

Write a one page single space describing

A -The major thesis or position of the chapter

B -What evidence does the chapter offer to support the thesis?

WHY THEY

FOUGHT IN

1861?

1
"THE HOLY CAUSE OF LIBERTY AND
INDEPENDENCE"

Invoking his state's Revolutionary motto, *Sic Semper Tyrannis*, a young Virginia officer filled letters to his mother with comparisons of the North's "war of subjugation against the South" to "England's war upon the colonies." He was confident that the Confederacy would win this "second War for American Independence" because "Tyranny cannot prosper in the nineteenth century" against "a people fighting for their liberties." An enlisted man in a Texas cavalry regiment told his sister in 1861 that just as their forefathers had rebelled against King George to establish "*Liberty and freedom* in this western world . . . so we dissolved our alliance with this oppressive foe and are now enlisted in 'The Holy Cause of Liberty and Independence' again."¹

The great patriotic holidays especially called forth such sentiments in the letters and diaries of southern soldiers. On Washington's Birthday in 1862, a captain in the 5th Alabama Infantry wrote to his mother: "How trifling were the wrongs complained of by our Revolutionary forefathers, in comparison with ours! If the mere imposition of a tax could raise such a tumult what should be the result of the terrible system of oppression instituted by the Yankees?" On the Fourth of July the same year, a Kentuckian who had cast his lot with the Confederacy reflected in his diary on George Washington, "who set us an example in bursting the bonds of tyranny" to fight for "those inestimable and priceless rights . . . obtained

by our forefathers and bequeathed to us." Exactly a year later, an Alabama corporal who had just been captured at Gettysburg nevertheless expressed confidence that, fighting for "the same principles which fired the hearts of our ancestors in the revolutionary struggle," the South would ultimately win the war.²

The memory of defeats followed by eventual victory in the Revolution helped bolster Confederate morale in similar times of trouble. During the retreat from Gettysburg, a Georgia captain in the Army of Northern Virginia learned of the surrender of Vicksburg. "What a calamity!" he wrote to his wife. "But let us not despair. . . . We must put forth even greater energy—resolve more fully to conquer or die. Our forefathers were whipped in nearly every battle & lost their capital & yet after seven years of trials and hardships achieved their independence." A farmer's son serving in the 1st North Carolina Infantry wrote to his father during another period of Confederate reverses: "Instead of indulging in feelings of despondency let us compare our situation and cause to those of our illustrious ancestors who achieved the liberties we have ever enjoyed and for which we are now contending."³

Whether or not they compared their own war for independence with the Revolution of 1776, the letters and diaries of many Confederate soldiers bristled with rhetoric of liberty and self-government and with expressions of a willingness to die for the cause. The writers of these letters ranged from the prominent to the obscure. They included the wealthy Alabama planter who married one of Mary Todd Lincoln's half sisters and who as a captain in the 4th Alabama declared that "I am willing to fall for the cause of Liberty and Independence," and the Georgia dirt farmer writing to his wife in 1864 from the trenches at Petersburg that "if I fall Let me fall for I will fall in a good cose for if I can not git Liberty I prefer

death."⁴ They also included the son of a rich Baltimore merchant who defied the wishes of his Unionist father and enlisted in the 44th Virginia. In a letter written three months before he was killed at Chancellorsville, this soldier explained to his father that he considered the war "a struggle between Liberty on one side, and Tyranny on the other." That is why "I determined to . . . espouse the holy cause of Southern freedom." A Louisiana corporal in the Army of Northern Virginia who also lost his life in the conflict had written a friend that this "struggle for liberty" was "a glorious & holy one and I for one am willing that my bones shall bleach the sacred soil of Virginia in driving the envading host of tyrants from our soil." A Missouri lieutenant who was wounded at Pea Ridge wrote in his diary while recovering from the wound that if he was killed, it would be while "fighting gloriously for the undying principles of Constitutional liberty and self government." Two years later he was killed in action near Atlanta.⁵

These voices of commitment to liberty and self-government shaded into simple but heartfelt avowals of patriotism. The Confederacy was their country; they felt a sense of duty to this country that had called on them to defend its very existence. "Sink or swim, survive or perish," wrote a young Kentuckian who went with the South, "I will fight in defence of my country." A lieutenant in the 47th Alabama, a farmer who owned a few slaves, wrote to his wife in 1862: "I confess that I gave you up with reluctance. Yet I love my country dearly. The war in which we are unfortunately involved has been forced upon us. We have asked for nothing but to be let alone. I intend to discharge my duty to my country and to my God." Like many others, he too made the supreme sacrifice to fulfill that duty, and never returned to see the wife and two children he missed so much.⁶

