



*Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War* by Elizabeth R. Varon.

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Review by Cathal J. Nolan, Boston University (cnolan@bu.edu).

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This ambitious history reinterprets the American Civil War as a crusading conquest of democratic enlightenment by a righteous Union in order to deliver deluded Southern masses from slave aristocracy. This thesis is couched in the familiar reckless language of religiously rooted politics and redemptive American nationalism. It concerns not the sources of victory and defeat but the deeply held Northern war aims summed up as “deliverance” (2).

Historian Elizabeth Varon (Univ. of Virginia) wants to move beyond conventional histories that gloss over the obdurate character of the Confederacy, and that treat the Southern “lost cause” and the North’s evolving cause of abolition as equivalently heroic. The result, however, is another old fashioned history—a narrative of a “war of liberation” told in traditional nationalist language of America as religious and political redeemer nation.<sup>1</sup> Union might is also right. In the South we meet obstinate rejection of the North’s interpretation of the war and a denial of any need of moral deliverance by superior arms and virtue. Varon correctly argues that this difference in moral outlook portended the discord that persisted for many decades, echoing down to this day. But this neglects complex moral issues. The war cannot be summed up as deliverance under a “battle cry of freedom.”

For Varon, the North’s regiments were raised by a morally advanced nation bent on uplifting enslaved blacks and saving deluded lower-class whites from dominance by the slaveholder class. Northern armies fought not just to preserve the Union, as Lincoln at first said. The turn toward a deeper moral justification started in 1862, in response to immense casualties and hard war. “The rhetoric of politicians, editors, reformers, and ministers echoed among Union soldiers, who believed that the Federal army, as it moved through the South, was bringing civilization in its wake” (11). Perhaps, but did they really mean it? Sincerity of moral talk is simply assumed. That may explain the shock and anger when heavily armed missionaries to a heathen land met lower class whites who refused conversion in favor of a sanctified nationalism.

The book is well written and salted with political, cultural, and racial anecdotes, mostly from newspaper accounts and editorials; these add cultural richness but are seldom persuasive because they seem cherry-picked. Varon skillfully clarifies the popular evolution of moral purpose in Union war aims. But she depends too much on lengthy quotations of anyone who spoke for a war of redemption, whether or not they held positions of real policy influence. She traces how the fighting intensified as it advanced beyond the first inept skirmishes of small armies, and how harder war affected internal politics of the North. That said, the larger story of a brutal contest of attrition and endurance is absent.<sup>2</sup> Superficial, even potted battle histories are strung together in an old fashioned way. Sentimental anecdotes abound—e.g., a broken doll left behind on a battlefield is a “token of a father’s love” (27). Vague generalities are rife: “the tide of the battle [of Shi-

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1. See Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: Univ. Pr, 1968).

2. An exception is discussion of the Richmond bread riots (222-25).

loh] began to turn” when a bad decision left “a vacuum in the center.” There followed “stiff resistance” and the advance “losing momentum” (58–60).

Missing are crucial operational or logistical details, replaced by religious-political shrouds of deliverance rhetoric. Exhaustion of the South by attrition is implied but not explicitly argued. This is disappointing in a study that purports to be a new history of the whole war. That would require a military accounting as well as analysis of moral/political debates in the North.

Lists of “decisive battles” determined solely by generals are laid out in short narrative strings. Beyond dates and names of generals and places, there is little detail or proper analysis of key campaigns like the terrible eighteen-month Vicksburg campaign that split the Confederacy and turned the strategic tide of the war. We hear of high casualties but not their effects on stunned contemporaries, which motivated both sides to see the war through to the bitter end. Nor do we learn of the erosion of Southern will by too many losses in too many bloody battles, none decisive in themselves, entailing months of trench warfare and a strangling blockade that prevented the Confederate States of America (CSA) from resisting beyond spring 1865. The narrative exaggerates the role of folly and foibles at the command level couched in far too many vignettes. Nor does Varon eschew overconfident tactical judgments, praising or condemning generals and their plans.<sup>3</sup> Such outdated bird’s-eye views are tempered by quotations typical of Civil War histories: diaries and letters of the “common man” serving in the ranks.

