The Governor’s Pawns: Hostages and Hostage-Taking in Civil War West Virginia

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Throughout the American Civil War, both Union and Confederate forces engaged in guerrilla warfare throughout the border states. With the emergence of this activity, non-combatants often found themselves as the principal targets; particularly in regard to hostage-taking. Both sides engaged in this practice for a variety of reasons, however, for the newly formed state of West Virginia, the taking of hostages became crucial for the survival of the state. In *The Governor’s Pawn*, Randall S. Gooden—native of West Virginia and professor of history at Clayton State University—illustrates the unique hostage policy adopted by West Virginia and how it proved vital in the state’s experience in the Civil War.

“The idea of hostages raises stark thoughts of terrorism, of individual vulnerability, and of uncertainty of friend and foe in gray areas between conventional and guerrilla warfare” wrote Gooden on page xi. This proved to be a constant reality for the people of West Virginia in the state’s tumultuous founding days. From here, Gooden sets out to chronicle how the state’s hostage law proved crucial within those days for the infant state’s government. Relying upon wartime West Virginia governor Arthur I. Boreman’s correspondence and newspaper accounts from the period, Gooden demonstrates how the struggle between a state government and the federal government over the process of taking hostages proved crucial for the survival of the newly formed state.
When the “hostage law” was initially established in West Virginia, governor Boreman—and his predecessor Francis H. Pierpoint, the governor of pro-Union Restored Government of Virginia—justified that it was meant to maintain the peace. To accomplish this, Gooden methodology focused on recounting how the hostage policy impacted different regions of the state—as loyalties varied region to region. However, as he stated, “the dynamics of hostage-taking were more than governmental or military, they were social and economic.” (14) With the heavily divided atmosphere of western Virginia, loyalties often were eschewed. Old rivalries and grudges became the subject of the new hostage law. Individuals only needed to be accused of being disloyal for an individual to be arrested. One’s social status before the war often determined the value they would have as a hostage. On several occasions, Gooden highlighted how physicians were taken as hostages, as their absence from their communities would apply pressure on local residents to protest the Confederate government for the release of hostages taken by local guerillas. Gooden argued that while this policy “allowed for pro-Confederate and anti-West Virginia residents to be detained and pawned…it also opened the way for revenge.” (118) Thus, chaos ensued in western Virginia for the remainder of the conflict.

But to take these hostages, the government of West Virginia relied on cooperation with the federal government. However, this proved to be a quagmire for the West Virginia government as their goals often did not align with the U.S. military. Even once hostages were taken, they fell under federal jurisdiction, thus complicating efforts for governor Boreman in his attempt to exchange them with the government in Richmond; this being demonstrated through several court cases. Therefore, the taking of hostages not only became a policy to maintain peace within West Virginia, but also to solidify the state’s authority within the Union.
The Governors Pawns presents an excellent account of the often-forgotten hostage taking policies that foraged West Virginia. But while Gooden demonstrates that these policies may have been crucial for the state’s survival, it did not come without its costs. Average citizens—which the laws were meant to protect—delt with the fallout of these policies for decades after the conflict, whether it be in the loss of a family member, property, or damage done to their reputation. For Gooden, the hostage law of West Virginia also “provide[s] lessons in law and practicality” and how “civil rights and civil liberties come under threat” in time of war (197). This legacy, in Gooden’s view, accelerated the downfall of U.S. hostage polices within the U.S. military. However, these policies were merely a distraction from a larger aim for the war; but they demonstrate the ugly legacy guerilla warfare and hostage-taking has left on the American Civil War.

Riley Sullivan earned an MA in History from Sam Houston State University and is a Professor of History at San Jacinto College in Pasadena, TX. Currently, he is in the process of publishing a new article for the Tennessee Historical Quarterly titled “The Battle for the Historical Record.”