

## I

## Introduction: *The Cambridge History of the American Civil War*

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The Civil War was America's great national trauma. Like the Napoleonic Wars in nineteenth-century Europe and World War II in the twentieth, the Civil War birthed a new civic order. Politics, economic and social life, and cultural expression all assumed a new cast for the war's participants and their children. Even a century and a half later, after industrialization, urbanization, the dramatic expansion of America's military and political power in the world, and generations of cultural change, the war's impact is plain to see. The structure of the national government and the nature of American federalism took their modern shape as a result of the war. Americans' sense of sectional identity emerged more clearly defined after the conflict and continues to shape politics and cultural life. The only genuine American philosophical tradition, pragmatism, emerged among postwar thinkers as a response to the horrors of the conflict. The war ended the long-standing system of racial bondage even as white Americans met the efforts of black Americans to achieve full and meaningful freedom with apathy, intransigence, and, in some cases, violent resistance.

In all of these areas of life, the Civil War altered the course of historical change but did not solely redefine it. Because wars conflate public and private drama – individual deaths and family crises happen in the context of momentous national events – they often acquire more power in retrospect than they actually possessed. The dramatic potential of wars means that they figure prominently in literature. Just like writers, playwrights, and filmmakers, historians have been drawn to telling stories about war. That narrative appeal generated in some historians a posture that suggested military conflict was the only important kind of historical change. This, in turn, propelled a shift toward social and cultural history, toward the lived history of everyday life without the overdetermined action of war. Combined with a growing skepticism about war itself, arising from the covert military actions of the Cold War and the Vietnam conflict, historians of the 1960s and 1970s deemphasized the

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Civil War in national history or scaled back the claims for how much change the war made. Scholars today are fortunate to live at a moment when we can incorporate various analytical approaches – cultural, social, economic, political, and military – into the histories we write and hopefully capture something of the capaciousness of life. The resulting perspective has reframed the Civil War in terms that recognize the changes it entailed but also respects its limits.

Regardless of disciplinary trends, all history begins by appreciating how participants understood their experiences, and people who lived through the Civil War recognized that theirs were momentous times. People first measured the war's impact in terms of how it addressed the problems that sparked it to life. Most people agreed that, in Abraham Lincoln's words, "slavery was somehow the cause of the conflict." Even the famous Confederate guerrilla leader John Singleton Mosby frankly confessed, "I always understood that we went to war on account of the thing we quarreled with the North about. I never heard of any other cause of quarrel than slavery."<sup>1</sup> Lincoln blurred the precise nature of that "somehow" in order to facilitate postwar sectional healing. Nineteenth-century Americans saw less ambiguity than Lincoln admitted, though they disagreed among themselves. Black Americans had always opposed slavery, but the first generation of white abolitionists used conservative, legalistic measures to emancipate individuals rather than mounting a direct challenge to the system itself.<sup>2</sup> In the 1820s, free people of color in the North demanded an immediate end to slavery and this call fueled the more radical second phase of American abolition that scared slaveholders into the defensive posture that produced secession.<sup>3</sup> Only a small number of white Americans began the war as outright abolitionists, but many more shifted from a nominal antislavery position to that of eager advocates of wartime emancipation. In the words of a popular Northern song, "Hurrah! Hurrah! We bring the jubilee! Hurrah! Hurrah! The flag that makes you free!" At the conflict's end, and for many decades following, Northerners celebrated the virtue of ending slavery. They had reason to cheer. The Thirteenth Amendment overturned two and a half centuries of slaveholding in North America and forced the reshaping of

- 1 John Singleton Mosby quoted in John Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 26.
- 2 Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
- 3 Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

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political, economic, and social relations across the nation and within the South in particular. Henry Turner, a free black minister in Washington, D.C. remembered the day when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation as a transformative event: “It was indeed a time of times, and a half time,” he wrote, “nothing like it will ever be seen again in this life.”<sup>4</sup>

