

VIRGINIA'S PRIVATE WAR

*Feeding Body and Soul
in the Confederacy,
1861-1865*

William Blair

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogota Bombay
Buenos Aires Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam
Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore
Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Copyright © 1998 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Blair, William Alan.

Virginia's private war : feeding body and soul
in the Confederacy, 1861-1865 / William Alan Blair.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-511864-2; 0-19-514047-8 (pbk.)

1. Virginia—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Public opinion.
2. Virginia—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Social aspects.
3. United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Public opinion.
4. United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Social aspects.

I. Title.

E581.B57 1998

973.7'13'09755—dc21 97-51657

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*For Mary Ann
For always being there*

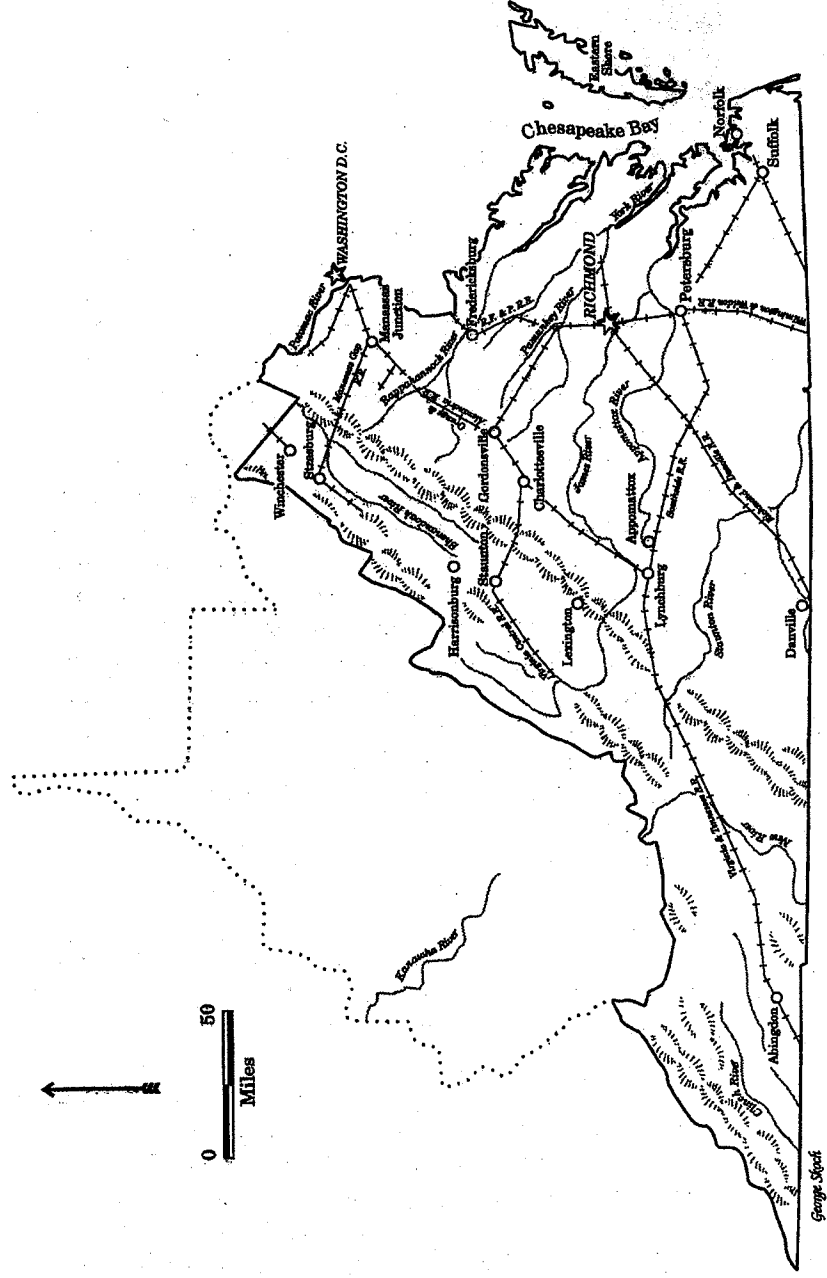


Figure 1.1 Key Features of Virginia, 1860

selves," Stuart reckoned, "the enemy will be encouraged by them, and make them the pretext for sending armies into our borders for the purpose of sustaining the bands of the disaffected." He counseled everyone to hold feuding in abeyance until after the contest.⁵⁸

It was a fine wish but an unrealistic one. Free, white Virginians agreed on the most important facets of their way of life. They shared the assumptions of a society oriented primarily around small rural communities led by a slave-owning elite. They would expect planters to continue to shoulder the burden of caring for the poor and interceding on behalf of constituents at crucial times. State pride, revolutionary heritage, and notions of liberty gave them a basic consensus for fighting. To a person, Confederate Virginians believed they had been forced into the conflict because the North had left no other choice by advancing armies into sovereign states. Yet this was also a contentious society of outspoken individualists who would not hesitate to voice their discontent with the management of the war. They would have plenty of opportunity to do so as the people faced enormous strains while mounting modern warfare against a persistent, and destructive, Union army.

*Problems of Labor and Order,
April 1861–April 1862*

The Southern worker, black and white, held the key to the war. . . .
—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*

By the summer of 1861, even Solomon might have needed advice. The volume of mail coming into the Confederate War Department in Richmond exhausted Albert T. Bledsoe. A career as professor at the University of Virginia and proslavery ideologue failed to prepare him as a bureaucrat. In the pile of correspondence he tossed into an armchair at day's end lay an array of competing concerns requiring instant decisions. Some letters contained relatively routine requests for military or political posts. The occasional crank also contributed, such as the "inventor" who asked for \$1,500 to build a machine to move air at 100 miles per hour, ostensibly to aim at the enemy. Dominating this correspondence were petitions from communities for the return of the local miller, or tanner, or blacksmith. Occasionally there appeared individual pleas from women for the army to return an only son, a husband, or a provider because the household faced hardship and possible ruin. How should a public servant decide these matters? And which choices promised the greatest chance for Confederate success with the least suffering among the people?¹

