

For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War Study Guide

For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War by James M. McPherson

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Plot Summary

For Cause and Comrades is a quest by historian James McPherson to understand why the Civil War soldiers fought the Civil War and why they fought as intensely and for as long as they did. The Civil War is unusual not only in American history, but in world history as well for the unusual intensity and carnage of the war. Men were taking up arms against other men that they knew, and their country was relatively small. What explains this? McPherson read over 25,000 letters that Civil War soldiers wrote home in preparation for the book. These letters are his primary source of evidence.

McPherson argues that the initial impulse to fight the war was the simple "military rage" that follows early in the declaration of any war. Soldiers and citizens have to fire themselves up and get energized to fight and kill others. But in the Civil War, men were tearing down the doors in order to enlist, and they continued to enlist even after the initial excitement slowed down.

One important factor was that men fought because of their sense of manliness and courageousness. To fight was to have a chance to prove that one was a man and to prove the same to one's fellow community members. Fighting also resulted from a strong sense of duty to family, community, state, region and country. Ideology was a motivating factor as well; both sides believed that they were fighting for liberty, the Confederacy for the liberty of Southern whites who were threatened with rule by the North and the North for the liberty provided by the Constitution which they saw Southern secession as threatening.

In battle, men fought for various reasons, one of which was honor and being seen as courageous. Men's reputations were made and destroyed on the battlefield, where demonstrates of courage were the main method of telling good men from bad. Adrenalin was also a major motivator in combat, as soldiers on both sides were shocked at their ability to focus and fight for hours without stopping. But primary battle cohesion, in McPherson's opinion, was the most important factor.

Civil War soldiers were particularly poorly trained and complained constantly, so discipline and coercion were used to motivate soldiers as well; officers' most effective tool was public shaming. The inspiration provided by good leadership also played an important role, particularly when officers and combat leaders performed all the same tasks as their men. McPherson argues that religion was a huge factor, particularly because the second Great Awakening had just occurred, producing two of the most religious armies in human history. Religion caused men who thought themselves "saved" to be unafraid of death.

Patriotism was a major factor, but many men were motivated by the prospect of sacrificing for their country; they also believed themselves to be fighting for liberty. Union soldiers initially didn't care about slavery, but by the end of the war, many had come to believe that a good reason to fight was to end the oppression of blacks. Support from home and family kept soldiers going during hard time, although



sometimes family members could undermine morale. Vengeance and hatred were undeniably huge factors in keeping men going, along with the mere fight for survival. Finally, victory and defeat on the battlefield correlated with the ebb and flow of high martial spirit.

McPherson concludes without settling on which of these factors were most important in motivating Civil War soldiers to fight, but the story he tells includes many important factors, which point the way towards a complete explanation, even if it does not explain which factors were the most important.



Chapter 1, This War is a Crusade

Chapter 1, This War is a Crusade Summary and Analysis

McPherson opens with the question of why 13,000 Confederate soldiers gave their lives at Gettysburg. It seems like a mystery that people would fight so hard for what appears to be the cause of slavery and what was almost assuredly a lost battle. This question led McPherson to the book. McPherson's great-great-grandfather has emigrated from England in 1857; he too chose to fight, but with the Union. Why did he do so? Letters from soldiers may shed some light on the question, for today it is hard to conceive of Americans fighting as fanatically for a cause as men did in the Civil War. The commitment is hard to explain with other factors; most men were not draftees; they were not paid well, and so on.

According to the letters, almost all men in the war thought that they fought bravely for country, duty, honor and the right, despite the fact that many found ways to avoid fighting when the risks became great. There were many deserters and they found many creative ways to escape. Bounty could not bring good men back, only unreliable ones. The men who wrote home, the ones that stayed, all complained constantly about the conditions, so it is surprising that more didn't defect. The major question of the book needs an answer; luckily, there are many sources that can provide an answer. Civil War soldiers were the most literate fighting men in history at that time. McPherson has read 25,000 letters in preparation for the book, but many of them leave out the most gruesome parts, the men declining to speak of them.

McPherson follows French Revolution historian John Lynn in dividing soldiers' motives into three types: initial motivation - what got them in the war, sustaining motivation - what kept them in the war, and combat motivation - what motivates them in combat. These categories are related.



Chapter 2, We Were in Earnest

Chapter 2, We Were in Earnest Summary and Analysis

The Civil War really was a war of brother against brother. For instance, James and John Welsh grew up together in Virginia but in 1853, James moved to Illinois and voted for Lincoln in 1860. The two brothers exchanged pained and hurtful letters which ultimately led them to fight against one another, never speaking again. The war incensed men's passions enough to cause them to fight against their own family members.

The initial anger and fighting spirit comes in the immediate aftermath of a war's beginning. Men get into a frenzy to energize themselves for a fight. It was not a problem to draft men for the war; instead, there was a problem accommodating all of the volunteers. Martial enthusiasm spread across the country on both sides.

Military rage cools quickly, however. Enlistments then began to track successes and defeats in the war. Most men proclaimed patriotism as their motive. But many Union soldiers enlisted for ideological reasons. They saw secession, as Lincoln did, as "the essence of anarchy;" the Southerners defied the Constitutions and the rule of law. However, few Union soldiers talked about slavery; instead, they only wanted to destroy slave political power. They didn't want slavery around them but did not seem particularly committed to ending it in the South. However, many Confederate soldiers fought to preserve slavery because they saw it as one of their core institutions; they saw slavery as part of "southern rights and southern liberty." In fact, Southerners usually paired defending slavery and fighting for liberty in the very same letters. The Confederate soldiers seem to think no paradox in this. They saw no absurdity in holding a black man as a slave.

Other Confederates saw the principle of federalism and corporate/state liberty at stake. The North was fighting for a tyranny. They had to stand for African slavery to preserve their institution of liberty. Southerners tended to be more passionate, though, about fighting for liberty rather than for slavery; they saw themselves as threatened by Northern slavery. Confederates routinely defended themselves in the words of the American founders. They also saw the North as invading "hearth and home," along with accusing Northern soldiers of raping their wives and daughters.

