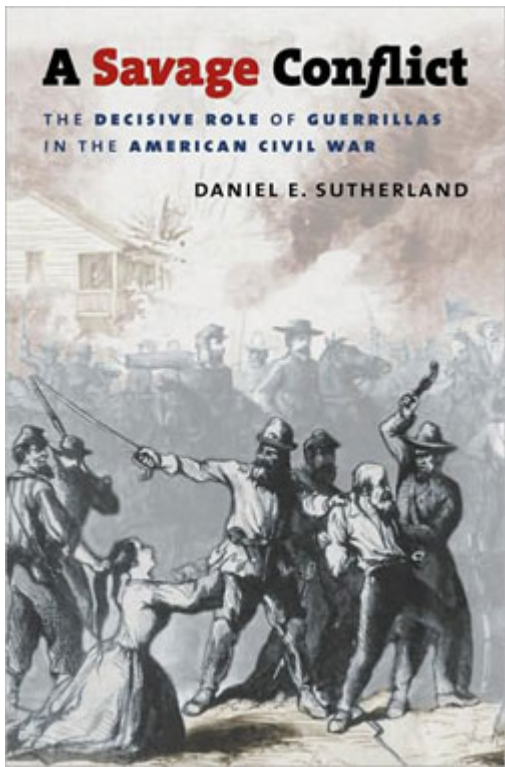


# Civil War Guerrillas: The Main Event



With this masterful work, Daniel E. Sutherland has presented historians of the American Civil War with the most important single volume on the role of guerrilla warfare to appear in twenty years. Scholars of the conflict have long awaited the publication of Sutherland's definitive work and the book does not disappoint. The author freely admits that he does not catalogue every attack and guerrilla action—an impossible task in any case. Nor does he try to put a precise number on how many irregulars fought during the conflict or even the number of bands because of the limitations of the source material. Though he narrates plenty of local conflicts, the focus of Sutherland's story is broader: how guerrilla warfare disrupted the lives of civilians, wrought changes in U.S. and Confederate military policy, and decisively affected the military events of the American Civil War. He ultimately argues that far from being a "sideshow," irregular warfare played a vital role in the outcome of America's most divisive conflict.

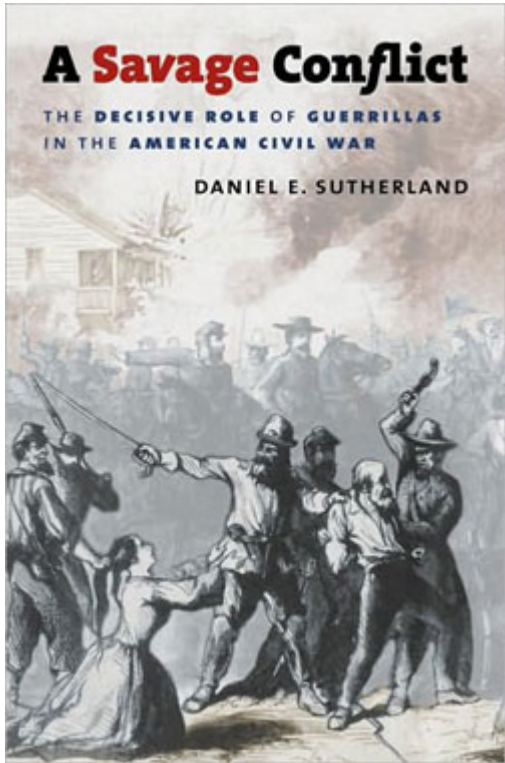
For the last three decades, the highly localized nature of guerrilla warfare has led scholars of Civil War irregulars to focus high-powered lenses on communities or regions. Phillip Shaw Paludan's classic study *Victims* (1981) on the Shelton Laurel massacre and Michael Fellman's powerfully analytical *Inside War* (1989), which addressed Missouri's brutal war, are two of the finest examples of this scholarship. Scholarship emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War as nineteenth-century historians began an intense search for the meaning behind war's brutality. In particular, America's defeat at the hands of Vietcong guerrillas pushed Civil War historians to think about why Confederates

did not effectively use irregular warfare to defeat the U.S. Army during the American Civil War. More recently work by Noel C. Fisher, Robert R. Mackey, Brian McKnight, Jonathan Dean Sarris, Clay Mountcastle, and Barton A. Myers has offered nuanced analysis on a range of topics relating to irregular warfare in Civil War America, from community studies to the development of counter-irregular policy. Sutherland's work departs from each of these earlier books in its scope by creating a lucid narrative of chaotic events across Civil War America, events which occurred from Florida and Maryland to Texas and North Carolina. Drawing on impressive archival research, Sutherland places a chronological and regional framework over his source material. The author picks up many of the threads that earlier historians have pursued and weaves it together with new, vibrant research of his own. The result is a tapestry of colorful characters and brutal events.

