Everyman's War: Confederate Enlistment in Civil War Virginia

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On July 1, 1861, 150 artillery, cavalry, and infantry companies from Virginia, comprising 42,000 men, were accepted into service with the newly established army of the Confederate States of America. Given Virginians' reluctant approach to secession, this display of support for the Confederacy would have been unlikely even three months earlier. The speed and completeness of Virginia's shift from pro-Union to pro-secession and the breadth and depth of Virginians' commitment to the Confederacy over the ensuing four years demands a clear accounting of what elements inspired this participation. The process and patterns of enlistment in the state offer a valuable perspective on the decisions that Virginians made in 1861 and beyond. Incentives for enlistment varied over the course of the war, of course, hinging on personal issues like family status and needs, local politics, the military course of the war, and the presence and behavior of Union troops in the state. Despite these variables, quantitative analysis of several important aspects of motivation—residence, politics, wealth, and slaveholding—can clarify some of the key questions that scholars have asked about the Civil War. Did men from the mountainous Allegheny region withhold support from the Confederacy? How did slaveholding affect men's decision to join the army? Was the Civil War a "poor man's fight"? The results of a quantitative approach generate valuable insights into aggregate patterns of support for the Confederacy or Union and also provide a context for understanding the decisions individuals made about where to direct their national loyalties.

1. The conclusions drawn in the text about enlistment patterns come from a database I constructed that organizes company-level enlistment information by county. In order to identify the county origin of all companies (and to note which companies were double-counted in regimental totals), I cross-referenced Lee A. Wallace Jr.'s A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations, 1861-1865, 2d ed. (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, 1986) and Stewart Sifakis's Compendium of the Civil War History, Vol. I No. 1 © 2004 by The Kent State University Press
The case of Virginia provides a valuable opportunity to analyze the relationship between socioeconomic and demographic factors and rates of enlistment. Because the state possessed a large population of nonslaveholders and had a long history of regionally distinct economic and political systems and vibrant two-party politics, it offered incentives for both pro-Confederate and pro-Union loyalties. Indeed, a sizeable group of Virginians rejected the Confederacy and formed the new Union state of West Virginia during the war. Across Virginia as a whole, however, and even in parts of West Virginia, Confederates successfully mobilized a very high proportion of eligible white men. They did so by drawing on those communities that profited from the economic development or the democratic politics of the late antebellum era. Residents who benefited from the slave economy, Virginia's dynamic regional and national markets, or the political networks of antebellum Virginia proved willing to defend that world in its Confederate form. This included a large community of nonslaveholders, who perceived advantages to living in a slave society. The pattern of enlistment in Civil War Virginia thus reveals the salience of material factors in spurring secession and support for the Confederacy.

Virginia unionists controlled the state secession convention from its opening in February into the early days of April. On April 4, 1861, delegates considered and rejected secession, but news of the fight at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, on April 12 galvanized immediate secessionists, and opinion began to tilt in their direction. The decisive shift happened on April 15, when Lincoln called up 75,000 ninety-day men from across the country to help put down the "insurrection" in the Lower South. Virginia unionists interpreted Lincoln's actions as betrayal. All spring, they had negotiated in good faith with Republican officeholders and party leaders and had received assurances that Fort Sumter would be given up and the Lower South slowly drawn back into the Union. Instead, Lincoln's call for troops confirmed the worst fears of the immediate secessionists, whom unionists had denounced as

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Confederate Armies, Vol. 1: Virginia (New York: Facts on File, 1992) with the individual unit histories from the Virginia Regimental History Series (Lynchburg: H. E. Howard, 1981–) (hereafter VRHS). I used discrete company-level enlistment figures wherever possible: forty of the VRHS regimental histories included exact enlistment numbers by company. For the remaining units I divided the regimental total evenly among the number of companies that filled each regiment. By averaging the company sizes, I maintained the accuracy of the regimental total but flattened out discrepancies in enlistment numbers from the different counties that contributed companies. On the positive side, my estimated company sizes are roughly similar to the exact company totals I pulled from the VRHS unit histories. My county totals probably offer a close degree of accuracy for each region (assuming that few men traveled more than a county or two away to enlist) and a fair degree of accuracy for each county.

being irresponsible. Now, the unionists looked irresponsible, blind to the treachery of the Republican administration. Worse still, Lincoln planned to raise an army to march south through Virginia. If he had deceived Virginians about his intentions toward Fort Sumter, they reasoned, perhaps he was lying about the purpose of the army. In many cases, former unionists became the most immediate and ardent Confederates in response to what they perceived as Lincoln’s duplicity.

