# "There is a big idea which is at stake"—Corporal in the 105th Ohio, 1864

## For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War, by James M. McPherson, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997

**David Walsh**
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This remarkable book deals at greater length with a subject its author, James M. McPherson of Princeton University, first broached in a volume published in 1994: *What They Fought For, 1861-1865*. In both works the author addresses himself to the motivations of Civil War soldiers, an issue with considerable implications for the present day.

In *What They Fought For*, McPherson argued persuasively, on the basis of an extensive study of Civil War diaries and letters, that a large number of soldiers on both sides "were intensely aware of the issues at stake and passionately concerned about them." He noted that the theme of ideological motivation had "emerged to greater importance than I expected when I began the project."

McPherson explains in his preface that *For Cause and Comrades* incorporates these issues, but "goes well beyond them to analyze the full range of causes *why* they fought and *how* they coped with the enormous stresses and emotions of combat." The new work certainly does that, but the political and ideological issues again come squarely to the fore. It should not be taken in any sense as a criticism that in the interests of establishing historical truth Professor McPherson has written a *second* book that argues, by different means, the same essential case as the *first*.

The author begins his work by noting that its intellectual origins go back several decades. Visits to Civil War battlefields, scenes of carnage in which thousands of soldiers participated in nearly suicidal attacks on enemy positions, prompted him to ask: "What possessed these men? How could they sacrifice themselves in that way?"

In an attempt to answer this complex and important question, McPherson examines a number of the factors that motivated Northern and Southern soldiers to join the fight and then sustained them in the face of terrible hardships. He discusses prevailing conceptions of duty, honor and manhood, the influence of religion, problems of morale and discipline, the importance of support on the home front, and so on. Much of this is illuminating and certainly speaks to why armies in modern times *in general* act as they do.

However, as the author himself notes at the outset, American troops in World War II, much less those dispatched to Vietnam, did not fight with the same fervor exhibited by their counterparts in 1861-65. The question remains: what was the *specific* attribute of the Civil War soldier that allowed him to fight with such selfless determination?

McPherson answers the question in the course of his book. He explains that Civil War soldiers had "ideological attachments ...to something beyond their comrades in squad or company: to nationalism, liberty, democracy, self-government, and so on. ... [A] strong case can be made that the most patriotic and ideologically committed volunteers were the best combat soldiers, because they believed in what they were fighting for."

*For Cause and Comrades* makes it abundantly clear that Northern troops, and here one must set aside for a separate discussion the motives of Confederate soldiers, fought with great tenacity because at least their most advanced elements were imbued with an understanding of the historical significance of their cause. They were engaged, of course with varying degrees of consciousness, in a task—the eradication of chattel slavery—that expressed the most general interests of human progress, and this gave them strong incentive to persevere personally and also provide leadership to their more backward comrades.

McPherson's work strikingly confirms the emphasis Marxists place on the decisive role of the *conscious element* in a revolutionary struggle. Again and again, because he is an honest historian, the author returns to this central theme. Referring to arguments by those who maintain that Union and Confederate soldiers "didn't know what they were fighting for," McPherson notes: "Research in the letters and diaries of Civil War soldiers will soon lead the attentive historian to a contrary conclusion. *Ideological motifs almost leap from many pages of these documents*." (Emphasis added - DW.)

He assembles a powerful body of evidence to back up this assertion. McPherson takes note of the fact, referred to in *What They Fought For*, that "Civil War armies were the most literate to that time." Soldiers received and wrote letters on a regular basis. He points out that "letters from the North reached Yankee soldiers in Virginia or Tennessee almost as quickly in 1861-65 as they take to travel to the same points today."

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Political discussion and debate raged. In the period leading up to the 1864 presidential election, a sergeant in the 8th Ohio Cavalry made the following entries in his diary: September 12—“Politics the principal topic of the day.” September 13—“Spend a good portion of my time reading the news and argueing politics.” September 21—“Politics keep up quite an excitement in our company.”

Major newspapers, McPherson notes, were available only a day or two after publication. A French army officer assigned to a command in the Northern army, Gustave Cluseret (later a participant in the Paris Commune of 1871), reminisced some years afterward that in “the midst of the messiest business one could hear the squeaking voice of the ‘news boy' over the sound of the fusillade, crying ‘ *New York Tribune*, *New York Herald*.' The soldier paid up to ten cents for the newspaper ... After reading it ... there would be a redoubling of his zeal and drive.”

