

In the Cause of Liberty: How the Civil War Redefined American Ideals

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Review

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An Examination of American Ideals

Subtitles often fail to live up to their lofty hyperbole, but that applied to this essay collection is right on the mark – or rather the nine essays that make up the volume are right on the mark in their individual and collective efforts to tackle these largest – indeed loftiest – of questions regarding the Civil War. The contributors – a distinguished and varied lot – have much to tell us about the values, agendas, and yes, ideals that brought on the war, determined how it was fought and was understood by those who fought it, and its meaning by both victors and defeated in the post-war decades.

This volume originated as papers delivered at a 2007 symposium at the American Civil War Center located at Richmond's Tredegar Iron Works. In keeping with the mission of that Center – to present the war from the perspectives of northern whites, southern whites, and northern and southern blacks – the participants kept their focus tightly on one or more of those three groups, which makes the published result an unusually coherent volume, while still allowing for coverage of a rich array of topics and perspectives.

In an all too brief opening overview, James McPherson notes that the “tragic irony” of the war lay in the fact that both North and South believed that they were fighting for the values bequeathed by the founding fathers. Even as both “wrapped themselves in that mantle of 1776,” neither included slaves in their respective visions of liberty (1). It took slaves themselves to add that third meaning of liberty by the war's midpoint. In playing out how those perceptions evolved, clashed, and ultimately were resolved, McPherson argues, we can trace many of the driving forces that shaped modern America, even though it would

take the civil rights movement to finally and fully make good on the prevailing version of liberty that triumphed in 1865.

Peter Onuf and his graduate student, Christa Dierksheide, provide a fresh perspective on why Southerners found slavery so integral to their conception of America's well-being and strength as a nation. Its emerging greatness, slaveholders maintained, owed much to the fact that slavery brought order and civilization to an otherwise unfettered frontier. The peculiar institution, in their view, supported a society of far more refinement, civility, and enlightenment, and in so doing, safeguarded the federal Union as envisioned by – yes, once again -- the founding fathers. It's a point packed with far more irony than the authors themselves acknowledge but one that resonates more fully as one moves through the subsequent essays.

Sean Wilentz is far more attuned to ironies and complexities in his explanation of why Southerners seceded. While his bottom line is the obvious one – that they saw in Lincoln's election a direct threat to slavery's future, both long- and short-term – he recognizes the importance of contingency, political fluidity, and human foibles to the decisions for disunion (decisions made on eleven different occasions over the course of five months). Wilentz emphasizes the collective ambivalence of white Southerners regarding the wisdom in leaving the Union, even as that decision was made through open, democratic forums which paradoxically derived from their rejection of a previous democratic process – the presidential election of 1860. It's a clear and insightful assessment of secession and (like the title essay in Ed Ayers' *What Caused the Civil War?* 2005) a model of balance and breadth that I look forward to assigning to students.

Three essays focus on the war years themselves, and examine how conceptions of liberty and other ideals of North, South, and African-American were both redefined and sharpened over the course of the conflict itself. Not surprisingly, Richard Carwardine focuses on Lincoln, and offers an intriguing look at how the president not only manipulated the two wings of the Republican Party by balancing “a policy radical enough *to destroy slavery* and conservative enough *to save the nation*” but also managed to build consensus through inclusion of those outside of the party as well (60).

In one of the volume's most original pieces, George Rable examines the multiple contexts of the term “revolution” as used by Confederates seeking to

define their new nation and the war to defend it. Looking back to the American Revolution, some Southerners argued that theirs was a conservative revolution. That oxymoron, as Rable calls it, led to an extended debate among Confederate leaders and commentators as they sought the proper terminology to define themselves and their cause. Casting themselves as both “rebels” and “patriots,” they sought to convey what the war meant to the South, and where the ultimate righteousness of their cause lay.

Chandra Manning takes on competing concepts of nationalism among soldiers, white and black, Union and Confederate, and demonstrates the role of racial attitudes in shaping each. Southern troops saw in their new government the best insurance of the racial order on which their society’s survival depended; African Americans saw the only means of rebuilding, indeed redeeming, the broken nation was to force it to embrace its ideals of universal freedom and equality. Most subject to change were the attitudes of white Union troops, who only slowly and never completely came to see what their black compatriots realized early on – that an “American nationalism rooted in white supremacy was part of the problem, which meant that altering the relationship between race and nationalism would have to be part of the solution” (103).

The final part of the volume’s triptych deals with the struggle to win the peace in essays by three of the most formidable scholars of post-war memory and commemoration – Nina Silber, Fitzhugh Brundage, and David Blight. In a piece entitled “Emancipation without Slavery,” Silber makes a compelling argument that because slavery’s abolition was the most significant legacy of the war, it became an integral part of how this newly transformed America and American progress were defined. As such, the language of liberation could be, and was, appropriated by women, labor, and other exploited segments of the population, who saw themselves as beneficiaries of that legacy and would draw on it, both rhetorically and conceptually, well into the twentieth century.

Brundage analyzes competing “architects of Confederate memory,” most notably white clergymen, Confederate veterans, and those who ultimately prevailed – southern white women, who provided “crucial ideological ballast” by tying the Lost Cause tightly to the other cause in which they were as fully invested, white supremacy. These groups usually reinforced each other “in their search for a redemptive narrative of their failed revolution,” though it is in their differences that Brundage teases out more complex agendas and more nuanced messages than we usually ascribe to the Lost Cause (135).

Finally, Blight explores African Americans ambivalence in terms of how they remembered the war. Given that their memories entailed points of pride and advancement as well as more negative images of despair and humiliation, Blight asks, "How could the past become a safe haven and a source of inspiration rather than a source of nightmares?" (141) He uses four disparate voices – those of Frederick Douglass, the faithful slave character through which Thomas Nelson Page filtered so much of his fiction, Silas X. Floyd, a Baptist minister in Augusta, Georgia, and Booker T. Washington – to illustrate the competing strains of what blacks chose to remember and to forget over the half century following the war.

The authors' emphasis on ideas, concepts, visions, and terminology provides connective tissue and effective forward thrust that allows each entry to build upon and play off of each other when read sequentially. They are fully attuned to the paradoxes, contradictions, and shifting contexts and contingencies that together transformed those crucial concepts – Union, democracy, revolution, nationalism, citizenship, and race – over which the war was fought and that ultimately shaped its meaning.

Much of this will sound familiar to those who have read the most recent books by the contributors, yet each has adapted his or her work to address in fresh, thoughtful and often eloquent terms some aspect of the question posed in the book's title. Graduate students will jump at it, given the opportunity to sample the work of eminent scholars addressing such major themes, and packaged in so compact a form and I find much here that will be equally useful as undergraduate assignments. Editors William Cooper and John McCardell deserve much credit for the high caliber of the work and the writers they've assembled here, and no doubt will see their efforts reach a wide readership as we begin to think more seriously about what the war meant as the sesquicentennial looms before us.

John C. Inscoe is University Professor at the University of Georgia. He is the author most recently of Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South (2008), and co-editor of Inside the Confederate Nation: Essays in Honor of Emory M. Thomas (2006).