White Northerners came more easily to celebrate the preservation of the national union. The act of secession cast in doubt the global future of democracy itself. Reunion, a goal that hindsight renders as a foregone conclusion, emerged as a triumphant political accomplishment, a validation of democracy that benefited not just the United States but the world. This is what made the United States, as Lincoln explained it, “the last best hope of earth.” Vermont Private Wilbur Fisk expressed the same sentiment as his commander-in-chief, writing in 1864 that the North fought to preserve “the faith of the world in the intelligence and virtue of the common people, and their ability to govern themselves and maintain national unity without being rent asunder by internal strife and discord.”<sup>5</sup>

If Northern victory repudiated secession, and recent work suggests that the legal response to secession remained ambivalent long after the war, the emerging shape of that national government engendered greater disagreement.<sup>6</sup> Republicans did not envision the New Deal state, but they hoped to use the organized wartime state to promote economic development. This posture, combined with the Democrats’ continuing strength below the Mason–Dixon line, ensured a regional split in economic experience and development that lasted well into the next century. Southerners did not oppose all state power – they used it to police moral issues such as alcohol and divorce – but they resisted any governmental policy that might weaken the edifice of white supremacy upon which they built the postwar world.<sup>7</sup> The ideological and geographic differences between political parties reshaped American politics. Democrats, and Southern Democrats in particular, dominated all branches of the federal government before the war. After it, Northern Republicans monopolized the White House and Congress for

4 Henry M. Turner quoted in James M. McPherson, *The Negro’s Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (1965; New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 50.

5 Emil and Ruth Rosenblatt (eds.), *Hard Marching Every Day: The Civil War Letters of Private Wilbur Fisk, 1861–1865* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1983), pp. 205–7.

6 Cynthia Nicoletti, *Secession on Trial: The Treason Prosecution of Jefferson Davis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

7 Gaines Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

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decades. The one place where the federal government exercised unrivaled authority was in the West. The Homestead Act and Pacific Railroad Act, both passed in 1862 and possible only because of the absence of Southern Democrats from Congress, organized the white settlement and infrastructural development that enabled the rapid growth of the region in the postwar decades. Just as important, US Army leaders directed the power of a larger, better-trained, and better-equipped postwar military against western Indian communities to clear space for white settlers.

Hardest to assess yet perhaps most important because of their long-term nature were the cultural changes wrought by the war. Most prominent among these was the hardening of sectional animosities. The South of 1861 was a fragile and unlikely nation but the shared experience of suffering and loss welded the white South together by 1865. Fear and anger over the racial and economic uncertainty of the postwar world compelled many Southerners to overlook the visible seams of their ad hoc wartime nation and, over time, most came to regard the South as a natural place of its own. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Southerners joined the majority of the world's population who had, at some point in their past, lost a war. The split in the historical experience between the North and South only disappeared with the US defeat in the Vietnam War over a century later. This divergence only exacerbated the cultural alienation that each side perceived.

In order to understand the outcomes of the Civil War we also need to consider what did not happen because of a Confederate victory or any mediated settlement of hostilities, as European powers came close to demanding. The 1864 Democratic platform called for an immediate "cessation of hostilities." With a peace settlement short of absolute Northern victory, slavery would have survived in much of the South. Even at the war's end, three and a half million African Americans remained enslaved. If the Confederacy had successfully broken up the United States, secession fever would likely have spread rather than sputtering out. The western states might have pursued their own Pacific orientation. The Midwest could well have sought separation from what a later generation of Populist reformers would deride as the tyranny of eastern banks. The Confederacy started disintegrating in its opening moments, when western Virginia effectively seceded from the Old Dominion. Later in the war, Jones County, Mississippi residents fought to remove themselves from the Confederacy. These instances, and the future ones surely to come in the absence of Union victory, fulfilled Lincoln's prophecy that secession nullified self-government and democracy itself. Instead, by securing the integrity of the United States,

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Lincoln enabled its subsequent growth. It would be too much to draw a straight line from Northern victory in the Civil War to the global hegemon of the twentieth century but the conclusion of the war indisputably shaped the landscape of power around the world as well as in North America.

