

1998

Worrying about the Civil War

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. "Worrying about the Civil War." In *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, edited by Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, 145-165. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Worrying about the Civil War

EDWARD L. AYERS

In 1995 the United States Post Office issued a stamp set commemorating the end of the Civil War; the set's motto was "Once Divided. Now Perforated." The stamps balanced carefully—Lee and Grant, Davis and Lincoln, Clara Barton and Phoebe Pember, Sherman and Jackson, the *Monitor* and the *Virginia*, Harriet Tubman and Mary Chesnut, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. The banners across the top also gave equal time, describing the conflict both as the "Civil War" and the "War Between the States." At the same time the federal government sold that artfully poised historical document, however, an episode of *The Simpsons*, a popular animated satire of American life, conveyed a different kind of message. Apu, an industrious South Asian immigrant in the Simpsons' hometown of Springfield, U.S.A., has studied hard for his citizenship test. The final question on the oral quiz is, predictably, "What was the cause of the Civil War?" "Actually, there were numerous causes," begins Apu. "Aside from the obvious schism between the abolitionists and the anti-abolitionists, there were economic factors, both domestic and inter——." The official, clearly bored with such superfluous erudition, intones flatly, "Just say slavery." Apu eagerly concedes the point—"Slavery it is, sir"—and wins his citizenship.¹

The Civil War has never been more popular. Soldiers on both sides of

¹ An instructive overview of other current uses of the war is Jim Cullen, *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past* (Washington, D.C., 1995). On *The Simpsons*, see the transcript for the episode "Much Apu about Nothing," written by David S. Cohen and directed by Susie Dietter, production code 3F20, original airdate in North America: May 5, 1996, capsule revision C: June 10, 1996, in "The Simpsons Archive" on the World Wide Web, <http://www.snpp.com/>.

the war receive reverential treatment from magazines that lovingly examine every facet of the war, from cavalry to cooking, reporting on battles as if they are late-breaking news. Reenactors gather at battlefields, getting the feel of heavy wool clothing on a suffocating August day, of a heavy rifle, stiff boots, and hardtack. The "Confederacy" finds no shortage of those willing to play the role of the gallant losers. Civil War encyclopedias, atlases, biographies, sweeping surveys, and minutely detailed volumes devoted to single days of battle fill the history sections at bookstores across America. The business sections of those bookstores often carry Donald T. Phillips's *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times*, in which Phillips proclaims that Lincoln steered the country through the war "with a naturalness and intuitiveness in leading people that was at least a century ahead of his time." Lincoln's lessons to today's executives include "Get Out of the Office and Circulate among the Troops" and "Keep Searching Until You Find Your 'Grant.'" For the Southern point of view, the businessperson can consult *From Battlefield to Boardroom: The Leadership Lessons of Robert E. Lee*, by Bil Holton, Ph.D.²

There is no animosity in any of these historical or practical interpretations of the Civil War. It is clear that the North fought for purposes entirely good—for Union and the end of slavery—but Confederate soldiers also win respect for their bravery, their devotion, and their struggle against long odds. They seem to have been playing historical roles for which they are not to blame. The reenactors, the books in stores, and the battlefield tours generally avoid talking about the cause of the war, focusing instead on the common bravery and hardships of soldiers North and South. The war has become common property, with the treacherous parts helpfully roped off.

Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, the most acclaimed fictional portrayal of the Civil War since *Gone with the Wind*, bears the major hallmarks of the current understanding of the war. Shaara's 1974 novel and the 1994 movie based on it, *Gettysburg*, view the conflict from the perspectives of men on both sides of the battle. We glimpse the anguish of Lee and Longstreet, the uncertainty and glory of Joshua Chamberlain, and the humanity of all involved. The moral centerpiece of both the book and the film is an Irish-American Union sergeant's soliloquy on freedom and dignity. The book, like other representations of the Civil War in recent decades, combines a respect for the warriors on both sides with an idealistic vision of the war's purpose.³

² Donald T. Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times* (New York, 1992), 173. First published in 1992 and now in its eighth printing, the book bears rows of endorsements from prominent political figures, coaches, and corporate leaders. Bil Holton, *From Battlefield to Boardroom: The Leadership Lessons of Robert E. Lee* (Novato, Calif., 1995).

³ Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels* (1974; paperback ed., New York, 1975); *Gettysburg*, a film directed by Ronald F. Maxwell, 1994.

The paperback edition of *The Killer Angels* carries the imprimatur of the two leading interpreters of the war. James McPherson calls Shaara's book his "favorite historical novel," and Ken Burns tells readers that the book changed his life: "I had never visited Gettysburg, knew almost nothing about that battle before I read the book, but here it all came alive." A work on the Civil War could not have more influential endorsements. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* and Burns's television series *The Civil War* have shaped the ways millions of Americans understand the central event in their nation's history. In 1988, McPherson's history of the Civil War won the Pulitzer Prize and remained ensconced for months at the top of the bestseller list. In 1991, Burns's nine-part series attracted the largest audience ever to watch public television in the United States and became a nationwide media event. Both men have gained growing audiences over the years, their works becoming fixtures in the nation's libraries and classrooms. McPherson has produced a steady stream of books and essays since *Battle Cry of Freedom*, amplifying his basic tenets about the war's cause and conduct. Episodes of Burns's film are often the first sustained exposure young Americans have to the Civil War and a major influence on those who have already finished their schooling. Many people have purchased their own copies of the tapes so they can watch them whenever they wish.⁴

Different media create different emphases, of course. Burns assembled an impressive team of academic historians to guide him, including McPherson, yet Burns is most interested in uncovering and recovering the feelings of the past. He offers an impressionistic account of the war, full of quotation, image, and sound. He focuses on the battlefields but uses private expressions of love and grief to powerful effect. McPherson, by contrast, is a professional historian, attuned to the debates, standards, and innovations of the academy. Like Burns, McPherson is most interested in the battles, but he connects the military conflict to politics and the social structures of the North and the South more rigorously than his counterpart.

