

Paul Escott, “Southern Yeomen and the Confederacy” (1978)

Abstract

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Introduction

Nonslaveholding yeomen farmers had an anomalous position in the antebellum South. They were the dominant group in terms of numbers but not in political power or social influence. In these areas the slaveholding elite generally held sway. The potential for conflict between yeomen and planters had always been present, but secession raised the issue with special acuteness. Could a new southern nation—one which was based on slavery but dependent upon the support of nonslaveholders—win the support of the yeomen?

For years common social and economic patterns had drawn southerners together, and sectionalism promoted a sense of southern identity which seemed ready to ripen into nationalism. But something happened to arrest this process. In 1863, for example, when a Confederate impressment agent asked one farmer for supplies, he met with a bitter refusal to cooperate. “The sooner this damned Government [falls] to pieces,” said the farmer, “the better it [will] be for us.”¹ Many southerners shared this attitude, and historians long have recognized that serious disunity plagued the Confederacy’s effort to establish its independence. But not enough has been said about the major role of class resentments in weakening southern nationalism.

The farmer’s ire at his “damned Government” illustrates the thesis of this essay—that the latent conflict between yeomen and planters became real during the Civil War and that a vital, positive commitment to the southern government failed to develop among the yeomen. Instead, poverty tested their willingness to sacrifice for a southern nation, and insensitive government policies provoked their anger. Strong class resentments developed which robbed the Confederacy of the support of many nonslaveholders. As will be shown, the yeomen were reluctant to secede. When fighting broke out, they gave their loyalty to their region, but soon this support faded. Very few yeomen took up arms against the South, and many fought to the end against hated Yankees. But large

¹ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. IV, Vol. III, 413-14, 407; hereinafter cited as *O.R.*

numbers of yeomen simply withdrew from the conflict and refused to work for a government which they felt was neglecting their needs and favoring the rich.

Early Fissures in Interclass Unity

Signs of faltering commitment among the yeomen class appeared at the birth of the Confederacy. Shortly after the presidential election of 1860 there was an important shift in the voting pattern of nonslaveholding areas throughout the South. These areas broke away from a consensus which the planters had struggled to build. Southern leaders who were aware that the loyalty of the yeomen class might be a problem had always stressed the argument that enslavement of blacks guaranteed the status of the humblest white. In the presidential election of 1860 this tactic seemed to work: nonslaveholding southerners remained loyal to the southern Democratic party and voted for [the Democratic candidate John C.] Breckinridge. In the balloting on secession, however, interclass unity broke down, and a different pattern emerged. Nonslaveholding areas swung from southern rights to compromise and sent delegates to the state conventions who pledged themselves to oppose secession or to work with other southern states for a settlement.

In the early days of the Confederacy this rift did not open. One reason for this fact was that [Confederate President] Jefferson Davis skillfully minimized class differences. As a moderate who had supported secession reluctantly, he seemed to sense the potential divisions in the South and reached out for themes which would unite all southerners. He avoided mentioning slavery, which was relatively easy to do as long as [Union President Abraham] Lincoln also skirted this issue. Instead Davis worked continually to identify the Confederacy with the founding fathers of 1787. Defining the new nation in terms which would appeal to those who still had some love for the old Union, Davis argued that the Confederacy did not destroy the American system but preserved it and guarded the founders' legacy. The North had departed from true principles, he said, but "the Constitution framed by our fathers is that of these Confederate States."² Doubtful southerners did not have to surrender their feelings of affection for the Union but could merely transfer them to their true object, the southern government.

While Davis was facilitating a transfer of loyalties, hard facts compelled southerners to stand together. Fighting broke out, and Lincoln called for troops. With invasion likely, [white] southerners had to choose, and their regional identity prevailed. The upper South promptly seceded, and a general outpouring of support took place. With the long season of tension and uncertainty finally broken, southern men and boys of all classes rushed to defend their homes. By July 1861, the Confederate government had turned away 200,000 volunteers whom it could not arm.³ Sectional loyalty, the instinct of self-defense, and sensitive leadership had created a moment of impressive unity. But the state of southern nationalism remained uncertain, for outward circumstances rather

² James D. Richardson (comp.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Confederacy*, 2 vols. (Nashville, 1906), I, 32-36.

