

Across the Divide: Union Soldiers View the Home Front

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Review

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Ramold, Steven J. *Across the Divide: Union Soldiers View the Home Front.* New York University Press, \$49.00 ISBN 978-0-8147-2919-9

A New Study About the Union War Effort

Despite numerous studies of the Civil War home front, no one has written on soldiers' attitudes toward the home front at monograph length until now. Making the first such venture, Steven Ramold could have emphasized congruence, stressed division, or split the difference. *Across the Divide* argues that the views of soldiers and the views commonly held on the home front grew increasingly divergent. Indeed, apart from a couple of single-sentence caveats, he focuses on such divisions, which he consistently labels "the divide" between "two sides," to the virtual exclusion of shared attitudes and beliefs. The result seems imbalanced, but is instructive, both in itself and as an example of historians' growing tendency to emphasize divisions and conflict within the Union. This review first surveys Ramold's argument, then presents my specific questions and concerns, and concludes with some implications for our understanding of the Civil War as a whole. My review will be more critical than descriptive, but Ramold has done the Civil War community a great service raising issues, and every Civil War scholar should read this book.

Ramold identifies all the sources of division one could wish for: misperception; limited communications capabilities; the soldiers' experience of hardship and death, versus civilians' sense of their own sacrifices; the new gender division of labor, as women managed households without husbands present; war aims, especially in regard to race and emancipation policy; the need for energetic measures versus threats to civil liberties, particularly in the question of conscription; and the growth of an antiwar movement. Several of these have been addressed as part of previous works on the home front; all make sense; and Ramold provides ample evidence for each. But there are several critical lacunae in his argument that leave it incomplete, if not flawed.

The first is partisan politics. Although chapters are devoted to the antiwar movement and the 1864 election, *Across the Divide* rarely addresses partisan attitudes and ideologies per se. Soldiers are presented primarily as soldiers, distinct from civilians as such, rather than Democratic or (especially significant) Republican soldiers, who shared many positions with civilians of the same party. Ramold bypasses this interpretive issue by emphasizing soldiers' growing, and ultimately overwhelming, support for Abraham Lincoln, but politics and ideology seem to be underplayed in comparison with soldiers' valuation of personal experience. Yet if we assume that most civilians who voted Republican also supported the draft and other energetic measures to prosecute the war, the majority of northern civilians were in synch with the soldiery as a whole. To what extent was the North's Civil War a partisan conflict, as scholars like Mark Neely have suggested?

The second critical issue is chronological and causal, but entwined with that of politics. How and when did the soldiery come to identify so strongly with Lincoln as an effective war leader? On the crucial issue of emancipation, Ramold portrays the majority of soldiers as opposed until sometime late in 1862, or even 1863. His conclusion about the timing of this shift is not clear, though page 4 has civilian views changing faster and more widely, which seems contrary to much of the historiography. Again (a third issue, of tone), apart from a valuable initial caveat his language tends to suggest limited division among soldiers, instead emphasizing "the divide" between soldier and civilian. Yet, as with politics, this perspective seems at odds with much of the existing historiography. While many soldiers certainly opposed emancipation, others saw the value of slavery to the Confederate war effort, or felt empathy when they encountered refugees from slavery (or Confederates seeking to re-enslave them), and came to support it. On the other side of the coin, many civilians came to support emancipation—but many remain strongly opposed, throughout the war and beyond. Historians to date have been virtually unanimous in ascribing some of this support to Republican affinities (and opposition even more strongly to Democratic ones), yet politics again take a distant backseat to soldier experience in this transformation. The immediate environment of war, experienced for a year or so by 1862 or 1863, rather than the years and even decades of past experience that had fostered partisan allegiances and ideological beliefs, drives soldiers' thinking in Ramold's interpretation.

Ramold does conclude that soldiers' views changed, that they became comfortable executing the policy of emancipation. But his most important

conclusion regarding their relationship with the home front is that “all soldiers [agreed] that their experience made them” best suited to understand policy (55). The experience of sacrifice made that position almost inevitable when debate erupted over conscription, especially when the opponents of conscription were so largely opponents of the war as a whole. And here one can easily see real antagonism from soldiers toward civilians. One can easily imagine their frustration and anger with civilian talk of compromise. These different perspectives and disparities of sacrifice have been constants throughout American history, and perhaps throughout military history. But in emphasizing division, the student moves toward emphasizing antagonism; *Across the Divide* ultimately conveys a strong sense of antagonism between soldiers and the home front. Is this warranted? On page 3 Ramold suggests that the divide might not have appeared had the means of communication been more plentiful. This turns the usual emphasis on the literacy and volubility of Civil War soldiers on its head, but it also contradicts Ramold’s emphasis on soldier experience. If the divide could have been redressed through clearer communication, the views of soldiers and civilians cannot have been that different. On the other hand, we presumably have that superior communication today, yet many soldiers still express frustration with civilian policy perspectives, in language not unlike that of Ramold’s Union veterans.

Perhaps the answer is that, while these differences and divisions have always been present, and are in large part rooted in the different experiences of soldiers and civilians, and have varied with the intensity of political views about particular wars, they were not so great that they threatened to tear apart northern society or cripple its war effort. After all, Republicans did remain in control of Congress throughout the war, and Lincoln was reelected, with a majority of the civilian vote. Indeed, Ramold’s chapter on the 1864 election is almost entirely about soldier views of the candidates, the issues, and the electoral process. Despite his assertion that “the battle for America’s political will was one of the sharpest clashes between the army and the civilians it defended” (166), he actually shows very little civil-military division, much less antagonism—apart from that expressed in partisan affinities. A more politically oriented perspective would be less unlikely to frame the “two sides” (167) as soldiers and civilians than as Democrats and Republicans. While more soldiers than civilians voted for Lincoln, Ramold notes that a majority of civilians also did so.