Despite their different purposes and means, however, the interpretations of Burns and McPherson share a common perspective. They both dramatize the ways that antislavery opinion, progress, war, and national identity intertwined at the time of the Civil War so that each element became inseparable from the others. Slavery stands as the antithesis of prog-

⁴James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988); *The Civil War*, a nine-part documentary film directed by Ken Burns and shown by the Public Broadcasting System in 1990. McPherson has deepened and extended his interpretation in several books since *Battle Cry of Freedom*, including *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York, 1991), *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge, 1994), *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (New York, 1996), and *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York, 1997). McPherson's earlier overview of the era was called *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1982).

ress, shattering nation and creating war; war is the means by which anti-slavery feeling spreads and deepens; the turn against slavery during the war re-creates national identity; the new nation is freed for a more fully shared kind of progress. This story has become common sense to Americans: emancipation, war, nation, and progress all seem part of one story, the same story.

Both Burns and McPherson make sophisticated use of their preferred medium. Burns explains the coming of the war in just a few minutes of his long film, introducing the cotton gin and portraying the resulting conflicts as the inevitable result of the growth of slavery. Familiar faces and events flash past, from William Lloyd Garrison to Frederick Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe to Abraham Lincoln, from Bleeding Kansas to Harpers Ferry to Fort Sumter. McPherson, by contrast, spends hundreds of pages explaining the origins of the war. Like Burns, McPherson uses quotation extensively and effectively; he lets the words of his protagonists carry his story. Persuasive Northern speakers come in at key points to make the liberal and nationalist statements attractive to McPherson.

White Northerners, white Southerners, and black Americans all grow morally during the war that Burns and McPherson portray. The white North comes truly to abhor slavery; white Southerners recognize the limits of their power and the meaning of full nationhood; black Americans gain not only freedom but also heightened dignity when they take up arms for their freedom. Abraham Lincoln embodies this moral growth of his nation, as the slaughter on the battlefield gradually persuades the cautious president that the war must become a war against slavery. Lincoln's transformation represents that of the North as a whole, and his assassination brings the story to its end.⁵

Burns and McPherson hold up the story of the Civil War as an inspiration to Americans of today. As Burns puts it, "If there's one political theme in this film, it's this: The Civil War is a chronicle of making permanent that which was promised, but not delivered, in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution." McPherson, long known as a historian of abolitionism, stresses that the war was about freedom in its many manifestations. "Lincoln led the country through the worst of times to a triumph that left America stronger, more free, and more democratic," he has written recently. "And that offers a lesson not only for Americans but also for 'the whole family of man.'" These historians celebrate the outcome of a

⁵ As a recent survey observes, Lincoln "now enjoys extremely high approval-ratings"; older "doubts and reservations seem to have evaporated." Michael Perman, "Lincoln, the Civil War, and the New Approval Ratings," *American Studies* 36 (Spring 1995): 131-34. Penetrating comments on McPherson's interpretation appear in Michael Johnson, "Battle Cry of Freedom?" *Reviews in American History* 17 (June 1989): 214-18, and in Jon L. Wakelyn's review of *Battle Cry of Freedom* in *Civil War History* 34 (December 1988): 344-47.

war that put the country on the long path to the civil rights movement and greater equality. Their powerful histories tell a story of freedom emerging through the trial of war, of a great nation becoming greater through suffering.⁶

Despite the harrowing picture of war in Burns's film, where severed limbs and bleaching bones appear frequently and memorably, his North and South are engaged in a collaborative effort. "Between 1861 and 1865, Americans made war on each other and killed each other in great numbers," Burns's narrator David McCullough tells viewers early in the film, "if only to become the kind of country that could no longer conceive of how that was possible." The beginning and the end of the war fuse into one; the soldiers kill each other for the common purpose of discovering the depth and the nature of their nationalism. The final scene in Burns's epic shows footage from 1913, when aging veterans of Gettysburg return to the scenes of carnage to stroll peacefully together through fields now regrown green and alive. McPherson has less of a reconciliationist bent than Burns, but he uses the first page of his book to emphasize that versions of the song "The Battle Cry of Freedom" were popular in both the North and the South. His title is nonpartisan.⁷

Burns and McPherson work hard to protect the memory of the war. They defend its integrity from the evasions of those who insist that the South fought for something other than slavery; they guard it from those who emphasize the North's narrow self-interest; they protect it from the many historians who hold military history in disdain; they shield it from cynics on both the right and the left. For Burns and McPherson, the war's sacrifices must not be wasted; the people of the United States must not become unaware and unappreciative of what was at stake and what was won. McPherson continually reminds Americans, as his recent book titles put it, "what they fought for," that "we cannot escape history," that Lincoln led "the second American Revolution," and that soldiers fought "for cause and comrades." He has spearheaded efforts to protect battlefields, "sacred soil," from development.

McPherson is so vigilant because he recognizes that this interpretation has become established only after long struggle. The elegance and directness with which he and Burns tell their stories can lead us to forget what a complicated event the Civil War was. It was, after all, simultaneously a

⁶ Burns's press kit for *The Civil War*, quoted in Cullen, *Civil War in Popular Culture*, 11; James M. McPherson, ed., *We Cannot Escape History: Lincoln and the Last Best Hope of Earth* (Urbana, Ill., 1995), 12.

⁷ Geoffrey C. Ward, with Ric Burns and Ken Burns, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York, 1990), xix. For stimulating and divergent discussions of the issues raised by Burns's series, see Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Ken Burns's "The Civil War": Historians Respond* (New York, 1996).

war among citizens and among states, a war fought by disciplined soldier-citizens and a war that continually threatened to spin out of anyone's control, a war whose opponents were driven by hatred and yet who quickly reconciled when it became convenient, a war in which slavery died at the hands of soldiers who often fought against slavery reluctantly and even then because slavery's destruction seemed the only practical way to win. The current interpretations contain these tensions in an overarching story of emergent freedom and reconciliation. While acknowledging the complicated decisions people faced, Burns and McPherson resolve them through narrative. White Northerners, including Lincoln, announce early on that the war is not about slavery, but the words do not disturb us because we know these people change their minds later on. White Southerners claim plausible support from the Constitution, but their arguments have little weight because they lost the war and thus their arguments. Black Americans denounce the war at first as irrelevant or worse, but we know they were, fortunately, mistaken.

