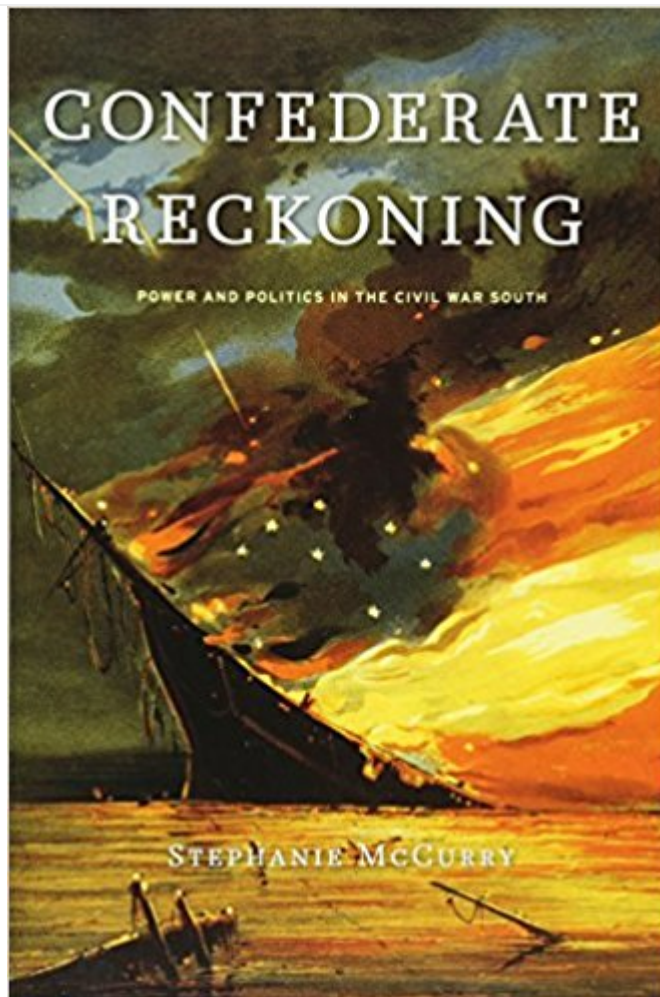


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Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South



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Reviewed Work(s)

Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South. By Stephanie McCurry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). Pp. 456. Cloth, \$35.00.

Stephanie McCurry convincingly argues that white women and enslaved Africans were able to shape the Confederate States of America during the Civil War era. For McCurry, southern secessionists set out to create “a proslavery antidemocratic state, dedicated to the proposition that all men were not created equal” (1). The author’s main purpose is to demonstrate how white women and enslaved African-American men and women during the Civil War forced the Confederate government, to recognize them as political agents. McCurry argues that these disenfranchised groups exercised agency during the Civil War because of the overall difficulties brought on by the war effort. In essence, the war allowed for an “opening up” of history: through the defeat of the Confederacy, the voices of the disenfranchised finally could be heard.

The author begins by shedding light on how the Confederate States presumed the passive nature of blacks and white women, with slaveholders and government officials such as Jefferson Davis re-conceptualizing the phrase “the people” taken from the Constitution to unite Southerners against the North. For Davis and other slaveholders, “the people” became the focal point for Southern identity. Confederate officials and polemicists used this concept to define a white brotherhood of protectors, thus excluding white women and black slaves. They organized and cultivated a masculine Southern identity of the people as white male protectors. As this identity was accepted and pushed into the minds of Southerners by groups like the fire-eaters, white men were successfully guided into rushing to the frontlines in order to protect the feminized and enslaved South and their interpretation of “the people.”

By feminizing “the South” and visualizing themselves as the protectors of this white femininity, the Confederacy left unanswered many of the issues stirring at the home front. As the first shots were fired on the battlefields in 1861, women were left to deal with the government officials

in their towns distributing benefits and other political duties such as money, food, and medical supplies. As more and more Southern men left their homes to fight, the white women and black slaves left behind were able to enact whatever miniscule amount of power they had in order to tackle the issues they faced. According to McCurry, many white women, such as Mary Moore, Eugenia Levy Phillips, and Martha Sheets, took desperate measures in hopes of obtaining necessary foods and materials, while enslaved Africans continued their attempts at freedom. The problem for the Confederacy was that the women and slaves left alone were not as passive to these issues as the C.S.A. had conceived.