Victorian American was deeply immersed in the concept of duty, which McPherson found over and over again in both Southern and Northern letters. They saw themselves as having a duty to defend their countries. Duty is a binding moral obligation which is rooted in the idea of reciprocity; if your country gave to you, it was your duty to give back. Confederate soldiers spoke of duty, but more often of honor - public reputation; dishonor is shame. Honor is a more exclusively masculine concept, so many wives did not understand it. Most talk of honor occurred amongst upper class Confederate soldiers and officers.



Two versions of manhood coexisted in American minds - hard-drinking, whoring, fighting men and sober, responsible, dutiful family men. The war would often convert one sort of man into the other. Southerners tended to be more boastful of their masculinity, however, whereas Northerners were more circumspect. Adventure and excitement was a rarely cited motive, much unlike participation in the Mexican-American War.



Chapter 3, Anxious for the Fray

Chapter 3, Anxious for the Fray Summary and Analysis

Most of the soldiers on both sides were eager to fight at the beginning. They were often afraid that the war would end before they had a chance to make their mark. Both sides wanted to show what kind of men they were. Those units stuck in the rear of a troop during a battle were not considered "safe," but rather dishonored. Most of the time spent not at battle was filled with boredom and monotony. But the troops retained their zeal.

The emotional impact of combat was overwhelming. The men often write that they were scared to death. They quickly grew tired of seeing dead bodies and limbs ripped off of bodies. Soon after a battle, the excitement disappeared. Honor talk evaporates and a sense of horror sinks in; soldiers quickly become somber but the media does not reflect this loss of enthusiasm in their reports. This was much like the American experience in World War II. The men have no desire to continue fighting, although some soldiers did not feel this way.

Nonetheless, most volunteer soldiers remained determined to fight; they mostly had to conquer their fear; they came to realize that to be courageous was to master fear, not to not feel it. Some would pretend not to feel it, others claimed to feel nothing at all; sometimes they would rename fear as "painful nervous anxiety" or something akin to it. As time progressed however, most of the letter writers admitted fear.

The worst of the fear came before battle began; their hearts raced and they would sweat themselves through. After they started fighting, adrenaline kicked in and they focused. Often tension would be released through yelling (perhaps where the Rebel Yell came from). And some were surprised by the lack of fear they came to feel in battle; their minds were completely absorbed. The men didn't know about the changes in their bodily chemistry but they described the affects of their adrenaline surges. They could overcome illness or disability and sometimes even wounds.

But after the adrenaline rush, after the battle ended, most men would be overcome with exhaustion. Sometimes this could occur during the battle, producing intense terror. At night, fears would return with great force, and nightmares plagued them. Their skills increased over time, but their morale gradually faded. The men, nonetheless, survived and pressed on. It is still unclear how they did so.



Chapter 4, If I Flinched, I Was Ruined

Chapter 4, If I Flinched, I Was Ruined Summary and Analysis

Most soldiers were motivated in the traditional way - through training, discipline and leadership. But Civil War volunteers had little of these. They hated being regimented, some of them thinking it unworthy of a democratic people. Their battle tactics were poor and had not improved much since the Revolutionary War. Privates often compared their lot in life to that of slaves. Officers often complained about how undisciplined their soldiers were, but McPherson often thinks they complained too much, given how effective the soldiers were.

Sometimes the officers would use coercion to force soldiers to act, sometimes threatening them with deadly force. Coercion was used more and more as the war pressed on. And when the order came to shoot fellow soldiers was given, few cavalymen would follow through. So by 1863, both armies had professional men to keep soldiers in line. Other times officers would rebuke them with public shaming. The Confederates seemed harsher than the Union. Both sides used the promise of promotion and reputation to motivate the soldiers; many regular soldiers wanted to go home officers. Some fought for glory.

Another common motivator was alcohol. Often officers would drink before entering battle, although few men mentioned the use of alcohol in their letters. Instead, they would point out that enemy soldiers were drunk. So it is not clear how much of the accusations are rumor.

Leadership often played a key motivating role. Good officers inspired their troops to fight on. Many combat leaders would lead through example, through fighting. And company officers often came from the same communities as their men, sometimes only a few years older, with more education and members of a higher class. These men had strong, paternal authority over their troops, but both sides often came to love one another. Soldiers admired officers who would share burdens on the march, or who would lend them their horses, or allow them to carry their gun.

Yet others complained about the divisions between officers and privates, and soldiers often were quick to criticize officers they saw as incompetent. The letters indicate that incompetence was a bigger problem in the Union than in the Confederacy early in the war. Drunken officers were a particular problem. Further, soldiers resented petty uses of authority by their officers, which sometimes was the result of regular-army officers attempting to impose order on their troops. There were occasional rumors of disgruntled soldiers shooting their officers, but few real records.

Officer-private relations usually improved when they went into battle together. The common threat united them, causing them to put differences aside. Surveys of soldiers



in World War II found this pattern of bonding in times of danger. Most leadership was affirmed or crushed during combat. If a combat leader would do everything he asked his men to do, he would earn respect. Confederate soldiers emphasized this more than Union soldiers. Courage in battle could also redeem an unpopular officer, whereas cowardice could destroy the reputation of a popular officer. Courageous action could often earn privates promotions, whereas cowardly officers were shamed into resignation.

Civil War soldiers were notoriously stubborn and resistant to discipline. They could be trained to some degree, but they were not professional British and German soldiers. American society prized individualism, self-reliance and freedom from coercive authority, which hurt their armies. Victorian Americans held individuals responsible for their own behaviors, not groups or institutions. Their characters mattered more than anything. God helped those who helped themselves. Therefore, their motivations had to come from within.



Chapter 5, Religion is What Makes Brave Soldiers

Chapter 5, Religion is What Makes Brave Soldiers Summary and Analysis

In war, soldiers often come to believe that their fate is predetermined. And when soldiers come to believe that their fate is sealed, they look to religious or superstition. These beliefs help soldiers to cope. Many soldiers carried Bibles or New Testaments to protect themselves. Many tell stories of a Bible stopping a bullet. Both sides were products of the Second Great Awakening. As a result, Civil War armies were among the most religious in history.

