

***For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War.* By James M. McPherson (1997)  
New York: Oxford University Press, Pp. xv + 178, ISBN 0-19-509023-3 (hardback) \$25.00 U.S.**

Why do soldiers fight? Pulitzer-prize winning Civil War historian James McPherson grapples with this question in his deeply researched and engaging book, *For Cause and Comrades*. McPherson is a superb scholar and author of over nineteen books and numerous articles on the Civil War, most notable among these is *Battle Cry of Freedom*, recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, published in 1988. He is the George Henry Davis '86 Professor Emeritus of United States History at Princeton University with a PhD from Johns Hopkins University, awarded in 1963. In *For Cause and Comrades*, McPherson offers very balanced and researched approach to the Civil War, typically a very emotionally charged topic. His writing style is eminently readable and his arguments convincing.

McPherson analyzes martial motivations leveraging French military historian, John A. Lynn, methodology of examining motivation at three levels: initial, sustaining, and combat. The initial motivators deal with why men enlisted; sustaining with what kept the armies together; and combat with how men steeled themselves for battle (12).

McPherson evenly spaced twelve chapters across the book to carefully analyze his primary sources of diaries and letters from soldiers on both sides of the Civil War. In doing so, he worked to weigh his data in a reasonably representative fashion from the demographics of the soldiers in the conflict. He statistically balances the values and demography of the ideals and opinions of the writers with their representative places in the armies of the North or the South. In doing so, he hoped to ensure that no one point of view would be given inappropriate weight. In addition to breaking down the basic views of North and South, he worked to further

determine whether the writer was a volunteer or a draftee; officer or enlisted; wealthy or common. McPherson paints a convincing portrait of soldiers on both sides of the conflict in well-balanced proportion to their role and place in the ranks. From this complex but convincing composition, McPherson draws his plausible, if not entirely original, conclusions. McPherson further balances his assessment with the widely reported findings after World War II and Vietnam on the same topics of combat motivation. This conveys a sense of ubiquity in modern soldiers and outlines some of the fundamental differences in the Civil War, the Second World War, and the Vietnam War.

The book focuses on the fundamental ideologies of the Civil War. The overarching motivator at all levels was honor. Honor in personal courage; honor in fighting for comrades; honor in preserving union (or fighting for liberty); and honor in defending home, hearth, and family. The conclusions are not as simple as that, however. McPherson describes complex dualities that exist in both the North and the South. For example, he describes the sustaining power of faith and religion in “the most religious [armies] in American history” (63) followed by a detailed discussion of the power of hate and revenge in both armies, but primarily the South. Unfortunately, McPherson does not offer deep insight into the conflict of hate and Christian fighting and simply dismisses it as normal in the eyes of the soldier.

He notes soldiers in during most of the Civil War were volunteers and that volunteerism had a dramatic impact on the motivations of those soldiers. The reasons men initially volunteered are largely predictable: duty, honor and adventure. Duty and honor to fight for the soldier’s home against an enemy is complexly related to the ideals of each side. The North asserted an ideal of union and responsibility to the legacy of 1776 and that revolutionary spirit.

The South asserted an ideal of freedom from tyranny and the same spirit of '76 strangely on behalf of human slavery. Adventure is a Victorian ethic acknowledged by soldiers of both sides who expressed a deep desire to “see the elephant” followed by a near universal regret for having done so (30). The sense of adventure rarely survives first contact with true combat and is not a deep or prolonged motivator and McPherson argues that once it fades, many soldiers adopt honor and courage as more sustaining motivators.

Sustainment of an army is a critical challenge of any commander. The unit must be built cohesively and remain cohesive through the length of the conflict. McPherson suggests several contributors to sustaining an army during a long war: honor, religion, brotherhood, ideology, and support at home. After the initial search for adventure and *rage militaire* fade, the army's spirits are buoyed and challenged by victory or loss on the battlefields, doubt surrounding support from home, political events near and far, and fear that the overwhelming sacrifice will have been in vain. McPherson argues religion and ideology played crucial roles in North and South to keep the armies intact. Deep religious faith took hold in both armies, but most significantly in the South. McPherson reminds us that the chaos of war leads to fatalism and concern for one's soul driving the combatants to seek refuge in religion. The soldiers, therefore, believed they were truly good Christian soldiers, marching off to war. While the strength of religion was more dominant in the South, ideology was strongest in the North. Both sides leveraged ideals of freedom, but the North fought for union and, McPherson argues, ultimately for abolition (118, 130).

Combat motivation initially is fed by a sense of adventure and ideals, but those fade upon contact with the enemy. McPherson clearly tells how soldiers, weary and exhausted from

battle do not march forward into a hail of bullets for glory or union or slavery or abolition or even God. They march forward out of a sense of personal honor and acknowledgement of the comradeship of arms. He writes that soldiers would rather die before showing cowardice or being labeled a shirker. He gives accounts of soldiers fighting while ill and legitimately excused from battle to prevent even the suggestion that they were shirkers (79). Almost as pervasive as honor and comradeship, there was universal hatred for shirkers. McPherson claims that only half of the men actually did the fighting while half found ways to not be present on a battlefield (6). As a result, his claim that men were motivated not to fail their comrades or show cowardice (77, 80) is somewhat misleading. It is possible at least, that men aspired to such goals of courage and honor and those who fought, fought for those reasons.

This is a very well-researched and written book. McPherson is known for his approachable style that succeeds in conveying the point without burying the reader in details. His research sources and analysis lend very fair balance to his findings which, while not terribly original, confirm that certain common motivators prevail in nineteenth, twentieth, and likely twenty-first century soldiers.

Unfortunately, McPherson lacks a certain depth in discussion of some of the more complex aspects of martial motivation. For example, he fails to appropriately address the conflicts of fighting for liberty by fighting for slavery and hating an enemy so perversely who is praying to the same God who commands "love thy neighbor." Although those are subjects broad enough to fill volumes, a more insightful discussion of them would have materially improved a solid work.

Letters and diaries are usually tricky sources for the historian. Both are greatly distorted by the writer who is not explicitly compelled to write either accurately or objectively.

Regardless, the volume of mail and dairies written during the war by the soldiers free from censorship who were beneficiaries of an effective post system cannot be ignored. McPherson deliberately draws from the mass of writings a generally statistically representative sample of material. That feat alone cannot be understated.

McPherson's approachable style and casual treatment of some of the more complex aspects of martial motivation leave this book best read by the well-educated public. It is informative to the professional historian and should compliment his understanding of the cause and effects of war, but for that John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* may be better. Regardless, *For Cause* needed to be written and does inform debate on what soldiers of both North and South were thinking and feeling during the war. Any text that convincingly describes war as hell should be written. McPherson does not exalt war or its heroes or villains. He treats them fairly while convincing the reader that "seeing the elephant" is not worth the price of admission.

George Mason University

Carl Allard Young