On April 17 the convention delegates passed an ordinance of secession and the state government began preparing for war. The process of mobilizing the state’s manpower required significant time and energy from the Virginia and Confederate governments; but once Virginia seceded, responsibility for action shifted to the ordinary men of the state who supported that decision by pledging their lives to defend its sovereignty. Almost all military units were organized locally, petitioning the governor for acceptance into state service and incorporating themselves into the rapidly growing state organization. Virginia’s troops were mustered into Confederate service en masse on July 1, 1861, by which time the state had 41,885 volunteers on its payroll. By February 1862 the Confederate Bureau responsible for counting troops enumerated 54,950 Virginians enlisted in the Confederate army. According to Confederate officials, this figure was 85 percent of the total that Virginia would be expected to supply if the state raised its full share of regiments. As with so many other expectations at the start of the war, this one proved wholly inaccurate. By the end of the Civil War, Virginia would raise another 100,000 troops beyond those in service in early 1862.

Emotional, intellectual, and material factors all influenced a man’s decision to join the Confederate army. Southerners perceived Lincoln’s election in 1860, and especially his militia call, as an affront to their honor. The masculine cult of honor, as it developed in the antebellum South, was highly attuned to perceived
offenses, and its adherents demanded immediate and usually physical retribution for these slights. When Northerners elected a strictly sectional candidate, Southerners believed that they were being excluded from the nation’s administration and perhaps its future. The special betrayal felt by Virginia unionists, who had publicly defended Lincoln in the fall and spring, added a personal element that helped fuse the demands of individual, family, state, and new “national” honor.

Southerners’ second response to Lincoln’s militia call was concern for the physical safety of their families. In Virginia this concern translated into military service, because most men believed that only an army could protect the South’s families. That sense grew stronger as the war dragged on, as a Confederate from the Virginia Piedmont revealed in an 1863 letter. “I had an idea of resigning some time ago,” he wrote his wife, “but I have come to the conclusion that the Yankees are too close by Home to resign. I am afraid that they will get my Boy. Now is the time to fight them while the Yankees are recruiting.”

An additional masculine imperative also compelled secession. This one was rooted in the home, not public space where the culture of honor was maintained. Virginia men, like most Southerners in the antebellum era, developed strong bonds of emotion within their families; these loving relationships spurred secession and helped maintain support for the war. Samuel Moore, a lawyer from Charlestown, Virginia, offered a frank assessment of his motives for serving in a letter to his young son. “My Dear Little Boy,” Moore wrote, “War is a dreadful thing, and I would rather do anything in the world than kill a man or help to kill one—but then if we were to let Lincoln’s army pass here, they might go into the State of Virginia and burn our homes and kill the old men and the women and children, and do a great deal more harm—and I am sure I would rather see a thousand of them killed around me, than to know that they had done any harm to my wife and dear little boys.” Moore’s use of family as his reference point reflected the changes occurring in American social life during the half-century before the Civil War, when men and women began to value affectionate family bonds as a central part of their lives. Because love and emo-

6. John Peter Jones to Mary Elizabeth Putney Jones, May 27, 1863, John Peter Jones Papers, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville (hereafter UVA).
7. Samuel J. C. Moore to “My Dear Little Boy,” May 16, 1861, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
tion played an increasingly important role in private lives it is often left out of the public narratives of war and secession, but families, and the relations within them, were intrinsically related to secession and the decision to fight.9

Between 1861 and 1865 almost 70 percent of Virginia’s white men between the ages of fifteen and fifty served in Confederate units, more than double the original estimate made by the Confederate Conscription Bureau. When those men - who were unavailable for Confederate service because of Union occupation are factored in, overall enlistment jumps to 89 percent.10 This figure was more than twice the 35 percent mobilization rate achieved by the North and higher than that of many other Confederate states as well.11 Further, the high rate of enlistment in Virginia was achieved across a diverse array of communities in spite of the sharp regional divisions that had prevailed before the war. The support white Virginians lent the Confederacy reflected their considerable interest in the social and economic institutions of antebellum Southern life. The broad pattern of mobilization in the state reveals that most white Virginians perceived some advantage to living in a slave society. Men from the mountains and the coast, rich and poor, slaveholders and nonslaveholders, urbanites and rural residents all pledged their lives to defend the antebellum South. The residents who profited most from Virginia’s antebellum society, however, fought the hardest to maintain it. Those places that benefited least, with low slaveholding and low wealthholding, and which maintained close political and physical ties to the North, sent the fewest men. The experience of Virginians in the Civil War reveals that public pressure, government coercion, and unique personal motivations all compelled


10. Of the 124,202 Virginia who men were eligible for military service during the war, 155,231 served, or 69.2 percent. The base number of possible enlists represents white men between the ages of fifteen and fifty in 1860 (249,805) who reached the minimum of age of enlistment during the war minus those men considered ineligible for the Confederate draft (25,603); 49,961 Virginians also lived under Union occupation. Eligibility figures were derived from the 8th U.S. Census, vol. 1, “Population” (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1864). Service numbers were derived from John S. Preston to James A. Seddon, Feb. 9, 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 395–102.

men to enlist in Confederate armies but that underneath these elements lay a deep commitment to preserving the social, political, and economic status quo of antebellum Virginia.

