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## Book Review: Useful Captives: The Role of POWs in American Military Conflicts

Michael E. Lynch

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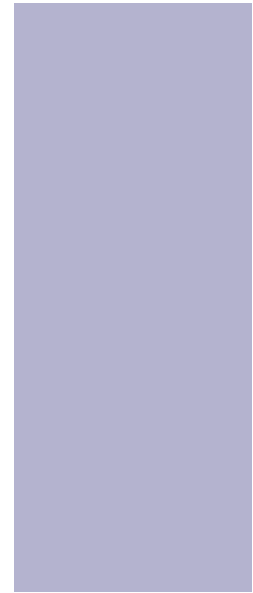
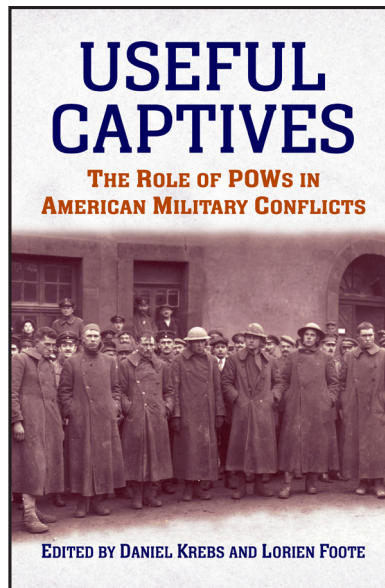
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## — PARAMETERS BOOKSHELF —



Reviewed by Dr. Michael E. Lynch, senior historian, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College

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**A** common refrain among my graduate students is “I’m going to complicate our understanding of [subject]”—a cliché intended to convey nuance and show the writer is challenging accepted narratives. As historians, our role should be to simplify rather than complicate understanding. Daniel Krebs and Lorien Foote have done just that with an anthology of 11 essays addressing prisoners of war (POWs) throughout American military history. Krebs and Foote have gathered a group of eminent scholars, with expertise ranging from the American Revolution to the twenty-first century, whose essays include varied perspectives on several conflicts, discussions of propaganda, and public history interpretations of the POW experience.

*Useful Captives* takes longer to read than might be expected, but for a good reason. The authors have taken great care to link their essays, which will often compel readers to reread previous chapters or skip ahead to others. The challenge of melding these disparate works into a cohesive whole while maintaining the nuances of individual arguments was no doubt difficult, yet Krebs and Foote accomplished it well. Notably,

the authors have taken pains to highlight where their work intersects with other essays. These references serve a dual function, alerting readers so they can spot threads of continuity in later essays and addressing connections they might have missed. In such an interesting and provocative collection of essays, singling one out for quality would be difficult for the reviewer and unfair to the authors.

Krebs and Foote grouped the 11 essays based on various aspects of the POW experience. Group 1, “Cultural Contexts of Warfare,” addresses two social constructs that underpin American attitudes toward prisoners of war in varying degrees to the present. Joshua S. Haynes explores the differences between the capture of Native Americans and African Americans in the eighteenth century, and Brian K. Feltman studies the role of masculinity and attitudes toward captivity during World War I.

In group 2, “Military Policies in Warfare,” Paul J. Springer’s essay studies the differentiation between political and military prisoners during the American Revolution, the Vietnam War, and the twenty-first

century. He argues that the transformation of warfare over the last half century—specifically, the nature of war against non-state actors—has fundamentally changed the definition of prisoners of war. T. Cole Jones examines the seldom-explored topic of civilian prisoners in the context of the American Revolution. His essay has contemporary resonance, illustrating concepts of prisoner identification, defining combatants and noncombatants, and compelling readers to wonder when the laws of war apply. Marcel Berni explores the different treatment of prisoners of war under various international agreements, such as the Third Geneva Convention of 1949, and argues that both US and South Vietnamese troops showed abundant evidence of maltreatment toward prisoners during the Vietnam War.

Group 3, “State-Building and Warfare,” combines studies of the American Civil War and World War II to examine how captors have used prisoners of war as borrowed manpower.

Group 5, “Political Symbols in Warfare,” provides an example of the close correlations that inspire readers to revisit previous chapters or skip ahead to others. Daniel Ferrell and Angela M. Riotto examine the concept of war propaganda for postwar political gain in a pair of essays focusing on the American Civil War. Riotto’s excellent analysis studies how a Confederate POW narrative developed years after the war came to reinforce the “lost cause” myth, and she very efficiently connects her argument to Farrell’s chapter on prison-based propaganda.

Groups 4 and 6 do not lend themselves well to combination with others, but they remain important as stand-alone pieces. In group 4, “Economic and Environmental Dimensions of Warfare,” Michael P. Gray’s essay surveys the existing literature on the environmental impacts of Civil War-era prisons—and by extension, the bases themselves—on the local areas of Elmira, New York, and Camp Douglas, Illinois. It is hard to imagine the Civil War still retains

topics ripe for exploration, but Gray adds depth and breadth to an area some might think could offer no more. Assessing the ecological impact of these prisons illuminates some of our earliest conceptions of prisoner of war theory.

In group 6, “Public Conversations and Narratives about Warfare,” Adam H. Dombay and Christopher W. Barr address the particularly important issue of how contemporary public history interprets prisoners of war. Dombay and Barr argue the lack of the POW narrative in public history reflects two realities. First, most American popular history tends to ignore or at least subordinate the stories of African Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color, many of whom were also prisoners. Second, only the largest national parks—which help interpret POW experiences—are sufficiently staffed and funded to address minority points of view.

The authors of these excellent essays each provide valuable insights into POW theories and experiences from a variety of viewpoints. The work’s greatest value, however, comes from the care with which it was edited. *Useful Captives* is much more than a collection of essays. The authors have clearly contributed to the work as a whole, rather than simply lending their own bit of expertise. Editors Krebs and Foote have masterfully engineered linkages between essays and added a valuable introduction that explains their methodology and synthesizes the collection in a way that thoroughly prepares readers to get the most out of the book. Senior leaders will find *Useful Captives* valuable for the historical-mindedness it provides, which demonstrates that today’s policy issues are rooted in the American experience in the last three centuries.

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**Keywords:** POW, prisoners of war, history, prisoner of war theory, conflict

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