



THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR AND CIVIC VIRTUE

by Mark Grimsley

The most important thing to understand about the Civil War is the sheer fact that it happened.

The United States of America has now endured over two centuries under the same form of government. That is a great success story--one that Americans take largely for granted. The country has grown and changed in many ways and has endured many challenges, nearly all of them addressed within the limits of constitutional government. How many other countries can make such a statement? The massive exception to this rule is the Civil War, a war that began when seven states refused to abide by the result of a constitutionally mandated, fairly conducted presidential election with an unambiguous winner. Instead they left the Union to form their own separate republic. In the weeks that followed, four more states joined the Confederacy, and those eleven states fought a four-year war against the other twenty-two. Six hundred twenty thousand Americans perished during that conflict. That was about 2 percent of the U.S. population in 1860, the equivalent of 6.1 million today

What accounts for this singular failure of democracy? Over the years, historians have offered different explanations. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was common to blame a "blundering generation" of politicians for losing control of a crisis that was largely of their own making. After World War II, it became common to view the conflict as unavoidable: the product of a fundamental contradiction in a society that preached freedom and equality yet attempted to reconcile those values with the institution of chattel slavery.

But perhaps a better answer is that the war reflected a failure of American citizens themselves.

The Founders of the United States created a government based on the tenets of classical republicanism. Republics are held together not by authority imposed from above but rather from below, by the people themselves. This, the Founders understood, doesn't happen naturally. Historically, republics have tended to fall apart--in effect, they die--because the people prove unworthy of citizenship. Through laziness and self-absorption let the republic fall into dictatorship or anarchy.

According to the Renaissance thinker Niccolò Machiavelli, one of the most penetrating and influential political philosophers of republicanism, citizens--those who shall have a political voice in the republic--must possess civic virtue: an ability to see beyond their narrow self-interest to the good of the republic; and a commitment to placing the common good above purely personal interest.

Machiavelli and others thought citizen-soldiers were indispensable to a sound republic--not just to keep coercive power out of the hands of one or a few people (tyranny), but also because military service could verify one's willingness to sacrifice for the republic and could instill civic virtue to a greater degree. American revolutionaries accepted the idea of civic virtue as indispensable to their own republic, but tied it to property ownership, not military service. In the early republic, only property owners could vote or hold public office. But by 1820, most of these property requirements had vanished. And by 1830, there was a growing sense that the common (white male) people automatically possessed the wisdom needed for good self-government, simply because they were common people. This was the triumph of Jacksonian democracy.

Not all Americans were comfortable with this development, and one warning concerning it came from a surprising source: Abraham Lincoln, who for many present-day Americans is the very embodiment of the wisdom of the common man. In a famous speech made at the Springfield Men's Lyceum early in his career, Lincoln warned of the potential for a demagogue to gain power in the United States. In doing so he was echoing the time-honored fear about the fragility of republics.

How to avoid this fate? According to Machiavelli, citizens--those who shall have a political voice in the republic--must possess civic virtue: an ability to see beyond their narrow self-interest to the good of the republic; and a commitment to placing the common good above purely personal interest. Lincoln saw matters in much the same way.

“Let reverence for the laws,” he said, “be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap--let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;--let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation.”

Lincoln gave the Lyceum speech in 1837, when he was twenty-eight years old. He then spent his entire political career watching the American experiment in republicanism spiral out of control.

Within three decades, the republic was torn apart by civil war. For many thinking Americans, this did not seem a coincidence. Meditating on the secession crisis in January 1861, for example, William T. Sherman concluded that the agitation over slavery was only the symptom of a deeper disease: The real problem was “the Democratic spirit which substitutes mere popular opinions for the law.”

“Our country,” Sherman complained, “has become so democratic, that the mere popular opinion of any town or village rises above the Law--men have ceased to look to Constitutions and Law Books for their guides, but have studied popular opinion in Bar Rooms and village newspapers and that was & is law--The old women & Grannies of New England, reasoning from abstract principles [about slavery and freedom], must defy the Constitution of the country, the people of the South not relying on the Federal Govt. must allow their people to form filibustering expeditions against the Solemn treaties of the Land--and everywhere from California to Maine any man could do murder, Robbery or arson if the People’s prejudices lay in that direction--and now things are at such a pass that no one section believes the other, and we are beginning to fight--The right of secession is but the beginning of the end.”

Once war broke out the country’s only hope for salvation lay in its army, but even here Sherman was pessimistic. In the wake of the battle of First Bull Run he wrote, “I doubt if our Democratic form of Government admits of that organization & discipline without which our army is a mob.”

In a real sense, Sherman was correct. The United States possessed only a tiny professional army. It would have to depend on volunteer forces raised, officered, and manned by politicians and erstwhile civilians. Since the government utterly lacked the institutions and political culture required to impose discipline from above, the sole solution was for the volunteers to impose discipline upon themselves. Winning the war required them to rediscover the classical republican values of Machiavelli. The way in which they accomplished this feat was by a fusion of republican ideology and Victorian ideas about manliness.