The socioeconomic and demographic diversity of the state was mapped against a scheme of physical divisions. Virginians in the 1850s understood their state as consisting of five regions distinguished by their ecology, geology, and weather patterns as well as distinct and generally complementary economic systems and political orientations. The tidewater, with its old colonial heritage, held a symbolic place as the state's most influential region, but by 1860 it held neither the most people nor the most wealth. An antebellum traveler in Virginia's piedmont, beginning at the fall line and riding west to the gentle slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains, would have understood immediately why families in this region held more personal property and more valuable real estate than any other. Living among hundreds of square miles of fertile soil laced by rivers flowing out of the mountains to the west, prosperous households in this region held more slaves than their neighbors in other regions, and they used those slaves in the production of a diverse array of crops and animals. Like families in the piedmont, people living in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains, profited well from rich soil and dependable water supplies. Despite owning fewer slaves than households in either the piedmont or the tidewater, residents of the upper valley used slaves in a variety of tasks and to good effect; some of the state's wealthiest citizens lived in this area. Average family wealth in real estate (not personal property) was higher in the valley than in the tidewater, reflecting the shift in land values during the antebellum era.

During the legislative debates about the future of slavery in Virginia in the early 1830s, many legislators and voters assumed a fundamental conflict between the largely nonslaveholding trans-Allegheny region and the largely slaveholding eastern regions, but by the 1850s that simple dichotomy did not reflect reality. Two decades of rising prices had encouraged many tidewater planters to sell their slaves to new farmers in the expanding cotton belt of Alabama and Mississippi. Accelerating this dispersal of slaves across Virginia, some planters moved west to find fresh land and new places to establish themselves.

Although farmers in the southwest corner of the state held low numbers of slaves compared to their piedmont and tidewater colleagues, during the late

12. In distinguishing Virginia's regions I have applied the boundaries used by the state auditor in response to a request from the Secession Convention to enumerate the men available for military service. Journals of the Virginia State Convention of 1861, vol. 3, "Documents" (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1966), doc. 37, table A.
antebellum era these men began to expand their use of slaves, especially in the production of tobacco. They also reached out more aggressively to deliver their products to markets, particularly in western North Carolina and Tennessee. As a result of these decisions and trends, people in Virginia to the south and west of the Shenandoah Valley identified with the South. The opposite was true for people in northwest Virginia, who had little investment in the slave economy that dominated the rest of the state. Their commercial contacts flowed along the Kanawha River toward Pittsburgh and markets in southern Pennsylvania and Ohio, and people in this region identified more closely with Northern interests. The distinct interests of the northwestern corner of the state compelled its residents to pursue a much more cautious policy of engagement with the new Confederacy.

With the exception of the upper northwest, the geographic pattern of enlistment over the course of the war reveals the evenly distributed and near-total mobilization that Confederate Virginians accomplished during the crisis.  


16. Virginia's experience is similar to other Southern states where opposition to the Confederacy came most strongly from places that were unionist long before the war. See Victoria Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001); Noel Fisher, *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-69* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Paul Horton,
Table 1. Regional Enlistment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Eligible Men as a Percentage of State Total</th>
<th>Actual Enlistees as a Percentage of State Total</th>
<th>Percentage of Eligible White Men Who Enlisted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tidewater</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piedmont</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valley</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.2%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Virginia Regimental History Series* (Lynchburg, Va.: H.E. Howard, 1982-)

Antebellum leaders still feared the salience of the broad east-west division that had been so prominent as late as the early 1850s. What hindsight allows historians to see is that regional animosities alone did not present a sufficient obstacle to organizing soldiers for the Confederacy. Throughout the valley and the southwest, hostility to eastern elites ran deep, and men enlisted in high numbers. For example, both contemporaries and historians have focused on the community debate among residents of the valley about whether to join with pro-secession counties from east of the Blue Ridge or to follow their more conservative neighbors to the north and west who feared the destruction that war would bring to the border states. The early 1861 arguments over secession and its consequences undoubtedly reflected and generated tensions in the region, but once the war began valley men, like most others around the state, enlisted in high numbers.

Many counties in the northwest also organized Confederate units, with most enrolling in excess of 25 percent of their eligible men and many in excess of 50 percent. Still, people in the northwest organized fewer Confederate companies than any other part of the state because of their prewar economic, political, and social ties to the North, their low rates of slave- and wealth-holding, and because Francis Pierpont’s government, with the aid of the Union army, controlled much of the region during the war. Virginians quickly identified the weak response of


18. I am distinguishing northwest Virginia from what becomes the state of West Virginia, because almost all of the counties in eastern and southern West Virginia sent high numbers of men to fight for the Confederacy.

the northwestern portion of the state. On June 12, 1861, a northern piedmont newspaper printed an editorial on the "Sentiment of Northwestern Virginia." Concerned that northwest Virginia might break away from the state, the editor blamed any prospective split on unionists' campaign of political terror. "No matter what may be the social position of gentlemen, their previous associations or social qualities, unless they fully coincide with the Union sentiment of the masses, they are driven from their homes by vandal Virginians, urged on to the perpetra-
tion of acts of malice and violence by the presence of federal troops."

