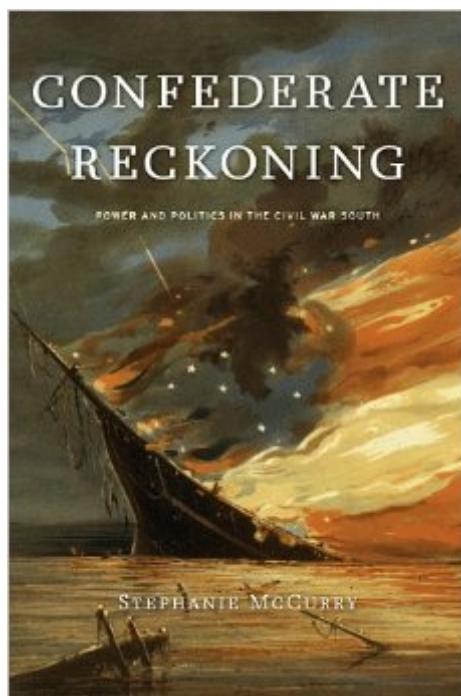


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Confederate Reckoning: Power And Politics In The Civil War South



Synopsis

The story of the Confederate States of America, the proslavery, antidemocratic nation created by white Southern slaveholders to protect their property, has been told many times in heroic and martial narratives. Now, however, Stephanie McCurry tells a very different tale of the Confederate experience. When the grandiosity of Southerners' national ambitions met the harsh realities of wartime crises, unintended consequences ensued. Although Southern statesmen and generals had built the most powerful slave regime in the Western world, they had excluded the majority of their own people-white women and slaves-and thereby sowed the seeds of their demise. Wartime scarcity of food, labor, and soldiers tested the Confederate vision at every point and created domestic crises to match those found on the battlefields. Women and slaves became critical political actors as they contested government enlistment and tax and welfare policies, and struggled for their freedom. The attempt to repress a majority of its own population backfired on the Confederate States of America as the disenfranchised demanded to be counted and considered in the great struggle over slavery, emancipation, democracy, and nationhood. That Confederate struggle played out in a highly charged international arena. The political project of the Confederacy was tried by its own people and failed. The government was forced to become accountable to women and slaves, provoking an astounding transformation of the slaveholders' state. Confederate Reckoning is the startling story of this epic political battle in which women and slaves helped to decide the fate of the Confederacy and the outcome of the Civil War.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Confederacy was formed as a slaveholding, white man's republic. The irony, McCurry argues, is that the people who were not supposed to play an active role in this new nation, namely women and slaves, ended up playing decisive roles in the Civil War South. Women, especially soldiers' wives, secured a place as active and legitimate participants in the political and social worlds of the South. Slaves not only did not actively support the Confederacy, but undermined it by running away, joining the Union war effort, and/or simply not working on the farms and plantations they lived on anymore. In this way, they became the Jacobins of the South. The thrust of this book is that the actions of these women and slaves expanded the realm of politics to those who did not have a vote, but could still affect the policies and outcome of the war. McCurry shows, through both a synthesis of previous secondary work as well as primary sources, that the war brought women into close contact with their state and federal governments. Further, she argues, this changed the shape of American politics forever. Women, both North and South, were not active participants the way that they became during the Civil War. McCurry feels that southern women, though, were more assertive in demanding assistance from the Confederate and state governments. The women came to believe that the governments owed it to them to offer support while their husbands were off fighting.

McCurry shows that women were often successful in this, through rioting more than writing. This is a well-written, readable account that does have some good information. That being said, the main issue with the book is less the evidence or conclusions McCurry has reached and more the way it is presented. From the introduction forward, McCurry writes as if what she is presenting is groundbreaking, earth-shattering stuff. In fact, as her endnotes indicate, much of what she writes has been written before, although perhaps not in the same terms or using the same framework she does. However, the ideas McCurry espouses were written, at minimum, over thirty years ago by Emory Thomas in *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience*. Thomas argued, as McCurry does, that the Confederacy was a white man's revolution that quickly dismantled as the war started and wore on. This is a somewhat petty criticism and has more to do with McCurry's hubris than anything wrong with the book. She should be commended for synthesizing the secondary research since Thomas wrote and thus expanding upon his original work.

I loved the book because I thought that it did an excellent job of exposing interesting facts, such as:
- The word "hubris" (excessive pride or arrogance) is the best one word definition of the planter class which ruled the South.
- The southern slaves were an "enemy within" the South. So in effect, the south was fighting a "two front" war.
- The slaves had "no country" until the North offered them

freedom. - The planter class in the South started the secession movement and war and then refused to support it by allowing their slaves to be impressed for labor. - The incredible convoluted Southern thinking that slaves were: - An asset when fighting a war when the history of recent wars by similar slave holding countries showed the opposite. - That slaves were content and would support a war and society that imprisoned them and their astounding surprise when slaves did not choose to support their "jail keepers". I hated the writing style of the author. I found that she often repeated herself and kept saying the same thing over and over, only in different ways. I felt that I had to dig out the information noted above rather than it being presented in an easy to digest format. If the writing style had been better, I would have rated this book with five stars.

Confederate Reckoning provides a refreshing new take on the well-established historiography of the Confederate South. McCurry shows how the dream of a white man's republic that propelled the South into secession was undermined by those typically deemed powerless. Although white men expected to use white women and slaves as instruments of war, they proved instead to be parties with which the "powerful" had to reckon. McCurry argues that though they have been largely left out of the conversation, women and slaves were influential in the political landscape of the Confederate South. She provides convincing evidence for this argument through a variety of primary sources including letters, political documents and first-person narratives. Unfortunately, her tendency to draw from historical and theoretical literature rooted in different time periods distracts the reader from her argument. Lack of organization is also an issue in this book, which attempts to merge two stories "that of white women and slaves" into a single historical narrative. McCurry begins with the women's story and then with no real warning moves on to that of the slaves, leaving the reader confused when approaching the epilogue as to which party she is referring. Her writing style is also problematic. It reads a bit like stream of consciousness, and is often repetitive and sometimes shallow. Many of her points lack development, even though they are reiterated on numerous occasions.

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