

Rebirth of a Nation: Nationalism and the Civil War

“There is a habit of speaking derisively of going to war for an IDEA – an abstraction – something which you cannot see,” wrote a Southern editor in 1861. “This is precisely the point on which we would go to war. An idea is exactly the thing that we would fight for.” By 1861 ideas about what America was and what it meant to be an American – the essence of nationality – had become elevated to the plain of irreconcilable principles. Civil war was the result.

The nineteenth century was an age of nationalism. Throughout the Western world, this impulse to nationality, vaguely perceived, imprecisely defined, and imperfectly comprehended, was nonetheless strong and pervasive. The United States was fully a part of this process. The Great Seal of the United States boldly proclaimed this new experiment in republican government a “Novus Ordo Saeclorum,” a new order of the ages. With exhilaration and fear but above all with a missionary determination to make their experiment succeed and stand as a beacon of hope, a city upon a hill, Americans entered upon nationhood, truly believing that in their constitution they had fashioned “a more perfect Union.”

New. Perfect. Exemplary. Yet also incomplete – politically, psychologically, and, of course, geographically. Committed to making their republican experiment succeed and thus occasionally hypersensitive about the possibility of making a misstep, Americans after 1789 saw in almost every political issue grave threats to the new nation. Sometimes these questions were economic (a national bank? a protective tariff? federally funded internal improvements?), sometimes diplomatic (alliances? neutrality? war?), and sometimes philosophical (Should the constitution be strictly or broadly interpreted?). For the most part, the issues in question usually found resolution within a highly competitive two-party system. The one potentially divisive issue, slavery, seemingly had been removed from the political arena by the Missouri Compromise in 1820, which established definite boundaries for slave territory, and by an agreement in Congress to table any petition that addressed the question of emancipation. This “gag rule,” combined with an abiding faith in party politics, reinforced Americans’ confidence in their republican experiment and, in turn, inspired a confidence in the nation’s “Manifest Destiny” to grow and develop.

Yet, though it remained on the fringes of debate and at the margins of thought, slavery would never quite go away. A small but vocal band of abolitionists, centered in New England, upstate New York, and portions of the West, continued to stress that slavery was the embodiment of evil and, hence, a blemish on an otherwise perfect union. Their sensitivity to the presence of evil was hardly unique.

Throughout American history, groups of aroused citizens have been moved, often by religious revivals, to attempt to eradicate sin in their midst. Precisely because America was still so ill-defined as a nation, this cause took on a particular urgency, especially after the acquisition of vast new territory won from Mexico reopened the issue of slavery expansion. During the debates over how the territory was to be organized, Americans were forced to define themselves as a nation. In the process, slavery came to overshadow all other concerns: strong drink, the Masonic order, a growing immigrant population. It became the ultimate reform. The quest for the “more perfect Union” became more urgent than ever before as reformers in growing numbers believed that they had found the path to greater perfection.

These emotions were galvanized in 1852 with the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The book was an immediate best-seller and, like most such works, was referred to knowingly even by those who had never opened it. More than 300,000 copies were sold in America alone in 1852, more than 2 ½ million worldwide. Stowe’s message, spun out over hundreds of pages and thousands of miles, was simple and compelling: slavery debases America and mocks American liberty. It is a national, not simply a Southern, problem, and it is the chief obstacle in the way of attaining a more perfect Union. And Stowe puts the most eloquent statement of this belief in the mouth of a slave, who declares, “You have a country, but what country have I, or anyone like me, born of slave mothers? What laws are there for us? We don’t make them – we don’t consent to them – we have nothing to do with them; all they do for us is to crush us, and keep us down. Haven’t I heard your Fourth-of-July speeches? Can’t a fellow THINK that hears such things? Can’t he put this and that together, and see what it comes to?”

Stowe’s book advanced in perceptible ways the cause of antislavery. It also served to harden opinions among slavery’s many defenders. In dividing Americans along sectional lines, the issue of slavery obscured the many things Americans continued to have in common. The lives of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, as depicted by William and Bruce Catton in *Two Roads to Sumter*, reveal both the similarities and the differences. Born less than 12 months and 100 miles apart in the American heartlands of Kentucky, Lincoln and Davis followed two very different roads to the presidencies of the United States of America and the Confederate States of America. Shaped by the exuberant

nationalism characteristic of the time and place of their births, one went north, to Illinois, the other south, to Mississippi. Neither was ever a “radical.” Both professed loyalty to the Constitution. Each assumed his presidential duties with a mixture of sorrow and resolve. To the task of restoring the Union, Lincoln brought a prairie lawyer’s love of freedom and sense of fair play, Davis a plantation aristocrat’s quiet confidence and attachment to tradition.

