

‘God Cannot Afford To Do Without America’: What Was the American Civil War About?

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Compared with the Civil War centennial of 1961–5, the sesquicentennial celebration of the American Civil War has been a muted affair. President Barack Obama, mindful of the political trouble the Centennial Commission caused another Democrat, President John F. Kennedy, has steadfastly refused to appoint a successor to preside over the 150th anniversary. Also evident is a marked reluctance by art galleries and museums to recreate a visual history of the Civil War. The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, is bucking the trend, though an exhibition scheduled for November 2012 is narrowly and safely restricted to a survey of the war's impact on American art. In 2011 *The Art Newspaper* described such unwillingness under the headline, 'The war we want to forget'. Richard B. Woodward in the *Wall Street Journal* comments on 'the frankly revisionist style of the curators' who see nothing to celebrate, which 'left me wondering if they haven't just replaced one form of historical distortion with another': certainly, the reluctance to celebrate nationally illustrates a fundamental lack of consensus over the war's overall significance.[\(1\)](#)

In line with the polarization of the American electorate, discussion of the war has assumed a contemporary significance and contentiousness. Three areas in particular raise hackles. The vexed issue of 'states' rights' hurriedly pushes itself to the fore. This is traditionally and erroneously presented as some kind of southern monopoly interest. The changing phases of race relations can also assume an explosive form, with a further, related dimension of the race issue being the grudging refusal in some parts of the United States to accept the legitimacy of a black president (with fevered and absurd discussion of the president's 'true' place of birth). These issues offer warning of the political mines awaiting to explode in a presidential election year. For there *are* issues that some people do not want to forget, but they have less to do with the war itself than with its coming – a significant departure from 50 years ago. So trouble lurks just beneath the surface for any unwary politician, even a Republican. In April 2010 the Governor of Virginia, Bob McDonnell, a former US Army lieutenant colonel, issued a proclamation heralding a 'Confederate History Month' which glossed over the significance of slavery. I observed the ensuing ructions from the comparative safe harbour of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and can vouch for the strength of the emotions and denunciation his act provoked. McDonnell was forced to apologize at what is now regarded as the 'low point' of his first term which fortunately does not end until 2014. The wisdom of President Obama in steering away from such treacherous waters has perhaps been underestimated.[\(2\)](#)

Although there are signs that the compelling hold of Civil War military history on the reading public is waning, historians continue to work ceaselessly at improving our knowledge of this momentous conflict. It is a pleasure to consider these three fine books under review at length, as all are composed by historians at the peak of their form.

Steven Woodworth offers a distillation of current scholarship in readable form which can easily be grasped by readers coming to the subject for the first time. In exploring the nature of the war and its overall significance, he at once dismisses the notion that the war was a 'futile' waste, an accusation that echoes the language of British critics of the Western Front 1914–18 and reflects vastly different perspectives from the pre-Vietnam triumphalism of 1961–65. The Civil War 'was worth fighting', Woodworth declares forthrightly. More than that, it is 'worth studying because of what was at stake ... because of how the war changed America' and because 'of the height to which that generation of Americans rose and its challenge to future generations to be worthy of a free government' (p. xiii). This passage reveals the influence of the popular notion which holds that specific generations evince a particular moral character. Historian Stephen

E. Ambrose's *Band of Brothers* (1992) reinvigorated this rather sweeping idea, exemplified in the journalist Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation* (1998), which idealizes those born after 1918.⁽³⁾ Given Woodworth's stress on liberty, he has no truck with the fancy that the South fought for 'states' rights'. Like all professional historians, irrespective of their private inclinations or political views, Woodworth locates the 'seeds of the dispute' in the institution of slavery. As for states' rights, Woodworth is at pains to point out that the South was keen to exploit the agencies of the federal government when it worked in its favour in order to extend the writ of slavery. Its legislative advances, like the Fugitive Slave Act, were 'a slap in the face of states' rights'. Indeed he holds the South constituted an 'enemy' of the concept which its latter day defenders believe that the Confederacy fought to uphold (pp. 1, 5, 6-7, 9-10, 12, 15-17, 29, 36, 118).

