

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Southern Unionism, Dissent, and Resistance

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In 1863, as battles raged on distant fields, a newspaper editor in the central Georgia town of Milledgeville was more concerned about the war at home. In an essay discussing the many ways in which Southerners were working against the Confederacy, the editor wrote: “We are fighting each other harder than we ever fought the enemy.” Samuel Knight agreed. After touring southwest Georgia in the late fall and winter of 1863-64, he wrote to Governor Joe Brown of “strong Union feeling” in that part of the state. Knight concluded that Southerners were “as bitterly divided against each other as the Southern and Northern people ever has been.”¹

These two men saw clearly in their place and time what generations of historians have so often ignored or dismissed—that during its brief existence, the Confederacy fought a two-front war. There was, of course, the war it waged with the North, the war so familiar to almost every school child. But, though school children rarely hear of it, there was another war. Between 1861 and 1865, the South was torn apart by a violent inner civil war, a war no less significant to the Confederacy’s fate than its more widely known struggle against the Yankees.

From its beginnings the Confederacy suffered from a rising tide of intense domestic hostility, not only among Southern blacks but increasingly among Southern whites. Ironically, it was a hostility brought on largely by those most responsible for the Confederacy’s creation. Planters excused themselves from the draft in various ways, then grew far too much cotton and tobacco, and not nearly enough food. Soldiers went hungry, as did their families back home. Women defied Confederate authorities by staging food riots from Richmond, Virginia, to Galveston, Texas. Soldiers deserted by the tens of thousands, and draft evasion became commonplace. By 1864, the draft law was practically impossible to enforce and two-thirds of the Confederate army was absent with or without leave. Many deserters and draft dodgers formed armed bands that controlled vast areas of the Southern countryside.

1. David Williams, Teresa Crisp Williams, and David Carlson, *Plain Folk in a Rich Man’s War: Class and Dissent in Confederate Georgia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 164; David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South’s Inner Civil War* (New York: New Press, 2008), 1.

Wartime disaffection among Southerners had solid roots in the early secession crisis. Most white Southerners, three-fourths of whom owned no slaves, made it clear in the winter 1860-61 elections for state convention delegates that they opposed immediate secession. Nevertheless, state conventions across the South, all of them dominated by slaveholders, ultimately ignored majority will and took their states out of the Union. One Texas politician conceded that ambitious colleagues had engineered secession without strong backing from “the mass of the people.” A staunch South Carolina secessionist admitted the same. “But,” he asked, “whoever waited for the common people when a great move was to be made—we must make the move and force them to follow.”²

Despite their general reluctance to secede, there was considerable enthusiasm for the war among Southern whites in the wake of Lincoln’s call for volunteers to invade the South. Whatever their misgivings about secession, invasion was another matter. And despite Lincoln’s promise to the contrary, “fear of Negro equality,” as historian Georgia Lee Tatum put it, “caused some of the more ignorant to rally to the support of the Confederacy.” But Southern enlistments declined rapidly after First Manassas, or Bull Run as Yankees called the battle. Men were reluctant to leave their families in the fall and winter of 1861-62, and many of those already in the army deserted to help theirs.³

In October 1861, one worried Confederate wrote to his governor that “our people don’t seem to be inclined to offer their services.” That same month, a recruiter from Columbus, Georgia, reported to the war department that it was almost impossible to find volunteers. In February 1862, W. H. Byrd of Augusta, Georgia, wrote that he had been trying for two weeks to raise a company in what he called “this ‘Yankee City,’ but I regret to say every effort has failed.” That failure did not result from a lack of potential recruits. The *Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel* had noted a week earlier that “one who walks Broad street and sees the number of young men, would come to the conclusion that no war . . . was now waging.”⁴

The Confederacy’s response to its recruitment problems served only to weaken its support among plain folk. In April 1862 the Confederate Congress passed the first general conscription act in American history. But men of wealth could avoid the draft by hiring a substitute or paying an exemption fee. For planters, Congress also exempted one white male of draft age for every twenty slaves owned. This twenty slave law was the most widely hated act ever imposed by the Confederacy. Said Private Sam Watkins of Tennessee, “It gave us the blues; we wanted twenty negroes. Negro property suddenly became very valuable, and there was raised the howl of ‘rich man’s war, poor man’s fight.’”⁵

2. Paul D. Escott, “Southern Yeomen and the Confederacy,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 77 (1978): 157; Lillian A. Kibler, “Unionist Sentiment in South Carolina,” *Journal of Southern History* 4 (1938): 358.