Both Lincoln and Davis rose to prominence in the 1850s. Davis, an outspoken opponent of the Compromise of 1850, which upset the sectional balance in the Senate by admitting California as a free state, remained an important national figure for most of the decade. He served Franklin Pierce as Secretary of War and was then elected to the Senate in 1857. A legitimate early contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1860, Davis advocated Congressional protection of slavery in the territories, fearing that, otherwise, the rights of Americans living in the South to migrate where they chose with their property might be denied. Lincoln, who helped organize the new Republican Party in 1854, never wished to interfere with slavery where it existed. But he opposed its expansion, preferring that all the territories should be “free soil.” This moderate antislavery position, advocated by this most moderate of men, gained increased Northern support and pushed the issue of slavery up the ladder of Americans’ political priorities even as it wrecked the two-party system that had for so long preserved political equilibrium. In 1860, though winning barely 40 percent of the vote (and not a single electoral vote in the South), Lincoln and the principle of “free soil” brought the Republicans to power.

Southerners called them “black Republicans,” less because of their position on slavery than because they seemed to espouse a shadow republicanism antithetical to the spirit and beliefs of the Founding Fathers. By 1860 a much more distinct sense of separate Southern nationalism had emerged. It claimed to be a purer and truer form of American nationalism, and it argued that the North had diverged from long-held understandings. As James McPherson points out at the start of the *Ordeal by Fire*, slavery was an integral part of the Southern view of liberty and constitutionalism. The proslavery argument that developed in the South thus represented far more than just a defense of the peculiar institution. It claimed to offer an alternative version of American nationality that was arguably closer to that of the Founding Fathers than was that of the North, where immigrants, industry, and a reformist impulse had perverted the original understandings and made the Union less rather than more perfect. Ultimately the Southern states seceded in hopes of retaining what they feared they otherwise would lose. When they met in Montgomery in February 1861 to form a “more perfect Union,” they adopted almost without revision the constitution of the Union from which they had so recently withdrawn.

The story of the war years as told by McPherson is very much the story, for both North and South, of national self-definition. The rival governments, facing pressing questions of recruitment and outfitting of troops, move almost simultaneously to a national draft. The rival treasury secretaries, confronting mammoth problems of finance, turn to deficit spending, paper money, and taxes. The battlefield commanders, discovering that the strategy and tactics they had studied at West Point are outmoded by advances in weaponry, move to trench warfare and "total war." Businessmen, facing huge demands for critical commodities, consolidate and centralize their operations. Diplomats courting foreign support recognize the international importance of this indigenous conflict. And simple men, women, and children experience in varying degrees the reality of modern war.

General William T. Sherman's march through Georgia in late 1864 brought that reality home. McPherson offers telling firsthand accounts: the Indiana officer who witnessed, during the evacuation of Atlanta, "babies tumbling from the backs of mules to which they had been told to cling, while mothers stood by the roadside crying for their lost children"; the Southern soldier who wrote, "i hev concluded that the dam fulishness uv tryin to lick shurmin Had better be stoped we hav bin gettin nuthin but hell & lost uv it"; the member of Sherman's staff who recognized that war had been made "so terrible that when peace comes it will last."

No wonder that in such a conflict Northern war aims began to shift from a simple restoration of the Union to the abolition of slavery. With a mere stroke of the pen, President Lincoln initiated the largest expropriation of private property by government in American history. The Emancipation Proclamation clearly looked toward a radical transformation of American society. Hardly a radical liberal, Lincoln nonetheless acted upon his conviction that all human beings possess certain inalienable rights. By 1865, even Jefferson Davis, albeit for practical rather than humanitarian reasons, also decided to offer freedom to any black willing to enlist in the Confederate army. At war's end, the trend from improvisation to organization, and, with it, the triumph of the Northern understanding of American nationhood and the national interest, was everywhere apparent.

This war, like most wars, produced unintended consequences, not the least of which was a national government more powerful than at any previous point in its history. Americans in 1865, facing immediate and pressing questions of reconstruction, looked to this strong and triumphant national government for guidance. John Hope Franklin in *Reconstruction: After the Civil War*, examines these issues in detail. How were the seceded states to be readmitted? How were the men who had taken up arms for the

South to be treated? What did the future hold for the more than three million slaves so recently freed? Were wartime economic policies to be continued? Was the Republican Party, which claimed to have won the war, to become a sectional minority? In short, were all the processes leading to a stronger national government and a clearer sense of national self-definition during the war to be extended, halted, or turned back?

