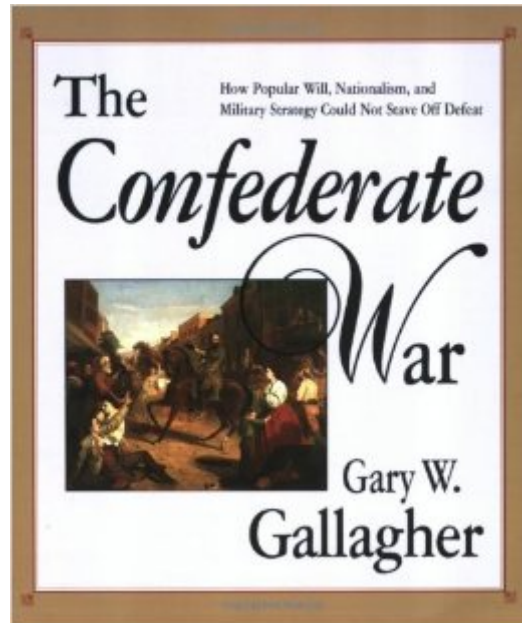


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The Confederate War



Synopsis

If one is to believe contemporary historians, the South never had a chance. Many allege that the Confederacy lost the Civil War because of internal division or civilian disaffection; others point to flawed military strategy or ambivalence over slavery. But, argues distinguished historian Gary Gallagher, we should not ask why the Confederacy collapsed so soon but rather how it lasted so long. In *The Confederate War* he reexamines the Confederate experience through the actions and words of the people who lived it to show how the home front responded to the war, endured great hardships, and assembled armies that fought with tremendous spirit and determination.

Gallagher's portrait highlights a powerful sense of Confederate patriotism and unity in the face of a determined adversary. Drawing on letters, diaries, and newspapers of the day, he shows that Southerners held not only an unflagging belief in their way of life, which sustained them to the bitter end, but also a widespread expectation of victory and a strong popular will closely attuned to military events. In fact, the army's "offensive-defensive" strategy came remarkably close to triumph, claims Gallagher—in contrast to the many historians who believe that a more purely defensive strategy or a guerrilla resistance could have won the war for the South. To understand why the South lost, Gallagher says we need look no further than the war itself: after a long struggle that brought enormous loss of life and property, Southerners finally realized that they had been beaten on the battlefield. Gallagher's interpretation of the Confederates and their cause boldly challenges current historical thinking and invites readers to reconsider their own conceptions of the American Civil War.

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Customer Reviews

Among historians, the dominant view of the Confederacy since the 1960s was the "lack-of-will" thesis, which offers the vision of a failed CSA collapsing under the weight of its own internal contradictions. A Southern government abandoned by its people, rejected and repudiated by every non-slaveholding white person, fighting with an army of disgruntled draftees: That is some people's estimation of the CSA. Since the early 1990s, however, this fixation with Southern "lack of will" has been questioned by some of the most active and able historians, who believe we have replaced one unbalanced view (the old "Lost Cause" thesis) with another. Such questioning invites a charge of "neo-Confederate," or worse, from people who have some political or personal investment in the prevailing paradigm. Yet this questioning is not the work of "moonlight-and-magnolia" sentimentalists. Many of them are not Southern-born; many have no ancestors who fought the war. Gary W. Gallagher is among them. This handsome little book, engagingly written, summarized the work that has been done to date in correcting the historical view of the South's war effort. Gallagher, in an interview, has said, "Common sense should play more of a role in historical evaluation than it often does. To be able to wage war, the Confederacy was willing to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of its young men and suffer the destruction of its economy. In terms of military casualties, Confederates sacrificed far more than any other generation of white Americans in U.S. history. Yet the South still fought. This would suggest broad popular support for the war." Among the points he makes: The battle losses the South took would translate into six million U.S.

Gary Gallagher has written an excellent and insightful book that presents novel interpretations and raises insightful questions; this book should be required reading for all Civil War historians. In *The Confederate War*, Gallagher discusses the historiography and different interpretations of important themes in Confederate history--popular will, nationalism, military strategy, and ultimately defeat. One of Gallagher's main contentions develops the idea that Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia were the rallying point for nationalism and the support of the Confederate people, yeomen and slaveholder alike: he writes, "As the war progressed, Confederate citizens increasingly relied on their armies rather than on their central government to boost morale, and Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia eventually became the most important national institution." Gallagher also contends that the Southern people had a strong sense of nationalism prior to the war, and he cites

numerous letters, diaries, and other written documents of the time to illustrate this Southern concept and identity. In addition, by presenting evidence of Southern support from the home front throughout the war and the unique problems surrounding Confederate desertion (fear of Yankee threats to loved ones at home and not lack of support for the war effort), Gallagher masterfully illustrates that the war was not lost because of internal divisiveness or strife within the Confederacy. He says that the Confederacy "waged a determined struggle for independence," and argues that the South could have won the war. Working from the beginning of the war, and not backwards from the defeat, Gallagher argues the Confederacy lost because of a flawed military strategy.

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