

The Uncivil War: Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861-1865

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Review

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Mackey, Robert R. *The Uncivil War:Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861-1865*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 806136243

Unconventional Confederates

Union troops neutralized guerrillas and rangers

The Uncivil War offers a systematic evaluation of the role that irregular operations played in Confederate strategy in the Upper South and the effectiveness of Union responses to these operations. Mackey, a United States Army officer, divides Confederate unconventional operations into three types: guerrilla warfare, or intermittent operations by self-constituted units; partisan operations, or the use of elite conventional units in unconventional roles; and raiding by conventional cavalry. He also groups Union responses into three categories: antiguerrilla operations designed to eliminate irregular combatants; passive counter guerrilla measures such as railroad blockhouses; and counterinsurgency operations intended to deny civilian support to unconventional forces. Mackey then uses detailed case studies to consider each type of Confederate irregular warfare: the activities of Confederate guerrillas in Arkansas, the career of Colonel John Singleton Mosby's 43rd Virginia Cavalry, and the raids conducted by Brigadier Generals John Hunt Morgan and Nathan Bedford Forrest in Kentucky and Tennessee. Mackey argues that the Confederate government made extensive use of unconventional operations, but that Union forces defeated or neutralized every attempt. When the Confederate armies surrendered, therefore, Southern officers did not resort to irregular operations precisely because these methods had already failed.

Mackey centers his discussion of the war in Arkansas on the policies of Maj. Gen. Thomas C. Hindman. Newly appointed to Arkansas following the Confederate defeat at the Battle of Pea Ridge, Hindman was desperate to delay the expected Union invasion while he rebuilt his conventional forces. In June 1862, Hindman issued General Orders 17 and 18, which authorized citizens to

form companies of ten men under an elected captain and placed these companies under the authority of the nearest provost marshal. Eventually, over 5,000 men joined these companies, and for a time they met Hindman's purposes. When Union forces attempted to open the White and Little Red Rivers and then move on Little Rock in 1862, Confederate guerrillas swarmed the waterways, sniping at Union craft and harassing Federal landing parties. Union forces found the guerrillas such a menace that they quickly resorted to punitive operations such as executing captured guerrillas and burning homes, farms, and towns in areas where the irregular forces operated.

But Confederate authorities soon lost control of the irregular companies. Increasingly, the guerrillas shifted from harassing Federal forces to terrorizing Unionists and living off the population. In the spring of 1863, Confederate authorities ordered the guerrillas to enroll in regular units and sent troops to break up the irregular companies. Union forces also employed increasingly effective measures against the guerrillas. In the most threatened areas they required families either to leave or to relocate to fortified farm colonies protected by Home Guard units. Union officers also formed a special riverine unit of gunboats, transports, and land forces to patrol the waterways and respond rapidly to guerrilla threats, though poor discipline and command conflicts kept this unit, the Mississippi Marine Brigade, from having the effect intended. Finally, the Union command recruited Arkansas Unionists into special antiguerrilla units, which had considerable success in hunting down Confederate irregulars.

Mackey draws a sharp contrast between the Arkansas guerrillas and Mosby's Partisan Rangers. Though they were dispersed among the population, operated in small bands, and sometimes wore civilian clothes or Federal uniforms, Mosby's men were officially enrolled Confederate soldiers. They were subject to military discipline, rarely took private property, and operated against military targets under the command of commissioned officers. By repeatedly sabotaging the critical Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, capturing wagon trains, eliminating Union pickets and garrisons, and collecting critical intelligence, Mosby's men effectively hampered Union operations in northwest Virginia, cost the Union considerably in materiel and manpower, and provided a huge boost to Confederate morale. Mackey attributes the unit's success to a few critical factors: Mosby's freedom to recruit selectively from among the Virginia cavalry units, his authority to distribute captured Federal property, the support the unit received from Gen. Robert E. Lee and the Confederate War Department, Mosby's own operational inventiveness, and his practice of operating in small units of ten to 20

men.

