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FOR CAUSE and COMRADES

WHY MEN FOUGHT IN THE CIVIL WAR

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CHAPTER 8

THE CAUSE OF LIBERTY

THE PATRIOTISM OF Civil War soldiers existed in a specific historical context. Americans of the Civil War generation revered their Revolutionary forebears. Every schoolboy and schoolgirl knew how they had fought against the odds to forge a new republic conceived in liberty. Northerners and Southerners alike believed themselves custodians of the legacy of 1776. The crisis of 1861 was the great test of their worthiness of that heritage. On *their* shoulders rode the fate of the great experiment of republican government launched in 1776. Both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis appealed to this intense consciousness of parallels between 1776 and 1861. That is why Lincoln began his great evocation of Union war aims with the words: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth . . . a new government, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Likewise, Davis urged his people to "renew such sacrifices as our fathers made to the holy cause of constitutional liberty."[1]

The profound irony of the Civil War was that, like Davis and Lincoln, Confederate and Union soldiers interpreted the heritage of 1776 in opposite ways. Confederates professed to fight for liberty and independence from a tyrannical government; Unionists said they fought

to preserve the nation conceived in liberty from dismemberment and destruction. These conflicting impulses, which had propelled many volunteers into the armies at the war's beginning, became more intense as the fighting escalated.

Patriotic holidays had a special tendency to call forth meditations by Confederate soldiers on the legacy for which they fought. "How trifling were the wrongs complained of by our Revolutionary forefathers, compared with ours!" wrote a captain in the 5th Alabama on Washington's Birthday in 1862. "If the mere imposition of a tax could raise such a tumult what should be the result of the terrible system of oppression instituted by the Yankees?" On the Fourth of July that same year a Kentuckian who had cast his lot with the Confederacy reflected upon George Washington, "who set us an example in bursting the bonds of tyranny." On the same date a year later an Alabama corporal who had just been captured at Gettysburg was not disheartened. Soldiers of the Revolution had endured many setbacks, he noted in his diary, and in fighting for "the same principles which fired the hearts of our ancestors in the revolutionary struggle" the Confederacy too would ultimately prevail.[2]

This folk memory of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat four score years earlier sustained the morale of Confederate soldiers during times of discouragement. A wealthy South Carolina planter and a North Carolina farmer's son who both served in elite regiments on the Virginia front wrote similar letters to boost spirits at home after a string of Confederate reverses in early 1862. "Times may grow a great deal worse than they now are," wrote the South Carolinian, "and still we can stand it—And even then not go through what our Grandparents went through, when they were struggling for the same thing that we are now fighting for." The North Carolinian told his father that "instead of indulging in feelings of despondency let us compare our situation and cause to those of our illustrious ancestors who achieved the liberties we have ever enjoyed and for which we are now contending." During the retreat from Gettysburg, a captain in the 50th Georgia learned of the surrender of Vicksburg. "What a calamity!" he wrote to his wife. "But let us not despair. . . . Our forefathers were whipped in nearly every battle & yet after seven years of trials & hardships achieved their independence."[3]

The rhetoric of liberty that had permeated the letters of Confederate volunteers in 1861 grew even stronger as the war progressed. A corporal in the 9th Alabama celebrated his twentieth birthday in 1862

by writing proudly in his diary that "I am engaged in the glorious cause of liberty and justice, fighting for all that we of the South hold dear." The lieutenant colonel of the 10th Tennessee declared in May 1862 that "my whole heart is in the cause of the Confederacy, because I believe that the perpetuity of Republican principles on this Continent depends upon our success." A year later he was killed in the battle of Raymond.[4] In a letter to his Unionist father early in 1863, the son of a Baltimore merchant tried to explain why he was fighting for the Confederacy as a private in the 44th Virginia. The war, he wrote, was "a struggle between Liberty on one side, and Tyranny on the other," and he had decided to "espouse the holy cause of Southern freedom"—for which he gave his life three months later at Chancellorsville. A lieutenant in the Confederate 3rd Missouri wrote in his diary while recovering from a wound he suffered at Pea Ridge that if he was killed, it would be while "fighting gloriously for the undying principles of Constitutional liberty and self government." Two years later he was killed in action near Atlanta.[5]

The opposites of independence and liberty were "subjugation" and "slavery." These two words continued to express the fate worse than death that awaited Confederate soldiers if they lost the war. "If we was to lose," a Mississippi private wrote his wife in 1862, "we would be slaves to the Yanks and our children would have a yoke of bondage thrown around there neck." An enlisted man in the 8th Georgia was "ready to fight them 50 years rather than have them subjugate so noble a people as we are." And a Texas cavalryman who rode with Forrest agreed that the issue was "either subjugation, slavery, confiscation" or "victorious, glorious, and free."[6]