Wars increase religious conviction because it makes death a reality. And religious conviction increases morale. The main thing that kept men going in World War II was prayer, and the same was true in the Civil War. Many men before the war were not serious Christians, but their experiences changed them. Already religious men became more committed. Christian fatalism could be both positive and negative; those with a negative attitude thought that God could take them away at any time, but others believed that God willed their survival. Those who believed God willed their deaths often accepted it happily, as God's will. From North to South, regardless of denomination, all men expressed a sense of God's will in their lives.

Often soldiers expressed a belief in Predestination and thought that it would be silly to ask God to change His will for their lives. The predestination doctrine of John Calvin was popular in the United States, as Calvinists had a strong presence there. Soldiers often asked their families to protect them, but some worried that to ask for these prayers was to question God.

Religion seems to make brave soldiers. For true believers, death held no sway over them. Skeptics and nonbelievers tended to agree with this observation. Many wavering believers envied the faith of their fellow soldiers and worried about their salvation. Some devout soldiers became more certain of their reception by God. Literature at the time reflected these sentiments.

But how did soldiers handle the commandment not to kill and to turn the other cheek? Some soldiers saw the contradiction and many hoped that they would never have to kill. Others could not understand how "maiming and butchering men" could be God's will. Christian societies are often reluctant to kill human beings, but they have fought the bloodiest wars in history. Christianity developed the idea of just war only through centuries of destruction.

Many soldiers simply reconciled themselves to the fact that they had no other choice but to defend themselves and their countries. Southerners could not believe that God

wanted them to be ruled by the North. Civil War soldiers often drew a distinction between combat and murder. But as the war pressed on, these distinctions became less important and men became used to death and killing. But no matter how bad it got, respect for human life survived here and there.

The prospect of death led to mass revivals in the Confederate army. Tens of thousands of men converted and were baptized. Men formed prayer groups in almost every regiment. No similar large-scale conversions happened in the Union army, but there were localized conversions. The revivals may have kept the war going until 1865. But religion only explains how men stayed in combat. Religion does not explain what led them to get involved in the first place.



Chapter 6, A Band of Brothers

Chapter 6, A Band of Brothers Summary and Analysis

Civil War soldiers were interested in bravery, courage and valor. Cowardice was the enemy. No men could bear to be shamed for cowardice and men's fears in their first battle were often focused on whether they would break. When men were scared they often pretended to be sick, and soldiers who went into action sick often suffered badly. Many of those in the same company came from the same community; as a result, the pressure to retain one's reputation was important because it could outlast the war. Officers were held to an even higher standard. Many would pull strings to find a place at the front lines when they feared men thought them cowardly.

Combat motivation studies show that the desire of a soldier to prove himself is the strongest motivator in his first and second battles. But the desire wanes soon thereafter. Once courage is demonstrated, there is little need to continue to prove it. Many men fought through the whole war when they had the opportunity to go home early so they did not feel like cowards. Soldiers' letters confirmed this.

Pride and honor was not only individual, however, it stretched to a soldier's regiment, state and nation. Disparaging regiments from other states was standard. North Carolina took a lot of flack from other Confederate States because of a series of small Union victories there. And when a regiment lost, soldiers bore their shame together. Regiment loyalty often caused men to re-enlist, and their symbols bound them together. Planting a national flag after conquering enemy territory was a great sign of group achievement. These groups, bonded by the threat of death or injury, literally become a band of brothers. Scientists have developed theories about this phenomenon, which they call "primary group cohesion." Intense loyalty is produced by close ties with the group. These men rarely fight for flag, country or ideas, but for each other. The Civil War was no exception, and group loyalty is clear in the letters.

Battle even healed rifts and undermined factionalism. Battles even resolved tension between pious men and nonbelievers. Men with different backgrounds would resist easier assignments to stay with their groups. However, some group loyalties were destroyed when most groups were killed. And primary group cohesion can be undermined by high turnover rates. It is here that McPherson believes larger group loyalties, to either state or ideals, come into play.



Chapter 7, On the Altar of My Country

Chapter 7, On the Altar of My Country Summary and Analysis

Many historians and psychologists believe that ideological and patriotic loyalties produce little motivation among soldiers. But the Civil War letters belie these views. The outcome of the country was at stake, and the soldiers knew the outcome of the war would change life for everyone. Newspapers were read constantly. And European officers fighting in the war were usually shocked by citizens' desire to know about their cause. Many regiments and brigades even established debating societies. They would often debate on the impact of the war on the future of the country, or how the opposing side should be dealt with after the war. Many officers were unhappy with this outbreak of debates.

Confederate soldiers often spoke of "The Cause," which was the idea of establishing the Confederacy as a separate nation. They had feelings of American nationalism too, but their Confederate nationalism ran deeper; antebellum Southerners strongly believed in their distinctiveness. And the men often saw themselves as being sacrificed on "the altar" of their countries. The tension between love of family and love of country often upset married Confederate soldiers, but the defense of family is what motivated many men to join the Cause in the first place.

Not all loyalties were to the United States and the Confederacy in the South, though. Some were loyal to their particular states and even cities. Northerners often saw the greater spirit of the Southern soldiers and remarked on it. These men fought for their homes and neighborhoods. Although, often Confederate soldiers in captured territory would fight in resistance movements. However, this would sometimes confound Confederate battle plans. That said, Confederate political identity was created mostly by the war.

Patriotism motivated the Union as well, but these motives have been harder to understand because they were not under attack. Why would the Union fight? Southerners saw Union soldiers as fighting for something abstract and intangible. And indeed, Northern nationalism was not as concrete as Southern nationalism but it was real. Northerners often thought that the United States would be destroyed by secession. They saw the Confederate soldiers as undermining the goodness of their nation, as traitors.

These men were romantics in a time prior to its destruction by the World Wars, when cynicism triumphed. Patriotic sentiment was spread throughout the Union army and the letters show it. And some soldiers were unwilling, seeing themselves as having no interest in the war; they often saw themselves as being sacrificed in a "rich man's war."