Union forces took a number of steps to counter Mosby's operations, including the construction of an extensive network of blockhouses and stockades along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the employment of armored trains, expanded operations against partisan forces, and the recruitment of special antipartisan units such as Captain Richard Blazer's Independent Scouts. Though these measures certainly reduced the amount of damage the partisans inflicted, Mackey argues that Union efforts were hampered by a fundamental misunderstanding. Drawing on their experiences in West Virginia, Union officers such as Brig. Gen. David Hunter and Col. George Crook viewed Mosby's men as rag-tag guerrillas, rather than the disciplined, effectively led troops they actually were, and repeatedly underestimated their abilities. When Union antiguerrilla operations failed, Northern troops increasingly resorted to punitive measures against the population, culminating in the Union campaign of destruction against the Shenandoah Valley in 1864.

Mackey asserts that the long tradition of cavalry raiding and its chivalrous overtones made this form of irregular warfare particularly appealing to Confederate authorities. Recognizing the superiority of Confederate cavalry at this time, and the fragility of Union communications, in the summer of 1862 Maj. Gen. Braxton Bragg sent cavalry into the Union rear to tear up railroad track, eliminate Federal posts and garrisons, and destroy supply depots. Mackey argues that these raids effectively halted Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell's advance toward Chattanooga, opened the way for the Confederate invasion of Kentucky, and again boosted Southern morale. But they also gave the Confederates a false sense of what raiding could accomplish and led Morgan to attempt the same approach in 1863, with unfortunate results.

Union commanders, conversely, used the winter of 1862-63 to revamp their responses to Confederate raiding. They strengthened the network of blockhouses and stockades on the railroads, improved the training of troops in the rear, and instituted harsh penalties for commanders who surrendered garrisons. They also greatly improved Union cavalry and increased the number of gunboats patrolling the rivers. Thus, when Morgan launched his raid into Kentucky in 1863 he faced determined resistance from Union garrisons, bombardment by gunboats, ruthless pursuit by Union cavalry, and harassment by thousands of Home Guardsmen in Ohio and Indiana. Together these measures delayed and wore down Morgan's men and eventually led to their defeat and capture. This, along with Forrest's

promotion to command the left wing of Bragg's cavalry in the summer of 1863, ended large-scale raiding in the western theater.

The Uncivil War is an ambitious work that brings together previously scattered information and offers a series of bold propositions. Mackey sets Confederate irregular operations within a clear strategic framework, presents a precise analysis of their successes and failures, and offers a particularly insightful evaluation of Union responses to the Confederate unconventional war. His work deserves praise for cutting through the melodrama that too often has surrounded this topic and for offering a critical, unsentimental evaluation of the Confederate irregular war in the Upper South.

The Uncivil War also suffers from a few curious flaws. Mackey seems determined to cast his analysis within a framework of military doctrine, even though that concept would have had limited meaning to most Civil War officers. This determination leads him to base his approach on the writings of Carl von Clausewitz and Henri Jomini, even while offering no substantial evidence that the main figures in his work drew on these concepts in any way, and even occasionally to employ 20th century concepts. More serious is Mackey's insistence on viewing the unconventional war almost entirely from a centralized, military perspective and deliberately dismissing any other approach. Reflecting the attitude of too many Civil War officers, Mackey tends to deride guerrillas as bandits or thugs. Many guerrillas were criminals, and certainly they could not compare with partisans or regular troops in military effectiveness. But this view ignores the important political roles of guerrillas and their abilities to control the loyalties of a region, suppress dissent, and frustrate occupation policies. It also ignores the fact that the South did indeed resort to guerrilla warfare, in the form of the Ku Klux Klan and similar secret organizations, to frustrate Union racial and reconstruction policies during Reconstruction. Considering the use of Mackey's work at the United States Army's Command and General Staff College and Advanced Military Studies program, this is a critical issue, for any analysis of irregular warfare that leaves out its political, social, and even cultural elements will inevitably prove inadequate and perhaps even misleading.

Dr. Noel Fisher is the author of War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869 and of a forthcoming work on the Civil War in the Great Smoky Mountains region.