So self-evident does the dominant interpretation seem that many Americans of today never suspect how hotly historians have contested these issues throughout much of the twentieth century. Although vestiges of older interpretations still crop up in people's vague recollections, no one has stepped forward in a very long time to offer a popularly accepted counterargument to the explanation codified in Burns and McPherson. Major American thinkers last offered strong dissent three decades ago, when Robert Penn Warren and Edmund Wilson expressed visions of the Civil War that now seem startling in their vehemence and skepticism. Wilson made audacious comparisons in his influential book *Patriotic Gore*, a survey of wartime writing. "All animals must prey on some form of life that they can capture, and all will eat as much as they can," Wilson dryly observed as he compared the North and the South to sea slugs he had seen in a Walt Disney documentary. Man is different only because he "has succeeded in cultivating enough of what he calls 'morality' and 'reason' to justify what he is doing in terms of what he calls 'virtue' and 'civilization.'" Abraham Lincoln, Wilson thought, should be grouped with other leaders who sought to build nations through force and appeal to transcendent meaning: Bismarck and Lenin.⁸

Robert Penn Warren offered a more generous, yet still critical, meditation in his book *The Legacy of the Civil War*. The war, Warren cautioned, had produced two dangerous habits of mind in Americans. For the South, it offered "the Great Alibi," the great excuse for everything that was wrong or lacking in the region. For the North, the war offered "the Treasury of Vir-

⁸ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: 1962), xv-xix.

tue,” in which the war appeared as “a consciously undertaken crusade so full of righteousness that there is enough overplus stored in Heaven, like the deeds of the saints, to take care of all the small failings and oversights of the descendants of the crusaders, certainly unto the present generation.” Warren, like Wilson, did not shun dramatic effect: it was tempting, he argued, for Americans to regard the war as “part of our divinely instituted success story, and to think, in some shadowy corner of the mind, of the dead at Gettysburg as a small price to pay for the development of a really satisfactory and cheap compact car with decent pick-up and road-holding capability.”⁹

Wilson and Warren wrote during the one-hundredth anniversary of the war—“this absurd centennial,” Wilson called it—when histories, plays, reenactments, products, and commemorations of all sorts proliferated. Wilson and Warren wrote to dampen the self-righteousness and materialism to which Americans inclined in those stressful years of the cold war. The two authors considered themselves voices in the wilderness, delivering jeremiads, for a once-powerful tradition of skepticism about the Civil War had crumbled and a new tradition of acceptance and celebration was rising in its place.¹⁰

The skeptical viewpoint had peaked decades earlier, in the 1920s and 1930s, when “revisionism” flourished. The “revisionists” challenged the comforting bargain put forward in the years before World War I by Southern journalists such as Henry Grady and scholars such as Woodrow Wilson. Without sacrificing any respect for the Lost Cause, the reconciliationist bargain admitted that secession had been a mistake and that the nation should never have been divided. It argued that emancipation had been a fortunate occurrence for the white South, for whom slavery had been a burden. Southerners who made such concessions won in return the admission by white Northerners that Reconstruction and its elevation of black Southerners had been a mistake. This understanding of the Civil War, in other words, was simultaneously antislavery and racist, emphasizing the triumph of white reconciliation and progress at the expense of black rights. All white people emerged from the conflict looking high minded and principled.¹¹

Charles and Mary Beard’s immensely popular *Rise of American Civilization*, first published in 1927 and reflecting the disillusionment that fol-

⁹ Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (New York, 1961), 64, 49–50.

¹⁰ Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, xxxi. A blistering assessment of the Civil War from the perspective of the centennial also appears in Oscar Handlin, “The Civil War as Symbol and Actuality,” *Massachusetts Review* 3 (Autumn 1961): 133–43.

¹¹ Willie Lee Rose discusses the turn-of-the-century sectional compromise in *Race and Region in American Historical Fiction: Four Episodes in Popular Culture* (Oxford, 1979), 21–24.

lowed World War I, scoffed at this interpretation. They argued that neither side had been high minded, that the Civil War had been fought over neither slavery nor states' rights. Rather, economic issues stood paramount. "If the southern planters had been content to grant tariffs, bounties, subsidies, and preferences to northern commerce and industry," the Beards declared, "it is not probable that they would have been molested in their most imperious proclamations of sovereignty." The skeptical view broadened and deepened throughout the 1930s. In *The Repressible Conflict* of 1939, Avery Craven argued that the Civil War should be judged by its consequences and that those consequences looked bleak indeed at the end of the 1930s: the black American had escaped "little of the hard fate destined for his race in 1850. Industrial capitalism, with the banners of righteousness, patriotism, and progress over its head and with all critics hushed in disgrace and defeat, went on to its fullness and perhaps its ruin." Something precious had been lost in the Civil War, Craven lamented: "a Constitution which might have protected rights, an agrarian way of life which might have fostered a rich American culture and a sane economic order, a decentralized government wherein individuals and localities might have realized a more satisfactory democracy." Craven believed, along with many Americans, that those dreams had died with the Civil War.¹²

In 1940 James G. Randall delivered his presidential address to the leading organization of historians of the United States. In the address, titled "The Blundering Generation," he concluded that "the Civil War mind seems a sorry *melange* of party bile, crisis melodrama, inflated eloquence, unreason, religious fury, self-righteousness, unctuous self-deception, and hate." The war could, and should, have been avoided, Randall argued, for it was not fought over irreconcilable differences between the North and the South. Randall, like his fellow revisionists, thought he was moving discussion of the war to more realistic grounds, puncturing Northern arrogance and Southern apology. The Civil War was not to be glorified. It stood as an example of how democratic politics could run out of control, of the way moral absolutism could blind people to their own faults and to the consequences of their actions.¹³

¹² Charles Beard and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York, 1927), 51-54; Avery O. Craven, *The Repressible Conflict, 1830-1861* (Baton Rouge, 1939), 62-63. For useful overviews see Thomas J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War* (1954; 2d ed., New York, 1962); David Donald, "American Historians and the Causes of the Civil War," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 59 (Summer 1960): 351-55; David M. Potter, "The Literature on the Background of the Civil War," in *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge, 1968), 87-150; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 72-80, 234-38, 354-59; Michael Perman, *The Coming of the American Civil War*, 3d ed. (Lexington, Mass., 1993).