Chapter 8, The Cause of Liberty

Chapter 8, The Cause of Liberty Summary and Analysis

Civil War soldiers admired the founders and the soldiers of the Revolutionary War. They understood that their republic was "conceived in liberty." Both sides saw themselves as inheriting that tradition. They both believed that the legacy of the Founders fell on their soldiers. Ironically, each side interpreted the legacy in opposition to the other. Confederate soldiers were often comforted by the fact that the United States' founders had won when things looked worst. Confederate soldiers' letters always spoke of liberty, and this subject increased as the war continued. They conceived of themselves as under the threat of subjugation.

Unlike the Revolutionary soldiers, however, Confederate soldiers were so used to slavery that they saw no problem with it. Before the war, though, Confederate soldiers did not speak of "slaves" or "slavery," but of "servants" and "Southern Institutions." During the war, though, all pretense fell away. They thought that their entire way of life depended on slave labor. Some Confederate troops were happy about the Emancipation Proclamation because it revealed that the North was fighting to end slavery, which they regarded as scandalous. After the Proclamation, Southern hope increased because their slaves were increasing in value; if they won, they would be rich.

However, the defense of slavery and excitement about selling slaves was hardly present in the letters of non-slaveholding soldiers. Although, some of them did believe that they were fighting for property rights. The idea of equality for all those who belonged to the master race was common. Many hated the idea of negro equality and fought for white supremacy; their letters often expressed that the Yankees wanted them to have sex with slaves, or marry their daughters to blacks. But McPherson denies that Confederate soldiers were obsessed with the matter. Only 20% of McPherson's sample of 429 Southern soldiers expressed pro-slavery sentiment. 33% of soldiers from slaveholding families supported slavery, but only 12% of soldiers from non-slaveholding families did. What is remarkable, however, is that not a single one of McPherson's sample dissented from slavery.

The Northerners defended their actions as continuing the tradition of the Founders' commitment to liberty. They believed themselves just as much lovers of freedom and they saw themselves as sacrificing, just as the Founders did. While some wives supported their Union soldier husbands, others emphasized the duties of these men to their families. But Union soldiers believed that they defended "glorious institutions," which included rights to property, liberty, free thought, religion, and so on. Southern secession would destroy the Constitution that protected these liberties and produce anarchy or despotism.



Lincoln emphasized that the United States was the only democracy in the world at that time, the only nation with no king; if the South won, this would show the whole world that democracy was a failure. The Union soldiers agreed with Lincoln. Many of the Union soldiers' families had fought in the Revolution and so they felt deeply connected to this cause. Irish-Americans identified with their struggle for liberty in Ireland as well. Sixty-six percent of both Union and Confederate troops expresses patriotic sentiment. And around 40% of both sides discussed abstract ideas like liberty, constitutional law, tyranny and democracy. Patriotism and ideology seemed to be a significant motivating factor.

McPherson does not know which factors truly motivated Civil War soldiers - primary group cohesion, religion, adrenalin, honor, ideology, or what. He believes that no one answer will work. A few Civil War soldiers tried to answer the question. Many soldiers say that they were held up in battle by their ideology. They believed themselves members of the greatest nation in the world. Ideology was one reason that the Civil War had such high casualty rates, as ideological war is particularly destructive.



Chapter 9, Slavery Must be Cleaned Out

Chapter 9, Slavery Must be Cleaned Out Summary and Analysis

Many Confederate soldiers thought the Union commitment to ending slavery was silly and abstract and few Union soldiers thought they were fighting for racial equality. But 30% of Union soldiers started the war advocating the end of slavery in their letters and Union soldiers were converted as the war continued. They often claimed that the "rebellion" was caused by slavery. Confederate experience hardened their commitment to slavery. Union soldiers stationed in the South found slavery abominable, and this was from soldiers with no abolitionist sentiment. The presence of slavery convinced many men. Although, some wanted to end slavery to weaken the Southern cause and economy, and many Union troops were glad to take the slaves and have them work for them. By 1862, antislavery morality and antislavery pragmatism had fused into a Union-wide belief in the end of slavery.

Politicians in Washington came to the same conclusion, leading to Lincoln issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. But many Union soldiers opposed freeing the slaves and anti-emancipation commitments popped up in the letters. The Union felt that they weren't fighting to end slavery and that Lincoln had undermined their purpose. A large minority felt this way in 1862. Many came from border-states and many voted Democratic, which was the party of slavery and the South.

Freedom for the slaves was hotly debated among Union soldiers. Many of the debates strengthened the resolve of both sides. But all soldiers agreed that the Emancipation Proclamation changed the war's purpose; many Union soldiers became bitter and produced a crisis of morale among Union troops. It is hard to say how much trouble this loss of morale caused.

Officers and white-collar men had a large minority supporting ending slavery, whereas enlisted men were less friendly to it. But after pro-freedom ideas converted the officers, the privates often followed suit, but some openly rebelled, often called "copperheads." But eventually these men changed their tunes. Of course, many were convinced by the pragmatic benefits but the pragmatic commitment slowly morphed into a moral one.

Even border-state soldiers converted and were surprised that they did. Some hoped that they could organize Negro regiments and many became excited by the prospects of getting Negro soldiers to take bullets for them. Black soldiers did prove their ability and willingness to fight, and the Union soldiers came to have more positive sentiments towards them as a result. When black soldiers achieved victories, they won the respect of white Union soldiers. Black soldiers themselves had a major stake in the war and saw their fighting as such. But because many slaves could not read or write, few records exist of their feelings. Many literate black soldiers, however, expressed radical

commitments to liberty and freedom. Many desired the rights of citizenship, the same rights as whites.

By the end of the war, most Union soldiers seemed to have come to fight partly for liberty for blacks, although there were holdouts. But this view was a minority. When Lincoln ran for president again, 80% of Union soldiers voted for him. And later in the war, some soldiers actually joined to fight for black freedom, such as the Quakers, who were typically pacifists. Many came to believe that God's hand was supporting them in the fight for black liberty.



Chapter 10, We Know That We are Supported at Home

Chapter 10, We Know That We are Supported at Home Summary and Analysis

McPherson holds that duty, honor, patriotism and ideology produced the major sustaining motivations for the Civil War, while courage, self-respect and group cohesion kept men going in combat. Yet all of this morale and motivation relied on support from home. Without home support, the Civil War soldiers would have fallen apart. Homesickness is an omnipresent theme in the writings of Civil War soldiers. Efficient mail services helped to keep morale high; both armies understood the importance of effective communication. Mail call was the happiest moment of each soldier's day, and they often criticized their family members for not writing enough.