These questions highlight the problems that faced state and national authorities in the first year of the war. Within a few months the home front began to suffer from the loss of men vital to their

economies. Areas with fewer slaves felt this loss the most: with white farmers and mechanics away serving in the military, the labor did not always exist to fill in the gaps. Each neighborhood had developed close-knit economic relationships over generations. The same families tended to own mills, tanneries, and other shops that kept communities running. When these men left home, problems other than economic ones occurred as well. The people in these communities increasingly had to find their bridles, shoes, grains, and other supplies in regional markets rather than close to home. The war also created a heightened sense of insecurity because of disorderly troops, suspected traitors, and speculators. Within the tobacco belt, residents worried about the possibility of a slave uprising as most young men went off to war. To local folks, the solution to all of these problems was simple: they wanted the military to exempt key personnel to preserve the neighborhood's way of living. To national authorities, of course, the answers were more complex. With perhaps 180,000 men of military age in Virginia—and little more than one million throughout the Confederacy—the southern war effort required a delicate balance of man power with woman power, soldier power with civilian power, and slave power with free power.²

The public's concerns did have an impact, although not always in the intended way. Government began to expand. Locally, officials organized supplies and provisions by authorizing community funds and group purchasing. Nationally, the Davis administration invoked martial law and established provost marshals to control spies, deserters, and disorderly troops. In April 1862 the Confederate Congress enacted the first national draft in American history, which not only put men in the military but also designated laborers who would be allowed to stay at home to maintain production. The kind of exemptions written into law matched those requested in the petitions that besieged bureaucrats like Albert T. Bledsoe. Trying to protect the community demanded certain controls over people's lives—not all of them unwelcome.

Few could foresee this development as most free Virginians rushed to support the war effort. As news of the April 17 secession ordinance reached the interior, people fired cannons, paraded in streets, and prepared for conflict. When the state turned out to vote for ratification on May 23, the balloting overwhelmingly favored disunion. Communities displayed their unity with a 130,000-vote majority for secession, although the margin tells a slightly deceptive story. Persons who harbored doubt remained at home rather than

face the harassment experienced by those who openly declared Unionist sentiments. Some Unionists voted for secession because of pressure from neighbors, some of whom threatened to hang the uncooperative. In Fredericksburg, the community forced the *Christian Banner* to shut down after May 9, 1861 because of the Unionist sentiments of its editor. Even Unionists who quietly went about their business drew suspicion. One Campbell County woman told her husband: "I would not trust those strong Union men—none of them can be relied on—especially a Whig for if they think they are working against Democrats they will do all kinds of unprincipled things."³

Actions by the Lincoln government reinforced this enthusiasm. Danger from the Union army seemed imminent. Troops amassed in Washington to invade the South. By May 1861 they had entered Maryland and seized control of civilian life, further convincing southerners that Lincoln intended to deny people their rights through military force. The next target would be Virginia. Invasion could come from at least four directions: along the coast, near Norfolk, where the James River provided access to Richmond; in northern Virginia; in the Shenandoah Valley, from the Federal armory at Harpers Ferry; and from the Ohio River, up the Kanawha, eventually to threaten Staunton in the Valley. Delegates to the secession convention, which served temporarily as a de facto legislature, overwhelmingly chose Robert E. Lee to organize defenses.

Shortly, Union generals tested each avenue. The northwest fell fairly quickly as Unionists formed a new government and the northern army defeated Confederates at Philippi and Rich Mountain on June 3 and July 11, respectively. Governor John Letcher sent Lee and two of the state's prominent politicians—Henry A. Wise and John B. Floyd—to reclaim the region, but they failed badly. In the Shenandoah, militia and Confederate forces seized Harpers Ferry but evacuated the town after stripping it of equipment as Union troops arrived from the north and west. From Washington, northern soldiers prepared the advance into Northern Virginia that culminated in the battle of First Manassas on July 21. Along the southeastern coast, Union gunboats traded fire with Confederates at Gloucester Point, and northern soldiers reinforced their toehold on the state at Fort Monroe.

Although enthusiasm ran high the first couple of months, not everyone could afford to leave home. The first wave of volunteers consisted primarily of young unmarried men who had yet to establish

themselves. The majority of the Lynchburg Rifle Grays were under age 30, and only fourteen of the 112 members were married. Units from Orange County looked about the same, with a study of that region concluding that "sons of the large slaveholders could afford to leave home for the army because they contributed relatively little to the household economy."⁴ Areas with fewer slaves contained farmers who could ill afford to leave chores without finding someone to take their places. When an editor of a newspaper in Staunton worried that too few citizens responded to meet the emergency, he realized that the reasons had little to do with patriotism. "Professor J. Hotchkiss," he noted, "is also raising a company to go into service after harvest. It will be composed principally of our farmer boys, who are necessarily detained at home until the crops are gathered."⁵ Faced with the losses in western Virginia and increasing pressure from the Union army, Governor John Letcher called out the militia in the second week of July, establishing a quota of 10 percent of the white population for each county. It was a controversial move, but he had to do something. The situation, however, was not grim enough for him and other southerners to accept help from an unexpected quarter. Black people in some areas volunteered to fight. In Lynchburg, for instance, free blacks attempted to form a company of soldiers. Welcomed at first by the press, the gesture quickly dropped from public sight.⁶

Volunteers steeped in a militia tradition found it hard to accept that they could not freely come and go. The victory at First Manassas only exacerbated this attitude, sending men trickling from the army. The Yankees had been defeated, went the rationale, so men should not have to stay in camp until another threat materialized. Why drill or perform other camp routine when crops needed tending at home? General Joseph E. Johnston recalled about this time: "Many, therefore, in ignorance of their military obligations, left the army—not to return." Some went home while others accompanied wounded friends to hospitals in the state's interior. "Exaggerated ideas of the victory, prevailing among our troops," Johnston added, "cost us more men than the Federal army lost by defeat."⁷

