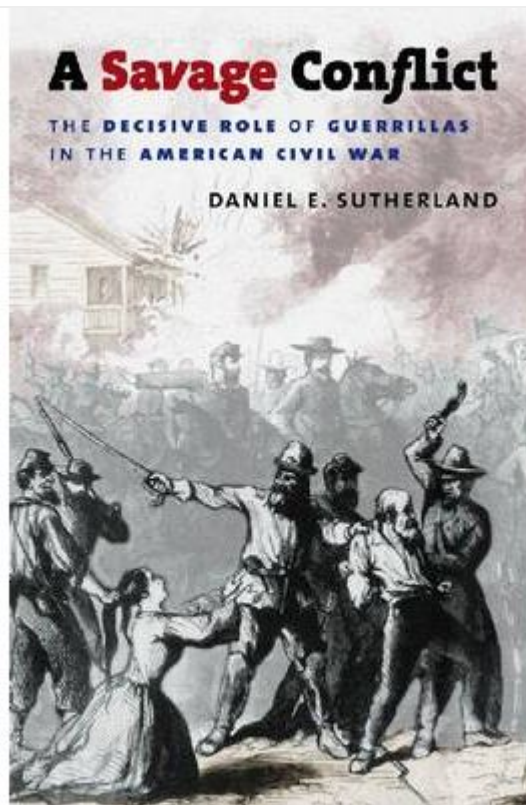


{essays in history}

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A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War



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Reviewed Work(s)

A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War. By Daniel E. Sutherland (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Pp. 456. Cloth, \$35.00.

Americans imagine the Civil War as an event dominated by great campaigning armies, gallant charges, principled generals, and an honorable finale. Of course these were important elements to the conflict, yet, as Daniel E. Sutherland points out, they were also only part of the story. *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* convincingly demonstrates that the war was riddled with an ugly underside, characterized by unconventional combat, murder, thievery, pillaging, and smaller wars that functioned within the larger national conflict. Sutherland's work is the first comprehensive treatment of the subject, and he argues that the guerrilla war fomented unusual destruction on the Southern home front, which contributed directly to Confederate defeat. Sutherland employs a dizzying array of sources—including more than 500 manuscript collections, newspapers, government documents, and published correspondence—to paint a comprehensive picture of the guerrillas and their war.

Rather than operating as a minor sideshow to the major armies, guerrillas played a central role in affecting the war's conduct. "Guerrillas helped check invading armies at every turn," writes Sutherland, "distracted the Federals from their primary objectives, caused them to alter strategies, injured the morale of Union troops, and forced the reassignment of men and resources to counter threats to railroads, river traffic, and foraging parties" (ix). Although Sutherland concedes that it is near impossible to determine how many guerrillas participated in the war, he firmly acknowledges that their operations extended deep into the four corners of the Confederacy, and even into parts of the lower Midwest.

For Sutherland, though, the numbers assume secondary importance to the guerrillas' overall impact on government policy, military management, civilian spirits, and the war's eventual outcome. He claims that the guerrillas expanded the war's scope and length, and made it considerably bloodier than the conventional armies could have done alone. Confederate partisans, for instance, forced Union policy makers

into hardening their strategies toward civilians and irregular soldiers, which invariably escalated violence and chaos on the home front. The turn toward total war sapped civilian morale and convinced many southerners that their government lacked the appropriate means for protection. The Richmond government, therefore, generally failed to manage escalating local conflicts, and “[g]uerrillas would flourish despite the government’s needs or wishes” (54). Incidentally, Jefferson Davis and other leaders had seemed largely reluctant to embrace the guerrillas’ efforts, even when it became painfully obvious that the Confederate nation was on the verge of collapse. By 1865, southerners simply were unwilling to endure further martial punishment and had lost faith in their political leaders to control a disorderly home front war.

Although he certainly acknowledges that the Confederacy as a whole was outnumbered by superior Union armies, Sutherland suggests that southerners, through their use of and response to guerrilla tactics, contributed to their own defeat. However, his book is an explicit and refreshing departure from the “loss of will” school of thought, and instead offers a unique perspective to a long-debated topic. For this, as well as its comprehensive scope, deft research, and lucid writing, *A Savage Conflict* is a welcome historiographical contribution.

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