Letters were crucial to sustain soldiers, but bad letters had the opposite effect. Wives would often complain that they were lonely and suffering, or that they were worried that the war would leave them widows. They were full of dread and cared nothing for patriotism. Wives often begged their husbands to defect, and these letters destroyed morale. Married and family men were often torn by divided loyalties, although 700,000 to 800,000 married men volunteered to enlist. Confederate soldiers had an easier time making an argument for fighting since they were protecting their homes.

Civil War soldiers gave many arguments to defend their participation in the war. They often asked their wives to think of the value of the Revolution and preserving its legacy. They appealed not only to family loyalty but to family honor. Others complained of the moral pain they would suffer if they left. The problem of justifying themselves was worst for officers, since they could resign voluntarily. They often responded that resignation would destroy their reputations; honor and manhood motivated them. But many married men wanted to go home and a large subsection of those men deserved. This was true in the North and the South.

McPherson notes that the sense of the ubiquity of wives' opposition to their husbands' fighting is probably due to the fact that the women who supported their husbands saw no need to bring up their support. Often letter collections do not include the writings of wives, either. Engaged soldiers had an easier time, since their obligations were less stringent, and sometimes officers worried that married men made bad soldiers because it makes men cowards.

War often estranges soldiers from their home communities because war is too horrible for them to express. This creates a gulf between soldiers and their families that psychologists have documented. This gulf produces a deep bond between soldiers as they experienced estrangement together. And they often reacted by attacking those



men who stayed home. Men who stayed home sometimes talked of peace, but the soldiers always resisted and often with great intensity.

"Dry rot" on the Union side was a far broader phenomenon. A particular outrage was due to the fact that many Union soldiers were allowed to hire drafted men to serve in their places for \$300. Union soldiers despised men who bought themselves out, deserters but particularly the Copperheads, a group of "Peace Democrats" who opposed the war.

As the Peace Democrats fought in Congress for peace, the demoralization of Union soldiers increased and some swore to avenge themselves on the Copperheads. In a few rare cases, soldiers even threatened to shoot family member Copperheads. Many soldiers even expressed more respect for enemy soldiers than for dissenters at home. Lincoln's reelection ended Copperheadism and the prospect of ending the war before the South was conquered, so these issues were wrapped up before the war ended.



Chapter 11, Vengeance Will be Our Motto

Chapter 11, Vengeance Will be Our Motto Summary and Analysis

A conception of masculinity animated both Union and Confederate troops, and this code included revenge for insults and injury. Hatred typically followed this commitment to revenge. And despite these soldiers' Christian commitments working against revenge and hatred, hatred and vengeance often won out. These sentiments played out more often among Confederate soldiers, as they suffered more and their homes were devastated. After large-scale invasions began, both sides began to de-humanize one another, seeing them as demons, hordes, and so on. Texans were particularly nasty in their pursuit of revenge and Confederate soldiers generally expected eye-for-an-eye retaliation for the destruction of their homes.

In 1863, the thirst for revenge already ran high, but things went particularly bad during 1864, leading to plunder, rape, arson and so on. Confederate passion for revenge often became pathological, with some soldiers enjoying the site of dead and dismembered men, sometimes even picking up Yankee bones as trophies. Black Union soldiers particularly incensed the Confederate troops. And some Confederate soldiers killed surrendering black Union soldiers on the spot, often leading to massacres.

Union troops rarely experienced invasion or occupation, but in some border states like East Tennessee, Union troops experienced something like what the Southerners experienced. The same desire for vengeance filled these soldiers as well. And the desire to avenge fallen comrades was as intense in the North as the South, although Union commitments to revenge were more abstract, yet they often desired to punish the Confederacy for treason and they wanted to "clean out" the rebel soldiers. Some Union soldiers, on the other hand, saw most Confederate soldiers as dupes of an evil Southern aristocracy. And Union vengeance and desire for conquest was manifest in Sherman's march through South Carolina, which was perhaps the most brutal act of the war.

Rhetoric about revenge ranged among both Southerners and Northerners. The union of community and patriotism certainly had a dark side. Revenge ebbed and flowed according to who was winning and who was losing. McPherson then illustrates this pattern in the experience of the Army of the Potomac. Hatred and defeat often produced rage, revolt, disaffection and desertion.

Failures of armies in other areas could demoralize even the most successful of troops elsewhere. Victories, however, mostly led to a great increase in morale. As the South lost, their morale collapsed and Confederate soldiers lost their energy. What surprises McPherson is that the war lasted as long as it did; it is not clear how both sides continued to fight through 1864 and 1865 as intensely as they did.



Chapter 12, The Same Holy Cause

Chapter 12, The Same Holy Cause Summary and Analysis

Civil War soldiers suffered all the same psychological traumas that men of later years would know under the names "shell shock," "battle fatigue," and so on. They saw these traumas as challenges, however. This commitment often produced breakdowns, particularly when coupled with constant marching, little sleep, hunger and extreme temperatures. Combat stress increased most dramatically in the last year of the war and both sides often fell to combat exhaustion.

Post-traumatic stress disorder can also be identified from some war reports and letters. The campaigns of 1864 produced these disorders most clearly. Modern psychologists have shown that a regiment's psychology is completely wrecked by the time it loses one-third of its strength, and this occurred in many cases during the Civil War. By the time 1864 came, many men were simply fighting to stay alive and return home. Their other commitments could not be sustained under such terrible psychological and physical conditions. The values of duty and honor persevered, however.

Confederate soldiers in 1864-5 persisted on many motives, including honor, liberty, independence, and protecting their families and communities. They saw themselves as on the verge of losing everything. Surprisingly, the idea that the Confederacy was on the side of liberty never became complicated. But some were willing to let the blacks go free if they could maintain their sovereignty. The Confederate Congress allowed blacks to join the Confederate army towards the end of the war because they needed more troops. These troops were promised their freedom after they fought, but this caused many whites to desert. Others accepted it as merely necessary.