When prospects for the Confederacy appeared bright,

these convictions took the form of an expansive nationalism. A University of Georgia student who left school to enlist when the war broke out wrote to his sweetheart in 1862 that "we are living in the midst of the grandest revolution ever known in the annals of the world." He expected the Confederacy to "become a nation among the nations of the earth, designed, in the hands of God, to fulfill a glorious destiny." When the going got tough, patriotism became the last refuge not of the scoundrel but of the genuinely committed soldier. "Our struggle has to be carried on desperately; and with the determination to die rather than be conquered," wrote Sandie Pendleton of Virginia during a low point in Confederate fortunes. "Our men are thinking too much of a whole skin, and too little of their country and the future. What difference does a few hours more or less here of life make in comparison with the future destiny of the people?" The writer of these words was killed at Fisher's Hill.

Over and over again in Confederate letters, one finds sentences like these: "It is better to spend our all in defending our country than to be subjugated and have it taken away from us." "It is better to die than be subjugated, and I for one am ready and willing to fight to the bitter end." *Subjugated* was the favorite word for the far worse than death that would face southern whites if the Confederacy lost the war. *Enslaved* was another frequent choice to describe that fate. "We had better all go the same way [as those who have died] than suffer the wretches who are trying to enslave us, to accomplish their ends. I prefer death to Yankee rule."⁸

Such phrases as "the holy cause of southern freedom," "duty to one's country," "death before Yankee rule," "glorious destiny," "bursting the bonds of tyranny," and the like, may come across to this post-Freudian age as mawkish posturing, romantic sentimentalism, hollow platitudes. We seldom speak or write that way anymore. Most people have not

done so since World War I, which, as Ernest Hemingway and Paul Fussell have written, made such words as *glory*, *honor*, *courage*, *hallow*, *sacrifice*, *valor*, and *sacred* vaguely embarrassing if not mock-heroic.⁹ Without question, such hackneyed phrases as "tell mother I died for my country," reported as the dying words of many a Civil War soldier, were a sentimental convention. But our cynicism about the genuineness of such sentiments is more our problem than theirs. It raises a barrier to our understanding of what I am convinced, after reading at least 25,000 letters and more than a hundred diaries of Civil War soldiers, were deeply felt convictions. That was the age of romanticism in literature, music, art, and philosophy. It was a sentimental age when strong men were not afraid to cry (or weep, as they would say), when Harriet Beecher Stowe's great novel and Stephen Foster's songs could stir genuine emotions. What seems like bathos or platitudes to us were real pathos and convictions for them.

All of the quotations I have presented here were taken from uncensored private letters and diaries. These men were not posturing for public consumption. They were not looking back from years later through a romantic haze of myth about the war. They were writing during the immediacy of their experience to explain and justify their beliefs to family members or friends who shared—or in some cases questioned—those beliefs. And how smugly can we sneer at their expressions of willingness to die for those beliefs when we know that so many of them did just that?

But one might justly ask whether most Confederate soldiers shared these convictions. The answer is yes—with some qualifications. Of 374 Confederate soldiers whose letters and diaries I have read, two-thirds expressed patriotic motives. The proportion that discoursed in more depth on ideological issues such as liberty, constitutional rights, resistance

to tyranny, and so on was smaller—40 percent. That does not mean that those who made no references to these matters were unmoved by them. By their nature, most personal letters or diary entries were descriptive rather than reflective, concerned with day-to-day events in the army and at home—with the weather, food, sickness, and other mundane concerns. The dominant themes in letters were homesickness and a longing for peace. Yet as much as they wanted to return to their families, many of these soldiers would have echoed the words of a Texas officer who wrote to his wife in 1863 that even though “I am sick of war” and “no gratification could exceed that of my being safe at home with you,” nevertheless “were the contest just commenced I would willingly undergo it again for the sake of . . . our country’s independence [so I can] . . . point with pride your children to their father as one who fought for their liberty & freedom.”¹⁰

