"Homemade Yankees": The First Alabama Union Cavalry in the Civil War

At the Battle of Monroe's Crossroads on March 10, 1865, as the Civil War drew to a close, Alabamians fighting for the Union helped finish off the southern rebellion. In his official report, Major Sanford Tramel, of the First Alabama Union Cavalry, described the action that day. "At the sounding of reveille," he wrote, "we were aroused from sleep by the whistling of bullets and the friendship yelling of the enemy, who were charging into our camp." Then followed "a most bloody hand-to-hand conflict, our men forming behind trees and stumps and the enemy endeavoring to charge us (mounted) with the saber. The fighting was most desperate for an hour, when we succeeded in driving the enemy away." During the fight, Tramel reported, "I was captured by the enemy and held as prisoner until the 14th instant, when I succeeded in making my escape, and after three days lying the swamps and traveling nights, I succeeded in rejoining my command." A month later, having fought for three full years against their rebel neighbors, Tramel and the First Alabama Cavalry watched as Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston surrendered the Army of Tennessee at Bennett Place.[1]

Southerners fighting for the Union represent a well-documented phenomenon to historians of the Civil War. As many as 100,000 white citizens of Confederate states, spread over eighty-five units, enlisted in the Union Army over the course of the war. The vast majority of these men came from the Upper South, particularly Virginia and Tennessee, states which had vacillated in their allegiance right up to the outbreak of hostilities. The First Alabama Cavalry, however, comprised of men from the states of the Confederate heartland. It constituted one of only a dozen white units eventually raised

[1] U. S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 vols., index, and atlas (Washington: GPO, 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. 47, pt. 1: 896-898 (hereafter cited as *OR*).

from the Deep South for the Union, and the only one from Alabama, the state where the Confederate government came into existence. As such, it occupied a small, but conspicuous, place in the minds of both Union and Confederate leaders during the war. William Stanley Hoole, author of the only dedicated history of the regiment, writes that while, from a strictly military standpoint, the unit does not appear worthy of much individual attention, the "very *existence* of the First Alabama Cavalry entitled it to special consideration."[2]

During the war, martial manifestations of unconditional Unionism on the part of Deep South whites, where they did occur, held significant symbolic importance. To northerners, these recruits stood for the ever-loyal citizens swept away by the tide of secession, upon whom the basis for reconstruction might rest. Valuable for their knowledge of the country and motivated by an even greater enmity towards the Confederate government than the northern invaders, the First Alabama Cavalry sent a clear statement to fellow southerners that not all of their countrymen acquiesced in the destruction of the Union. To Confederates, unconditional Unionists were tories in the classic sense and unconscionable traitors to the new nation. Historians have overlooked the Confederate response to the mid-war materialization of Unionism within the southern heartland, though recent scholarship has started to provide a clearer picture of its causes and consequences. The development and execution of policies toward southern "traitors" like the soldiers and officers of the First Alabama Cavalry functioned as an element of performed nationalism for the new slaveholding republic. By indicting citizens of the Confederacy for their treasonous assistance of the Union occupation, the fledgling state

[2] William Stanley Hoole. *Alabama Tories: the First Alabama Cavalry, U. S. A., 1862-1865* (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Pub. Co., 1960), 15; William W. Freehling. *The South Vs. the South: How Anti-confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), xiii.

reasserted its claim to legitimacy as the defender of an authentic nation. Relatively unheralded in Civil War literature, the First Alabama Cavalry represented both a challenge to those who sought to create a new southern nation and an opportunity to those who sought to reunite the old one.

The First Alabama Cavalry could not have come into existence in the absence of a Union military presence in the Deep South. In the spring of 1862, Union forces won a series of significant victories in the Western Theater and began to occupy parts of western and central Tennessee, as well as sections of northern Mississippi and Alabama. Soon, locals hostile to the Confederacy started filtering into Union lines at places such as Memphis, Corinth, and Huntsville, often at great hazard to themselves, offering their services to the fight against the rebel government. Recognizing the value of these potential recruits, Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell wrote to Washington from Huntsville on July 19, requesting official sanction to "organize and muster Alabamians into service in companies or regiments as they present themselves." Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton duly approved the request two days later, laying the groundwork for the formation of the First Alabama Cavalry.[3]

These individuals who made their way into the army had different, often uniquely personal, reasons for rejecting the Confederacy and becoming actively loyal to the Union. A few common motivations, however, guided their decisions. The vast majority of the men who made up the First Alabama Cavalry hailed from the regions of the Deep South where economic dependence on slavery appears least pronounced. In the Alabama counties of Blount, Walker, DeKalb and Randolph, for example, which contributed a

[3] *OR*, ser. 3, vol. 2, pt. 1: 233, 235; P. D. Hall, "A Loyal Southron: Troublesome Times in Alabama for Union Men – How the 1st Ala. Cav. Was Made Up" *National Tribune* (Washington, D.C.), December 14, 1899; Hoole, *Alabama Tories*, 7.

large portion of the regiment's recruits, the enslaved population averaged only 7.5% of the total. These four counties together produced just 11,762 bales of cotton in 1860, compared with the 64,428 produced in Marengo County alone. As a result, the prospect of the abolition of slavery – as utterly unpalatable as the idea undoubtedly seemed to most of them – did not amount to a justification for the dissolution of the Union. Their economic lives did not depend on it. Subsistence-focused farmers of the Deep South's White Belt had resented the political and economic domination of the planter class for decades, and in the secession winter the Black Belt's precipitation of a potentially ruinous war brought these tensions to a new height. As William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson note, "nonslaveholders rarely objected to enslavement of blacks." Rather, they objected to "slaveholders' antiegalitarian dominion over whites in the name of shoring up dominion over blacks." James Bell, a resident of Winston County, Alabama, wrote to his son Henry, then living in a secessionist county of Mississippi, that, "all they [the slaveholders] want is to git you pupt up and go to fight for there infurnal negroes and after you do there fighting you may kiss there hine parts for o [all] they care."[4]