History began its modern incarnation as a professional discipline working as a handmaiden to nation-building and state creation. The central role of the Civil War in US history reveals the success of that enterprise. For today's college students, most of whom learn across fifteen-week semesters, 1865 is almost always the breaking point in the introductory US history survey class. US history textbooks, for high school and college, use the Civil War to divide early American history from modern American history. Professional historians today have divorced themselves from the practice of state-building and even Civil War historians, despite the importance of our slice of the timeline, have grown more critical about the role played by the conflict. This skepticism draws strength from our ability to see the ways that previous generations of historians bent the story of the war toward the attitudes, prejudices, and interests of their day. As white Americans reunited in the 1880s and 1890s, historians endorsed a view of the war, known as the Lost Cause, that deemphasized slavery and emancipation as causes and outcomes of the war, stressed the bravery of Confederate and Union soldiers, and incorporated the conflict into an expanding tale of American greatness. Union veterans advanced the Cause Victorious, which celebrated emancipation and the preservation of the Union. In his memoir, Ulysses S. Grant characterized the Confederate purpose in language that many Northern veterans would have endorsed – “that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.”<sup>8</sup> African Americans, both north and south, created their own memory of the war, conveyed in both popular ceremonies, like Juneteenth and Emancipation Day celebrations, and academic histories like that written by W. E. B. DuBois. Our ability to see these competing interpretations and to frame them in their own context lends an important humility to contemporary efforts to understand the war. We continue to do so but always with the knowledge that we possess our own vantage point.

The three volumes of the *Cambridge History of the American Civil War* convey a broad swath of the human experience of civil war in America. The first volume narrates the major battles and campaigns of the conflict. The military encounters between Union and Confederate soldiers and

8 Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters* (New York: Library of America, 1990), p. 735.

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between both armies and irregular combatants and true noncombatants structured the four years of war. These encounters were not solely defined by violence – occupation and garrison duty were typically nonviolent, often dull administrative work at odds with the supposed glamor of soldiering – but military encounters gave the war its central architecture. The iconic and determinative clashes between Union and Confederate armies created a new geography. Before the war, locals knew Antietam and Gettysburg, Chickamauga, and Missionary Ridge, but after the war every American knew these names. At the same time, because much of the military conflict occurred outside the Virginia and Tennessee corridors that defined the war’s geography, one section of this volume is devoted to places. Some of these places are abstract – defined by political qualities (like the Border or the West) or physical ones (such as rivers or seas) and they all encompass parts of multiple states – but they cohered as distinct spaces because of their war experience. These chapters remind readers that the Civil War was not solely a series of battles. It was also a sustained process that drew people together in more ambiguous settings and outcomes.

Millions of Americans (indeed, most of the North) lived outside the major campaign zones so they experienced the war through the political and social dimensions of the conflict and through secondary exposure to military events through newspaper reporting and letters home from soldiers. The second volume conveys this world, for both North and South. It explores the affairs of state that carried Americans into conflict and guided their understanding of the conflict as it occurred. Because the US Civil War occurred between two democracies with vibrant media networks but long before the creation of the modern military-industrial complex, regular people played a much larger role in the conflict. The politics of military leadership played out in the newspapers of both sections. Governors and congressmen assumed a major role in steering the personnel decisions, strategic planning, and methods of fighting, much larger than that played by twentieth-century politicians. Regular people also played roles in direct military action, as guerrilla fighters, as nurses and doctors, and as military contractors (both near, as sutlers in soldiers’ camps, and far, as suppliers of equipment to the armies). Many Civil War prison camps were located near major metropolitan areas in the North and South, with the result that residents of these areas knew about the camps and interacted with captured officers, who occasionally had liberty to visit adjoining towns. The US government expanded the system of war bond finance that had been used to pay for previous conflicts to include individual bond purchase. Famously embodied by Philadelphia financier Jay Cooke,

