

Legacy of Disunion: The Enduring Significance of the American Civil War

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Review

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Modern memories

Essay collection reflects the elusive legacy of the War

Legacy of Disunion is a book of essays by twelve different authors, all concerned with modern memories of the nation's most horrific conflict. Susan-Mary Grant, a Reader in American History at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Peter J. Parish (1929-2002), the late Mellon Senior Research Fellow in American History at the University of Cambridge, compiled and edited the book's essays. Contributors to **Legacy of Disunion** are primarily British scholars, although Richard Current and James M. McPherson are two notable American participants in the project.

This volume of essays has one key concept running through it, namely that the Civil War's legacy is not a matter of universal agreement: The conviction that the war left a massive legacy, the co-editors inform the reader, has generally been much clearer than the definition of what that legacy has actually been. **Legacy of Disunion** is a very appropriate title for a work that reflects a continuing cultural disunion.

Given that the work concerns the very broad concept of legacies, most essays necessarily view the Civil War broadly, some going back well before 1861 for insights. While all of the contributors necessarily stretch their vision to include the present, there are interesting differences regarding how that is done. Essays by Brian Holden Reid and Richard N. Current see no legacy of militarism coming from America's greatest war, as for a generation after that conflict the United States maintained a very weak military establishment. Yet Susan-Mary Grant forthrightly states that the Civil War contributed mightily to the

celebration of warfare that lies at the heart of the American national experience. Both viewpoints are substantiated with historical evidence, showing that divergent interpretations can enlighten and educate. The essay by James M. McPherson juxtaposed with that of Susan-Mary Grant suggests the same conclusion. McPherson celebrates the idealistic legacy of Abraham Lincoln's resolve to pursue a nationalist agenda of positive liberty for all humankind, whereas Grant is appropriately troubled by the imperialistic possibilities of a civil-religious missionary fervor propelling American warriors onto a global stage to die to make men free. Peter J. Parish appreciates both American idealism and American militarism as coupled in the Civil War experience, applauding both Lincoln's restatement of the Declaration of Independence as a priceless legacy to the nation while at the same time being somewhat disturbed by Lincoln's tough, resolute, and even ruthless pursuit of victory no matter what the cost. It is perhaps inevitable that one or more important legacies would be missed in any volume of this sort. One striking absence is any mention of the modern black reparations movement. Is this not part of the legacy of disunion coming from the Civil War? Within the African American community itself, some argue that the white casualties in the Civil War paid for the debt owed to black people from centuries of slavery. However, others emphasize that destroying slavery alone does not constitute adequate compensation, just as the eventual release of Jews and Japanese-Americans from their respective concentration camps in World War II did not eliminate recognized historic debts owed to those groups.

The book's lack of coverage regarding the reparations movement seems to validate a point made by several of the book's contributors that African Americans have been largely shut out of meaningful ownership to Civil War legacies. Melvyn Stokes reviews how the Civil War has been portrayed in the movies and finds that despite an occasional *Glory* (1989), the Civil War remains largely a white media property. This point is also made by Robert Cook's review of conflicts that surfaced during the official centennial celebration of the war during the height of America's modern civil rights movement. Briefly during the early 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. picked up Lincoln's fallen standard of the Declaration of Independence's proclamation of universal human equality. However, both before and after the 1960s, whites from both the North and the South have grown comfortable in affirming that the war really was not about black people at all. Despite David Blight's well written and professionally acclaimed *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001), which

is a valiant effort to create a broader conception for a more inclusive American memory concerning the Civil War, there seems little current inclination to see the multiple racial legacies of the war. Unwittingly reflecting this blind spot, Bruce Collins's essay sees a southern military tradition as resulting from the war. Yet it could also be shown that this tradition derives as much from a regional culture long dedicated to a quasi-military enforcement of first slave codes and later white notions of proper racial deportment. John Hope Franklin said as much in *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (1956).

Modern scholarship is commonly regarded as more sophisticated and advanced than much older academic accounts concerning legacies of disunion that prevailed a century ago. Yet Ulrich Phillips at least had the honesty to say that the primary legacy, so far as the South was concerned, was a resolve to keep that region a white man's country. Today, this same sentiment might exist, but it is hidden behind maintaining a semi-mythological Confederate battle flag in public places as an innocent symbol of home, hearth, and place. It is evident that South Carolina's Charles W. Joyner, who writes the first essay in this compilation, does not subscribe to this convenient post-war legend. While Joyner understands the white resolve to maintain the view that southerners fought for the rights of the states to control their own destinies, he nevertheless looks forward toward the emergence of a new breed of southerners who someday will regard the disastrous Confederate experiment with more regret than pride.

Joyner prays that someday southerners, knowledgeable of their regional past, can move with tragic vulnerability toward the broader ideals of American democracy. James McPherson hopes the same for much of the rest of American society currently wedded to what he defines as negative liberty, or freedom from social obligations. If and when these societal transformations do occur, that which Lincoln once proclaimed as a people's contest will again be resurrected. Until then, some good people looking to expand upon the ideological legacy of Lincoln will continue to look to the Courts, although Lincoln himself never pursued his American dream in that particular venue. The volume ends on this forlorn note, with Patricia Lucie hoping that someday the Warren Court's reviving of the constitutional legacy of Reconstruction will again become normative. Unfortunately, it was the federal courts themselves that long silenced this legacy in the latter third of the nineteenth century.

In his essay, James McPherson poignantly quotes an English immigrant, who was killed in action while fighting in an Ohio regiment. The forty-year old

corporal wrote friends and family back in England: 'If I do get hurt I want you to remember that it will be not only for my Country and my Children but for Liberty all over the World that I risked my life, for if Liberty should be crushed here, what hope would there be for the cause of Human Progress anywhere else?' Some Americans today cannot comprehend what Lincoln meant when he stated in his second annual message that the Union cause was to preserve the last best, hope of earth. The English immigrant, who was soon to lose his life, understood. At that time, white southerners supporting their own new nation regarded that they too were fighting for liberty. But if their definition of liberty was in fact meaningful, why were the forces of aristocracy both in England and all over Europe then praying that the Confederacy might emerge triumphant? Southern warriors were truly dedicated to preserving their states' rights. Similar to Robert E. Lee, who conceded that slavery was wrong; their attitude was my country right or wrong. For many Union soldiers, the fight was also about nationalism. But Lincoln tried to inspire them to pursue the war to its bloody end for higher considerations.

In the years following Reconstruction, Lincoln's legacy clearly was temporarily ignored by an American society intent on labeling enduring issues of race as the Negro Problem. The modern changing demographic landscape of the United States is sure to change this persistent negative legacy with time. As the United States becomes a nation no longer content with simply defining race in black and white terms, new more subtle perspectives concerning the legacy of disunion are bound to appear. Perhaps then the Negro Problem and the white problem will merge into a common American problem that needs to be addressed in the light of day. At that future time, American films on the Civil War will come to do more than celebrate bloody battlefields and a regional lost cause.

Professional historians and lay readers familiar with the themes covered in this book will enjoy the diversity of opinions displayed throughout. The key question underlying many of the essays is: Was the Civil War worth all of the suffering that it spawned? Those who answer positively typically emphasize Lincoln's idealistic legacy. Those who might answer negatively are not so neatly characterized, a disunity fitting for a book of this nature.

Ward M. McAfee finished and edited Don E. Fehrenbacher's prize-winning The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations With Slavery (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). He is also

the author of Religion, Race, and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) and is currently working on a biography of Abraham Lincoln.