Southern Homefront
Introduction to Homefront

It is on the lives of such individuals that I would like to focus my remarks today. "Home front" is a bit of an amorphous category and might be seen to include such non-military dimensions of the war as Union and Confederate politics, finance and economic policy. But instead of examining these public dimensions of civilian life, I would like to explore what we have learned about the everyday experiences of the ordinary men and women across the nation who were also significant actors in the drama of Civil War.

It is important at the outset to emphasize that there was no single Civil War "home front"—no single experience that can encompass the variety of civilian life between 1861 and 1865. North and South, Union and Confederacy endured the war quite differently—primarily because of the far greater pressure the war placed on the economic and manpower resources of the South. A far higher percentage of Confederate than Yankee men left their homes and jobs and families to serve in the army: four out of five white southern men of military age entered the army; fewer than half of northern men did so. And a far higher percentage of Confederate men died in military service, leaving a greater proportion of widowed, orphaned and bereaved southerners. The death rate—numbers of deaths in comparison to the size of the population—was 6% in the North and a striking 18% in the South. As a South Carolinian observed in 1863, "death has been in our midst as a people."

Even within North and South, different "home fronts" existed. Those portions of the Confederacy subjected to military invasion became a realm not easily characterized as either home or battlefront, and these areas incurred particularly high costs during the war. Families living in much of Virginia, for example, endured the presence of troops and the loss of their crops, livestock and property to the military for four long years. Their war was very different from that experienced by individuals remote from the line of battle. These sorts of contrasts were less important in the North, for only a few areas confronted actual Confederate military invasion. Nevertheless, the war had a different impact on city dwellers and rural residents. Even within the same geographic areas North and South, wars' effects were different for rich and poor, black and white, women and men. This attention to difference, to the complexity of the civilian experience, and to the kinds of conflicts that occurred behind the lines has been a major contribution of the new social history to our understanding of the Civil War.

Southern Hardships

Many desperate southerners blamed these hardships on the rich and powerful, manifesting a sensitivity to class differences that had been muted in the general prosperity of the white South in the 1850s. Accusations of "extortion" against merchants and other individuals believed to be hoarding necessities became a central theme of Confederate public discourse. Both the Confederate government and individual states endeavored to respond to this discontent, both with largely ineffective laws against price gouging and with unprecedented efforts to provide direct aid. In some areas of North Carolina, for example, as many as 40% of white women received government support to relieve hunger and deprivation.
Historians differ on the question of how effective these welfare efforts proved, but few would deny the emergence of sharply felt divisions within the white population. Some of these conflicts originated in political differences--Opposing sentiments of Unionism and pro-southernism. Yet in many cases economic and class resentments intensified the oppositions. As we shall see, the passage of a measure exempting supervisors of twenty or more slaves from conscription provoked especially vocal resentment about the wartime meaning of privilege within southern society.

In some regions, most notably border areas like Missouri and Kentucky, tensions escalated to the point that many civilians themselves became victims of the violence of Civil War. Even in North Carolina, differences that tended most often to express themselves in the realm of Confederate politics erupted into violence on numerous occasions. In January 1863, for example soldiers murdered thirteen suspected Unionists, including boys thirteen and fourteen years old. Women, too, became embroiled in the controversy--most notably in bread riots that erupted in Richmond and locations across the Confederacy in 1863 and later. An eloquent but barely educated North Carolina woman named Nancy Mangum wrote feelingly to Governor Zebulon Vance in 1863: "I have threatened for some time to write you a letter--a crowd of we poor women went to Greensborough yesterday for something to eat as we had not a mouthful meat nor bread--what did they do but put us in jail--we women will write for our husbands to come home and help us."

**Southern Women**

Louisa Walton reported that her South Carolina community had by 1862 been "thinned out of men." Margaret Junkin Preston of Lexington, Virginia described "a world of femininity with a thin line of boys and octogenarians." In Shelby County, Alabama, 1600 of 1800 white males were in the army. What was the significance of such demographic shifts?

The burgeoning literature on southern women and the war has introduced new perspectives into the consideration of the southern home front. While scholars have explored the relationship of women's actions to the compelling issue of Confederate defeat, they have not confined their analysis to the issue of women's impact on the war. Equally significant has been an investigation of how the war affected women and gender roles more broadly. What were the consequences, to use the words of one Confederate female, of women's "trying to do a man's business" in response to war's exigencies? As women took up men's responsibilities, managing farms and plantations, working for remuneration for the first time, providing their own support, their understandings of themselves were profoundly challenged.

