

Cwbr Author Interview: The Union War

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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THE UNION WAR

Gallagher, Gary

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Interview with Dr. Gary Gallagher, John L. Nau III Professor of History at the University of Virginia

Interviewed by Nathan Buman

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today, I'm delighted to be joined by Gary Gallagher who is John L. Nau III Professor of History at the University of Virginia to discuss his most recent book *The Union War*. Professor Gallagher, thank you for talking with us today.

Gary Gallagher (GG): Thanks for inviting me.

CWBR: You mention in the acknowledgements that you came up with the idea for this book ten years ago; how did you decide to approach this question and look at a study of the Civil War through the concept of Union?

GG: I began talking about the book ten years ago with Joyce Seltzer, who is the editor I worked with at Harvard on an earlier book, *The Confederate War*. But I've really been thinking about this for much longer than that. I've been thinking about it because I've found over the years perhaps the most difficult thing to explain to students, or groups of adults to whom I speak about the war, is why the loyal citizenry thought Union was worth fighting for. It's a very hard concept for many modern Americans to come to terms with: why would someone from Vermont who is under no direct threat, either their property or their system of local government, from the Confederates, why would they think it was worthwhile to put on a uniform and risk their lives to save the Union? Union just doesn't mean anything to us now, and it's very hard to explain that to modern audiences.

CWBR: I was especially intrigued by your discussion of language and vocabulary, particularly when you discuss how the word "Union" has essentially dropped from our current vocabulary but that it dominated the Civil War and antebellum period. Why do you suppose that is the case? What did Union truly mean to the wartime generation of soldiers and civilians?

GG: I do think Union has gone out of our vocabulary, literally gone out of our vocabulary in terms of its mid-nineteenth-century meaning. Union has a labor connotation now; it has no tie to the way that it was used in the mid-nineteenth century. In the mid-nineteenth century, Union and nation and country and United States were deployed as synonyms frequently; they're interchangeable in a lot of the writings that you see in the mid-nineteenth century. I think that part of the problem now is that Union, among that cluster of words, simply has dropped out. Now we think of nation, or we think of country. And we take the nation for granted; we take all of the things for granted that were much more fraught in the mid-nineteenth century. We can't imagine an internal threat to the United States of the sort that galvanized the loyal citizenry between 1861 and 1865. Union is just a word that no longer has any meaning in that regard, and if we don't have a sense of what that word means . . . I think Elizabeth Varon's book from a couple of years ago, *Disunion*, helps get at the meaning of the word. She talks about how important the word "disunion" was and, of course, disunion can only be an important word if Union is an even more important one. Why was the idea of disunion so troubling to so many people? Well, it's because Union meant so much, and I think it meant a cluster of things. It meant the legacy of the founding generation, the handiwork of the Philadelphia Convention, the small "R" republican form of government, the small "D" form of democracy; it meant a nation where common people had a voice in their own government--of course, we're talking in a mid-nineteenth-century context, so that is to say white men had a voice in their government--and also had the ability to rise economically. Lincoln spoke to this beautifully, in many ways during the war, but the really interesting and important thing to me is Lincoln is simply saying the same kinds of things--he says them better--but he is saying the same kinds of things that untold people are saying. This place is unique in the Western World, the rest of the Western World is going in the wrong direction, advocates of Union believe. They believe the failed revolutions of the 1840s show that the European nations were falling even more into the embrace of oligarchy and aristocracy and monarchy. In an American context, the slaveholding southerners represented oligarchs and aristocrats; unionists in the free states deploy those

words constantly in referring to those who led the secession movement. Everything they stood for, slaveholding oligarchs, was inimical to the work and promise of what the Founding Fathers had done from the perspective of those who really took Union seriously. They also believed that Union had meaning beyond the United States. It's important for all of those reasons within the United States but beyond that, it's important because, they would argue, that democracy had not at all been established in the Western World and if it fails here, it might be snuffed out entirely. When Lincoln talks about the last, best hope of earth, that's what he is talking about, but lots of other people used language very similar to that. So it has a Trans-Atlantic meaning, and it also has a meaning for those who lived in the United States: a profound meaning, something that would cause people to risk their lives.

CWBR: You admit, up front, the challenges that any scholar must overcome when looking at the motivations of the common soldier and/or the common population during wartime, especially given the tremendous amount of letters written during the American Civil War. What sorts of obstacles did you face in trying to provide a broad enough scope to achieve a representation of the ways in which soldiers and civilians, alike looked at Union and the Civil War?

