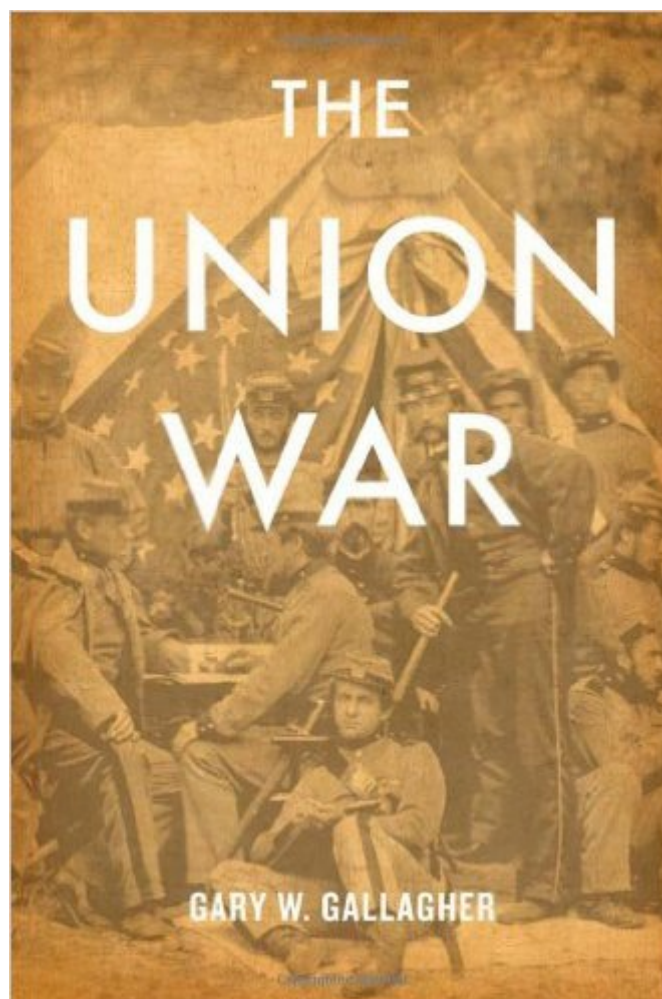


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The Union War



Synopsis

Even one hundred and fifty years later, we are haunted by the Civil Warâ by its division, its bloodshed, and perhaps, above all, by its origins. Today, many believe that the war was fought over slavery. This answer satisfies our contemporary sense of justice, but as Gary Gallagher shows in this brilliant revisionist history, it is an anachronistic judgment. In a searing analysis of the Civil War North as revealed in contemporary letters, diaries, and documents, Gallagher demonstrates that what motivated the North to go to war and persist in an increasingly bloody effort was primarily preservation of the Union. Devotion to the Union bonded nineteenth-century Americans in the North and West against a slaveholding aristocracy in the South and a Europe that seemed destined for oligarchy. Northerners believed they were fighting to save the republic, and with it the worldâs best hope for democracy. Once we understand the centrality of union, we can in turn appreciate the force that made northern victory possible: the citizen-soldier. Gallagher reveals how the massive volunteer army of the North fought to confirm American exceptionalism by salvaging the Union. Contemporary concerns have distorted the reality of nineteenth-century Americans, who embraced emancipation primarily to punish secessionists and remove slavery as a future threat to unionâs goals that emerged in the process of war. As Gallagher recovers why and how the Civil War was fought, we gain a more honest understanding of why and how it was won.

Book Information

Hardcover: 256 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; First Edition edition (April 25, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674045629

ISBN-13: 978-0674045620

Product Dimensions: 1 x 6.5 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (24 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #320,036 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #331 inÂ Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War > Campaigns & Battlefields #517 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Democracy #3013 inÂ Books > History > Military > United States

Customer Reviews

not why it started. Gary Gallagher, professor at the University of Virginia and Penn State and noted

Civil War historian, has written a short book on "why" the northern soldiers fought their southern brethren. Conventional wisdom aside - that it was the question of slavery and the righteousness of the practice - Gallagher says the real reason was the idea of "union". Many of the soldiers and lawmakers had fathers and grandfathers who had fought the British for Independence and the sense of "Union" of the "United States of America". To these men, "preserving" the Union was as important as their forefathers having attained it in the first place. Look at the word "union" and the phrase "the Union". Both mean virtually the same thing but only one applies to a specific entity. And these men were willing to die for that "union". But what about slavery and the idea of the North fighting to emancipate the slaves? The South may have begun with war with the yell of "states' rights" but the idea of fighting to keep those rights - including the practice of slavery - was a southern ideal. Gallagher states that while slavery was not well regarded in the north, he didn't feel it was the reason the north fought. He quotes Abraham Lincoln - on page 50 - of the three practicalities he had in freeing the slaves in the context of fighting and winning the war. Gallagher also writes about those thousands of immigrants who joined native-born Americans in the northern armies. What were they fighting for? Again, "union" and the idea of a country that was seen in Europe as a "bright spot" among nations. Many countries - France, the German States, the Austria/Hungary - had weathered uprisings in 1848 by citizens protesting traditional rule.

With the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, there has been an increase in both scholarly and popular interest in this seminal event of American history. Among the best of the recent studies of the conflict is "The Union War", a short, provocative examination of the reasons that led the United States to fight this long, costly, and bloody war rather than, say, accept secession. The author, Gary Gallagher, is a widely respected Civil War scholar who is John Nau III Professor of History at the University of Virginia. His many other books include a companion volume called "The Confederate War." The Confederate War Beginning in the 1960s, students of the Civil War have focused on Emancipation --- freeing the slaves -- as the dominant goal and accomplishment of the Civil War. In his carefully nuanced study, Gallagher argues that this conclusion demands substantial modification and clarification. It is important to consider Emancipation from the perspectives of North and South. Gallagher admits, together with most modern scholarship, that the South seceded and went to war to protect its "peculiar institution" of slavery. With this granted at the outset, Gallagher examines the reasons the the North fought the secessionists. His basic answer is "Union". The United States fought to hold the country together and not primarily to end slavery. If the conflict had ended in the spring of 1862, as it might have with Grant's victories in the West and McClellan at the gates of

Richmond, it is doubtful that Emancipation would have been a condition of the Confederacy's surrender.

An often neglected topic of Civil War literature is the role preserving the Union played in motivating the North. Even when the importance of preservation of the Union is acknowledged, it's often relegated to second tier status in favor of emancipation. University of Virginia professor Gary Gallagher's latest work replaces preservation of the Union as the primary goal for which the North fought, helping 21st century Americans understand why it was so beloved by those willing to die for it. He differentiates this Northern GOAL from the war's CAUSE, which was "beyond dispute...controversies related to slavery." The Union War provides insight into subjective Union views on topics related to the war's aims, although it does not offer an objective assessment of their accuracy (e.g., whether the Union really afford its citizens, particularly those in urban slums and factories the economic opportunities often claimed). At the same time, it disputes the thesis that emancipation emerged as a goal equal to or greater than Union by the war's conclusion. To the vast majority of the North, emancipation remained a necessary tool to prosecute the war, and restoring the status quo ante was unthinkable given how slavery had nearly destroyed their beloved Union. In a day when we debate concepts such as "American exceptionalism" there was little doubt that it was exceptional in 1861 in terms of popular government, or self-rule by the common (white) man.

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