Woodworth grants emancipation a key position in Union strategy. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation he considers 'a declaration of war aims. A promise of what Union forces would do when they arrived' (p. 165). This act amounted also to a declaration of war on the southern social system, but it takes two sides to wage a war of attrition. The commitment of southern whites to the maintenance of slavery left them obdurate in face of Lincoln's offer of compensated emancipation and deaf to the pleas of northern critics of the war, like Clement L. Vallandigham, that they accept a compromise peace and return to the Union. They were also hostile in 1862 to the well-meaning efforts by most of the commanders of occupying Union forces at 'reconciliation'.

Much of Woodworth's book concerns the military history of 1861-65, and this is engagingly done with some splendid accounts of individual campaigns and a firm grasp of the overall shape of the war. It is also garnished by some pithy assessments of the more colourful individuals. Woodworth deflates the pompous Confederate general, Leonidas Polk, with sardonic wit, and attributes his 'chief drawback' to a reluctance to take 'orders from anyone below the rank of God, with Whom he tended to confuse himself' (p. 59). On the more controversial figures, he appraises Sherman fairly, and sensibly rejects the idea that Sherman was a prophet of 'total war'. He observes that Sherman's March to the Sea lay 'well within the existing laws and customs of war' and in its central features resembled Robert E. Lee's June 1863 advance into Pennsylvania (pp. 315-16). Woodworth's book represented the informed consensus of current Civil War historiography. Gary Gallagher challenges several of the assumptions which underlie Woodworth's account, but before gauging the degree to which he succeeds, it is important to explore the nature of those parts of Woodworth's book which do not impress.

The most striking deficiency in Woodworth's book is its besetting parochialism. He fails to assess the Civil War as a significant international event. When he does turn to it, the focus is almost exclusively on Great Britain. Woodworth concedes that the Lincoln Administration's insistence before September 1862 that the war was being waged exclusively for the restoration of the Union and not to destroy slavery limited the appeal of the Union cause abroad. Woodworth's grasp of events beyond the eastern seaboard is shaky at best, and in dealing with them his lively style leads him into crass distortion. He begins with what he admits is an over-simplification, but for the want of something better, he perseveres with it, for it is 'still generally true' (p. 67); this smacks more of prejudice than the informed judgment of the scholar. Woodworth contends that the British upper classes supported the Confederacy while the middle and lower classes supported the Union. There is no evidence to support this shibboleth and Woodworth provides none. He then continues merrily to assert the existence of a uniform upper class 'outlook' which permeated 'the British government's approach to the Civil War'. He misunderstands the nature of neutrality, and appears to consider it a pretext to smile on the Confederate cause. The British recognition of the Union blockade in February 1862 reveals this as nonsense. He implies that the British government colluded in the escape of the commerce raider, the CSS *Alabama*, though Frank J Merli has long ago disposed of this fabrication.⁽⁴⁾ He believes that the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston and the Foreign Secretary Earl Russell were 'furious' at the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation, 'perhaps because they resented losing their grounds for claiming moral superiority over the United States' (pp. 67, 163). Woodworth's treatment of British reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation serves to illustrate how Civil War historians often fail to resist the temptation of misrepresenting and reducing to caricature serious figures both of whom had dedicated their careers to opposing slavery.