³ *O.R.*, Ser. IV, Vol. I, 496-98.

than inner convictions had brought about the change. Doubts and potential class divisions remained.

Through the years southern leaders had told the yeoman farmer that slavery guaranteed his social status. Hundreds of politicians had echoed the words of Calhoun, who said, "With us, the two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper classes, and are respected and treated as equals."⁴ This argument was largely successful. Combining racism with democratic values, it did bring whites together behind slavery.

But it also succeeded in convincing small farmers that they were the equals of aristocratic planters, and here lay significant consequences. The doctrine of equality among white men fed an already powerful tradition of individualism. Southern yeomen, who lived in proud rural independence, had an assertive sense of their rights and refused to accept discrimination. They believed that they were entitled to equal treatment from the planters. This attitude quickly produced problems in the Confederate army. Notoriously lacking in discipline, southern troops scoffed at rigid obedience and insisted on electing their officers. Yeomen privates simply refused to abide a form of discipline which negated social equality among whites. Thus, the ideology which planters employed to protect slavery also had the potential of stimulating nonslaveholders to defend their interests.

Economic Hardships

The nonslaveholders rarely rebelled before the war, but wartime conditions placed extraordinary strains on the mechanisms of interclass unity. One basic change was the impoverishment of the yeoman class. For most nonslaveholders, the conditions of life deteriorated rapidly. One of the first indications of their plight was the flood of letters which poured into the War Department from rural communities throughout the South. Thousands of citizens complained that the rush of volunteering had deprived their areas of essential artisans. Tanners, millers, wheelrights, doctors, and other craftsmen were needed at home to keep the local economy going. Blacksmiths were especially important, for as one petition from Alabama declared, "Our Section of Country ... [is] entirely Destitute of any man that is able to keep in order any kind of Farming Tules [tools]."⁵

More serious in the long run was the rapid inflation of prices. Many items of everyday use rapidly became unattainable luxuries as the federal blockade aggravated shortages within the South and sent prices skyrocketing. Families boiled dirt from the smokehouse floor in order to have salt and did without coffee. Speculators bought up stocks of bacon, flour, leather, nails, and various manufactured goods. Many blamed greedy merchants

⁴ Quoted by David Donald in "The Southerner as a Fighting Man," in Charles G. Sellers, Jr., ed., *The Southerner as American* (Chapel Hill 1960), 74.

⁵ Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, 1861-1865, in Record Group 109, National Archives, Microcopy M 437, Roll 10, pp. 160-62, Roll 23, pp. 523-26, Roll 44, pp. 44-51, and Roll 110, pp. 1000-1002.

and cold-hearted extortioners, and there was some evidence of organized profiteering. The *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer* wrote that because of speculation, “want and starvation are staring thousands in the face.”⁶

The greatest cause of suffering was the loss of manpower on nonslaveholding farms. Thousands of southern families depended on one man: the husband, father, and breadwinner. While proslavery propagandists boasted that the war proved the value of slaves, who could work the fields while white men fought, the families of nonslaveholding yeomen confronted a severe shortage of labor. As the Edgefield, South Carolina, *Advertiser* observed, “The duties of war have called away from home the sole supports of many, many families.... Help must be given, or the poor will suffer.” Soldiers’ wives could not raise enough food and appealed in desperation to the Secretary of War. “I ask [you] in the name of humanity,” read one letter, “to discharge my husband he is not able to do your government much good and he might do his children some good and there is no use in keeping a man there to kill him and leave widows and poor little orphen children to suffer while the rich has aplenty to work for them....” State governors joined in these appeals and emphasized that the situation was grave. At one point Governor M. L. Bonham of South Carolina flatly predicted that if the Confederacy called up troops from a nonslaveholding area, “There will be great suffering next year, and ... possible starvation.”⁷

As a result of all these problems, harsh poverty gripped thousands of southern farms. The suffering was extremely widespread. An idea of its extent can be gained from the fact that in Alabama more than one-quarter of the state’s white population was on relief at the end of the war.⁸