These soldiers were using the word *slavery* in the same way that Americans in 1776 had used it to describe their subordination to Britain. Unlike many slaveholders in the age of Thomas Jefferson, Confederate soldiers from slaveholding families expressed no feelings of embarrassment or inconsistency in fighting for their own liberty while holding other people in slavery. Indeed, white supremacy and the right of property in slaves were at the core of the ideology for which Confederate soldiers fought. "We are fighting for our liberty," wrote a young Kentucky Confederate, "against tyrants of the North . . . who are determined to destroy slavery." A South Carolina planter in the Army of Northern Virginia declared a willingness to give his life "battling for liberty and independence" but was exasperated when his supposedly faithful body servant ran away to the Yankees. "It is very singular and I cant account for it."[7] A captain in the 15th Georgia who owned forty slaves wrote to his wife in 1863 of "the arch of liberty we are trying to build." When she voiced apprehension about the future of slavery, he assured her that if the Confederacy won the war "it is established for centuries." In 1864 a South Carolina lieutenant who professed to fight for "the land of liberty and freemen" told his mother that he intended to sell his no-account body servant, who then ran off before he could do so. Good riddance, said this soldier, "but [I] would rather had converted him into money."[8]

Before the war many Southern whites had avoided using the words *slaves* and *slavery*, preferring instead *servants* and *Southern institutions*. Some Confederate soldiers kept up this custom even in private letters, referring to "our own social institutions," "the integrity of all our institutions," "the institutions of the whole South" as the cause for which they fought.[9] In June 1863 a lieutenant in the 2nd North Carolina stopped for a meal at the home of a Pennsylvania farmer during the Gettysburg campaign. "They live in real Yankee style wife & daughters . . . doing all the work," he wrote to his mother. "It makes me more than ever devoted to our own Southern institutions."[10]

A lieutenant in the 53rd Georgia, however, indulged in no euphemisms or circumlocutions. "Pennsylvania is the greates country I ever saw," he wrote to his wife on the eve of the battle of Gettysburg. "If this state was a slave state and I was able to buy land here after the war you might count on living in Pennsylvania." In January 1865 this same officer whipped his body servant for stealing some of the company's meat allotment. "I give him about four hundred lashes. . . . Mollie you better belive I tore his back and legs all to pices."[11]

Other soldiers were equally plain-spoken. "This country without slave labor would be completely worthless," wrote a lieutenant in the 28th Mississippi in 1863. "We can only live & exist by that species of labor: and hence I am willing to fight to the last." A captain in the 8th Alabama also vowed "to fight forever, rather than submit to freeing negroes among us. . . . [We are fighting for] rights and property bequeathed to us by our ancestors."[12]

Some Confederate soldiers welcomed Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation for bringing the real issue into the open. "The Proclamation is worth three hundred thousand soldiers to our Government at least," wrote a Kentucky cavalry sergeant who rode with John Hunt Morgan. "It shows exactly what this war was brought about for and the intention of its damnable authors." A captain in the 27th Virginia,

a small slaveholder in the Shenandoah Valley, believed that "after Lincoln's proclamation any man that would not fight to the last should be hung as high as Haman." Several Union soldiers regretted the Proclamation on just these grounds that it would make the enemy fight harder. "My hopes (if I had any) of a speedy termination of the war is thereby nocked in [the] head," wrote a New York corporal, "for I know enough of the southern spirit that I think they will fight for the institution of slavery even to extermination."[13]

Confederate prospects for victory appeared brightest during the months after the Emancipation Proclamation, partly because this measure divided the Northern people and intensified a morale crisis in Union armies. Slave prices rose even faster than the rate of inflation during that springtime of Southern hope. A number of soldiers wrote home advising relatives to invest in slaves. "Every species of property is selling now at a very high price—Negroe men for $1500 to 2000, fancy girls & women with one or two children at about the same," wrote a navy captain commanding the CSS *Morgan*. "I will buy five or six more if I can get them right." The famous "boy colonel" of the Confederacy, the planter's son Henry Burgwyn, who became colonel of the 26th North Carolina at the age of twenty-one, urged his father to put every dollar he had into slaves. "I would buy boys & girls from 15 to 20 years old & take care to have a majority of girls," he wrote. "The increase in the number of negroes by this means would repay the difference in the amount of available labor. . . . I would not be surprised to see negroes in 6 mos. after peace worth from 2 to 3000 dollars." Gettysburg cut short his life before he could witness the collapse of his dreams.[14]