Gallagher's *The Union War* mounts a sustained attack against prevailing tendencies in Civil War historiography. His focus is the shallow tendentiousness that searches out aspects of the past which do not conform to the high standards expected in the 21st century and then roundly condemns them. Such habits resulted from the uncritical absorption of post-modernist perspectives after 1980 which quickly replaced Marxism in certain academic circles. The preoccupations of post-modernism with 'discourse' inculcated an assumption that documentary sources that survived, often by a very haphazard process, were bequeathed to us for our benefit to judge the past by our standards, irrespective of the motives and the conditions that generated these sources in the first place. Gallagher's book is argumentative, trenchant, economical and his paragraphs are tightly packed so they demand the attention, but there is no gainsaying the fundamental wisdom of much of his message – though the whole package may not persuade in its entirety. His especial target is interpreting the American past through the prism of 'minorities'. 'Yet a portrait of the nation', Gallagher writes, that is dominated by 'oppression', of race, or exclusion on grounds of gender or class, 'obscures more than it reveals'. And on the imposition on the 19th century of the standards of 150 years later, he observes sarcastically, 'Most people did not begin each day by thinking immediately about the need to protect a privileged status conveyed by their "whiteness"' (pp. 4, 44).

Gallagher prefers to explore the Union cause by reference to three quite different but related concepts: first, the meaning of the war; secondly, he asks how and why emancipation became a war aim; and thirdly, the role of the citizen-soldier in determining the nature of American nationalist sentiment. On the last question, I share Gallagher's amazement that the importance of the military experience is so rarely acknowledged as an important influence that shapes the patriotic mould. Gallagher praises the contributions of two British scholars, Peter J. Parish (my mentor) and Susan-Mary Grant (whose PhD thesis I examined) both of whom are not deterred from giving military considerations their due. Gallagher also stresses that loyal northerners 'remained steadfast enough to pass through to victory' – another Parish theme. Gallagher contends that this resilience rested upon 'a vision of their nation built on free labor, economic opportunity, and a broad political franchise they considered to be unique in the world'. Their clutch of nationalist beliefs underlay a conviction that North America should be made safe from malign southern 'aristocrats' who sullied the meaning of freedom and threatened to plunge the North American continent into anarchy and endless wars. Gallagher argues these were serious ideas that deserve serious attention. 'Maintenance of the Union ... always ranked first among war aims for most citizens in the United States' (pp. 6, 34).

Another of Gallagher's targets is the assumption that emancipation was the *only* worthwhile war aim that justified its cost. He argues insistently for a differentiation between causes and the cause, 'between the war's causes and the goals for which most loyal citizens fought'. That is to say, though slavery may have been the prime cause of the war, the liberation of slaves did not excite the majority of northern soldiers. Gallagher suggests that the tendency to downplay patriotic motives is a reflection of the way that 'modern sensibilities' – or should it be academic? – wilfully distort the experience of the mid-19th century. Gallagher finds further examples in treatments of the Grand Review of the Union armies held in May 1865 in Washington DC. It has been held up as a representative example of the racism of a militaristic republic which prevented black soldiers from parading with their white comrades. But Gallagher argues that black units were not deliberately 'excluded' from the review or from praise in the public print (though they would be later, pp. 11–12, 21, 31–2, 35, 78).

Gallagher contends that there was nothing inevitable about emancipation. The North could (and almost did) win with slavery left intact and could have lost with it. But there is a paradoxical element in his interpretation. He salutes the role of the Union Army as 'an agent of liberation' but underplays the role of individual Union soldiers in the process. Gallagher's tone sometimes has the quality of a manifesto. Laudable though military historians might find his condemnation of the study of war with the military history left out, and no matter how much we agree with Gallagher's view that the military experience is vital for an understanding of 'the larger meaning' of 1861–65, his book is too short to sustain his overall case; more space should have been devoted to substantiating his themes and less to criticizing the work of other historians. Gallagher, moreover, by returning to the sources of American exceptionalism to found his analysis, runs the danger of reflecting its prejudices, distortions or self-righteous conceits. This style of weakness, as we have seen, is all too evident in Woodworth's shallow discussion of the world beyond Maine. Gallagher excludes the international dimension and the manner in which a 'Union War' limited the appeal of the North abroad. His few comments on 19th-century Europe lack authority and fall back on exceptionalist stereotypes. Finally, Gallagher (and other scholars) are correct to stress the cultural ambiguity of the Union as a symbolic patriotic focus, and it has been replaced in common usage with a term Gallagher uses, 'the nation'. Other states, too, are similarly ambiguous for different reasons. Both Britain and Spain are conglomerations of ancient states with their own cultures, legal and educational systems and languages; the former, too, is a product of a Union currently under threat. There is, in short, something of a reluctance to admit the cultural plurality of the world outside the United States and explore these perspectives to illuminate American problems.