Sutherland addresses one of the most contentious issues of the scholarship on guerrillas—namely, how to define them. He defines three groups of Civil War irregulars: guerrillas or bands operating independently of the major armies with little or no oversight; partisan rangers or officially sanctioned guerrillas; and bushwhackers or lone gunmen, outlaws, deserters and ruffians. Sutherland believes these three typologies shared two distinct characteristics: their method or the “irregular way they attacked,” and their purpose, which he argues was local defense from internal or external enemies. Sutherland admits to the “elusive, ungainly, and untidy definition” he lays out. But he demonstrates his deep understanding of the nature of guerrilla conflict by not forcing too precise an explanatory framework onto his story, which is fraught with chaos and idiosyncrasy rooted in the diverse local experiences of the vast Civil War home front (xii). Sutherland's refusal to accept neat categories for Civil War irregulars strengthens his book because it leads him to an important part of his argument. Most civilians and many soldiers did not employ these rigid categories as they tried to cope with the horrors of the guerrilla conflict. For many northerners, sanctioned Partisan Ranger units like the one commanded by John Singleton Mosby and regular cavalry raiders like John Hunt Morgan were no different than the self-constituted bandits organized by William Clarke Quantrill and William “Bloody Bill” Anderson.

Throughout his book Sutherland returns to a vital, central question of Civil War scholarship: What motivated Civil War irregulars? The author finds motivations nearly as numerous as the many men who took up arms in the local guerrilla wars. While some irregulars clearly fought for a Confederate nation with that clear political objective in mind, just as many were drawn into the conflict because of the threat of invasion or occupation by the U.S. Army, desire for personal gain or revenge, or because of their kinship and family ties. Sutherland's work confirms that of many earlier community studies. Many people became involved in guerrilla conflicts to fight for their own personal cause with little thought of fighting to build a new nation. While Sutherland's points on the background of irregulars are insightful, his deep research could have yielded more in the way of quantitative analysis by comparing a variety of regions and localities. This would have grounded his assertions still further.

By adopting a layered narrative and a region-by-region structure, Sutherland has offered several important arguments. The author boldly asserts that the guerrilla war began before the major battlefield hostilities commenced and that it continued to ebb and flow across state boundary lines until it reached its zenith in 1864, when the Confederate government lost control of its ability to manage the problem.



Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2009, 456 pp., cloth, \$35

Clearly he is right to argue that the war was much bloodier as a result of the widespread irregular warfare. His point that irregulars shaped U.S. military policy in a fundamental way is yet another major contribution. Sutherland not only recounts the U.S. army's efforts to codify a response to guerrillas in General Orders No. 100, but he goes into great detail about the agonizing local experiences of officers in the Trans-Mississippi theater that first forced Union officers to take notice of the problem. Sutherland believes that in the end, irregular warfare led U.S. authorities to adopt a harsher military strategy.

Sutherland asserts that the war was prolonged by at least several months by the irregular wars, sowing considerable chaos in the process. Civil War irregulars demonstrated to the Confederate populace that the Confederate government could not protect its own citizens. Indeed, Sutherland asserts that the Confederate irregulars "helped their nation lose the war" (277). Finally, Sutherland offers that guerrilla warfare damaged the Confederacy's legacy and image, and southerners worked hard in the post-war period to forget the brutality of guerrilla warfare and rehabilitate the tarnished image of their struggle.

Perhaps the most important criticism that could be leveled at such a fine example of research and narrative scholarship is that it does not go as far as it might have with the evidence mustered. By introducing the concept of "a savage conflict," Sutherland avoids the rigid definitions and long-standing debate over whether the Civil War was a "total war" or a "hard war." According to historians Mark Neely and Mark Grimsley, who both firmly argue that the war was far more restrained than earlier conflicts in its application of violence toward the civilian population, "total war," includes unrestrained violence directed at noncombatants. A "hard war," by contrast, destroys economic resources and property, while limiting acts of violence toward civilians. It is clear that Sutherland thinks the war was brutal in its treatment of civilians, but by avoiding the terminology and definitions laid out by earlier scholars, he does not directly confront a debate where his work could have played an important and perhaps transformative role. The reader is left to wonder exactly where the violence toward civilians illustrated in his book touches one of the most important debates in Civil War history. Did the "savage conflict" make the Civil War a truly "total war"? Was the civilian body count high enough? Or, was the savagery toward civilians harsher than "hard war" but not quite "total"? An effort by the author to place Civil War guerrilla violence into the context of other American wars might have brought valuable answers to the relative place of Civil War violence directed toward civilians.

This criticism, however, should not take away from the many valuable and important arguments that Sutherland presents. With his book, Sutherland has pushed the story of Civil War irregulars into the spotlight and offered new insight into America's uncivil war. Civil War historians should no longer ask whether guerrilla warfare was important, but when, where, and how it originated. With Sutherland's extensive research in mind, scholars should initiate projects that bring together the diffuse source materials on guerrilla warfare that will enable the next generation of scholars to dig even deeper than Sutherland's fine study. While it is possible to take Sutherland's work as a bookend, Civil War historians, an indefatigable lot, should see it as just the beginning, an inspiration for even more ambitious endeavors.