But Gettysburg did not discourage Colonel E. Porter Alexander, Longstreet's chief of artillery who directed the barrage that preceded Pickett's charge. Three weeks after the battle, Porter told his wife to buy a wet nurse for their twins, for "Carline and her baby wd. be a fine *speculation* at $2000." Even as late as January 1865 an officer from low-country South Carolina wrote to his fiancée that "now is the time for Uncle to buy some negro women and children on the principle that if we don't succeed the money won't be worth anything and if we do slaves will be worth a 1000 times more than now."[15]

These soldiers, of course, belonged to slaveholding families. They tended to emphasize the right of property in slaves as the basis of the liberty for which they fought. This motive, not surprisingly, was much less in evidence among nonslaveholding soldiers. But some of them

emphasized a form of property they did own, one that was central to the liberty for which they fought. That property was their white skins, which put them on a plane of civil equality with slaveholders and far above those who did not possess that property. Herrenvolk democracy—the equality of all who belonged to the master race—was a powerful motivator for many Confederate soldiers.

Even though he was tired of the war, wrote a Louisiana artilleryman in 1862, "I never want to see the day when a negro is put on an equality with a white person. There is too many free niggers . . . now to suit me, let alone having four millions." A private in the 38th North Carolina, a yeoman farmer, vowed to show the Yankees "that a white man is better than a nigger."[16] Similarly, a farmer from the Shenandoah Valley informed his fiancée that he fought to assure "a free white man's government instead of living under a black republican government," while the son of another North Carolina dirt farmer said he would never stop fighting Yankees, who were "trying to force us to live as the colored race." Many Northern soldiers shared the bewilderment of a private in the 25th Wisconsin who wrote home describing a conversation with Confederate prisoners captured in the Atlanta campaign: "Some of the boys asked them what they were fighting for, and they answered, 'You Yanks want us to marry our daughters to the niggers.' "[17]

Such sentiments were not confined to nonslaveholders. Many slaveholding soldiers also fought for white supremacy as well as for the right of property in slaves. An Arkansas captain was enraged by the idea that if the Yankees won, his "sister, wife, and mother are to be given up to the embraces of their present 'dusky male servitors.' " After reading Lincoln's Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction in December 1863, which required Southern acceptance of emancipation as a condition of peace, another Arkansas soldier, a planter, wrote his wife that Lincoln not only wanted to free the slaves but also "declares them entitled to all the rights and privileges as American citizens. So imagine your sweet little girls in the school room with a black wooly headed negro and have to treat them as their equal." Likewise, a Georgia infantry captain wrote to his wife from the trenches on the Chattahoochee in 1864 that if Atlanta and Richmond fell, "we are irrevocably lost and not only will the negroes be free but . . . we will all be on a common level. . . . The negro who now waits on you will then be as free as you are & as insolent as she is ignorant."[18]

It would be wrong, however, to assume that Confederate soldiers

were constantly preoccupied with this matter. In fact, only 20 percent of the sample of 429 Southern soldiers explicitly voiced proslavery convictions in their letters or diaries. As one might expect, a much higher percentage of soldiers from slaveholding families than from nonslaveholding families expressed such a purpose: 33 percent, compared with 12 percent. Ironically, the proportion of Union soldiers who wrote about the slavery question was greater, as the next chapter will show. There is a ready explanation for this apparent paradox. Emancipation was a salient issue for Union soldiers because it was controversial. Slavery was less salient for most Confederate soldiers because it was not controversial. They took slavery for granted as one of the Southern "rights" and institutions for which they fought, and did not feel compelled to discuss it. Although only 20 percent of the soldiers avowed explicit proslavery purposes in their letters and diaries, *none at all* dissented from that view.[19] But even those who owned slaves and fought consciously to defend the institution preferred to discourse upon liberty, rights, and the horrors of subjugation.

