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[Introduction to] A House Divided: A Century of Great Civil War Quotations

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"A House Divided..."

A Century of Great Civil War Quotations

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Introduction

The people in this book speak directly to us. We hear the voice of command and the voice of the common soldier. We hear those who speak without hope and others who hope even when they have every reason to give up. We hear the weariness of older people and the confusion of the young. We hear the voice of sympathy across the battle lines and the voice of vengeance and hatred. We hear the resignation of the wounded and the despair of those who survive. We hear the pride of victorious generals and the crushing doubt of those who sacrificed lives in a losing cause. Some of the words have become famous while others have passed from our collective memory.

We have organized this book so that we can follow these complicated conversations more easily. The topics range from the battlefield to the homefront, from the hospital tent to the prison cell, from New England to Texas. Men and women, black and white, soldier and civilian, all get their say. Secessionists and Unionists, heroes and deserters, warriors and peacemakers speak their minds.

The chapters also follow a chronological sequence. People chose different words as the years unfolded, as they saw more of what this war meant. The cockiness of 1860 rapidly became the fury of 1861, the horror of 1862, the wild determination of 1863, the resoluteness of 1864, and the mingled sadness and relief of 1865.

A book of quotations such as this one, juxtaposing words and phrases across battle lines and across years, shows the importance of words themselves. The words stand not merely as vehicles of emotion, but define and evoke emotions. Just as the open battlefields of First Manassas became replaced with the trenches of Cold Harbor, muskets with rifles, and volunteers with conscripts, so did some words displace others. Early in the conflict, words such as *decisive, glory, brilliant,* and *gallant* punctuated the hopeful pronouncements and predictions of both

sides. As the war unfolded, people spoke more of *vengeance*, *subjugation*, and *humiliation*. They mixed images of *peace* with images of *extermination* and *devastation*, sometimes in the same letter. Anything that would end the killing.

Northerners and Southerners, we see, often used identical words to express their deepest motives and emotions. Words such as *God* and *Christian* grace the diaries, letters, and editorials of those on both sides. Both felt certain that their side bore the highest divine sanction. They habitually linked the spiritual and the secular, calling their causes and their sacrifices *righteous* and *sacred*.

Both Union and Confederate soldiers also spoke repeatedly, ritualistically, of *duty*, *country*, *liberty*, *patriotism*, and *honor*. Both sides invoked *courage* and *blood*, *manliness* and *nobility* at every opportunity. All these words people knew to be the language of warfare, the language they had learned from the Bible, their history books, and the speeches they heard on election day. They instinctually turned to this stirring rhetoric when lesser words seemed pale and inadequate.

Despite the language they shared, however, those in the Union and those in the Confederacy also chose words they deemed especially suited to their cause. Northerners rallied to the call of *Union* and *Constitution*; identifying their enemies as *traitors*, *rebels*, and *aristocrats*, their opponents' actions as *rebellion* and *crime*. Those above the Mason-Dixon line saw themselves as fighting for order and the rule of law, for the peaceful transfer of power through open elections. They pictured themselves as the heirs to the nation created by the Founding Fathers.

Southerners, for their part, pictured themselves as the heirs of the Revolution itself, of the struggle for independence. In their eyes, the nation was not as important as the principles for which they thought it stood; the nation was merely a vehicle for their freedom. The key words in the Confederate lexicon leaped from the Revolutionary struggle. Southerners saw themselves as *patriots* fighting for *independence* from the *unconstitutional aggression* and *invasion* of a *tyrannical* and arrogant central government, just as their forefathers had three generations earlier. They were proud to call themselves *rebels*, though in their eyes there was nothing of treason involved in their actions. The considered themselves rebels just as George Washington had been a rebel.

Confederates thought that Northerners had usurped the federal government for their own selfish ends, violating the spirit of the Constitution on which the states had agreed. Southerners, whether they thought it was wise or not, believed that they had the right to leave the Union if they so chose. And when they did, they became, in their own eyes, *defenders* of their *independence* and *pride* from the *submission* and *slavery* the North would inflict upon them. Northerners at the time and many people ever since have refused to accept the sincerity of white Southerners who could use such words when they themselves were a slaveholding people. Even though most white Southern families did not themselves own slaves, virtually all were supporters of the system both in fact and in theory. Few white Southerners spoke against the evils of slavery in the three decades before the Civil War. Their diaries, letters, and sermons showed few pangs of private regret or guilt, seldom mentioning slaves or slavery at all.

White Southerners explained the apparent inconsistency between their freedom and the slavery they oversaw with the words of race. In their eyes, the descendants of the English were naturally fitted for freedom by blood, by heritage, and by struggle. White Southerners explained the bondage of African Americans by bondage itself; because black people were held in slavery they were fit only for slavery. Whites turned to the Bible and to antiquity for sanction of slavery. Whites took the color of skin as evidence of something deeper, of character and depth of feeling and longing for freedom.