Some upcountry counties of the Cotton South, Whig enclaves in states traditionally safe for the Democratic Party, sent anti-secession delegates to their states' respective secession conventions. Doomed in their efforts to stem the overwhelming tide of pro-secession fervor, most representatives from these regions ultimately yielded and signed the ordinance, while a few bitterly refused. Once separation became a fait

[4] Hugh C. Bailey, "Disloyalty in Early Confederate Alabama." *The Journal of Southern History* 23.4 (November 1, 1957), 525; Hoole, *Alabama Tories*, 11; J. Mills Thornton. *Politics and Power In a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 349; Walter L. Fleming. *Civil War and Reconstruction In Alabama.* (Cleveland: The A.H. Clark Company, 1911), 129; William W. Freehling and Craig M Simpson. *Showdown In Virginia: the 1861 Convention and the Fate of the Union* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), xviii.

accompli, most white residents of states that joined the Confederacy threw their full support behind the new nation. Alabama historian Walter L. Fleming writes that "at the beginning of the war there were probably no more than 2000 men who were wholly disaffected" in the state. These recalcitrant southerners, however, mostly poor non-slaveholding farmers who had nothing to gain and everything to lose from war with the Union, determined to stay out of the conflict altogether.[5]

When the Confederate Congress approved conscription in the spring of 1862, such passivity became impossible to sustain. The unpopular legislation, soon followed by the notorious "Twenty-Slave Law," further alienated many of the South's poorest citizens, who now possessed proof of their marginalization in the slaveholding republic. Designed to maximize the fighting ranks of Confederate armies, conscription also drove some poor whites, still unwilling to fight the Union, into hiding. Those who fled to the woods became known colloquially as "mossbacks." As efforts at conscription ramped up, others finally volunteered for Confederate service only to desert at the first opportune moment. Looking back after the war, one prominent southern Unionist remarked that, "if they had a right to conscript me when I didn't want to fight the Union, I had a right to quit when I got ready." Some, crucially, possessed another option, and decided they would rather cast their lot with the Union forces that came within reach than with the government that coerced them into serving in a war they opposed. The progress of northern arms created an outlet for white anti-Confederates of the Deep South, who by mid-1862 found that the war had reached their doorstep. "As with so many aspects of Confederate history," writes Gary W. Gallagher, "the impact of Union military forces

[5] Georgia Lee Tatum. *Disloyalty In the Confederacy*. (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 6-8; Clarence Phillips Denman. *The Secession Movement In Alabama* (Montgomery: Alabama state department of archives and history, 1933), 147-151.

likely played a significant role in shaping behavior and attitudes among people hoping to maintain some type of neutrality." Thrust into the war against their will, a few white southerners seized the chance to don the blue uniform, and by doing so endeavored to defend their homes and their families, aid in the destruction of the rebel government, and accelerate the restoration of the old Union.[6]

Some who joined the First Alabama Cavalry did so not out of unwavering loyalty to the Union, but because of depredations suffered at the hands of the Confederate government. To rabid secessionists, neutrality signified tacit approval of a Republican administration, and, in the crucible of war, represented no less than outright toryism and treason. Attempting to enforce conscription, Confederates sometimes resorted to extreme measures when faced with resistance. Jesse Tiara, of Marion County, Alabama, became known as a "lie-out," determined to avoid serving. As a result, Confederates burned down his house, destroyed "twenty-one bales of cotton, thirty bushels of oats, fifteen hundred bundles of fodder, a wagon," and "cut the ears off" two of his horses. Another Alabamian who joined Union forces wrote that he did so in part after witnessing the hanging of "old man Kennedy" for "no offense whatever" but his anti-Confederate sentiments. In the novel *Tobias Wilson*, published in 1865 by Alabama Unionist Jeremiah Clemens, the protagonist similarly joins Union forces only after the murder of his grandfather at the hands of Confederate soldiers. Captured by conscription agents, Wilson makes his escape and joins Union forces near Chattanooga. "It is impossible for any one who has not witnessed them," wrote Clemens in his preface, "to appreciate the

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[6] *New Orleans Item* (New Orleans, LA) March 20, 1921; Gary W. Gallagher, "Disaffection, persistence, and nation: some directions in recent scholarship on the confederacy." *Civil War History* 55.3 (September 1, 2009), 352; Albert Burton Moore. *Conscription and Conflict In the Confederacy.* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), 16-18.

wrongs, indignities and outrages to which the Southern Union men have been subjected. Their property taken or destroyed, their persons constantly threatened with incarceration, if not assassination, and their sons dragged to the slaughter pen." These, he averred, "were common occurrences, whose frequent recurrence deprived them of half their horror." Many of the white residents of the Deep South who served in the Union army did so because the actions of the Confederate government pushed them into northern arms.[7]

In all, 2,066 soldiers enlisted in the First Alabama Cavalry over the course of the war. By constantly recruiting, the unit continued to add volunteers to its ranks as Union forces penetrated deeper into the Confederate heartland. Roughly one-half listed an Alabama birthplace, most from counties such as Madison, Winston, and Morgan in the northern part of the state, though Hoole estimates that as many as three-quarters resided in Alabama when they joined. In addition, 271 Georgians, 150 Tennesseans, 76 North Carolinians, and 65 Mississippians volunteered. Ninety-eight natives of South Carolina fought for the regiment as well, among the rarest of all white southern Unionists. The First Alabama Cavalry drew its men from the politically marginalized corners of the Deep South, where the Union army's presence provided an outlet for their collective frustration. Colonel Abel O. Streight, of Indiana, believed that "if there could be a sufficient force in that portion of the country to protect these people, there could be at least two full regiments raised of as good and true men as ever defended the American

[7] Margaret M. Storey. *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists In the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 83; Hall, "A Loyal Southron."; Jeremiah Clemens. *Tobias Wilson: a Tale of the Great Rebellion. 1st Ser.* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1865), vii.

flag . . . They have been shut out from all communication with any thing but their enemies for a year and a half, and yet they stand firm and true."[8]