The war spirit had not died; rather, the men followed a local kind of patriotism in keeping with the militia tradition rooted in American life since the colonial era. Local militias performed much like volunteer fire companies in which members responded to emergencies and then returned to civil life. Few volunteers in the first year of war intended to adopt a different mindset. One bemused fellow wrote home when his unit arrived in Jefferson County that

the women "call us Soldiers here—not militia," and his emphasis underscored the novelty of the concept. In a similar vein, a Campbell County man told a friend: "I'm afraid George if I should come out of this war alive, that people will continue to call me 'Captain'—There's nothing half so genteel as 'Mr.,' and I don't like to give up the title—would you?"⁸

At this point in the war, the men remained more citizen than soldier, which created quaint but vexing problems in the military. Discipline was hard to inculcate among enlisted men and sometimes company officers. Because communities often used militia groups to form these early regiments, more complicated relationships existed within units than simply officer to enlisted man. There might also have been personal relations: uncle with nephew, merchant with miller, or planter with day laborer. In line with the antebellum tradition, community leaders were to heed the wishes of men who expected to hold on to the rights of a democratic society. The bottom line was that enlisted men should have some say in their fate: that officers should consult them in important decisions; that they could choose the units in which they would serve; that they could elect company officers. They also preferred to fight at home rather than perform guard duty somewhere else. A man from Botetourt County near the boundary between the southwest and the Valley noted that patriot hearts beat within his mountain wilds, but of a particular kind. While offering his "Blue Ridge Scouts" for service with the regular army, he added: "It would be impossible to get these men into service in any other way, except as militiamen."⁹ Whenever action stopped, it seemed ridiculous to expect them to perform picket duty while their communities faced a Yankee threat. Members of the Wise Legion hailed from a part of the northwest that had fallen to the Union. Fifty-two of them voted to return to western Virginia, protesting that the enemy possessed "our homes and fire-sides." The petition added that the enemy was encroaching "still farther in to the bosom of our beloved Commonwealth." Consequently, the men could not understand why they "should be compelled to turn our backs upon them and our homes, to repel invasion in another quarter." Higher authorities, of course, denied the request.¹⁰

Local orientation also characterized civilians, who tried to keep the war a community affair by supporting their "boys" with minimal help from outsiders. Residents expected state and Confederate officials to supply arms and equipment, but accepting this aid did not mean relinquishing responsibility for *their* troops. Instead of turning

to the national government, communities in Virginia and throughout the South conducted campaigns to gather food, clothing, and equipment. Women were especially prominent as they formed associations to sew uniforms, package foods, or present flags to local companies. Like Lucy Wood Butler of Albemarle, they believed that "our needles are now our weapons, and we have a part to perform as well as the rest."¹¹ Masters offered to send slaves to construct defenses, provided that the state would pay for transport and food. Men too old or too ill to fight funded local companies or donated provisions. County courts passed legislation for similar purposes. When a bank board in Lynchburg authorized \$200 for each local unit, the cashier noted, "There is wonderful liberality displayed—Eighteen of our citizens have given \$500 a piece for the purpose of equipping troops and maintaining their families in their absence."¹² This support became vital as winter approached. Virginians donated an estimated \$3 million worth of overcoats, shoes, socks, and blankets, raising funds through floating bonds or finding money from other government pockets. The Lynchburg City Council, for instance, set aside \$2,800 in surplus funds from the public water committee. Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin noted the efforts overall in his annual report, indicating that without community cooperation the Quartermaster's Department could have supplied neither shelter nor other essentials for soldiers in time for winter.¹³

The Confederacy's victory at First Manassas also awakened civilians to the problems of running a modern war through local resources. Supplies proved entirely inadequate. Medical facilities could not handle the wounded who suddenly swelled the populations of towns. Charlottesville found itself caring for about 1,200 of the wounded from Manassas. The town contained a total of only 3,000 people, with hospital space for 300 patients. Residents scrambled to find room in public buildings and at the University of Virginia. Private homes absorbed the overflow, with each taking from two to twenty soldiers. Women volunteered as nurses, cooks, and seamstresses, but the institutions needed more of everything. Repeated elsewhere in the Confederacy, these conditions accelerated the establishment of hospitals that quickly turned to slaves and free blacks for staffing. By 1862 the number of African Americans working at the six hospitals in Lynchburg totaled 420, or nearly 14 percent of the town's black population in 1860. Hospital officials also needed soldiers to police the convalescing men who might not be ready for battle but felt well enough to cause trouble.¹⁴

By the autumn of 1861, three kinds of scarcity confronted people. The loss of the Kanawha Valley had cost the state one of its most important regions for producing salt—a necessity to preserve a family's bacon. The supply of leather from the North and from South America also dwindled because of the blockade. With so many tanners in the army, leather sometimes rotted from inexperienced handling or lying unprocessed in the tanyard. Finally, communities suffered from shortages of currency. The need for cash increased as the Confederacy adopted new systems of banking and currency. Women wrote to their husbands in the army for money because little circulated on the home front. In Augusta County, a wife could no longer pay tuition for her boys' schooling, saying, "I am out of money, have been for some time, so you see my darling husband I am in a dreadful fix." Another Virginian could not loan a friend \$50 "as I have no money by me at all, and cannot collect enough to pay pressing demands. The wealthiest men in the county here have no money and consequently are not paying anything."¹⁵

Like most southerners, Confederate Virginians blamed the shortages on extortioners and speculators—often called "Yankee southerners"—who capitalized on the suffering of others by purchasing items for resale instead of their own use. It was quickly apparent that this could have an impact on morale. One Virginian indicated that a Union general attempted to erode loyalty among the populace by offering to supply them with salt at 75 cents per bushel, along with coffee and other goods. "To some," he continued, "these may appear but weak efforts to conquer men's patriotism, but to men who have wives and large families of helpless children surrounded by enemies—and suffering for the necessities of life—they are more powerful than armies." He added that families could not purchase salt for a month's worth of a soldier's pay. Shortages affected planters, farmers, and poor people alike, although the rich had the means to stockpile salt and other goods from the beginning of the war. No one, however, had stored enough to last the entire conflict.¹⁶