A Poor Man’s Fight

Hunger by itself was a strong test of the yeomen’s devotion to southern nationalism, but other conditions aroused their anger at the Richmond government and encouraged them to support their families instead of the war. Southern yeomen became convinced that they were receiving unequal treatment from their government. The first instance of discrimination arose in the midst of heavy volunteering in the spring of 1861. Blessed for once with more volunteers than it could arm, the Davis administration decided that it would accept and arm only those who volunteered for three years or the duration of the war. To increase the size of the forces, however, the government made an exception and allowed companies which could arm and equip their own men to enter the service for only twelve months. The effect of this provision was to make the price of patriotism

⁶ Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Ersatz in the Confederacy* (Columbia, S.C. 1952), 63-68, 70-74, 17, 20-21; *O.R.* Ser. IV, Vol. I, 1173, 697-711; quoted in the *Rome (Ga.) Weekly Courier*, 18 Oct. 1861, p. 1; *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer*, 4 Sept. 1862.

⁷ Edgefield (S.C.) *Advertiser*, 5 March 1862; Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, Roll 100, pp. 664-66; *O.R.*, Ser. IV, Vol. II, 464-65 and Vol. III, 307, also Ser. I, Vol. XXV, Pt. II, 519-20.

⁸ *The American Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events*, Vol. V, 1865 (New York, 1870), 16.

three times higher for the poor man than for the rich man, since only the wealthy could afford to form the twelve-month units.

Resentment increased after the Confederacy turned to conscription in April 1862. The Confederate Congress adopted a system much like the twentieth-century's selective service and exempted men in various occupational categories. Perhaps the common people would have accepted this system if the government had administered it with rigid fairness, but examples of favoritism cropped up everywhere. Judge Robert S. Hudson advised Jefferson Davis that the incompetency and favoritism of conscription officers caused much of "the real and admitted disloyalty, discontent, and desertions" in Mississippi. A congressman from Virginia demanded "justice to the poor and uninfluential" and a citizen in Georgia summed up the common feeling when he wrote, "its [*sic*] a notorious fact if a man has influential friends—or a little money to spare he will never be enrolled." President Davis himself expressed concern over the large number of men who managed to find "bombproof" jobs at depots and supply offices. Citizens complained of "wholesale conscription of the *poor* while the able-bodied & healthy men of property [are] all occupying *soft places*."⁹

One of the worst outrages in conscription was the system of substitution. Those who had the money could hire substitutes to take their places in battle. According to a group of high-ranking officers in the Army of Tennessee, more than 150,000 wealthy southerners may have avoided service in this way, while the Assistant Adjutant General of the Confederacy placed a "moderate estimate" at 50,000. Not until the beginning of 1864 did the Confederacy abolish this system, but by then the damage to morale had been done.¹⁰

Many observers felt that another category of exemption had even graver effects. Congress bowed to the protests of planters soon after conscription began and authorized the exemption of one white man for every twenty slaves under his control. This was the notorious "twenty nigger law," of which one congressman said, "never did a law meet with more universal odium.... Its influence upon the poor is most calamitous, and has awakened a spirit and elicited a discussion of which we may safely predict the most unfortunate results." The General Assembly of North Carolina formally protested the "unjust discrimination" of this law and other exemptions for the rich. Such favoritism was a predictable by-product of the southern social system with its muted but real privileges for the upper class. Although special treatment for wealthy individuals often harmed the war effort, the government's granting of considerations to "gentlemen" was a basic social pattern.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 856-58; Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, Roll 120, pp. 116-20, Roll 30, pp. 1058-59; Dunbar Rowland (ed), *Jefferson Davis: Constitutionalist; His Letters, Papers and Speeches*, 10 vols. (Jackson, Miss. 1923), V, 583-84; Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, Roll 140, pp. 110-14.

¹⁰ *O.R.*, Ser. IV, Vol. II, 42-49; J. B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, ed. Howard Swiggett (2 vols.; New York, 1935), II, 219; Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, Roll 118, pp. 114-17, Roll 80, pp. 1028-33; *O.R.*, Ser. IV, Vol. II, 670-71 and Vol. III, 11-12.

Desertion and Disaffection

For all these reasons, the Confederacy never won the loyalty and enthusiasm of a large portion of the yeoman class. Hostility toward the government became very widespread, and hundreds of thousands of yeomen withdrew their support from the government and worked instead simply to care for their own needs during the war. The loss of yeoman support manifested itself in many ways, but the two most important were desertion and disaffection.