Gallagher's is a short and provocative work which exhibits his brilliant debating skills, but it can only be suggestive. George Rable supplies the wealth of explanatory detail that fills in a significant ideological cavity that Gallagher passes over. Rable's title, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples* is an adaptation of a characteristically cautious Lincolnian rendering of exceptionalist claims. Rable's emphasis is placed on the impact of religion on the war, on what Americans believed, what they were told and what proselytisers

thought they wanted to hear. His approach is interdenominational and estimates the role of most sects and outlooks. Rable's book is a work of remarkable learning and pleasing skill in exposition and judgment. His key assumption is a uniformity of outlook North and South, which are not treated separately but thematically, as Rable contends they shared similar beliefs, value systems and a common religious language; they also shared comparable cycles of confidence and despair, pride and humiliation during the vicissitudes of the war's cataclysmic, changing phases.

The first half of the 19th century had witnessed a significant growth in church membership from one in 15 in 1800 to one in seven by 1850. Rable notes the importance of a providential outlook: as contemporaries observed God's influence on their daily lives, so it was easy for them to habitually detect 'God's hand in the war's origins, course and outcome', and they struggled to read the signs He dispensed in such profusion. Rable argues that this providential obsession had significant ideological consequences, not least the 'conviction that Americans were a people chosen by God to carry out his mission in the world'. Hence the melding of religious faith and civic values, so tested by the rigours of war, 'storms such as Americans had never before endured' (pp. 1–4). As the crises of the war were weathered, so faith in the special role of the United States gained strength. 'God cannot afford to do without America', announced Matthew Simpson, a northern Methodist bishop, in September 1864 (p. 356). The religious dimension also illuminates a persistent tension in American political life between the role of the United States, in Rable's words, an 'ultimately transforming force in the world' which intermingled 'secular and religious hope', and the acknowledged perfection of its founding constitutional documents. How can perfection be transformed? In the secession crisis a deepening divergence between North and South over slavery consistently undercut moderate opinion, represented for instance by the Roman Catholic Church which regarded any form of emancipation as 'utopian'. The churches thus failed 'to tamp down fires of sectionalism and this process continued throughout the war' (pp. 21, 25, 27, 28–9, 31–3, 295). Consequently, by 1863–4 any semblance of neutrality in thought or deed became impossible. Americans have frequently expressed difficulties with the concept of neutrality when they are engaged in some form of conflict themselves. One recalls Hillary Clinton's clarion call on 13 September 2001, 'Every nation has to either be with us, or against us'. Such declarations appear to be culturally rooted.⁽⁵⁾

Once it began in earnest both North and South gauged their progress by way of their understanding of God's retribution caused by sin. God smiled on the armies of the side which sinned the less and thus offered His favour to the side with the purest cause, as both sides, as Rable puts it nicely, were 'praying against each other'. However, 'declension', letting oneself down by sinful indulgence, could be explained away as a 'blessing in disguise' because it allowed sinners to put their house in order and, to use the language of a later generation of believers, 'get it right' with God. A succession of defeats, however, could lead to severe difficulties in accepting God's ways and, of course, the price of victory kept increasing. On the other hand, a run of victories encouraged self-righteousness and even reckless chauvinism. Consequently, battles became religious sign-posts in what Rable calls 'an unfolding, and ever mysterious, providential history' (pp. 75, 81–7, 97–8, 184, 203, 372–3, 378; 75–7, 181, 268, 338, 397).