³ 3. Georgia Lee Tatum, *Disloyalty in the Confederacy* (1934, reprint with introduction by David Williams, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 38.

4. Williams, Williams, and Carlson, *Plain Folk in a Rich Man’s War*, 22.

5. Sam R. Watkins, *Co. Aytch: Maury Grays, First Tennessee Regiment* (1882, reprint Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing, 1987), 69.

To make matters worse, planters devoted much of their land to cotton and tobacco while soldiers and their families went hungry. In the spring of 1862, a southwest Georgia man wrote to Governor Joe Brown about planters growing too much cotton, begging him to “stop those internal enemies of the country, for they will whip us sooner than all Lincolndom combined could do it.” Thousands of planters and merchants defied the Confederacy’s cotton export policy and smuggled it out by the ton. Most states passed laws limiting production of non-food items, but enforcement was lax. With prices on the rise, cotton producers and dealers were getting richer than ever. Some bragged openly that the longer the war went on the more money they made.⁶

The inevitable result of cotton and tobacco over-production was a severe food shortage that hit soldiers’ families especially hard. With their husbands and fathers at the front and impressment officers confiscating what little food they had, it was difficult for soldiers’ wives to provide for themselves and their children. Planters had promised to keep soldiers’ families fed, but they never grew enough food to meet the need. Much of what food they did produce was sold to speculators, who hoarded it or priced it far beyond the reach of most ordinary people.

Desperate to avoid starvation, thousands of women took action. As early as 1862, food riots began breaking out all over the South. Gangs of hungry women, many of them armed, ransacked stores, depots, and supply wagons searching for anything edible. Major urban centers like Richmond, Atlanta, Mobile, and Galveston experienced the biggest riots. Even smaller towns, like Georgia’s Valdosta and Marietta, and North Carolina’s High Point and Salisbury, saw hungry women rioting for food.

In an open letter to the *Savannah Morning News*, one enraged Georgian was sure where the blame lay: “The crime is with the planters . . . as a class, they have yielded their patriotism, if they ever had any, to covetousness . . . for the sake of money, they are pursuing a course to destroy or demoralize our army—to starve out the other class dependent on them for provisions.” The letter spoke for a great many plain folk. It seemed increasingly obvious to them that they were fighting a rich man’s war, which made the problem of desertion that much worse. One Confederate officer wrote home to his wife that “discontent is growing rapidly in the ranks and I fear that unless something is done . . . we will have no army. The laws that have been passed generally protect the rich, and the poor begin to say it is the rich man’s war and the poor man’s fight, and they will not stand it.”⁷

Deserters who made it home found plenty of neighbors willing to help them avoid further entanglements with the Confederacy. That was obvious even from distant Richmond. A disgusted head of the Bureau of Conscription complained that desertion

⁶ Lee W. Formwalt, “Planters and Cotton Production as a Cause of Confederate Defeat: The Evidence from Southwest Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 74 (1990): 272-75.

⁷ Williams, *Plain Folk*, 4; Blakey, Arch Fredric Blakey, Ann Smith Lainhart, and Winston Bryant Stephens, Jr., eds., *Rose Cottage Chronicles: Civil War Letters of the Bryant-Stephens Families of North Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 307.

had “in popular estimation, lost the stigma that justly pertains to it, and therefore the criminals are everywhere shielded by their families and by the sympathies of many communities.” A resident of Bibb County, Georgia, wrote that the area around Macon was “full of deserters and almost every man in the community will feed them and keep them from being arrested.” In Marshall County, Mississippi, a witness noted that “many deserters have been for months in this place without molestation. . . . Conscripts and deserters are daily seen on the streets of the town.” When deserters were arrested in Alabama’s Randolph County, an armed mob stormed the jail and set them free.⁸

Some deserters joined with other anti-Confederates in a shadowy antiwar movement, widely known as the Peace Society. The Peace Society was the largest of the many secret or semi-secret organizations, such as the Peace and Constitutional Society in Arkansas and the Heroes of America in Appalachia, which sprang up across the South to oppose the war. Little is known of the Peace Society’s early days. It probably formed in north Alabama or east Tennessee during the spring of 1862 and later spread south into Alabama and Georgia.

Desertion became so serious by the summer of 1863 that Jefferson Davis begged absentees to return. If only they would, he insisted, the Confederacy could match Union armies man for man. But they did not return. A year later, Davis publically admitted that two-thirds of Confederate soldiers were absent, most of them without leave. Many thousands of these men joined antiwar organizations that had been active in the South since the war’s beginning. Others joined with draft dodgers and other anti-Confederates to form guerrilla bands, often called “tory” or “layout” gangs. They attacked government supply trains, burned bridges, raided local plantations, and harassed impressment agents and conscript officers.

