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A Military Legacy of the Civil War: The British Inheritance

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Few works about the American Civil War have aged as gracefully as Jay Luvaas's *The Military Legacy of the Civil War: The European Inheritance*. Since its publication in 1959, it has commanded widespread assent among historians, leading them to downplay the impact of the conflict on European military thought.¹ Luvaas asserts the Civil War "never exerted a direct influence upon military doctrine in Europe." Even the British, he claims, who scrutinized the Civil War more thoroughly than their continental counterparts, drew nothing from the American experience that warranted reconsidering prevailing military ideas. Indeed, like everyone else in Europe, the British saw only what they wished to see, lest their visions conflict with existing military doctrine. These assertions remain unchallenged. In a new introduction written for the 1988 edition of the work, Luvaas maintained "nothing has appeared since 1959 that casts new light upon the impact of the American experience upon European armies or the lessons that individual soldiers thought they had learned."²

In fact, British observers of the American Civil War drew lessons that they and succeeding military thinkers took deeply to heart. Indeed, the semiofficial interpretation of the conflict that prevailed among the elites most intimately involved with extracting these lessons—statesmen, journalists, foreign service personnel, and soldiers—claimed that Federal forces had waged a new type of war unprecedented in **[End Page 153]** its destructiveness and scope. The limitations of a volunteer army produced by a democratic society—particularly the lack of leadership and discipline that resulted from egalitarianism—prevented the North from waging a limited war of skill. Instead, so the argument went, Federal military officials had waged a revolutionary war of nations, employing their superior weight in numbers and material to bludgeon the Confederacy. Showing little knowledge of the military art, Northern forces ignored the traditional distinction between soldier and civilian in their assault on the Southern home front while waging a war of attrition on the battlefield. Those responsible for shaping the semiofficial interpretation of the conflict found themselves appalled by the destructiveness of this struggle, doubtful that they could obtain the numbers necessary for a war of attrition and frightened by the revolutionary potential of this type of conflict. Instead of seeking to emulate this new style of warfare, they counseled that Britain ought to avoid it and the democracy that served as its foundation. Indeed, they presented Confederate forces as a model for emulation, highlighting the social inequality that had produced traditional military virtues in the South. These notions associated with a skillful *Confederate* way of war exerted much influence on British military thought in the period leading up to World War I, particularly through the works of G. F. R. Henderson, Britain's leading military theorist of the era.

This semiofficial view of the war did not go unchallenged. During the war, a number of leading Radical figures and journals sought to stress the military strengths of the democratic North. Although these observers felt reluctant to endorse the destructive war of nations on which the Federals had embarked, they reveled in the invincibility of a democracy engaged in a revolutionary war of principle. The identity between people and state meant that a democratic society possessed much greater staying power, while the meritocracy that dominated such a society ensured that the best leaders would eventually rise to the top. These Radicals insisted that the Northern experience had proved not only that democracies could endure the strain of modern war, but that they would become unconquerable if they sustained a revolutionary idealism.

The semiofficial and Radical views of the war constituted part of a much broader public debate in Britain over the American conflict's meaning. Although Luvaas attempted to portray each European interpreter of the Civil War "against a background of ideas and doctrines alive in his own army," he neither investigated this debate nor traced its influence on military thinking. In large part, this omission stems from Luvaas...

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1. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 27. For how Luvaas's work has minimized the influence of the Civil War on European soldiers, see Edward Hagerman, *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992), 336.

2. Jay Luvaas, *The Military Legacy of the Civil War: The European Inheritance* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1988), 226, 14, 202, 233, xv.



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