The First Alabama Cavalry officially mustered into service at Corinth, Mississippi, on December 18, 1862. Enlisted men, most of who had signed on for three-year terms, selected company officers, with northern veterans assuming a prominent leadership role within the unit. Indeed, northern-born officers commanded the southern regiment for the entire period of its service. Captain Ozro J. Dodd, of the 81st Ohio, was elected the first lieutenant colonel, and Adjutant George L. Godfrey, formerly of the 2nd Iowa, the first major. Writing after the war, a former member of the First noted that only "Co. B was officered by native Alabamians." The experimental unit effectively combined proto-scalawags with proto-carpetbaggers. Part of a larger re-organization resulting in the creation of the XVI Corps, the newly minted First Alabama Cavalry fell under the command of New England native Brig. Gen. Grenville M. Dodge as 1863 opened.[9]

Arriving in Corinth, Union headquarters in northern Mississippi, after receiving both a wound and a promotion at the battle of Pea Ridge, Dodge had helped organize the Alabamians entering Union lines into a regiment. He considered them an especially valuable asset to the Union cause. "These mountain men," he claimed, "were fearless and would take all chances." He appears unusually proactive, even cavalier, in his efforts to mobilize anti-Confederate southerners, black and white, throughout the war. For example, "at Corinth," he wrote, "I established the great contraband camp and guarded it

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[8] Hoole, *Alabama Tories*, 15-16; Frank Moore and Edward Everett. *The Rebellion Record,* 11 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1861-1868), vol. 5, 284. In addition, the unit contained a small number of men who listed a Northeastern or Midwestern birthplace, as well as eight men who were foreign born (two from England, two from Ireland, and one each from Canada, Germany, France, and Norway).

[9] "What Has Become of all the Old Boys?" *National Tribune* (Washington, DC) January 24, 1889; "…Horrible Massacre by the Rebels…" *New York Times* (New York, NY) April 16, 1864.

by two companies of Negro soldiers that I uniformed, armed, and equipped without any authority, and which came near giving me trouble. Many of the Negro men afterwards joined the First Alabama Colored Infantry and other Negro Regiments that I raised and mustered into the service." Before it had become official Union military policy, Dodge recognized the value of deploying the Confederacy's own manpower against it and did not hesitate to act. He steadily built an information network, in part through these pet units, that stretched throughout the Cotton South. Acknowledging his energy and ability, Ulysses S. Grant, in overall command of Union forces in the Western Theater, made Dodge his intelligence chief in 1863, telling him, "you have a much more important command than that of a division in the field." Dodge, in turn, relied on units such as the First Alabama Cavalry, which he singled out for special praise during and after the war. As a measure of the regiment's importance to him, he placed his chief of staff, Colonel George E. Spencer, "a very competent officer who was a genius in getting inside of the enemy's lines," at its head.[10]

Born in the North Country region of New York State in 1836, Spencer attended college in Canada before moving to Iowa, where he enlisted at the outbreak of hostilities. In the early stages of the war he formed a close relationship with Dodge, five years his senior, who had also migrated west and volunteered for an Iowa unit. Markedly ambitious, Spencer requested a transfer from Dodge to command the First Alabama Cavalry, which his superior readily obliged. As the regiment's colonel, Spencer most often speaks for the unit in the dispatches and reports in the *Official Records*, and he

[10] Grenville M. Dodge. *The Battle of Atlanta: and Other Campaigns, Addresses, Etc.* (Council Bluffs: The Monarch Print. Co., 1911), 116-117; William B. Feis, "Finding the Enemy: The Role of Military Intelligence in the Campaigns of Ulysses S. Grant, 1861-1865" Diss. The Ohio State University, 1997, 218; John F. Marszalek, and John Y Simon eds., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant,* 32 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967). vol. 7, 15.

gained a national reputation as a leader of the Union men of the Deep South. The *New York Times*, for example, noted in late 1863 that the, "commander of the First regiment of Alabama cavalry is in this City, on a brief leave of absence. The regiment . . . is composed entirely of Alabamians and Mississippians . . . men who know by experience what the rebel tyranny is, and are willing to spend their life exterminating it. They are a noble body of soldiers, and have a most accomplished and gallant leader." Just 26 when he took command, Spencer aimed to make a name for himself at the head of this noteworthy unit.[11]

Initially, the First Alabama Cavalry engaged in typical cavalry assignments such as reconnaissance and short-range raids. Union brass often subdivided the regiment and assigned various companies to a variety of duties in concert with other units. In early 1863, near Tuscumbia, Alabama on the Tennessee River, they received their baptism by fire. The official report records that, "after charging to within short musketrange of the enemy, [the men] halted for some cause I cannot account for, and the enemy escaped to the woods." Immediately thereafter, "Captain Cameron was killed . . . when the enemy turned and poured a perfect hail of lead into our ranks." The First Alabama Cavalry sometimes lacked for discipline, but not for bravery. Writing to Maj. Gen. Stephen A. Hurlbut, Dodge praised the men, affirming that, "the charge of the Alabamians with muskets only, and those unloaded, is creditable, especially as they are all new recruits and poorly drilled."[12]

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[11] Terry L. Seip, "Of Ambition and Enterprise: The Making of Carpetbagger George E. Spencer," in Kenneth W. Noe ed., *The Yellowhammer War: The Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2013), 191-220; "FIRST ALABAMA CAVALRY. col. GEORGE E. SPENCER, the commander of the first regiment of.. 1863." *NYT*, August 15, 1863.
[12] *OR,* ser. 1, vol. 23, pt. 1, 251-258; *OR,* ser. 1, vol. 23, pt. 1, 246-250.