As early as the summer of 1862, there were newspaper reports of layout gangs in Calhoun County, Florida, just west of Tallahassee, who had “armed and organized themselves to resist those who may attempt their arrest.” They were already in contact with the Union blockading fleet and receiving arms from them. At one point they even hatched a plot to kidnap Governor Milton and turn him over to the Federals. A pro-Confederate learned of the scheme and warned Milton, who stayed in Tallahassee to avoid capture.⁹

Just east of the state capital, deserter bands raided plantations in Jefferson, Madison, and Taylor counties. Along Florida’s western Gulf coast, armed and organized deserters and layouts were abundant in Lafayette, Walton, Levy, and Washington counties. In southwestern Florida between Tampa and Fort Myers, they ranged virtually

⁸ Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 93; Williams, *Plain Folk*, 182; Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War* (1928, reprint with introduction by William Blair, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 69.

⁹ John F. Reiger, “Deprivation, Disaffection, and Desertion in Confederate Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 48 (1969-70): 288.

unchallenged. On Florida's Atlantic coast, the counties Volusia, Duval, Putnam, and St. John's saw running battles between anti-Confederate bands and soldiers trying to bring them in.

Bands of deserters also ranged over southern Mississippi's Simpson County. When the sheriff arrested several of them, their friends broke them out of jail. That entire area of Mississippi was, in fact, largely controlled by deserters and resisters who killed or drove off anyone connected with the Confederacy. In spring 1864 Major James Hamilton, quartermaster for taxation in Mississippi, wrote to his superiors that in the state's Seventh District, covering most of southern Mississippi, deserters had "overrun and taken possession of the country." Hamilton's agent in Jones County had been driven off, and Hamilton had heard nothing more from him. In Covington County, deserters made the tax collector cease operations and distribute what he had on hand to their families. Deserters raided the quartermaster depot in Perry County and destroyed the stores there. Under the circumstances, Hamilton could no longer continue tax collection in that region.¹⁰

One of the most effective layout gangs operated in southeast Mississippi's Jones County and was led by Newton Knight, a slave-less farmer who deserted the Confederate army soon after conscription began. Upset that wealthy men could avoid the draft, Knight deserted and took up with others of his community who had done the same. "We stayed out in the woods minding our own business," Knight said, "until the Confederate Army began sending raiders after us with bloodhounds. . . . Then we saw we had to fight." And fight they did. For the rest of the war Knight and his men, roughly five hundred strong, drove off Confederate agents, ambushed army patrols, looted government depots, and distributed the food stored there to the poor. So successfully did they subvert Confederate control of the county that some called it the free state of Jones.¹¹

"Free state" was a phrase widely applied as well to north Alabama's Winston County. Soon after Alabama seceded from the Union, Winston seceded from the state. A December 1861 letter to Alabama's governor warned that "if they had to fight for anybody, they would fight for Lincoln." And they did. Twice as many Winston County men served in the Union army as did in the Confederate. Even many of those who initially signed on with the Confederacy soon had a change of heart. Frank and Jasper Ridge, two brothers from Jackson County, deserted after just fifteen days. By the summer of 1863 there were at least ten thousand deserters and conscripts in the Alabama hill country formed into armed bands. Some did so to fend off Confederate authorities, killing officers sent to arrest them. Others went on the offensive. In Randolph County about four

¹⁰ Mark A. Weitz, *More Damning than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 206.

¹¹ Victoria E. Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 105.

hundred deserters organized and carried out “a systematic warfare upon conscript officers.”¹²

Farther south, still others in or near the Alabama Black Belt targeted planters and their property. “Destroying Angels” and “Prowling Brigades” swept out of their piney wood strongholds to burn cotton, gin houses, and any supplies they could not carry away. Along the Florida line in southeast Alabama, a Confederate captain sent in to catch deserters called the region “one of the Greatest Dens for Tories and deserters from our army in the World.”¹³