Such issues would have given even so adroit a politician as Abraham Lincoln difficulty. After Lincoln's tragic assassination, the burden of Reconstruction fell upon the feeble shoulders of Andrew Johnson, who for the next three years, worked at cross-purposes with the Republican-dominated Congress. There is much evidence to suggest that the South, in the spring of 1865, was prepared to accept the consequences of military defeat. But Johnson's generous and lenient terms raised hopes and lowered expectations. By December 1865, when Congress reassembled, Johnson declared Reconstruction completed and urged the speedy readmission of the Southern states, whose satisfaction with the President's plan had led them to elect many ex-Confederates to political office. Outraged, Congress rebuffed the President and began to develop a far more comprehensive set of requirements. Not knowing whether to heed Congress or the President, the South waited in limbo, until finally, in March 1867, almost two full years after Appomattox, a newly elected, veto-proof Congress asserted its supremacy, broke the stalemate, and imposed what is still often regarded as "radical Reconstruction" upon the Southern states.

How radical was it in fact? Judging from the treatment of losers by winners in civil wars in other times and places, not radical at all. The Southern states, divided into five military districts, were simply required to frame new governments that embodied the principles of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments, which they were required to ratify. Only one Confederate, the commander of the Andersonville prison, was executed. Boundaries were not redrawn. Property and land were not confiscated and redistributed. Guerilla warfare did not continue. By 1870, all the Southern states had been readmitted. By 1877, the last of the federal troops had been withdrawn from the South, and "home rule," by which Southerners meant white supremacy, had been restored.

Reconstruction then, was largely a test of the degree to which the impulse toward a consolidated, modern nation-state, brought about during the war, could stand up against other, deeply held, American beliefs about local control, an unregulated economy, racial differences, and strict constitutionalism. To be sure, the subject/ verb agreement tellingly shifted from the prewar "United States are" to the postwar "United States is." But when a view of nationality has been eliminated by force of arms rather than by force of argument, it never quite dies. By the 1880s, a new equilibrium had been

established based on a consensus that continued to exclude blacks from many areas of American life and that defined ever more narrowly the permissible boundaries of national government activity.

The nature of that equilibrium becomes apparent in *The Private Mary Chestnut*, an abridgement of what the volume's editor, C. Vann Woodward, terms a 'stimulated diary.' In the course of her life with husband James Chestnut, who served the Confederacy in a variety of capacities, Mary Chestnut had the extraordinary luck to be in the right place at the right time: Montgomery in February 1861, when the Confederacy was established; Charleston in April 1861, for the firing on Fort Sumter; Richmond for much of the war; South Carolina as Sherman approached. Her reactions to both public events and private encounters were dutifully recorded in a diary that, for many years after, she revised and reworked.

Mary Chestnut offers intimate and revealing glimpses of character both major and minor. She also provides her own views on a variety of subjects, in the process creating a mosaic of the Confederate South every bit as interesting and opinionated as Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 masterpiece. Woodward helpfully indicates throughout where Chestnut revised her diary or added new material. That editorial apparatus reveals the extent to which the prism of time distorted the memory of events long ago. For instance, Chestnut's oft-quoted statement that slavery was a sin has frequently been cited as evidence of her advanced and liberal opinions on the subject of race in 1861. Woodward shows, however, that in the 1880s revisions of her "diary," the author removed that particular passage.

As Chestnut's views defined the form and limits of the emerging national consensus of postwar white America, sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* dropped dramatically. By the end of the century, Uncle Tom was out of print, a victim of the racial attitudes that had reestablished, at the price of black equality, a balance between North and South. Properly read, Mary Chestnut's Civil War is a valuable historical document that helps to answer the knottiest questions of the Civil War era: To what extent did the war have fundamental causes? To what extent was slavery a cause of the war? How far did the processes set in motion by the war toward a consolidated nationality actually go? What was the price of sectional reconciliation? What, finally was (is?) the legacy to our own time of the Civil War?

Two Roads to Sumter
by William and Bruce Catton

This beautifully written book traces the story of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis from birth to the outbreak of war. It is a comparative biography of the first order, and it is also a sweeping, vivid description of nineteenth-century America. The Cattons capture the uncertainties as well as the dreams of Americans pursuing a future that beckons even as it terrifies. New light is shed on the lives of two men whose biographies are already well known. As they each grope for answers to the vexing political and moral questions posed by the times in which they live, they reveal the ways in which imperfect human beings, imperfectly comprehending the world around them, struggle to avoid – and yet finally participate – a national tragedy.

