The War That Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters

Matthew E. Stanley

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Review

Stanley, Matthew E.

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McPherson, James *The War that Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters*. Oxford University Press, \$27.95 ISBN 9780199375776

The Civil War's Long Shadow

Coming on the heels of social unrest in St. Louis County and released amid galvanized debate over the Confederate battle flag, James M. McPherson's question of "why the Civil War still matters" might seem self-evident. But there is nothing obvious about the depth of McPherson's questions and the lucidity of his analysis. One of the luminaries of nineteenth century American history, McPherson's *The War That Forged a Nation* presents the evolution of a master historian's thought and scholarship over the past decade. In a series of twelve roughly chronological essays, he draws fresh conclusions and responds to some of the most groundbreaking recent Civil War scholarship: Mark Neely's *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (2007), James Oakes's *The Radical and the Republican* (2007), Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering* (2008), Eric Foner's *The Fiery Trial* (2010), and Gary Gallagher's *The Union War* (2012). The result is a significant yet slim and highly readable volume that will appeal to academics and popular audiences alike.

In "Why the Civil War Still Matters," one of the book's two chapters of entirely new material, McPherson reflects on America's continued interest in the conflict and tells a personal story of how he came to see parallels between the war and his own world as a graduate student under C. Vann Woodward at Johns Hopkins in the late 1950s. The war fought to preserve the *Union* created a modern *nation*, McPherson reminds, thus changing the nature of the federal government, altering the expectations of its citizenry, and paving the way for industrial capitalism and twentieth century American economic and military predominance. Furthermore, whereas amendments to the U.S. Constitution's prior to 1865 defined the limitations of government power, those since typically express what the government might do to ensure the positive rights of citizens. In

broadening the dimensions of freedom from purely *negative* (freedom *of*) to *positive* (freedom *to*), the Reconstruction Amendments paved the way for future civil rights advancements and impacted later contests over the meaning of *liberty* in America (recently revived by libertarian and antigovernment political movements). "These multiple and varying meanings of liberty," McPherson explains, "and how they dissolved and re-formed in kaleidoscopic patterns during the war, provide the central meaning of the war for the American experience."

Two early chapters tackle meta (historiographical) questions. In "A Just War?," McPherson takes issue with some of Harry Stout's seemingly contradictory conclusions by reminding that the war to liberate enslaved people and the "hard war" against southern society were mutually reinforcing parts of the same mechanism. Drawing on new research by J. David Hacker that projects that war's death toll as closer to 750,000 (and perhaps as high as 850,000), McPherson examines the human cost of sectional conflict in "Death and Destruction in the Civil War." Countering both Faust's thesis on the war's primary legacy and Neely's conclusion that the Civil War was characterized by "remarkable restraint," he reminds that while the Civil War was the most catastrophic in American history, its chief inheritance rests in its nationalizing cultural and institutional impulses and the legal and social framework outlined by the postwar amendments. Throughout, McPherson injects new life into often well-tread debates through cogent analysis and authorial clarity.

The War That Forged a Nation devotes multiple chapters to Abraham Lincoln, including his role in emancipation. McPherson determines that Lincoln, Union armies, and enslaved people all played vital roles in liberation, as perhaps 700,000 bondsmen ran away to advancing Union lines, aided by national policy and Lincoln's own antislavery principles. Freedom was not inevitable, he argues, and it could well have been reversed through either military setbacks or by Lincoln himself. (Recall that although the American Revolution resulted in a mass "general strike" on southern plantations and British armies liberated many slaves, slavery did not end as an institution). In other words, Union and emancipation were intertwined, and Union armies and navies winning the war were essential to secure African American freedom. Lincoln himself was an autodidact in way of military strategy who recognized the necessity of political generals, possessed a clear sense of national policy, and, in defiance of conservatives at home and abroad, grasped the international and historical significance of a war to prove democracy a viable form of government. He was

also, as Horace Greeley phrased it, a “growing man.” His racial views having evolved from gradualism and colonization to more egalitarian policies and an endorsement of limited black suffrage by 1865, the prospect of a postwar America with Lincoln at the executive helm is a captivating one.

Other chapters address the Mexican War (which McPherson compares to the Iraq War as a “war of choice”), the significance of the naval war (which McPherson feels historians have given short shrift), and the contingency of international intervention (in which navies played a decisive role). Perhaps in response to recent scholarly reconsiderations of George B. McClellan, McPherson’s essay on “Young Napoleon” paints him as an unruly narcissist with “paranoid tendencies,” suggesting that the obstinate general created the Army of the Potomac in his own image, fashioning its reputation as slow, cumbersome, and easily demoralized.

This reviewer’s criticisms are few. Though McPherson synthesizes political and military topics with predictable expertise, the addition of more social history might have provided more topical balance. Within that vein, some reference to contemporary socioeconomic data (such as the established relationship between places of slaveholding in 1860 and places of poverty, inequality, and economic immobility today), along with his discussion of civil rights and political theory (other forms of historical structuralism), might have answered more fully the author’s central question. Moreover, students of McPherson’s recent monographs, *Tried by War* (2008) and *War on the Waters* (2008), will find the content on Lincoln and the Union navies familiar, although these essays do provide succinct introductions for new readers.

In his final chapter McPherson calls Reconstruction a “low intensity continuation” of 1861-1865, concluding that the Civil War, not Vietnam, might rightly be deemed America’s longest war. And the war’s “shadow” is longer still. Connecting President Rutherford B. Hayes’s withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877 with Dwight Eisenhower’s federalization of the Arkansas National Guard eighty years later, McPherson makes clear that the Civil War still matters because the nineteenth century is the groundwork of recent and contemporary history. “I became convinced that I could not fully understand the issues of my own time unless I learned about their roots in the era of the Civil War,” he maintains, reflecting on the 1960s. Summoning William Faulkner, McPherson warns that the debates that spurred the Civil War—race, citizenship, region, the role of government and the relationship between that government and

the individual—are “neither dead nor past.” “In the twenty-first century . . . we may well wonder if we are still paying for the blood drawn with the lash of slavery,” McPherson ruminates. Indeed, the Civil War still matters because, from the streets of Baltimore to the South Carolina statehouse, we are still advantaged or limited, united or divided, and, above all, defined as a people by its complicated legacies.

Matthew E. Stanley is Assistant Professor of History at Albany State University.