As the Civil War continued, government officials delivered compensation to the women in the desperate Southern communities in need of assistance. As a result of the war, the men were not present to deal with this new governmental presence. This lack of a male population allowed for a personal relationship to develop between the white women and the government. According to McCurry, Southern white women had never before experienced such a close relationship between themselves and the government. This novelty reshaped the way Southern women identified with each other as powerful citizens with rights (133). These same white women who had been taught to be passive and patient began to demand protection when the government officials and general merchants refused to provide them with these promised benefits and products. As the war continued in 1862 these same white women throughout the South decided against waiting and began demanding price reductions and their promised governmental aid while identifying as “soldiers’ wives.”

With each day in war, the Confederacy required more manpower and financial funding. Together, these two necessities resulted in higher taxes and the draft of around seventy percent of the southern white male population. For the already aggravated white women, higher taxes meant elevated prices on essential products like grain. The draft further decreased the male population causing even more women with insufficient income to write letters and petitions to their government officials and husbands at war. Other women chose a different path outside of writing; many decided to take their struggle to the streets. Women like Martha Sheets threatened to kill merchants like Aaron Saunders if he refused to sell grain at a reasonable price, Sheets told Saunders “send me the grain if you want to live” (174).

In 1863, as the Confederate government refused to provide poor white women with the required aid, the women turned to pistols, rifles, bowie knives, and axes in order to take what they felt should be provided to them as women. By writing letters and petitions while looting stores and mills, white women solidified an identity for themselves as “soldiers’ wives.” A clerk named John B. Jones remembered white women armed with hatchets and six barreled pistols and how they looted numerous stores. Another witness remembered “when [a store clerk] refused to budge on price, the woman immediately drew a long navy pistol from her bosom and, holding the owner at bay ordered the women to help themselves” (181). Although many women, such as the “forty or fifty...who mounted armed attacks on about eight merchant establishments” in Salisbury, North Carolina, took what they believed was theirs, some wrote letters and petitions aimed at the emotions of government officials, while others chose to abandon the Confederacy altogether (182).

Some women living near the Mason Dixon line abandoned the Confederate war effort, serving as spies for the Union. Eugenia Levy Phillips was among one of the many who were arrested and charged with treason against the C.S.A. for spying. These riots and treasonous acts on behalf of white women were soon recognized as political acts by the Confederate government. According to McCurry, this wave of white resistance during the Civil War had a parallel movement among the enslaved population in the South. Resistance from whites intensified slave resistance in the South, as slaves and free whites shared many social activities.

Abolitionists, preachers, and slave sympathizers during the Civil War encouraged slaves to take advantage of the hectic opportunities presented by the crumbling Confederacy. McCurry combines runaway slave accounts with the narratives of slaves that remained and resisted on the plantations. By combining these two archival sources, McCurry focuses on the vast majority of slaves and their day-to-day resistance on and off the plantations, providing the reader with a broader picture of African resistance.

Slaves, according to McCurry, made up ten percent of the population at political rallies and were aware of Abraham Lincoln, the North, and the plan to emancipate Southern slaves. These circumstances brought on by the war allow the reader to understand how and why a slave named

William Robinson struck his owner with an axe handle for beating his mother and ran away to a hideout made known to him by fellow slaves. While others like Jack Savage and Big George fled to the North on canoes, another black slave named Ishmael Savage stockpiled guns and gunpowder to blast his way to the North (231).

As slaves resisted in a multitude of ways on the plantations, the white Southern men on the battlefield were being annihilated by the thousands. As a result, by 1862 slaves had to be admitted into the Confederate armed forces. With this new opportunity to hold guns and rifles, many slaves turned on the Confederacy immediately and those captured were either charged with treason as humans or physically disciplined as slaves. Huge controversy accompanied the accusation of slaves with treason, for to do so would acknowledge their humanity. When faced with this dilemma the Southern Confederate War Department of Pensacola, Florida decided against taking action, rather than accepting the humanity of the enslaved Africans. To recognize their humanity would also trouble the notion of “the people” as a white brotherhood, so passionately protected by the Confederacy (307).

McCurry concludes by reasserting that the C.S.A. crumbled not only as a result of the Union but also because of multiple inner structural failures. By relying on a concept of “the people” as a white brotherhood of protectors, the Confederate States of America neglected the two pillars it most depended upon, white women and black slaves. As McCurry eloquently concludes, “[the Civil] war transformed the social and political relations it was designed to preserve” (360). The combination of an atrocious war and the inner struggles and resistance produced by the disenfranchised proved to be enough to cause the collapse of the Confederate States of America.

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