In April, two companies participated in Streight's Raid, an abortive attempt to destroy portions of the Western & Atlantic Railroad that ran between Atlanta and Chattanooga. Poorly planned and poorly executed, it ended in embarrassment. Four regiments of Confederate cavalry, led by Brig. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, quickly caught up with Streight and pursued him and his men across Alabama. Through a clever piece of deception typical of Forrest, the Confederates tricked Streight into thinking he was outnumbered and induced him to surrender his command at Cedar Bluff, near the Georgia border. Among those taken prisoner, the Alabamians became some of the first white residents of the Deep South captured in action fighting for the Union. Their capture initiated an unprecedented discussion at the highest levels of Confederate government. The treatment of prisoners of war, for both sides, carried significant political implications as each sought to formulate policies that aligned with their formal diplomatic stance toward the other.[13]

Less than a week later, on May 8, Governor John G. Shorter of Alabama contacted Confederate Secretary of War James A. Seddon. Forced, for the first time, to consider how to manage a formerly theoretical problem, Shorter framed his letter as a discussion of jurisdiction and policy. He hoped, "to arrive at just and correct conclusions as to the proper course to pursue not only in relation to the present but to future captures of our own citizens willingly serving in the ranks of the enemy." Evidently alarmed, he reported that the prisoners "have been captured on the soil of Alabama not only levying war against the State but instigating the slaves to rebellion." This represented the most disquieting form of subversion. The position of the First Alabama Cavalry, Shorter

[13] Keith S. Hebert, "Streight's Raid" *The Encyclopedia of Alabama*. n. page. Web. 30 October, 2007; *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 23, pt. 1, 292-295.

judged, "has been volunteer treason, openly avowed and boastingly vindicated, their attack upon the State premeditated, their violence wanton and malicious." Legally, without a shadow of a doubt, he wrote, "they stand as citizens levying war as well as giving aid and comfort to our enemies." For Shorter, their situation contained little ambiguity. "It cannot be alleged for them," he concluded, "as it might be for traitorous citizens of border States, that there are conflicting claims of hostile governments." Because they had chosen to remain in the state after secession, Shorter argued, the Alabamians could not claim to have retained their United States citizenship, and therefore their crimes amounted to insurrection. Satisfied that the captured men would receive their just deserts, Shorter's principal concern in writing to Seddon was determining who would have the honor to mete out the punishment. He requested that the secretary of war remand the prisoners to his state for trial, adding as a *nota bene* that, "it may become expedient in order to satisfy the public mind now much exercised on these questions to publish our correspondence."[14]

After inquiring to General Braxton Bragg, Forrest's commanding officer, about the Alabamians, Seddon replied to Shorter on May 23. He informed the governor that, "this communication has been submitted to the President and has been the subject of advisement and grave consideration." Though he had, "been instructed to inform you that while on the statement of facts presented the offenses of these parties against the laws and dignity of the State are recognized," he judged that, "considerations of public policy in his judgment make it more advisable that the cases should be brought under the cognizance of the tribunals of the Confederacy and remain subject to the final determination of its Executive." Agreeing with Shorter that such treason deserved a

[14] *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 5, pt. 1, 946-947.

conspicuous response, Seddon grimly concluded that "some of the officers of these companies . . . will suffice perhaps to . . . serve as exemplars of the punishment which will be visited on such crimes." Though the captured Alabamians ultimately eluded Confederate justice, mistakenly paroled before Seddon could order their remand, the conversation itself appears significant. The punishment of treason represents a fundamental assertion of national authority. Any aspirant nation state had to appear in control of those residing within it. In this way, the First Alabama Cavalry presented not only a problem, but also an opportunity, to Confederate authorities seeking to reaffirm their nationalistic credentials. The escaped Alabamians represented a missed chance to, in Seddon's words, "exhibit the determination of the government."[15]

Since the earliest stages of the war, Confederate leaders had prepared for the possibility of persistent Unionism within their new nation. As early as 1861, Judah P. Benjamin, one of Seddon's predecessors as secretary of war, similarly advised making a visible example of traitors. Having captured a number of Unionist bridge-burners, Confederate authorities in eastern Tennessee appealed to Benjamin, who informed them that those actively involved in the burning "are to be tried summarily by drum-head court-martial, and, if found guilty, executed on the spot by hanging." To underscore both the culprits' perfidy as well as the resolve of the new government, he added, "it would be well to leave their bodies hanging in the vicinity of the burned bridges." Having seen intense resistance to secession in the Appalachian regions of eastern Tennessee and

[15] *OR,* ser. 2, vol. 5, pt. 1, 952, 955-956; Paul Quigley. *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South, 1848-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 158.

western Virginia, Benjamin advocated a strong public response toward treasonous citizens.[16]

In Alabama and other states of the Deep South, persistent Unionism in counties that had expressed a reluctance to secede does not appear to have taken Confederate leaders especially by surprise. Many residents who had opposed secession hoped to stay out of the war altogether and adopted a supposedly neutral stance, but Confederate leaders believed they saw through such ambivalence to the treason it masked. Assessing the situation in early 1862, Brig. Gen. Bushrod R. Johnson reported that "the northern counties of Alabama, you know, are full of Tories. There has been a convention recently held in the corner of Winston, Fayette, and Marion Counties, Alabama, in which the people resolved to remain neutral; which simply means they will join the enemy when they occupy the country." Even in Mississippi, from where he wrote, "people from these counties have been…carrying the United States flag."[17]

Conscription hardened the fault lines in contested regions of the Confederacy, and forced military-age men either into the ranks – on one side or the other – or into prison. Some finally acceded to the law's demand and enlisted in the Confederate Army, while others, where Union forces came within reach, rejected the laws of the new slaveholding republic altogether and appealed to their old flag for protection. As the Union army began to establish a presence in Confederate territory, and the Confederacy stepped up its efforts at impressment, pockets of the Deep South became the site of bitter internecine warfare. "Of deserters, tories, and 'mossbacks' there could not have been less than 8000 or 10,000 in north Alabama," judged Walter Fleming, and "of these, at least half were in

[16] *OR,* ser. 1, vol. 4, pt. 1, 245.
[17] *OR,* ser. 1, vol. 10, pt. 2, 431.

active depredation all over the section." A volatile combination of staunch Confederates, disillusioned deserters, and steadfast Unionists created a chaotic situation in parts of the southern heartland after 1862.[18]

