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[Introduction to] In the Presence of Mine Enemies: Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863

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IN THE PRESENCE OF MINE ENEMIES

WAR IN THE HEART OF AMERICA 1859–1863

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PREFACE

AMERICANS COULD NOT have imagined the war they brought on themselves. Though people had long talked of conflict between North and South, no one could have foreseen battlefields stretched across an area the size of continental Europe or the deaths of more than half a million people. No one could have known that the most powerful slave society of the modern world, generations in the making, would be destroyed in a matter of years. No one could have known that a North long complicit in slavery would turn a struggle against disunion into a war against bondage. No one could have known that African Americans could so quickly rise to seize freedom from the turmoil.

Today, of course, we do know these things. Looking back to tell the story to ourselves, we search for opposites and contrasts to explain this overwhelming war, to set abolitionists against secessionists, industry against plantations, future against past. We look for impending crises and turning points, for the reassuring patterns that lead to the end of the story we already know.

This book tells a different kind of story. It offers a history of the Civil War told from the viewpoints of everyday people who could glimpse only parts of the drama they were living, who did not control the history that shaped their lives, who made decisions based on what they could know from local newspapers and from one another. It emphasizes the flux of emotion and belief, the intertwining of reason and feeling, the constant revision of history as people lived within history. It sets aside our knowledge of the war's outcome, starting before war could be envisioned and ending with everything in uncertainty.

The years between 1859 and 1863 saw abrupt transformations in the United States. Political conflict burst into civil war, a reluctant use of state violence turned into furious war making, war making turned into despair. In the North anti-Southernism grew into support for abolitionism that promised revenge and deliverance. In the South passionate loyalty shifted intact from the Union to the states to the Confederacy. Though profound, these transformations were never complete, never certain, and never unchallenged.

Because the Civil War was such a vast and complex event, historians often approach it in the familiar and manageable forms of broad surveys, battle histories, and biographies of generals and presidents. In these accounts, the experiences of the majority of people, soldiers as well as civilians, tend to blur into generalizations, categories, and scattered quotes. It is easy to lose sight of the way the war continually changed its meaning and implications for most Americans.

In pursuit of a more inclusive and more intimate history, this book tells the story of two communities, one Northern and one Southern. Holding a tight focus across the complicated landscape of the Civil War, this book follows the people of Franklin County, Pennsylvania, and Augusta County, Virginia, from peace into the maelstrom of the war. It intertwines the stories of North and South, sometimes using sections in italics, like voice-overs in a film, to comment on the twin narratives. The book follows the cadences of the Twenty-third Psalm, for the Bible's words were a great commonality of the two warring sides.

Augusta and Franklin lay about two hundred miles apart in the Great Valley that stretched across much of the eastern United States, a land of rich farms and pretty towns that found itself at the very center of the Civil War from John Brown's raid to Gettysburg and beyond. These two communities were swept up in nearly all the challenges the nation faced in these years. They played central roles in several episodes of the national drama and their soldiers fought in every major battle in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Augusta and Franklin experienced much of the Civil War in microcosm.

The stories that follow unfold on the borderland these two counties occupied, the borderland that spanned the lower North and the upper South. The people of the border did not start the fight that became the

Civil War. Indeed, they prided themselves on their restraint in the face of what they saw as provocation by extremists above and below them. They weighed the claims of antislavery and proslavery, of Democrats and Republicans, of unionists and secessionists, arguing heatedly with and among themselves, and then they threw themselves into the conflict with a desperate finality. The people of the border contributed far more than their share of critical votes and leaders, more than their share of soldiers, battlefields, and sacrifices. The nation redefined itself on the landscape of the border, the heart of the nation where North and South met.

Conflict based in slavery had divided Americans for generations before the Civil War. Some of the conflict grew from rivalry for power, some from moral outrage, some from memories from past insults, some from new events that inflamed the antagonism. But the unifying forces between the North and South were strong, too. Shared histories, religions, ethnicities, economies, languages, families, and national aspirations made a devastating civil war inconceivable to Americans, no matter what their loyalties.

Although the source of sectional divisions, slavery itself connected the North and South. Its dark threads were woven through Unionism as well as secession, private emotion as well as public policy, the mobile, technological, opportunistic, profit-driven sectors of American life as well as its agrarian and traditional aspects. Slavery relentlessly pulled in white people on both sides of the border who held no obvious stake in the institution, forcing them to take sides. It defined the fears and aspirations of black people no matter where they lived. A war about slavery would be a war that touched everything in America.

Seeing the centrality of slavery to the nation means that we acknowledge great complexity in the coming and fighting of the Civil War. Simple explanations, stark opposites, sweeping generalizations, and unfolding inevitabilities always tempt us, but they miss the essence of the story, an essence found in the deep contingency of history. To emphasize deep contingency is not to emphasize mere chance, all too obvious in a war, but rather the dense and intricate connections in which lives and events are embedded. Because all facets of social life interact, because history is woven throughout people's lives in ways both visible and invisible, all parts of life are contingent on one another, dependent on one

another. The brute operations of economy or government continually interacted with the more subtle but no less potent power of culture and ideology. Sometimes people acted from personal or local motivations while at other times distant events drove their actions. A history of the Civil War must comprehend all of these facets of life as they connected in the flow of time.

An interpretation that focuses on deep contingency cuts against the grain of many Americans' understanding of the Civil War. We usually look closer to the surface, seeing the North as a modern society in obvious conflict with an archaic South, the future in conflict with the doomed past. Such a view seems like common sense, for it embodies an understandable and useful desire to see American history as a path, albeit strewn with challenges, to the realization of our best selves. This interpretation of America's great war appears in many forms, from Ken Burns's television epic *The Civil War* to best-selling novels such as Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* to influential histories such as James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*. These works of national affirmation, so beautifully rendered, emphasize the national redemption bought by the war's trial and sacrifice. When these works focus on chance and turning points, they do so to dramatize how things worked out for the best, for freedom, progress, and Union.[1]

Nations need, and crave, such encouraging histories, films, and novels. But nations also need other kinds of stories if they are to use history wisely, if they are to learn all they can from their past. This book dwells on facts that have posed persistent challenges to our understanding of the Civil War. The North and the South, so divided by slavery, also shared a great deal. The South was more economically advanced and the North more racially oppressive than they often seem in retrospect. To many white Southerners slavery seemed safer within the Union than without, so that no simple connection between slaveholding and votes for immediate secession emerged. Most white Southerners did not own slaves and yet supported secession and the Confederacy. The upper South, so strongly Unionist, quickly became devoted to the Confederate cause; the lower North, often sympathetic to the South before the war, threw its allegiance to the Union cause. Both the North and the South faced desperate internal conflict among their citizens, with the North's dissidents

more overt and organized than the South's. The North turned against slavery as a military object but many whites, including some among the North's leaders, could not imagine black people as free American citizens. The United States, so overwhelming in its resources, could well have lost, deep into the conflict, much that it went to war to protect from the Confederacy.

Slavery brought war and its own destruction precisely because of these complications, because the war was not a simple and straightforward conflict. And once it began, the Civil War, in all its power, brought changes no one could have foreseen in the quiet and prosperous summer of 1859.

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