The Democratic Mirror accurately assessed the political sentiment of this part of the state; all of those counties that organized no companies for Confederate service were located in the upper northwest, mostly along the border with the North. It was the specific amalgam of low slaveholding, low wealth-holding, political attachment to the Union, and location that helps explain the unique response of northwestern Virginians in comparison to their western brethren. The reluctance of people from this region to support secession or the Confederacy in mid-1861 produced a solid triangle of Confederate country in Virginia that ran from the lower valley counties of Berkeley and Jefferson southwest through the Kanawha River Valley, east along the North Carolina state line, and north up the Atlantic seaboard to Washington, D.C.

One important tradition that northwest Virginians shared with their fellow Virginians to the south and east was politics. Until the April 17 vote on secession in

20. Leesburg Democratic Mirror, June 12, 1861.
the Virginia Secession Convention, politics in the northwest resembled other parts of the state. During the 1860 presidential election, John Breckinridge, the Southern Democratic candidate usually associated most closely with pro-secession forces, drew substantial support from the largely unionist voters of the valley and the northwest. Most antebellum observers of the state understood that differences in the concentration of slavery distinguished northwestern Virginia from other parts of the state, but voters from high slaveholding counties voted the same way as voters from low slaveholding counties. The Breckinridge supporters, for instance, were mostly loyal Democrats voting—as most Americans did in the mid-nineteenth century—according to well-defined and usually permanent party loyalties. The politics of secession, however, threatened to undo the Democrats' dominance within the state. A strong unionist surge, based mostly in areas of Whig strength, together with a noticeable Democratic component, forestalled Virginia's secession in February and ensured a long fight in the convention over Virginia's role in the conflict.21

Virginia controlled the Secession Convention and discussed compromise proposals with the Lincoln administration and Republicans in Congress. As mentioned above, when Lincoln issued his call for troops, Virginia unionists responded with outrage, and the betrayal they felt precipitated another significant shift in the political landscape of Virginia. James B. Dormán, a unionist delegate to the convention from the valley, typifies the change among delegates and the tenacity with which these men held to secession once committed. In March 1861 Dormán was generally pleased with Lincoln's inaugural address and convinced that Lincoln had given up all interest in "Coercion." When Lincoln called for troops on March 15, Dormán's position became indistinguishable from that of the rabid secessionists he had scorned in previous weeks. "I have no idea that our people will tamely submit to Lincoln's arrogant and infamous usurpation of power, and to his diabolical purpose of waging war with a force of 50,000 Northern men against the Southern states. The issue is presented of a fight, and the question is simply 'which side will you take?'" Dormán's cousin, a staunch unionist in Lexington, Virginia, made the same shift to secession as evidenced by a letter that crossed paths with his cousin's. "We are now, we all know, in the midst of revolution. There seems to be one feeling, and now that we should 'in mutual, with closed ranks, march all one way.'" For those who did not fall in step voluntarily, the Virginia government demanded their support. In mid-April the Lynchburg Daily Virginian reported, "Governor Letcher will issue his proc-

lamination forewarning all the persons in the Commonwealth from corresponding with, aiding or abetting one Abraham Lincoln, and that whoever shall do so will be considered traitors, and be dealt with accordingly.23

Because of the transformative nature of secession, the enlistment pattern during the war bore no relation to the pattern of votes in the 1860 election and little relation to the voting in the Secession Convention itself. Strongly pro-Union counties did form the majority of those places that organized no companies for the Confederacy, but even in diehard unionist areas more than half of the counties sent some men, and nearly a third sent more than 50 percent of their eligible men. For example, several valley counties that had been resolutely pro-Union during the convention became strongholds of support for the Confederacy once Virginia seceded. Frederick, Augusta, and Rockingham Counties all sent more than 50 percent of their eligible men to serve in Confederate armies. Not surprisingly, all of the strong secession communities sent men to fight, and two-thirds sent more than 75 percent of their eligible men.