William McGough, of Walker County, Alabama, experienced the turmoil acutely. He had two sons in the First Alabama Cavalry, and four in the Confederate army. Appealing to the Southern Claims Commission after the war, McGough claimed he had always supported the Union, and attested that his pro-Confederate neighbors had repeatedly threatened his life. "They said they would kill me," he wrote, "and let the buzzards pick my bones. They tried at one time to burn me out . . . said that we were dangerous men to the Confederacy and that we ought to be hung." The practice of "burning-out" alleged draft resisters occurred with relative frequency in northern Alabama during the war. Attempting to defend his family's Unionist bona fides, he averred that his four sons in the Confederate army had not joined willingly, but "were all of them forced into the army by the Conscript Act." One died less than a month after "they took him off," and another deserted to Union lines at Petersburg, he explained. He conceded, however, that of his four sons forced into Confederate service, only "three of them were true Union men." From within this one Alabama family came two Unionists who managed to enlist in the Federal army, three Unionists impressed into the Confederate army, and one true neutral who was – by his father's own account – neither an avowed Union man nor a Confederate volunteer. The case of the McGough sons

[18] *OR,* ser. 1, vol. 52, pt. 2, 609-614; Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama*, 128; Stephen V. Ash. *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos In the Occupied South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 69; Danielson, Joseph Wesley. *War's Desolating Scourge: the Union's Occupation of North Alabama.* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 124.

illustrates the contested nature of national allegiance in some upcountry regions of the Deep South.[19]

Attempting to impose order and sort friend from foe, Confederate authorities sometimes had trouble differentiating between disgruntled anti-Confederates, whose grievances might merit redress, and dedicated Unionists, whose treason merited swift punishment. In legal terms, argues Stephanie M. McCurry, after the passage of the conscription laws "no distinction remained between draft evaders, resisters, and deserters." In fact, Confederate leaders did make a distinction: between the draft evaders and deserters who refused to aid the Confederacy, and resisters, like the men of the First Alabama Cavalry, who took up arms for the Union. As the situation on the ground grew increasingly muddled, Alabamians in blue at least represented the most unambiguous form of resistance to Confederate nationalism. Their regiment, and others like it, deserved specific treatment. Governor Shorter, for one, asserted that, "in avowing themselves Alabamians and as such serving with marauding bands of the enemy within the borders of our State . . . [they] are not entitled to the privileges of prisoners of war." Seddon agreed.[20]

These men did not merely reflect a disaffected citizenry shirking their duty. They represented an internal affront to the would-be nation, a negative referent to hold up against the patriotic ideal. The Rome, Georgia *Tri-Weekly Courier* reported in early 1864 that a member of the "1st Alabama Tory Battalion" had recently gone "to the house of Elisa Barbour, *a true Southerner,* and beat Mrs. Barbour with a hickory withe, and only

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[19] Claim 2071, William McGough, Walker Co. June 8, 1871. *U.S. Southern Claims Commission Master Index, 1871-1880* [database on-line] Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2007. [Accessed April 9, 2015.]

[20] Stephanie McCurry. *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics In the Civil War South.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 123; *OR*, ser. 2, vol. 5, pt. 1, 946-947.

desisted when her daughter, heroically, seized an axe and drove him off." The same paper described the unit as, "villainous whelps," and hoped that the authorities would "bring the traitorous wretches to a punishment befitting their crimes." One rebel captain, writing in 1863, even dubbed the members of the First Alabama Cavalry "abolition devils." Purging such men from their midst was among the *raisons d'etre* of the Confederacy.[21]

Ultimately, however, the Confederate government never formulated a consistent set of policies toward its traitorous citizens. The exigencies of war precluded it. Accusations of treasonous activity could lead to everything from a short stint in jail to the scaffold depending on the circumstances. In Montgomery, Alabama, for example, William Bibb, an elderly member of one of the city's leading families, remained an outspoken and unapologetic Unionist throughout the war, avoiding any detention whatsoever. In the same city, however, authorities arrested Daniel Starr, a Connecticut native, for subversive writings in 1863. Taken to jail, locals dragged Starr from his cell and lynched him near the edge of town. These Montgomerians did not wait for a formal conviction of sedition. Neither did the residents of Gainesville, Texas, who in late 1862 subjected alleged Unionists to mob justice. After Confederate officials ordered the arrest of almost anyone that had expressed a resistance to the draft, locals seized control of proceedings and ultimately executed more than forty men. A kangaroo court, neither military nor civil, sentenced roughly a third to hang, and mob lynchings – without even the benefit of a show trial – accounted for the rest. Throughout the South, pro-

[21] *Weekly Courier* (Rome, GA), May 15, 1863; *Tri-Weekly Courier* (Rome, GA), February 18, 1864; *Evening star* (Washington, DC), May 16, 1863.

Confederate civilians often took the law into their own hands, forming their own criteria for what constituted treason and meting out their own punishments.[22]

Confederate officials, at least, maintained a distinction in theory between treasonous professions of loyalty and treasonous deeds, like those so openly perpetrated by the soldiers of the First Alabama Cavalry. Advocating desertion and facilitating defection did not hold the same symbolic menace to authorities as actually donning the enemy's uniform – literally becoming a turncoat – which demanded an authoritative response from the would-be nation. Had the regiment's colonel, George E. Spencer, been captured, he might have faced capital punishment, in accord with Confederate policy toward white officers at the head of black regiments. Authorities threatened to punish acts of sedition with imprisonment, but, as befitted a sovereign nation, threatened acts of insurrection with summary execution. In 1864, Lt. Gen. Leonidas Polk instructed a subordinate that, "there is in North Alabama a secret society composed of citizens and soldiers for the purpose of opposing the Confederate Government and promoting desertions to the Federal army. Should these men be found in arms and offering resistance, you will order that they be put to death on the spot." The First Alabama Cavalry represented an opportunity for the Confederate government to articulate its policies toward treason, and to perform that particular aspect of its national authority. The extermination of these "homemade Yankees," as Polk made clear, had become a high priority. The very existence of the First Alabama Cavalry, however, also indicated a