During the war, southern white women of the poorer classes of necessity undertook an unprecedented level of physically demanding agricultural labor. In search of support for their families, many toiled for the Confederate Clothing Bureau, sewing uniforms for a paltry wage, thirty cents for an entire shirt, for example. Arsenal workers in Augusta made cartridges for a dollar a day. In Richmond, forty female ordnance workers were killed in an 1863 explosion; fifteen died in similar circumstances in Jackson, Mississippi. By the last years of the war, munitions workers in Richmond had become so dissatisfied and desperate they struck for higher wages. Ladies of the privileged ranks confronted new work responsibilities as well. Some few found themselves sometimes forced into the fields; more often, they assumed new duties...
managing slaves, or entering the workforce as teachers, government employees or hospital matrons, areas of southern life all but closed to women in the prewar years.

In the fall of 1862, the Confederate Congress authorized women to serve officially in Confederate hospitals because wards managed by females demonstrated far lower mortality rates. Yet only a few respectable middle or upper class women worked as matrons or nurses. Caring for men's bodies seemed demeaning and indelicate; most of the more privileged females supervised the wards or visited the sick while slaves or poorer white women bandaged, bathed and fed the soldiers. Many white women were compelled by the war to seek remunerative work for the first time. Teaching seemed an obvious prospect because of women's traditional nurturing roles. Northern women had flocked to classrooms in the prewar years, but no similar development had taken place in the South. In North Carolina in 1860, for example, only 7% of teachers were women. By the end of the war, there were as many females as males in the classroom. For the most part, however, white southern women of the middle and upper classes regarded their new roles as necessity, not opportunity; no rhetoric of liberation or empowerment accompanied these shifts.

**Southern Slave Homefront**

Race played a critical role in resolving these contradictions and influencing white women to embrace a reinstatement of patriarchy. The advantages of whiteness and the protections of femininity remained too precious to abandon. War's most trying burden for white women of the slaveholding classes had proved to be its transfer of responsibility for managing slaves onto their shoulders. When white men departed for war, Confederate women assumed the duty of controlling the region's four million slaves. Despite an ideology that celebrated slaves' loyalty and docility, white women expressed profound anxieties about the possibility of slave insurrection and violence. "I fear the blacks more than I do the Yankees," a Mississippi woman declared.

A vigorous recent historical debate has focused on the question of how freedom came. Expressed most starkly, the question is whether Lincoln freed the slaves by government action or whether the slaves freed themselves through thousands of acts of flight, rebellion and resistance that ultimately destroyed the system from within. What seems to me most striking about this debate is not so much the controversy, but the broad agreement on both sides about the powerful impact of slaves' agency in the Civil War South. No one in this debate embraces a notion of slave loyalty and docility; all agree that the institution of slavery was in considerable upheaval behind Confederate lines.

The Civil War took place not just on the battlefield, not just on the home front between different classes of whites, but even within slave owning households--between women and their servants, between owners and their supposed property within the context of everyday life. From the slaves who smothered their mistress, to those who put salt in the coffee or refused to work on Saturdays or after sundown, to those who fled to freedom or to Union military service, African Americans in the wartime South embraced means of claiming new roles for themselves and of undermining the Confederate social order. Slaves did not rise in open revolt, as had been the case in Saint-Domingue during the French Revolution.
The fear and actuality of racial violence were a central component of life on the Confederate home front—not in the form of organized insurrection, but in innumerable day-to-day atrocities arising from the determination of blacks to be free and of whites to prevent them from achieving their goal. These conflicts remind us as well that in an important sense there existed separate black and white home fronts in the South. While one race faced profound challenge to its power, its assumptions, its very existence, the other could regard war's disruptions as opportunity.

**The Southern Mother’s Charge**

*The Southern Mother's charge to her Son on his departure to Virginia to defend his country's rights and honor.*

You go, my son, to the battle-field  
To repel the invading foe;  
'Mid its fiercest conflicts never yield  
Till death shall lay you low.

Our God, who smiles upon the Right,  
And frowns upon the Wrong,  
Will nerve you for our holy fight,  
And make your courage strong.

Our cause is just. For it we pray  
At morning, noon and night;  
Upon our banners we inscribe  
God, Liberty and Right.