People who lived in towns felt these early shortages the most. From Lynchburg in particular came cries to do away with a free market by having local government step in to control transactions. A writer to a Lynchburg newspaper, identifying himself as "One of the People," suggested that salt dealers be licensed like the hucksters in Richmond. "Why may not our Hustings Court make out a table of prices and require all who are licensed to sell in the city to conform

thereto, under certain penalties. Something must be done by our constituted authorities or the people will take the subject of redress into their own hands." The writer hated seeing good southerners behaving like Yankees. "If salt be scarce," he added, "its market value straight away goes up from 2¼ to 6 or 8 dollars a sack; no matter whether poor people can buy it or not."¹⁷ Charles Button, the editor of the Lynchburg *Virginian*, carried on perhaps the most vocal campaign for government regulation of the marketplace. He did so with the understanding that any measures would be temporary. "Under ordinary circumstances," he wrote, "it would be impolitic, perhaps unjust, to interfere with the laws of trade; which, it is concluded, should be allowed to regulate itself without legislative interference." But in war, he added, "the laws, to a certain extent, are suspended." Under the circumstances, he pondered, was it right for government to suspend the liberties of individuals by forcing them from their homes and into the army while it respected the liberty of those on the home front who profited from the absences?¹⁸ What Button suggested would become a reality in impressment legislation enacted by the Confederacy in 1863.

For the moment, however, local governments bore the burden of solving this problem. Lynchburg residents by late November 1861 had decided to control salt extortion by purchasing in bulk with community money. It took a week or so for a committee of merchants and key townspeople to work out the details. The committee calculated that the price of salt could be set at \$3.50 a sack at a time when Governor Letcher claimed it sold at \$20 to \$25 per sack.¹⁹ As communities throughout Virginia resorted to similar measures, the state finally endorsed these procedures in legislation enacted May 9, 1862. There was little coordination of these efforts. Counties negotiated individual contracts rather than cooperate statewide. Typically, magistrates on county courts established agents to secure the commodity with public funds raised through bond issues. Salt was then distributed throughout an area at the purchase price, plus the costs of transportation and commission for the agents. Richmond began this procedure in the summer of 1862 with the council providing \$5,000 for the purchases. Petersburg did likewise. Thus, as early as the winter of 1861–1862, the trend had emerged for citizens to call on government to influence the market, although this expansion of powers occurred through local people administering a specified commodity.²⁰

Communities could not solve all the challenges of mobilizing for war. State and Confederate help would be needed. At the end of the

summer, Virginians began to realize this and complained to Governor Letcher and the Confederate War Department about the inequities they observed. This was especially true for regions containing fewer slaves than the tobacco belt. Alexander H. H. Stuart of Staunton spoke for the Shenandoah Valley when he warned against the governor's levy en masse for the militia order on July 15. Stuart explained that "men go to the battlefield with very little alacrity when they feel they may leave their wives & children exposed to horrors to which their own perils are as nothing—The call ought to be modified or the people may be driven to desperation."²¹ Members of the Seventh Brigade, Virginia Militia, described the Valley's dilemma thusly: "The Valley of Virginia is a wheat-growing country, in which slave labor is scarce; consequently the larger proportion of the labor must be performed by white men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five years. The time for sending the wheat crop has arrived, and unless at least a considerable proportion of the men new here can be returned to their homes to attend to putting that crop in the ground we will be unable to raise supplies sufficient for our own subsistence." Valley people in general believed that the east could better withstand the demands for troops because of their slaves.²²

Planters east of the Blue Ridge had their own worries. Those who hired out slaves for government work discovered they had entered uncharted terrain. It took time to clarify who should bear financial responsibility for slaves who escaped, died, or became disabled from the grueling work of building fortifications. The Confederate government at first wanted no part of this liability. In November 1861 the attorney general ruled that the government bore no obligation to reimburse owners because the Confederacy assumed the position of an individual hirer, whom the law absolved from paying damages unless expressly stated in a contract. Because work placed slaves near the frontier, many also escaped. Gloucester Point and Westmoreland County in the southeast became two areas through which slaves routinely fled. This stunned planters such as Edmund Ruffin whose proslavery views had not anticipated that "happy" slaves would leave of their own accord. Equally frustrating was the exposure of slaves to dangerous ideas. John Spiece of Albemarle County complained about impressed slaves sent to the Valley because "whilst there they get to talking with Union men in disguise, and by that means learn the original cause of the difficulty between North & South: then return home and inform other negroes."²³

Planters began to withhold slaves, move them toward more secure areas of the interior, or demand their return from military work. The Union success at Roanoke Island in March 1862 escalated these trends in the southeast. Major General John B. Magruder claimed that he could not send reinforcements to Suffolk in southeast Virginia because "notwithstanding all my efforts to procure negroes, I have received but 11 from the counties in my district, the presiding magistrate referring the calls in some cases to the district attorney, who decides that it is illegal, and in other cases no response is made."²⁴ Adding to the problem was a belief among slave owners that not all of the community bore the war's burden equally. The teamster of Robert C. Mcluer, a slave owner in Rockbridge County, died from typhoid while working for the government. "I don't feel," Mcluer wrote the governor, "that it is just that I should sustain such loss whilst my neighbor who did no more lost nothing."²⁵ Planters unwittingly added to labor shortages by hiring slaves to send to the military instead of their own chattel, which quickly tapped out the available pool.²⁶

To relieve the shortage of labor, local and state authorities first turned to the free black population. Similar to the way World War I stimulated demand for African American labor, free blacks in Virginia found opportunities at higher pay as workers of both sexes negotiated with soldiers to cook for company messes, wash clothes, and perform other domestic chores. Within communities, mechanics and artisans found increased demand for skills that would grow more precious to the military as time passed.

