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America on the Eve of the Civil War

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AMERICA
★ ON THE EVE OF THE ★
CIVIL WAR

Edited by Edward L. Ayers *and* Carolyn R. Martin

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INTRODUCTION

EDWARD L. AYERS

No one was sure what to expect. Sixteen historians from varying backgrounds and perspectives were coming together to talk about one of the most controversial topics in American history for an entire day. They would not invoke anything that happened after the end of 1859, a restraint possible because they knew their subject so well they understood what they could *not* have known at that time. And they were doing this in front of two thousand people from all over the United States and on streaming video.

The scholarship and public history the sixteen historians had created over their careers made this plan seem at least feasible. Their collective body of work embraced everything from politics to literature, from industrial slavery to African American art, from women's reform efforts to racial ideologies, from military history to the history of memory. Some of them worked at museums and libraries while others taught at universities and colleges across the nation. They belonged to no particular school of interpretation, and quite a few had never met one another.

The historians, whatever their backgrounds, shared a sense of responsibility for opening a national conversation about the causes, events, and consequences of the American Civil War on its 150th anniversary. When the Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission approached the University of Richmond to see if we might be interested in hosting the first session to wrestle with the commemoration, we jumped at the chance. The former capital of the Confederacy and a center of the internal slave trade would be a fitting place to begin the conversation about the meaning of the Civil War and the end of slavery.

When they approached us, the representatives of the commission asked, logically enough, if we would host that first session on the "coming of the Civil War." Despite our general enthusiasm, we warned that those words, so obvious and commonsensical, actually hinder our understanding of the war. They rush the story along, waste too much information, foreclose too many ways of seeing how the Civil War embodied the full scope of American history. If, instead, the session explored the years before the conflict began, ranging broadly across the entire continent and embracing all Americans, it would better explain how the war, as Abraham Lincoln would later put it, "came." We could better see what we were looking for if we broadened our scope of vision.

The commission's leaders enthusiastically embraced that notion, and we proceeded to frame a conversation around America on the eve of the Civil War. A better name, we noted, would have been "America on what would become the eve of the Civil War," but that was more than a mouthful. The participants in the conversation signed on to the concept of invoking nothing after December 31, 1859. Several conference calls wrestled with that premise and its consequences, and the more we talked, the more interesting the idea became. We would begin our analysis with what the historical actors, the people who actually made the history, knew and believed. The restricted perspective was not a gimmick but a challenging discipline. Like a detective who searches for the motivations for a crime in clues that do not seem obvious at first, the historians in this conversation did not dwell only on the obvious issues that moved the nation. Things that did not seem immediately related to the war turned out to be crucial.

The refusal to look ahead allowed us to set aside some of the usual conventions of Civil War discussion. "No one secedes; in fact, the Confederacy does not exist," my opening remarks warned those who had journeyed from twenty-six states to join us in a large basketball arena at the University of Richmond. "Robert E. Lee will play a lead role, but in command of *United States* troops at Harpers Ferry. Tom Jackson is still a math professor at VMI, though he will lead cadets to ensure order at the hanging of John Brown at the very end of the year. Sam Grant is a bill collector in St. Louis, and 'Cump' Sherman is heading up a military school in Louisiana. Jefferson Davis is still a United States senator and Abraham Lincoln is a successful lawyer and a failed senatorial candidate

with good prospects." Richmond itself was in 1859 "a booming modern city, full of immigrants, free black people, and factories." After encouraging and insightful remarks from Governor Timothy Kaine and the head of the Sesquicentennial Commission, Speaker of the House William Howell, we plunged into the discussion.

For most of 1859, it turned out, only one year before the momentous election of 1860, little happened that would have told Americans that they were living on the precipice of a continent-wide war and the end of the most powerful slave society in the world. Republicans widely distributed Hinton Rowan Helper's *The Impending Crisis,* which had come out two years earlier, arguing that slavery damaged, economically and politically, the non-slaveholding white majority in the South. The book helped mobilize Republicans, who were gaining ground in Northern states on the divided Democrats, but the putative audience for the book—white men in the South who owned no slaves—ignored or derided it. The most salient features of politics in 1859 were the obvious weakness and corruption of the Buchanan administration. That was why the Republicans were looking for someone who could be trumpeted as honest. A man from outside the usual circuits of power and dealing would be ideal.

The truly electrifying event of 1859 would be John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October. That raid was so profoundly unexpected, so complicated in its origins and in its consequences, that Americans at the time hardly knew what to make of it. The response was paradoxical, with most white Northerners apparently agreeing at the outset with all white Southerners that Brown was, at best, insane. The long delay between the raid and his execution in December, however, gave Brown an opportunity to frame the issues so that he became a martyr. Though the Republicans kept their distance from Brown, white Southerners blamed the Republicans in any case. America in 1859 was a hall of mirrors in which people fought reflections of reflections.

