

Battle cry of freedom

[Philosophy](#), [Freedom](#)



James M. McPherson was born October 11, 1936. He is considered to be an American Civil War historian and he is a professor at Princeton University. He received the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Battle Cry of Freedom* and Wikipedia states this was his most famous book. He holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Ph. D. and teaches United States History at Princeton University. *Battle Cry of Freedom; The Civil War Era* is a work of such vast scope necessarily emphasizes synthesis at the expense of theme. If there is a unifying idea in the book, it is McPherson's acknowledged emphasis on "the multiple meanings of slavery and freedom, and how they dissolved and reformed into new patterns in the crucible of war." In spite of the existence of a growing class of urban workers and a burgeoning immigrant population, McPherson finds that "the greatest danger to American survival midcentury was neither class tension nor ethnic division.

I feel it was sectional conflict between North and South over the future of slavery." He dismisses the idea advanced by some historians that conflicts over tariff policy and states' rights were more central to the political tensions of the 1850's than the South's "peculiar institution." McPherson emphasizes that "by the 1850s Americans on both sides of the line separating freedom from slavery came to emphasize more their differences than similarities. McPherson is critical of previous literature that he says "lack the dimension of contingency-the recognition that at numerous critical points during the war things might have gone altogether differently" (857-858). The narrative style allows him to point out such critical moments that others would have missed or looked over. He carefully identifies instances where another

outcome was possible, or even probable. His treatment of both sides in the war is evenhanded.

The Compromise of 1850 was an attempt to brace a government ready to split apart with a few political two-by-fours: It gave the South a deferred decision on the question of slavery in New Mexico and Utah in return for a stronger fugitive slave law and the admission of California to the union as a free state. Four years later, the Kansas-Nebraska Act shattered this uneasy peace by repealing the Missouri Compromise line of 1820, which had banned slavery in the northern territories, and substituting the deliberately ambiguous doctrine of popular sovereignty, which left room for violent disagreement among the territorial settlers.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act completed the destruction of the divided Whig Party and gave rise to the new, entirely Northern, Republican Party, whose stated objective was to prevent the spread of slavery. Although not all Republicans were motivated by sympathy for the Negro—indeed many were deeply antipathetic toward blacks and opposed slavery only in the economic interest of working-class whites—and although the party was pledged not to disturb slavery where it already existed, Southerners regarded it as a threat.

The election of Republican Abraham Lincoln in the “revolution of 1860” precipitated the “counterrevolution of 1861,” the secession of the lower South and, after the firing of shots at Fort Sumter, of the upper South as well. In stressing the formation of the Confederacy as a “preemptive counterrevolution,” McPherson follows the model of historian Arno Meyer, who applied it to twentieth century Europe.

Such a counterrevolution does not attempt to restore the old orders; it strikes first—preempts revolution—in order to protect the status quo before revolution can erupt. The secessionists magnified the potential threat posed by Lincoln's election, arguing that waiting for an “overt act” against Southern rights was comparable to waiting for a coiled rattlesnake to strike. The time to act was before the North decided to move against slavery, as the Southern radicals believed the “Black Republicans” ultimately would.

McPherson's other important theme is that the Civil War was a political war, fought by citizens rather than by professional armies; as a consequence, political leadership and public opinion directly affected military strategy, and events on the battlefield reverberated on the home front and especially in Washington, D. C. For this reason he chose a narrative rather than a thematic format, integrating political and military events to emphasize complex patterns of cause and effect. Thus, he emphasizes that the failure of the Army of the Potomac to reach Richmond during the Seven Days' Battle in the spring of 1862 changed Union policy from the limited goal of restoring the Union into one of total war to destroy the Old South and consequently gave rise to the Copperhead faction of antiwar Democrats in the North. Antietam was a major turning point not only because Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was driven back across the Potomac, but also because it ended Confederate hopes for European recognition and military assistance, and gave Lincoln the military victory he had been waiting for as a backdrop for his Emancipation Proclamation.

Especially in the North, where the two-party system still operated and the Republican position on slavery was still evolving and far from unified, Union

military success or failure had far-reaching effects. The defeats at Bull Run and Ball's Bluff led Congress to establish the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, and the Union failure at Fredericksburg gave Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, who aspired to replace Lincoln as the Republican nominee in 1864, an opportunity to encourage a senatorial investigation of the cabinet.

