



## *True Blue: White Unionists in the Deep South during the Civil War and Reconstruction* by Clayton J. Butler

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2022. Pp. xiii, 228. ISBN: 978-0-8071-7662-7.

Review by Douglas R. Egerton, Le Moyne College, NY (egertodr@lemoyne.edu).

When scholars write about southern men who picked up a rifle and fought for the United States in 1861–65, they always cite the 140,313 southern-born Blacks who escaped to serve in the Union military. They also sometimes focus on Whites who lived along the southern border or the trans-Mississippi West, resisted secession, and sought to reattach their regions to the United States. Even noted historian Christopher Rein, whose *Alabamans in Blue*<sup>1</sup> centered loyalists in the Yellowhammer State, gave equal time to freedmen and White Unionists. By comparison, Clayton Butler's equally valuable new book concentrates on southern Whites who resided in the cotton belt and risked their lives and their property—and in some cases, forfeited their slaves—in service to the Union cause.

Butler's impressive research shows just how comprehensively lower South loyalists differed from their upper South brethren. Prominent Unionists along the border tended to be former Whigs who had supported John Bell and the Constitutional Union Party in 1860. Most of the recognizable names in these pages, however, belonged to the men who had endorsed Illinois Democrat Stephen Douglas. Convinced that Kentucky Democrat John C. Breckinridge could not capture a majority of electoral votes, they tried to remain true to their party by casting their ballots for Douglas, who had consistently denounced secession during his fall 1860 campaign across the South. But just as Douglas ran well behind Breckinridge in most southern states, the number of deep South unionists remained small by comparison to that of Whites who supported disunion. In Alabama, Butler notes, some 300,000 men volunteered for the US Army, while as many as 800,000 enlisted or were drafted into Confederate forces. Even so, they remained Democrats and quickly supported their old party after the death of Abraham Lincoln. Their embrace of Andrew Johnson played a role in the collapse of Reconstruction-era reforms across the former Confederacy.

Although Butler maintains the makeup of southern Union forces varied from state to state, quite often these regiments reveal how atypical southern loyalists were. The 1860 census indicated that southern residents were less than 1 percent foreign born. But the many southern unionists born outside the United States made these regiments more like northern regiments from Wisconsin or New York City than Confederate units. The 1st Louisiana Cavalry, for instance, was fully 50 percent foreign born, with large numbers of German and Irish immigrants serving. That reflected the sizable foreign-born population of New Orleans, the only southern city that matched the ethnic diversity found in northern seaports. The 1st included men from twenty-three different nations. Some had lived in Louisiana for years, others were new arrivals. Most were working-class.

---

1. Subtitle: *Freedmen, Unionists, and the Civil War in the Cotton State* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 2019).

All regarded themselves as Americans, however, and hoped their military service would bring a quick reestablishment of the Union they loved.

A surprising number of these men accepted emancipation as a means to crush the slaveholders' rebellion and punish the planters who had inflicted war upon their country. A few even advocated the confiscation of Confederates' slaves and property as a way to compensate loyal men. In a time when northern Democrats and journalists routinely denounced the Lincoln administration in racist terms, southern unionists used racial epithets to describe Jefferson Davis's government: "The scoundrels that infest Louisiana will soon have to succumb to the great Grant and Sherman," Robert Taliaferro wrote his father, "and the n\_\_\_\_r government of Davis & Stephens will vanish like smoke" (61). That did not mean, of course, that many of these soldiers cared to fight beside Black unionists, only that they believed wealthy planters served their own interests alone, not those of the nation or even the South.

The 1st Alabama Cavalry was regionally diverse. Most of its troops were born in Alabama, and most non-natives of the state had relocated from elsewhere in the South. The regiment even had ninety-eight enlistees from South Carolina, more than in any of the other units Butler surveys. Only eight men appear to have been foreign born; most were from Britain or Canada. As with the Louisiana cavalymen, those who enlisted in October 1862 had suffered under Confederate state governments or had been drafted by the Confederate Congress the previous spring. They were the sons of farmers, and not planters. As one northern editor commented, they were "refugees, driven from their homes by their traitorous southern brethren." As men who knew the terrain, the editor added, they were adept at "scouting and bushwhacking" (77). Unlike the other loyalist regiments, the 1st Alabama served alongside Sherman in his March to the Sea, where they earned a reputation for taking revenge on pro-Confederate southerners. As southern men, they believed they had every right to disobey Sherman's orders about protecting private property and routinely pillaged plantations and homes in retaliation for the treatment of their families in Alabama.

Butler also brings a fresh eye to the massacre of US soldiers at Tennessee's Fort Pillow. Although the atrocities committed there by Confederates commanded by Nathan Bedford Forrest have been well documented, Butler reminds us that, besides slaughtering Black soldiers as they tried to surrender, Confederates murdered some one hundred White Tennessee unionists. In one case, Forrest's men nailed Lt. John Akerstrom to the floor of a tent before setting the canvas afire. Butler acknowledges that Confederates dealt with Black soldiers more harshly than they did southern Whites: 64 percent of Black soldiers became casualties as compared to 31 percent of Whites. But as the story of Akerstrom suggests, Confederates were far crueler to captured southern loyalists than to captured White northern soldiers. Believing officers like Akerstrom, who had commanded soldiers of both races, to be guilty of "race betrayal," they responded with "an extraordinary level of retributive fury" (105).

Crisply written, grounded in deep archival research, and based in careful reading of the relevant secondary literature, *True Blue* will fascinate lay readers and prod academics—especially in southern states—into revising or at least updating their lectures on White southern disaffection.