"A Woman’s War:"
Gender and Civil War Studies

Nina Silber

Although the Civil War has frequently been portrayed as a “brothers’ war,” it is important to recall that women, perhaps as much as men, became enmeshed in the sectional conflict. Never, remarked a British journalist of the 1860s, had any war seemed so much “a woman’s war” as the Civil War. Many participants, of course, played the supporting roles to which women are so often assigned—sewing flags and uniforms, writing letters of encouragement to absent loved ones, praying for the wounded and the dead. Yet in light of the rigid ideals that defined white womanhood in nineteenth-century America, the Civil War inevitably tested the boundaries of female behavior, forcing women of both sections into new and unsettling circumstances. With men away at war, many women assumed greater responsibilities for running businesses, earning wages, and managing farms and plantations. Some undoubtedly relished the new opportunities and took pride in their new accomplishments. Many, however, had to accept the fact that the war had placed new and sometimes troubling demands on their sex.

In many ways, the history of women’s involvement in the Civil War is a history of tension and constant struggle to reconcile images with reality. Influenced by Victorian notions of gender behavior, women and men both struggled to understand their new roles and responsibilities in ways consistent with their nineteenth-century sensibilities. Thus, the official propaganda of both North and South called upon women to make patriotic sacrifices for their country and their loved ones. This propaganda, however, generally presented a fairly limited vision of feminine involvement. Women had to provide moral support, relinquish their property, and sacrifice material needs. These tasks could be distressingly restrictive, prompting some ladies to feel useless from inactivity. “What is the use,” asked one Louisiana woman, “of all these worthless women, in war times?”

The war invariably called upon some women to play more active roles. But even in celebrating women’s more active participation, Northern and Southern literature never lost sight of Victorian standards of appropriate gender behavior. In this regard, one of the most time-honored legends that Northern wartime culture produced was the tale of Barbara Frietchie, the elderly woman of Frederick, Maryland who, according to John Greenleaf Whittier’s 1863 poem, put herself in the line of fire when Stonewall Jackson ordered his men to shoot down a flag flying from her window. Most reliable evidence suggests that while Jackson did indeed pass through Frederick, he never came close to Frietchie’s home. Even if he had, moreover, the 96-year-old widow was probably too frail to put up much of a fight. But the Frietchie myth served an extremely useful purpose: it was an inspiring, albeit limited, vision of feminine involvement. Women had to provide moral support, relinquish their property, and sacrifice material needs. These tasks could be distressingly restrictive, prompting some ladies to feel useless from inactivity. “What is the use,” asked one Louisiana woman, “of all these worthless women, in war times?”

The Civil War inevitably tested the boundaries of female behavior, forcing women of both sections into new and unsettling circumstances.
leans women who in February 1863 angrily defied the Federal troops who were trying to keep them from cheering for a group of captured rebels. In Confederate lore, the commanding Union officer, Nathaniel Banks, appeared as a foolish and unmanly coward, compelled to use armed troops against a group of women wielding nothing more threatening than handkerchiefs and parasols.

In fact, women often did much more than wave flags and handkerchiefs; many acted out of their own, personal motivations and not simply with the intent to humiliate enemy men. Nonetheless, both Northern and Southern women were influenced by notions of gender that were a significant part of their mid-nineteenth-century world. While many women relished the opportunity to experience the excitement of the war more directly, they could not completely ignore the prevailing ideology. Many women who became nurses, for example, tried to cling to notions of gentility and respectability as they defined their new positions. Katherine Wromeley, a Union nurse on a hospital transport, believed her feminine attributes were crucial to her job. "It is not too much to say," she explained, "that delicacy and refinement and the fact of being a gentle woman could never tell more than they do here." Dorothea Dix, the legendary Superintendent of (Union) Women Nurses, took what some considered an extreme view in emphasizing the respectability of the female nursing corps. Anxious to prove that her staff members were sober and responsible women, and not girls on a lark or ladies of ill repute, Dix refused applicants who were under thirty and accepted only those who could be considered "plain in appearance."

There were times when the traditional ideology offered women an avenue to enhanced authority. Apparently, some nurses used nineteenth-century ideals of female morality and domestic skill to challenge incompetent doctors and army bureaucrats. Determined to make the disease-infested battlefront more like a properly sanitized and well-run home, many female nurses boldly spoke out against corrupt commanders or drunken administrators. When nurse Annie Wittenmeyer locked horns with a drunken medical director, she had him dismissed. Nurse Mary ("Mother") Bickerdyke developed such a fiery reputation as a maternal crusader for the wounded that she ultimately inspired General Sherman to remark, "She ranks me." By drawing on an ideology that portrayed women in a morally and spiritually superior light, nurses such as Bickerdyke managed to gain respect and even, albeit to a limited degree, some power in the male-dominated world of war-making.

For Southern white women, particularly those who came under Union occupation, the struggle to maintain feminine respectability could be especially trying. Not only had these women been influenced by some of the most rigid ideals of ladylike gentility, they were now forced to confront the brutality and hardship of war more directly than their Northern counterparts. Southern white women in areas of Union occupation made up one of the few lines of defense against the opposing army and thus were caught between a desire to defend the Confederacy and the need to maintain an appropriate semblance of feminine decorum. These women found that their political loyalties often came in conflict with prevailing notions of gender behavior.

Few episodes reveal this conflict as dramatically as the Union Army's confrontation with the ladies of New Orleans. When the Union army captured New Orleans in April 1862, its many female inhabitants came under the jurisdiction of Union General Benjamin Butler. Seldom celebrated as one of the more outstanding commanders of the war, Butler nonetheless revealed an astute awareness of the ways in which the war was playing havoc with the Southern white woman's worldview. Consequently, when Federal troops became the targets of insults and hostility from the ladies of the Crescent City, Butler managed to silence much of this feminine wrath by playing on nineteenth-century images of refined womanhood. In General Order No. 28 (also known as the "Woman Order"), Butler declared that "when any female shall, by word, gesture, or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation." In short, Butler had announced that no respectable woman would publicly display her anger and contempt. Those who did were assumed to be the most disreputable women of all, prostitutes. Ultimately, Butler's order managed to contain much of the abusive behavior of the New Orleans women.

Some historians have suggested an additional Union advantage stemming from the New Orleans incident. This embarrass-
ing episode, it is thought, may have made many ladies feel angry and resentful toward the Confederate cause because they had been placed in such a vulnerable position. In other words, Southern women were subject to unladylike abuse because Southern men had failed to live up to nineteenth-century notions of masculinity; the men's lack of honor and bravery had put these women at risk.

Ultimately, the New Orleans episode suggests that both men and women during the Civil War years were influenced by prevailing notions of proper masculinity and respectable femininity. This is not to suggest that the ideal notion of gender behavior was always the reality. Certainly some women jumped at the chance to take on extremely unconventional roles as spies or even as soldiers, and some men likewise shirked their soldierly obligations and chose the security of the homefront over the terrors of battle. Moreover, black and Indian women were seldom granted the rights of refined womanhood, and many soldiers from both North and South believed that the honor and protection bestowed upon white women did not apply to women of color. Nonetheless, established models of masculine and feminine behavior were extremely influential and played an important role in shaping the actions of women and men during this most tumultuous and earth-shattering event of the nineteenth century.

Select Bibliography

Nina Silber is assistant professor of history at Boston University and co-editor of Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War (1992).