

An impertinent discourse

ARI KELMAN

An impertinent discourse

Published: 24 February 2012

David Blight **A M E R I C A N O R A C L E** The Civil War in the Civil Rights era 320pp. Belknap Press. £20.95 (US \$27.95).

978 0 674 04855 3 Gary W. Gallagher **T H E U N I O N W A R** 256pp. Harvard University Press.

£22.95 (US \$27.95).

978 0 674 04562 0 Stephanie McCurry **C O N F E D E R A T E R E C K O N I N G** Power and politics in the Civil War South 456pp. Harvard University Press. £25.95 (US \$35).

978 0 674 04589 7 Donald Stoker **T H E G R A N D D E S I G N** Strategy and the US Civil War 512pp. Oxford University Press.

£17.99 (US \$27.95).

978 0 19 537305 9 As birthday parties go, this one has been a bit of a downer so far. The American Civil War was 150 years old last year, but it went on for four years, so there's still plenty of time for history buffs in period costumes to re-enact blood-soaked battles; actors to give President Lincoln's and Frederick Douglass's speeches, grafting new wings on to a bygone era's soaring oratory; and writers to churn out volumes chronicling the history of the nation's deadliest conflict. But, up to now, the reaction has remained oddly muted, suggesting that people in the United States, though apparently still obsessed with the Civil War, remain uncertain about how to remember this troubling event collectively: as triumph or tragedy, as rebirth or mass murder, or as something else again. Or maybe it's just that Americans are notoriously suspicious of foreign languages, and just what kind of fancy word is sesquicentennial anyway? The problem of how to recall the conflict dates back to its immediate aftermath. With broken bodies still cooling in trenches outside Richmond, and ruined swathes of Georgia and South Carolina still smouldering in the wake of Sherman's march, Confederate ideologues, having lost the war itself, embarked on a memory project designed to help them win the peace. They argued that their beloved grey-clad soldiers had fought bravely and honourably throughout and that their leaders - especially Robert E. Lee, that most genteel of killers - had been chivalrous and decent, exemplars of the very best that Southern society had to offer. Nevertheless, they suggested, the Confederate project had been tragically doomed from the get-go. Union forces had so outnumbered the rebels, Union generals, including Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant, had been so bloodthirsty (Southern myth-makers cast Lee as a surgeon to Grant's butcher), the Union's industrial output had so completely overawed the Confederacy's warmaking capacities, that the noble South had never stood a chance. When linked, these after-the-fact justifications for failure became known as the Lost Cause: one part mnemonic device, one part soothing balm applied to a battered Southern psyche.

Through the last decades of the nineteenth century, with the nation still exhausted, both from the effort of fighting the war and the process of reconstructing the South, the myth of the Lost Cause stood largely unchallenged. Then, as Civil War veterans nationwide reached the end of their lives, an organized but diffuse effort to shape for posterity the way that future generations would remember the conflict and its combatants swept the United States. Libraries archived

documents during this commemorative moment; authors published regimental histories; and heritage organizations constructed monuments designed to inspire in onlookers a shared vision of a venerated past. Nostalgia reigned, as Americans in both the North and the South idealized the Civil War generation for its sacrifices and crafted a heroic narrative of the conflict, in which both the Union and the Confederacy had fought hard, fought well, and fought for just causes. Unresolved issues, including the war's roots - the struggle over slavery and the racial inequities that lingered into the postbellum years - could be set aside in service of an amicable reunion.

By the time the United States celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, this reconciliationist impulse had hardened into something like official dogma. From July 1-4, 1914, more than 50,000 veterans - very nearly the same number of men who had, half a century earlier, consecrated that hallowed ground with their blood - and as many more spectators arrived in Pennsylvania to recall the war's pivotal battle. Elderly men wearing moth-eaten uniforms fashioned of blue and grey mingled and regaled one another with tales of their courage under fire. Together they remembered. And together they forgot. None of the invited speakers discussed sectional enmity or slavery. Instead, Governor William Mann of Virginia insisted that the conflict's context should be ignored in favour of a relentless focus on heroism. "We are not here to discuss the Genesis of the war", he remarked, but "to discuss this great fight." President Woodrow Wilson agreed, insisting that it would have been "an impertinence to discourse on how the battle went" or "what it signified". Instead, he suggested of the old warriors, "We have found one another again as brothers and comrades, in arms, enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the quarrel forgotten". A stalwart segregationist, Wilson didn't give a second thought to the fact that the festivities had been, in the words of the historian David Blight, "a Jim Crow reunion" where "white supremacy might be said to have been the silent, invisible master of ceremonies".

In his new book, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights era*, David Blight argues that little had changed by the time the US celebrated the war's centennial.

