In Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865, William Blair, an associate professor of history at Penn State, rethinks the conventional wisdom regarding loss of will on the Confederate homefront by probing the relationship between the state of Virginia and the Confederate nation. Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson (specifically his notion of "imagined communities") and David Potter's classic essay on Southern nationalism, Blair argues that for Virginians the Confederate nation came to coincide with their pre-existing state and local loyalties. The real strength of Blair's book lies in the realm of "feeding the body." His analysis of impressment regulations, conscription policy, and poor relief show that class conflict in the Confederacy, while present, did not always exist to the detriment of the lower classes. Similarly, Blair's close attention to the ebb and flow of policymaking belies the conventional wisdom that because the Confederacy was founded on principles of states' rights and small government, its citizens resisted centralization. Rather, Blair argues, wartime expansion of government into areas like price regulation came about because the common people clamored for it.

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In constructing his state study, Blair concentrates on three counties: Albemarle and its county seat of Charlottesville, in the Piedmont; Augusta and the town of Staunton in the Shenandoah Valley; and Campbell, centered around the town of Lynchburg, in the tobacco belt. Together these counties represent a range of farming and slaveholding strategies, from small grain farms in the Valley to large plantations in Campbell. He also worked with a range of sources from other parts of the Virginia, fleshing out his portrait of a state engulfed by war. Blair's approach pays off by imbuing his story with a sense of place and stressing the ties that bound neighbors of all classes together before the war. White Virginia men had long been accustomed to rituals of democracy like public meetings and legislative petitioning in which men of all classes (artisans and small farmers, as well as planters and town elites) participated, and Blair shows how they continued to rely on those strategies during the war.

Blair adopts a chronological framework for his study, and uses it to argue that dissent and class conflict in Virginia, and by extension the Confederacy, increased in intensity until the middle of 1863. People at home wanted to preserve draft exemptions, both for local artisans and slaveholders, and to hold onto a measure of security and social control over their slaves. The first two years of the war saw increasing shortages of foodstuffs and household goods, rising concern on the part of planters for the preservation of their slave property, and growing anxiety about social disorder and petty crime in towns. One of Blair's greatest contributions comes from his close reading of this period, as he convincingly shows that Virginians did not oppose government centralization in the form of price controls and even exemptions from conscription. Their primary concern was not with the size of their government but rather with the fair and equitable application of its policies. Discontent in both Virginia and the Confederate nation as a whole peaked during the spring and summer of 1863 with a series of strikes and food riots, the best known of which was in Richmond. Desertion from the army also peaked in this period, much of it motivated by familial concerns.

Following the upheavals of 1863, the Confederate government consciously began to respond to complaints about civilian distress and enacted measures to alleviate homefront suffering. For the rest of the war, Blair demonstrates, Confederate policies were shaped by the needs of small slaveowners, yeomen, and soldiers families, not, as we had previously thought, by the slaveholding elite. The government actively intervened in markets through new impressment policies and price controls, provided more centralized support for local charities, and ended the practice of substitution. Within the army, more generous furlough policies lessened both outright desertion and the practice of "straggling" (men leaving the marching army for a few days to check on their families and then returning). Ultimately, Blair concludes, Virginians found a unifying enemy in the Union army. The Yankees were always more hated than the Confederate government, and it was the pressure from the invading army, rather than internal strife and dissension, that finally brought down the Confederacy in April 1865.

That pretty much takes care of feeding Virginians' bodies, but what about their souls? The second half of Blair's subtitle receives short shrift in this slim volume, which comprises only 152 pages of text. In large part this stems from an odd choice on Blair's part to largely forego analysis of the roles of both women and religion, "not because either is unimportant but because others have focused on and developed these topics."(9) While that may be true, their omission profoundly weakens his book. It is particularly odd for a book with the word "soul" in its title to so completely ignore the role of evangelical Christianity in both the public and private lives of Confederate citizens. Blair makes only the most tantalizing of references to Confederates' beliefs that their nation was ordained by God, the revivals that swept through the Confederate armies in 1863 and 1864, and Jefferson Davis' frequent proclamations of days of fasting, humiliation, and prayer.

Blair seems to be using the word "soul" to refer to Virginians' sense of Confederate nationalism and the place of the army, as opposed to the civil government, as the repository of people's hopes and loyalties. In his last chapter he poses "The Problem of Confederate Identity," and joins the legions of historians re-examining Confederate nationalism. Blair returns to David Potter's classic 1960s essay "The Historian's Use of Nationalism and Vice Versa" and argues that for Virginians their local and national identities meshed: in effect that for Virginians the Confederacy was Virginia writ large. Blair then describes an immediate post-war resurgence of Confederate identity, with the Radicals replacing the Union army as the designated enemy. But again, Blair's work would have benefited from more depth and analysis. He refers to the greater strength of nationalism among elite white women, but does nothing to explain why that might be so. His failure to connect religion and ideology weakens this final section considerably. Too, one wonders how much can be extrapolated about national identity in general from Virginia's unique experiences. Blair is almost too careful to stick close to home in his assessment of the power and importance of nationalism.
It's rare that a reviewer thinks that a book should be longer, but that is exactly the case with Blair's work. The story that he tells, of the ways in which Virginians were able to be both disaffected and loyal, able to shape national policy to their own needs, to force their government into "feeding their bodies," is both fresh and important. No longer can historians casually throw around terms like "class conflict" and "died of democracy" without paying heed to the subtleties that Blair ably illuminates. It is precisely the strength of this area of Blair's analysis that makes his omissions seem so glaring. We still need the story of the Confederates' souls, not just their bodies.

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