In Louisiana, James Madison Wells, though a man of means himself, denounced the Confederacy as a rich man’s government and organized a guerrilla campaign against it. From his Bear Wallow stronghold in Rapides Parish, Wells led deserters and other resisters in raids against Confederate supply lines and depots. In the state’s Cajun parishes, bands of anti-Confederates did the same. One group that ranged west of Washington Parish, known locally as the “Clan,” numbered more than three hundred. Commanded by a Cajun named Carrier, it drove off home guards and plundered all who opposed them. A woman from Bayou Chicot wrote to Governor Moore of local guerrillas there: “We could not fare worse were we surrounded by a band of Lincoln’s mercenary hirelings.” Confederate Lieutenant John Sibley wrote in his diary that one band of “marauders” had “declared vengeance against Confederate soldiers. . . . After killing five members of the Home Guard, they almost inhumanly beat their faces to pieces with the breach of their guns so no friend would know them again.”¹⁴

In Bandera County, Texas, just west of San Antonio, residents formed a pro-Union militia, refused to pay taxes to the Confederate-backed state government, and threatened to kill anyone who tried to make them do so. At the state’s northern extreme near Bonham, several hundred anti-Confederates established three large camps close enough so that the entire force could assemble within two hours. They patrolled the region so effectively that no one could approach without their knowing of it. In the central Texas county of Bell, deserters led by Lige Bivens fortified themselves in a cave known as Camp Safety. From there they mounted raids against the area’s pro-Confederates. According to an 1863 report, two thousand other Texas deserters “fortified themselves near the Red River, and defied the Confederacy. At last account they had been established . . . eight months, and were constantly receiving accession of discontented rebels and desperadoes.”¹⁵

12. Wesley S. Thompson, *The Free State of Winston: A History of Winston County, Alabama* (Winfield, Ala.: Pareil Press, 1968), 33; Malcolm C. McMillan, *The Disintegration of a Confederate State: Three Governors and Alabama’s Wartime Home Front, 1861-1865* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986), 41-42.

13. Bessie Martin, *A Rich Man’s War, A Poor Man’s Fight: Desertion of Alabama Troops from the Confederate Army* (1932, reprint with introduction by Mark Weitz, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 52.

14. Ethel Taylor, “Discontent in Confederate Louisiana,” *Louisiana History* 2 (1961): 425-26.

15. Tatum, *Disloyalty in the Confederacy*, 51.

An Arkansas band of anti-Confederates operated out of Greasy Cove, a mountain pass at the head of the Little Missouri River. Made up of “deserters, disaffected, and turbulent characters,” as one newspaper called them, they swept through the countryside harassing Confederate loyalists and challenging Confederate authority. So did anti-Confederates in east Tennessee, a region where open rebellion against the Confederacy was common from the start. As early as the fall of 1861, bands of native Unionists disrupted Confederate operations by spying for the Federals, cutting telegraph lines, and burning railroad bridges. The next spring Unionists in Scott and Morgan counties staged a coup. They forcibly took control of all county offices, disbanded the Confederate home guard, and put in its place a force made up of local Union men.¹⁶

After pro-Confederates from neighboring North Carolina mounted a series of raids against Unionists in and around the Smoky Mountain town of Cades Cove, Tennessee, the area’s Union men formed their own militia. Led by Russell Gregory, pastor of a local Primitive Baptist church, they established a network of sentries along the roads to warn of approaching danger. In the spring of 1864, raiders invaded Cades Cove once again to steal livestock and provisions. They plundered several farms, taking all they could carry, but never made it back to North Carolina with their loot. Near the state line, Gregory’s militiamen felled trees across the roads and ambushed the Rebel partisans, forcing them to scatter and leave their plunder behind.

Anti-Confederates, deserters, and resisters alike in the North Carolina mountains also formed defensive militias and set up warning networks. Wilkes County was home to a band of five hundred deserters organized as a guerrilla force who openly challenged Confederates to come and take them. Wilkes County’s Trap Hill gang was especially aggressive in harassing local pro-Confederates. In Cherokee County, about one hundred layouts formed a resistance force that disarmed Confederate soldiers and terrorized Confederate loyalists.

Though their motives were not always the same, the one thing nearly all armed resisters had in common was that they were men of modest means. In eastern Tennessee, for example, Unionist guerillas were mainly small farmers, artisans, and laborers. By contrast, their pro-Confederate counterparts held three times as much real estate and twice as much personal property. In the North Fork district of western North Carolina’s Ashe County, a comparison of thirty-four Union and forty-two Confederate volunteers shows that holdings in real and personal property among Confederates was more than twice that of their Union counterparts. In eastern North Carolina, the difference was even more dramatic. In Washington County, which supplied nearly an equal number of troops to the Union and the Confederacy, Union soldiers were fourteen times poorer than those in the Confederate army. Such figures reflect a class-based Unionism that made itself felt all across the South.