Still, for many free blacks the story was not a happy one because they faced coercion into military work. The state convention helped by authorizing the enrollment of black men between ages 18 and 50. Many would go to work in hospitals or be used as teamsters. Magistrates of county courts selected workers from the registry that free blacks were required to sign each year. Local sheriffs then prodded the workers into service. This method eased the demand for slaves from planters and pleased mechanics as well. A Lynchburg mechanic indicated to Jefferson Davis that the Confederacy should put the black bricklayers, carpenters, and stone masons to better use: "I want to know, if that degraded and worse than useless race could not do something in the way of defending the South such as throwing up Breast works Building tents or any thing els [*sic*] that would be of advantage to us. and take the hard portion of labor off of the Soldiers who has to drill 6 or 8 hours every day besides work."²⁷

As the demand for workers grew, Virginians experimented with

convict laborers. The superintendent of the state penitentiary in Richmond sent seventy-nine inmates to work on fortifications in response to an order by the Confederate government on June 1, 1861. When he lost ten runaways, he resisted sending more, although he dispatched another group later that year. All of the thirty-two convicts in this second group were black—nineteen slaves and thirteen free men. A soldier detailed to work on the railroad reported to his family in December: "They are working negroes on it, all convicts."²⁸ The state needed such coercion because free black people often turned down dangerous work with the army. For instance, an official asked the government to impress workers because he could secure none at any price to build winter quarters.²⁹

By the autumn of 1861, authorities recognized that the system for mobilization served neither front nor home front very well. Virginians led the Confederate states in numbers of volunteers, but there was a disturbing side to the statistics. By February 1862 only 1,500 had formed companies enlisted for three years, while the terms of 53,950 others expired in April. Many of these men found military service incompatible with either their physical abilities or their appetites. Even the healthiest and most patriotic felt the need to return to families undergoing difficult times. Someone had to do something to avert a crisis as enlistments expired.³⁰

Letters to the secretary of war from the Augusta, Albemarle, and Campbell regions during calendar year 1862 reveal the stresses on communities and the delicate task facing state and national authorities. Consisting of 168 letters, the correspondence fell into three large categories: the need for labor, military questions, and personal security (table 2.1). As a whole, the communication shows that local communities were changing in ways that forced more regional orientation and expansion of government.

The need for labor was the leading reason for writing to the Confederate government. Correspondence of this kind constituted 67 letters, or 40 percent, of the total from these three regions. Many followed the pattern of the antebellum era by taking the form of petitions endorsed by local leaders who passed them on to the administration. Typically, the petitioners asked for the exemption from military service of a skilled artisan, professing that the neighborhood could not function without the individual. Communities missed millers and shoemakers the most, although tanners were also in demand. As usual, the Shenandoah Valley expressed these needs more than the tobacco belt, where slaves helped to fill artisan positions.

Table 2.1 Community Needs Expressed to the Confederate Secretary of War, 1862

Type of Request (N=168)	Augusta/ Staunton	Albemarle/ Charlottesville	Campbell/ Lynchburg
Labor Needed			
Tanners	3	2	0
Shoemakers	7	2	0
Millers	5	5	5
Smiths	3	0	1
Metalworkers	0	0	5
Laborers	4	0	1
Confederate Work	1	0	1
Slaves	0	1	5
Other	8	3	5
Subtotal	31	13	23
Military Questions			
Conscription	7	9	1
Substitution	3	1	4
Assignment Wanted	5	2	1
Exempt for Health	5	5	2
Exempt for Religion	2	0	0
Goods Impressed	4	2	3
Subtotal	26	19	11
Personal Security			
Deserter Problems	1	2	0
Liquor Problems	1	2	1
Exempt Overseer	0	2	1
Law and Order Fears	5	4	1
Disloyalty Suspected	8	1	1
Speculation Concerns	3	1	3
Household Needs	2	5	1
Subtotal	20	17	8
Totals	77	49	42

Source: Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, NA

The letters in this category emphasize the small radius in which local economies operated.³¹ Almost immediately, war disturbed the fragile network of the neighborhoods. Petitioners on behalf of a tanner, blacksmith, or miller often complained that they could not find a substitute for these services within three to five miles. This might strike today's reader as a distance scarcely worth noting, but it illustrates the orientation of rural life in the mid-nineteenth century. To-

bacco, wheat, and other crops involved transactions beyond the community, but the commodities of daily life—shoes, barrels, milled flour, leather goods, and so on—typically came through neighborhood resources in which custom dictated the cost. Cash played a role in the economy, but more often with external exchanges such as when merchants purchased supplies from the North. Internally, trust rather than cash characterized transactions. Merchants forgave debt or carried a customer until payment came, sometimes accepting services in kind.³² The next village might lie only five miles away, but the journey covered a far greater distance into a different network of exchanges. And individuals often had no prior experience to guide them as to whether the seller would charge reasonable prices or whether the buyer would be trusted to pay a debt.³³

War disrupted these long-standing arrangements, forcing many for the first time to confront prices established primarily through demand, and leaving them without the ability to conduct a transaction with little or no cash. Also, resentment built within communities when their valuable food was shipped beyond the neighborhood to help others.³⁴ Under such circumstances it was easy to feel as if one were being gouged by an extortioner. Undoubtedly some people were. To make matters worse, as the winter of the first year of war came, merchants tightened their lines of credit and demanded cash payment even from long-standing customers. In Lynchburg, merchant George M. Rucker announced that he would sell goods for cash only, making no deliveries before receiving payment "in view of all the troubles of the country." By February 1862, the town druggist in Culpeper began forcing people to settle their accounts.³⁵

The second largest group of concerns involved military questions. Although constituting fifty-six, or 33 percent, of the communications from the three regions, these letters were less remarkable. They primarily asked questions about conscription laws and a host of issues surrounding substitutions and exemptions. The Shenandoah Valley residents were tremendously interested in these issues. As will be discussed below, the region contained large numbers of pacifist families associated with the Mennonite and Dunkard churches who hoped to secure religious exemptions. Other letters in this category came from men wanting a particular military assignment—promotion, transfer, and so on. Nine of the correspondents complained about the lack of regulations for impressment, which left civilians at the mercy of military officers who wanted goods.

The final grouping of letters to the War Department expressed

anxieties about personal security or asked what to do about deserters, slaves, Unionists, speculators, and loss of providers for the household. Forty-five letters from the three regions, or 27 percent, dealt with such issues. Perhaps because it was early in the war, complaints from households about emergencies requiring their menfolk did not yet dominate: the total of eight that spanned the three areas appeared as frequently as those dealing with disloyalty, law and order, or speculation.

