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[Introduction to] America's War: Talking about the Civil War and Emancipation on Their 150th Anniversaries

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america's war

Talking About the
Civil War and
Emancipation
on Their
150th
Anniversaries

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introduction

YOU ARE LIKELY TO BE surprised by some of what you find in this collection. The cast of characters, the range of perspectives, and the number of interesting questions about the Civil War have expanded to a remarkable extent over the last few decades. While the key questions and characters endure, we now have the exciting opportunity to see through the eyes of many people neglected in earlier generations. A hundred and fifty years after the pivotal event in our nation's history, we are still discovering its meanings.

The purpose of these selections is to give people interesting things to talk about. The American Civil War is intrinsically interesting, though it has often been buried in cliché and overfamiliarity. The global significance of the war seems different than it did fifty years ago, at the time of the centennial, when its major consequence seemed to be the unification of a nation that would stand against communism. Today, the Civil War seems to matter, too, because it brought an end to the most powerful system of slavery in the modern world. If the themes of union and freedom give the war the meanings we wish to see, however, we have also come to acknowledge that the war reveals humans' capacity for killing one another in vast numbers.

From the moment Americans found themselves pulled into a civil war of unimaginable scale and consequence, they tried

desperately to make sense of what was happening to them. From the secession crisis into the maelstrom of battle, from the nightmare of slavery into the twilight of emancipation, Americans of all kinds made up narratives that tried to order the chaos. Because the need to understand that war endured long after the end of fighting, people have told stories about the Civil War for the last century-and-a-half—and they always will.

Whatever their origin or timing, all these stories tell more than appears on the surface. They speak, often in spite of themselves, of purposes and patterns larger than their immediate subject. They often belie or undercut their original purpose, too obviously reveal their wishful thinking and self-deception. The histories we write today strive for balance and inclusion, but we, too, tell ourselves stories, new and old, for our own reasons. The only way we can understand those stories is to read them together to explore their similarities and differences.

Each of the readings in this collection adds a crucial voice to our understanding, a perspective we need in order to see the whole. The silences or anger or hatred or idealism that separate the voices are as important as their commonalities. The American Civil War was not a single thing, a simple thing. It changed shape from the beginning to the end. The war's full significance, incomplete in 1865, continues to unfold all around us.

The selections in this book range from the 1850s through the first decade of the twenty-first century. They reflect the perspectives of Americans—from an enslaved man to the president of the United States, from a teenage girl to veterans recalling battles fought decades earlier, from diary writers caught in the terror of the moment to novelists imagining events that unfolded generations before their own time. Whatever their sources, the selections here convey unique and distinctive voices.

The clearest example of the difference between the people of the nineteenth century and those of the twenty-first lies in the representation of African Americans. Any student of the Civil War era must confront the callous and stereotyped portrayals of black people by whites in the writings of the time. A disregard of the full humanity of

black Americans seemed all too natural. The flashes of empathy and concern that sometimes emerged stand as the exceptions.

Other themes stretch across these selections. Though we have grown accustomed to thinking of the years before the Civil War as prelude to a war people knew was coming, they did not in fact have that knowledge. People expected, as Abraham Lincoln put it, that some kind of “tug” had to come, but they did not expect a cataclysmic war that would sacrifice their sons, brothers, and fathers and devastate a generation. People expected some kind of struggle over slavery, but they did not expect the full emancipation of four million people within a few years. If Americans had known of these things, many would not have fought. And if we are to understand their actions, we must set aside our own knowledge of how events turned out.

People have found turning points around one event after another, especially between 1862 and 1864. In fact, the very profusion of these turning points should make us wary of the concept, for the war continually turned. The future of slavery, the relationship of the states to the federal government, the fate of African Americans, and the degree of postwar reconciliation between the North and the South could each have followed different trajectories at many points throughout the conflict and beyond.

The selections show, too, that the United States and the Confederacy held sharp conflicts within their own borders. Despite sentimental images of soldiers in blue and gray marching off to war with their communities cheering them on, many struggles divided the North and the South. In the United States, people squabbled over the very purposes of the war from start to finish, some arguing that only a war for union was worth fighting, others arguing that only a war for freedom deserved such sacrifice, and still others arguing that nothing justified such a bloodletting. Furious dissidents against the inequities of the draft rioted in the streets of New York. In the South, leaders of states raged that the Confederacy exercised tyranny in its draft and taxation. Women rallied in the streets of Richmond against the inequities of sacrifice and hunger. Border areas fell into their own civil wars, chaotic, bloody, and destined to fester for generations.

The selections that follow show that Northerners and Southerners believed passionately in the justice of their cause. They urged themselves and their families to ever-greater sacrifice. Before the war's outbreak, only a relatively few self-appointed spokesmen called for a new Southern republic based on slavery. Within weeks of its creation, though, people declared themselves willing to die for that republic—and they did die, in staggering numbers. The Confederacy was a brand-new nation, built out of the materials at hand: an edited United States Constitution, the apparent sanction of the Old Testament, movements for independence in Greece and Italy, and a determination to protect a system of slavery of global economic importance. The United States was a few decades older, but it, too, was untested, the idea of perpetual union only recently and imperfectly defined.

The experience of fighting was as alien and surprising as the coming of the war itself. The United States had only a tiny army and navy, with an anemic tradition of a professional military. The states that would become the Confederacy possessed virtually no military resources. Yet, within a matter of months, both sides amassed enough men and military material to fight a war across an enormous expanse of space and time. In one horrific battle after another, they killed each other in proportions that would only be equaled sixty years later on the fields of Europe in the Great War.

The experience of African Americans varied greatly. For the four million held in slavery, war sometimes meant they were sent to work on fortifications, sometimes sent to battle with young masters, and sometimes removed as far from the presence of Union troops as possible. Enslaved people seized opportunities to make themselves free, risking their lives to travel to Union camps or to follow Union troops. Over 200,000 African American men, some free before the war and some enslaved, joined the United States Army and Navy. Only small numbers of black men willingly picked up arms for the Confederacy. Most enslaved people, laboring far from the battlefield, remained on the farms and plantations where they had lived before the war, praying for freedom and taking whatever steps they could to make that freedom real.

Within each section of this collection, the writings are organized as a kind of conversation. In some cases, they are ordered by the dates when they were written, in others by the order of the events they evoked. Both of these organizing principles are important, so it would be good to think about both. People could see things in the 1870s they could not have seen in the 1850s, but the reverse is also true. We do not necessarily grow collectively wiser with time, though new experiences and new kinds of writing reveal things invisible to people at an earlier time.

The selections of *America's War* build on the remarkable scholarship of the last several decades. Historians and literary scholars have carefully gathered and edited the works of writers, famous and otherwise, setting their words in context, clarifying issues of controversy, and presenting important writings that few general readers would be able to find on their own. Readers will discover a wide range of usages, spelling, and documentation in the works that follow; each reflects the original document and time and purposes for which it was written. Gathering to talk about these powerful voices from the past is the best way to understand them. It is also a useful way to understand ourselves a hundred and fifty years after this war descended on the United States.

*Edward L. Ayers, President
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