As a sergeant in the 59th Illinois simply explained: “It is the caus that makes a man fight.” “There is nothing pleasant” about soldiering, wrote a corporal in the 105th Ohio, but “I can endure its privations ...for there is a *big idea* which is at stake ...the principles of Liberty, Justice, and of the Righteousness which exalteth a Nation.”

Civil War soldiers “had come of age in the 1850s,” McPherson writes, “when highly charged partisan and ideological debates consumed the American polity. A majority of them had voted in the election of 1860 ... When they enlisted, many of them did so for patriotic and ideological reasons—to shoot as they had voted, so to speak.” The speeches they heard at recruiting rallies “merely reinforced the ideas they had absorbed from the political culture in which they had grown up.”

One could make the case that Union troops, whose conditions of life were not immediately threatened by Southern secession, engaged in one of the noblest and most selfless struggles of all time. It certainly struck some Southern soldiers this way. One Texas private, for example, asserted that “we are fighting for matters real and tangible ... our property and our homes,” while Northern soldiers fought only for “matters abstract and intangible.”

Sentiments expressed by the most enlightened soldiers, cited by McPherson, cannot fail to move and inspire the reader 130 years or so after the end of the Civil War. “I do feel that the liberty of the world is placed in our hands to defend,” wrote a private in the 33rd Massachusetts in 1862, “and if we are overcome then farewell to freedom.” A private in the 122nd Illinois added, but “if we succeed in establishing our Gov[ernment], *then you may look for European struggles for liberty*.”

McPherson observes that very few letters or diaries of black soldiers, and even fewer written by freed slaves, have survived. He writes: “Perhaps the best summary of what blacks fought for was provided by a literate slave who escaped from his master in North Carolina and joined the Union navy in September 1862. In a diary he kept during his service on a blockading warship he wrote that he fought ‘for the holiest of all causes, Liberty and Union.' In April 1865 he added ‘the cause of Right and Equality.'”

In *For Cause and Comrades* McPherson takes issue with historians who argue that Union veterans showed signs of disillusionment in the later years of the war. He notes that there is little sign of such feelings in their letters and diaries. More than half of those Northern veterans whose terms expired in 1864, 136,000 men, reenlisted; 78 percent of the Union army voted for Lincoln. The author comments eloquently: “The conviction of Northern soldiers that they fought to preserve the Union as a beacon of republican liberty throughout the world burned as brightly in the last year of the war as in the first.”

The questions that Professor McPherson's initially posed to himself, “What possessed those men? How could they sacrifice themselves in that way?,” as legitimate as they are, reveal a great deal about the current period. Throughout the work, he feels obliged—and one understands why—to adopt a slightly defensive tone in regard to the sentiments expressed by the subjects of his research. McPherson asks at one point, for example, “And how smugly can we sneer at their expressions of a willingness to die for those beliefs when we know that they did precisely that?”

In our day the decision to stand up for principles, to make sacrifices in the service of socially progressive ideals, is looked upon by official public opinion as an act of insanity. He earns respect today who never passes up a chance to make a killing on the stock market. Such a state of affairs, however, is not eternal.

In concluding his book, Professor McPherson writes: “Civil War soldiers willingly made extraordinary sacrifices, even of life itself, for the principles they perceived to be at stake in the war. Whether Americans today would be willing to make similar wartime sacrifices is unanswerable. One hopes that it will remain unanswered.”

Naturally one hopes that such a mass bloodletting will not recur on American—or any other—soil. Does this entirely rational sentiment, however, amount to hoping that a cause won't arise that will arouse the passions of masses of people? Is it impossible to conceive of a great struggle today in which people would be willing to lay down their lives?

It is inconceivable, of course, that such passion would take the form of support for a war conducted by the US government, which would inevitably have an imperialist character. This, however, raises another question: was the Civil War merely a war, or was it, at its essence, a *social revolutionary struggle*? Were even those Northern soldiers who merely professed patriotism and love of country primarily devoted to a flag and a piece of territory, or to a *social principle*?

There is a cause today for which it is worth making great sacrifices: the struggle to liberate all mankind from class oppression. In the coming period this cause will engage the intelligence, energy and emotions of masses of people in this country, and throughout the world. It is the participants in that struggle who will, in our view, be worthy of the heritage of the great revolutions and civil wars of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

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