

---

[Home](#) > [Volume 85, Issue 4, December 1989](#) > [Nolan](#)

**Title Reviewed:**

Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era

**Author Reviewed:**

James M. McPherson

**Author:**

Alan T. Nolan

**Date:**

1989

**Source:**

*Indiana Magazine of History*, Volume 85, Issue 4, pp 373-374

**Article Type:**

Book Review

**Download Source:**

[xml](#)

**Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era.** By James M. McPherson. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Pp. xix, 904. Notes, maps, tables, illustrations, bibliographical note, index. Clothbound, \$35.00; paperbound, \$14.95.)

The Civil War is at last remote in time. Thoughtful people, North and South, have forgiven each other and themselves. The explosion in communications and transportation has contributed to the growth of a national culture. Finally, racial attitudes have changed markedly. Although race relations are far from ideal, reasonable people acknowledge the equality of blacks and whites as the appropriate ideal. These rather recent changes have permitted a new view of the Civil War and its preliminaries and aftermath. Much of the best scholarship on the period is taking place now.

James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* is a symbol, perhaps the apogee, of this advance in historiography. The book therefore reflects two premises: that the war was about black slavery and that it was in no sense a romantic event.

As his title suggests, McPherson understands that in terms of cause and effect the central issue of the war was the status of black people. However flawed and inept the trial, freedom was at stake. McPherson therefore rejects the implicitly racist rationales that have trivialized that issue in favor of once-fashionable cultural and economic explanations of the war. He has put black people back on the center of the stage, paying needed attention to their military contribution and to abolition and the survival of the Union.

As regards the romance of the war, by discarding the clichés of "the Blue and the Gray" McPherson makes it plain that the war was nothing less than a tragedy. It was an abject failure of American politics and the source of untrammelled harm in human terms. Thus, unlike much previous writing, the book does not glorify the events of the war.

The book is remarkable in another respect. Pervasive events like the Civil War tend to receive specific treatments. One book is a military history. Another is a political history. Still others present social or economic histories. In addition to offering significant insights into the ordeal, McPherson skillfully synthesizes its many aspects. In this reviewer's experience only one prior historian has had this faculty for dealing with the Civil War as a whole. This was Allan Nevins in his multivolumed works of a generation ago, *The Ordeal of the Union* and *The War for the Union*.

McPherson's analysis is questionable with respect to a special interest of Hoosiers. This concerns his treatment of dissent in the North, especially among the Democrats in the Middle West, including Indiana. Although he devotes needed attention to the complicated economic and political sources of the Copperheads' attitudes, his choice of sources leads McPherson to overstate both the extent and the nature of dissent. Depending on which data one consults, Indiana ranked either first or second among the northern states in the percentage of its military population that enrolled in the northern armies, and these soldiers were overwhelmingly volunteers. Gilbert R. Tredway's *Democratic Opposition to the Lincoln Administration in Indiana* establishes that the Democratic Congressional Districts consistently furnished more volunteers in proportion to their population than the Republican districts. In short, the evidence contradicts the once-prevailing view that the Indiana Democratic party was rife with pro-Confederate feeling. There were surely some disloyal party spokesmen and a disloyal fringe group, but

the mainstream, although racist and politically irresponsible, supported the Union. There is a difference between being wrong and being disloyal.

Despite this exception, McPherson's book is superb. Beautifully written, it is a book for scholars and those of the general public who would understand this watershed event of American history.

ALAN T. NOLAN is a lawyer in Indianapolis. He is the author of *The Iron Brigade* and numerous historical articles about the Civil War. He is currently working on a critical analysis of the Lee tradition.

Published by the [Indiana University Department of History](#).