¹³ James G. Randall, "The Blundering Generation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27 (June 1940): 18.

Such claims did not go completely uncontested, for black historians warned that such views distorted all American history. Throughout the Gilded Age, abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, trying to create a usable past, argued in vain that the war had been fought over slavery. In 1935, during the peak of revisionism, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that the Beards' work created the "comfortable feeling that nothing right or wrong is involved. Manufacturing and industry develop in the North; agrarian feudalism develops in the South. They clash, as winds and waters strive, and the stronger forces develop the tremendous industrial machine that governs us so magnificently and selfishly today." Du Bois wondered how "anyone who reads the *Congressional Globe* from 1850 to 1860, the lives of contemporary statesmen and public characters, North and South, the discourses in the newspapers and accounts of meetings and speeches, [could] doubt that Negro slavery was the cause of the Civil War?" Du Bois granted that the "North went to war without the slightest idea of freeing the slave" but showed how the abolitionists and the slaves themselves forced Lincoln into making the war a war against slavery. These arguments won little attention or respect from white historians. This was the heyday of revisionism: "everyone" knew the war had been a mistake.¹⁴

Yet revisionism, so powerful in the first half of the twentieth century, faded away with remarkable speed in the second half. No sooner had World War II ended than commentators called for a rethinking of the dominant skeptical interpretation of the Civil War. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued in 1949 that the revisionists, despite their claims to the contrary, had been "sentimentalists," insensitive to the evil of slavery and excessively squeamish about using violence to end it. "The unhappy fact is that man occasionally works himself into a log-jam; and that log-jam must be burst by violence," Schlesinger lectured. "We know that well enough from the experience of the last decade." In 1953, the year that James Randall died, the black historian Benjamin Quarles published his *Negro in the Civil War*, arguing that black people had played central roles in transforming the Civil War into a war to end slavery. Avery Craven began toning down his earlier views, and no one picked up the revisionist banner. David Donald, a student of Randall's who, more than any other leading scholar, seemed sympathetic to the revisionists, explained in 1960 why the perspective no longer won converts: "To those who reached maturity during the years when irresistible and complex forces brought the United States, and the whole civilized

¹⁴ David W. Blight, "'For Something beyond the Battlefield': Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War," *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989): 1156-78; W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York, 1935), 714-16.

world, into a disastrous world war, it no longer seems so simple to unravel the causes of the conflict and to pass out praise and blame like honors at a college commencement exercise."¹⁵

The decline of revisionism was part of a larger rethinking of the American past. Historians in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s changed the way Americans understood nineteenth-century America, reflecting the influence of the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, and the counterculture. Many of the country's most visible historians valued rapid reform, through nonelectoral means if necessary, far more than they did the political stability, gradual change, and regional compromise championed by the revisionists. A self-consciously reformist, often radical, social history swept the profession, displaying and analyzing evidence of injustice and dominion. Southern slaves emerged as fully human, anguished by their bondage and determined to be free in whatever ways they could. Abolitionists no longer appeared as deluded zealots but rather as men and women willing to risk their lives for the highest religious and political ideals. The Republicans came to be seen primarily as advocates of free labor and economic progress, hating the South for its political arrogance and its violation of American virtues. Politicians in general no longer appeared to be blundering but responding, and rather timorously at that, to the very real dilemmas of their society.¹⁶

Despite penetrating essays and books by historians attentive to the complexities of the party system, no aggressive Civil War revisionism swept over America in the 1960s. This absence of antiwar thinking is surprising. After all, if the disappointments following World War I helped create the first revisionism, why did the far greater disillusionment with the war in Vietnam not create another surge of revisionism? Although disgust with the military and with warfare, with claims of national virtue and innocence, permeated the academy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, only one young scholar, a graduate student, issued a call for "a new revisionism." In 1969, he argued that "the limited improvement in the status of the Negro in this country was not worth the expenditure in lives required to make that improvement possible."¹⁷

¹⁵ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism," *Partisan Review* 16 (October 1949): 980, 981; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1953); Donald, "American Historians," 354. We can trace Craven's self-revisions in his *An Historian and the Civil War* (Chicago, 1964).

¹⁶ Perhaps the most important book in this regard was Eric Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970).

¹⁷ John S. Rosenberg, "Toward a New Civil War Revisionism," *American Scholar* 38 (Spring 1969): 261; for the debate that ensued, see the response to Rosenberg in Phillip S. Paludan, "The American Civil War: Triumph through Tragedy," *Civil War History* 20 (September 1974): 239-50, and John S. Rosenberg, "The American Civil War and the Problem of 'Presentism': A Reply to Phillip S. Paludan," *Civil War History* 21 (September 1975): 242-53.

David M. Potter, while not an aggressive revisionist, wrote several brilliant essays in which

Merely to quote the argument today is to show why it did not succeed: the antiwar spirit directly conflicted with the other great ideal of the sixties, black freedom. Revisionists in the 1920s and 1930s had argued that the end of slavery was not worth six hundred thousand lives because those historians did not consider slavery intrinsically immoral and certainly not much worse than what followed. By the late 1960s, however, slavery seemed so uniquely and undeniably wrong that the calculus of sacrifice had changed. The moral passion that earlier generations had invested in explaining why there should have been no Civil War now focused on explaining why the war and Reconstruction had not been more thorough, why Reconstruction had not been more aggressively supported by confiscation and military power. Scholars' compassion now focused more on the former slaves than on the soldiers in the war. The war itself became something of a scholarly backwater, neglected by the leading historians of nineteenth-century America. The distaste for the war in Vietnam manifested itself in an aversion to any kind of military history, while the fascination with social history made generals and their maneuvers seem irrelevant and boring at best.