For those who had advocated secession before Lincoln’s militia call, enlistment was the logical extension of their political commitment. The idea of limited government, advanced from Madison and Jefferson’s Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of 1798 through the late antebellum vagaries of “state rights” offered an important justification, if not explanation, for secession. White men in the nineteenth century treated politics and political ideology very seriously, and many Confederates were motivated to enlist or support the new nation by a desire to preserve a political ideology they imagined to be endangered by Lincoln’s election. The paradox of state rights—many of its most fervent supporters also advocated federal protection of slavery in the territories and denounced the “personal liberty laws” of some Northern states that sought to nullify the Fugitive Slave Act—did not deter most Southerners from adopting it as the cornerstone of their political ideology in the 1850s. By itself, the theory of state rights or limited government could not compel secession. Southern political leaders understood this and shaped their rhetoric accordingly. They argued, and most Southerners perceived, that Lincoln’s election was a threat to their social and economic order; abolition, free love, and a new class of disaffected industrial workers all loomed in the nightmare to come under a Republican administration. When bundled with the specter of these dangers, state rights provided an elegant philosophical justification and a familiar political language with which to understand secession.24

Many pro-state rights Virginians were ideologues who believed strongly in the need for an independent Confederacy. Most assumed that Southern victory would come with relative ease, and they committed themselves to the physical

23. Lynchburg Daily Virginian, Apr. 17, 1861.

struggle just as they had the intellectual and social struggle for secession in the first place. Edmund Ruffin, the Virginia planter, agricultural expert, and ardent pro-secessionist, is one of the most well-known examples: he fired the first shot on Fort Sumter to start the war, and all of his sons enlisted in the Confederate military at the onset of hostilities. Most white Virginians transferred their allegiance from one national government to the next just as smoothly as fire-eaters like Ruffin. Robert Hooke, who joined the 1st Virginia Cavalry in April 1861 wrote a brief note home after enlisting. His first camp letter reads like many sent by young soldiers in the heady days of April: “When I will see you all if ever I trust in God for that and I hope if it should be his will that we would not meet on earth I hope we may meet where there will be no war neither parting[]. It goes right hard for me to leave but I intend to hold to my company and defend my Country and our consolation is if I have to be killed it will be in defending my Country & Farewell, Farewell perhaps forever who knows[]. I would like to write a great deal more but there is such an excitement I cannot—Yours Forever, Robt. Hooke.”

Like politics, evangelical Christianity provided another layer of justification for secession and, later, inspiration for supporting the Confederacy. Robert Hooke was not alone in imbuing his political commitment to his new “country” with deep religious faith. Religion had informed the idea of Southern separatism for years, with ministers defending the sanctity of the South and arguing against Northern abolitionist attacks on the region. Building on a biblical defense of slavery, Southern ministers criticized abolitionists for investing Christianity with a political power that had corrupted the Northern church. In the process, they sanctified secession as a religious obligation. This interpretation shifted the debate from political economy to spiritual freedom, an issue with much higher stakes. Most white Southerners were convinced that God was on their side, and this provided crucial reassurance throughout the war:25 As one man confided to his brother during a battle, “Knowing their [the Northern armies] tremendous numerical strength I tremble as to the possible issue of the struggle. In God is

our strength. "The battle is not to the strong if He be on our side. It is so full of comfort to know that He rules and directs the destinies of armies & nations."  

When religion or patriotism failed to inspire men to enlist, Confederate civilians around the state exerted social pressure, particularly in small communities. Counties with larger-than-average populations actually offered proportionally fewer men than did smaller places. Only 7 percent of the counties in the smallest population quintile sent fewer than 10 percent of their eligible men to fight for the Confederacy. For the two largest quintiles, 23 percent and 27 percent, respectively, of eligible men enlisted. Larger places may have permitted a broader diversity of opinion toward the Confederacy so that men who disagreed with its goals did not need to support it physically. Because of their size, cities and towns also provided greater opportunities for men to avoid service.

The converse seems true as well. Men living in smaller communities had a harder time avoiding service. The larger counties may have supported more diversified economic productivity and maintained more national trade contacts, so resistance to the war could have come from an interest that grew out of the nature of those places. So too, men living in smaller places and with fewer economic opportunities may have felt that the threat to their livelihood posed by the Lincoln administration demanded direct action.

In counties with only a few hundred eligible men, everyone who did not support the Confederacy had to endure public scrutiny. Newspapers in places big and small played an active role in encouraging men to volunteer. The Lexington Valley Star, published in one of the towns in the upper Shenandoah Valley, included extensive reports on the organization of companies in the area. Throughout May 1861, the paper, like others around Virginia, included full lists of the names of men who had joined local companies. The result of this pressure was obvious to those who traveled through the state that same month. James Davidson, a valley lawyer, took the train north through Virginia and surveyed the public attitude. "When I left home I wondered if other counties were as enthused as Rockbridge, for I thought we had been first up almost to a conflagration. But I found, upon my 'winding way,' that Augusta, Albemarle, Orange, Culpeper, Prince William, Clark, Shenandoah, Jefferson, etc. were all like us—on fire."