The Union soldiers' letters do not show much wavering in ideological commitments; the winter of 1863-4 was particularly challenging, yet 136,000 reenlisted in 1864. The initial enthusiasm was gone, to be sure, but many of the original motives endured. Yet these commitments were far from universal and shocked the Confederacy, who still could not understand why Union soldiers fought.

The Union army still believed themselves on the side of liberty, and the 1864 election only strengthened their convictions. The election caused divisions between the soldiers and their families at home, however. Three-quarters of Union soldiers voted for Lincoln (sometimes under peer pressure and coercion, it must be said) but many family members remained committed Democrats.

McPherson then ends the book, arguing that Americans have a lot to learn from men on both sides of the Civil War who fought hard and died for their principles.



Characters

James McPherson

James McPherson is one of the world's great historians of the American Civil War. Currently he is a professor emeritus at Princeton, holding the George Henry Davis Chair. His writing is so well known and well done that his most famous book, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, won the Pulitzer Prize. He is widely understood to have increased the public's understanding of the importance and meaning of the American Civil War.

For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought the Civil War is not one of McPherson's most well-known works, partly because of its narrow scope. It seeks not to give a grand narrative of the war, to tell of its heroes, but instead to answer a very specific question: Why did the Civil War soldiers fight the Civil War with such ferocious tenacity?

McPherson is not a character in the book, but he does insert his own thoughts and experiences in the book from time to time, particularly in the beginning. He cites as his inspiration for the book a trip to Gettysburg in 1976 with some Princeton students. He realized then that 13,000 Confederate soldiers had fought at Gettysburg presumably with the knowledge that they would lose. His students ask why they did it, why they marched directly into fire. To them, it seemed insane. The question began to bother McPherson more and more until he wrote the book. He read over 25,000 letters written by Civil War soldiers in preparation for it.

Civil War Soldiers

The main characters of *For Cause and Comrades* are the soldiers who fought in the Civil War, both Union and Confederate. The book is an inquiry into their psychology, and McPherson uses a variety of historical tools to explore who these men were and why they fought. A particularly valuable source of historical information was a collection of Civil War letters that soldiers wrote to their families; these letters were not censored by the armed services, as later generations of soldiers' letters were, so the letters are often quite revealing.

It turns out that the Civil War soldiers fought for many reasons, but the list of major reasons is particularly revealing. Many initially fought out of a sense of political and nationalistic rage at the other side - the South against the North for invading, the North against the South for threatening the stability of the country as a whole. Yet this motivation wore off quickly.

A major motivating factor was a sense of duty, not only to one's country but to one's community and family. Honor mattered as well, since men who fought stood the chance to gain glory and those who stayed home looked like cowards. Religion was an important influence, substantially reducing men's fear of death and giving them strength when nothing else could. Patriotism, ideology, support from home, primary group



cohesion, and even vengeance all play core roles in explaining why the Civil War soldiers fought for as long and as hard as they did.

Union Soldiers

Union soldiers were the soldiers of the Union Army, which represented the North. Their motivations tended to be more abstract and ideological than those of the Confederate Army, as they were the invading not defending force.

Confederate Soldiers

Confederate soldiers were the soldiers of the Confederacy, the group of Southern states that seceded from the United States. They were committed to protecting their homes but also their liberty. They combined this with a complete inability to see the irony of combining their strong commitment to defending black slavery and their strong commitment to defending white freedom.

Enlisted Men

Enlisted men were largely volunteers but could not leave once they joined up. Their conditions were difficult and they often resented the discipline that officers imposed upon them.

Officers

Officers could join the war voluntarily and often fought for glory and ideology. They found enlisted men undisciplined.

Slaves

Initially, neither side cared much about the fate of African slaves, but as time went on, particularly when blacks started to fight alongside Union soldiers and die with them, Union soldiers came to believe in ending slavery, although sometimes only for pragmatic reasons.

Black Soldiers

Black soldiers were recruited to fight for the Union and the Confederacy was eventually forced to offer freedom to black slaves if they joined the Confederate army.



Men of Faith

Religious men made particularly good soldiers for their resolve, but struggled to justify participating in violence.

Married and Family Men

Many officers worried that married and family men made bad soldiers because they had divided loyalties.

Regiments

Groups of soldiers that fought as one in the Civil War. Their common experiences and sufferings bonded them such that a major combat motivation was preserving one another.

Abraham Lincoln

The famed president of the United States during the Civil War. Like the Union, Lincoln initially fought for the preservation of the Union but came to believe in the anti-slavery cause as time progressed.



Objects/Places

Letters

The letters of Civil War soldiers to their families were the primary source of McPherson's information about the motivations of Civil War soldiers.

The Civil War

The Civil War (1861-1865) began when eleven Southern states seceded from the United States and created the Confederate States of America. Both sides fought the United States' most bloody war. McPherson is interested in why the soldiers in the war fought as hard and as fiercely as they did.

The United States

The country where the Civil War took place.

The South

The South included the Confederate States that formed the Confederacy. The Civil War was fought as an attempt to conquer the South and free captive slaves.

The North

The North included the Union States, which were mostly free states and some border-slave states. They fought to preserve the Union primarily and later to free the slaves.

The Union Army

The Union Army was the army of the remaining United States.

The Confederate Army

The Confederate Army was the army of the Confederate States of America.



Christianity

Nearly all Civil War soldiers were Christians, some quite committed. Because they fought near the end of the Second Great Awakening, the Civil War soldiers were among the most religious soldiers in human history.

Slavery

African slaves were forced to labor on plantations in the American South. The Civil War was fought in part to free them.

Liberty

Both Union and Confederate Soldiers saw themselves as defending liberty, despite the fact that the Union soldiers were fighting a war of conquest and the Confederate soldiers were fighting to defend slavery.

Patriotism

Patriotism for nation, region, state and community motivated both Union and Confederate soldiers.

Vengeance

Vengeance was a ubiquitous motive for battle, particularly as the war progressed and casualties mounted.

Family

Letters from family kept many soldiers going, although when troubles arose their spirits could be crushed.

