

Storey also offers a timely study of counterinsurgency in time of civil war. White Unionists and African slaves provided important intelligence to Federal forces, but like the Union soldiers had to face Confederate guerrillas. Guides, scouts, and partisan fighters participated in bloody assaults and skirmishes, most involving small numbers of men but displaying often shocking cruelty. Unfortunately the reprisals continued after the war, and Storey wisely carries her story into what is traditionally defined as the Reconstruction period. If Unionists found the war frustrating, peace brought increased disillusionment and dashed hopes. The political resurgence of ex-Confederates appalled loyalists who had made so many sacrifices to preserve the Union and suppress the rebellion. And so-called Radical Reconstruction brought its own frustrations as Republicans failed to disfranchise any significant number of former Confederates or confiscate property from men who had tried to destroy the Union. Ironically enough, the Unionists found their own property and lives in danger as the Ku Klux Klan engaged in a successful campaign of intimidation and terrorism against Republicans.

Besides the Southern Claims Commission documents, Storey has examined a wide array of manuscript and published material, and her book is quite well grounded in the secondary literature. There is fresh information here along with some colorful quotations and dramatic stories. Yet it is never entirely clear why a reader should care to know more about Alabama Unionists because Storey does not carefully assess their significance. Staunch Confederates, Federal officers, and even slaves often dismissed Southern Unionists as an unreliable if not a

degraded group of people. Storey refurbishes their historical reputation without ever quite explaining why contemporaries had so little good to say about them. Of course the evidence with which to evaluate Unionist virtues and vices is fragmentary and partisan, and therefore despite all the recent literature on the subject, too many questions of significance and evaluation remain unanswered.

George C. Rable, Charles Summersell Chair in Southern History, University of Alabama, is the author of Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!, winner of the 2003 Lincoln Prize.