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whose firm marketed millions of dollars' worth of bonds, this system of finance drew Northerners into a financial relationship with the war's outcome that amplified their routine civic connection to the conflict. The vibrant two-party system of the antebellum decades conditioned Americans of both regions to be deeply involved in politics. The war raised new issues – from emancipation and the draft to the nature of fighting and the suspension of habeas corpus – that shifted the partisan dynamics, especially in the North with its fledgling Republican Party and the Democrats, for the first time acting as an opposition party. The impact of the Civil War also spread beyond the country's boundaries. Anxious Canadians, hopeful British reformers, and concerned Brazilian slaveholders all watched the war with great interest, and its conclusion helped steer debates over democracy, slavery, and nationhood in countries around the world.

Just as important as politics were the ways that the war reshaped Americans' spiritual, cultural, and intellectual habits. The conflicts of the previous decades – against Mexicans, Indians, and the British – did not inspire the kind of existential crisis that the Civil War engendered. The war's duration, scale, and intensity drove Americans to question how they understood themselves as people. The rise of social history as a discipline in the 1960s gave historians the tools to unpack the social and cultural perspectives carried by residents of the past. Civil War historians put these skills to use in the 1980s and 1990s, uncovering how the war changed attitudes about gender, religion, ethnicity, and race. The experiences of Northerners and Southerners differed profoundly and the chapters in the third volume distinguish the varied impacts of the conflict in different places on people's sense of themselves. With most white men of military age serving in the army, white Southern women found themselves performing much of the labor that drove Southern households. Some took jobs in factories, others in new government bureaus. With a lower proportional enlistment rate in the North, changes in gender roles and ideology there came more by choice, with Northern women seizing new opportunities, especially in teaching and nursing. But in both regions, the scale of death and disability forced many families into new configurations of domestic and paid labor. For black Americans, especially in the South, the changes were greater still. Despite the Union's inconsistent policy on emancipation, many enslaved people seized their freedom from the chaos of war, sometimes as whole families and at other times piecemeal. After escaping from his Missouri master and joining the Union army, Spotswood Rice told his daughters, "Dont be uneasy my children I expect to have you. If Diggs dont give you up this Government will and I feel

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confident that I will get you.”<sup>9</sup> Rice’s confidence came from his role as a volunteer in the Union army. Other people, especially soldiers, found their faith in secular institutions broken by the war’s violence. Some found their religious faith broken as well. Americans wrestled for decades with refashioning their spiritual and philosophical foundations after the war.

Like the war’s participants, Americans of later generations struggled with the war’s meaning, for themselves, their region, and the nation. The concluding section of Volume III draws on recent work in the field of memory to consider the various legacies of the Civil War, from the legal and institutional to the cultural and intellectual. These legacies have varied over time as Americans reinterpret the Civil War in light of their times. In the wake of World War I’s futile carnage, historians came to see the Civil War as unnecessary. After the fascistic horror of World War II and the continuing intransigence of white southerners to accept black people as equal citizens, the potential of war as a productive agent of social change returned. Attuned to the human dimensions of slavery, American historians came to regard the ending of slavery as a goal worth the cost of even so bloody a war. The recent writing on Civil War memory has usefully blurred the lines between the war and reconstruction, challenging us to distinguish military action from regular political change, a worthy goal in an increasingly global and public world. Future generations will undoubtedly challenge existing interpretations. However they come to understand the war, whatever conclusions they draw, the Civil War will remain a touchstone of American life.

9 Spotswood Rice quoted in Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (eds.), *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (1992; Edison, NJ: The Blue & Grey Press, 1997), p. 480.