Primary Group Cohesion

"Primary Group Cohesion" is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when stressful and/or meaningful events bond those who experienced these events together. McPherson believes that Primary Group Cohesion was a major form of combat motivation.



Adrenalin

The chemical adrenalin ran so strong in the bodies of Civil War soldiers during battle that many of them were amazed.

Military Rage

The rage that accompanies the beginning of a war. It can be understood as the national equivalent of psyching one's self up to fight.

Ideology

A pattern of related ideas, principles and commitments that often are tied to politics, ideology was a powerful motivation for some Union and Confederate soldiers.



Themes

Combat Motivation

In *For Cause and Comrades*, James McPherson is searching for an explanation of the motives of Civil War soldiers to fight and remain fighting. He divides these motivations into three types: initial motivations, sustaining motivations and combat motivations. He tells a different but not entirely unique story about each type. Combat motivations come in for scrutiny in part because McPherson believes that his reader will be as shocked as he was when he learned how fiercely Union and Confederate soldiers fought in battle. He attributes this degree of carnage and commitment to several factors.

First, duty and honor played central roles. Soldiers felt that they had a duty to their country, region, army and troop to fight in a noble way, to take up burdens for the group and so on. Many men desired to prove themselves to their fellow soldiers, many of whom were from their home communities. Another important combat motivation was simple adrenalin. McPherson notes that Confederate soldiers were stunned at the adrenalin highs they experienced on the battlefield; Confederate and Union soldiers would often right home about how they were afraid to fight prior to battle but that after the first shots were fired, their minds left them and they acted only on instinct and with unusually great energy and strength.

Primary group cohesion was another major factor. McPherson discusses the studies psychologists have done on how shared suffering, triumph and experiences can bond groups together. Many Union and Confederate troops fought to protect their "band of brothers." But the soldiers had darker motivations as well, particularly as the war continued. Men often fought out of a desire for vengeance, particularly the Confederate soldiers whose homes were being destroyed and families killed at the Union conquered the South.

Sustaining Motivation

Again, in *For Cause and Comrades*, James McPherson is searching for an explanation of the motives of Civil War soldiers. These motivations are of three sorts: initial motivations, sustaining motivations and combat motivations. McPherson's story differs from motivational class to motivational class. Sustaining motivations are those motivations which keep men in the army between battles; in order words, they are the non-combat motivations that keep men in the war after they have committed. McPherson finds sustaining motivations particularly baffling. Combat motivations and initial motivations are easier to understand.

McPherson cobbles together several distinct theories. First, men acted out of a sense of duty and honor. They stayed in the war because they wanted to prove themselves and felt obligated to defend their country, communities and families. Second, McPherson



cites the high degree of religious motivations that drove Civil War soldiers: the Civil War took place around the time of the Second Great Awakening and this influenced Civil War soldiers, making them among the most religious armies in history.

Patriotism and ideology moved Civil War soldiers as well. Union soldiers often fought to preserve the Union, whereas Confederate soldiers fought on behalf of their states and homes. They both fought for their own understanding of liberty and were willing to sacrifice for their countries. As time progressed, many Union soldiers fought to end slavery and men of both armies stayed strong through support from their families.

The Shock of Commitment

Perhaps the main theme of *For Causes and Comrades* is McPherson's utter shock at the radical level of commitment to the war expressed by Civil War soldiers. They fought for four years, tearing one another to pieces. Confederate soldiers killed Union soldiers and vice versa with a near unrelenting drive which killed hundreds of thousands of men and wounded hundreds of thousands more. In many cases, family members fought other family members. Commitment to the war was so radical that brother would fight against brother.

Much of the build-up to the Civil War provided the initial motivation in causing men to join the Union and Confederate armies, but McPherson argues that this initial motivation, while present in some of the earliest letters, quickly dies out. The eagerness to prove one's self in battle lasts until a soldier's first or second battle, where his attempts to prove himself have already succeeded or failed. Adrenalin drove men in battle, but not off the field, and while primary group cohesion bonded men, the high casualty levels and turnover rates prevents group cohesion from telling a complete story.

McPherson is shocked at the high degree of religiosity of Union and Confederate soldiers. He remarks that due to the recent Second Great Awakening, Civil War soldiers were among the most religious in history, constantly praying and ardently struggling with deep theological questions. McPherson is also surprised at how much soldiers were motivated by abstract ideological commitments, as it seems odd that any large number of men would give their lives for abstract ideas.

McPherson ends the book uncertain of which factors he cites played the most major role in explaining why Civil War soldiers fought the way they did. He hopes that by mixing all of these factors together he can explain enough of the intensity of the war to satisfy his question. But the book ends with a slight note of disappointment, as McPherson admits that there is no way to know which factors mattered most and which did not.

Style

Perspective

James McPherson is a professor emeritus of history at Princeton and is widely regarded as one of the great contemporary historians of the American Civil War. He is an eminent scholar whose works on the Civil War have won him not only an endowed chair and the presidency of the American Historical Association, but even a Pulitzer Prize. His perspective is that of an erudite scholar. He reports in the book that he read over twenty-five thousand Civil War soldier letters in preparation for writing the book. He is clearly a man committed to conveying the truth about the Civil War to his readers.

McPherson is arguably fiercely pro-Union, disgusted by the outrageous racism of Confederate soldiers and more or less indifferent or insensitive to any legitimate moral complaints that non-slave owning Confederate soldiers might have to being conquered by their fellow countrymen. He exposes the shocking and disgusting fact that in none of the hundreds of Confederate soldiers' letters that he read did he find a single moral objection to slavery. He is bitterly critical of Confederate soldiers for their contradictory ability to fight for white liberty and black slavery.

He has his fair share of criticism for the Union Army, however, particularly with those who were upset by the Emancipation Proclamation and expressed strong prejudice against blacks. While he is properly condemnatory of the South, he does not examine their moral claims in great detail. Nor does he document in any detail of the merciless looting, torching and plundering of South Carolina and Georgia by General Sherman and his army. For most Americans, this will seem perfectly natural. It may well be, but it is nonetheless important to emphasize that McPherson is on the side of the victors. That said, he seems to honestly have come to his opinion and there is no hint of intellectual dishonesty about his argumentative style.

