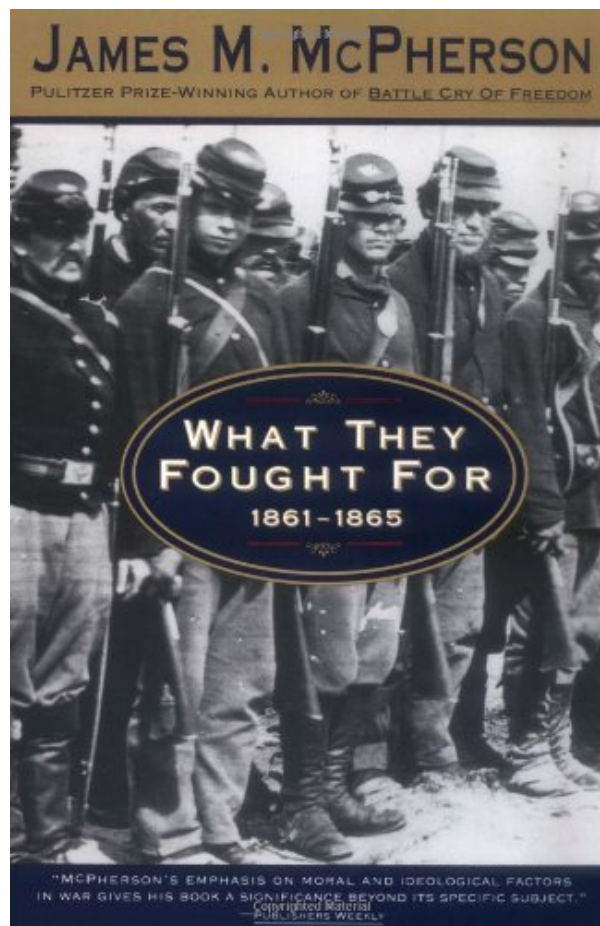
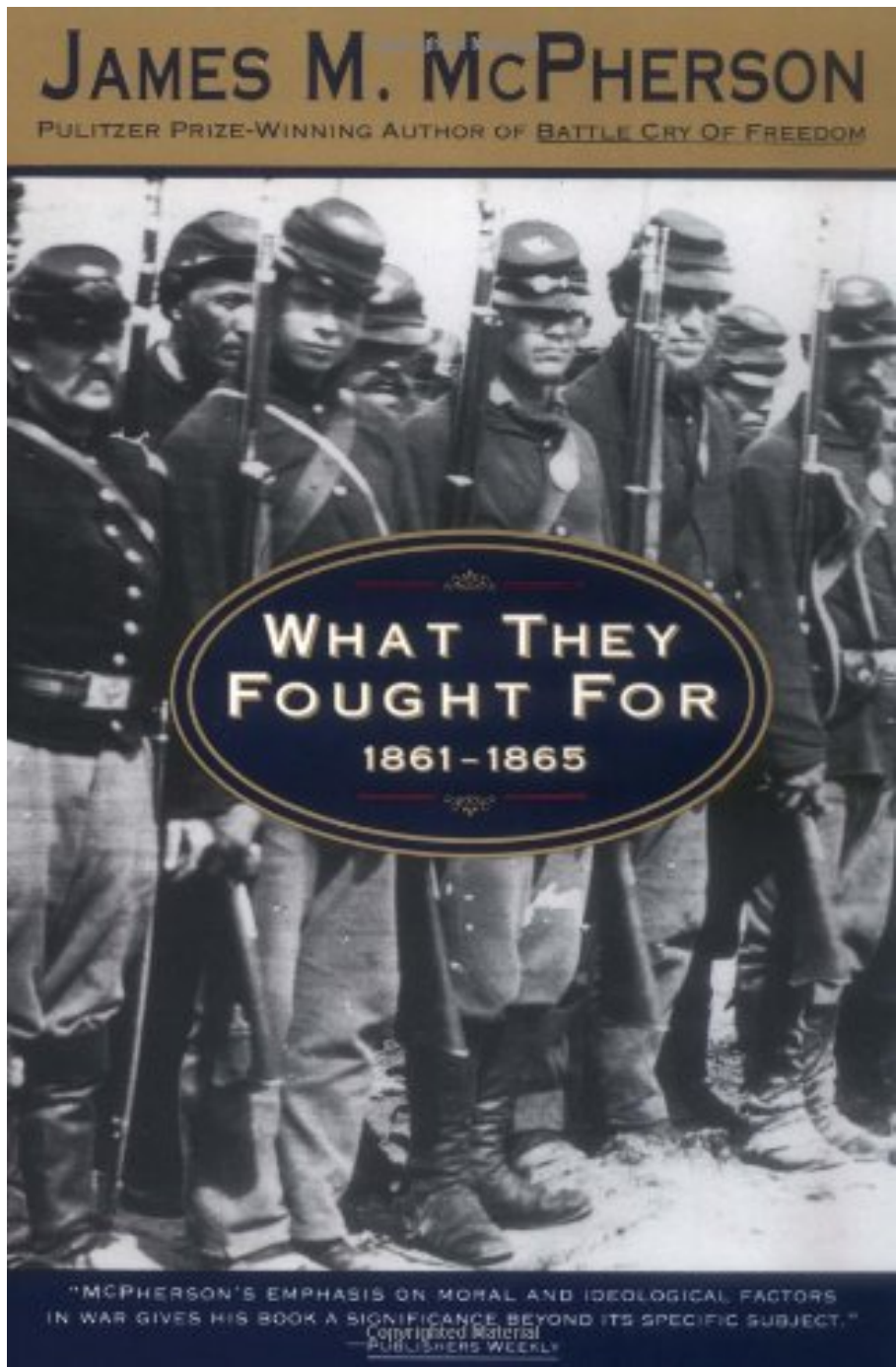