CONFEDERATES WHO PROFESSED to fight for the same goals as their forebears of 1776 would have been surprised by the intense conviction of Northern soldiers that *they* were upholding the legacy of the Revolution. A sergeant in the 1st Minnesota proudly told his parents that he fought for "the same glorious ensign that floated over Ticonderoga, [and] was carried triumphantly through the Revolution." A schoolteacher with several children of his own, who had enlisted in the 20th Connecticut on his thirty-sixth birthday, celebrated his thirty-seventh by writing that he had never regretted his decision to fight for "those institutions which were achieved for us by our glorious revolution . . . in order that they may be perpetuated to those who may come after." An Illinois farm boy whose parents had opposed his enlistment in 1862 asked them tartly a year later: "Should We the youngest and brightest nation of all the earth bow to traters and forsake the graves of our Fathers?" He answered his own question: "No no never never."[20]

As with Confederate soldiers, patriotic holidays had a special power to prompt such reflections. An officer in the 22nd Kentucky (Union) rejoiced at the surrender of Vicksburg on the Fourth of July, for that day "will now be sanctified to the lovers of freedom as the day of a second deliverance of the land from a danger greater, more potent and

more to be dreaded than any our British progenitors threatened us with."[21]

The theme of parallel sacrifice with the patriots of 1776 appeared in the letters of many Union soldiers. An officer in the 101st Ohio wrote in December 1862 that "our fathers in coldest winter, half clad marked the road they trod with crimson streams from their bleeding feet that we might enjoy the blessings of a free government," and therefore "our business in being here [is] to lay down our lives if need be for our country's cause." Two weeks later he was killed at Stones River. A young private in the 2nd Michigan was killed in action less than a year after he had written a letter to his uncle describing the hardships of a soldier's life. But "did the revolutionary patriots in valley forge," he asked rhetorically, "complain [when] they had to march in the snow with there bare feet and to stand the cold twenty degrees below zero without blankets? We will show our fathers and mothers wifes sisters brothers and sweethearts that we are" worthy of that heritage.[22]

Some of those wives, however, told their soldier husbands that they had a greater responsibility to their present families than to the Founding Fathers. A lieutenant in the 41st Ohio received several such letters from his wife complaining about the burdens of raising three children while worrying about his fate. In response, he asked her to "bear your trouble with good cheer. . . . It only gives another trouble on my mind to know that you are so discontented. . . . If you esteem me with a true woman's love you will not ask me to disgrace myself by deserting the flag of our Union. . . . Remember that thousands went forth and poured out their lifs blood in the Revolution to establish this government; and twould be a disgrace to the whole American people if she had not noble sons enough who had the spirit of seventy six in their hearts." Justifying to *his* wife a decision to stay in the army instead of seeking a medical discharge after he was wounded, a thirty-three-year-old Minnesota sergeant, also a father of three children, wrote that "my grandfather fought and risked his life to bequeath to his posterity . . . the glorious Institutions" now threatened by "this infernal rebellion. . . . It is not for you and I, or us & our dear little ones, alone, that I was and am willing to risk the fortunes of the battle-field, but also for the sake of the country's millions who are to come after us."[23]

What were those "glorious Institutions"? An officer in the 54th

Ohio defined them as "the guaranty of the rights of property, liberty of action, freedom of thought, religion [and] . . . that kind of government that shall assure life liberty & the pursuit of happiness." But a Confederate soldier would have said that he fought for the same things. His Union adversary might have replied, like Lincoln, that secession was "the essence of anarchy," a challenge to constitutional law and order without which liberty becomes license and leads in turn to despotism. The Founding Fathers fought a revolution and adopted a Constitution to achieve *ordered* liberty under the rule of law. Southern states had seceded in response to Lincoln's election by a constitutional majority in a fair vote held under rules accepted by all parties. To permit them to get away with it, said Lincoln, would be to "fly to anarchy or to despotism."[24]

Many Union soldiers echoed Lincoln's words. We are "fighting for the maintenance of law and order," they wrote, "to assert the strength and dignity of the government" against the threat of "dissolution, anarchy, and ruin."[25] "This is not a war for dollars and cents," wrote a captain in the 12th Indiana, "nor is it a war for territory—but it is to decide whether we are to be a free people—and if the Union is dissolved I very much fear that we will not have a Republican form of government very long." To an Ohio blacksmith, the cause for which he fought as a private in the 70th Ohio was "the cause of the constitution and law. . . . Admit the right of the seceding states to break up the Union at pleasure . . . and how long will it be before the new confederacies created by the first disruption shall be resolved into still smaller fragments and the continent become a vast theater of civil war, military license, anarchy, and despotism? Better settle it at whatever cost and settle it forever."[26]

