

# James McPherson's *What They Fought For*: When great ideals gripped the American people

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To give him credit, James M. McPherson, author of *What They Fought For, 1861-1865*, is one of the few historians worth reading at the moment. In the current intellectual atmosphere, his conscientious defense of the progressive character of the American Civil War stands out.

In taking such a stance, McPherson is swimming against the current. A whole host of works—a virtual industry—have appeared over the past several decades which seek to belittle the significance of the Civil War. There are both right- and "left"-wing variations of these arguments.

According to one version, the "popular romanticism of the Civil War," in McPherson's expression, the war was "a tragic war of brothers." This view, which brushes class and economic issues aside, treats the two sides in the conflict as more or less moral equals. Other historians have even asserted that the horrors of slavery were exaggerated and that the Old South was not so bad after all.

On the so-called left, historians have argued that the Civil War and Reconstruction period had the effect merely of shoring up the white landowners and ensuring a docile and dependent source of cheap labor in the South. Another group of historians, including a number of prominent black historians, assert that while the war resulted in the abolition of slavery, its democratic content was negligible. They assemble quotations from Lincoln which prove that he was no abolitionist, adduce evidence of racism in the North or among northern soldiers and conclude on that basis that the war was not a struggle for genuine equality and social justice.

In a previous book, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, McPherson convincingly demonstrated the genuinely revolutionary character of the Civil War. In response to those who denied the existence of meaningful change, the author pointed out that "the abolition of slavery represented a confiscation of about three billion dollars of property—the equivalent as a proportion of national wealth to at least three trillion dollars in 1990. In effect, the government of 1865 confiscated the principal form of property in one-third of the country, without compensation."

He further showed that while the black population in the late nineteenth century suffered severely from poverty and racism, the relative changes were quite extraordinary. The rate of literacy for blacks, for example, increased by 200 percent in the 15 years from 1865 to 1880 and 400 percent from 1865 to 1900. Based on the work of two other historians, he points out that "black per capita income in these seven states [of the lower South] jumped from a relative level of only 23 percent of white income under slavery to 52 percent of the white level by 1880. Thus, while blacks still had a standard of living only half as high as whites in the poorest region of the country ... this relative redistribution of income within the South was by far the greatest in American history."

It was not for nothing that Marx described the war against the "slave oligarchy" as a potentially "world transforming ... revolutionary movement." When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which freed 4 million slaves, Marx commented, "Never has such a gigantic transformation taken place so rapidly."

McPherson's new work confirms that the Civil War was indeed "about something" and that many of its participants knew quite well what that was. *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* was written, in the author's words, to dispel "the general impression that Civil War soldiers had little or no idea of what they were fighting for."

The book strikes sharp blows against another prevailing conception. It is fashionable nowadays to maintain that the masses have never played a conscious role in the social transformations of the past and that they can never grasp "world transforming" ideas. Richard Pipes, the Cold Warrior and pathologically anti-Bolshevik historian of the Russian Revolution, summed up this view when he stated, at a conference in 1992, "I believe I have studied the materials on the Russian Revolution as much as anybody alive today, and I found no desire for revolution on the part of the common people."

This argument, driven by obvious political motives, is principally leveled against the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia. But it is directed as well against the great bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In this new work, based on lectures McPherson delivered at Louisiana State University in 1993, the author considers the intellectual motivations of soldiers who fought in the Civil War. He explains in the introduction that the work has been "carved from research for a larger book tentatively entitled *Why They Fought*," in which one of the themes to receive attention will be ideology. He adds, "This theme has emerged to greater importance than I expected when I began the project."

McPherson culled his material from some 25,000 letters and more than one hundred diaries written by 562 Union soldiers—only two of them black—and 374 Confederates. In two separate chapters, McPherson analyzes the overall motives of Southern and Northern soldiers, and in a final chapter he considers their attitudes towards slavery.

In introducing the material, the author makes the general point that a large number of the soldiers on both sides "were intensely aware of the issues at stake and passionately concerned about them." He notes "that these were the most literate armies in history to that time," since more than 80 percent of Confederate soldiers and more than 90 percent of white Union soldiers could read and write. Furthermore, most of the soldiers were volunteers and their median age at enlistment was 24, which meant that a majority had voted in the election of 1860, "the most heated and momentous in American history."

Newspapers were widely read in both armies and political discussion

took place, according to the diaries McPherson quotes, on a wide scale. Several units, he writes, established debating societies which considered quite complex social questions. One such society organized among convalescing soldiers debated the following: "Resolved that the present struggle will do more to establish and maintain a republican form of government than the Revolutionary war."