GG: The key is, there's so much evidence from the Civil War that you can argue anything. You can take almost any position and argue it, and you can find evidence that supports what you want to argue. I don't just look at soldiers in this book, but common soldier testimony is so voluminous that I think the only way to come at it is to read as much as you can with the understanding that no scholar can read anything but the tiniest percentage. We're talking about millions and millions of letters that the soldiers wrote, any scholar who reads 20 or 25,000 of them has done heroic labor in research. But those 25,000 letters are statistically insignificant, and they cannot, in any way, be considered a real representative sample of soldiers' sentiments. So I think it's important to place different kinds of evidence in conversation with one another. Read as much as you can, pick out the themes in the letters that you've read, and then compare those to what you find elsewhere. There are other types of evidence you can use. In *The Union War*, I used patriotic covers, newspapers, song lyrics, and other things. I believe historians should use as many different kinds of evidence as possible--and when you have the array of different kinds of evidence, see if themes cross over from one kind to another. That's the way I think we have to come at this. Everything we do is imperfect; there's just no way to get a perfect reading of what was going on. But when I think that you look at an array of evidence, Union stands out. This

includes the writings of Abraham Lincoln, who had as good a sense of what motivated the loyal population as anyone. He was an incredibly perceptive politician, and his public statements and statements designed to be leaked to the public, so to speak, first and last, spoke of a war for Union. He says it in the beginning; he says it in his message to Congress after the 1864 Presidential Election. In the latter, he says, in every great war--I'm paraphrasing him--a people have to have one overriding goal and in this great war of ours, its Union. Much of what he is talking about in that statement is a plea to pass the Thirteenth Amendment. But in calling for that, he specifically says the Thirteenth Amendment emancipation, killing slavery--will be one of the tools to help achieve the overriding goal of Union. Even at that late stage of the war, he understood that, for most of the loyal citizenry, it's still about Union. Most of them had embraced emancipation by that time, not for the reasons we would want them to, not as a great moral crusade, but because they knew that emancipation would help to beat the Rebels, would punish the slaveholding oligarchs who caused all of the problems in the first place, and would create a better Union, an improved Union, a Union that didn't have the poisonous issue of slavery sort of lurking in the national political scene to rise up and cause a problem such as that in the Secession Winter of 1860-61.

CWBR: If northerners were fighting for Union, does that mean southerners were fighting primarily for disunion and not states' rights **or** slavery?

GG: I think it's very important to separate the issues that brought secession and what motivated people in the Confederacy during the war. Those are two related issues, but they're not the same thing. Secession came because the cotton South believed that Abraham Lincoln's election, the election of a Republican, posed a sufficient threat to the long-term stability of slavery to make secession a smart choice. It's all about slavery (secession is), absolutely, it's all about slavery. You take slavery out of the picture in 1860, and you don't get secession. I see no way for secession without slavery. I don't think there can be any question about that, and I don't think that any serious scholar does question that. The fact that the Republicans had a plank in their platform that said they would leave slavery alone wherever it existed struck slaveholders as dishonest. They knew that both Lincoln and Seward, the two most famous Republicans at that stage, had said, in very well-known speeches from 1858, that the nation couldn't exist half-slave and half-free. Slaveholders knew that both Lincoln and Seward wanted the nation to be all-free, and therefore they just didn't trust this idea that Republicans wouldn't strike at slavery wherever it was, never mind that they were going to

block it in the territories. So secession is all about slavery. Once you get secession, once you get the cascading crises in the wake of that first round of seceding states, then other factors do come into play. And I think motivations for actually supporting the Confederacy and going into the Confederate army were various, just as they were with the United States soldiers. But I think protecting home ground, not being dictated to by the United States, those are very important. But Confederates talked, all the time, about preserving their way of life, preserving their country, preserving their homes, and all of those things are tied, inextricably, to the fact that they lived in a slaveholding society, in a society that gave them racial control over 3.5 million black people. Slavery is important any way you look at this, but I think different kinds of motivations come into play in terms of what why soldiers went into the army for the Confederacy, for example. But we have to take as a base line that the vast majority--you can't say everybody because with millions of people there are always outliers--the vast majority of the white south, whether or not they owned slaves, had a profound interest in slavery as a means of race control, in addition to slavery as a means of economic control in some ways.

CWBR: During Grant's campaign, how did many northerners justify going through the trial of so many casualties? It seems almost as if Grant gets a pass for the tremendous casualties. Was it the promise of a stronger Union?