Scholars, if not interested in the events on the battlefields, did remain intrigued by the causes of the Civil War. To scholars mindful of either mainstream social science or Marxist thought, the North increasingly appeared as a modern and modernizing society locked in an unavoidable struggle with an antimodern, archaic, and stagnant slave South. The economic conflict between the two societies no longer seemed one merely of tariffs and taxes, issues that could have been worked out, but rather a fundamental clash of free labor and slavery, of the future and the past. The two societies, historians of widely differing perspectives came to agree, could not, should not, have coexisted within the same nation-state. Slavery had to be destroyed as soon as possible, and given the white South's intransigence, only violence was likely to accomplish that purpose.¹⁸

By the 1970s and 1980s, in sum, the Civil War no longer appeared as a moral problem to the people who wrote the major books about the struggle. Such authors wasted little ink on what had been lost in the war other than precious lives; they worried little about how the war might have

he asked hard questions about comforting interpretations of the Civil War. They are collected in *The South and the Sectional Conflict*. While his posthumous and magisterial *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York, 1976) cannot be clearly labeled, Potter's revisionist leanings are clear in the textbook *Divisions and the Stresses of Union, 1845-1876* (Glenview, Ill., 1973).

¹⁸ For an influential statement of this argument, see Eric Foner, "The Causes of the American Civil War: Recent Interpretations and New Directions," *Civil War History* 20 (September 1974): 197-214.

been avoided. Slavery displaced other questions that had long agitated Americans, questions about state power, centralization, democracy, war itself. The Civil War came to seem like bitter medicine the country had to swallow for its own good.

Today's stories pivot around moments of wartime cohesion, purposefulness, and decision, especially the growing recognition among white Northerners that the war had to be a war to end slavery and not merely one to save the Union. The war appears as a crucible that burned away the impurities in the Union purpose: this is what Americans were willing to die for, the story says, this is how America atoned for the sin of slavery. The Civil War stands as the origins of our better selves, of the time when we threw off the slavery of our inheritance and became truly American. To Ken Burns, the war marked the equivalent of a "traumatic event in our childhood." To James McPherson, a generous reckoning of the war's purposes and consequences can help Americans overcome "the climate of disillusionment produced by the Vietnam War and the aftermath of the civil rights movement."¹⁹

So what is wrong with a generous interpretation? After all, it puts the ideals of democracy and nationhood at the center of the story, offering a counterweight to those who have appealed to less expansive interpretations of the nation's ideals. It holds up heroes worth emulating. It reconciles the North and South to each other, giving respect where it has not always been found. It places the struggle for black freedom and equality at the heart of American history. It connects Americans with their past. All these worthy purposes have been won only after great effort, and a person of goodwill might think twice before questioning them. And yet if we do not question them, we close ourselves off from other kinds of understanding and other perspectives on the American nation.

The current interpretation reassures Americans by reconciling the great anomaly of slavery with an overarching story of a people devoted to liberty. These stories reassure Americans by reconciling the horrors of fratricidal war with a vision of a peace-loving republic devoted to democracy and prosperity. They tell the story of a devastating war so that it seems not merely unavoidable but transformative and ultimately healing. The stories help restock Robert Penn Warren's "Treasury of Virtue" in the wake of the war in Vietnam. White Southerners have been permitted limited access to parts of the treasury, handed the keys to the rooms that contain honor, bravery, and even idealism—though not justice. Black Americans have finally been acknowledged as agents in their own freedom. But it is white Northern

¹⁹ According to Burns, "If you see history like the life of a human being, this [the Civil War] was the traumatic event of our childhood." *Newsweek*, October 8, 1990, 59; McPherson, *Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, 13.

men who come off best in these stories, martyrs for the Union and the liberty of others.²⁰

The new interpretation contains little of the cynicism and irony of the revisionists of the 1920s and 1930s. Today's stories tend to be earnest accounts, clear and linear, with motives and emotions close to the surface. Indeed, it is in part the very appeal of these stories as stories which makes them so resistant to revision and which makes them seem so self-evident. The accounts of the war have a familiar narrative shape; they present an apparently unresolvable problem and then, after great trials, show its resolution, echoing other basic stories of Western and American culture.

We understand the plot lines of war, dramatized every day on sports fields and in action films: good causes and bad, cowardice and bravery, sacrifice and glory, winners and losers, sudden victories and unexpected reverses. Fundamental ideas of history, religion, and science, as Hannah Arendt has argued, incline twentieth-century people to see wars as major engines of beneficial social change, even as we loathe and fear the conflict itself. Not only does the Judeo-Christian religious tradition accustom us to think of violence and blood as necessary accompaniments of progress, but evolutionism also leads us to conceive of violence as a part of nature, a way for bad ideas and institutions to be culled. These assumptions, combined with a widespread belief in the divine favor enjoyed by the United States, have made it easy for Americans to believe that the Civil War was not merely necessary but actually good for the country in the long run.²¹

Our current understanding of the war makes us impatient with those in the North—the great majority, at the beginning—who argued that they were fighting only for the Union, not for the end of bondage. We are befuddled by black Northerners who argued that a war fought to protect the Union—“this unholy, ill-begotten, would-be Republican government, that summons all its skill, energy, and might, of money, men, and false philosophy that a corrupt nation can bring to bear, to support, extend, and perpetuate that vilest of all vile systems, American slavery”—was not a war worth fighting. We are disappointed with those many white men who died

²⁰ For an example of black agency and white leadership, see *Glory*, a film directed by Edward Zwick, 1989. Ironically, Warren served on Burns's team of advisers and is quoted in the introduction to the book based on the series (Ward, *Civil War*, xix). Burns focuses on Warren's statement that the war was so central and complex an event that it tends to create a personal connection between it and Americans. In many ways, though, Burns's *Civil War* seems an example of the sentimental nationalism that Warren warned against thirty years earlier.

²¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 858; Thomas Cripps, “Historical Truth: An Interview with Ken Burns,” *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995): 741–64; Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York, 1970), paraphrased in Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Reflections on War and Political Discourse: Realism, Just War, and Feminism in a Nuclear Age,” in *Just War Theory* (Oxford, 1992), 270.

for the Union who would not willingly have risked their lives for the end of slavery. As the *Chicago Times*, commenting on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, put it, "They were men possessing too much self-respect to declare that negroes were their equals, or were entitled to equal privileges."²²

Garry Wills, in *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992), used such quotations to explain the great transformation of the North. In this best-selling and prize-winning interpretation of the war, Wills argued that Lincoln, in the mere 272 words of the address, cleared "the infected atmosphere of American history itself, tainted with official sins and inherited guilt." Rather than burning the Constitution because it countenanced slavery, as William Lloyd Garrison had proposed, Lincoln instead "altered the document from within, by appeal from its letter to the spirit, subtly changing the recalcitrant stuff of that legal compromise, bringing it to its own indictment." Lincoln's redefinition of the Constitution to embrace black equality, Wills admiringly noted, was "one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting. Everyone in that vast throng of thousands was having his or her intellectual pocket picked. The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought with them."²³ Lincoln tricked Americans into being better than they really were, into fighting for a higher cause. Wills's Lincoln transmogrified a war for the Union into a war for freedom.

There are, of course, scholarly dissenters from this standard interpretation. Historians such as David Potter, J. Mills Thornton, Michael Holt, William Gienapp, and William Freehling have questioned the political narrative that makes the conflict over slavery seem relatively straightforward, in either the North or the South. Their regions are marked by strong countercurrents, compromises, and possibilities for alignments other than those that brought on the war.²⁴ Other historians have argued that African Americans did more to free themselves than Abraham Lin-

²² First quotation from James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York, 1965), 34. The quotation from the *Chicago Times*, November 23, 1863, is in Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York, 1992), 38-39.

²³ Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 37-39, 183-85. David Brion Davis has explored, with characteristic subtlety, the conflation of Lincoln with the images associated with individual emancipation. See his "The Emancipation Moment," in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Lincoln, the War President* (New York, 1992), 63-88.

²⁴ Potter, *Impending Crisis*; J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, 1978); Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Wiley, 1978), and Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge, 1992); William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York, 1986); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: The Secessionists at Bay* (New York, 1990), and Freehling, *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York, 1994).

coln ever did. In the eyes of Leon Litwack, Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, and Armstead Robinson, the focus on white Northern soldiers and civilians gives undue credit to reluctant friends of freedom. Without the desperate efforts by slaves to free themselves, they argue, the Union cause would have remained a cause for union alone. It was anonymous African Americans who forced Union generals to take a stand on slavery—to recognize that only by ending slavery could the North win the war. Assuming an implicit and intrinsic push toward freedom on the part of the North, these historians warn, gives that society far too much moral credit.²⁵

Other historians have argued that the conflict was considerably more vindictive, hateful, and destructive than the new orthodoxy emphasizes. Michael Perman, Charles Royster, Michael Fellman, and Steven Ash stress the chaotic violence that swirled around the regimented violence of the war, tormented the border regions from Missouri to occupied South Carolina, ravaged the postwar period throughout the South, and nullified much that the war claimed to have won. Noncombatants as well as leading generals, these historians show, were often less eager to rejoin the foe as part of the Union than to see them dead. As Royster puts it, Northerners and Southerners fell into “visions of purgation and redemption, into anticipation and intuition and spiritual apotheosis, into bloodshed that was not only intentional pursuit of interests of state but was also sacramental, erotic, mystical, and strangely gratifying.” Such imagery has little place in the way most Americans prefer today to remember the war, in which violence was inflicted almost reluctantly, brother against brother.²⁶

The dominant story of the war can absorb a great deal of such amendment, however, without changing its fundamental outlines. The standard interpretation, after all, never makes the war seem painless; in fact, the suffering, struggle, conflict, and uncertainty constitute crucial parts of the “ordeal by fire” that tried the nation and its ideals. Arguments about the complexities of the antebellum period can complicate without undermining a belief that the war, as Lincoln put it, was “somehow” about slavery.

²⁵ On blacks' efforts to strike their freedom, see Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979); Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, 1st ser., vol. 1 (New York, 1985); and Armstead Robinson, “Day of Jubilo: Civil War and the Demise of Slavery in the Mississippi Valley, 1861–1865” (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1976). For strong criticism of Burns on this issue, see Litwack, “Telling the Story: The Historian, the Filmmaker, and the Civil War,” in Toplin, *Ken Burns's “The Civil War”*, 119–40.

²⁶ Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869–1879* (Chapel Hill, 1984); Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (New York, 1989); Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York, 1991); Michael Fellman, *Citizen Sherman: A Life of William Tecumseh Sherman* (New York, 1995); and Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861–1865* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

Arguments that Southern slaves helped free themselves can fit into and even enrich a story of the war that emphasizes the growth of liberty. Though arguments about the irrationality, brutality, and bloodthirstiness of the war may signal a new, darker school of interpretation, defenders of the standard interpretation have argued that the American Civil War actually saw less inhumanity than most other wars, that the American war was distinguished by the rigor with which soldiers and leaders played by agreed-upon rules. Even historians find it hard, in other words, to convey an overall interpretation of the war that fundamentally challenges the one that has become so deeply entrenched in American culture.²⁷

This lack of far-reaching debate over the Civil War—so unlike that which has surrounded other major historical events such as the French Revolution, the Holocaust, or the cold war—may not be a cause for self-congratulation. It is not merely that all the evidence is in and accounted for and historians have finally found the one true interpretation. It may be, rather, that we like the current story too much to challenge it very deeply and that we foreclose questions by repeating familiar formulas. The risk of our apparent consensus is that we paper over the complicated moral issues raised by a war that left hundreds of thousands of people dead. The risk is that we no longer worry about the Civil War.

