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Virginia at War, 1861 (review)

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War, and is a welcome addition to the literature of the Civil War as well as to local Cleveland history.

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Virginia at War, 1861. Edited by William C. Davis and James I. Robertson Jr. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. Pp. x, 256.)

Virginia at War, 1861 is the first of five planned volumes, "each to deal with a discrete year" in the history of Virginia during the Civil War. The prospect of such a series certainly will excite the interest of students of the history of the Civil War, Virginia, and West Virginia.

The team of authors gathered by the editors have brought fresh and often neglected subjects to the pages of the first volume. Collectively, the essays reflect the authors' combined academic and public history perspectives and are written in a style that is accessible to all interested audiences.

What spoils the style, subject range, and the promise of a thorough treatment of Virginia's Civil War years through upcoming volumes is the resurrection of old sectional rivalries. The book is decidedly Virginia-centric, not merely in subject (as would be expected), but in attitude and analysis. *Virginia at War, 1861* hearkens back to the age of Southern apologists. This bias severely damages the work.

In the first essay, "The Virginia State Convention of 1861," James I. Robertson Jr. provides a thorough account of the convention which culminated in the secession of Virginia from the Union. Robertson's depiction of the convention sheds greater light upon the crucial events of the convention than perhaps any other account. Robertson aptly recounts actions on the part of both North and South that exacerbated the secession crisis, but fails to maintain a balance in assigning fault. The author portrays Abraham Lincoln as disingenuous and refers to Lincoln's "hostility to Southern rights." While Robertson provides pointed detail on the number of pro-secession votes cast by western delegates, he overlooks accounts of intimidation which hastened the departure of pro-union delegates from Richmond before the consummation of the state's secession.

The editors chose Craig L. Symonds, formerly a professor at the U.S. Naval Academy, to write about the land war in Virginia in 1861. In spite of a sometimes precarious grasp of local geography and scattered use of citations of mostly secondary sources, the essay is thorough and interesting. By contrast, Joseph T. Glatthaar's essay on "Confederate Soldiers in

Virginia, 1861” makes liberal use of primary sources in its quest to trace the life of the common soldier. As might be expected, the book contains no similar treatment of life for Union soldiers from Virginia in the first year of the war.

John M. Coski of the Museum of the Confederacy provides arguably the most original and worthwhile of the essays, “A Navy Department, Hitherto Unknown to Our State Organization.” This fascinating article describes the history of the short-lived Virginia state navy and its administrative and combat actions in the opening phases of the war.

Also of importance and often overlooked is the history of African Americans in Virginia during the war. Ervin L. Jordan, special collections librarian at the University of Virginia, furnishes an essay on the subject. With its citations of the patriotism of “Afro-Confederates” and tales of the forced labor of free blacks and runaway and contraband slaves behind Northern lines, this essay leaves the impression that there was no difference between the North and South for blacks. Jordan makes the surprising assertion that 25 percent of the state’s free black population was loyal to Confederate Virginia, despite his own caution about “inherent difficulties in discerning black Virginians’ true feelings about secession.”

The most opinionated of the essays is C. Stuart McGehee’s “The Tarnished Thirty-Fifth Star.” Without the use of one primary source, McGehee delivers a selective interpretation of the creation of the pro-Union government of Virginia, the state of West Virginia, and a superficial and slanted account of Reconstruction in West Virginia (a stretch for a book about Virginia at war in 1861). McGehee continues the pro-Southern theme with the inference that ex-Union officers exploited West Virginia’s natural resources following the Civil War, while completely ignoring the role of Virginians such as William Mahone and Jed. Hotchkiss. McGehee spends an extraordinary amount of space in a diatribe against West Virginia University historian Charles Henry Ambler and the “Morgantown school of interpretation.”

Two other essays, “Richmond Becomes the Capital” by William C. Davis and “The Shenandoah Valley of Virginia” by Michael Mahon, give important insights on little-known, pivotal aspects of secession in Virginia. The book ends with a version of the diary of Alexandria resident Judith Brockenbrough McGuire, edited by James I. Robertson Jr. The choice of a diary to depict the women’s perspective on Virginia in 1861 seems rather odd and out of place considering that secondary accounts cover the other topics of the book. Also odd is the choice of McGuire’s diary since it has been previously published.

Virginia at War, 1861 adds to the knowledge and appreciation of the state's place in history during the secession crisis and Civil War. However, the straining efforts to justify the Confederacy and Virginia's place in it dampen the scholarship of the work. What's more the pity is that such efforts are unnecessary. Balance has been brought to the historical record of secession, the Civil War, and the separation of Virginia and West Virginia. The efforts in *Virginia at War, 1861* only exhibit an unoriginal approach that tempts the reader to view the book as secondarily important.

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Reclaiming the American Revolution: The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions and Their Legacy. By William J. Watkins Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pp. xx, 236).

Reclaiming the American Revolution examines the politics and legislation of a tumultuous and frequently disregarded period of American history, the post-Revolutionary 1790s, and the impact those politics have had on American government. Watkins focuses on the foreign policy debates that divided the Federalist and Republican political factions and led to the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. These acts were intended to consolidate Federalist control of the government and to silence the criticism of the administration, particularly by foreign-born statesmen. They also gave the president arbitrary powers to arrest and deport any aliens imprisoned under the act, thus stripping them of the right of due process.

The Alien and Sedition Acts prompted a debate between Federalists and Republicans over the powers of the national government and free speech. Federalists defended the acts, arguing that it was the inherent power of a government to protect itself against injury. The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, which Watkins calls "a reaffirmation of the spirit of 1776" (1), were authored by Republicans Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in response to the Alien and Sedition Acts. Both felt that with the Alien and Sedition Acts, as well as other abuses, the national government under the Federalists had gone beyond the bounds of constitutional power, assuming undelegated powers. The Resolutions called for protest by the states, although they were ambiguous as to the form of protest. Jefferson's initial draft of the Kentucky Resolutions called for the nullification of unconstitutional national laws by the states, but the term was struck from the final draft.