Earlier this week I visited Gettysburg in the company of about twenty new faculty members at the U.S. Army War College, located at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The battlefield is, in effect, a celebration. The story implicit in its monuments and memorials is one of patriotism and self sacrifice. In political terms, its moral is etched in the monument in the U.S. National Cemetery commemorating Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address: that the battle was part of a struggle testing whether a nation based on liberty and equality could long endure. Since we know the outcome of that struggle, we know the answer to the test.

The answer is a bit dangerous.

In the introduction to a recent book on Civil War combat, historian Kent Gramm opens with a surprising comment: “One of the most harmful consequences of the Civil War results from our very interest in the war, and our attraction to it.” As a Civil War buff, he explains, you can vicariously march with the indomitable veterans of Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, you can learn from the men of the Army of the Potomac’s Iron Brigade what it means to be a hero, you can return in imagination to a moment when “the hopes of a nation are still young and still full, and a kind of clarity and innocence are still poised to win the future--and the smoke and noise and dirt of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have not yet swept in behind the buzzing machines of our age.”

“Who would not love such a war?” Gramm asks. But that war, he continues, “is a war of fantasy, myth, and entertainment,” not a war of carnage, horror, and desolation. “By replacing this actual Civil War with an imaginary and beautiful war,” he argues, “we misunderstand our own natures, and we allow ourselves to fall for what Wilfred Owen called ‘the old lie’: that it is sweet and seemly to die for one’s country. Falling for that old lie, we enter more easily into what should be entered into only as one would enter a corridor to hell: you go that way only because all the other ways are shut.”

Over the past two decades, a number of Civil War historians have crafted what might be called an antiwar school of Civil War historiography, works that attempt to place the conflict’s destructiveness squarely before the reader’s eye and to reject, sometimes angrily to reject, the tendency to sentimentalize the conflict. One good example is Charles Royster’s critically acclaimed *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans*, published in 1991. Royster explicitly portrays the conflict as a failure of democracy and sees the war it spawned as a reflection of extremists on both sides who set out to validate their own regional definition of America by destroying those who had a different version. “Americans did not invent new methods of drastic war during the Civil War so much as they made real a version of conflict many of them had talked about from the start.”

Another example is Harry S. Stout’s *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*, published in 2006. In it, Stout takes direct aim at one of the most cherished tenets of our memory of the Civil War: that it was a just war fought for a noble cause and that it was worth the terrible cost in human life and suffering. Although Stout cannot bring himself to say that 620,000 men died in vain during the conflict, in reviewing the conduct of the war, particularly the massive attacks on civilian property, the abysmal treatment of prisoners of war, and the frequency of racial atrocities on the battlefield, he finds that too

much of it cannot be reconciled with the tenets of just war doctrine. The violence too often was indiscriminate--directed against noncombatants, not combatants--and disproportionate to the legitimate aims in view.

This, he writes, is something that few historians of the conflict have been willing to face. "We have preferred a violent but glamorized and romantic Civil War. Military histories have focused on strategies and tactics and the sheer drama of battles in action. Political histories have focused--especially in the present--on slavery and emancipation, accounting the evil so complete and pervasive as to justify even murder."

"All too often," he continues, "the moral calculus perfected in the Civil War has been applied to other wars, often in cases involving nothing as noble as abolitionism. By condoning the logic of total war in the name of abolition--and victory--Americans effectively guaranteed that other atrocities in other wars could likewise be excused in the name of 'military necessity.'"

In his book's conclusion, Stout asks, "Why is it important to finally write the moral history of the Civil War?" He responds: "It's important because we are its legates, and if we question nothing from that costly conflict, then we need question nothing in conflicts of the present and future. Issues of discrimination and proportionality recur in every war. The Civil War does not provide an especially encouraging model in this regard, especially if the crimes go largely unnoticed beneath the natural urge to forget and move on. But as with the Holocaust, if we forget, we do so at great peril to our own humanity."

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Upon the Altar of the Nation* is Stout's argument that unprecedented destructiveness of the Civil War generated what he calls an American civil religion. During the conflict, "patriotism itself became sacralized to the point that it enjoyed coequal or even superior status to conventional denominational faiths." Stout employs the term "civil religion" as defined by historian of religion Rowland Sherrill: "a form of devotion, outlook, and commitment that deeply and widely binds the citizens of the nation together with ideas they possess and express about the sacred nature, the sacred ideals, the sacred character, and sacred meanings of their country." Stout notes that "though lacking a formal creed American civil religion does contain sacred texts, including most importantly the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the two Lincoln orations"--by which he means Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and his Second Inaugural Address, speeches that have fundamentally shaped the way in which Americans have viewed the meaning of the Civil War and the meaning of the American nation. The Civil War is such a touchstone of American civil religion that it is impossible to revisit the conflict, as Stout would have us revisit it, without reaching disquieting conclusions about our values and ourselves.