Public morale in the North rose after the victory at Stones River and temporarily blunted the Copperhead offensive against Lincoln's war policy; it plummeted again after the Confederate triumph at Chancellorsville on May 2-3, 1863, and Lincoln exclaimed in despair: " My God! my God! What will the country say? " McPherson gives military outcomes the central place in his explanation of Northern victory and Southern defeat; he is critical of theories that undervalue events on the battlefield.

In his concluding chapter he reviews the various explanations that historians have advanced for the South's ultimate defeat, analyzing the weaknesses in each. Although the North was superior in manpower by two to one and had even greater economic resources, revisionist historians have denied that the South fought against odds so great as to make defeat inevitable; they have pointed out the number of small countries that won independence against even greater odds, not the least of which was colonial America against Great Britain.

Such historians have argued instead that internal divisions—the states' rights governors who refused to cooperate with the central government, the disaffection of non-slaveholders, libertarian resentment of conscription and the restriction of civil liberties—fatally weakened the South's morale and

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destroyed its will to fight. McPherson discounts this argument, as well as the alternative interpretation that stresses the gradual development of superior Northern military and political leadership that was evident by 1863, because both commit "the fallacy of reversibility": If the outcome had been reversed, the same factors could be cited to explain a Southern victory. He particularly faults the loss-of-morale thesis, for "putting the cart before the horse"; defeat was the cause of Southern demoralization and loss of will, McPherson argues, not the consequence. McPherson faults most explanations of Southern defeat for failing to take into account the factor of contingency, the realization that at various turning points the war might have taken an entirely different turn.

He identifies four critical turning points that shaped the final outcome. The first was in the summer of 1862, when Stonewall Jackson and Lee in Virginia and Braxton Bragg and Edmund Kirby-Smith in the West launched counteroffensives that prevented the Union armies from claiming what had appeared to be certain victory. This rally by the South meant that the war would be prolonged and intensified, and Southern success seemed assured before each of three successive turning points toward Northern victory.

First, Union triumphs at Antietam and Perryville in the fall of 1862 turned back Confederate invasions and killed the hope of European recognition for the Confederacy; they may also have prevented a Democratic victory in the 1862 elections, which would have hampered the Lincoln government's ability to prosecute the war, and certainly permitted the president to make his Emancipation Proclamation from a position of political and military strength.

The next critical time was during the summer of 1863, when success at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga turned the North toward eventual military victory. The last one came in the summer of 1864, when enormous Union casualties of the spring campaign in Virginia—three-fifths as many battle deaths as in the previous three years of fighting—combined with the seeming lack of progress forced the North in the direction of peace negotiations and nearly resulted in the election of a Democratic president.

William Tecumseh Sherman's capture of Atlanta and Philip Henry Sheridan's destruction of Jubal Early's army in the Shenandoah Valley made Union victory inevitable; only then, after the military situation became impossible, McPherson contends, did the South lose its will to fight. Several important long-term consequences of the Northern victory emerge in McPherson's analysis. Slavery and secession were killed forever, and the word "United States" became a singular instead of a plural noun; the "union" of states, as in "the United States are a republic" became a nation and an indivisible entity. Replacing the old federal government with which the average citizen rarely came in contact, except at the post office, was a new "centralized polity." This national government levied direct taxes and collected them through an internal revenue service that it created itself, drafted citizens into a national army, imposed a national banking system, and instituted numerous other innovations.

Eleven of the first twelve amendments to the Constitution, McPherson points out, had restricted the authority of the national government; beginning in 1865 with the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, six of the next seven amendments greatly increased federal power at state expense.

Finally, the balance of political power shifted from the South, which had controlled the presidency for two-thirds of the years since the founding of the republic, and had predominated in the selection of the House Speakers, presidents pro tem of the Senate, and Supreme Court justices.

For fifty years after the Civil War no Southerner was elected to the presidency, none of the House Speakers or Senate presidents came from the old Confederacy, and only one-fifth of the Supreme Court justices were appointed from the South. McPherson contends that despite the South's appearance of being different from the rest of the United States, the argument can easily be made that until the Civil War it was actually the rapidly changing North that was out of step with the rest of the world. Although slavery had been largely abolished, most societies had an un-free or only semi-free labor force.

Most of the world was rural, agricultural, and traditional; only the northern United States and a few countries in northwestern Europe were speeding toward industrial capitalism. Thus, Southerners were both sincere and correct when they claimed to be fighting to preserve the republic of the founding fathers: limited government that protected property rights and served an independent gentry and white yeomanry in an agrarian society. The South's preemptive counterrevolution attempted to preserve this tradition, but Union victory in the Civil War ensured the dominance of the Northern vision of America.