

### **Punitive War: Confederate Guerrillas and Union Reprisals**

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## Review

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**Mountcastle, Clay** *Punitive War: Confederate Guerrillas and Union Reprisals*.  
University Press of Kansas, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1668-8

### A New Look at a Different Kind of War

An old truism warns historians that their books often reflect the times during which they were written. When it comes to the Civil War's guerrilla conflict, for example, it is hard to miss the shadow of Vietnam that looms over works such as Philip Paludan's *Victims* (1981) or Michael Fellman's seminal *Inside War* (1989). During the two decades since the latter volume's appearance, numerous historians have expanded upon Fellman's foundational depiction of a vicious, increasingly nihilistic conflict that was more about brutality than glory and tales of derring-do. Studies of the war's guerrillas, usually embodied in discrete local studies, thankfully have become a familiar and useful part of the historiographical landscape, reminding scholars that Civil War combat was not confined to the most celebrated battlefields.

Meanwhile, the shadows of other, more recent wars increasingly began to fall. As American troops confronted insurgents daily in Afghanistan and Iraq, both the American military and the scholarly community began to look back to Civil War counterinsurgency. In *The Uncivil War* (2004), Army officer and Iraq War veteran Robert Mackey offered precise, useful definitions of the various manifestations of guerrillas as well as their opponents in order to argue that the Union Army's counterinsurgency efforts ultimately proved successful. In *Punitive War*, however, another officer, Clay Mountcastle, comes to decidedly different conclusions. Mountcastle insists that the army's tough methods, which increasingly focused on harshly punishing local civilians for guerrilla attacks, failed miserably. Punitive revenge measures such as the widespread burning of buildings and towns, as well as field executions of prisoners, only served to harden the men in blue and encourage exponential increases in the levels of destruction and reprisal.

After a survey of previous American experiences with guerrillas, which he characterizes as ineffective, Mountcastle turns to Missouri. There, he argues, the Union Army first learned its lessons about counterinsurgency. Frightened and frustrated, Union soldiers and officers alike abandoned conciliation in desperate attempts to silence the guerrilla's rifles. John Pope, in particular, emerged as an early proponent of punishing locals for nearby bushwhacker activities. First under Pope, and then under the succession of Union brass that included John C. Frémont, Henry Halleck, U. S. Grant, and William T. Sherman, the army's responses escalated from arrests and demands for monetary compensation to the regular execution of suspected guerrillas and John Schofield's destruction of entire towns. The nadir came with Thomas Ewing's familiar Order No. 11, which infamously depopulated the entire region along the Kansas border in retaliation for William Clark Quantrill's Lawrence Raid. Notably, all of these measures routinely failed to stop guerrillas. Nonetheless, generals such as Grant and Sherman carried the same tactics from their cradle across the western theater and, in Grant's case, on to Virginia. Sherman's March to the Sea as well as Philip Sheridan's burning of the Shenandoah Valley proved the culmination of the Union Army's determination to punish Southern civilians for both guerrilla attacks and the war as a whole. Often taking on historians who argue that the Civil War was not a "total war," notably and pointedly Mark Neely and Mark Grimsley, Mountcastle concludes that the army's punitive war, in the end, often was little more than vengeance, signified a regrettable loss of restraint and military discipline, and was much more common than the soldiers and later historians want to admit.

Mountcastle offers a powerful challenge to those who would minimize the war's comparable destructiveness and cruelty. Too, he turns up incidents that otherwise have slipped through the cracks of history while pushing irregular warfare, as a whole, closer to the center of the conflict. At times, the narrative does stretch the tight thesis a bit too thinly. Having argued for a Missouri genesis and a subsequent west-to-east trajectory that in many ways mirrors Grimsley's model in his book *The Hard Hand of War* (1995), Mountcastle ends up spending considerable ink in his final chapter on explaining the almost simultaneous appearance of the same phenomena in Appalachia. In so doing, the author misses much of the recent literature on that corner of the guerrilla war. Nonetheless, on the whole this is another important addition to the literature on the topic, signaling as it does a discussion that will continue.

*Kenneth W. Noe is the Draughon Professor of History at Auburn University. His most recent publication is Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army After 1861 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).*