Northern soldiers also picked up Lincoln's theme that the United States represented the last best hope for the survival of republican government in a world bestrode by kings, emperors, and despots of many stripes. If secession fragmented America into the dis-United States, European aristocrats and reactionaries would smile in smug satisfaction at the confirmation of their belief that this harebrained experiment in government of, by, and for the people would indeed perish from the earth. "I do feel that the liberty of the world is placed in our hands to defend," wrote a private in the 33rd Massachusetts in 1862, "and if we are overcome then farewell to freedom." A private in the 27th Connecticut agreed that if "traitors" destroyed the government that cost "our forefathers long years of blood" to establish, "all the hope and confidence in the capacity of men for self government will be lost."[27] But "if we succeed in establishing our Gov[ernment]," added a private in the 122nd Illinois, *"then you may look for European struggles for liberty."* In 1863 on the second anniversary of his enlistment, a thirty-three-year-old private in the 2nd Ohio Cavalry wrote that he had not expected the war to last so long, but no matter how much longer it took it must be prosecuted "for the great principles of liberty and self government at stake, for should we fail, the onward march of Liberty in the Old World will be retarded at least a century, and Monarchs, Kings and Aristocrats will be more powerful against their subjects than ever."[28]

All of the Union soldiers quoted in the preceding paragraphs were born in the United States. Many of their forebears *had* fought in the Revolution. Foreign-born soldiers are underrepresented in the Union sample, and some who are represented expressed few if any ideological convictions. Of those who did, however, the theme of the Union as a beacon light for the oppressed in their homelands shone brightly. In 1864 a forty-year-old corporal in the 39th Ohio who had been born in England wrote to his wife after he had reenlisted for a second three-year hitch: "If I do get hurt I want you to remember that it will be not only for my Country and my Children but for Liberty all over the World that I risked my life, for if Liberty should be crushed here, what hope would there be for the cause of Human Progress anywhere else?" Four months later he was killed near Atlanta.[29]

Irish-American soldiers drew some of the clearest parallels between their fight for the Union and the struggle for liberty in the old country. An Irish-born carpenter, a private in the 28th Massachusetts of the famous Irish Brigade, angrily rebuked both his wife in Boston and his father-in-law back in Ireland for questioning his judgment in fighting for the Black Republican Lincoln administration. "This is my country as much as the man who was born on the soil," he wrote in 1863. "I have as much interest in the maintenance of . . . the integrity of the nation as any other man. . . . This is the first test of a modern free government in the act of sustaining itself against internal enemys . . . if it fail all tyrants will succeed the old cry will be sent forth from the aristocrats of europe that such is the common lot of all republics. . . . Irishmen and their descendents have . . . a stake in [this] nation. . . . America is Irlands refuge Irlands last hope destroy this republic and her hopes are blasted." A year later he too was killed in action. Another Irish-born soldier, a sergeant in the 2nd New Jersey,

gave this argument a different twist. After he and his brother had been in the army for about a year, their mother rued the day they had enlisted. He told her curtly that "you are not a fit subject to live in a free and prosperous country. Ireland is the place for those who possess such sentiments—there is where the iron heel of despotism grinds the Patriot heart."[30]

As noted in the preceding chapter, two-thirds of both Confederate and Union soldiers in the samples expressed generalized patriotic motives for fighting. Likewise an almost identical proportion—42 percent Confederate and 40 percent Union—discoursed in more depth on ideological issues such as liberty, constitutional rights, constitutional law, self-government, resistance to tyranny, republicanism, democracy. Among Confederate soldiers, 47 percent of those from slaveholding families but only 28 percent from nonslaveholding families emphasized one or more of these themes. The greater disparity between officers and men in the Confederate than in the Union army that characterized simple expressions of patriotism also prevailed with respect to more sophisticated ideological comments. Some 53 percent of Confederate officers and 30 percent of Southern enlisted men discussed ideological themes; the comparable figures for Union soldiers were 49 and 36 percent.

PATRIOTIC AND IDEOLOGICAL convictions were an essential part of the sustaining motivation of Civil War soldiers. But how important were they for combat motivation? Were soldiers who avowed such convictions better fighters than those who did not? Or were the factors of primary group cohesion, religion, adrenalin, and the fear of showing cowardice that were discussed in earlier chapters the only things that counted when the bullets started flying?

No unequivocal answer is possible. American soldiers in World War II and those social scientists who studied them relegated patriotism and ideology to a marginal role in *combat* motivation. On the other hand a questionnaire administered to their slightly older contemporaries, American volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, found that "belief in war aims" helped 77 percent of them to overcome fear in battle—a far higher percentage than any other factor.[31] But these volunteers were exceptional both in the degree of their ideological convictions and in their motivation. What about soldiers in the *American* Civil War? Nobody gave them a questionnaire. But several of them tried to answer the question anyway.