¹⁶ Carl Moneyhon, “Disloyalty and Class Consciousness in Southwestern Arkansas, 1862-1865,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (1993): 230.

The rise of such class warfare was the very thing that slaveholders had tried to avoid for so long and what had, in large part, led many to push for secession in the first place. “Ironically,” as historian Charles Bolton points out, “by engineering disunion, slaveowners fostered the growth of the kind of organizations they had long feared: class-based groups that pitted nonslaveholders against the interests of slaveowners.”¹⁷

Nowhere was that more evident than in the low country of North Carolina. Planters in the region were terrified to learn that, as one wrote, Unionists among the lower classes had “gone so far as to declare [that they] will take the property from the rich men & divide it among the poor men.” It was no idle threat. From near the war’s beginning, bands of unionists had been raiding coastal plantations. Formed initially to protect themselves from conscription and Confederate raiders, their objectives eventually expanded to include driving planters from their land and dividing it among themselves.¹⁸

In the spring and summer of 1862, a pro-Union newspaper in the port town of New Bern reported the formation of Unionist militias in Washington, Tyrrell, Martin, Bertie, Hertford, Gates, Chowan, Perquimans, Pasquotank, and Camden counties “not only for self-protection against rebel guerillas, but for the purpose of expatriating all the rebel families from their limits.” Further west in the central piedmont region of North Carolina, class antagonism was also a strong motive for resistance. Many members of the Heroes of America were poor men who, as one contemporary recalled, were “induced to join the organization by the promise of a division here after among them of the property of the loyal Southern citizens.”¹⁹

South Carolina’s hill country too saw its share of resistance. Centered in Greenville, Pickens, and Spartanburg counties, deserter bands had designated assembly areas and an organized system of signals to warn of trouble on the way. “Every woman and child,” according to one report, was “a watch and a guard for them.” Deserters commandeered and fortified an island in the Broad River. They also built fortified positions at Jones Gap, Hogback Mountain, Table Rock, Caesars Head, and Potts Camp. Near Gowensville, they built a heavy log fort. Deserter bands went on the offensive too. A force of more than five hundred controlled a region bordering North Carolina. Operating in groups of between ten and thirty, they chased off conscript companies, raided supply depots, and looted and burned the property of anyone who openly supported the Confederacy.²⁰

17. Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 160.

18 Richard N. Current, *Lincoln’s Loyalists: Union Soldiers from the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 137.

19. Wayne K. Durrill, *War of Another Kind: A Southern Community in the Great Rebellion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 108-09; William T. Auman and David D. Scarborough, “The Heroes of America in Civil War North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 58 (1981): 345.

²⁰ Tatum, *Disloyalty in the Confederacy*, 138.

Much the same was true in southwestern Virginia, where J. E. Joyner noted large numbers of deserters with weapons, which they vowed to use “against the Confederacy if there is any attempt to arrest them.” Montgomery, Floyd, and Giles counties especially were home to numerous bands of deserters. Local Unionists too, aroused by Confederate home guard depredations, formed armed militias. One such unit, headed by Charles Huff of Floyd County, regularly backed up local deserters and ambushed home guard patrols. The job was made easier by Joseph Phares, a double agent who kept Huff informed of the guard’s plans while feeding its officers disinformation.²¹

The Confederacy’s keystone state of Georgia was one of the most divided in the South. Anti-Confederate gangs operated in every part of the state. Some areas were so hostile to the Confederacy that army patrols dared not enter them. The Pine Barrens region of southeast Georgia was a favorite hideout for those trying to avoid Confederate entanglements. Soldier Camp Island in the Okefenokee Swamp was home to as many as a thousand deserters. In southwest Georgia, a Fort Gaines man begged Governor Brown to send cavalry for protection against deserters and layout gangs. So did pro-Confederates in northwest Georgia’s Dade and Walker counties.

From the upland county of Fannin, a letter arrived on the governor’s desk in July 1862 warning that “a very large majority of the people now here perhaps two thirds are disloyal.” Anti-Confederates became so aggressive in Fannin that one man called it a “general uprising among our Torys of this County.” That same month came news from Gilmer County, just north of Fannin, of “tories and traitors who have taken up their abode in the mountains.” September found neighboring Lumpkin County overrun by tories and deserters, robbing pro-Confederates of guns, money, clothes, and provisions. One Confederate sympathizer wrote that “the Union men—Tories—are very abusive indeed and says they will do as they please.”²²

Resistance was just as fierce in the lower part of the state. In September 1862, forty men of southwest Georgia’s Marion County built a fortification that once source described as a military castle. Armed and provisioned for the long haul, they swore not only to prevent their own capture but to protect anyone who sought sanctuary in their fortress. Though Confederate and state military officials tried repeatedly to force them out, they had little success against these men. Captain Caleb Camfield, stationed at Bainbridge with a detachment of cavalrymen, had no better luck. He finally retreated after fierce battles with layout gangs in south Georgia and north Florida.