The role of slavery in the North's cause was not always clear. As the quotes in this book show, at the beginning of the Civil War few white Northerners proclaimed themselves fighting a war to abolish slavery. They wanted to stop the spread of slavery, to be sure, for they viewed slaveholders as petty tyrants and non-slaveholding white Southerners as dupes for tolerating slavery in their midst. But this distaste and disdain for white Southerners did not translate into respect or even into concern for black Southerners. While those who wanted to begin the end of slavery immediately spoke out in the North from the 1830s on, they were by no means a majority in 1860. Most white Northerners seemed contemptuous of black people, sometimes violently so.

This ambiguity of purpose tore at the Union throughout the war. Abraham Lincoln viewed slavery with deep and genuine distaste, but he wanted above all to win the war and to keep the Union together. Over the course of the war he and some of his generals began to understand that the best way to defeat the Confederacy was to turn slavery, a potential strength of the South, against the enemy. Slavery could be used to help woo English or French support by identifying the North with the cause of freedom. Slavery could be used to weaken the Southern economy by allowing Union generals to accept runaway slaves into their camps. Slavery could be used to strengthen the North by recruiting 180,000 African American soldiers to fight against the Confederates, saving white Northern lives while demonstrating the enormous hunger of black Americans for freedom. Nevertheless, many white Northerners remained skeptical of ending slavery immediately. As late as 1864, only a victory by William T. Sherman in Atlanta ensured that Lincoln would win reelection as president. The man who ran against him, George McClellan, wanted to bring the war to an end, leaving slavery in place.

In sharp contrast, the language of black freedom echoed from the very outset of the conflict among black people themselves. The quotes in this book present their key words: *freedom, liberation, emancipation, rights*. Black people were not sure at the beginning of the war that the conflict would help bring those freedoms, for few white people in the North spoke in those terms. As the war progressed, however, African American leaders used every opportunity to impress upon Union leaders that the cause of Union could best be served by making it the cause of a more universal freedom. Arming black men to fight not only helped on the battlefield, it also helped in the black freedom struggle. Some white Northerners began to talk more of the evils of slavery and to

celebrate the general idea of freedom. What that talk might mean remained unclear from one year to the next, however, as events spun out of anyone's control in 1865 and 1866.

Throughout the war, women held the same political ideals as men. Some women seemed even more virulent and vitriolic than their husbands and sons; Northerners certainly accused white Southern women of being so. In other cases, women left to tend farms, plantations, and homes tired of the war earlier than did the men swept up in the camaraderie and excitement of the camp and battlefield. Women were more likely to speak of *mourning*, *hunger*, and *sacrifice* than their men, to speak more of family and children. For many women true manliness elevated family over political cause. It was no accident that desertion increased in the second half of the war.

The end of war brought no common language to North and South, black and white, male and female. Indeed, the end of the actual fighting seemed to unleash even harsher language. Freed from the common experience of battlefield suffering, Northerners and Southerners seemed to feel mainly contempt and anger toward one another. The Union blamed the South for starting a war that killed more than 600,000 Americans, but the South refused to accept the blame, then or for decades thereafter. In their eyes, Reconstruction showed the true purpose of the North from the very beginning: to destroy the economic and political power of the white South. Those former Confederates could see no purpose in Northern Republican support for black suffrage other than vindictiveness and petty cruelty. White Northerners, for their part, saw their worst opinions of white Southerners displayed in Reconstruction. The unwillingness to accept defeat and emancipation graciously, the North charged, showed the true character of the violent, deceitful, and arrogant South.

African Americans steered between the ambivalence of the white North and the bitterness of the white South as carefully as they could, looking for any opportunity to control their own lives. Black Southerners seized on the chance for political power offered by the North, but also sought to maintain peace with the white people among whom they lived and upon whom they depended for employment. The experiment of Reconstruction proved short-lived, white Southerners resisting with every means, the white North and the white South reconciling with one another at the expense of black Southerners. Within three decades of war's end, white veterans of both the Union and the Confederacy spoke of one another with respect born of common bravery and suffering while permitting segregation and disfranchisement to flourish.

The ambiguity of the war's beginning, fighting, and outcome have allowed Americans to argue about the Civil War for all the generations that have followed. People on both sides idealize the purposes of their ancestors and demean those of their opponents. White Southerners have been most visibly invested in the trappings of the Confederacy and in defending honor and heritage, but white Northerners have been invested as well. The war seems evidence to them of the nation's greatness, of its devotion to the ideals of freedom.

Black Americans, while never forgetful of their freedom and how it arrived, have been skeptical of the claims of both Southern and Northern whites. The differences among these three groups of Americans show little sign of disappearing.

This book can help us see the Civil War more clearly. It does so not by imposing an easy moral on the story, not by offering convenient answers to the persistent and troubling questions about the war's causes and outcomes. Rather, it helps us see that the war was, above all, war. It was confusion as well as certainty. It was self-deception and lying as well as nobility of purpose. It was blood of accident and brutality as well as of sacrifice. The war constantly changed within itself, redefined itself. And that process has not yet ended.

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