Gary Gallagher got a good laugh, and made a key point, when he pointed out that few white people woke up in the mornings of 1859 and thought first about the sectional crisis. Fittingly, therefore, the first session of the day focused on the things that people did think about, including the vast immigration from Ireland and Germany. This immigration fed growth, uncertainty, and conflict in American religion and

in the American economy, in the cities and the countryside. Millions of newly arrived people, the men among them voting not long after coming to the United States, fed resentment and fear among many who were already here. Nativism fueled the Know-Nothing Party, which in turn helped destroy what remained of the Whigs and fed into the nascent Republican Party.

The breakneck expansion of the nation, the product of countless individual decisions fed by ambition, desperation, calculation, and sheer restlessness, became another major thread of discussion. "The territories" became a critical stage for the conflicts that fed the Civil War, but political consequence played little role in the thinking of the people who moved. Their migration put the nation and the Constitution under enormous strain over the issue of slavery, but that did not factor into the calculations of many families. Whether in Missouri in 1820, Texas in 1845, California in 1850, or Kansas in 1854, a flood of people moving west drove political struggle back east.

Railroads and telegraphs, we heard in the opening conversation, transformed one area of life after another. The race to the West would not have been nearly as rapid, as large, or as momentous for those left behind had it not been for the railroads that connected the nation in the 1840s and 1850s. The economic life of the country, in every region, in manufacturing, agriculture, and slavery, surged because of new means of transportation. The nation suddenly found itself tied together in new ways, and that very unification created the conditions that led to its disunion. The events in Kansas, Harpers Ferry, and even Washington, D.C., could not have electrified the entire United States without the instantaneous spread of news fed by a burgeoning partisan press driven by the telegraph.

The changes in immigration, population, politics, transportation, and communication help explain why it was that slavery, which had been a national presence for more than two centuries before 1859, suddenly became so combustible. For the nonhistorians in attendance at the conference, perhaps the largest single surprise was the strength of slavery on the eve of the Civil War. People have long been taught that slavery was weakening. Some of that interpretation is a holdover from older pro-Southern arguments that war was not necessary because slavery would have faded away in its own time. Other assumptions about the weakness

of slavery come from exactly the opposite direction, a holdover from Republican arguments that slavery was backward and incompatible with economic growth. Those two older currents converged in the familiar argument that the Civil War was a fight between the "industrial" North and the "agrarian" South, a formulation that became popular in the 1920s in the work of Charles and Mary Beard and that has shown remarkable durability.

The Richmond conference, especially the session on the future of the South, showed how misleading that common interpretation is. The North was not nearly as dominated by cities and factories as our collective imagination portrays it, and the slave South was far more integrated into the world of business, finance, manufacturing, insurance, technology, and international trade than many people imagine. When Charles Dew projected a page from the account book of the Richmond slave broker Hector Davis on the large screen in the auditorium, people gasped when they saw that this one businessman had conducted transactions in the sale of men, women, and children of over two and a half million dollars in 1859 alone.

The slave trade in Richmond was far larger than this, of course, enveloping a considerable portion of the central business district. And that trade was growing throughout the 1850s, gathering and shipping tens of thousands of people every month from across the Middle Atlantic states to New Orleans and Texas. Many merchants, bankers, and suppliers who did not deal in slaves directly built businesses around their trade with the slave traders. The enslaved people who lived in Richmond worked in some quite modern occupations, ranging from iron and tobacco to flour and tourism.

African American people were a central presence in the future capital of the Confederacy, involved in every aspect of the city's life and economy. They sustained their own churches, lived in their own neighborhoods, and regularly made attempts at escape and freedom. But there was nothing about the evolution of slavery itself, other than its dismaying economic strength and geographic expansion, that fed the conflict between the North and the South. White Southerners hardly lashed out in desperation over a dying institution. If anything, they were too confident in the future of slavery, too certain that the nation's economy depended on the vast profits of the cotton and other goods produced

by slavery, too sure that the industrialized world would stumble and fall without the bounty produced by the enslaved people of the South. When Walter Johnson argued that white Southerners viewed Cuba and Latin America as lands ripe for the expansion of American slavery, people in the audience were taken aback, their frame of reference suddenly expanded.

The discussion of politics proved just as surprising. The historians unraveled a remarkably complex series of personalities, accidents, and structural changes that brought the United States to the fractured, unstable, and unpredictable political situation of 1859. Long-term developments such as westward expansion, immigration, and the spread of the telegraph fed the instability, but so did volatile events that dominated the newspapers. The attack on Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner by South Carolina representative Preston Brooks dramatized the growing resentment between the North and the South, inflaming regional fears and fantasies. News from Bleeding Kansas kept the wounds raw for month after month, turning the actions of a relatively few people into a morality play for the nation.