GG: He didn't get a pass from *all* citizens in the North. A lot of the Democratic newspapers, especially the Copperhead kind of newspapers such as *The Old Guard*, were very hard on Grant. Some of them began to call him a butcher; that's mainly an epithet that was leveled against him by Confederate newspapers but some of the newspapers in the United States did so as well. I think it was a measure of the devotion to Union that the citizenry *was* willing to put up with that level of loss in the spring and summer of 1864, although it was a close thing in the summer. We always need to remind ourselves that United States victory was not pre-ordained. The United States could have lost the war. I think that more than once the Confederacy came close to meeting the test it needed to meet for success. The Confederacy had an easier test than the United States did. All the Confederacy had to do and Lee understood this very well--was persuade the civilian population of the United States that it wasn't worth the cost. I think Overland Campaign pushed a significant part of the civilian population close to that point in the summer of 1864, from late June and through July and into August. I think it was--of course this isn't new with me--Sherman in Atlanta and Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley that turned things around and re-elected

Lincoln and the Republicans who, of course, had not run as Republicans in 1864. They ran as the Union Party, which is another very clear indication of how important that concept was. Let's don't even call ourselves Republicans, they said, we'll bring in the greatest possible support if we call ourselves the Union Party. It was close in the summer of 1864. Grant did get some criticism; the person who was largely immune from criticism and a person who was a much bloodier general than Grant, first to last, was Lee. That's one of the interesting topics of the war. We're off-subject a bit, but Lee essentially was given a pass by the people of the Confederacy. That's always fascinated me.

CWBR: You seem to be arguing for a middle ground when you discuss the role that the Union Army played in emancipation, a coming together of opposing traditions (military and social). How important is an understanding of both perspectives in the process of emancipation and the execution of the war?

GG: There are several factors that have to be in any consideration of the process of emancipation, and it was a process. Lincoln has to be in it; Lincoln's absolutely one of the crucial factors. Congress is very important, beginning with the first Confiscation Act in the summer of 1861 and moving through all of that legislation in the spring and summer of 1862. And, of course, the actions of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people in the Confederacy are very important, the notion of self-emancipation that W.E.B. Dubois advanced in the mid-1930s and which has been picked up by any number of historians beginning in the late 1960s and coming down, most recently, through Steven Hahn and others now. All of those are very important elements of the process, but my argument is the one that gets left out is the role of the United States Army. If you take the United States Army out of the equation, you don't get emancipation no matter what any of those other people want; it doesn't matter. If the United States Army doesn't go somewhere, emancipation doesn't go there either. It's fascinating to look at the geography of emancipation in the Confederacy during the war. Where are the roughly half-million enslaved people who actually achieved freedom during the war? And I take this number from Ira Berlin's project at Maryland, which I think is the gold standard in that regard; it's about a half a million, about one in seven. One in seven, where are they? They're where the United States Army went and stayed for a significant period of time: up and down the Mississippi River, the Lower Peninsula in Virginia, in significant parts of Tennessee, that's where emancipation comes. It comes where the army goes. What is the degree of emancipation in Texas? Virtually zero; the United States Army doesn't get there, so it doesn't matter how much an enslaved person wants to be free. In Texas,

there's no chance because the army doesn't come. So I just think it's very important to put the army, not only in the picture, but put the army very prominently in the picture. And also, to make the point that it doesn't even matter whether the soldiers in the army want emancipation to come or not. A lot of them do; by the end of the war, I think most of them did, though again, not for the reasons we would want but they still did. But even somebody who isn't really for emancipation, an army commander who's not really for emancipation--Sherman would be a good example of that--still acts as a destructive agent regarding slavery as he moves his army through central Georgia or wherever he's going. The army is absolutely critical to the process of emancipation.

CWBR: Stephanie McCurry's most recent book suggests taking the slaves seriously in the ways in which they negotiated freedom, that they had to navigate a difficult environment when the Union army came marching through the Confederate countryside. How might your findings complement or contradict the concept of the slave as an active player in emancipation?

GG: I don't contradict it at all. I think that enslaved people *did* play an active role when they were in a situation where they could. I'll just come back to my earlier point; the situation has to be one where there is the possibility of freedom, and that possibility of freedom lies in the presence of a United States military force near enough at hand to make the decision for freedom one that was attainable. It might still be very difficult to get to Union lines, it often was, but they had to be close enough to get there. So I see no inherent contradiction at all between the idea of an enslaved people working hard to achieve their own emancipation and the fact that the United States Army was crucial in allowing them to do so. I see no contradiction there; it's just that I would argue that it doesn't matter how much an enslaved person wants to be free, they cannot be free within the context of the Civil War unless the conditions are appropriate and the crucial factor is: has the United States Army come close enough to make it possible?

