What Caused the Civil War?: Reflections on the South and Southern History

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Interview

WHAT CAUSED THE CIVIL WAR?: REFLECTIONS ON THE SOUTH AND SOUTHERN HISTORY

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Edward L. Ayers is the Hugh P. Kelly Professor of History and dean of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia. His book, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863*, won the Bancroft Prize and the Albert J. Beveridge Award of the American Historical Association. His archival project *The Valley of the Shadow* comprises primary-source materials documenting everyday life in two border counties of Virginia and Pennsylvania in the Civil War years. The CD version of the project won the first e-Lincoln Prize from Gettysburg College in 2001.

His most recent book, *What Caused the Civil War? Reflections on the South and Southern History*, has been published by W.W. Norton. It is composed of essays, some of which are brand new, and some of which are updated versions of essays that will be familiar to Ayers's readers. Interview with Edward L. Ayers

Interviewed by Frank Winter Hardie

*Civil War Book Review (CWBR): In the Preface of your new book, you say that cliché marks much of what we say about the South. Why is it important to get the South right?*

Edward L. Ayers (EA): The South is a crucial part of the DNA of the United States. To understand this country we have to understand the South, in both its encouraging and discouraging aspects. The South plays a central role in American politics, culture, and economic life--and it always has.
The question Why Caused the Civil War? is deceptively simple. Why is this question so complicated and potentially dangerous?

This question is volatile because it immediately raises other questions: was 250 years of American slavery a great accident or emblematic of something deep and enduring about this country? Did the Civil War begin as a failure of our democracy or as an embodiment of its fundamental strength and decency? Could the Civil War have turned out quite differently, with a different kind of North America and a different world history as a result? There are no simple answers that are also adequate answers to these questions.

Modernity has been identified as a concept that separated antebellum North and South. In what ways did the South resist modernity? Are there examples of the South embracing modernity?

This is an issue that cuts across all of Southern history, including the history we are living today. The South has long been defined as the place in the United States where modern life--generally, whatever is new, technological, and socially and economically fair and efficient--has not arrived. In the antebellum period, of course, slavery was the great violation of modernity. One of the most ancient of human institutions, slavery contradicted the ideals of personal freedom and autonomy that lie at the heart of liberal democracy. The puzzling thing is that despite slavery white Southerners managed to build a quite up-to-date economy, politics, and civic culture for themselves, and they adapted slave labor to manufacturing, geographic mobility, cities, and agricultural diversity. It is this unstable combination of the archaic and modern that accounts for much of the antebellum South's dynamism, expansion, defensiveness, and political restlessness. The South was not as consistently and thoroughly modern as the North, of course, but it was modern enough to go to war with the North in an effort to create a new nation based on slavery and to wage sustained warfare in a quite modern context of mass mobilization and constant innovation. My argument is that the Civil War was not so much a conflict between a modern North and an antimodern South, as we are commonly told, as a conflict between two societies that were both quite modern in ways crucial to bringing on a massive war.

While slavery was a strong catalyst for the onset of war, how did politics determine its momentum and timing?
EA: No slavery, no Civil War: slavery posed the fundamental problem in American history. But it was not change in slavery, an institution flourishing economically and demographically, that brought on the Civil War. And slavery did not dictate a particular political strategy to defend it; for many of the largest slaveholders, secession seemed the worst possible move. The political system that had evolved over the first 70 years of the United States could not handle the challenge posed by slavery in the new context of modernity in the 1850s. It is that context on which I focus. The remarkably rapid spread of telegraphs and railroads changed the very medium through which politics worked. When people throughout the nation heard what people everywhere else were saying, and finding out in a matter of days and in a highly partisan manner, the enduring problem of slavery suddenly became a problem that could not be contained by the fractured and weak political parties of the time, parties that had become weakened in part because of the new media. In this context, Uncle Tom's Cabin and John Brown's Raid became media events that divided Americans as never before.

CWBR: In your chapter, Exporting Reconstruction, you contend that our own Reconstruction may be more useful as a guide to what to expect elsewhere in the world. What are some examples of foreign reconstructions that are analogous to the American South’s?

EA: Unlike Japan and Germany in 1945, most of the societies we have tried to reconstruct have been like the South in 1865, with a strong indigenous resistance to the occupying force, a prewar regime not fully destroyed and discredited, forces of change and reaction racing for domination, a strong ethnic or racial dimension, and a lack of overwhelming military presence of the United States on the ground. Understanding our own Reconstruction can let us better understand the reconstructions the United States is currently undertaking elsewhere.

CWBR: In general, white southerners intensely resisted their own Reconstruction; how have they contributed to the United States' reconstruction of other nations?

EA: White Southerners pride themselves as being among the most patriotic of Americans. They have long been heavily represented in the military and have played leading roles in American politics. Presidents identified with the South, such as Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon Johnson, and George W. Bush, have led the
United States into efforts to remake other societies. Yet the parallels between the Reconstruction the South underwent and the reconstructions Southerners have led elsewhere have not been commented on as we might expect.

**CWBR:** In your chapter, *A Digital Civil War*, you describe the teamwork used to produce *The Valley of the Shadow* archives. How do you see the internet and other multi-media resources affecting how history is studied and presented in the future?

**EA:** I am writing these answers on an airplane flying over the Pacific Ocean, on my way back from Australia, where I spoke at several universities. I was struck by how much better *The Valley of the Shadow* is known than are any of the books on which I have labored so long. Perhaps I should not have been surprised. Unlike my books, after all, the Valley is delivered live (and free) to everyone's home and office. People seem to like the basic idea of the Valley Project, that they can see the raw materials of history for themselves and make up their own minds about that history. We are at the very beginning of new ways of imagining the past and that is as thrilling now as it was back in the early 1990s, when we built the first versions of the Valley Project.

**CWBR:** This book covers a wide variety of subjects including your own childhood experiences, commentary on technology and methodology, and suggestions on how the history of the South can be interpreted. What was your guiding purpose for creating this book? What goals do you hope to accomplish with it?

**EA:** As the subtitle suggests, these essays are woven into a meditation on what the South is, has been, and might become. Themes recur throughout—the complexity of the South, the surprise of history, the possibilities that lie in new ways of understanding the past. I try different strategies in various essays, including bits of autobiography, but the larger points are the same. Throughout, my goal is to open some new conversations about the South and its history. I appreciate this opportunity to talk about that a bit and thank you for these good questions.