Ramold maintains that studying “the divide” “is necessary to understand how the social and political outcomes of the Civil War came about” (2). But did

soldier antipathy toward emancipation prevent emancipation? Instead, soldier experience of the value slaves had to the Confederacy, and could have as free people to the Union, encouraged them to accept it. The differences between their varied, but increasingly pro-emancipation views and those (also varied, but increasingly pro-emancipation) of the home front did not change policy or its execution. Soldier support for conscription, and antipathy toward civilian opposition, did not change policy. That support was crucial for enforcing the policy, but would have been present, due to soldier experience and desire for victory, regardless of civilian views pro or con.

In other words, soldier experience mattered, encouraging support for necessary war measures like emancipation and conscription, and for Lincoln's reelection—but it is not at all clear whether the opposition of some civilians made a significant difference in soldier views rooted in personal experience. While soldier appeals probably led some civilians (if only family members) to vote Republican in 1864, it seems unlikely that soldier votes actually made kept Lincoln president. Nor, contrary to statements on pp. 55 and 167, does it appear that soldiers claimed any exclusive right to determine the course of policy or the outcome of elections. The divide, such as it was, did not “threaten to end in disastrous Union defeat” (167): soldiers mutinying and refusing to serve might have done so, but they did not do so en masse, and Ramold presents no evidence of civilians, as a group, reacting to soldiers by voting against Lincoln. A minority of civilians voted for McClellan, but they did so as Democrats, from traditional Democratic reasons (including a racism intensified by emancipation), or because they felt the administration was too energetic and uncompromising—but not against the troops, or in response to their views, or to frustrate them.

None of this is to say that the views of soldiers and civilians did not sometimes differ, or matter. Indeed, they mattered as much as or more than in any other American war, and their significance gave a popular, democratic cast to an already inherently political conflict. My principal critique of *Across the Divide* is that it substitutes civil-military tension for that between Republican and Democrat. As a result, when the war was over Ramold says the divide vanished. Certainly differences and divisions decreased, but what about “waving the bloody shirt” in elections well into the 1880s? The decline of wartime urgency certainly contributed to the defeat of Reconstruction, but did soldiers forget their experiences and their enemies that quickly?

Now for an editorial, hopefully of interest to historians of Civil War politics as well as its military dimensions. Recent scholarship has emphasized dissent and conflict on the northern home front, perhaps in response to that on the Confederate home front since the 1980s. This perspective goes hand in hand with questioning the traditional interpretation of the Civil War as a good war, a recent historiographical development ably critiqued by Yael A. Sternhell in the June 2013 issue of the *Journal of the Civil War Era*. Yet, when it comes to violence on the northern home front, we really have very little of monographic detail on draft resistance outside New York City, and certainly nothing to compare with Paul Escott's essential *Civil-Military Relations in the Confederacy* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), William Freehling's indispensable *The South vs. the South* (Oxford, 2002), or the many works on armed Unionist resistance, armed Confederate repression, and civil violence in the South. It seems indisputable that dissent was usually conducted through peaceful politics in the North, and much more often by violence in the South, and that the repression of dissent was much more violent—replete with summary executions—in the Confederacy. Why this was so—essentially why southern Unionists fought a violent civil war, or insurgency, against the Confederacy, while very few Copperheads did so for sustained periods in the Union—merits monographs yet unwritten.

The election of 1864 and northern public opinion also remain open fields for exploration. Given all the factors involved in mid-nineteenth-century American politics, all the sources of Republican strength (demonstrated in 1856 as a brand-new but nearly victorious party, and in 1858 and 1860) that did not depend on progress in the war, I have always wondered whether military historians exaggerate the contingencies of 1864 and the chance of Republican defeat. After all, Lee and Johnston were besieged and Early had been repulsed: in hindsight the Confederacy was clearly on the defensive. The media and partisan politics may have obscured this to some at the time, but the major Confederate armies had clearly lost freedom of action, and did so in May, not just when besieged a month or two later (still three to four months before the presidential election). Yes, northern public opinion was suffering from casualty fatigue, but the military situation in the East was dramatically different from that in August 1862, or May-June 1863. Though they may be apples and oranges, we might compare the summer and autumn of 1864 with that eighty years later: in 1944 the Allied forces were stalled, and took great casualties, for six weeks in June and July, then drove across France in August, but were halted, and engaged in

slow attritional combat, during September and October. Yet no historians argue that FDR was in danger of losing reelection because the army was stalled at the Siegfried Line. Was the difference simply in better communications technology? Was it because the media was actually less free, or critical, in 1944? Or do we as historians need to take Lincoln's fears of defeat with a grain of salt, remembering that we should analyze and assess—which means hindsight—as well as describe what the actors said at the time?

More broadly, the determination of northern public opinion has repeatedly been underestimated, by southern fire-eaters, secessionists, and Confederates from the 1850s through the Civil War, and I think by far too many scholars since. In our search for contingency, our quest to give agency to dissenters, do we exaggerate their numbers and power? In our quest for complexity and our drive to think critically, have recent historians (I do not include Ramold in this indictment) lost sight of the fundamental issues at stake in “this people's contest”? Are we in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater?

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