

Review - Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era - This Is Not News Forums

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Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era

By James M. McPherson

Paperback, Ballantine Books, 904 pages

([Buy it at Amazon.com](#) - \$18)

The Civil War is such a complex event that comprehensive treatments of it tend to be multi-volume affairs. How else can you capture the political tensions of the 1850s, the critical presidential election of 1860, the transformation of the economic and social systems of the Union and the Confederacy, the intricacies of tactics and strategies, and the horrible violence of the bloodiest war in American history? *Battle Cry of Freedom* nevertheless manages to cover all those themes over the course of its 900-page narrative, and its extensive footnotes and bibliography provide an excellent starting point for more detailed research on specific topics.

One remarkable element of the book is that almost 275 pages pass before the Confederacy fires on Fort Sumter and the war officially begins. McPherson uses those pages to carefully establish the political and social context of the time and make his argument as to the central cause of the war. Here he pulls no punches - while issues such as states' rights and industrial expansion were bandied about, the fundamental, irreconcilable conflict between the North and South was the presence of slavery in the South and its expansion into the territories. Southern legislators were dominant in the 1850s, holding legislation such as the Homestead Act and the transcontinental railroad in check, and overturning the Missouri Compromise through the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the *Dred Scott* decision. Southern leaders had also been engaged in a continuous effort to conquer new territory to the south of the country and therefore extend the reach of slavery. The Republican Party was no immediate threat to any of the South's institutions, but the election of a president from a party whose platform explicitly opposed slavery was too much for Southerners to handle. Agitators in South Carolina and other states (known as fire-eaters) almost immediately called conventions to secede, and the road to Fort Sumter was paved.

Once the shots are fired, *Battle Cry of Freedom* is primarily a military history, concerned with the tactics and strategy of the war, with a secondary but significant emphasis on the political maneuvering and events of the era. Here McPherson emphasizes the

notion of contingency - that the course of the war was not determined by one particular advantage that the North held over the South, but instead on the outcome of particular battles that could just as easily have gone the other way. If George Meade had not effectively countered Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg, the Confederate Army may have successfully invaded Philadelphia or Baltimore. If William Tecumseh Sherman had not conquered Atlanta in the fall of 1864, Lincoln may have lost his bid for re-election and the Democrats would likely have recognized the Confederacy.

While there is a certain merit to this contingency-based approach, and the doubt about the outcome of the war that follows as a consequence makes McPherson's narrative that much more engaging to read, it is possible he takes it too far. The North had a tremendous advantage in industrial capacity that allowed it to turn out guns, uniforms, and other military supplies while still keeping the citizenry prosperous; the Southern army was desperate for shoes and other staples by the end of the war. The Union also held a considerable edge in population, so that it could afford to wage a war of attrition against the Confederacy and simply wear it down. This in fact became a major component of the Union strategy under Ulysses S. Grant toward the end of the war. At the same time, McPherson offers cogent arguments for his thesis, so even those who disagree would do well to grapple with them.