The American Civil War presents great narrative opportunities. No one could ask for a richer subject, a better plotline of conflict and resolution, struggle and triumph, good and evil. But with those opportunities also come temptations. All the struggle, conflict, and uncertainty can appear as so many plot complications in a story that drives to its natural conclusion. Because the secession conflict led to the Civil War, war now seems to be the intention of those who sought to leave the Union. Because the war became a bloodbath of incalculable scale, that scale now seems inevitable. Because the war ended with the survival of the Union, that survival now seems the natural outcome of the war. Because slavery came to an end in 1865, that victory has suffused the purposes of the North throughout the war and before. The story has been settled upon, assuming the shape of an elaborate play. Every American schoolchild learns the set pieces, the way that generals and presidents personified various traits: Grant's cool purposefulness, Lee's selfless dedication to homeland, Sherman's prescient destructiveness, Lincoln's forgiveness and suffering.

Yet things may not have been so settled. The contingencies of the war, we might recognize, could easily have changed not only the outcome of the conflict but its apparent moral meaning as well. If the North had

²⁷ A counterargument that has received McPherson's endorsement is Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861–1865* (Cambridge, 1995).

overwhelmed the South in 1862, the victory would have brought the restoration of the Union without the immediate end of slavery. If that had happened, the war's causes as well as its outcome would be understood differently today. Similarly, if Lincoln had escaped assassination and had overseen the conciliatory form of Reconstruction he seemed to have had in mind, he likely would not appear to be the transcendental visionary he is considered now. Not only events were contingent, in other words—so were apparently fixed ideologies, values, personalities, and memories. With one key victory, after all, George McClellan might well be pictured on classroom walls throughout a very different kind of United States.²⁸

We might rethink, too, the role of modernity in causing and deciding the war. Modernity is perhaps the single most deeply embedded part of the standard story; Americans of all regions and generations, for different reasons, accept the idea that the North was a modern society that could not long coexist with a South that had rejected modernity. McPherson, for example, divides the country into two halves with different orientations toward “modernization.” He characterizes that process as one marked by “an evolution from the traditional, rural, village-oriented system of personal and kinship ties, in which status is ‘ascriptive’ (inherited), toward a fluid, cosmopolitan, impersonal, and pluralistic society, in which status is achieved by merit.” A 1996 book that offers “everything you need to know about America’s greatest conflict but never learned” boils things down this way: “The America of the Union states was racing toward the twentieth century, with banks, booming factories, railroads, canals, and steamship lines. . . . The southern states of the Confederacy were, in many respects, standing still in time.” The prominent historian George Fredrickson has argued that a modern society such as the North, in conflict with a nonmodern or less modern society such as the South, will benefit from modernity in wartime because “its greater social mobility and emphasis on achievement will bring to the fore more effective leaders, and its more highly differentiated structure of social and occupational roles will make possible a more efficient allocation of tasks.”²⁹

Such views may give modernity more credit than it deserves as the driving force behind freedom and military victory. Modern economies, after all, have often found ways to make their peace with nondemocratic gov-

²⁸ Battlefield contingency is the major analytic argument in McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom*, where he posits four points at which the North could have lost the war; see pp. 857–58.

²⁹ McPherson makes this point explicitly in *Ordeal by Fire*, 13, and implicitly in *Battle Cry of Freedom*; Kenneth C. Davis, *Don’t Know Much about the Civil War: Everything You Need to Know about America’s Greatest Conflict but Never Learned* (New York, 1996), 151–52; George Fredrickson, “Blue over Gray: Sources of Success and Failure in the Civil War,” in *A Nation Divided: Problems and Issues of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Minneapolis, 1975), 78.

ernment, coercive labor, and constrained liberties. And while the events of the twentieth century show that a technologically sophisticated, "highly differentiated" society can become a terrifyingly effective war machine, Americans have learned that more advanced societies do not always triumph over less developed enemies. If the South had won the Civil War, in fact, historians could plausibly argue that a defensive, highly mobilized, self-sacrificing, organic South would naturally defeat the commercial, aggressive, polyglot, individualistic North, with its draft riots, paid substitutes, and indecisive president. They would look to the American Revolution as foreshadowing the inevitable success of the Confederacy—just as the Confederates themselves did.

Even this counterfactual perspective does not go far enough, for it neglects how "modern" the slave South itself had become by the late antebellum period. This topic has been hotly debated by historians for decades, revealing that modernity is among the most slippery of concepts, especially as it related to slavery. It seems fair to say that from the perspective of most other societies in the world in 1860, the slave South was an advanced society, rich in the machinery and trappings of modernity. Railroads, telegraphs, cities, newspapers, active political parties, factories, and reform societies emerged in the 1840s and 1850s. Slavery grew no weaker as a result, however, showing itself dismayingly adaptable. Where the incentives existed, as in Virginia, slaves were put to work in the machinery of the new age, laboring in industries such as iron foundries. White Southerners considered themselves a progressive people, taking the best of the new while maintaining social stability and responsibility for their workers. They prided themselves on their white democracy, their widespread church membership, and their strict adherence to the Constitution. They saw themselves on a different, smoother, more humane path to progress.³⁰

Modernity, slavery, and nation appeared in strange combinations in the secession crisis and war. Some of the largest planters and richest slave areas in the Deep South tended to be Unionist, whereas cities, where modern ways had made the greatest inroads in the slave South, often voted for secession. The machinery of print and telegraph, rather than moderating the opinions of city dwellers and inclining them toward freedom, could inflame them against the North. The most heavily Unionist districts, for their part, were those least connected to the South and the rest of the nation;

³⁰ Richard Graham, "Economics or Culture? The Development of the U.S. South and Brazil in the Days of Slavery," in Kees Gispens, ed., *What Made the South Different?* (Oxford, Miss., 1990). For insightful portrayals of "modern" influences in the South, see Thornton, *Politics and Power*; Eugene D. Genovese, *The Slaveholders' Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought, 1820-1860* (Columbia, S.C.; 1992); and Kenneth W. Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana, Ill., 1994).

up-country people seemed bound to older ideas of nation, not newer ones. Once the war began, the Confederacy innovated quickly on the battlefield, on the oceans, and behind the lines, even as it held stubbornly to slavery.

