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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.

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Customer Reviews

This is a wonderful book. Prof. McPherson read over 30,000 letters and diaries for this, and thus I think he has provided one of the most thorough and thought provoking treatments of the psychology of Civil War soldiers and studies on why exactly they fought. For this work, Prof. McPherson also incorporates theories, reports, and research of the combat motivation, effects of combat, and psychology of men and soldiers in others war such as WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War, not to mention general medical studies from British, American, and German armies. In some instances, he uses modern knowledge to analyze the thoughts and feelings of the soldiers of the Civil War. As interesting as this is to show how soldiers in the Civil War had the same problems and feelings as most men of war, his academic findings illustrate how Civil War soldiers were also very different from soldiers in other wars. The difference lay in their devout belief in their causes, and their sustained belief in those causes, and the close relationship with the men they fought with (which is a common thread for men of all wars), throughout the war. McPherson rarely goes on for more than a paragraph or two of his own narrating. He lets the voices of the men who fought take up 90% of the book, giving you a real sense of who these people were, and allowing the reader to derive an opinion for themselves, but always with McPherson's voice in the background guiding the reader, teaching you. The causes brought up by the letters and McPherson are wide and varied, and McPherson makes sure to research each and explain as elaborately as possible, but quite noticeable are the few main causes that men on both sides proclaimed in verbose rhetoric.

Although Professor James McPherson wrote this study of the motivation of the Civil War soldier, it is not a great exaggeration to say that in this book the soldiers speak for themselves. Professor McPherson has read and analyzed a prodigious amount of source material written by Civil War combatants, Union and Confederacy, officer and enlisted soldier. For this book, he has taken a sample of the letters home and the diaries of 1076 soldiers, 647 Union and 429 Confederate to analyze their candid, uncensored reflections of why they fought. Professor McPherson also draws on many modern studies of combat psychology and utilizes their findings in discussing the Civil War soldiers. Professor McPherson's sample is not statistically random and it may be skewed in some ways. For example, the sample does not include (obviously) illiterate soldiers or black soldiers. It tends to be tilted in the direction of those individuals who did most of the fighting and who were committed to their respective causes. Professor McPherson recognizes that many of the combatants were unwilling participants, particularly as the draft was instituted in both armies and that both armies included many shirkers. These individuals are not represented in his sample of letters. But still, these letters, written in the activity of soldiering and not intended for publication, are revealing of their authors' thoughts and feelings in a way impossible to replicate in other writings. The letters reveal much about the motivation of the combatants and about life in Civil War America. Professor McPherson finds that many of the soldiers in the Civil War had a firm idea of why they were fighting. On both sides soldiers fought for the preservation of liberty and the duty they perceived they owed to their country.

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