[22] William Warren Rogers Jr., "Safety Lies Only in Silence: Secrecy and Subversion in Montgomery's Unionist Community" in John C. Inscoe and Robert C Kenzer eds. *Enemies of the Country: New Perspectives On Unionists In the Civil War South.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 172-188; James M. Smallwood, "Disaffection in Confederate Texas: The Great Hanging at Gainesville.."*Civil War History* 22.4 (Dec1976): 349-360.

potential crack in the Confederacy's foundation, one that northerners appeared keen to exploit.[23]

Just as the regiment offered Confederates a chance to affirm their nationalism through the prosecution of treason, it also offered that opportunity to northerners, who saw the unit as exemplars of unbroken citizenship and sustained support for federal authority. To many, the First Alabama Cavalry represented the uncompromised integrity of the Union and the illusory nature of Confederate sovereignty. Newspapers across the North, and within the occupied South, reported on the "First Alabama Loyal Cavalry" and carried news of their exploits. In February, 1864, the San Francisco *Daily Evening Bulletin* reported that, "but few persons are aware of the existence of a loyal white regiment of Alabamians; yet it deserves honorable mention in this age of strife, as much for the circumstances under which it was organized, as for the signal service it has since rendered to the Government." Northerners held "citizens' meetings" in their honor. A number of figures associated with the regiment rose to prominence, and came to stand for the long-suffering Unionists of the Deep South who could form the foundation for future reconstruction.[24]

These well-known recruiters for the First Alabama Cavalry, native southerners rather than northern transplants, functioned as a direct connection between the regiment and the hopes for white southern Republicanism that it represented to northerners. William Hugh Smith, for example, "a man well known to Alabamians," championed the unit throughout the war. Born in Georgia, he moved across the border to Randolph

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[23] *OR*, ser. 1, vol. 38, pt. 4, 657-658.

[24] *Orleans independent standard.* (Irasburgh, VT), February 19, 1864; Correspondence of the N. Y. "Post". "Loyal Alabamians—The First Alabama Cavalry Regiment."*Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco, CA) March 17, 1864: 3. *19th Century U.S. Newspapers*. Web. 16 Apr. 2015; Hoole, *Alabama Tories,* 5.

County, Alabama in his youth, and, from 1855 to 1859, served in the State House of Representatives. Smith had opposed secession on the grounds that it would threaten slave property. In 1862, having made his antipathy toward the Confederacy clear, he fled with his father to Union lines. For the rest of the war, he lent his support to efforts to organize and mobilize the loyal men of the Deep South. Among many others, Smith enlisted three of his brothers in the First Alabama Cavalry. "It was his plan," writes Walter L. Fleming, "to carry on the state government with the 2000 or 3000 'unionists' and the United States troops." He believed that his continual support for the federal government, and his work on its behalf with the First Alabama Cavalry, would ensure him a leading role in the reintegration of his state into the Union.[25]

Another native southerner well known to contemporaries, Jeremiah Clemens recruited for the First Alabama Cavalry and functioned as a national representative of Unionists within the Confederacy. Born in Huntsville in 1814, Clemens commanded a regiment in the Mexican War and represented Alabama as a senator for one term during the Fillmore administration. He opposed secession and represented Madison County as a "wait and see" delegate at the state's convention. Like the great preponderance of white men in the South, however, he initially set aside his objections and turned out for the Confederacy when the war began. In the spring of 1862, with the arrival of Union forces to northern Alabama, Clemens defected. He spent the rest of the war working to return his state to the Union, organizing disenchanted anti-Confederates, and recruiting men for the First Alabama Cavalry. Clemens also corresponded with President Lincoln on how

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[25] James Alex Baggett. *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters In the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 73; Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction In Alabama*, 736; Michael W. Fitzgerald, "William Hugh Smith" *The Encyclopedia of Alabama*. n. page. Web. September 30, 2014; Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, *The Scalawag In Alabama Politics, 1865-1881* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 38.

best to approach Reconstruction in Alabama. He favored the installation of a military governor in the northern part of the state who would "set the machinery of laws in motion" and form the focal point for the restoration of the Federal government throughout. He supported emancipation, telling Vice President Andrew Johnson that the "Secessionists deserve [it] as a punishment for their guilt, & the Union men would rather part with [slavery] now & forever." The administration valued Clemens' opinion as an authoritative Alabamian plugged into Union activity in the state.[26]

When appealing to his fellow southerners, Clemens channeled Lincoln's charitable tone based on reconciliation. In a widely circulated pamphlet written in October 1864, he spoke to his countrymen still engaged in rebellion. "You ought to abandon at once the attitude of armed resistance to a Government that never wronged you, and a people whose hearts now bleed in sympathy with yours over the miseries which the mad ambition of your leaders has produced," Clemens reasoned. "Return, as you may now do without dishonor," he wrote, "to the protection of that banner which has been for nearly a century the symbol of freedom and the harbinger of happiness." Men such as Clemens and Smith, it seemed, gave voice to the forcibly silenced Unionists within the Confederacy. They represented, to the North, the ever-loyal foundation upon which Reconstruction could begin in the Deep South. But before they could help rebuild their state, the Alabamians in blue would have to finish off their counterparts in grey on the battlefield. Never one to miss a chance to send a pointed message, Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman chose the Alabamians as his headquarters escort on his March to the

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[26] Joseph W. Danielson, "Jeremiah Clemens" *The Encyclopedia of Alabama*. n. page. Web. August 18, 2008; William C. Harris. *With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union.* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 159; Clemens to Andrew Johnson, Nov. 19, 1864 in Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson,* 16 vols. (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1967-1969), vol. 7, 303-4.

