

Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War

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Review

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Stout, Harry S. *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War.* Penguin Books, \$18.00 softcover ISBN 9780143038764

What Constitutes an Just War?

Morality and the Civil War

An ambitious undertaking, Stout attempts to apply the evolving concept of just-war theory, especially in examining the actual conduct of war, to fashion a moral history of the Civil War. His question then is not how the war was fought, won, or lost. Rather, Stout examines how the Civil War was conducted morally—given the immorality of war in itself—under the rubric that permits wars of self-defense, requires proportional measures in response to actual threats, and provides protection for civilian lives and property. He concludes that the expenditure of blood, the preservation of Lincoln's last, best hope, and the ending of slavery makes the war just.

Quite appropriately, Stout focuses on the planning and execution of battles, the incidences of inappropriate violence, and needless suffering. He makes a solid demonstration of the link between the homefront and battlefield. And save for a few gaffes with terminology—confusing corps with brigades on page 231—his military history is generally sound. Unlike Steven Woodworth's magisterial treatment of the evolving religious world of actual combat soldiers, Stout examines the evolving ideas of civilian and military leaders, clergy, and the religious press as shapers of opinion, grappling with the horrific moral landscape of Civil War.

Stout recognizes that both Northerners and Southerners held consistent moral views about the war, its causes, and the merits of their respective civilizations, and he avoids the tendency of some recent scholars to suggest that views discredited by events cannot have been seriously believed by those who articulated them. Southern soldiers and their leaders believed slavery was a

moral system before the war; they did not abandon their beliefs in slavery or white supremacy just because Lee surrendered. Northern Democrats and Irish immigrants who opposed Lincoln's war acted on their perceptions of right, race, and interest.

Stout traces an evolving theory of warfare, from the limited war of suppressing the rebellion and respecting civilians and their slave property, through the articulation of a broader rubric of war drafted largely by Francis Lieber, which Lincoln issued as General Order No. 100. In Stout's reasonable argument, the goal of winning the war and the broad justification for conduct that is militarily necessary allowed the Civil War to become a total war.

Stout is at his best in describing how southern civilians reacted to total war. One can easily see through the network of sermons and the press how Southerners learned of apparent atrocities to southern civilians and then created an evidentiary litany that became one jack in the ladder of the Lost Cause.

Although well worth reading, the book fails on several counts. First, he makes the Emancipation Proclamation Lincoln's tool to escalate the limited war to the total war he thought necessary to preserve the Union. Historically, this is arguing a distant result for a cause. Indeed, Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation can be read as an attempt to stop the war with slavery intact.

Once the war becomes total, Stout seems to suggest that there are few practical limits on moral conduct besides proscribing outright rape and murder (which did occur during the Civil War). He suggests that throughout the conduct of the Civil War, an emerging civil religion which transmogrified the New Israel of New England into a missionary nation of the United States took root in mental soil sanctified by the blood of martyrs. This civil religion became a bond of postwar union. He then provides examples of how the American sense of moral rectitude led to atrocities against indigenous Americans after the Civil War.

Stout's argument is not convincing, and indeed his afterword seems to argue for a conclusion contrary to what he states. The Civil War cannot be adjudged as moral simply because its participants thought it was and it preserved the Union. Because the United States went on to play a massive role in the world and its experiment in democratic union benefited many of its citizens and inspired others to seek political freedom and material comfort begs the question of the morality of the Civil War. Other people thought themselves victimized or can be

shown as victimized by its outcome. To turn Lincoln's phrase, this is still an argument of might makes right. Just war theory evolved to provide cover for institutions and states to do what they needed to do in order to survive, including sacrificing lives to preserve others. And its application is at best only a guide to what remains a highly subjective judgment about morality.

Stout's Lincoln, who emerges as both practitioner of *realpolitik* and sage prophet, might be a better guide. At the end of war, he believed that Providence was in charge of events, but he could not say on whose side the Almighty was fighting. He was content to trust in the justness and rectitude of a higher authority than himself or human theorists.

In conclusion, Stout's willingness to ask moral questions is meritorious. But given the limits of history as a discipline and lacking a real metric to impose upon the chaos of Civil War, he can still only assert what he believes the complex evidence shows. One is sympathetic to his clarion call to contemporary citizens to insist that their government, when it wars, conducts war with justice and ends it with mercy. But using the logic of just war theory, these citizens might be censured for undermining the just war being waged in their name.

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