By themselves, these episodes might have come and gone. Had the Democrats not been weakened by President James Buchanan's passivity and reputation for surrounding himself with corrupt cronies, had Buchanan and the powerful senator Stephen A. Douglas been able to come to terms, had the Whigs not faded away after their loss of long-time leaders and defining purpose, had the Know-Nothings been able to sustain their sudden rise to power, and had the Republicans not turned to more moderate leaders, the flamboyant dramas of regional conflict might have passed in 1860, as they had so often before. But an election was looming in 1860 and people on all sides jockeyed for advantage, recklessly playing with the nation's future for political advantage. By the end of 1859, the dangers of that jockeying were not yet apparent. The candidates for the next year's election, including Abraham Lincoln, were by no means evident, and neither was the strange four-way contest that would soon pull the nation apart.

The four conversations that make up this book remind us that people lived economic, religious, and cultural history at the same time they lived political and ideological history. History is unpredictable not merely because surprising events occur but because every part of his-

tory impinges on every other part. Everything constantly moves and everything constantly touches everything else. Our familiar stories of the Civil War isolate regional conflict from all the other things going on that pulled in different directions. The conversations in this book, in contrast, offer a much more dynamic view of history, taking more Americans and more kinds of Americans into account.

It was, frankly, surprising that such a coherent view of this period emerged from the conversations in Richmond. The historians at the conference certainly brought different perspectives with them, and the format encouraged them to jostle with one another. But while they emphasized different topics and interpretations, they were surprised to find that they agreed on so much. The conversation revealed, in fact, that a new interpretation of the Civil War era has emerged from the last twenty-five years of scholarship. African American history, women's history, and immigrant history have flourished for decades now, with one breakthrough after another. Struggle, change, and complexity now dominate where broad generalization once characterized the representation of these people in our history books.

Detailed studies of political development, too, have shown the limitations of simplicity. Sophisticated studies of electoral patterns reveal that the constituencies of the Republicans and Democrats cannot be traced as simply as we once thought, that complex currents flowed into the new Republican Party. Studies of the South show that slaveholders often sought to protect slavery by protecting the Union and opposing secession. Histories of both the North and the South reveal how quickly things were changing in the late 1850s, how uncertain the prospects were for the most powerful men.

Economic history, too, has undergone radical change. Where not so long ago simple ideas of development, industrialization, and modernization dominated our understanding of economic life, historians now understand that economic change is anything but straightforward. There is hardly one path to economic development and that path does not invariably proceed through democracy and freedom. Studies of slavery in the United States and elsewhere reveal that forced labor can be fused with innovative forms of finance, transportation, communication, and political development. As historians come to understand the interrelations of national and international commerce, it becomes ever clearer

that economic development knit the North and the South together ever more tightly and tied the South into complex webs of economic development far from its borders.

Dichotomies that long dominated American history have dissolved even though we do not yet have an account of the Civil War era that incorporates all the new dynamic elements. This slender book, in fact, may offer a glimpse into the history that is to come. The historians who gathered in Richmond did not come together to promote a new perspective on the defining conflict in American history. They would certainly not consider themselves a school. But each brought some particular perspective, some unique knowledge, to the conversation and revealed that our understanding of the American Civil War is growing richer, more inclusive, and more supple than we may have realized.

As we began the day, I asked a rhetorical question of the unexpectedly large audience in the arena where we met: "Why would you come as far as many of you have, and spend as much time as you seem prepared to spend, to discuss the years before any of the famous events of election, secession, war, emancipation, and reconstruction have occurred?" We already knew the answers from the hundreds of replies to the questions that we posted on the Web site where the participants registered. As I reminded them that day, they told us they were coming to Richmond "to help us reckon with the hardest parts of American history to comprehend. You have come here to help us think through the meanings of slavery, of violence, of nation, and of history itself. You have come here because you know that if we do not lay the foundations for our understanding of the Civil War in the 1840s and 1850s, there is no understanding the 1860s and 1870s." The people who journeyed to the former capital of the Confederacy to explore the years on the eve of the Civil War "know that if we do not understand the Civil War, we cannot understand the decades in the 150 years since, including our own. You have come here to show that Americans are ready, even hungry, to examine the Civil War on its 150th anniversary with fresh eyes."

David Blight, a participant at the conference, wrote a telling essay soon after the event. A student of the memory of the Civil War, Blight was struck by the difference between this conversation and those of the war's centennial fifty years earlier. American life changed profoundly over those decades and so has our understanding of the American past.

This book ends with Blight's thoughtful words because they remind us of what is at stake in our conversations about the American Civil War. If we come to that era ready to learn all that it can teach us, we can see ourselves, our past, and our many potential futures with a new and broader vision.