Blacks could often be counted on to aid anti-Confederate whites. Deserters escaping the Confederate army could rely on slaves to give them food and shelter on the journey back home. Some blacks joined tory gangs in their war against the Confederacy. Two slaves in Dale County, Alabama, helped John Ward, leader of a local deserter gang, to kill their owner in his bed. Three white citizens of Calhoun County, Georgia, were

²¹ Weitz, *More Damning than Slaughter*, 198-99.

²² Jonathan Dean Sarris, *A Separate Civil War: Communities in Conflict in the Mountain South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 89; Williams, *Plain Folk*, 164-65.

arrested for supplying area slaves with firearms in preparation for a rebellion. Slaves in neighboring Brooks County conspired with a local white man, John Vickery, to take the county and hold it for the Union. Tens of thousands of blacks fled to federal lines and joined Union forces. Of about 200,000 blacks under federal arms, four out of five were native Southerners. Together with roughly 300,000 Southern whites who did the same, (about 200,000 of them from states of the border South) Southerners who served in the Union military totaled nearly half a million, or about a quarter of all federal armed forces.

From the war's outset, blacks were sure that the war meant impending freedom and thought that ending slavery was Lincoln's ultimate intent. How could they think otherwise with Southern Fire-Eaters preaching it from every political stump? "The idea seems to have gotten out extensively among [the slaves] that they are soon all to be free," wrote one worried slaveholder in April 1861, "that Mr. Lincoln and his army are coming to set them free."²³

But enslaved blacks were not simply waiting to be given freedom. They were taking it for themselves. Though Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation is often cited as having freed the slaves, it applied only to those behind Confederate lines. Even then, it only grudgingly recognized what blacks themselves had already forced on Lincoln's government. During the war's early months, Lincoln repeated that he had no intention of ending slavery. In his March 1861 inaugural address, in an effort to call back the seceded states, he supported a thirteenth amendment to the Constitution, the Corwin Amendment, that would have guaranteed slavery in the slave states forever. Citing the Fugitive Slave Act, Lincoln also instructed the army to return any escaped slaves to their owners. In July 1861, Congress, which had earlier passed the Corwin Amendment and sent it to the states in a failed attempt at ratification, backed Lincoln up with a resolution making clear that this was a war to preserve the Union, not to free the slaves. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of escaping slaves took freedom for themselves, refused to be re-enslaved, and ultimately forced Lincoln to alter his policy. Former Maryland slave Frederick Douglass, in an 1865 speech before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, stressed the impact that escaping slaves had on forcing an end to slavery. The Civil War began, he said, "in the interest of slavery on both sides."

The South was fighting to take slavery out of the Union, and the North was fighting to keep it in the Union . . . both despising the negro, both insulting the negro. Yet, the negro, apparently endowed with wisdom from on high, saw more clearly the end from the beginning When our generals sent their underlings in shoulder-straps to hunt the flying negro back from our lines into the jaws of slavery, from which he had escaped, the negroes thought that a mistake had been made, and that the intentions of the Government had not been rightly understood by our officers in shoulder-straps, and they continued to come into our lines, threading their

23. *Ibid.*, 135.

way through bogs and fens, over briers and thorns, fording streams, swimming rivers, bringing us tidings as to the safe path to march, and pointing out the dangers that threatened us.²⁴

“It is a matter of notoriety,” lamented a Confederate official, “in the sections of the Confederacy where raids are frequent that the guides of the enemy are nearly always free negroes and slaves.” In March 1863, seven escapees arrived at Union lines in Mississippi with word of artillery positions around Vicksburg. A fugitive from the same area told of Confederate cavalry operations below Jackson. Jim Williams, an escaped former slave from Carroll Parish, Louisiana, led federal troops in an ambush of a small Confederate force, during which he killed one Rebel and capture two more. In Missouri, information from escaping slaves saved Union troops at Jefferson City from a surprise attack. On July 18, 1864, as a Union raiding party approached the outskirts of Auburn, Alabama, a group of local blacks hurried out to warn its commander, Colonel William Hamilton, of Rebels hidden among the thickets ahead. In a charge that “could be better heard than seen,” Hamilton and his men rushed the surprised Confederates, who, as Hamilton reported, “broke on our first fire and scattered in every direction.”²⁵

