

**Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-8078-3277-6.**

**Reviewed by Darren Dobson  
(Monash University)**

Typically, the American Civil War has been passed down through history and popular culture as being the struggle between North and South. This war has come to be seen as the ultimate battle to end slavery and ensure the future of freedom and liberty for all people. If there is any mention at all about guerrilla war being a component of this great conflict, it is usually relegated to the backwater theatre of Missouri. It is these portrayals and myths of the American Civil War, which Daniel Sutherland's book, *A Savage Conflict: Guerrilla Warfare in the American Civil War*, helps to shatter.

As a student of the American Civil War, Sutherland's narrative has amazed me as he shows that guerrilla combat existed from the outset of the war and stretched across not just the western Border States of Missouri and Kentucky, but encompassed all theatres and Southern states for the duration of the war. What Sutherland taps into is the real essence of America's Civil War; that it was not just about the two giants of the North and South and their competing political ideologies. The war was more about local people and their fears and frustrations, as the war would be fought amongst their homes and families and thus impact directly on their lives. The author helps to reveal that the American Civil War was a series of little wars, of which guerrilla action was a smaller but significant component within the larger conflict. Sutherland clearly situates his study as being, 'to show how the guerrilla conflict, especially as waged by the Confederates, helped decide the outcome of the Civil War.' (page xiii)

So what and who were these so called guerrillas? Sutherland defines this broad term as being those people who participated in the ‘irregular war.’ Irregular war implies that there existed a ‘regular war’ waged and battled between the standing armies of the Union and the Confederacy. On this basis at least, guerrillas were not so much aligned to the ranks and machinations of the regular forces of either the North or South. In fact, Sutherland goes to some length to explain that these guerrilla fighters took sides based more on their social circumstances than adherence to a political system. Sutherland shows that this irregular war allowed people the opportunities to enact revenge and settle family feuds which stretched back well beyond sectional conflicts over slavery and free soil ideology. The author captures these hostile circumstances as:

Sabotage, assassination, fear and suspicion of one’s neighbours, lynching of unarmed civilians, the use of terror to maintain law and order, the cover of war to settle old scores, retaliation against those who used violence, a subsequent escalation of violence against those who retaliated, and an apparent sanctioning of terror by governments became commonplace. A guerrilla war had been set in motion, and its influence would know few bounds. (page 6)

Guerrillas who sided with the Confederacy typically referred to themselves as ‘partisans’ or ‘partisan rangers’. But even this definition proves somewhat difficult in gaining an understanding of this term. For partisans were expected to follow army regulations, perform co-ordinated movements with local Confederate forces while also providing reconnaissance, raids and assaults against Northern troops. This sounds more like being a part of the Southern armed forces and not civilian groups undertaking hostile enemy action. To provide some clarity here, Sutherland stipulates that there were additional categories of guerrilla warriors, such as independently armed groups who roved across the countryside deciding for themselves when, where, how and who to attack. These groups were not bound by obedience to military orders. Another category of guerrillas was the

'bushwackers', or lone gunmen who under the cover of the forest would rob, kill and inflict other atrocities upon unsuspecting victims who were not always Unionists or Northern soldiers.

However, Sutherland provides the best definition of guerrilla combatants by identifying them by two main traits. Firstly, the irregular manner in which they attacked, harassed, and worried their enemies. These methods were strikingly different from those tactics employed by conventional troops. Secondly, the very reason for these guerrillas' existence was the local defence, the protection of their families and communities against internal and external foes.

One aspect of Sutherland's study is a noticeable link to many other scholarly works about the American Civil War. For me what is most striking is the connection to both Charles Royster's *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson and the Americans*, New York, 1991, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, New York, 1982.

The comparison with Royster's *The Destructive War*, is apparent by Sutherland's argument that guerrilla or irregular warfare was the initial cause for the brutality of the Civil War and then the escalated Northern military strategy under generals Grant and Sherman. But what is of great importance is that Sutherland attributes both Presidents Abraham Lincoln for the Union and Jefferson Davis for the Confederacy with the knowledge that guerrilla warfare was rife throughout all theatres of the war. In some cases both Lincoln and Davis condone and encouraged this terror as they were unable to supply troops into certain areas to wage a regular war. While Royster argues that the Civil War was always intended to be 'destructive', Sutherland lists one of the causes for this 'total war' as being the guerrillas.

In a similar fashion Sutherland has tapped into Wyatt-Brown's study of *Southern Honor*. Here, Sutherland constantly harks back to violence being enacted due to codes of socially accepted forms of behaviour such as self defence of home, family, property and community. Any breaches or threats to these would be justifiably supported with direct acts of violence and retaliation. These are the same codes which Wyatt-Brown argues for in his study.

Overall, I found Daniel Sutherland's *A Savage Conflict* to make a vital contribution to the existing body of historical literature about the American Civil War. Yet, this book's main strength is also at times its Achilles' heel. In trying to provide the reader with an all encompassing view of the guerrilla war as it spanned across the Southern states and the border regions of Kansas, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, it at times proves to be difficult to keep track of exactly where particular events and confrontations occurred. However, as this study does identify and begin to explore the broader events and places affected by guerrilla activity, it may also provide a good place for either Sutherland or other budding American Civil War historians to continue to unearth the significance of guerrilla war within the wider Civil War history.