Sea in the fall of 1864. Taking Smith with him, Sherman placed southerners in the vanguard of his declaration of total war on the Confederacy.[27]

In addition to the unmistakable symbolism of surrounding himself with loyal southerners, Sherman picked the First Alabama Cavalry to help lead the march for practical reasons as well. Setting out on November 15 with less than three weeks' rations, Union forces would rely on forage for sustenance. The men of the First, one Union officer wrote, "enjoyed a special faculty of divining the most likely locality that a southern rebel would choose for secreting provisions." Essentially, Union commanders expected southern soldiers to possess a certain familiarity with the country and its people. They had proven themselves in battle during the Atlanta campaign that summer, clashing with the enemy at Resaca, Dallas, Kennesaw Mountain, and Jonesboro. Now, with their pedigree established, Sherman called on the First Alabama Cavalry to help deal the death blow to the Confederacy. "We are all bustle and excitement here just now being on the eve of another campaign," wrote Colonel Spencer from Atlanta, adding that he thought he could, "make some reputation on this trip." Thought to possess a superior knowledge of the country, they often spearheaded General Francis Blair's column of the march. A common refrain of Blair's orders placed, "the First Alabama Cavalry . . . moving in advance," and the regiment consistently led the XVII Corps on the march to Savannah.[28]

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[27] "Letter from the Hon. Jere. Clemens (1864)" in Jon L. Wakelyn, *Southern Unionist Pamphlets and the Civil War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 330-341; William T. Sherman. *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman.* (New York: D. Appleton, 1876), 178.

[28] Frederick H. Dyer. *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion.* (Des Moines, IA: The Dyer publishing company, 1908), 997; Edward D. Neill. *Glimpses of the Nation's Struggle: [1st]-6th Series. Papers Read Before the Minnesota Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States [1887]-1903/08,* 6 vols. (St. Paul, Minn. [etc.], 1887-1909), vol. 5, 191; Spencer to Dodge, November 1, 1864, in Grenville M. Dodge Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines; Seip, "The Making of Carpetbagger George E. Spencer," in Noe, ed. *The Yellowhammer War*, 205.

Making up the vanguard, the First Alabama Cavalry most often received orders to secure towns, ferries, bridges, and railroads in advance of the main host. In a typical dispatch, on November 21 one officer reported that at Milledgeville, the Alabamians "destroyed the depot and some 75 or 100 boxes of ammunition and the telegraph office . . . [and] replenished mules and horses." The men often seemed to take special glee in the destruction and seizure of Confederate property. Given license to vent their frustration toward their late countrymen, they sometimes overindulged their desire for retribution. In one particularly egregious case, a member of the First Alabama Cavalry was caught with his revolver pointed at a Georgian's temple, demanding his valuables. The conduct of Spencer's men even earned the colonel an official sanction. "The major-General commanding directs me to say to you," read the reprimand, "that the outrages committed by your command during the march are becoming so common, and are of such an aggravated nature, that they call for some severe and instant mode of correction. Unless the pillaging of houses and wanton destruction of property by your regiment ceases at once, he will place every officer in it under arrest, and recommend them to the department commander for dishonorable dismissal from the service." The First became notorious on the March to the Sea, Joseph Glatthaar writes, because they "felt they had a right to retaliate for way pro-Confederate southerners had pillaged their family homes, imprisoned family members, and drove them from their communities."[29]

David Snelling, a native Georgian and member of the First Alabama Cavalry, actually went out of his way to lead a raid against his uncle's plantation. Employed as a colporteur in central Georgia before the war, Snelling "knew every stream and cross-

[29] *OR,* ser. 1, vol. 44, pt. 1, 509-510; *OR,* ser. 1, vol. 44, pt. 1, 504-505; Joseph T. Glatthaar. *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops In the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns.* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 147-149.

roads, and kept by the side of 'Uncle Billy' all the way, to post the old man." In his youth, his uncle had forced him to work in the fields side-by-side with his slaves, engendering a deep hatred for both planters and slavery in the young man. Faced with conscription in 1862, Snelling, like a number of his comrades, had initially entered the Confederate army before deserting to join Union forces that summer. Enlisting as a private, he rose to the rank of lieutenant. On the March to the Sea, in Baldwin County near Milledgeville, he took his opportunity for revenge. After recognizing a former slave from the old plantation among the refugees coming into Union lines, Snelling secured permission from Sherman to "pay his uncle a visit." Leading a detail to the site of his pre-war suffering, Snelling and his men made off with as many provisions as they could carry and pointedly destroyed the cotton gin.[30]

In the end, Sherman did not punish the First Alabama Cavalry for their seemingly vindictive destruction. In general, it fit his policy. "The fact is," writes historian Terry Seip, "Spencer and his men were pretty much doing what Sherman wanted done, he knew Spencer and the Alabamians were capable of doing it, and the regiment remained in the vanguard." Arriving in Savannah around Christmastime, Colonel Spencer wrote to General Dodge, now commanding the Department of Missouri in St. Louis, informing him that, "we have had a delightful trip & all enjoyed it." Without a hint of modesty, he added that he had, "done all the fighting that was done by our Column (the 17th Corps) & have made a reputation for both myself & Regiment." On December 27, when Sherman formally reviewed the troops, Blair placed the First Alabama Cavalry at the head of the

[30] "What Has Become of all the Old Boys?" *National Tribune* (Washington, DC) January 24, 1889; David Williams. *Bitterly Divided: the South's Inner Civil War.* (New York: New Press, 2008), 151-152; James C. Bonner, "David R. Snelling: A Story of Desertion and Defection in the Civil War." *Georgia Review* 10 (1956): 275-282; Sherman, *Memoirs*, 186.

line, a hard earned place of distinction and source of pride to the loyal men of the Deep South.[31]

Six months later, after further fights at Averasborough and Bentonville, the regiment watched as General Joseph Johnston surrendered the last major Confederate force still in the field. The war over, the First Alabama Cavalry returned to Huntsville, where, along with the Fourth Alabama Colored Infantry, they remained as a peacekeeping force until October, before mustering out of service. They had fought for almost three years. By that time, only 397 men remained with the regiment. Many did not wait for official dismissal, departing of their own accord to return to what remained of their farms and their families. Two hundred seventy-nine deserted, in total, over the course of the war. In all, 345 men died in service with the First Alabama Cavalry: 50 in battle, 228 of disease, the rest as prisoners or as the result of "non-battle causes." No accurate count exists for the number of wounded. Eighty-eight became prisoners of war, falling into the hands of their Confederate neighbors. Of the twelve men taken to the Andersonville prison camp, all died – a striking figure even by its notorious standards. Some fled the South after the war. As ex-Confederate soldiers returned home, a number of former members of the First Alabama Cavalry migrated west to Nevada and the Dakota Territory, worried that their families could not safely remain with their wartime allegiance publicly known.[32]