How representative is this sample of 374 soldiers? They came from all states of the South in roughly the same proportions as did all Confederate soldiers. Their average age was about the same as that of the army as a whole. But in other respects the sample is not representative in the sense that a modern Gallup Poll or survey questionnaire is designed to represent proportionately all the relevant groups in a given population. This sample of soldiers is, of course, biased toward the groups most likely to write letters or diaries and to save them for posterity to read. By definition, the 15 to 20 percent of Confederate soldiers who were illiterate are not included. An overlapping category, the unskilled laborers who constituted about 8 percent of Confederate soldiers, are also unrepresented. Skilled laborers and foreign-born soldiers are decidedly underrepresented. Although the sample includes a substantial number of yeoman farmers, they too are underrepresented. On the other hand, the planter class and the professional classes—especially lawyers—are over-

represented. Therefore slaveholders are also overrepresented. Whereas about one-third of all Confederate soldiers came from slaveholding families, a little more than two-thirds of my sample whose slaveholding status is known did so. Thus the groups most likely to express strong ideological convictions are overrepresented in the sample: for example, 75 percent of the soldiers from slaveholding families avowed strong patriotic convictions, compared with 42 percent among non-slaveholders; 43 percent of those from slaveholding families expressed ideological motives, compared with 27 percent of the nonslaveholding soldiers.

The sample also provides an imperfect cross-section of the internal structure of the Confederate army. It overrepresents those who enlisted during the first year of the war, before conscription went into effect, and underrepresents conscripts, substitutes, and those who volunteered only to avoid being drafted. There was a marked difference between these two groups in the level of patriotic and ideological conviction. Among yeoman farmers, for example, 56 percent of those who enlisted in the first year of the war asserted patriotic sentiments, compared with only 14 percent of those who came into the army after conscription was enacted. The least enthusiastic soldiers were nonslaveholding farmers in their thirties who were drafted in 1862 and forced to leave behind a wife and several small children. Their bitterness became even more acute after the Twenty-Negro Law in October, 1862, exempted from the draft one white man on every plantation of twenty or more slaves. This law exacerbated the class tensions that a number of historians have identified as undermining Confederate unity and morale.

I found less evidence of the “rich man’s war/poor man’s fight” attitude in soldiers’ letters than I expected, given the prevalence of this theme in recent scholarship. But I did find some, such as the dirt farmer in the 60th North Carolina who

complained in an 1863 letter to his wife that "this is a Richmans Woar But the poor man has to doo the fitting," or another farmer, drafted into the 57th North Carolina, who lamented that "I could be at home if it warent for a few big rulers who I cannot help but blame for it. . . . These big fighting men cant be got out to fight as easy as to make speeches . . . all they care for is to keep the poor men run away from home and they lay at home feesting on the good things of the land . . . while we poor soldiers are foused away from home and dare not return if we do we are liable to be shot to death."¹¹

These negative sentiments seem to have been stronger among soldiers from North Carolina than from any other state. This may help to explain why the desertion rate was highest in North Carolina regiments. In general, a larger proportion of soldiers from lower-South cotton states expressed strong patriotic and ideological motives than of those from the upper South. The contrast between South Carolina and North Carolina soldiers was especially notable: 82 percent from South Carolina avowed patriotic convictions, compared with 47 percent from North Carolina.

These regional and state contrasts fit with the data cited earlier showing a greater degree of ideological commitment among soldiers from slaveholding than from nonslaveholding families, for a higher percentage of families in the Deep South owned slaves than in the upper South. This pattern is also confirmed by a comparison of officers and enlisted men. The proportion of slaveholders among officers was almost twice that among enlisted men. The disparity in their degree of avowed ideological and patriotic convictions was almost as great. And here also is another and perhaps the most serious distortion in the sample: whereas some 10 or 12 percent of all Confederate soldiers served as officers for at least half of their time in the army, 47 percent of my sample did so. In that

respect, as in those of wealth, slaveholding, occupation, and education, the sample is biased toward those who had the largest stake in the Confederacy and were therefore most prone to have strong ideological convictions. This bias cannot be helped, for it reflects the selectivity of the evidence available to the historian who seeks to get inside the minds of those men.

In one final way is the sample unrepresentative. But this bias may go a long way to neutralize the others. The title of this book is *What They Fought For*. Let me emphasize the second and third words of that title. Who were the *they* that *fought*? Civil War soldiers—officers and men, Union and Confederate alike—agreed that about half of the men on the rolls did nearly all of the real fighting. The remainder were known, in Civil War slang, as beats or dead-beats, skulkers, sneaks, stragglers, or coffee-coolers. They "played off" (shirked) or played sick when battle impended. They seemed to melt away when bullets started flying, only to reappear the next day. Some deserted for good. Some really were sick much of the time. Others got what combat soldiers called "bombproof" jobs a safe distance behind the lines—headquarters clerk, quartermaster sergeant, wagon-train guard, teamster, hospital attendant, and the like. My sample is biased toward genuine fighting soldiers. What is the evidence for that statement? The best way to tell who really fought is to look at casualty rates—the fighting regiments were those with the highest casualties; the fighting soldiers were those most likely to get killed. Some 11 or 12 percent of all Confederate soldiers were killed or mortally wounded in action; no less than 29 percent of the men in my sample died that way. This rather startling bias in the sample may have occurred because those who did the fighting came disproportionately from the same groups as the sample. But the main explanation probably is that the families of soldiers killed in action were the most likely to

