

### Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility

Rod Andrew Jr.

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## Review

Andrew, Rod, Jr.

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**Phillips, Jason** *Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility*.  
University of Georgia Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9780820328362

### Southern Superiority

During the past several decades, numerous studies have attempted to trace the failure of Confederate nationalism, document a supposed lack of will in the Confederacy, and study desertion and dissent in southern armies and on the home front. Jason Phillips's *Diehard Rebels* looks at the other side of the question — why did so many Confederate soldiers continue to fight literally until the very end, long after the point that some contemporaries judged, and virtually all historians conclude, that their cause was hopeless?

On the surface, Phillips's answer is simple. In providing it, however, he has much to say about southern culture and religion, Confederate nationalism, the roots and nature of the Lost Cause, and the psychology of veteran soldiers caught up in a vast, brutal, and bloody war. Phillips argues that diehard Rebels, of which there were certainly tens of thousands, truly believed they were unconquerable . . . They submitted to unending carnage and squalor because they expected to win (2). In short, they shared an ethos or culture of invincibility (2).

In the first two chapters, Phillips explains that antebellum southern culture had much to do with forming this ethos of southern superiority long before the war began. The South's evangelical religious heritage tended to regard white southerners as a chosen people and to trust that an omniscient God directed or permitted all human events. Confederate victories thus reinforced assumptions that God favored the cause of the South; defeats, meanwhile, were only God's ways of chastising his beloved and teaching them to rely primarily on His goodness rather than their own strength. Antebellum mythology and stereotypes played a role as well. Southern men went off to war believing the Cavalier myth of southern superiority over boorish Yankee Roundheads. Moreover, the roughness of southern life bred a militant defense of honor and the Rebel

soldier's sense that, in the words of W. J. Cash, nothing living could cross him and get away with it (45). As the war progressed, southern preconceptions of northerners hastened the depersonalization of the enemy that inevitably occurs during wartime. Soldiers, especially, easily convinced themselves that their opponents were incompetent; or, if not inferior fighters, they were evil and barbaric. Reunion with, or surrender to such fiends was not an option. Soldiers convinced themselves and clergymen preached that surely God would not deliver his people into the hands of such a thieving, rapacious, unscrupulous foe.

In the next two chapters, Phillips imaginatively reconstructs how Confederate soldiers perceived the war from their worm's eye view. He argues that diehards were not delusional or bombastic when they continued to predict ultimate triumph; they were rational people who saw and fought a war radically different from the one we imagine in retrospect (4). They interpreted disasters such as the fall of Vicksburg, the destruction of Atlanta, or even the loss of Richmond not in the light of what we know now, but in light of their own world view and severely limited knowledge of the larger situation. Even with the telegraph, reliable information traveled slowly if at all to the men in the ranks and even to officers. Most knew little of what transpired beyond the world of their own company, and they constantly spread and attempted to evaluate rumors of fantastic southern victories, major Union disasters, and foreign intervention for the Confederate nation. Moreover, some battles that historians have judged to be Confederate defeats scarcely appeared so to men in the ranks who knew only that their unit had held its sector of the field. Additionally, large military reviews and the bonds of camaraderie gave Confederates an exaggerated impression of their own army's strength; meanwhile, most of the Union soldiers they encountered up close were dispirited prisoners.

The final chapter argues that the Confederate culture of invincibility evolved into the legend of the Lost Cause, as it emphasized southern valor and righteousness and Yankee barbarity. Even after defeat, southern diehards remained defiant. Thus, unlike other scholars, Phillips emphasizes the extent to which the Lost Cause inhibited rather than fostered sectional reconciliation.

This book is grounded in impressive research, though Phillips openly admits its limits. He relies on hundreds of letters of Confederate soldiers of all ranks from the three main Confederate armies — the Army of Northern Virginia, the Army of Tennessee, and the Army of the Trans-Mississippi. However, he excludes partisan forces and Confederate sailors and prisoners. He also draws

insights from secondary works in psychology, anthropology, and the sociology of religion. Yet he does so judiciously and cautiously, and never enough to damage the book's readability or narrative flow.

I do have some minor quibbles. Phillips casually asserts that while southern or Confederate nationalism failed, the culture of invincibility lived on. (3) Perhaps, but scholars have recently questioned whether Confederate nationalism actually failed after Appomattox, or whether instead it continued to evolve into new forms, just as it had since secession. Phillips does not tackle this thorny question directly. Moreover, I wonder, could not the culture of invincibility itself have been a key component of southern nationalism? In another place, the sophistication of Phillips's discussion on the role of religion in soldiers' perceptions perhaps leads him to ignore a central primary source. He seems struck by how often soldiers wrote home or to their diaries, *If God is for us, who can be against us?* (25) and then ponders for several paragraphs what those men must have meant. He seems unaware that the sentence comes directly from Romans 8:31, the context of which probably makes the soldiers' meaning clear.

Despite these very minor complaints, this is an extremely well-researched and readable book. It should find a place on the syllabi of many graduate seminars as well as laymen's bookshelves. It is important for several reasons. It will become required reading for anyone interested in the psychology and motivations of Civil War soldiers, Confederate nationalism and will, the Lost Cause, and postwar reconciliation. Rather than ask why soldiers fought (i.e., nationalism, ideology, camaraderie, trust in their leaders) it is more concerned with why they *continued* to fight into late 1864 and 1865, as the Confederacy itself was crumbling. It is also a powerful, if indirect, critique of the lack of will thesis — the old argument that the Confederacy collapsed from within due to lack of national unity and determination. Additionally, it breaks down artificial chronological boundaries that historians have created so that important links between the antebellum, wartime, and postwar southern culture are not obscured. Finally, it is the latest work to support the growing sense among many historians that the roots of the Lost Cause can be found in the war itself or even earlier; the Lost Cause was not simply a cynical, deliberately fabricated reaction against postwar social change. The book's purpose is not to revive Lost Cause mythology; indeed, Phillips sees the growth of the culture of invincibility as tragic, not romantic, for the South and for the nation. However, Phillips makes it easier for us — without the condescension or moral smugness of modern Americans who enjoy the benefit of hindsight — to understand how determined,

defiant, white southerners perceived themselves and why they continued to fight.

*Rod Andrew, Jr. is associate professor of history at Clemson University. His latest book is Wade Hampton: Confederate Warrior to Southern Redeemer (University of North Carolina Press, May 2008).*