Uncle Tom's Cabin
by Harriet Beecher Stowe

Stowe's triumph in this volume is not her literary artistry but her panoramic social portrait of mid-nineteenth century America. Like *Two Roads to Sumter*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* begins in Kentucky, on the Shelby plantation, where a decent but financially strapped master presides over a declining domain. Tom, his best worker, is a simple man of common sense and unquestioning Christianity, whose odyssey takes him first to New Orleans and then to the hell-on-earth of Simon Legree's plantation on the Red River. Stowe clearly recognizes the tragedy of slavery – not just for slaves but for all who touch it. And it corrupts not just Southerners but all Americans. "A mere matter of latitude and longitude," observes a New Orleans master, is the only difference. "Your father," he tells a Vermont cousin, "settles where all are free and equal; becomes a regular church member and in due time joins an Abolition society, and thinks us all little better than heathens. Yet he is, for all the world, in constitution and habit, a duplicate of my father." Stowe's point is simple: Americans are far more alike than the scriptural metaphor, is the "mote of deviance" that must be removed from the Southern eye.

Ordeal by Fire, Volume II: The Civil War
by James McPherson

The volume, written by one of the nation's leading scholars on the Civil War era, is a textbook, but it is unlike most textbooks in that it is written in a lively style. Moreover, while giving ample attention to the battlefields, it does not neglect the non-military side of the conflict. Problems of race, economy, politics, and civilian morale receive full coverage in a fashion that makes the reader eager to turn the page. Further, the book is packed with maps, charts, graphs, and photographs that offer vivid and even moving

testimony to the magnitude of the conflict. McPherson's overarching theme, the growth of nationality, makes this book a natural for inclusion in the series. In showing us "how the centripetal forces of nationalism proved stronger than the centrifugal forces of sectionalism," how coming together triumphed over moving apart, he isolates the fundamental issue of the Civil War.

Reconstruction: After the Civil War
by John Hope Franklin

This volume, written by one of America's most distinguished black scholars, tells the story of the working out the American compromise known as Reconstruction. The prompt restoration of the Union, Franklin makes clear, came at the price of halting the political and social revolutions portended by the end of the war. Jim Crow (legalized segregation) set the tone of race relations, first in practice and then, by the 1890s, by law. States' rights and strict construction, as interpreted by the Democratic party, governed politics. The North acquiesced, weary of war and ready to get on with the economic revolution that the war had also precipitated and that continued without restraint for the balance of the century. The message of the volume comes through clearly: the price of peace and reconciliation was another century of second-class citizenship for black Americans, who were no longer slaves, but who were not yet free.

The Private Mary Chestnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries
edited by C. Vann Woodward

The extraordinary look at life in the Confederate South represents a unique genre that is neither entirely history nor entirely invention. At Mary Chestnut's death in 1886 she left behind several versions of her manuscript, which she had clearly been revising and reworking for 20 years. Earlier published versions of this document, selectively edited incorrectly titled it a diary. In 1981, Woodward painstakingly edited and published, with heavy annotation, the 1880s version of Mary Chestnut's writings. This volume is an abridgment of that work. The book may thus be read at many levels and must be read with great caution. It is a valuable primary document that offers profound insights into the changing mind of the South and the nation. It provides, further, and more specifically, the views of a woman of more than ordinary intelligence whose mind penetrates the realities of Southern life. With Uncle Tom, *The Private Mary Chestnut* gives to this series a meaningful symmetry, closing a cycle of national self-definition that is, in the end, the enduring significance of the Civil War.

For further reading:

Antebellum Period:

Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War, by David Donald

Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War, by Eric Foner

The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860, by Suzanne Lebsock

The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina, by Gerda Lerner

Growing Up in the 1850s: The Journal of Agnes Lee, ed. By Mary Curtis Lee DeButts

The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860, by John McCardell

The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861, by David M. Potter

Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860, by William J. Cooper, Jr.

Narrative of the Life of an American Slave, by Frederick Douglass

Ordeal of the Union, by Allan Nevins

Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, by Harriet E. Wilson

Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made, by Eugene D. Genovese

The War Years:

The Centennial History of the Civil War, by Bruce Catton

The Civil War: A Narrative, by Shelby Foote

Grant: A Biography, by William McFreeley

Jubilee, by Margaret Walker

The Killer Angels, by Michael Shaara

Lincoln, by Gore Vidal

Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of a Virginia Girl, 1862-1864, ed. By Mary D. Robertson

The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union, by James McPherson

R. E. Lee, by D. S. Freeman

We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century, ed. By Dorothy Sterling

Why the North Won the Civil War, ed. by David Donald

Why the South Lost the Civil War, by Richard E. Beringer [and others]

With Malice toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln, by Stephen Oates

Reconstruction:

Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction, by Eric L. McKittrick

The Burden of Southern History, Revised edition by C. Vann Woodward

The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877, by Kenneth M. Stamp

Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty, by John W. De Forest
The Strange Career of Jim Crow, by C. Vann Woodward

"Rebirth of a Nation: Nationalism and the Civil War" was written by John McCardell, Associate Professor of History at Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont.

The development, design, and production of this material were made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Copyright © 1986 American Library Association



is a project of