preserve their memory and therefore their letters for posterity—and for the historian. In any case, if we are interested in what the *they* who did most of the fighting thought they were fighting for, the unrepresentativeness of the sample may help us to answer the question.

The concepts of southern nationalism, liberty, self-government, resistance to tyranny, and other ideological purposes I quoted earlier all have a rather abstract quality. But for many Confederate soldiers these abstractions took a concrete, visceral form: the defense of home and hearth against an invading enemy. This purpose in turn became transformed for many southern soldiers into hatred and a desire for revenge.

These were purposes and motives that, for obvious reasons, functioned much more powerfully for Confederate than for Union soldiers. “We are fighting for matters real and tangible . . . our property and our homes,” wrote a Texas private in 1864, “they for matters abstract and intangible.” A Tennessee lieutenant insisted that “the yankees are sacrificing their lives for nothing; we ours for home, country, and all That is dear and sacred. . . . Every one seems to know that his life liberty and property are at stake, hence we never can be whipped.”¹² A young Alabama soldier agreed that “when a Southron’s home is threatened the spirit of resistance is irrepressable,” and one of the Confederacy’s numerous gentleman privates—men who enlisted in the ranks despite their wealth and social status—a thirty-two-year-old Virginia planter, declared two weeks before he was killed at Malvern Hill that to drive “the insolent invader . . . from the soil polluted by their footsteps . . . has something of the glorious in it, that appeals to other feelings than those of patriotism and duty.”¹³

Military analysts who have studied the will of armies to fight confirm this southern conviction: defense of the home-

land is one of the most powerful combat motivations.¹⁴ Some northern soldiers conceded this truth. They “fight like Devils in tophet,” an Illinois sergeant wrote of the Confederates in 1862, because they were “fighting to keep an enemy out of [their] own neighborhood & protect [their] property. . . . Not that I consider their cause just but, right or wrong, if we thot or believed we was right it would be the same to us.” Two years later an officer, also from Illinois, made the same point in a letter to his wife: “They are fighting from different motives from us. We are fighting for the Union . . . a high and noble sentiment, but after all a sentiment. They are fighting for independence and are animated by passion and hatred against invaders. . . . It makes no difference whether the cause is just or not. You can get up an amount of enthusiasm that nothing else will excite.”¹⁵

The antebellum propaganda war between North and South had created in southern minds an image of the hated Yankees as an amalgam of money-grubbing mudsill Black Republican abolitionist Goths and Vandals. Well before significant Union invasions of the South, Confederate soldiers’ letters bristled with these negative stereotypes. The following quotations are all from letters written during the first months of the war. It is “a glorious mission . . . to defend our homes from the spoiler,” from “hordes of Northern Hessians,” to fight “in defence of innocent girls & women from the fangs of lecherous Northern hirelings,” or in “defiance to the Vandal hordes, who would desecrate and pollute our Southern Soil.” “I will never stand by and see my native soil polluted by a horde of Abolition incendiaries” or for that matter by the “lowest and most contemptible race upon the face of God’s earth,” “the theiving hordes of Lincoln.”¹⁶

If these phrases seem like clichés, they nevertheless had real meaning to those who wrote them. The same was true of the numerous expressions of intent to defend southern wom-

anhood from the “vile and inhuman wretches” of the North. A young Texas private with a sense of humor wrote to his parents from Memphis, where his regiment had gone after fighting at Pea Ridge, that he had met two “beautiful women” who had given him a bouquet of flowers. He put the bouquet in the muzzle of his musket and bid farewell, thinking “as I sped my way . . . the misery is solved . . . what are we fighting for why ‘By George’ we are fighting for the women.”¹⁷ Men with wives and sisters felt this obligation a good deal more seriously, filling their letters with references to protecting “the fair daughters of my own native state . . . from Yankee outrage and atrocity,” from the “varlet’s tread,” the “fendish vandals” and “despoiler of Southern homes,” shielding “the loved ones who call upon me to defend their homes from pillage.”¹⁸ “Do you suppose we are going to submit to see our wives etc. insulted for all future by brutes they would send among us?” a North Carolina colonel wrote his wife in 1861 with a rhetorical question which he promptly answered: “So long as we have such wives, mothers, and sisters to fight for so long will this struggle continue until finally our freedom will be acknowledged.”¹⁹