Perhaps the most direct way that blacks expressed their opposition was by escaping to the Union. Hundreds of thousands of slaves fled their enslavers in what historian W. E. B. Du Bois called a general strike against the Confederacy. Every slave taken as servants to the front by Georgia’s Troup Artillery fled to Union lines. One Georgia slave was hanged for attempting to organize a mass exodus of local blacks to Federals on the Gulf coast. Many, like Susie King Taylor of Savannah, escaped to Union forces operating along the Atlantic coast. Taylor served one of the Union army’s first black regiments, cooking for the men, doing their laundry, and acting as nurse. She also served as a teacher, having secretly learned to read and write while enslaved. She eventually married one of the soldiers and after the war opened a school for black children in Savannah.

Enslaved blacks in the interior for whom escape was more difficult nevertheless found various ways to resist. In areas of the black belt from which many of the white males had gone off to war, slaves were particularly defiant. In August 1862, slaveholder Laura Comer wrote in her diary: “The servants are so indolent and obstinate it is a trial to have anything to do with them.” Slaves feigned ignorance or illness, sabotaged equipment, and roamed freely in defiance of laws requiring them to carry a pass.²⁶

24. Frederick Douglass, “What the Black Man Wants,” in *The Equality of All Men Before the Law Claimed and Defended in Speeches by Hon. William D. Kelly, Wendell Phillips, and Frederick Douglass* (Boston: Rand and Avery, 1865), 37-38.

25. United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series II, volume 6, p. 1053. David Williams, *Rich Man’s War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 172.

²⁶ T. Conn Bryan, *Confederate Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1953), 125.

What work slaves did, they did grudgingly. Some refused to work at all. Others used the threat of escape to force wage payments from their owners. Even if escape did not result, slaves were largely taking freedom by degrees. In the summer of 1863, an Alabama newspaper complained of blacks becoming “so saucy and abusive that a police force has become positively necessary as a check to this continued insolence.” In Georgia, legislators had already introduced a bill “to punish slaves and free persons of color for abusive and insulting language.” Along with freedom of speech, blacks were taking freedom of assembly as well. In Blakely, Georgia, the *Early County News* reported that blacks were “almost nightly running around where they have no business.” One woman wrote to her husband: “We are doing as best we know, or as good as we can get the Servants to do; they learn to feel very independent.”²⁷

When independence led to escape and they could not make it to Union lines, fugitive slaves often gathered in small, isolated communities. Sometimes these settlements were multiracial. They were so numerous in the southern coastal plain that one source called it “the common retreat of deserters from our army, Tories, and runaway negroes.” Like their white counterparts, groups of self-emancipated blacks sustained themselves by making raids on local towns and plantations. One white man complained in a letter to his governor that escaped former slaves were “killing up the stock and stealing every thing they can put their hands on.”²⁸

Trying to stem the rising tide of resistance among slaves, state legislatures made several additions to their penal codes. They made arson punishable by death. They reinforced laws forbidding slaves to travel without passes and canceled all exemptions for slave patrols. Such efforts did little to restrain slaves. They had long since begun to anticipate freedom, even taking it for themselves, and were more and more ignoring the patrols. Some even fought back. They often tied ropes or vines neck-high across a dark stretch of road just before the patrollers rode by. According to a former slave, these traps were guaranteed to unhorse at least one rider. When patrollers raided a prayer meeting near Columbus, Georgia, one slave stuck a shovel in the fireplace and threw hot coals all over them. Instantly the room “filled with smoke and the smell of burning clothes and white flesh.” In the confusion, every slave got away.²⁹

Try as they might, slaveholders found it impossible to maintain their accustomed control. It was with good reason that, as one Texas slaveholder wrote, “a great many of the people are actually afraid to whip the negroes.” In Choctaw County, Mississippi, slaves turned the tables on their owner, subjecting him to five hundred lashes. Texas

27. Carl H. Moneyhon, “White Society and African-American Soldiers,” in Mark K. Christ, ed., *All Cut to Pieces and Gone to Hell: The Civil War, Race Relations, and the Battle of Poison Spring* (Little Rock: Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, 2003), 38; Philip S. Foner, *A History of Black Americans: From the Compromise of 1850 to the End of the Civil War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 379; Williams, *Rich Man’s War*, 160; Bryan, *Confederate Georgia*, 125.

28. Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 130; Williams, *Rich Man’s War*, 157.

