

Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War

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Review

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Blight, David W. *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War*. University of Massachusetts Press, \$19.95 ISBN 1558493611

We are embattled still

Americans wrestle with collective memory

The Civil War is the most widely studied period in United States history and it is also one of the most poorly understood. The myths and distortions that pass for this nation's collective memory depict the most deadly and destructive war to ravage American soil as something ennobling, a necessary rite of passage that left the republic stronger and more unified.

This nostalgic view does not depend on ignoring the war's massive bloodletting. To the contrary, most Civil War buffs embrace the carnage. They cannot get enough accounts of slaughter, the men who performed it, and the generals who led them. What is usually left out of the mix, however, is a frank discussion of the reasons why Union and Confederate soldiers had to die in such massive numbers, what the Civil War meant to the people who experienced it, and how the contest changed America.

The way that Americans today remember the Civil War was decided by the power struggles that began almost as soon as the guns fell silent. Northern whites, Southern whites, and African Americans all had a vital stake in the how the war would be interpreted. In the fifty years following Appomattox, white Americans decided that they prized sectional reconciliation over racial justice. The fact that the Civil War resulted in the preservation of the Union took precedence over the vision that it also brought African Americans freedom, citizenship, suffrage, and a dignity that had been denied them for their first two centuries on American soil. The few times that blacks figured in this revised narrative, they were depicted as either faithful slaves or passive bystanders, with little understanding of the momentous events swirling around them. This

readjustment in the national memory, in keeping with other manifestations of heritage, had a political purpose. It coincided with the establishment of the Jim Crow system that stripped blacks of the gains they had made during and immediately after the war.

David W. Blight, the Class of 1959 Professor of History at Amherst College, articulated this disturbing vision of the Civil War's subverted legacy in his 2001 tour de force, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. That book elicited glowing praise from professional historians and won seven major awards, including the Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Bancroft, and Merle Curti Prizes. Although it may not be familiar to the denizens of Civil War round tables, it will increasingly influence how the Civil War is taught in the classroom and interpreted at historical sites for generations to come.

Perhaps to reinforce the impact of *Race and Reunion* on our current culture wars, Blight echoes the former book's themes in the title under review here, **Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War**. Blight's latest book is actually a collection of twelve essays and lectures written over fifteen years as he wrestled with the problem of the memory of the Civil War in American life and culture. He groups the essays into three sections. The first deals with the causes, course, and consequences of the Civil War. The second focuses on African-American history and the significance of race in the Civil War era. The third explores the character and purpose of studies in historical memory.

Readers of *Race and Reunion* will not find much that is materially new in **Beyond the Battlefield**. Nevertheless, the selections featured in **Beyond the Battlefield** permit the reader to trace Blight's intellectual growth for more than a decade, and it is fascinating to see how he developed his ideas. At the same time, these essays provide insights into Blight's methodological approach. Some of them apply his findings to areas that were beyond the scope of *Race and Reunion*.

One essay that shows Blight at his perceptive best is a discussion of the work of filmmaker Ken Burns. Burns proclaimed himself America's Homer after his eleven-hour documentary, *The Civil War*, set viewing records for the Public Broadcasting System when it first aired in 1990. Because Burns identified slavery as the war's root cause, gave occasional attention to African-American issues, and chose Barbara Fields, a black woman, as the only professional

historian to appear on camera, Southern apologists denounced his documentary as an exercise in political correctness. Yet as Blight deftly demonstrates, the history in Burns' epic film was more traditional than groundbreaking. Burns emphasized battlefield confrontation over social revolution, and he concluded with the pat assertion that the Civil War made Americans one people — conveniently ignoring the fact that the century following Appomattox would see the white majority deliberately exclude the black minority from full membership in American society.

Ken Burns failed to grasp the fact that the tragedy of the Civil War did not end when the Confederate armies laid down their arms. Blight's writings show that the men who lost the military struggle managed to prevail both politically and culturally before the dawn of the twentieth century. As Senator Trent Lott's recent fall from grace reminds us, the battle over Civil War memory continues to affect the state of the nation.

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