This conviction that they fought for their homes and women gave many Confederate soldiers remarkable staying power in the face of adversity. “My dear be a brave woman to the last,” wrote a Shenandoah Valley farmer serving in the 10th Virginia Cavalry to his wife when their home was threatened by the invaders. “I intend to fight them to the last . . . I will kill them as long as I live even if peace is made I never will get done with them.” A gentleman private in the 21st Mississippi told his mother that “the life of a soldier is a hard one & no amount of description can convey the most remote idea of the hardships. . . . Still . . . I am perfectly content to remain five years or until there is not a Yankee south of the Mason & Dixon’s line.” Another planter’s son,

a sergeant in the 16th Mississippi with two brothers in the same regiment, also detested the drudgery of an enlisted man’s lot. Nevertheless, he wrote to his mother in 1862, “I joyfully embrace it as a means of repelling a dastardly, plundering, oppressive, and cowardly foe from our homes and borders. . . . And cheerfully I determine never to lay down my rifle as long as a Yankee remains on Southern soil.”²⁰

This Mississippi sergeant concluded his letter with the words: “Mother I am getting to hate the Yankees in earnest.” As the war escalated in fury, mounting Confederate casualties and loss of property, including slaves, caused this flame of hatred to burn ever more brightly. Bitter enmity and a desire for revenge became the consuming passion of many Confederate soldiers—motives that, like defense of home and hearth, operated much more powerfully for them than for Union soldiers.

Vengeance for comrades cut down by Yankee bullets became an obsession with some Confederates. When the popular colonel of Terry’s Texas rangers was killed in a skirmish, a sergeant in the troop reported that “the men were too much exasperated after the death of our colonel to take prisoners—they were shot down.” Another Texan, a captain, wrote his wife to teach their children “a bitter and unrelenting hatred to the Yankee race” that “have invaded our country and devastated it . . . [and] murdered our best citizens. . . . If any luckless Yank should unfortunately come into my way he need not petition for mercy. If he does I’ll give him lead if he ask for bread. . . . [I intend] to *Massacre* the last one of them that ever has or may hereafter place his unhallowed feet upon the soil of our sunny South.”²¹

Texans seemed particularly ferocious on this subject, at least rhetorically. But soldiers from other states were not far behind—especially states that experienced northern occupation and confiscation of property. A Virginia cavalry officer

and planter who learned that his slaves had run off to Union lines angrily denounced the Yankees as "a nation of thieves and robbers. . . . [I] am the more willing to kill as many of them as God in his providence will permit me." The most unrelenting rhetoric of revenge came from a Louisiana cavalry sergeant, a schoolteacher before the war, whose pen was at least as sharp as his saber. He had enlisted for patriotic reasons, he wrote his wife in 1863, but by the time Vicksburg and Port Hudson had fallen the "only one thing" that kept him going was "absolute hatred of . . . the hyperborean vandals with whom we are waging a war for existence. . . . The Thugs of India will not bear a comparison to my hatred and destruction of them when opportunity offers. . . . I expect to murder every Yankee I ever meet when I can do so with impunity if I live a hundred years and peace is made in six months. . . . I don't intend ever to take any prisoners. I think anybody who should see the destruction they have caused in this country would applaud the resolution."²²

Some Confederate soldiers demanded an eye-for-an-eye retaliation for the burning of southern cities. A lieutenant in the 4th Virginia declared that "I for one should like to apply with my own hands a torch to Philadelphia or New York that would level either of those proud cities with the ground." A sergeant in the 8th Georgia on his way into Pennsylvania in June, 1863, voiced the conviction that "we [should] take horses; burn houses; and commit every depredation possible upon the men of the North . . . slay them like wheat before the sythe in harvest time. I certainly love to live to kill the base usurping vandals. if it is a sin to hate them; then I am guilty of the unpardonable one." As matters turned out, he had little chance to burn houses or slay Yankees like wheat; he was himself killed in the first exchange of fire at Devil's Den. Another Virginian, though, a captain in one of the regiments that burned Chambersburg, Pennsylvania in 1864, de-

scribed that event with pleasure in a letter to a cousin: "Our men soon became drunk & mad for plunder. Some would come to a man's house with a torch & demand \$500 or so, or else they wd. fire his house. This he wd. give, and fancy himself safe, when another would come, and make a similar demand. This was continued untill all his money was gone, when the last party would set fire to it. . . . It was one of the best strokes we have ever inaugurated, its effects have been most beneficial."²³