The Confederacy had tried to deal with "tories" in a more systematic way than the persecution that characterized early treatment of Unionists. Residents of the southern states were forced to declare their loyalty or leave the new country. An act determining alien enemies act adopted in August 1861 required persons who were not citizens of states in the Confederacy to evacuate by forty days after the president's proclamation of August 14. A sequestration act allowed authorities to seize property of the alien enemies who remained. Passed on August 30, 1861, this act responded to the Union government's confiscation of the property of Confederates. When enforcement began in October, the government seized Monticello because it was owned by Captain Uriah P. Levy of the Union navy. The government also granted passports to the 300 people in Lynchburg who had registered as alien enemies and asked to leave for northern territory. By October, provost marshals in Richmond had begun publishing the names of aliens and processing passports to lead them out of the country through Fort Monroe.³⁶

The home front also worried about controlling slaves—a fear more strongly felt in the countryside than in the towns. Many in the tobacco belt east of the Blue Ridge spent the first months of the war anxiously watching for incipient rebellions. Petitioners to the government justified the exemption of overseers on the basis of shoring up the police powers of a community rather than protecting labor, an attitude mirrored by the Congress. The home front had reason to worry. In a petition calling for the exemption of an overseer, Thomas J. Randolph of Albemarle explained that the mountains and a river framed an area of roughly nineteen miles in which 270 slaves and seventy-nine white people lived. Of the latter, twelve were in the service, two had volunteered, and several had moved. Randolph estimated that thirty women and thirty children remained. Of the males, only two were eligible for service.³⁷ Similar circumstances would have applied to much of the county in which roughly 60 percent of the households had slaves. Rural areas of the tobacco belt, in

which slaves often outnumbered the free, contained the greatest number of residents desiring overseers' exemptions.

Concern for law and order arose over the friction created by refugees, soldiers, laborers, mechanics, and others who flocked to towns. Fighting broke out daily and thieves routinely entered homes. Soldiers on furlough or awaiting orders challenged civilian watchmen. Charlottesville's jail overflowed with soldiers who proved so destructive that the jailer refused to accept more prisoners. Here and elsewhere, town leaders targeted drinking as the root of the difficulties and tried to ban the sale of liquor. They achieved mixed results. Because of the enormous profits from selling alcohol, farmers often wanted to turn their surplus corn into liquor. A woman in Campbell County told a friend it was no use quoting the price of corn, for it increased weekly "on account of so many stills being put up in the country." The local editor lamented the Confederacy's failure to prevent the distilling of valuable grain. The mayor attempted to halt the flow of alcohol by closing saloons but later rescinded the action because of the revenue that liquor generated for hotels and saloons in the city.³⁸

When disorder showed no sign of abating, people petitioned the national government to declare martial law. Jefferson Davis issued a proclamation in late February for Norfolk and Portsmouth because the Federal army had landed in that vicinity. Davis and Congress had been reluctant to go this far because of the potential political backlash throughout the Confederacy. Southerners had rallied to the cause because they saw Lincoln directing military force to accomplish Yankee abolitionist goals. To calm concerns about the loss of liberty within the Confederacy, Davis vested civilian authorities—not the military—with the power to enforce martial law. The president had read the public's mood well. Within communities, tension existed over the extent of martial law and who should enforce it. Charles Button, editor of the *Virginian*, was among community leaders calling on Lynchburg residents to demand complete military rule, but a public meeting failed to support this position. Residents preferred to give local people the power to handle disturbances. In Lynchburg's case, this meant expanding the night watch and police powers in general. Richmond followed a similar course, with its council arming local police with shotguns, placing a curfew of 10 P.M. on the sale of liquor, and banning sales on Sundays. When none of the measures worked, the council finally invited the Confederate government to establish martial law. Brigadier General John H.

Winder took command on March 1, 1862, with city authorities at first welcoming the help.³⁹

As spring neared, the Federal army commanded the attention of most Virginians and propelled Confederate authorities toward conscription as the means to resolve the most pressing problems of both home and front. In February and March 1862 enemy soldiers crossed the Potomac River into northern Virginia. By early March, Joseph Johnston retreated from near Washington and shifted defenses to the Rappahannock River. Union soldiers under officers marched into the vacuum. Much of the area fell under quasi-Federal control, costing Virginia resources for processing flour and fattening cattle. By March, George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac shifted from Washington to the Peninsula. The base in southeastern Virginia offered the perfect position for a thrust toward Richmond. Outside of the state the picture looked bleaker. Ulysses S. Grant had captured Forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee. The Union navy, in conjunction with the army, had begun sealing off the coast by seizing Port Royal, South Carolina, in November 1861 and Roanoke Island, North Carolina, in early February 1862. Everywhere one looked, momentum lay with the Union as the Confederacy faced the prospect of enlistments expiring among volunteers.

The military situation affected morale minimally in the Old Dominion, but in conjunction with events in the eastern theater it bolstered the argument for centralized controls over the war effort. This, of course, was not a unanimous sentiment; however, a segment of the population believed that lack of momentum occurred from mismanagement by leaders and too much democracy. One Virginian relayed sentiments common in a portion of the populace when he stressed to a relative that the time had come to employ stronger measures at home to defeat the enemy. Volunteers, he argued, should be enlisted for the duration of the war instead of limited terms. "There are many who will reenlist for the war & many who will have to be forced to go—all this from our mobocratic please-everybody institutions, the prostitution of the ballot box, and the 'liberty equality & fraternity' feeling that has been pervading all classes in this country until the government has gone to decay. . . . For my part I prefer the excess of power to the excess of liberty, and when the war is over I hope we will have a government that will stand the test of time, and keep the rabble quiet."⁴⁰