There is no doubt that the North was more economically developed than the South and that slavery rendered the South economically backward by comparison. But seeing the war as a conflict between the future and the past tempts us to think that modernity naturally, if often violently, creates freedom. It tempts us to bifurcate and simplify the causes of the war into easy-to-understand formulas that flatter Americans, including white Southerners, into thinking that things unfolded pretty much as they were destined to unfold. It conflates slavery with the agrarian past and ignores the viruslike ability of slavery to insinuate itself into diverse kinds of societies. An interpretation based on modernization ignores how intertwined North and South, black and white, and slavery and freedom were in antebellum America.

Slavery and freedom remain the keys to understanding the war—but they are the place to begin our questions, not end them. The interpretation of the Civil War that appeals to so many Americans today weaves antislavery sentiments, war, economic progress, and nationalism into an inseparable whole. Freedom, it seems, was driven by the machinery of modern life, achieved through cathartic violence, and embodied in a government that valued freedom above all else. The triumph, moreover, seems to have operated retroactively. A nation that tolerated slavery at its founding can seem, in retrospect, fundamentally opposed to slavery. A national economy that for generations depended on slavery as its main-spring can seem intrinsically antagonistic to slavery. A war that began as a fight to maintain the Union with strong protections for slavery can be seen as inherently antislavery from the beginning. Given these assumptions, a conflagration on the scale of the Civil War appears inevitable.

Those who resist this argument, its assumptions, and its implications are often conservatives of various kinds. Some are white Southerners unwilling, as they see it, to abandon their ancestors and their heritage. Other critics resent the power of the national government and are jealous for the power of states and localities.³¹ Others are racists, denying to black Ameri-

³¹ Jeffrey Rogers Hummel offers iconoclastic and penetrating commentary on the war in his *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men: A History of the American Civil War* (Chicago, 1996). Hummel, from the viewpoint of one who finds the market and its values more just and efficient than the state and its values, challenges some of the orthodoxies of the liberal interpretation. He argues that a war to maintain the Union alone was not the worthy crusade it often appears: "As an excuse for civil war, maintaining the State's territorial integrity is

cans the freedoms and aspirations available to other Americans. As a result, liberals have stood staunchly behind the standard interpretation, hoping it can help strengthen the activism and authority of the national government, the claims of African Americans for full citizenship, and the tradition of white reform.

Perhaps, however, the standard interpretation is no longer serving liberal ends as it once did. The story of the Civil War has become a story of things being settled, of scores being righted. Movies and books that tell of Americans killing more than six hundred thousand other Americans somehow convey a sense of the greatness of everyone concerned and of the nation for which they died. Such faith in the transformative effects of warfare can make it easier for Americans to find other wars natural and inevitable. Celebrating the martyrdom of whites for black freedom can reduce white guilt. Celebrating the bravery of Confederate soldiers and the brilliance of Confederate generals can trivialize the stakes of the war. Celebrating sectional reconciliation can mask the struggles over justice, power, and arrogance that have marked relations between the North and the South for generations.

A new Civil War revisionism may help us avoid some of these temptations. That revisionism, unlike its predecessors, might focus on the way we relate the Civil War rather than on matters of interpretation alone. It might resist the very notion of the war as a single story, with a beginning, middle, and end, with turning points and near misses. The war did not have a single chronology, a rising and falling, an obvious pivot, but rather competing and intertwining chronologies in different theaters, on different home fronts, in politics and in economy. The sequence of sectional crisis, war, and aftermath did not follow a cumulative and linear development. To some, war seemed less impending in 1859 than in 1854, less threatening in February of 1861 than in November of 1860. The war seemed more pointedly about slavery in late 1863 than it did six months later when the presidential election in the North threatened to capsize the Lincoln administration. Black freedom promised more liberation in 1865 than it had delivered by 1876.

bankrupt and reprehensible" (352). Hummel believes that the war was not the only, or even the best, way of ending slavery, pointing out that the amount of money the North alone spent on the war "was enough to buy all slaves and set up each family with forty acres and a mulch" (354). The source of his dissent, reflected in his title, is that "in contrast to the whitening away of government that had preceded Fort Sumter, the United States had commenced its haltless but inexorable march toward the welfare-warfare State of today" (359). Hummel's notes on the historical literature are often biting, but his narrative of the war's coming, fighting, and aftermath does not differ markedly from more conventional accounts. His political perspective has revealed to him the evasions and conventions of the current orthodoxy and suggested promising areas for further reflection and research, but he has not yet offered a coherent counternarrative of the conflict.

A new revisionism might also set aside the Olympian perspective and voice of our dominant books and films to provide a different sense of the war's depth and scale. It might give up older reassurances to provide new kinds of clarity. It might convey what Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* conveyed—the swirl of action and reflection, the partial knowledge of those swept up in war. A new revisionism might inspire battle histories that leave some of the fog of battle on the page.

A new revisionism would place more distance between nineteenth-century Americans and ourselves, the very distance that lets us see ourselves more clearly. If Americans resist the temptation to count every cost of the Civil War as a “sacrifice,” we might be more grateful for our simple good fortune and perhaps less self-satisfied with the people we have become. If we acknowledge that we inherit all the past and not merely those parts we like to call our “heritage,” we would better respect the past's complexity, weight, and importance. If we recognize that the Civil War did not represent the apotheosis of American ideals, we might look for that culmination in the future rather than in the past. All we need is the faith to approach these threatening years without a comforting story already in hand.