The legacy of the first American revolution was in fact claimed by both sides. Although it might seem ludicrous in our day, Confederate apologists portrayed the preservation of chattel slavery as the defense of the highest democratic principles of the American republic. Southern soldiers made constant reference in their letters and diaries to the traditions of 1776. An enlisted man in a Texas cavalry unit, for example, wrote that just as his forefathers had rebelled against the British to establish "Liberty and freedom in this western world ... so we dissolved our alliance with this oppressive foe and are now enlisted in 'The Holy Cause of Liberty and Independence' again." According to McPherson, "*Subjugated* was the favorite word for the fate worse than death that would face southern whites if the Confederacy lost the war. *Enslaved* was another frequent choice to describe that fate."

At its best, the Union soldiers' patriotism was infused with a revolutionary democratic content. Its essence was not "national," but universal and all-embracing, the opposite of the striving for privileges, wealth and territory with which we associate modern-day bourgeois nationalism. The most politically advanced soldiers quoted in *What They Fought For* were animated by great principles and not the defense of a particular geographical entity.

"Many Union soldiers voiced with extraordinary passion the conviction that preservation of the *United States* as 'the beacon light of liberty & freedom to the human race,' in the words of a thirty-five-year-old Indiana sergeant, was indeed the last, best hope for the survival of republican liberties in the Western world."

Echoing these sentiments, a New York captain wrote his wife in 1864: "Every soldier [knows] he [is] fighting not only for his own liberty but [even] more for the liberty of the human race for all time to come." In 1863, a 33-year-old Ohio private wrote that he had not expected the war to go on so long, but no matter how long it took it must be prosecuted, "for the great principles of liberty and self government at stake, for should we fail, the onward march of Liberty in the Old World will be retarded at least a century, and Monarchs, Kings and Aristocrats will be more powerful against their subjects than ever."

The identification of the Union army's mission with the general furtherance of human progress was also widespread, according to McPherson's researches. To cite one example, an English-born Ohio corporal wrote his wife in 1864, after enlisting for a second three-year hitch: "If I do get hurt I want you to remember that it will be not only for my Country and my Children but for Liberty all over the World that I risked my life, for if Liberty should be crushed here, what hope would there be for the cause of Human Progress anywhere else?"

One citation along these lines from a Union naval officer is remarkable because of its source. The officer was Percival Drayton, a native of South Carolina—a Confederate hotbed. Drayton, whose brother became a Southern general, was the scion of a prominent planter family. He asserted in 1861 that there would never "be peace between the two sections until slavery is so completely scotched [that]...we can see plainly in the future free labour to the gulph...I think myself the Southerners are fighting against fate or human progress."

The most complex section of the book deals with the attitude of northern soldiers to slavery before and after the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863. In the winter of 1862-63, after a considerable amount of temporizing, Lincoln declared that it was time for "decisive and extensive measures.... We [want] the army to strike more vigorous blows. The Administration must set an example, and strike at the heart of the

rebellion" (*Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, p.84). The Proclamation did that, but as it clarified the Union forces, it necessarily polarized them.

McPherson doesn't conceal the fact that a considerable percentage of Northern soldiers were either pro-slavery or indifferent to the fate of the slaves. Forty percent of them had voted for the Democrats in 1860, another ten percent came from border states.

He points out that the Proclamation "intensified a morale crisis in Union armies during the winter of 1862-63." The removal of General George B. McClellan as commander of the Union forces and a series of military disasters had plunged the army "to an all-time low." Desertion rates in both armies soared. Many Northern soldiers agreed with an Illinois private who wrote, "I am the Boy who Can fight for my Country, but not for the Negros."

But the deepening of the crisis within the Union ranks was a necessary and healthy process. The transformation of the Civil War into a revolutionary war alienated or purged the retrograde elements and breathed new life into the more advanced.

It certainly galvanized the antislavery soldiers. Take, for example, a New York private who wrote: "Thank God ... the contest is now between Slavery & freedom, & every honest man knows what he is fighting for." A Minnesota corporal commented, "Abraham 'has gone and done it' at last. Yesterday will be a day hallowed in the hearts of millions of the people of these United States & also by the friends of liberty and humanity the world over." In a letter to his fiancée, an Illinois cavalry sergeant declared, "In giving freedom to the *slave*, we assure freedom to the free."

McPherson concludes that "the evidence indicates that proemancipation convictions did predominate among the leaders and fighting soldiers of the Union army. And that prevalence increased after the low point of early 1863 as a good many antiemancipation soldiers changed their minds." In 1864, Lincoln received 80 percent of the soldier vote.