The social pressure continued through the summer, often from women who advocated secession and traded on notions of masculinity to compel men to


28. See Lexington Valley Star, May 2, 9, 23, 1861.

enlist. In August 1861 a young woman bragged to a friend in uniform about the efforts at home: "I heard of the best thing on Nathan Price. He went to the blocks to wait on Miss Nancy Miller Harvey and she would not allow him thanked him that she didn't want stay backs to wait on her. Time afterwards her buggy and horse were in a rather critical condition. Nathan and Jimmie Thornton rode up and assisted her and said as they left, that 'they guessed she was glad to get stay backs now' and she announced 'No, I thank you sir, You volunteered your services. I didn't ask you.'"30

If some men avoided military service by hiding in large cities, others simply bought their way out. The most direct way wealthy men could ensure they stayed home was by sending a substitute in their place. Wealthy men used their status to secure positions within the civil or military bureaucracy in Richmond or to attain appointments to local militia companies, which would exempt them from service. Anecdotal evidence has compelled some historians to emphasize the divisive nature of class relations within the Confederate South, in particular by arguing that poor men bore a disproportionate burden of the war.31

The experience of the war in Virginia, however, does not bear out this argument, as the enlistment data attest. Places with higher-than-average household wealth tended to organize more companies than did the counties with mostly middle- and lower-income families. All of the state's wealthiest counties sent more than 25 percent of their men, and most sent more than half their eligible male population. When enlistment rates and wealth holdings are analyzed against each other, they reveal a positive linear relationship: the more wealth a community held, the more likely it was to send high numbers of men to the army. Rich men did fight the Civil War.32

For poor men the situation appears more complicated. Over half of the counties that organized no volunteer companies were located in places with the lowest household incomes. Many of these places were located in the northwest, where low rates of slaveholding may also have contributed to a lack of enthusiasm for the Confederate cause. Quite possibly nonslaveholding families in this region with lower-than-average household wealth had grown dissatisfied with their inability to compete with the larger farms, manned with slave labor, in the

32. Logue, "Who joined the Confederate Army?" 616-17; Campbell, "Fighting for the Confederacy," 36-37; Carlson, "Civil War Enlistment Patterns in Southwest Georgia," 30, 37; Blair, Virginia's Private War, 81.
rest of the state. Their decision to rejoin the Union may have stemmed from concern over the economy rather than any ideological opposition to slavery. Poor communities in the southwest seem to have had the opposite reaction. There, and in the valley, many Virginia counties with middle- or lower-income families sent higher numbers of men to fight. In these places, surrounded in all directions by other slaveholders, poor men could just as easily have interpreted the possibility of not having access to slaves as the most serious threat to their economic future. Recent studies of Virginia show that despite complaints about inequities, middle- and lower-class citizens did not abandon their support for the Confederacy.34

For those poor men who did fight, the war offered its own opportunities for advancement. Less frequently noted in wartime accounts, but a crucial motivation nonetheless, was the pay that soldiers received. For many young men who entered the army in the first wave, the opportunity to earn a steady salary (if only for a few months) was no small incentive. As one man observed when his company paymaster finally set up an office in September 1861, the men "manifest a great desire to speedily get hold of the needful."\(^3\) The timing of the war's opening shots fit well into the yearly work cycle for most Virginians. Planting was nearly concluded when most men left to join the army, and they anticipated a return by the fall for harvesting. In the interim the opportunity to earn cash for military service seemed to some like a good opportunity. Visions of stockpiling a nest egg for capital improvements at home turned out to be hopelessly optimistic, however, as rampant inflation decreased the value of Confederate script throughout the war. Even so, remuneration for military service did provide inducement early on.

The strong interest that wealthy communities showed in Confederate independence was shared by those communities with a strong commitment to slavery. Slaveholders had an obvious interest in protecting the economic and social system on which they built their prosperity, and most of those places with high rates of slaveholding sent high proportions of their men to fight, but so too did many places with low rates of slaveholding. Explaining the participation of nonslaveholders in the secession movement and in Confederate armies continues to be one of the most challenging tasks facing American historians. The patterns of enlistment in the Confederate army in Virginia confirm that nonslaveholders did participate in high numbers. The specific shape of the patterns suggest that many nonslaveholders fought for the Confederacy because they too had an interest in maintaining the status quo, for economic and social reasons, as well as ideological ones.\(^3\)

The economic and social advantages white men enjoyed in the Old South were considerable. In many places, slaveholders purchased agricultural products from their nonslaveholding farmer neighbors, maintaining local markets that kept agriculture profitable. Slaveholders all over the state deployed slave labor to build the vibrant and flexible economy that provided many nonslaveholding families with a standard of living almost unmatched in the world. Nonslaveholders also enjoyed the privilege of being white in a society built on

35. John Hill Lyon Diary, Sept. 2, 1861, John Hill Lyon Papers, VHS.
rational slavery. By the late 1850s most white nonslaveholders recognized a racial solidarity with the slaveholding elite.37

Slavery shaped the relationships Virginians established among themselves and with outsiders; hence, defending Virginia in 1860 was defending slavery. During the secession crisis, political elites made no effort to hide this fact. To the contrary, they based many of their impassioned appeals specifically on the danger posed to slavery by Republican control of the federal government.38

