

Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War.

Joseph Beilein Jr.
Penn State Behrend, jmb79@psu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Beilein, Joseph Jr. (2022) "Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War.," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.2.13

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss2/13>

Review

Beilein, Joseph M. Jr.

Spring 2022

Foote, Lorien. *Rites of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers, and Campaigns in the American Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$22.95 ISBN 9781469665276

Rites of Retaliation explores the ways in which Union and Confederate officers tried to maintain their respective visions of civilized warfare through retaliation. Lorien Foote, Patricia and Bookman Peters Professor of History at Texas A&M University, depicts warfare as a tit-for-tat at the highest levels that not only shaped military policy but also combat and the experience of soldiers in the Civil War. Through Foote's careful analysis of the raging brawl between the Union and Confederate armies in the Union Department of the South, she is able to connect the dots and reveal the path that led the two sides to its massacres and the targeting of civilians. While it was unquestionably brutal, *Rites of Retaliation* shows readers that the leaders of each army were trying to follow the blueprint of warfare as it was supposed to be waged by honorable combatants in order to discourage their enemies from unwarranted violence and bloodshed.

For those familiar with Professor Foote's work, her turn towards the cosmic dialogue between combatants seems like a natural and ambitious outgrowth of her previous scholarship. Foote's first book examined the life of Francis George Shaw, Robert Gould Shaw's father, a Boston Brahmin, and influential reformer. In her next book, *The Gentlemen and The Roughs*, she used the lenses of gender and class to examine the way that the sons of wealthy New Englanders worked to keep control of their rough and tumble enlisted men even as both tried to conquer the rebellious South together. Foote's interests turned to the Union prisoners of war who escaped in 1864 and '65 from prisons in South Carolina with the help of enslaved African Americans. Foote has proved herself to be one of the most open-minded scholars of the Civil War, a historian who will use the most effective analytical approaches to tackle a subject and bring it to life.

Beginning in 1862, this book tracks the war as it evolved in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. This theater of war was ground zero for the most significant areas of dissonance between Union and Confederate ideas of "civilized warfare." There, the Union army recruited and

organized some of its first black units. Along the Combahee River and against the breastworks of Fort Wagner, African American soldiers proved themselves as fighting men and tormented the psyche of the Confederacy, built on the cornerstone of white supremacy. The question of whether or not civilians could be targeted by honorable soldiers came up time and again as the Union army bombarded Charleston and Sherman made Georgia howl. Both sides used prisoners as human shields against enemy artillery fire and the Confederates massacred black soldiers even as they tried to surrender—on and on it went in the Department of the South.

Foote knows the sources available for this area of the war probably better than any other working scholar. Her grasp on the first-person accounts of the events she describes is broad and deep. The story told in *Rites of Retaliation* is one that requires a range of perspectives from officers on both sides, black and white soldiers, and noncombatants. Foote seamlessly integrates these stories gleaned from published documents, materials available online, and collections housed in Boston, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and Columbia, South Carolina. The end result is a masterful retelling of a multidimensional story of an ever-shifting battlefield.

Rites of Retaliation is a well-executed contribution to Civil War history. While this reviewer found little to take issue with, it is possible that some of the questions Foote asks of her sources might yield different answers if they were asked of Union officers waging a different kind of war against guerrillas (or guerrilla captains fighting the Union). Foote admits as much but points out that the Department of the South “lacked the retaliation rituals against Confederate partisans and guerrillas that were characteristic of the border states and the western theater”(3). Fair enough.

This is a great book. Students, buffs, and scholars of the war will all enjoy this fresh take on a part of the war they probably thought they knew well. It is highly recommended.

Joseph M. Beilein Jr. is Associate Professor of History at Penn State Erie, The Behrend College and editor or author of several books including Bushwhackers: Guerrilla Warfare, Manhood, and the Household in Civil War Missouri.