



Raising the White Flag: How Surrender Defined the American Civil War

by David Silkenat.

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In *Raising the White Flag*, historian David Silkenat (Univ. of Edinburgh) seeks to provide

the first comprehensive study of Civil War surrender, to explain how Civil War Americans understood surrender and how their attitudes evolved over the course of the conflict.... Looking at the war from the perspective of men who surrendered opens new vistas onto familiar topics, providing fresh insights into such diverse issues as the plight of prisoners of war, Confederate guerrillas, Southern Unionists, and African-American soldiers; the culture of honor; the experience of combat; and the laws of war. These connections reveal that surrender profoundly shaped both the character and the outcome of the Civil War. (4)

Many Americans have the impression that surrendering was forbidden during the Civil War, and that those who did so were simply cowards—real men preferred to die fighting. Silkenat shows that surrender, both formal and on the battlefield, was commonplace during the war. In fact, one in four soldiers surrendered at some point during the conflict, a figure “approximately equal to the number of soldiers killed” (2).

Viewing the war from the perspective of surrender brings fresh insights into the evolution of the nation’s views on manhood and honor during and after the conflict. Aptly noting that the “Civil War began with a surrender and ended with a series of surrenders” (2), the author structures his book to elucidate the effect of particular surrenders, major and minor, on Americans’ attitudes and the outcome of the war itself.

Civil War-era Americans believed that manhood and honor demanded that men would willingly go to war and conduct themselves bravely at all times. In this cultural environment, desertion and surrender were momentous decisions for any soldier. Surrender had to be conducted in manner that would not dishonor the soldier or his family. It was acceptable in some circumstances and disgraceful in others.

In his first chapter, Silkenat considers examples of acceptable surrender and disgraceful surrender, beginning with Union commander Robert Anderson’s surrender at Fort Sumter (13 Apr. 1861). The mindset of most Americans at the time was voiced by Gen. Winfield Scott when he condemned surrender as cowardly and contrary to American laws of war. Anderson was fully aware of this when he surrendered. He nonetheless became the symbol of heroism and honor, greeted by cheering crowds and favorable news reports as he and his men traveled home. Chapter 2 concerns the contrasting case of Gen. David E. Twiggs’s dishonorable surrender at San Antonio (16 Feb. 1861).

Chapters 3–4 shift focus to individual soldiers and POWs, with attention to their feelings about their surrenders and the treatment they received as prisoners. Chapters 5–6 move from the surrender of black American soldiers and the atrocity at Fort Pillow (12 Apr. 1864) to Grant’s development of hard war and insistence on his enemies’ unconditional surrender.

Chapter 7 contrasts the actions of Grant and Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, in particular at Appomattox. Chapter 8 concerns post-Appomattox surrenders and 9 looks at those who refused to surrender even after the war. Chapter 10 assesses how surrender shaped the war and its remembrance.

The author writes that the “ubiquity of surrender indicates that most Civil War soldiers and officers believed they were fighting in a civilized war, one in which soldiers had the right to surrender and the expectation of humane treatment as prisoners.” (295) This was true for white (“legitimate”) soldiers, but not for African Americans, Southern Unionists, or guerrillas, whose experiences with surrender were more savage, deadly, and uncivilized.

A soldier’s entire future hinged on how and when he chose to surrender. The author demonstrates that people of the time sometimes considered surrender to be acceptable, based on an interpretation of the honor code that allowed soldiers (and armies) to surrender under the right conditions. In any case, it was a very common occurrence.

Raising the White Flag is the first thorough scholarly investigation of the extent and meaning of surrender in and after the Civil War. It reveals its lasting effects on the American cultural and social landscape with regard to ideas of honor and manhood, behavior in battle, and race relations. David Silkenat makes a convincing case that a good grasp of Civil War surrender can help us see it “not as a sign of weakness but as a hallmark of humanity” (297).