Again and again, event organizers cast to the margins African Americans, who, caught in a bitter irony, were then struggling to secure for themselves the equal protection under the law that federal authorities had guaranteed but never delivered to them during the era of Reconstruction. In February 1961, for example, as student activists sat in at segregated lunch counters throughout the South, white elites in Montgomery, Alabama, commemorated the Confederacy's founding, capping the festivities with a swearing-in ceremony for a Jefferson Davis lookalike. The man who administered the oath of office, Judge Walter Jones, had five years earlier issued an injunction outlawing the state chapter of the NAACP. And in 1961, when Jones wasn't romanticizing the Civil War, he was still fighting a rearguard action against Civil Rights; he presided over a trial in which Montgomery's police commissioner sued the *New York Times*, claiming that he had been libelled in an advert run in the paper to raise money for Martin Luther King, Jr's legal defence fund. At trial, several jurors wore beards that they had grown out for the centennial festivities and Jones insisted, over defence objections, that the courtroom remain segregated.

Later that year, racism again cast a pall over the conflict's hundredth anniversary. When the Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC), carrying a Congressional mandate, commemorated the attack on Fort Sumter, it chose for its headquarters a Charleston hotel that refused to serve African American patrons. Several affronted delegates from Northern states threatened a boycott. The chairman of the commission, Ulysses S. Grant, III, grandson of the Union general, responded by refusing to change the venue and insisted that the CWCC had no power to compel private property owners to offer "rooms for Negroes". An anxious President Kennedy, who had only recently been inaugurated, tried to avoid the issue entirely. Rather than engage with the centennial celebration, which seemed mired in the ongoing struggle for Civil Rights, Kennedy preferred to focus on the upcoming Bay of Pigs invasion. He did, though, issue a statement calling on the CWCC to avoid staging a segregated meeting. Grant grudgingly complied with the Commander-in-Chief's wishes, but outraged South Carolina delegates seceded over the slight.

So it went throughout the centennial. In July 1961, as white supremacists rained blows down on Freedom Riders seeking to desegregate buses travelling interstate routes in the South, 75,000 people gathered to

watch a re-enactment of the Battle of Bull Run. The *Washington Post* reported that "the biggest applause, laced with

Rebel yells, came at the battle's end when the last Federal forces were driven into the woods". On New Year's Day 1963, rather than taking a strong stand for desegregation by issuing a second Emancipation Proclamation a century after the first went into effect, as Civil Rights activists had asked him to do, President Kennedy attended the Orange Bowl football game. He watched Joe Willie Namath quarterback the segregated University of Alabama Crimson Tide to victory.

In the end, Blight suggests, "the official Civil War Centennial could never find adequate, meaningful ways to balance Civil War remembrance with civil rights rebellion". Still, he allows, there were cracks in the edifice of reconciliationist public memory at the time of the centennial. Literary critics and public intellectuals, like Robert Penn Warren and Edmund Wilson, viewed the war as a horrible tragedy, a waste of human life, and an outgrowth of human depravity. James Baldwin saw the conflict as an unsurprising byproduct of American racism, more than 600,000 chickens come home to roost during a four-year slaughter. And Martin Luther King took the centennial celebrations as an opportunity, his "I Have a Dream" speech suggesting that the nation should finally make good on promises offered by President Lincoln a century earlier.

Out of such fertile soil grew fresh insights into the Civil War era. Historians, organized under the banner of the New Social History, reappraised the conflict through a revisionist lens. After generations of historiographical wrangling, these scholars arrived at something like a consensus: diehard Confederate sympathizers had hatched a variety of fictions during the postbellum years, not just the Lost Cause lament but also other calumnies, including the charge, most vividly expressed in films like *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, that Reconstruction had failed owing to federal bungling and corruption, rather than because of the intransigence of white supremacists who had employed terror tactics to prop up the South's antiquated racial and socio-economic hierarchies. The war's causes and consequences were impossible to discern amid all the moonlight and magnolias. But beginning with works written in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, a raft of monographs explored the impact of slavery and racism on the road to and from the Civil War. This literature has since recast the conflict as a defining struggle over the meaning of freedom and citizenship in the United States.

Gary Gallagher argues in *The Union War* that this well-intentioned revisionism has gone too far, that in its most extreme iterations such scholarship now "obscures more than it reveals". As a corrective, he offers his central argument: that Northerners, ranging from President Lincoln all the way down to the conscripts in the Army of the Potomac, didn't fight the Civil War to free the slaves or to topple white supremacy in the South. Instead, they fought for the Union, an admittedly diffuse concept, Gallagher admits, but nevertheless their central animating principle.

This point, he claims, "has been almost completely effaced from popular understanding of the conflict". And because of a relentless "focus on emancipation and race", he fears that in collective memory and scholarship alike, the war now has "scant meaning apart from these issues - and especially that the Union victory has little or no value without emancipation". Leaving aside the question begged there - Gallagher never directly grapples with whether the Civil War, without emancipation, would have been worth the loss of more than 600,000 lives, whether, in other words, a reunited nation in which the institution of slavery survived would have been worth preserving - he remains sure that both academic and public perception has become too captive to identity politics.