²⁹ David Williams, “The ‘Faithful Slave’ is About Played Out: Civil War Slave Resistance in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley,” *Alabama Review* 52 (1999): 99.

bondsmen killed an overseer known for excessively abusing slaves. In Virginia, a band of slaves armed with shotguns killed two planters. After Mississippi slaveholder Jim Rankin returned from the army “meaner than before,” as one freedman told it, a slave “sneaked up in the darkness and shot him three times.” Rankin lingered in agony the rest of the night before he died the next morning. “He never knowed who done it,” the freedman recalled. “I was glad they shot him down.”³⁰

With slave resistance so widespread, the Confederacy desperately sought to draw them to its side by offering freedom for military service. On March 13, 1865, the Confederate Congress passed legislation authorizing recruitment of up to three hundred thousand slaves. It was a futile gesture. By then the Confederacy was nearly spent. In April, the last major Confederate armies ceased to exist and chattel slavery died with them.

In a sense, the Confederacy’s existence as a national entity was questionable from the start. Most Southerners had opposed secession in the first place and increasingly came to view the struggle as a rich man’s war. On April 5, 1865, only days before the Confederacy’s collapse, Georgia’s *Early County News* expressed a resentment that had long since become common among Southern plain folk when it wrote, “This has been “a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.” It is true there are a few wealthy men in the army, but nine tenths of them hold positions, always get out of the way when they think a fight is coming on, and treat the privates like dogs. . . . there seems to be no chance to get this class to carry muskets.”

The important story of dissent in the Civil War South, buried for so long under a mountain of military/political tracts and Lost Cause hyperbole, has in recent years become something of a cutting-edge topic among professional historians. Though traditional histories still tend to downplay the significance of Southern resistance, that may be changing as new studies of Southern dissent steadily appear. In the popular realm, the film *Cold Mountain* (2003) has gone some way toward showing another side of the Southern experience, though it remains overshadowed in the public mind by the iconic picture *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and to a lesser extent *Gettysburg* (1993) and *Gods and Generals* (2003), all of which foster the myth of wartime Southern unity. Much-applauded documentaries have done little better. *Civil War Journal* (1994-1995) devoted not one of its many episodes to Southern dissent. That series was no threat to the Southern unity myth. Nor was Ken Burns’s *The Civil War* (1990), one of public television’s most celebrated events. Such ventures typically challenge few popular myths of any kind. That, to a great extent, accounts for their popularity.

In addition to these obstacles, the myth of Southern unity remains bolstered by some of our most widely read school books. Far too many texts continue to teach that the

30. James Marten, *Texas Divided: Loyalty and Dissent in the Lone Star State, 1856-1874* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1990), 111; Armstead L. Robinson, *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 180.

North's greater population and industry explain Union victory. Yes, the North had more factories. But the South imported and produced arms enough to keep its troops supplied. Never was a Confederate army defeated in a major battle for lack of munitions. What the Confederacy lacked was sufficient food. And it lacked consistently willing men to carry arms. Certainly the North's population was greater. But Confederate armies were outnumbered mainly because so many Southerners refused to serve—or served on the Union side.

Many northerners refused to serve as well. It was their resistance to the draft, and northern dissent generally, that goes a long way toward explaining how a Confederacy at war with itself was able to survive for as long as it did. But northern dissent pales in comparison to that in the South. The Confederacy could nearly have met the Union man for man had it not been for problems of desertion and draft dodging that were far greater for the Confederates than for the Federals.

It should be little wonder to us today that most Southerners eventually turned against the Confederacy. Many had never supported it in the first place. It stole their votes, conscripted their men, impressed their supplies, and starved them out. It favored the rich and oppressed the poor. It made war on those who withheld their support and made life miserable for the rest. That dawning reality led ordinary people all across the South oppose the Confederacy. Their actions and attitudes contributed in large part to the Confederacy's downfall, a fact that was well known to Southerners at the time. Some had even predicted it. In his November 1860 speech warning against secession, Georgia's Alexander H. Stephens, ironically soon-to-be Confederate vice president, prophesied that should the South secede, Southerners would "at no distant day commence cutting one another's throats." In the fall of 1862, an Atlanta newspaper put it just as bluntly: "If we are defeated, it will be by the people at home." And so the Confederacy was defeated, not only by the Union army—in which nearly half-a-million Southerners served—but also by sustained and violent resistance on the home front.³¹

³¹ William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Secession Debated: Georgia's Showdown in 1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 68; Williams, *Bitterly Divided*, 250.