The core of the book is its quotation of preachers and journalists to provide a sense of public opinion. This is interspersed with superficial myths of command genius, or the bickering, vanity, and incompetence of generals to explain victory or defeat in battles and the war as a whole. Some generals are better than others, and that is all that matters militarily. Missing are the hard realities of production and population, the resilience needed to endure casualties and keep fighting. Combat scenes are brief and mostly bloodless :

[Gen. Philip] Sheridan chased down [Gen. Jubal] Early and hit him again ..., flanking and stampeding the reeling Confederates, whose casualties more than doubled those of the Federals .... Cedar Creek was a personal triumph for Sheridan, who rallied the Federals for a counterattack after a surprise attack by Early had broken them. Sheridan’s conspicuous bravery pulled victory from the jaws of defeat. (361)

Where is the wider and longer bloody war of attrition that reshaped moral and political views on all sides?

The book comprises three parts of four chapters each. Part 1, “Loyalism,” carries the story from First Bull Run to Fort Donelson, on to Shiloh, and then the Virginia campaign of 1862, closing with Antietam and perils of Union liberation of slaves and puzzlingly recalcitrant whites. At last, we confront the fact that rebel fighting men were deeply committed to the secessionist cause, so that assumptions about “deluded masses” start to fray.

Part 2, “Emancipation,” concerns the Emancipation Proclamation, the liberation of Kentucky, and the first half of the Vicksburg campaign. The war in the West drifts into character sketches and anecdotes about Ulysses Grant and his opponents. Then we shift back east to the Battle of Fredericksburg, told as a clash of commanders rather than slogging armies. Gen. Burnside weeps over his new responsibilities. General Meade is alarmed. General Hooker attacks. General Longstreet defends. Union troops “melt away” under astonishing cannon and rifle fire. The routine

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3. E.g., about Antietam; see 140-43.

post-battle action of Confederates rummaging and foraging among the dead proves they had “lost their moral compass” (170). Then it’s on to Walt Whitman and Louisa May Alcott (172–80).

Part 2 continues past Chancellorsville to discuss Union Leagues, the Lieber Code, and efforts to apply laws of restraint to an increasingly merciless war. Gettysburg gets the usual extended treatment. Once again, despite the jejune military history actually offered, Varon renders strong judgments on specific decisions and generals: Richard Ewell “squanders,” J.E.B. Stuart leads “wayward cavalry,” Meade is exhausted by his noble effort. There is no awareness of irony in noting that other historians have ladled out similar blame or praise, before asserting a higher intention to join “historians who have sought to get beyond the blame game” (246–56). At least the text is enriched by discussion of women’s views of the war and the enlistment of black troops into Union “armies of deliverance.”

Part 3, “Amnesty,” starts with Chickamauga, where the remnant of Confederates “slink to safety.” At Chattanooga, Braxton Bragg “muddled his order to his men” (288) and seems to lose due to infighting among subordinates. The main interest is the politics of Lincoln’s “Ten Percent Plan” for amnesty for liberated Confederates. Securing public assent to this was complicated by atrocities like Fort Pillow and the rising issue of POWs. Getting white Southerners to agree to their own postwar redemption was made harder by the havoc Sherman wrought across the deep South. We at last encounter attrition as strategy in the Overland Campaign (May-June, 1864), though still couched in the unhelpful personification of the final outcome in the persona of generals. Thus, the fight inside the burning woods at the Wilderness becomes a “long-awaited, epic showdown between Robert E. Lee and Grant.” CSA armies did not counterattack outside Richmond, General Beauregard did. Meanwhile, ordinary soldiers are imbued with strong moral views that endorse deliverance (330–37). Absent is hatred born of fighting and any will to avenge.

The book’s last chapters leap from the politics of amnesty to Copperheadism, the Crater, and W.T. Sherman’s March. Here we encounter the latest academic and even pop psychological trends, as Sherman’s men practice “a premeditated form of gendered psychological warfare ..., laying hands on clothes, quilts and jewelry in symbolic acts of violation” (378). Or, perchance were they unsurprisingly plundering a defeated Southern population now truly despised as a result of hard war?

With a sense of relief, one arrives at the Thirteenth Amendment, the fall of Richmond, Appomattox Court House, and the final surrenders in North Carolina, Alabama and Texas. Will the Confederacy now be emancipated by an armed liberation ideology, replanted in Southern soil by the North’s occupying armies of deliverance? Of course not. Yet, not even this great failure tempered the American faith in a redemptive, armed national mission that was afterward carried overseas.

Copperheads and beaten Confederates ascribed the North’s victory to “overwhelming resources and brutal force, not to skill and righteousness” (412). Nor was deliverance coming to everyone in the North. It was a struggle to secure black enfranchisement, let alone real social acceptance of black equality even among Union veterans who had served beside black troops—something to remember the next time Americans think to send forth “armies of deliverance” in the false belief that “redemptive war” can overcome ingrained political and moral evils by sheer force of will and armed might.