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- Sales Rank: #19708 in Books
- Brand: McPherson, James M.
- Published on: 2010-08-18
- Released on: 1995-03-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .28" w x 5.17" l, .20 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 112 pages

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#### Most helpful customer reviews

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What made a Civil War soldier fight?

By bixodoido

This is a different kind of book about the Civil War. Instead of discussing all the "official" reasons for the war--in other words, instead of examining why Lincoln and Davis said the war was being fought--and instead of looking at the causes of the war from a philosopher's or idealist's point of view, James McPherson examines what really made men fight. After reading thousands of letters and scores of diaries of simple soldiers, McPherson attempts to explain why the men who participated in the actual combat of the war were there.

His process is simple. He looks at a group of Confederate soldiers (just under 400) and another of Union soldiers (a little over 500) and tries to discover what made them tick. In the book (which was originally a series of lectures), he quotes from many of them, and cites such causes as preservation of the Union, abolition of slavery, and individual liberty as reasons for fighting. Certain classes of soldiers are either over or underrepresented by his study, but McPherson makes allowances for these, and attempts to hypothesize what his data mean on a larger scale.

The Result? Basically, McPherson's study is a refutation of the recent scholarly belief that the common man fights in war more in a spirit of comradeship than for any other ideal. In other words, men become dependent on each other, and fight to save their own skin and that of their buddies. While this may have been true for the world wars and other conflicts, McPherson alleges it was not the case for the Civil War. And he makes his case pretty well. From his sample, it appears that a great deal of Civil War combatants were actually fighting for something, and believed in the cause for which they struggled. For this reason, this book is essential to any study of the war. McPherson has broken new ground with this study and helped us to better understand the human side of the Civil War.

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

A Must Read Introduction to Soldiers' Motivations

By 8th Conn Vol

Dr. McPherson's book, "What They Fought For, 1861-1865," explores the ideology of the Civil War soldier. His theme is that, in fact, Civil War soldiers knew why they fought and he rejects those historians' views who assert that Civil War soldiers had no idea for what they fought or that they just fought for their comrades. He maintains that: "a large number of those men in blue and gray were intensely aware of the issues at stake and passionately concerned about them" (4). The volunteer armies, the most literate to that time, were men who were concerned and knowledgeable about politics were fighting for, at the core, "liberty and republicanism." He supplies fewer quotations and more analyses than Bell Wiley and gives the demographics of his sources allowing one to better judge the veracity of his conclusions. His sources, uncensored letters and diaries, admittedly not statistically representative, are the best he could find to flesh out his thesis. His Confederate sources were biased because they were those who enlisted early in the war, were slaveholders, and were those who were in actual combat. The representative differences between the Union and Confederate samples were also stated: there were fewer class differences in the Union sample, and, the Union soldiers were more literate, better educated, and more politically aware. Union soldiers were similar to Confederates in that early enlistees were more patriotic than those who were drafted or enlisted after the first two years of the war and those who were in actual combat tended to express beliefs in "duty, honor and country" more than those in non combat assignments. That Union sentiment remained strong even through difficult times in 1863 and 1864, is demonstrated in Union reenlistments when initial terms of service expired and by the almost 80% soldier vote for Lincoln in the 1864 election.