In *Confederate Reckoning: Power and politics in the Civil War South*, Stephanie McCurry re-examines the conflict from the opposite angle; she focuses on the Confederacy, not the Union, on African Americans and women, not white men. McCurry's study pivots on a historical paradox: although the Confederacy formed as an explicitly proslavery and anti-democratic nation, devoted to keeping people of colour and white women disenfranchised and servile, those groups became central to its survival. McCurry suggests that white women seized on the exigencies of war, challenging dominant gender ideologies by stepping beyond the domestic sphere. They forged new identities for themselves, as when they demanded state-sponsored recompense for their families' contributions to the war effort; agitated against conscription or sheltered deserters; and rioted in the South's largest cities, demanding bread. Slaves, too, found new roles during the war, becoming, rather than the foundation of the Southern economy that they had been before the conflict began, an existential threat to the Confederacy. In a neat turn of phrase, McCurry suggests that the war became a "massive slave rebellion", forcing the South to fight the conflict on multiple fronts.

A close reading of Confederate Reckoning reveals that most commemorative activities in the United States fail to capture the significance of contingency in the Civil War. Looking backward, myths like the Lost Cause hinged on notions of inevitability. More recently, though, the same may be true of competing visions. It may even be that, after the process of negotiating and contesting how the Civil War should be recalled, memories, once they're made public, ossify. Put another way, the process of memorialization often proceeds like this: following the give and take that takes place between interest groups with incommensurable commemorative agendas, compromised recollections are typically set in stone and then made public. At that point, memory seems prone to shade into teleology, the practice of reading the past backward. McCurry's work echoes a number of other recent studies of the war, insisting that the conflict resists teleological analyses and demands instead the complexity that attends historical contingency.

Alas, contingency is not an easy sell. Americans seem to prefer their monuments and memorials neat (Maya Lin's stark Vietnam wall stands as a notable and refreshing exception to this rule), a mechanism for ordering the chaos of a fractured past. Most historical markers, then, provide a patriotic spin on the national narrative: usually telling tales of steady progress or, in the case of horrible tragedies, of hard-won redemption. But historians, including Donald Stoker, author of *The Grand Design: Strategy and the US Civil War*, keep insisting that the conflict's critical chapters resist such tidy storytelling, that such episodes often were, instead, shaped by historical happenstance. A recalcitrant general, like George McClellan, could gum the works of the best-laid plans. Confusion over personnel, as at First Manassas, could turn the tide during a critical battle. Misplaced orders could, as in the case of Lee's invasion of Maryland in the summer of 1862, scuttle a major initiative and provide the impetus for a change in war aims (Lincoln only issued his Emancipation Proclamation after Union forces turned back Confederate troops at the Battle of Antietam). Or, as at Gettysburg, soldiers seeking supplies could stumble instead upon the enemy, bringing two major armies into conflict and altering the course of the war. As much as Americans might want their history to proceed in a regimented fashion, the past won't be trained so easily to fall into line.

As for the sesquicentennial celebration, it is likely to continue, just as the war did. But signs aren't promising. South Carolina's leading families staged a grand ball to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the state's decision to leave the Union. A spokesman for the Sons of Confederate Veterans, which helped sponsor the gala, responded to outraged protesters by explaining that invitees were "not celebrating slavery but honoring the courage of the men who followed their convictions in severing ties with the United States". Attuned to the dictates of good taste, event organizers decided that there would be no "African-American re-enactors present posing as slaves". This is heritage and not hate, as they say.

Meanwhile, it's election season, and Rick Perry, until recently a leading presidential candidate, has in the past extolled the virtues of secession. Given the chance, he may commemorate the Civil War by recapitulating it. Newt Gingrich, for the moment still a leading presidential candidate and a trained historian to boot, has just released the final novel in his jointly authored trilogy on the conflict. An exploration of the notorious Battle of the Crater, where Confederate troops massacred African American soldiers fighting for the Union, Gingrich's book nevertheless portrays Southerners in a favourable light. With his co-author, Gingrich focuses on characters opposed to the slaughter and invents an order issued by General Lee, whom they depict demanding that his subordinates treat the enemy, regardless of race, equally: "I want the full honor of war observed", Lee says. Gingrich has found the Lost Cause and recycled it as political outreach to Southern partisans. The serving President, for his part, appears to have adopted a Kennedyesque attitude to the sesquicentennial. Although he never misses an opportunity to express deep admiration for Abraham Lincoln, President Obama now seems loath to engage with the ongoing clash over Civil War memory. It may be that, with the nation bitterly divided and a tough campaign on the horizon, it's more expedient for him to forget than to remember.

watch a re-enactment of the [...]

By continuing to use the site, you agree to the use of cookies. You can change this and find out more by following this link.