Some answered it in the same way as the G.I. who said that "a boy up there 60 days on the line is in danger every minute. He ain't fighting for patriotism. You're fighting for your skin on the line." A lieutenant in the 1st Virginia of Pickett's division wrote after he survived the famous charge at Gettysburg that "when you rise to your feet as we did today, I tell you the enthusiasm of ardent breasts in many cases *ain't there,* and instead of burning to avenge the insults of our country, families, altars and firesides, the thought is most frequently, *Oh,* if I could just come out of this charge safely how thankful *would I be!*" Similarly, a private in the New Hampshire company of the 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters wrote in his diary after the battle of the Wilderness that "when I first started on the charge this morning I felt that I could fight & do any thing for my bleeding country. But after I had got out the first time my patriotism had died & I thought of nothing but to keep clear of the enemy's bullets—zip, zip, zipping around me."[32]

But in the opinion of a good many others, it was the men whose patriotism did *not* die when the bullets zipped around them who made the best combat soldiers. "The Only thing that bears me up . . . in the hour of Battles is the Consciousness . . . that I am in discharge of a duty that all good sitizens owe there country," wrote a captain in the 37th North Carolina. "It is the caus that makes a man fight," agreed a sergeant in the 59th Illinois after the battle of Pea Ridge. Another Illinois sergeant expressed pride in his company after the battle of Stones River because "they are too patriotic to be cowards . . . and are willing to do or suffer anything for their country."[33]

During the siege of Port Hudson a strongly ideological sergeant in the 90th New York wrote his parents that "this place has been attacked again and again for the past two months and without success as in every regiment there are cowardly fellows who on a charge will fall out, drop behind logs, etc and that cripples the efforts of those who would go forward." On two occasions, therefore, Union commander Nathaniel Banks called for volunteers to form a special unit of shock troops to lead assaults. "You may wonder why I volunteered to undertake a work of such danger," this soldier said. "I thought of the mighty interests at stake . . . and I concluded that the great results which it promised were worth the sacrifice." A lieutenant in the 30th Massachusetts who also volunteered to lead one of these charges wrote in his diary before the attack: "Although we are going into a terrible conflict, the boys feel gay and happy. We came to fight for our country, and why should we falter?"[34]

These two men survived the assaults. But as an ideologically committed sergeant in the 8th Illinois Cavalry pointed out to his fiancée in 1863, it was "the *best*, *truest*, and *bravest* of the nation" who went forward and often got killed while the beats lagged to the rear and saved their skins. A few months later he was killed in action. The same fate befell a corporal in the 57th Massachusetts shortly after he wrote home in August 1864: "Mother if all our army felt as I feel when I go into battle, the war would soon be over but I am sorry to say that we have got too many in the army that are not fighting for there country but for money and all they think of when they go into battle is how to . . . skulk behind the first stump . . . [and] keep out of danger."[35]

This observation became almost a litany among the volunteers of 1861–62 as they tried to absorb the substitutes, draftees, and bounty men of 1863 and after. These new men "are far inferior to the old patriotic vols. who came 'without money and without price,'" wrote a division commander in the Union 12th Corps. "One of the old is worth ten of the new." A private in the 85th New York agreed that "thoes *money* soldiers are not worth as much as they *cost* for when you heer firing ahead you may see them hid in the woods." The same was true of substitutes and draftees in the Confederate army, according to a Texas captain, who in 1864 contrasted "the old soldiers, the original volunteers" who were "patriotic and sacrifice everything to Country" with the "whining, cowardly Georgians and Alabmians" who had been drafted into his division and "resort to every means to avoid" combat.[36]

The ideological commitment of so many of those volunteers of 1861 and 1862 was one reason for the high casualty rates of Civil War armies. Fighting for liberty was a dangerous business. The kind of liberty that most Americans today associate with the Civil War was the liberation of four million slaves. But that was not the liberty for which most Civil War soldiers initially fought. "I have been talking all my life for the cause of liberty," a recruit to the 5th Wisconsin had written in August 1861, and "now the time is nigh at hand when I shall have a chance to aid by deed this cause and I shrink not from doing my duty."[37] He did not mean freedom for the slaves. He meant the republican liberty and constitutional government of 1776 and 1789—which had left slavery intact. But by 1864 most Northern soldiers had broadened their conception of liberty to include black people.