The evolution of the Union army underscores the decisive role played by the most advanced layers in the process of social revolution. If a cause expresses the forward progress of human society, those elements which most consciously give expression to that progress play a crucial role in raising the general political and cultural level. The historical experience which McPherson recounts, when analyzed from a Marxist point of view, is a powerful rejoinder to the critics who treat the masses as incapable of rising to the level of historic tasks.

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One of those who radically changed his views was Marcus Spiegel, the highest-ranking Jewish officer to serve in the Civil War. A colonel in the 67th Ohio, Spiegel denounced the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863: "I am sick of the war.... I do not want to fight for Lincoln's Negro proclamation one day longer." Yet a year later, in January 1864, he wrote his wife from Louisiana that "since I [came] here I have learned and seen more of what the horrors of Slavery was than I ever knew before.... I am [in] favor of doing away with the ... accursed institution.... I am [now] a strong abolitionist."

A soldier from Lincoln's home state wrote: "It is astonishing how things has changed in reference to freeing the Negros. It allwais has been plane to me that this rase must be freed befor god would recognise us ... we bost of liberty and we Should not be Selfish in it as god gives us liberty we Should try to impart it to others ... thank god the chanes will Soon be bursted ... now I belive we are on gods side ... now I can fight with a good heart."

The attitudes of antislavery soldiers were hardened by their experiences in the South. After talking with a slave woman in Virginia who described the brutal whipping of her husband, a private from Pennsylvania wrote: "I thought I hated slavery as much as possible before I came here, but here, where I can see some of its workings, I am more than ever convinced of

the cruelty and inhumanity of the system."

In the spring of 1864, a Union soldier, a farmer from Michigan, wrote his wife, "the more I learn of the cursed institution of Slavery, the more I feel willing to endure, for its final destruction.... After this war is over, this whole country will undergo a change for the better ... abolishing slavery will dignify labor; that fact of itself will revolutionize everything."

The author points out: "As northern armies penetrated into the South they became agents of emancipation by their mere presence. Slaves flocked to Union camps everywhere. Attempts by their masters to reclaim these fugitives turned soldiers into practical abolitionists. Many letters tell of soldiers hiding fugitives in camp and laughing at the impotent rage of owners who went home empty-handed."

There were soldiers who indicated in writing a consciousness of class divisions. A number of Union soldiers were able to draw a distinction between the ordinary Confederate fighting man and his leaders, "between an arrogant 'aristocracy' and the deluded common people," in McPherson's words. They were aware that Senator James Hammond of South Carolina had called the northern working class "mudsills" in 1858. A farmer's son from Illinois, whose two brothers also fought in the war, declared that he longed for the "chance to try our *Enfields* [rifles] on some of their villainous hides and let a little of that *high Blood* out of them, which I think will increase their respect for the *northern mud sills*."

An Ohio infantryman was particularly contemptuous of the Carolina planters who "can talk of nothing but the purity of blood of themselves & their ancestors...Their cant about aristocracy is perfectly sickening."

McPherson makes reference to the fact that some northern officers were not at all pleased with the political debates and discussions of their men. One Union colonel wrote, "A soldier [should have] naught to do with politics. The nearer he approaches a machine ... the more valuable he becomes to the service. Our soldiers are too intelligent, for they will talk and they will write, and read the papers."

A number of recent historians have suggested that even if Union soldiers had ideals at the start of the war, they certainly discarded them after several years of bloody fighting often under inept commanders. One such scholar, for example, speaks of "a disillusionment more profound than historians have acknowledged."

McPherson replies that the letters and diaries "do not support the thesis of a decline in positive expressions of ideological and patriotic commitment among veterans who had enlisted in 1861 or 1862. Their belief in what they continued to call 'the glorious cause' was what kept many of them going. If anything, their searing experiences refined ideology into a purer, tougher product."

He quotes, for example, a letter written in a hospital by a Pennsylvania private to his wife. He had been marching hundreds of miles in the Shenandoah Valley in 1864, the last 25 of them in bare feet. He was ready to keep this up for years, he told her, for "I cannot believe Providence intends to destroy this Nation, this great asylum for the oppressed of all other nations and build a slave Oligarchy on the ruins thereof."

In a period in which reaction has the upper hand and the lack of political perspective leaves the oppressed—for the present—in a state of passivity, the superficial observer may find it difficult to imagine masses of people consciously making history.

The material in this book is a powerful antidote to this shallow and ahistorical view. It is a reminder of a time when a great number of people in the United States fought and many died in the name of great ideals. The Civil War resulted in the victory of northern capitalism. That system today has run its course, as southern slavery had in 1860. A new generation of workers and young people will take up the struggle today against the outmoded capitalist order on the basis of even higher principles. They could do far worse than to study the example of self-sacrifice and determination set by the fighters in the second American revolution of 1861-1865.



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