Tone

The tone of *For Causes and Comrades* is a mixture of analytic inquiry, admiration, pity and moral approbation and disapprobation. McPherson is one of the great contemporary historians of the American Civil War and is intimately familiar with the events, characters and ideas at the heart of the war. As such, he brings an enormous sense of scholarship and analytic inquiry to the text. He makes points carefully and then supports them with evidence from the letters of Civil War soldiers. He also is careful about making claims that are too strong, which helps him to come off as modest and sensitive to subtlety.

Admiration comes through the text when McPherson discusses the most moral motivations of Civil War soldiers, such as their commitment to liberty, their bonds with their fellow troops, their willingness to sacrifice for their principles and the coming



realization of the Union soldiers that slavery was unjust. He expresses great pity for the Civil War soldiers when he finds them overwhelmed by exhaustion and hunger, laboring under psychological trauma that they did not know how to cope with, struggling with the meaning of life and death in the midst of terrible slaughter and the psychological breakdown that led many soldiers to act out of vengeance.

Moral approbation and disapprobation are spread throughout the book. McPherson is particularly horrified by the fact that not a single Confederate letter expressed questions about the moral legitimacy of slavery and that Confederate soldiers could so easily combine the contradictory ideas of fighting for white liberty and black slavery at the same time. On the other hand, he clearly sees the Civil War soldiers as powerful moral figures at various points in the book, particularly when they express loyalty to noble ideas.

Structure

For Cause and Comrades has a simple structure built around answering a single question: Why did the Civil War soldiers fight as intensely and for as long as they did? The book has twelve chapters, the first of which sets up the initial question and divides it into parts. The other eleven chapters suggest and then analyze various hypotheses that answer the question. In each chapter, McPherson finds any one motivational story unconvincing, but he sees merit in each proposal. By the end of the book, McPherson proposes that all of these explanations play an important role and that the historical data cannot show which factors are the weightiest.

The first chapter, "This War is a Crusade," therefore, sets up the major question. The chapter also explains how McPherson decided to write the book and how he separates types of motivation for fighting the Civil War into initial motivations, sustaining motivations and combat motivations. The remaining chapters address theories that attempt to explain each type of motivation.

Chapter Two, "We Were In Earnest," discusses the role of honor and duty in initially motivating Civil War soldiers to volunteer in the army. Chapter Three, "Anxious for the Fray," shows that many men entered the war because they were eager to prove their masculinity and secure respect from their fellow soldiers and communities for their heroism. Chapter Four, "If I Flinched I Was Ruined," covers the powerful role adrenaline played in motivating soldiers during combat to press on.

Chapter Five, "Religion is What Makes Brave Soldiers," discusses the core role of religion in making me less afraid of death. Chapter Six, "A Band of Brothers," suggests that a major combat motivation was primary group cohesion, and Chapter Seven, "On the Altar of My Country," covers the role of sacrifice for hearth and home in motivating soldiers.

Chapter Eight, "The Cause of Liberty," discusses the role that ideology played in motivating the Civil War soldiers, particularly their interest in preserving their liberty and



Chapter Nine, "Slavery Must be Cleaned Out," reviews the slow to manifest motivation to end slavery. Chapter Ten, "We Know That We Are Supported at Home," analyzes the role that letters from home played in keeping up soldier morale and Chapter Eleven, "Vengeance Will be Our Motto" suggests that a thirst for revenge was a major motivating factor at later stages of the war.

Finally, in Chapter Twelve, "The Same Holy Cause," McPherson inquires into the role that battle victories and losses played in motivating troops and bringing the war to a close. It is in this chapter that he argues that all of these motivations played an important role in answering his original question.



Quotes

"I never expect to be fully believed when I tell what I saw of the horrors of Spotsylvania because I should be loath to believe it myself ..." p. 4

"A battle is a horrid thing. You can have no conception of its horrors." p. 12

"One of the phrases often used to describe the American Civil War is The Brothers' War." p. 14

"The vandals of the North ... are determined to destroy slavery ... We must all fight, and I choose to fight for southern rights and southern liberty." p. 20

"We pushed on anxious for the fray." p. 30

"My mind was wholly absorbed." p. 39

"We are just like Negroes." p. 47

"Neither the flaccid coercive mechanisms of Civil War armies nor charismatic leadership could alone or together have kept these armies in existence or made them fight. ... They came from a society that prized individualism, self-reliance, and freedom from coercive authority. The army broke down some of this individualism, or tried to, but could never turn these volunteer soldiers into automatons." p. 61

"Our fate is in His hands." p. 64

"Religion is what makes brave soldiers." p. 68

"Personal honor is the one thing valued more than life itself by the majority of men." p. 77

"If the American volunteers accomplished prodigies of patience, energy and devotion it is because they fought with knowledge of the cause." p. 93

"We are fighting for our liberty against tyrants of the North ... who are determined to destroy slavery." p. 106

"I have no heart in this war if the slaves cannot go free." p. 117

"Letters from home have been of crucial importance in sustaining morale in all literate armies." p. 133

"My husband is my country. What is country to me if he be killed?" p. 133

"Vengeance will be our motto." p. 149

"Courage is will power ... the fixed resolve not to quit." p. 163

"Whether Americans today would be willing to make similar wartime sacrifices is unanswerable. One hopes that it will remain unanswered." p. 178



Topics for Discussion

What are McPherson's three categories of motivation? Where does he derive these categories and how does he use them in the book?

What does McPherson see as three of the most important sustaining motivations for Civil War soldiers?

What does McPherson see as three of the most important combat motivations for Civil War soldiers?

What does McPherson see as three of the most important initial motivations for Civil War soldiers?

What were some of the differences in motivation between Union soldiers and Confederate soldiers? What were some of the less expected similarities?

How did the Confederate soldiers view slavery? How did Union soldiers view slavery? Describe any changes or surprising facts that you learned.

How reliable is McPherson's method of letter analyzing as a tool for understanding the motivations of Civil War soldiers?

In your opinion, which factors that McPherson discusses were the most important factors in motivating soldiers in the Civil War?