Virginia authorities reached similar conclusions and placed the home front on a stronger wartime footing. Before McClellan's ad-

vance up the Peninsula, the Union threat had not quite hit home. A Richmond editor complained that the people remained apathetic despite the enemy's being within several days' march. The governor and General Assembly felt compelled to take action. On February 8, the legislature enacted a conscription act for the Old Dominion that established enrollment in the militia for all males between 18 and 45. Sheriffs and other local officials supervised the process. Through this procedure, the state hoped to answer the Confederacy's call for 65,800 men from the state for three years of service. Several days later Letcher used his executive powers to designate two classes of militia: males from 18 to 45 would serve as part of the first class; those from ages 16 to 18 and 45 to 60 would constitute the second. Both would be used for home defense and other purposes as needed, with the first-class militia assigned to trouble spots beyond the immediate community. In times of Union threats, businesses were to close at 2 P.M. so the second-class militia could drill. Letcher worried about Richmond because of the city's manufacturing capabilities, which, he noted, "are doing so much to uphold the Southern Confederacy that its loss to us would be well nigh irreparable."⁴¹

In one way or another, Letcher's action placed all white males from age 16 to 60 in the military, although these were state units. To protect the economy of the home front, the legislature subsequently adopted exemptions, emphasizing public officials, local civil servants, ministers, doctors, and officers of businesses essential for communications in the state—telegraph, canal, and railroad companies. The legislation was vague about which occupations would be judged essential to the economy, choosing to establish three-member exemption boards that would oversee these decisions in communities. Once drafted, men vital to the economy could be detailed for essential work and receive the monthly wage for a soldier, rather than the going rate for civilians. It was a more expedient plan than the national conscription that shortly followed, and it anticipated features to which Confederate officials would turn.⁴²

The volunteers finally came, helped by Letcher's call in March to mobilize 40,000 militia members to defend the state. From Lynchburg to the lower Shenandoah Valley, officers and civilians noted the infusion of soldiers into the army. In his correspondence with the War Department, Stonewall Jackson, in the Valley, mentioned the influx. Jed Hotchkiss reinforced this impression by observing to his wife: "The men are in good spirits & many of those that at first ran away have concluded that it is best to come on & not

wait to be drafted for the war." By March 19, 1862, the adjutant general for the state reported that three-year volunteers had increased to 27,898, up from 1,500 the month before. Although Virginia needed to raise another 13,045 to bring the companies up to the requisite 100 soldiers each, he noted that "so many have volunteered that there is a fair prospect of the deficiency being filled up without a draft, or by a comparatively small one." Without exemptions for students, the University of Virginia lost a number of people that spring. Professor Socrates Maupin noted that when the governor threatened a state draft in February, students went home to consult with families "in regard to the expediency of volunteering and thereby escaping what they deemed the ignominy of being drafted into military service." Seventeen took leave from the university through March 3 and another twenty or so were on leave or withdrew by April 12.⁴³

The turn of events angered planters and manufacturers who feared the state had stripped the home front of men essential for war-related work and for preserving law and order. Proprietors of various manufactories filled the governor's mail with lamentations about the shortage of labor. The Langhorne mills in Lynchburg already had lost a number of millers, and its representatives hoped to hold on to the remaining three. At stake, the manager argued, was a government contract for 25,000 barrels of flour. In Albemarle, W. T. Early joined those protesting the lack of exemptions for overseers. He argued that the state draft depleted plantations of white males. Leaving operations in the hands of slaves, he continued, would produce disorganization, reduce production, and increase the chance of insurrection. A man from Lynchburg proved remarkably prescient when he told Letcher that the government ought to resolve a situation on the home front in which able-bodied males of military age worked on the railroad as commissaries, and in depots as ticket agents, while gentlemen over age 45 and disabled soldiers searched for work. He advocated switching these men, adding that most of the people were behind Letcher's measures for meeting the crisis.⁴⁴

Perhaps the strongest response against turning most of the male population into soldiers came in the Shenandoah Valley, home of a significant number of the state's pacifist religious sects. One study estimates that roughly 400 families of Dunkard and Mennonite faiths lived in the Valley. Resistance in this region in early 1862 fed notions that the Valley harbored Unionist sentiment, although the underlying motivations probably were more complex. Sectarians

would support no cause, whether Union or Confederate, that conflicted with religious principles. In March, Confederate cavalry captured at least two groups of Mennonites and Dunkards—one numbering more than seventy and another nearly twenty—as the men attempted to flee through Union-controlled northwestern Virginia into Ohio. Soldiers marched them to prison in Richmond. While spending one night in the Staunton courthouse, the group elicited more sympathy than hatred. "Some, if not all of them," one onlooker remarked, "are simple-hearted, inoffensive people, belonging to the Dunkard church, whose tenets forbid going to war." He added: "There is something pitiful in the case of these people, flying as they were to escape conscription, and being taken like partridges on the mountains. The whole crowd had a pocket pistol between them and no other arms."⁴⁵ This incident caused little alarm, for people understood the religious principles motivating such men. Even so stern a patriot as Stonewall Jackson treated religious objectors leniently by removing them from the front line and using them as teamsters or aides.⁴⁶ One result of this discord was that Virginia led both the Confederacy and the Union in crafting legislation for conscientious objectors. By March 29, 1862, the General Assembly authorized exemptions for religious reasons at the price of \$500. Few at the time objected to what amounted to a tax on faith.⁴⁷

Not all resistance was so tame. A more serious incident in April involved a group estimated at several hundred that staged what newspapers called the "Blue Ridge Rebellion." Political rather than religious reasons appeared to cause these men to band together, although at least one person believed Dunkards formed part of the resistance. Their methods, however, argue against interpreting this as a religious protest by pacifists because these rebels were "well armed with rifles, shot guns, and one instance with a pike." Stonewall Jackson crushed the rebellion with troops under Lieutenant Colonel J. R. Jones, who shelled the region, broke the resistance, and placed the leader in irons. Jed Hotchkiss revealed nothing about the person other than that he was "a tigrus looking fellow."⁴⁸