By this reading, past and present are inextricably fused: what we believe about a war that took place almost 150 years ago exerts a profound influence on what we believe about ourselves today. To teach the Civil War is therefore a political act. Like it or not, we find ourselves faced with a choice between reinforcing the American civil religion by emphasizing the necessity and justice of the struggle and the valor of the soldiers, on the one hand; or tacitly questioning that religion by placing at the center of our lessons the fact that the war's commencement reflects a breakdown in American democracy and that its ferocity reflects not some blind dynamic inherent in war, but deliberate choices made by human beings like ourselves.

It's impossible to escape the political implications of the Civil War once certain questions are raised, and therefore impossible to escape a debate. I say debate, not dialogue. Dialogue is something I welcome. To me it's one of the great appeals about being a teacher: to be able to consider the world in new ways, to share different premises and points of view. Debate is the antithesis, because in debate the lines are drawn, the premises largely unexplored, the points of view attacked and defended. And because we are talking about values that people care about, the possibility of giving offense is all too real.

Yet for me this conversation in some form--dialogue or debate--is unavoidable. My explorations of the Civil War have reached conclusions different from those of Royster and Stout. They see, for instance, a signal lack of restraint in the conduct of the war. In my own research, published in *The Hard Hand of War*, I was impressed by the extent to which the combatants placed limits on the destructiveness. Official Union policy, for example, plainly did not contemplate indiscriminate destruction. And although wanton depredations certainly occurred, I discovered almost no instances in which white Southerners were killed, assaulted, or raped. Indeed, my reading of the evidence did not sustain a portrayal of unrestrained destruction even of property. My judgment was and remains that the dominant theme of the Union hard war operations was as less an erosion of values than an on-going tension between competing sets of values. Union soldiers clearly came to understand the need to destroy Southern war resources. They also embraced the conviction that some Southern civilians deserved punishment for their role in starting or sustaining the war. But the same sense of justice that created this desire for retribution also insisted that punishment should fall upon the guilty. The result was indeed severity. Yet it was a directed severity aimed--and for the most part, aimed effectively--at certain portions of the Confederate population and economic infrastructure.

I wrote *The Hard Hand of War* without a political agenda--certainly none of which I was consciously aware--and yet I accept the argument that it has political implications. Indeed, having read Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, it is impossible to read the final paragraph of my book without those implications screaming from the page:

"If the Union's hard war effort displayed a novel element, it lay primarily in the linkage with a democratic society. That made it possible to blame Southerners for the outbreak and continuation of the war, and so justify the destruction. But it also made possible a politically and morally aware citizen-soldiery capable of discrimination and restraint as well as destruction. The Union volunteer who marched under Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan was a very different instrument than the ancien régime soldier under Turenne,

Marlborough, or Frederick the Great; for that matter, a different instrument even than contemporary European soldiers. It was the peculiar nature of the Federal citizen-soldier--his civic-mindedness, his continued sense of connection with community and public morality--that made possible the 'directed severity.' The Federal rank-and-file were neither barbarians, brutalized by war, nor 'realists' unleashing indiscriminate violence. Their example thus holds out hope that the effective conduct of war need not extinguish the light of moral reason."

In Stout's formulation, *The Hard Hand of War* uncritically reflects and implicitly buttresses the American civil religion. Another Civil War historian once termed my book an "apology for war," and in a recent conference of American historians made a pointed comment on the phrase "hard war," my label for the North's military operations against the Confederate economy. The phrase, he noted, quickly entered into the lexicon of Civil War historians and is now employed much more widely than "total war," which used to be very common. In my critic's view, that's because the use of "hard war" has assisted Civil War military historians in what he sees as an ongoing project to depict the conflict in rather celebratory terms. Stout explicitly preferred "total war" to the term "hard war" because hard war and similar expressions "do not penetrate the moral center of the Civil War." Apparently I am on the side of those who sentimentalize the conflict. I have even been told that my interpretation strengthens the place of the Civil War in its role as a touchstone for a resurgent American militarism that sees war as something clean, antiseptic and noble.

I disagree with Royster and Stout with regard to the sweeping conclusions they have drawn, but I welcome their work as a reminder that democracy is hard, that citizens can treat it so casually as to place it in mortal danger, and that other citizens must then pay a price, not just in wounds and death but also in simple loneliness, time spent away from families and the privations they must suffer, the disquieting things they must do, the things that they must live with for the rest of their lives after they return.

Are we back now today to a republic in which the only citizens asked to display civic virtue and sacrifice are the 1 percent of Americans who serve their country in uniform? How many of the other 99 percent of us take the time and effort to be good citizens, to make sacrifices--even the modest sacrifice required to understand the issues of the day in all their complexity? If not--if, as in the antebellum United States, we assume that our political judgments are sound merely because we are common people and we have an opinion, and that bumper sticker political philosophy is all that is required of us, then we would do well to remember the fragility of our democracy. It failed once, and that failure was retrieved only by the sacrifice of 620,000 Americans. At any given time, our democracy is only a generation away from failing once again. Thus every generation is responsible for maintaining, protecting, and promoting the republic.

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