In some Confederates this passion became almost pathological. A Maryland-born officer in Longstreet's corps, a grandson of the architect Benjamin Latrobe (who helped design the United States Capitol and the White House), directed the artillery fire of ten Confederate guns on Marye's Heights at the battle of Fredericksburg. Afterward he rode over the battlefield and, as he described the experience in his diary, "enjoyed the sight of hundreds of dead Yankees. Saw much of the work I had done in the way of severed limbs, decapitated bodies, and mutilated remains of all kinds. Doing my soul good. Would that the whole Northern Army were as such & I had my hand in it." Similarly, a Texas officer rode over the Chickamauga battlefield viewing "the black and swollen [Yankee] corpses that will never be buried and whose bones will be bleached by the pelting rains of the coming winter," and "it actually done me good to see them laying dead, and every one else that I heard expressed [the same] opinion."²⁴ The gentleman private in the 21st Mississippi quoted earlier wrote to his parents after Antietam that there were hundreds of dead Yankees lying in the sector of the battlefield controlled by the Confederates before they retreated. "Tell Miss Anna," he wrote of his sister, "that I thought of collecting her a peck of Yankee finger nails to make her a sewing basket of as she is ingenious at such things but I feared I could not get them to her." A Virginia cavalryman had better luck

when he camped on the battlefield of Brandy Station ten weeks after the great cavalry battle there and found himself “laying on Yankee bones” at the very spot where his regiment had fought. He wrote his wife that his brother Preston, in the same regiment, “is now making a ring of some portion of the leg bone of the dead yankee.”²⁵

Perhaps the ultimate in vindictiveness was expressed by an officer in an artillery battery defending Charleston, who was cheered by news of the burning of Chambersburg. “I long to hear,” he wrote his fiancée, like him a member of a prominent low-country family, “that we are paying the Yankees off in the same coin we have been enduring for the last 4 years—burn! and slay! until Ft. Pillow with all its fancied horrors shall appear as insignificant as a schoolboy’s tale.” A month later, after Sherman’s capture of Atlanta, many of the Union prisoners at Andersonville were moved to Charleston. The South Carolinian wrote again to his fiancée that “I never saw a worse looking set than the Yankee prisoners. They have all wasted away from starvation and are fortunately dying rapidly. . . . That is much better than exchanging them.” Yellow fever had broken out in Charleston, and “if it only gets among those 15,000 [prisoners] encamped on the race course it will make them beautifully less.”²⁶

I do not mean to suggest that such sentiments animated most Confederates. It is true that as the war ground on and devastated a widening swath of the South, the initial patriotism and ideological commitment of many Confederate soldiers became transmuted into hatred and a passion for revenge. But for others their initial idealism, even if intensified by more visceral emotions, persisted to the end. Confederate soldiers’ letters and diaries continued in 1864 and even into 1865 to abound with such expressions as this “gigantic struggle for liberty,” for “the great Democratic principles of States’ Rights and States’ Sovereignty,” for “the dear rights of

freemen” against “tyranny and oppression,” a cause “made a thousand times dearer by the sacrifice it has cost and is costing us.”²⁷ At a low point in Confederate morale in 1864, a Mississippi private insisted that “the old Troops are not as near whipped as the citizens at home. . . . Let [the war] be long or short meat or no meat shoes or no shoes [we are] Resolved to fight it out . . . for the sake of liberty . . . if we give it up now we will certainly be the most degraded people on earth.” A Louisiana cavalryman believed that a Yankee triumph would be “more galling in its tyranny than the darkest horror under which Ireland or Poland has ever groaned,” and a Mississippi officer feared it would mean descent “to a depth of degradation immeasurably below that of the Helots of Greece.”²⁸

We must give the last word to an Alabama lieutenant who exulted in the name of Rebel. “We should be proud of [that] noble name,” he wrote in December, 1864. “George Washington . . . Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and ‘Light Horse’ Harry Lee . . . were all Rebels. . . . Our martyred Saviour was called *seditions*, and I may be pardoned if I rejoice that I am a Rebel.”²⁹

Could Union soldiers match this intensity of ideological conviction? The next chapter will address that question.