Despite pockets of discontent, a number of factors cheered those who fought for the Confederacy. A critic of the Davis administration, Edward A. Pollard nonetheless crowed that the conflict proved the strength of slavery, because "no servile insurrections have taken place in the South, in spite of the allurements of our enemy; that the slave has tilled the soil while his master has fought."⁴⁹ The state also appeared to survive its first year of secession in fairly good shape. There

were, of course, cases of disloyalty. The worst occurred with the loss of northwestern Virginia to the Union, which the remainder of the Old Dominion rationalized as resulting from a combination of a small group of malcontents and the Union army's interference. In the rest of the state, only the southwest contained a Unionist enclave worthy of note, and military strategists had dispatched John Floyd, a native of the region, to protect the railroad line there from further damage by Tories. In the Tidewater, planters resisted sending slaves to the Confederate army, and both they and common tradesmen appeared far too willing to transact business with the enemy. But their reasons—while annoying—were understandable and not causing overwhelming difficulties.⁵⁰

In general, common sacrifice was beginning to forge a new identity, partly helped by the army that had been assembled and had won a major engagement at Manassas. That organization had the unintended benefit of linking civilians to the cause. Each soldier was the husband, son, brother, or cousin of family members who avidly followed the progress of local units. William Blackford had been a staunch Unionist but by April 17 found himself being tugged toward the Confederacy as his son became among the first to enlist. "So I have a deep personal interest in the strife," he noted in his diary.⁵¹ With a personal stake in Confederate success, these families might support measures to force the young men who loitered about town to contribute to the war effort.

A much more complicated process was occurring than the expansion of central government at the expense of local autonomy. In many respects the two goals were beginning to merge in the Old Dominion, especially because of the presence of Federal troops. Local and national interests intersected at other points. The breakdown of portions of the economy and the need to protect property fed support for the expansion of Confederate authority. This began typically as a cry for intervention by local officials for specific goals, such as buying salt or increasing the number of police. Leaders countered those who protested the loss of personal liberty by justifying such measures as being required only for the emergency: temporary inconvenience for the individual could result in the permanent improvement of society. When local efforts fell short and citizens requested national aid, Davis's use of civilian leaders to implement martial law helped ease the transition.

Some philosophically opposed centralized power, but more complaints centered on questions of fairness—whether the government

exacted contributions equally. People accepted hardships and loss of liberty as long as they were convinced of the necessity and could see that most shared the suffering. And inequities did exist. For the moment, Governor Letcher believed the war fell hardest on the planter and farming interests, adding that mechanics—tanners, shoemakers, blacksmiths, wagon makers, and lumbermen—prospered because they were exempted from service and could realize profits. He also identified inequities in the boards of exemptions. The governor complained to the Confederate Congress that the system led to abuse by allowing men to schedule physical screenings with family doctors, who were paid by the applicants. Letcher came to the unremarkable conclusion that a surgeon mustered into the military would be a more appropriate examiner and urged national officials to reject current rulings on disabilities. When the state conducted medical screenings at courthouses in early January, some complained that the doctors were "quite partial toward the rich[;] they could get a discharge[,] a poor man did not stand any chance . . . they would not let them off on no circumstances[,] the poor people has got the fighting to do and the rich can take their pleasure[.]" Because of this, one man swore he would not go into the military until forced.⁵²

Competition between state and national systems for raising troops also created confusion and gave men the chance to play one against the other. For example, if planters lost a company election or suffered other slights, they could resign from the Confederate army, raise a regiment for the state, and find themselves happily leading another unit closer to home. To build these new companies, local elites plucked men from the army whose enlistments had expired and who volunteered more readily if they could serve near families. Not surprisingly, this vexed Confederate officers. Colonel J. M. Brockenbrough of the 40th Virginia complained about the "worthless, intriguing, politicians, and those who have been defeated in company elections" who induced men to enter new regiments by "using bribery . . . and arguments which any worthless demagogue is capable of making." In other words, men of influence in a community—rivals perhaps of the very officers who complained about this interference—courted the foot soldier using methods commonly seen at every Virginia barbecue before the war. Most acknowledged the need for reform, which would result in future conscription legislation.⁵³

For the moment, Confederate Virginians remained committed

to the cause, blaming privations or other problems on inefficient or corrupt public officials. Like people in most societies, citizens saw no contradiction between loving a nation while loathing its caretakers. "That our cause is just & the motives of the people are patriotic I am persuaded," wrote a woman in Richmond, "but whether we are to share the downfall of the designing, selfish men who precipitated the war, is a question which weighs heavily upon my heart, if pure men were in power I would feel more sanguine."⁵⁴

The first year of war ended with the needs of labor and of law and order driving a shift in authority from community autonomy toward more centralized decision making. Conscription legislation would begin this transition. Better administration would end confusion and force people to choose Confederate service; however, it remained to be seen where the Old Dominion would find the labor it required at home without subtracting from the pool of potential soldiers. Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin wisely noted that legislation could not solve all problems. "Laws cannot suddenly convert farmers into gunsmiths," he told President Davis. "Our people are not artisans, except to a very limited degree."⁵⁵ Difficult times lay ahead for balancing the needs of the home front and the army.

3

*A Growing Sense of Injustice,
April 1862–April 1863*

[T]here are indications of a widespread feeling that people, even the most humble members of society, ought to have enough resources or facilities to do their job in the social order, and that there is something morally wrong or even outrageous when these resources are unavailable.

—Barrington Moore, *Injustice*

Because of the military crisis in the spring of 1862, Confederate Virginians generally accepted conscription and other intrusions of government in their lives. Continued tolerance depended on how political leaders administered the new systems and met the challenges that lay ahead. As the year progressed, shortages of food and other goods eroded faith in the government. Popular resentment increased as hardships worsened—especially as planters and other wealthy persons avoided military service by hiring substitutes or seemingly capitalized on the misfortune of others by charging exorbitant prices for goods. The belief that the rich benefited while others suffered caused civilians to riot for food and soldiers to leave the army, actions that the state and national officials could not ignore. Officials responded first with a heavy hand, employing measures that tightened discipline in the army and drew clearer lines between front and home front. As desertion and discord continued, however, authorities realized that they also needed a softer approach and increased the efforts to administer charity for the needy. The emphasis on public welfare still focused at the local level as leaders