Colonel Spencer, however, remained in Alabama after the war, and began practicing law in Decatur. In 1868 the Republican-controlled legislature voted him into the U.S. Senate. His participation in the post-war reconstruction of the state hinged on

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[31] Seip, "The Making of Carpetbagger George E. Spencer," in Noe, ed. *The Yellowhammer War*, 206; Spencer to Dodge, December 16, 1864, Dodge Papers.
[32] Hoole, *Alabama Tories,* 14, 18.

his involvement with the First Alabama Cavalry. "I shall settle there," he wrote during the war, "and my connections with this Regiment will do me a great deal of good . . . and I can do the country some good." Although some historians have represented Spencer as an archetypal carpetbagger, more recent scholarship has attempted to present a more nuanced characterization of his post-war career. One of the only members of the Republican Party representing a southern state to retain his seat, he remarkably managed to serve until 1879, three years after Alabama was redeemed.[33]

Following the passage of military Reconstruction, William Hugh Smith became governor of Alabama in 1868. He largely proved a disappointment to the Radical Republicans in Washington, however, as he appeared disinclined to take action against the Ku Klux Klan, re-enfranchised former Confederate leaders, and even publicly quarreled with Senator Spencer, his former wartime ally. Promising to remain the "governor *of the State,* not *of a mere party,*" Smith duly received criticism from both sides of the aisle. Nevertheless, his place in post-war state politics owed much to his involvement with the First Alabama Cavalry, which signified for Republicans his staunch Unionist credentials.[34]

Though he hoped to play a central role in the reintegration of his home state and his former neighbors into the Union, Jeremiah Clemens died of natural causes in May 1865. Having spent "more than three years in the very heart of this Titanic contest," he retired to Philadelphia where he succumbed after a long illness. His novel *Tobias Wilson,*

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[33] Seip, "The Making of Carpetbagger George E. Spencer," in Noe ed., *The Yellowhammer War,* 191-220; Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, "George E. Spencer: A Carpetbagger in Alabama," *Alabama Review* 19 (January 1966): 52. Wiggins writes that Spencer serves as a "memorable model for the concept of the corrupt Carpetbagger interested primarily in his own advancement."

[34] Michael W. Fitzgerald, "William Hugh Smith, July 1868 – December 1870" in Samuel L. Webb and Margaret E Armbrester eds. *Alabama Governors: a Political History of the State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 87-90; Wiggins, *The Scalawag In Alabama Politics,* 38.

published posthumously, became one of the first popular pieces of Civil War fiction. Its subject was the struggles of northern Alabama Unionists during the war, and it struck a chord with northern audiences.[35]

Writing in the *National Tribune* in 1899, Pinckney Hall, who had enlisted in the First Alabama Cavalry as an eighteen-year-old private, argued that his regiment had "made a greater sacrifice for the Union than the men of the North." He asked readers to "consider the loyal men of the South, especially as far south as Alabama, what they had to endure for their country. They were exposed and in danger every minute of their lives." Unlike northerners, Hall wrote, "they had to leave their families to the abuse of the enemy; had to keep themselves closely concealed like the vermin in the woods until they could make escape through the lines, and then had to share the same hardships of soldiers life that the comrades of the North bore." The dangerous stand taken by the First Alabama Cavalry deserved recognition, he argued. More than anyone else, Hall felt, they had risked their necks in rejecting the Confederacy and taking up arms for the Union.[36]

White residents of the Deep South, like Hall, represented a relatively miniscule portion of the overall Union war effort. As of 1900, only 3,469 people – including northern transplants – drew a federal pension in Alabama. Still, the very existence of a regiment like the First Alabama Cavalry presented an opportunity for both Union and Confederate authorities to make a symbolic nationalistic statement. To northerners, the regiment and its backers stood for the forcibly silenced loyal men of the Deep South, who needed only the opportunity to exhibit their commitment to the Union. Refusing to

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[35] Rhoda Coleman Ellison, "Propaganda in Early Alabama Fiction" *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 7 (1945): 432; Clemens, *Tobias Wilson,* v. Jeremiah Clemens was a distant cousin of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, later known as Mark Twain: *The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume One* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 205.

[36] Hall, "A Loyal Southron" *National Tribune* (Washington, DC) December 14, 1899.

acquiesce to the authority of the new Confederate nation, they had proven their allegiance with service to their country and could be counted on to carry on the work of Reconstruction. In 1867, the Boston *Daily Advertiser* judged that, "the fact that there returned to their homes in that region, several hundred members of the 1st Alabama Cavalry Regiment, is in the main the cause of Alabama republicanism being so far advanced." Men such as George E. Spencer, William H. Smith and Jeremiah Clemens, who each had a role in shaping post-war policy, held different ideas about how Reconstruction should proceed in Alabama, but all three based their credentials in part on their association with the First Alabama Cavalry.[37]

To Confederates who hoped to establish a new slaveholding republic, the First Alabama Cavalry embodied a traitorous refutation of that aim. The creation of policies toward these unrepentant and unconditional Unionists offered Confederate authorities the opportunity to perform an important element of their national sovereignty. White Alabamians in blue uniforms, "vicious as copperheads," provided a negative referent for the patriotic imagination of the new country. Attempting to distinguish between disenchanted deserters, unscrupulous opportunists, and bona fide Unionism, Confederate politicians James Seddon and John Shorter, as well as military figures Leonidas Polk and Stephen D. Lee, could point to the First Alabama Cavalry as the highest form of treason. Their situation, at least, contained no ambiguity. If, for Confederates, the Civil War was the second American Revolution, then the First Alabama Cavalry were among its Tories.[38]

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[37] Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction In Alabama,* 87; R. J. H. "The South" *Boston Daily Advertiser* (Boston, MA) June 15, 1867.
[38] Hugh C. Bailey, "Disaffection in the Alabama Hill Country, 1861.." *Civil War History* 4.2 (Jun1958): 191.