Religious consolation bolstered morale and sustained the soldiers and their families during much death and suffering. The impact of the war granted greater significance to the nature of the transcendental experience; earlier historians have remarked on the spread of evangelism in say, the Army of Northern Virginia. Rable is very careful not to exaggerate the growth of religious fervour, and he doubts whether claims that one third of Lee's soldiers embraced the Lord can be sustained, as they are self-serving by casting a holy glow of righteousness over the Lost Cause. He consistently underlines the significant ways in which religious belief and denominational loyalties were undermined. After all, the experience of battle promoted cynicism and scorn as well as elevated sentiment.

Still, such negative attitudes did not reduce the importance of religion in American social and intellectual life, far from it. It had a transforming effect on ideas and values, an effect underrated by Gallagher's dogged insistence on continuity. The churches were mobilized as part of the Northern and Southern war efforts; more closely in the North as they became an agency in the politics of loyalty, and mobilized support for the coalition of Republicans and War Democrats. A consensus *did* emerge that the war should destroy slavery,

and as Rable argues, this had a transformative effect, though gradually and haltingly. The war became a driving force in ‘the divine plan for the destruction of slavery’. Rable further explains, ‘Fighting for freedom as opposed to merely fighting for the Union – admittedly a sacred cause in itself for many devout northerners – gave the war a more transcendental purpose’. It fitted into American universalism, the belief that the wider world should succumb to American values, and the ‘world- wide struggle in which Christ would deliver all men from the shackles of slavery’ (pp. 83–5, 295, 368). Alas, if there is one area in which Rable disappoints, it is in his neglect of these international ramifications. The Roman Catholic Church is, after all, an international organization; Protestant denominations like the Methodists and Lutherans had important connections with Britain and Germany. How far Rable’s transformative experience was subject to the catalyst of foreign influences should be the subject of further investigation.

After 150 years what was this war about? Gallagher has performed a significant service in recalling our attention to the patriotic enthusiasm of northern soldiers eager to save their common country from destruction. But his interpretation appears too schematic and rigid. He *is* right to acknowledge continuity and down-play the revolutionary impact of the war; though so do many of the historians he criticizes. But the northern war aims of Union and emancipation were not mutually exclusive alternatives. Gallagher acknowledges this when he describes emancipation as a ‘tool’ to secure the defeat of the Confederacy. Rable supplies a missing dimension in the analysis. Millennial expectation persuaded many that slavery could and should be destroyed as a part of the promise of the Union, if latent, though these enthusiasts did not think very coherently about the future or embrace wholeheartedly over the long term a complete package of ideas that would gain approval 150 years later. Yet this halting adaption gave the Union cause a sharper edge and broader appeal.

All of these books in their different ways have contributed to the enhancement of our knowledge of these vexed and still controversial issues. The real question is how to take the subject forward rather than constantly revisit the same issues within the same parameters. One way is to embrace a more comparative approach and treat the Civil War as the world event it undoubtedly was. American historians should consider its reception around the world with less lip service and a little more respect. That is to say, give it the same degree of superb scholarly discernment on display here.

Notes

1. *The Art Newspaper* (International Edition), 20, 221 (February 2011); *Wall Street Journal*, 1 June 2011. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Michael Barone and Chuck McCutcheon, *The Almanac of American Politics* (Chicago, IL, 2012), pp. 1653–4. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506 Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler’s Eagles Nest* (New York, NY, 1992); Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York, NY, 1998) [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Frank J. Merli, *The Alabama, British Neutrality and the American Civil War*, ed. David M. Fahey (Bloomington, IN, 2004) [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Hillary Clinton, quoted in an interview with Dan Rather on CBS Evening News, 13 September 2001 < <http://freedomagenda.com/iraq/wmd/quotes.htm/#Sw8lcOyTFO> [4]> [accessed 23 July 2012]. [Back to \(5\)](#)

The authors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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