

# One Nation Divided by Slavery: Remembering the American Revolution While Marching Toward the Civil War

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## Review

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**Conlin, Michael F.** *One Nation Divided by Slavery: Remembering the American Revolution While Marching toward the Civil War.* Kent State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9781606352403

### A Contentious Divide: The Limits of Nationalism in Antebellum America

To understand the peculiarity, complexity, and ultimately the failure of American nationalism in the nineteenth century, go back to the monuments and traces of the most important events of the eighteenth century. Mount the 294 steps to the top of the Bunker Hill obelisk in Charlestown. Hop the fence and skulk around the private grounds of Monticello. Pocket a relic from Washington's Tomb at Mount Vernon. Hear the Declaration of Independence nearly speak from its faded parchment in the Washington Patent Office.

Before the Civil War, Americans traveled far and wide to commune with the Revolutionary past. But as Michael F. Conlin shows in his book *One Nation Divided by Slavery*, their journeys were more than just sentimental. They were deeply contentious. To celebrate the American past, Conlin shows, was to argue over the American present—and the contested place of slavery within it. No site, no monument, no figure, no anniversary was too sacred to be preserved from the quarrel.

Conlin's book is a thoroughly researched account of the "history wars" that raged from battlefields to patriot graves across the United States before the Civil War. North and South, many Americans could generally agree upon the meanings of national history and the practices associated with it. There was, Conlin argues, "a shared national culture" (12) built upon America's Revolutionary foundations. Moderates in particular could find common ground in glorious memories of the Founding.

But slavery, as Frederick Douglass powerfully reminded his contemporaries, was the dark cloud hanging over the Fourth of July parade. While moderates

sought to maintain their shared national culture across the Mason-Dixon Line, the loudest and most radical voices drowned them out. Abolitionists and pro-slavery ideologues alike turned to wildly different interpretations of the Founding to advance their arguments. Jefferson and Washington—slaveholders both—emerged as champions of emancipation and enslavement at once. By the 1850s, northerners and southerners were not just arguing about the Founders' intentions with respect to slavery. They were also disputing who provided more soldiers to the glorious cause, and who fought with more valor. The common ground of the Revolutionary past became a battleground.

To tell his story, Conlin listens carefully to a wide array of men and women who went back to America's origins to find answers, to advance arguments, and to silence discord. In their efforts, he finds a larger story that illuminates the compromised nature of American nationalism, the failure of consensus, and the coming of the Civil War. The book is full of rich details, revealing quotes, and engaging vignettes—like the work of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association to rescue the first president's estate from dilapidation and disrepair. Their efforts were ultimately successful—they raised enough money to purchase the property—but they also revealed the limits of national history as a source of national unity. As the Massachusetts Whig Edward Everett traveled the country raising money for the organization, he was pilloried at home as a doughface and by pro-slavery southerners as an abolitionist.

As revealing as Conlin's portrait of the contested cult of the Revolution is, there are a few areas where it could benefit from further development. Conlin's argument for a strong, shared national culture among moderates is a provocative one in light of recent studies that have emphasized what he calls "distinctive sectional nationalisms" (11). Though he ably brings to life the strength of a consensus patriotism across sections, he is less clear in explaining why it failed and sectional expressions triumphed by 1860-61. The book's final chapter—shorter and more suggestive than the others—begins to answer this question but leaves elements of it open. A clearer narrative arc showing change over time would provide more clarity.

So, too, would stronger connections to political developments. Working in the mode of cultural and intellectual history, Conlin largely avoids politics. But mapping key moments and controversies in Revolutionary commemoration onto the politics of disunion might clarify the book's story. The Republican Party, most notably, largely looms in the background here. Yet Republicans' claims to

Revolutionary heritage and fealty to the Founders' intentions could certainly help to explain how historical memory became a source of division rather than consensus. Some consideration of that story might cast Lincoln's forceful invocations of the Founding in an entirely new light—and reveal more clearly why the mystic chords of memory failed to swell the chorus of the Union in 1861.

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