I love you as my life,  
My dear beloved son;  
Your country calls—go forth and fight  
Till Freedom's cause is won.

It may be that you fall in death,  
Contending for your home,  
Yet your aged mother will not be  
Forsaken, though alone.

A thousand generous hearts there are  
Throughout this sunny land,  
Whose ample fortunes will be spent  
With an unsparing hand.  
Now go, my son; a mother's prayers  
Will ever follow thee;  
And in the thickest of the fight  
Strike home for liberty.

On every hill, in every glen,  
We'll fight till we are free—  
We'll fight till every limpid brook  
Runs crimson to the sea.

No truce we know, till every foe  
Shall leave our hallowed sod,  
And we regain that Heaven born boon—  
"Freedom to worship God."
To Go or Not to Go
By: Anonymous

To go or not to go, that is the question:
Whether it pays best to suffer pestering
By idle girls and garrulous old women
Or to take up arms against a host of Yankees
And by opposing get killed -- to die, to sleep --
(Get out!) and in this sleep to say we "sink
To rest by all our country's wishes blest,"
And to live forever (there's a consummation,
Just what I'm after). To march, to fight --
To fight! Perchance to die -- aye, there's the rub!
For while I'm asleep, who'd take care of Mary
And the babes -- when Bill is in the low ground --
Who'd feed 'em, eh? There's the respect
I have for them that makes life sweet;
For who would bear the bag to mill,
Plow Dobbin, cut the wheat, dig "taters,"
Kill hogs, and do all sorts of drudgery,
If I am fool enough to get a Yankee
Bullet in my brain! Who'd cry for me?
Would patriotism pay my debts, when dead?
But oh! the dread of something after death --
That undiscovered fellow who'd court Mary,
And do my hugging -- that's agony,
And makes me want to stay at home,
'Specially as I ain't mad with nobody.
Shells and bullets make cowards of us all;
And blamed my skin if snortin' steeds
And pomp and circumstance of war
Are to be compared with feather-bed
And Mary by my side.
Fold away all your bright-tinted dresses,
   Turn the key on your jewels today,
And the wealth of your tendril-like tresses
   Braid back in a serious way;
No more delicate gloves, no more laces,
   No more trifling in boudoir or bower,
But come with your souls in your faces
   To meet the stern wants of the hour.

Look around! By the torchlight unsteady
   The dead and the dying seem one --
What! Trembling and paling already,
   Before your dear mission's begun?
These wounds are more precious than ghastly --
   Time presses her lips to each scar,
While she chants of that glory which vastly
   Transcends all the horrors of war.

Pause here by this bedside. How mellow
   The light showers down on that brow!
Such a brave, brawny visage, poor fellow!
   Some homestead is missing him now!
Some wife shades her eyes in the clearing,
   Some mother sits moaning distressed,
While the loved one lies faint but unfearing,
   With the enemy's ball in his breast.

Here's another -- a lad -- a mere stripling,
   Picked up in the field almost dead,
With the blood through his sunny hair rippling
   From the horrible gash in his head.
They say he was first in the action;
   Gay-hearted, quick-headed, and witty:
He fought till he dropped with exhaustion
   At the gates of our fair Southern city.

Fought and fell 'neath the guns of that city,
   With a spirit transcending his years --
Lift him up in your large-hearted pity,
   And wet his pale lips with your tears.
Touch him gently; most sacred the duty
   Of dressing that poor shattered hand!
God spare him to rise in his beauty
   And battle once more for his land!

Pass on! it is useless to linger
   While others are calling your care;
There is need for your delicate finger,
   For your womanly sympathy there.
There are sick ones athirst for caressing,
   There are dying ones raving at home,
There are wounds to be bound with a blessing,
And shrouds to make ready for some.

They have gathered about you the harvest
   Of death in its ghastliest view;
The nearest as well as the furthest
   Is there with the traitor and true.
And crowned with your beautiful patience,
   Made sunny with love at the heart,
You must balsam the wounds of the nations,
   Nor falter nor shrink from your part.

And the lips of the mother will bless you,
   And angels, sweet-visaged and pale,
And the little ones run to caress you,
   And the wives and the sisters cry hail!
But e'en if you drop down unheeded,
   What matter? God's ways are the best;
You have poured out your life where 'twas needed,
   And He will take care of the rest.