



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

By James M. McPherson

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General John A. Wickham, commander of the famous 101st Airborne Division in the 1970s and subsequently Army Chief of Staff, once visited Antietam battlefield. Gazing at Bloody Lane where, in 1862, several Union assaults were brutally repulsed before they finally broke through, he marveled, "You couldn't get American soldiers today to make an attack like that." Why did those men risk certain death, over and over again, through countless bloody battles and four long, awful years ? Why did the conventional wisdom -- that soldiers become increasingly cynical and disillusioned as war progresses -- not hold true in the Civil War?

It is to this question--*why did they fight*--that James McPherson, America's preeminent Civil War historian, now turns his attention. He shows that, contrary to what many scholars believe, the soldiers of the Civil War remained powerfully convinced of the ideals for which they fought throughout the conflict. Motivated by duty and honor, and often by religious faith, these men wrote frequently of their firm belief in the cause for which they fought: the principles of liberty, freedom, justice, and patriotism. Soldiers on both sides harkened back to the Founding Fathers, and the ideals of the American Revolution. They fought to defend their country, either the Union--"the best Government ever made"--or the Confederate states, where their very homes and families were under siege. And they fought to defend their honor and manhood. "I should not lik to go home with the name of a couhard," one Massachusetts private wrote, and another private from Ohio said, "My wife would sooner hear of my death than my disgrace." Even after three years of bloody battles, more than half of the Union soldiers reenlisted voluntarily. "While duty calls me here and my country demands my services I should be willing to make the sacrifice," one man wrote to his protesting parents. And another soldier said simply, "I still love my country."

McPherson draws on more than 25,000 letters and nearly 250 private diaries from men on both sides. Civil War soldiers were among the most literate soldiers in history, and most of them wrote home frequently, as it was the only way for them to keep in touch with homes that many of them had left for the first time in their lives. Significantly, their letters were also uncensored by military

authorities, and are uniquely frank in their criticism and detailed in their reports of marches and battles, relations between officers and men, political debates, and morale. *For Cause and Comrades* lets these soldiers tell their own stories in their own words to create an account that is both deeply moving and far truer than most books on war.

Battle Cry of Freedom, McPherson's Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the Civil War, was a national bestseller that Hugh Brogan, in *The New York Times*, called "history writing of the highest order." *For Cause and Comrades* deserves similar accolades, as McPherson's masterful prose and the soldiers' own words combine to create both an important book on an often-overlooked aspect of our bloody Civil War, and a powerfully moving account of the men who fought it.



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Editorial Review

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Consider a war in which 25,000 soldiers are killed or wounded in a single battle, as they were at Gettysburg, or 16,000 in a single day, as at Antietam. The degree of suffering and hardship during the American Civil War has been well documented and analyzed in books and films from Margaret Mitchell's fictional *Gone with the Wind* to Bell Irvin Wiley's classic studies of Civil War soldiers, *The Life of Johnny Reb* and *The Life of Billy Yank*. All these sources agree on the brutality of the combat, but what motivated soldiers to continue fighting under such bitter conditions is the cause of some controversy. Until recently, the common stance has been that soldiers enlisted out of economic need and stayed out of loyalty to their comrades. The respected Civil War historian James M. McPherson weighs in with a different point of view in *For Cause and Comrades*.

Professor McPherson posits that the common rank-and-file soldiers did indeed hold political and ideological beliefs that prodded them to enlist and to fight. His research is based on letters and diaries from 1,076 Union and Confederate soldiers. These reveal many motivations, but always they lead back to duty, honor, and a cause worth dying for. *For Cause and Comrades* is a fascinating exploration of the 19th-century mind--a mind, it seems, that differs profoundly from our own.

From School Library Journal

YA. This powerful commentary by today's premier Civil War historian is truly compelling in its depth and intensity. McPherson has extrapolated and quoted from over 25,000 letters and 249 diaries of more than 1000 Union and Confederate soldiers. The documentation is impressive and is successful in substantiating the thesis that many motivations were at work in the hearts of the Civil War fighting men; but on the whole, they were driven by noble ideals of honor; duty; and devotion to God, country, home, and family. Many of the letters tell of the loneliness, depression, discouragement, exhaustion, pain, hunger, and lack of sanitation. The written words of these young soldiers are simple in expression but poignant in emotion. Frequently, after quoting a touching passage written to a wife, mother, or other family member, McPherson comments that the aforementioned soldier was killed on the battlefield or died of disease. The book fills readers with a profound respect for the soldiers who struggled so valiantly for the cause in which they believed. Interesting appendixes on the geographical origins of soldiers and their occupations give students an illuminating view of both armies. Extensive footnotes enhance the value of the volume. ?Peggy Mooney, Pohick Public Library, Burke, VA

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From Library Journal

Volumes have been written on the causes of the Civil War, but less has been written on what caused soldiers to risk their lives on the battlefield. McPherson, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom*, (LJ 3/1/88), fills the gap. After studying thousands of letters and diaries, he discusses what really led soldiers to enlist, what kept them in the army, and what led them to the front lines. Examining Victorian America and its influence on soldiers' sense of duty, he considers factors of religion, liberty, and preservation of the Union and the deciding pull of self-preservation. McPherson maintains that Civil War soldiers enlisted with others from their community and stayed with them as a unit?living, fighting, and dying together. Drawing liberally from primary sources, he has written an absorbing account. Essential reading for Civil War collections in both public and academic libraries. ?Grant A. Fredericksen, Illinois Prairie Dist. P.L., Metamora

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