Men left the armies for many reasons, and undoubtedly some soldiers went home because they did not like army life or had a personal gripe. But for most men concern for their families was paramount. Mary Boykin Chesnut gave us a striking illustration of this when she told of a woman in a “cracker bonnet” who yelled to her husband as conscription officers dragged him off. “Desert agin, Jake!” the woman cried. “You desert agin, quick as you kin. Come back to your wife and children.”¹¹

Serious concern about the problem began in the summer of 1862, when, despite conscription, the number of men present in the ranks fell slightly. The adoption of stringent policing measures swelled the army to 360,000 men present out of a total of 498,000 on the rolls in April 1863. From this point onward, however, the curve of army returns plunged downward while that of desertions rose steeply.¹²

Despite liberal furloughs and proclamations of amnesty, the Secretary of War reported in November 1863, that “the effective force of the Army is generally a little more than a half, never two-thirds, of the numbers in the ranks.” One-third of the Army was absent without permission. The stream of desertion widened in 1863 and became a flood in 1864. At the end of the war, official Confederate returns showed only 150,000 soldiers present out of a total of 359,000.¹³

Disaffection became so widespread that it effectively removed large portions of the South from the administrative reach of the Confederate government. An officer in the Bureau of Subsistence reported that, “in all the States impressments are evaded by every means which ingenuity can suggest, and in some openly resisted.” Tax collectors refused to enter some districts for fear of their lives, and conscription officers who came to localities to induct men increasingly discovered that no one was around to be drafted. In 1864 Senator Herschel Johnson advised Jefferson Davis that “the disposition to avoid military service is ... general.”¹⁴

¹¹ Bell Irvin Wiley, *Johnny Reb* (New York, 1943), Chap. VIII, pp. 145-46; Chesnut, *Diary*, 512; *O.R.* Ser. IV, Vol. II, 769-70; Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War* (New York, 1928), 123-24.

¹² Lonn, *Desertion*, p. v; *O.R.*, Ser. IV, Vol I, 1176, Vol. II, 7, 97-98, 530, 674, 995, 1073, Vol. III, 520.

¹³ Lonn, *Desertion*, p. v; *O.R.*, Ser. IV, Vol I, 1176, Vol. II, 7, 97-98, 530, 674, 995, 1073, Vol. III, 520.

¹⁴ *O.R.*, Ser. IV, Vol. III, 653-54, 644-45, Vol. II, 460-61, 732-34, Ser. I, Vol. XXIX, Pt. II, 676; Johnson to Davis, ?, 1864, Davis Papers, Duke University.

In state after state, yeoman discontent reached such proportions that certain districts welcomed deserters and fell under the dominant influence of those who wanted to withdraw from the war. Disaffection was particularly rife in the mountain areas of Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee, but no state was immune. Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, and Arkansas also reported serious problems. Louisiana's governor warned Jefferson Davis in December, 1862, that unless the government sent Louisiana troops back to defend their state, the citizens might demand secession from the Confederacy. After planters in the Texas legislature blocked aid to soldiers' families, one prominent political leader confided to his diary that secession had been "the work of political leaders" without strong support from "the *mass of the people* without property."¹⁵

Conclusion

Many elements contributed to the Confederacy's defeat, and it would be foolish to stress any one to the exclusion of the others. But it is clear that disaffection was extremely widespread among the southern yeomen, and that its effects were great. No historian could put the case more strongly than did John A. Campbell, the former Supreme Court Justice who became Assistant Secretary of War in the Confederacy. Commenting in 1863 on disaffection in part of the South, Campbell said, "the condition of things in the mountain districts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama menaces the existence of the Confederacy as fatally as either of the armies of the United States."¹⁶

Source

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¹⁵ *O.R.*, Ser. IV, Vol. II, 680-81, 9-10, 360-61, 639-41, 141, 879-80, Ser. I, Vol. XXIV, Pt. I, 505; Robert L. Kerby, *Kirby Smith's Confederacy* (New York, 1972), 23, 29-30, 36-39, 55-56, 63-64, 87-95; Nancy Head Bowen, "A Political Labyrinth: Texas in the Civil War-Questions in Continuity," Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 1974, pp. 84-87, 89-90, 140-41.

¹⁶ *O.R.*, Ser. IV, Vol. II, 786.