

### Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965

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## Review

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**Cook, Robert J.** *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 hardcover ISBN 9780807132272

Conflict and Commemoration

Remembering the Civil War

Even during the period of the Civil War centennial, historians were keenly aware of the irony that the commemoration found the United States engaged in a struggle closely resembling the one being commemorated. In more recent decades, historians Michl Kammen, John Bodnar, and Jim Cullen have probed the significance of the centennial in the larger history of American memory and popular culture. Robert Cook, a professor of American history at the University of Sheffield, England, has produced the first book-length study of the centennial.

*Troubled Commemoration*, Cook explains in his preface, was not conceived originally as another contribution to the growing corpus of literature on historical memory, but, rather, as a specialized investigation of the Civil War's continuing impact on the United States in the mid-twentieth century (ix). The book builds on the work of empirical scholars such as David Blight and W. Fitzhugh Brundage more than on the theoretical literature about memory. Cook's study does not mimic Blight's three narratives of Civil War memory, but occasionally invokes Blight's emancipationist narrative to suggest the limits of the centennial's accomplishments. This perspective is not unexpected given the critical intersection of the centennial with the Civil Rights movement and given Cook's research interest in Civil Rights history.

Two dominant themes of mid-twentieth-century American history — the Civil Rights movement and the Cold War — dominate Cook's study. In clear prose and an admirably neat organizational scheme (with extremely helpful short chapter introductions and conclusions) Cook develops his argument that a

celebration conceived to showcase American unity in the context of Cold War tensions ran afoul the ugly realities of continuing national divisions, primarily over race. Within a year of its formal beginning, Cook argues, the long-planned grand centennial foundered, lost the public interest, and settled for the lesser — though not inconsequential — accomplishments of sponsoring scholarship and popular literature.

Although Cook researched in the papers of the many state Civil War centennial commissions and devotes attention to their work, his focus is on the organization and work of the National Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC). He reveals that the Commission's 1950s origins contained tension between two competing visions — one more popular and the other scholarly. All of the centennial's architects were determined to prevent the reopening of sectional wounds.

Despite the fears of prominent southerners and their states' rights allies that the centennial would cast a harsh light on the Confederacy, the commission appointed in 1957 proved sympathetic with a southern agenda. Chairman U.S. Grant III and Executive Director Karl S. Betts were political conservatives concerned primarily with showing a reunified United States in its best light. Southern organizers soon recognized that the centennial was primarily what Cook terms a weapon in the cultural cold war and, as a result, they were free to celebrate their nineteenth-century past as they saw fit (31). Segregationists further recognized that they could exploit the centennial in their search for a usable past equating the fight of the 1860s with that of the 1960s (78).

The southern tilt backfired badly in April 1961, in Charleston, South Carolina, where the CWCC National Assembly met to commemorate the Fort Sumter Centennial. Cook dissects the crisis, the causes, and the consequences of the controversy that erupted when a Charleston hotel refused to accommodate an African-American delegate from New Jersey and the Commission refused to intervene. President John F. Kennedy ordered the Assembly to move to the Charleston Naval Base. Coupled with the ideologically loaded comments by the Southern-born editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, Ashley Halsey, the Charleston Assembly revealed the potential of the Centennial to reopen old wounds. The Centennial, Cook observes, seemed at best a national embarrassment and at worst a sinister excuse for segregationists to mobilize southern whites on the basis of the Lost Cause (121).

Further weakening the position of the CWCC's leaders was the next major event, a reenactment of the battle of First Manassas (Bull Run). Although a commercial and popular success and the kind of event that Karl Betts in particular believed should mark the centennial, the reenactment struck some observers as inappropriate. Led by historian Bell I. Wiley, the scholarly faction of the Commission forced Betts's ouster late in 1961 and Chairman Grant unexpectedly resigned. Taking their places on the Commission were historian Allan Nevins as chairman and a young Wiley protégé, James I. Robertson, Jr., as executive director.

As if middle-aged Civil War historians will not find it sobering enough that the era that spawned their historical interests is now a fertile field for serious historical study, Cook hauls many familiar Civil War historians before the bar of history. Bell Wiley emerges as something of a heroic figure, searching for a new director who was a Southerner who is also an American and who believes that being an American, and doing such things as voting, riding on the front seat of a bus and eating in public places is not a privilege and a responsibility restricted to folk with white skins (140). He found that man in Robertson. The new director's difficult role was to help reshape the centennial while at the same time winning the trust of southern leaders who feared that the new leadership would serve a radical agenda.

Although he shows sympathy for their position, Cook chides Nevins, Robertson, and even Wiley for mollifying southerner leaders at the expense of a broad airing of racial themes and, ultimately, for marginalizing African-Americans (222). The Centennial did not ignore the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, but Cook scores the CWCC for not including a single African-American speaker at the anniversary event. Quotations from Martin Luther King, Jr., and historian John Hope Franklin reveal that African-American leaders recognized and resented the continuing veto power that the Confederacy wielded over the rest of the nation. The August 1963 March on Washington was King's answer to this influence and to the muted CWCC observation.

The triumph of the scholarly over the popular vision of the centennial relegated it to a much lower profile in 1962-1965. Cook offers a somewhat superficial overview of the events sponsored by the national, state, and local commissions during those years. He devotes proportionately more attention to national-level publications, scholarly endeavors (including the still-enduring

Ulysses S. Grant and Jefferson Davis Papers projects), and films produced or initiated during this era. Considering the importance that he attaches to the tensions between the scholarly and popular visions, Cook gives surprisingly little attention to commercialization and the official efforts to prevent it.

But *Troubled Commemoration* is not intended to be an encyclopedic history of the Civil War Centennial and, properly, it does not attempt to note and comment upon every pageant, publication, and product of those years. Striking a healthy balance between depth and breadth, Cook keeps his eyes on the prize which is to relate the Centennial to its contemporary contexts of the Cold War and especially the Civil Rights movement. Cook's own evidence suggests that he desires in retrospect a more enlightened Centennial than the social and political circumstances would realistically allow.

*Troubled Commemoration* is successful also as a contribution to the empirical study of historical memory. The line between David Blight's 1865 to 1915 healing over justice and the centennial's marginalization of blacks in the name of national unity is clear. Cook's book will inspire other historians to determine whether that line were a straight one.

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