CWBR: David Blight has become the staple for looking at postbellum reconciliation. Does recognition of slavery and its abolition as major war motivations or war goals hold northern and southern whites accountable for rebuilding their postbellum society?

GG: Well, I think reconciliation has been exaggerated; I don't think most people were reconciled after the Civil War. I think there's a difference between

reconciliation and reunion, and there's an interesting study that will be coming out soon by Caroline Janney. She's writing a book on the memory of the war that is going to deal with these themes, and distinguishing between reunion and reconciliation is one of her points. I think she's exactly right. Of course reunion began at Appomattox; the two sections are put back together into the nation. But true reconciliation--the kind of reconciliation where the opposing parties would say it doesn't really matter who was right or wrong, let's just talk about how brave we all were together, and let's airbrush black people out of the picture, and just have a white drama of triumph--I don't think that ever really happened. I think it happened in key places, sort of showcase places, but reconciliation for Union veterans was--and Grant is a perfect example of this--their version of reconciliation was: we were right, you were wrong, and now we welcome you back on those terms. That's not really reconciliation of the sort that's often put forward. I think the animosities were profound, and I don't think they ever went away for the wartime generation. And the mass of white veterans did not airbrush emancipation out of the picture. That doesn't mean they held the kind of racial views we would want them to hold, but they didn't airbrush emancipation out. There's a wealth of evidence that supports this point. In the speeches at Union monument dedications--the ones at Gettysburg are the easiest ones to get to the speakers talk about Union the most but also talk a lot about emancipation. Emancipation was a good thing; emancipation hurt the slaveholding class, it removed this future threat to the republic, it made a better republic possible. I don't subscribe to the idea that there's this great collective amnesia that swept over white people North and South in terms of which side was right and which side was wrong. I don't think most Confederates would have ever said that they were wrong; they weren't happy that they lost and they weren't happy that slavery was gone but they accepted reality. And the United States veterans who won the war would never have said that it didn't matter whether you fought for Union or fought for the Confederacy. For Union veterans, they had been right and they were willing to reconcile on those terms: "You ex-Rebels were wrong and we defeated you, now you can now come back into the Union.

CWBR: During an 1889 battlefield dedication at Gettysburg, Joshua Chamberlain says "our thoughts were not then of States as States, but of the States united, ---of that union and oneness in which the People of the United States lived and moved and had their being "[T]he cause for which we fought was higher; our thought was wider." What is lost is slavery of men and supremacy of States." Was the Union the ultimate contribution of the wartime

generation to the future of the United States?

GG: I think the wartime generation would have absolutely said yes, and they would have said that it was an improved Union because it no longer had slavery in it and therefore did not have a powerful oligarchic class of slaveholders. I absolutely think they would have said that the primary outcome of this war was Union. Emancipation is also extremely important, they would have said, for those reasons, because it helps the Union. It makes the Union stronger; it protects the Union going forward. I think that Chamberlain gets at that. Chamberlain certainly mentions emancipation, and he would have been much closer than most Union soldiers to the position that we, in the twenty first century, would want the Union soldiers to have regarding emancipation. But it is about the Union; you have to save the Union first. To repeat myself, they would have also said it's a better Union. War made a better Union. It's a better Union because that ticking time bomb of slavery has been excised. So, for most of the loyal citizenry, they had taken care of all of the business at the end of the war. They had saved the Union, and with the Thirteenth Amendment they had gotten rid of slavery. The only reason they went beyond those things was because in the war's immediate aftermath former Confederates did not seem to understand they had been defeated. I don't think there's any great lost moment in Reconstruction, I absolutely do not. The Fourteenth Amendment was, in the mid-nineteenth-century perspective, mainly designed to punish slaveholders again; that's what loyal citizens would have said. Even the Fifteenth Amendment represented a way to punish the former slaveholding oligarchs. The only reason we got to those two amendments was because the white South behaved so badly, with a big assist from Andrew Johnson, in the wake of Appomattox. I think that many of the loyal citizens said: wait a minute; they're not acting like they lost the war. They're acting like they didn't lose the war! They were offended by that, and so they went beyond the Thirteenth Amendment.

CWBR: Professor Gallagher, thank you for taking the time to discuss *The Union War* with us.

GG: You're certainly welcome.