# Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865 (review)


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unanimity and at least the appearance of internal unity; and an aggressive, self-consciously confrontational style—were gradually transferred from the commercial to the political realm, leaving an indelible imprint on the political culture of South Carolina. Understanding South Carolina politics—including its much remarked "harmony" and its purported extremism—requires understanding how eighteenth-century Carolinians and their commercial allies in Britain, via lobbying, protected and promoted their mutual "interest" in rice, indigo, and slaves.

Starr makes a solid case in this short book that the experience and conventions of commercial lobbying made an important contribution to South Carolina's political tradition. She has found some new, or at least underutilized, materials, particularly relating to Carolina–Bristol commercial-lobbying networks, and employed them creatively to support her thesis. Moreover, she makes valuable and original observations about the similarities and differences between political developments in South Carolina and other British colonies, finding striking and surprising parallels between developments in Jamaica and South Carolina. Finally, she deserves praise for pumping new life into the undervalued behavioral approach to politics. If the evidentiary base upon which she makes her case is scattered rather than complete, and suggestive rather than definitive, Starr's monograph is, nonetheless, a provocative addition to the literature about the problematic political history and culture of South Carolina.

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*Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861–1865*. By William Blair (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998) 205 pp. $32.50

*Virginia's Private War* is one of the best books about the Confederate homefront to appear in recent years. After reading this insightful, well-written volume, students of this era will have a much harder time defending one of the oldest chestnuts in Civil War historiography, that the South went down to defeat because the civilian population lacked the will to win.

Not so, Blair insists: "Virginians did not lose because of failed nationalism or internal conflicts. Their sense of purpose remained strong enough to win until the winter of 1864–1865, when the pressure of the Union army and the lack of resources finally took their toll on the spirits of all but the heartiest souls" (4). To make his case, Blair focuses on four key elements in the debate about Confederate morale: conscription, desertion, privation, and impressment. He follows these issues through the war years in four chronological chapters that constitute the heart of the book. He also selects three counties for in-depth study—Campbell

(the principal city of which is Lynchburg), Albemarle (where Charlottesville and the University of Virginia are located), and Augusta (county seat, Staunton).

On both the state-wide and the local level, Blair finds a similar pattern. "People accepted hardships and loss of liberty as long as they were convinced of the necessity and could see that most shared the suffering" (53). Indeed, the mobilization and commitment of manpower and resources reached staggering proportions as the struggle dragged on. Before the war was over, 80 percent of the state's male population of military age (seventeen to fifty) either went into the army or worked in industries serving the war effort. According to Blair, a conflict that began in Virginia as a rich man's war and a poor man's fight was transformed by several key political decisions: legislation passed by the Confederate Congress in December 1863 that revoked the right to hire substitutes; Congressional imposition of impressment in 1863; and a follow-up bill in early 1864 requiring local farmers to sell food to soldiers' families at less than market prices. These measures—"striking achievements" in the author's view (104)—"distributed the pain among various classes" more equitably (106), reduced privation on the homefront, and helped check desertion among veteran soldiers. In the end, however, the South was overwhelmed on the battlefield. One of Blair's purposes is "to restore the importance of military events to the question of Confederate defeat" (8–9).

Blair's research and analysis are not without their shortcomings. He acknowledges that he "could find only scattered testimony from either the poor or families of soldiers about the perception of the relief measures adopted by local, state, and Confederate authorities" (9), and he admits that Virginia's experience may not speak for the rest of the South. Nevertheless, he has produced an important, challenging, and innovative study. Civil War scholarship could use more of the fresh thinking that Blair displays on page after page of this valuable book.

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*Freedpeople in the Tobacco South: Virginia, 1860–1900*. By Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999) 345 pp. $49.95 cloth $18.95 paper

Kerr-Ritchie's *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South* analyzes the Virginia tobacco belt's slow and depressed transition to capitalist agriculture in the post-emancipation era. The social relations of production are squarely at the center of the tobacco belt's ultimate demise, and the status and struggles of freedpeople both inform and reflect the transformations that he identifies. The actions of government officials are also a significant part of this strongly argued social history. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (BRFAL), for example, laid