While both sides said they fought to preserve the legacy of 1776, he found that "Confederates fought for independence, for their property and way of life, for their survival as a nation" (27) while the Yankees fought early in the war to preserve the Union "against the threat of `dissolution, anarchy, and ruin'" (32). Certainly feelings of revenge and hatred were present on both sides but since the South bore the brunt of the conflict, these feelings were stronger there due to the extensive physical devastation. The North had more thoughts of punishments the South should undergo since its secession was the cause of the war.

In his final chapter, McPherson discusses what the soldiers thought about slavery. He finds that Southerners fought for their freedom to own slaves as property and for white supremacy. Without slavery, the South could not exist as it had--its economy and therefore its culture depended on slavery. Northern soldiers were almost as racist as Southern soldiers but as the war progressed, many finally realized that the war would end

much faster if it also became a war to free the slaves. Slavery caused the war so to finally end the rebellion, slavery must end. Freed slaves employed as soldiers and laborers could end the war faster not only by fighting the Confederates, but also by freeing Union soldiers for frontline duties. In addition, depriving the South of labor would help deplete its production of food and trade goods. As Lincoln said, preservation of the Union was paramount so if freeing the slaves did that, then it must happen. Thus freeing the slaves became both a means and a goal of Union victory. Ironically, the emancipation issue faded for both Union and Confederate veterans after the war as the "Lost Cause" myth took hold.

McPherson's clearly written book was, for me, compelling, because he carefully discusses his sources and how he interprets them. I did come away believing his thesis that most Civil War soldiers knew about the issues for which they fought, but it is a slightly qualified belief--I would like to see him find and analyze more from the cohorts with less documentation. It may be, however, groups such as black soldiers, non-native soldiers, etc., simply do not have sufficient extant documents to give a more statistically valid sample, so a "quasi-representative sample" is the best one can construct. His later book, "For Cause and Comrades," an expansion of this one, used larger sample sizes (Union 647 versus 562, Confederate 429 versus 374), and he was able to find a few more sources for African American Union soldiers (1% versus .36%) and foreign-born Union soldiers (9% versus 8%), but not surprisingly, came to the same conclusion as his earlier book: "many Civil War soldiers felt a profound and passionate commitment to the ideological purposes for which they fought" (68-69). His later book discusses in more depth his earlier themes especially in making more contemporary comparisons and was somewhat better able to approximate statistically the composition of the Union and Confederate armies, but he still admits that it is still only a close approximation. This book gives modern analyses of what combat soldiers in more recent wars underwent which helps to understand what Civil War soldiers endured, however, as McPherson points out, the Victorian Age had a different zeitgeist, allowing some to argue that the heartfelt patriotism felt by most Civil War combatants was unique, and would not lend itself to modern analyses. I believe with McPherson that combat is combat and that the comparable stresses a man undergoes in modern intense combat are similar to Civil War combat and therefore new analytical techniques such as studying combat fatigue or post traumatic stress disorder could be used in trenchantly dissecting Civil War combat reactions. Also, some may argue that because he started his research with a conclusion already in mind, i.e., there are identifiable reasons why soldiers fought, he found evidence to support that and disregarded or downplayed that which did not. Realistically, I believe that most writers and scholars start out writing a book or monograph with a thesis or idea in mind although they may modify or even discard it as their research progresses. From the books and articles I have read authored by McPherson, I conclude that he would have been willing to revisit his beginning thesis should his research have required it.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

A skinny book with a provocative thesis

By Steven Peterson

James McPherson is an eminent historian, who has written some classics, such as "Battle Cry of Freedom." This is a slender volume (part of a larger research project and the basis for a lecture) that is based on an interesting thesis: that soldiers, both north and south, fought to a considerable extent for ideology, and not solely as brothers in arms with other troops, for ideals of manhood, for the notions of honor and duty, and so on..

He used as his "data base" hundreds of letters and diaries written by soldiers, from both the Union and Confederate ranks.

In his Introduction, he observes that there were a range of motivations among soldiers, but that one emerged that surprised him--(pages 1-2) "This theme [the role of ideology] has emerged to greater importance r=than

I expected when I began the project." He notes this thesis in juxtaposition to one common perspective, namely, that many soldiers had little or no idea what they were fighting for.

Among the "causes" that soldiers said they were fighting for in their writings: liberty and independence (both Yankees and Rebs), to preserve what the Founding Fathers stated in 1776 (the Declaration of Independence) and what they fought for in the Revolution, and slavery (many Confederate troops in favor of the peculiar institution and many Union troops opposed to it--far more, apparently, than one might have guessed).

All in all, given its brevity, a good little book. Those who attended this lecture series surely got their monies' worth! For an interesting effort to understand what the soliders, blue and gray fought for, this is a nice volume.

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