

### One More War to Fight: Union Veterans' Battle for Equality Through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Lost Cause

Brian Matthew Jordan  
Sam Houston State University, [bmj018@shsu.edu](mailto:bmj018@shsu.edu)

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

---

#### Recommended Citation

Jordan, Brian Matthew (2023) "One More War to Fight: Union Veterans' Battle for Equality Through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Lost Cause," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.3.11

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss3/11>

## Review

Fall 2023

**Jordan, Brian Matthew**

**Goldman, Stephen A.** *One More War to Fight: Union Veterans' Battle for Equality Through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Lost Cause*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. HARDCOVER. \$29.95. ISBN: 9781538161555. Pp. 439.

According to author Stephen A. Goldman, whose professional training is in psychiatry, this book “tells the story of how the obligation of Northern servicemen to their beloved country did not end when they left the military” (2-3). It was clearly a labor of love, and the passion with which the author writes is evident on every page. Building from the “Left Armed Corps” (a cohort of veterans who lost their right arms to battle or disease and then entered one of two “left-handed penmanship” competitions soon after the war), Goldman argues that as “Jim Crow took hold on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, Union veterans individually and collectively maintained their important interconnected roles as potent moral and political forces, particularly through the Grand Army of the Republic (3). The author further alleges that “Northern veterans, black and white, fought a second war seeking equality for all Americans, thereby creating the model of civic responsibility based on military service that American citizen soldiers, sailors, and marines have emulated in modern times” (5). By reminding that the GAR opposed racial segregation—and by pointing to veterans who opposed the Ku Klux Klan and promoted a thoroughgoing Reconstruction—the author seeks to extend chronologically the conclusion of historians like Chandra M. Manning, who have argued that among its rank and file, the war promoted more enlightened attitudes on slavery and race.

*One More War to Fight* is ambitious in its scope and claims. Goldman contends that the “Left Armed Corps” was “exceptionally representative of the white Union common soldier,” and

he stakes many of the arguments that follow on this premise (7). The veterans who entered the left-handed penmanship contests may have been remarkably representative of the larger population of Union ex-soldiers in terms of demography and geographic origin, but they were made distinctive (and as such unrepresentative) by what the war had done to their bodies. Even amputees themselves intuited that they were a unique “fraternity”—that they derived their authority over the war from the “eloquence” of their injuries. “Empty sleeves,” as plenty of historians have argued, became “sites of memory”—so much so that they became pilloried and parodied in the postwar press. Union amputees became among the most visible, voluble, and virulently anti-reconciliationist veterans in post-Civil War America.

When Goldman identifies one-armed veterans as such, he is on to something. Union amputees, as the historian Paul A. Cimballa has pointed out in his important scholarship, were conspicuous among the ranks of Freedmen’s Bureau sub-assistant commissioners. Such men were “essential” to securing the fruits of citizenship for the formerly enslaved (105). But when Goldman stakes a claim for the typicality of these veterans, he effaces the most remarkable part of his story: that amputees, in search of meaning for their injuries, often found it refusing to cede ground in the struggles over the Civil War’s unfinished work—and its historical memory. If similar to other veterans, they were also unique. Goldman has, in fact, unearthed much evidence to support this point. He finds, for instance, that “remarkable 35 percent” of the Left Arm Corps “achieved post command” within the Grand Army of the Republic, the largest fraternal order for Union veterans (140). Here again, it is the atypicality of amputees—not their alleged representativeness—that stands to yield interesting insights.

Elsewhere throughout the book, Goldman neglects to ask the best or most penetrating historical questions of his evidence. Goldman writes that Union veterans “collectively...demonstrated that the measure

of a citizen soldier's, sailor's, or marine's time spent in uniform is not solely defined by their deeds in combat—the impact of military service on one's country in peace can be just as crucial, if not more” (67). Yet there is little appreciation for just how startlingly novel this concept was in the mid-nineteenth century United States, still in awe of the classical republican citizen soldier. When Union veterans concluded that “political activism was critical to maintaining what had been achieved through war,” they broke sharply with spoken and unspoken traditions in American political life (161). To what extent did this break account for veterans' shabby regard in Gilded Age America?

Too, there is oddly little analysis about how the triumph of the Lost Cause and the rise of Jim Crow complicated veterans' postwar lives. “It troubled Union veterans that Americans born after the Civil War did not understand their profound resentment toward the [Robert E.] Lee statue [placed on display in Statuary Hall],” he writes (329). How did that “trouble” manifest in ordinary veterans' lives, whether psychologically, emotionally, or politically?

*One More War To Fight* demanded tighter organization, fewer asides, and a better appreciation for a now sprawling historiography on the lives of Civil War veterans. Goldman overreaches, for instance, when he claims that “scholarly examinations of predominantly white Northern veterans after the Civil War have generally taken little notice of their involvement in politics” (143). Nor are the left-handed penmanship contest essays (which have featured prominently in works by Allison Johnson, Frances Clarke, and others) “new” material. The author would have improved his study by better comprehending the significance and singularity of the soldiers at its heart, and by tracking how their attitudes changed (or not) over time.

Goldman writes that plenty of “white and black ex-servicemen through the remaining years of the nineteenth century” relied on their status as veterans to challenge Jim Crow (135). It is

undeniably significant that so many Union veterans believed their work to be unfinished. But some did not embrace racial equality as the war's charge, and others simply grew wearied of the effort. Reconciliation had lived consequences for veterans. "We are losing out all along the line," one Grand Army man claimed in 1910. "We are too old, too shattered, to keep up the battle individually, and as an organization we lag superfluous." (332). As this gem reveals, Stephen Goldman has sifted through loads of rich evidence. Scholars will find the author's subject and sources wholly compelling, but his questions and answers less than convincing.

*Brian Matthew Jordan is associate professor of Civil War history at Sam Houston State University and the author or editor of five books on the Civil War and its era. His book Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War was a finalist for the 2016 Pulitzer Prize in History.*