Direct admissions by soldiers that they were fighting to defend their economic stake in slavery were rare, a direct result of slavery’s centrality to Southern economic growth.39 Even though few men recorded their sentiments about slavery, it is important to recognize that slavery did play a role in motivating men to enlist and serve in Confederate armies. At the most basic level, Confederates fought to retain their property and to ensure that it would be passed on to

their descendants. Edmund Ruffin himself recognized the relationship between protection of slavery and willingness to serve the Confederacy. For Ruffin, his biographer writes, "the cause involved no desire to preserve mastery over slaves for its own sake, nor to save some paternalistic rural lordship. Rather, it involved calculations of what he would lose materially if deprived of slave property and slave labor." Regular soldiers demonstrated this concern as well, and they eagerly transformed Lee's army into a great slave patrol that captured runaway slaves and returned them to their owners whenever possible.

One of the signal accomplishments of Southern political leaders was their success in crafting a regionally distinct political ideology that drew the support of most white men. They did this by creating a language of rights and liberties that reconciled the sometimes conflicting demands of personal, class, and party interests. Even as proslavery propagandists argued that only racial slavery could ensure Southerners' economic success and political liberties, white men conceptualized and expressed their motivations in a language of political rights without reference to slavery. This ability to frame issues in abstract rather than self-interested terms was one element that helped propagate and prolong the conflict. John Lightner, a young soldier stationed in Martinsburg, in the northwestern corner of Virginia in early 1861, claimed to understand the war's cause clearly. "This war is certainly a holy & just one, on our side; the other is none else than unconstitutional, brought on by wicked usurpation of power." Like most Confederate men, Lightner did not need to detail the specific form of the "usurpation" perpetuated by the North, so confident was he that his correspondent would understand his meaning.

The particular patterns of enlistment in high slaveholding districts adds further evidence to support the contention that white men understood and appreciated the advantages they accrued from living in a slave society. The relationship between enlistment and the percentage of the population that was enslaved had the greatest explanatory power of any variable under scrutiny, indicating how strong a stake nonslaveholders had in slavery. Slaveholders worried, like Ruffin, about the loss of their productive capital. Nonslaveholders also worried about

43. John P. Lightner to Amanda Catherine Amentrott, June 29, 1861, William Francis Brand Papers, UVA.
the economic ramifications of emancipation, in terms of the increased competition for jobs and in terms of the indirect decline in economic productivity that they anticipated with abolition. The prospect of emancipation held social concerns as well. Most Virginians of voting age could remember the 1831 uprising led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, where more than fifty whites had been killed; they had lived through the John Brown raid of 1859. These episodes solidified the belief that black liberation would bring death and destruction to the white community. Even for those who did not accept these apocalyptic scenarios, emancipation portended a chaotic and terrifying new world. The multiple incentives for nonslaveholders to support slavery produced a harmony of white interests that resulted in very high support for the Confederacy in communities with the highest numbers of slaves; the majority of counties with more than 50 percent of their residents enslaved sent 75 percent or more of their eligible men to fight.

The sweep of enlistment across the state makes it hard to see who did not support the Confederacy. But by closely analyzing the edges of enlistment patterns, we can learn more about Confederate opposition within Virginia. Out of 148 Virginia counties in 1860, eleven raised no companies for Confederate service. All of these counties lay in the extreme northwest, and nine bordered the Union. The two socioeconomic factors that these communities also had in common were the absence of slavery and low wealth-holdings. None of the eleven counties had more than 5 percent slaveholding households, and nine out of eleven had fewer than 2 percent slaveholding households. Further, although the white populations of these places reflected the variation of population rates in the state as a whole, they held less wealth on a per-family basis than communities that enlisted more men, and they contained less wealth than average for the northwest region. Probably just as important as any of these demographic factors was the location of these counties along the edge of the Confederacy and their frequent occupation by Union troops.

While low rates of slave- and wealth-holding and geographic proximity to the North seem to have deterred allegiance to the Confederacy, the same cannot be said for communities with low rates of slaveholding located in Virginia’s interior. Six counties with less than 5 percent slaveholding households sent 50 percent or more of their men to fight in Confederate armies. Unlike the counties that organized no companies, these low-slaveholding places had several other factors in common. Families living in Gilmer, Roane, and Braxton Counties, all located in the northwest, held much less wealth than their neighbors and had smaller white populations than was common in the area. The households in

44 The counties are identified with the lightest shading in Figure 2: Brooke, Clay, Doddridge, Hancock, Marshall, Mason, Morgan, Preston, Tucker, Tyler, and Wetzel. Undoubtedly, many men from these counties served the Confederacy, but the fact that these places did not organize any companies indicates a lack of popular support for the Confederate cause as well as a lack of institutional support that elites in other counties directed on behalf of the Confederacy.
these counties owned farms with values almost 50 percent lower than the average for the northwest. These factors help explain the motives of the men who did enlist from these counties. Their support for the Confederacy represented dissatisfaction with the prevailing economic trends in their home region. The northwest had a weak commitment to slavery, and businessmen in the region were increasingly establishing links with Northern markets. The people of Gilmer, Roane, and Braxton Counties do not seem to have benefited from that approach, and perhaps they saw a better economic future as members of an independent Southern Confederacy. Located in contested territory in the middle of northwest Virginia, the families in this region had more autonomy to decide their loyalty than those counties along the border with the Union or deeper in the interior of the Confederacy.

