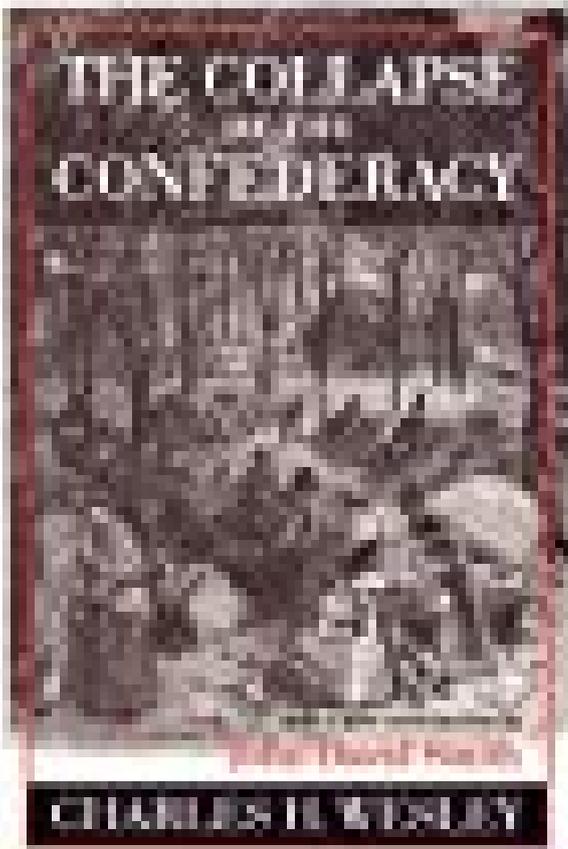


The Collapse of the Confederacy



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A history of Confederate defeat by a renowned black historian In 1937, in his groundbreaking *The Collapse of the Confederacy*, the African American historian Charles H. Wesley (1891—1987) took a bold step in rewriting the history of the Confederate South by asserting that the new nation failed because of underlying internal and social factors. Looking beyond military events to explain the Confederacy's demise, Wesley challenged conventional interpretations and argued that, by 1865, the supposedly unified South had "lost its will to fight." Though neglected today by scholars and students of the Civil War, Wesley ranked as one of the leading African American historians, educational administrators, and public speakers of the first half of the twentieth century. Like other historians of his day, Wesley recognized that many factors contributed to the defeat of the Confederacy: overwhelming numbers in the Northern armies, scarcity of food in the South, loss of manpower in the Confederate army, lack of war materiel, poor fiscal management, the Union blockade, the South's "king cotton" diplomacy, states' rights, and inferior Confederate leadership. But Wesley, then a professor of history at Howard University, insisted that "romantic historians and novelists," especially those friendly to the South, had overvalued the alleged paucity of resources and undervalued "disintegrating internal factors," most notably the deterioration of popular morale, as causes of Confederate defeat. Wesley's emphasis on public morale provided an important corrective to traditional studies that stressed the impact of the South's

military setbacks and economic scarcity. By questioning the depths of Confederate patriotism and loyalty, Wesley openly challenged prevailing explanations of Southern defeat in the Civil War and, indirectly, he contested essential elements of Southern identity. He also examined the role and attitudes of blacks in the Confederacy and positioned African Americans close to the heart of the Confederate experience. This edition of Wesley's *The Collapse of the Confederacy* includes a new introduction by John David Smith that examines Wesley's interpretation of Confederate defeat, contextualizes it within contemporary writings, and analyzes its significance for modern scholarship on the experiences of African Americans in the Civil War.