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# For Cause And Comrades: Why Men Fought In The Civil War



## Synopsis

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 like to go home with the name of a coward," 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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 Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Why did they fight? In this book, McPherson attempts to answer that question for both the North and South by concentrating not on battlefield tactics and leaders but on the experiences of men in the field -- those who did fight, and continued to fight, whether enthusiastically or dutifully, until death, defeat, or victory. Drawing on the vivid, poignant diaries of more than 1,000 soldiers, this account cuts against the conventional wisdom about the motives of Civil War soldiers. Some soldiers felt a sense of masculine adventurousness, like the Wisconsin captain who craved to "lead [men] into danger to see what they are made of & if I would run," or the South Carolina planter's son who fancied himself "a knight in a beleaguered fortress" who must, "when the castle is to be stormed...put on my harness & wield my blade." Others harbored an unholy thirst for vengeance, such as the Louisiana cavalry sergeant who asserted in 1863 that the only thing keeping him going was "absolute hatred" of "the hyperborean vandals with whom we are waging a war for existence....I expect to murder every Yankee I meet if I can do so with impunity." But at bottom lie the factors named in McPherson's title. Time and again, he finds sentiments similar to those of a New York private who wrote in 1865 that the sacrifice of his friends had been worthwhile because they had fought "against cruelty and oppression" and had "proven to the world that the American people can and will govern themselves." On the Southern side, McPherson finds idealistic affirmations of "liberty" and "the dear rights of freemen" against the "vassalage" and "degradation" being threatened by the North. In short, McPherson concludes that there is no plausible way to reduce the

motives of Civil War soldiers to low or self-interested goals. These men understood what was at stake, and a steely sense of honor made them persevere to the bitter end. The reader comes away with lasting admiration for the soldiers on both sides -- and a lingering uneasiness about the mettle of our own cynical age.

Extremely helpful and even-handed description of the reasons that Union and Confederate soldiers gave in letters home and the like for fighting the Civil War. It is worth noting that though secessionist politicians talked much about defending slavery as the cause for the southern revolt, that was not true of the actual soldiers, though some (chiefly the wealthier ones) used euphemisms for slavery like "southern institutions." The main issue seems to have been simply southern independence on one side and preservation of the union on the other (with a gradual shift on the Union side to ending slavery as the war progressed.)

This is not one of your typical American Civil War History books. Other notable historians such as Shelby Foote and Bruce Catton have mastered the military aspects but McPherson goes behind the scenes to explain the why of the war. He dissects the initial reasons for both sides then demonstrates how these motivations evolved. McPherson does not stop there, he shows how the soldiers are changed as the war continues, especially how governmental policies such as the Emancipation Proclamation impact the war. The author uses first hand accounts on the form of diaries, letters home and official dispatches to support his thesis. He thoroughly illustrates what the common soldier was thinking and feeling as they fought the most destructive war in American history. Claims of bias are dismissed when McPherson breaks down the use of his primary source documents between Union and Confederate, officer and enlisted, educated and uneducated, free and slave etc. As with other books, McPherson entertains the reader while supporting his thesis with exhaustive research. A must read book for historian and avid reader alike.

Normally I would have never even looked at this book, but it was required for a military history class, so naturally I picked it up here as it was \$10 cheaper than the university book store. The book is a deep insight into the mind and daily activities of American Civil War veterans, as told by them through letters and experiences. The author has a clear grasp where he wanted to take this book, and he executed his thesis and point effectively. While I am by no means an expert on Civil War or especially Civil War books, I would expect this book to be on the short list for best books available on the subject. If you are a Civil War buff, you're going to really love this book!

I have read over 50 books about America's Civil War. But this was the first one that dwelt on the soldiers themselves. I love the real spelling and wording from their letter's home. And I learned a lot about the war as I always do. I learned that the Civil War was likely the one war where the soldiers knew why they were fighting. I also learned in more detail about how the Confederates struggled with the slaves in the war fighting against them and that U.S. Grant said if the Confederates will not trade black prisoners that no prisoners would be traded. The well written book offers so much more than many books from the perspective of the fighting men, those losing their lives.

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