The three other counties with very low rates of slaveholding but high rates of enlistment were all located in southwest Virginia. Like their northern counterparts, families in Wise, Buchanan, and Wyoming Counties maintained smaller-than-average farms and held less wealth than others in their region. They too could have been fighting for the Confederacy in an attempt to preserve an economic future for themselves, albeit one based on slavery. Throughout the 1850s residents in this region deployed slave labor in a variety of agricultural and industrial settings to successfully expand the region's economy; thus they had every reason to continue pursuing what had already proven to be an effective economic strategy. The people in the region advocated secession early in 1861, at least in part because of the threat to slavery posed by the Lincoln administration. In early March the Abingdon Democrat ran an article entitled "A Prospective Stampede," in which the editors noted, "The Richmond Enquirer has private advices from different parts of the state, which inform it that a large number of the largest slaveholders in Virginia are already making preparations for an exodus." The editors bemoaned the loss to the state of those good men because "they will carry away from us what is far more valuable to the state than property—thousands and tens of thousands of busy hands, which now constitute the productive labor of the state." The men from Wise, Buchanan and Wyoming Counties may have enlisted precisely because their stake in slavery was so small; a new Confederacy that guaranteed the right to own slaves offered hope that they could expand their meager livelihoods in the coming years.

The pattern of enlistment across Virginia reveals the widespread mobilization of men accomplished by the Confederacy, which included nonslaveholders, former Unionists, residents of wealthy and poor areas, and residents of both remote, mountainous communities and diverse urban ones. Aggregate analysis

46. Abingdon Democrat, Mar. 8, 1861.
also allows us to identify with some precision those places that did not send men to fight for the Confederacy. Within Virginia, only those places that met a certain set of characteristics—few slaves, poor families, a history of opposition to secession, and proximity to the North. Places that shared these traits were cut off from the economic success of Virginia in the 1840s and 1850s but not sufficiently engaged with the North to benefit from growth and development there. The Confederacy's firm commitment to an economy and society based on slavery presaged a continuation of these trends. As a result, the residents of these communities demonstrated a deep reluctance to invest themselves in the new Southern nation.

Similarly, no single issue or characteristic created steadfast Confederate loyalty. Those who supported the Confederacy did so by drawing on a wide variety of incentives. In 1861 the emotional inducements that men found in their families and communities, from love to honor to zeal to anxiety over proving one's manhood, tended to reinforce one another by encouraging secession and enlistment. Likewise, the intellectual justifications of a religious duty to preserve a biblically sanctioned social order and the political ideology of state rights initially blended with the material interests of most white Virginians. The security of slavery, the continuity of the robust and stable economic order Virginians had built in the 1850s, and the privilege of being white in the antebellum South all depended on defending the society as it was in 1861. Families that held more interest in this society had stronger motivations to fight, a conclusion consistent with the finding that enlistment rates were highest among those parts of Virginia that held the most wealth and the most slaves. Virginians who made themselves into Confederates did so by drawing on love of their families, honor in their communities, and faith in their god, as well as the material conditions of Southern life: the violence of slavery, the aggressive acquisitiveness of an emerging capitalist society, and the inequality of a society built on strict racial hierarchy.

The Old Dominion was not alone in this pattern. Although Virginia's antebellum experience differed from that of other Upper- or Deep-South states in many respects, soldiers from Georgia, Louisiana, or Tennessee would have come to the Confederacy with very similar beliefs and interests. The broad benefits from slavery and the synthesis of abstract ideological and material economic motivations encouraged a common Southern response. The challenge for the Confederacy as the war extended beyond 1861 was managing the tensions between the frequently contradictory elements of motivation in the context of a new nation.

The beliefs and events that motivated soldiers to enlist did not cause the war in any fundamental sense; historians are nearly unanimous in agreeing that slavery as a political and social issue drove the people of the two sections apart. Rather, the various sources of motivation upon which Southerners drew continued the conflict. Confederate Virginia successfully mobilized nearly all of its
white men of military age, a feat that reflects deep commitment to the war among the population as a whole. Blind optimism, overpowering confidence, and simple self-delusion played no small role in bolstering enthusiasm for the Confederate cause as the war dragged on, but beneath these elements lay a considered and deeply felt dedication to preserving a world that had served most white people very well. If we can explain that commitment and its emotional, intellectual, and material origins, we will have come a long way toward understanding the meaning of the war for the participants and ourselves.