

Looming Civil War: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Imagined the Future

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Review

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Phillips, Jason. *Looming Civil War: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Imagined the Future.* Oxford University Press, 2018 \$34.95 ISBN 9780190868161

In *Looming Civil War: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Imagined the Future*, Jason Phillips argues that in the decades before the Civil War most Americans shared one of two visions of the future. “Some people imagined themselves traveling through time, into a future ahead of them, and forging that future and their lives in the process” (4). Phillips calls this sort of temporal thinking “anticipation,” arguing that it was a feature of more modernist outlooks, and urges readers that it was built on a belief in free will and progress. “Other people imagined themselves stationary while time passed through them. The future remained ahead, but instead of moving toward it, these people watched as the future approached them” (5). Phillips describes this phenomena as “expectation,” stressing that it was common among more traditionally-minded men and women, and that it was characterized by an acceptance of fate and providence.

This book rests on the metaphor “looming,” a nineteenth-century cultural term, drawn from sailors’ experience of refracted light at sea lifting land and ships into the sky, and Phillips’ broader claim that “something small, insignificant, and low appeared large, portentous, and high” because of a particular set of “atmospheric” (i.e. cultural, social, and political circumstances) contexts that played back into the two notions of time, helping observers understand and wring meaning from discordant events. *Looming Civil War* is a risky, smart book that explains how past peoples considered the future, mining deep veins of worry, fear, and doubt, to appreciate the vast shared terror that the overwhelming majority of Americans felt when facing the prospect of civil war. Beyond the innovative approach, privileging material objects as worthy of serious study, or the sophisticated analysis, which draws on interdisciplinary investigations of how human beings experience time, Phillips’ most important, and durable contribution to Civil War history is the devastating way that *Looming Civil War* shatters the Romantic short-war myth. Far

from a holiday jaunt where glory and adventure would be easy and bloodless, Phillips shows that most Americans instead rightly expected a tidal wave of gore.

Phillips' inventive analysis begins with the different ways that antebellum Americans looked to disparate horizons and interpreted what they saw. Technical advances, improvements in education, and of course territorial expansion are only a few of the prospects spreading out in front of Jacksonian America. As with much of his book, his arguments are subtle, supple, and persuasive. Generally, Americans living before the Civil War were excited about their nation's expansion west. However, the abstract air of eagerness papered over worries about the cost of conquest. "These tensions raised hopes and fears. The confidence that Americans felt about shaping the future concealed uncertainties about tomorrow" (15). American arrogance, Phillips shows, and a crude certainty regarding the virtue and probity of "manifest destiny" also raised fears of a future that might still be beyond control. This gnawing doubt grew from the general conceit that the most glaring impediment to building a glorious future was the fate of black chattel slavery. And nearly everyone knew it. Indeed, one of the better technical features of Phillips' study is the way that he weaves slavery into his story without letting it obscure the broader whole. Slavery lurks beneath this book like an acid ombre soaking everything slowly over time, and eating away at any pretense of temporal anticipation. This book is about time, not slavery, but black bondage underscores different notions of time giving the lie to the modernist hope that the future might be anticipated and shaped to positive ends. The tension builds as *Looming Civil War* continues, and readers feel the increasing sense of impotence and futility that gripped antebellum America as it tripped and tumbled towards civil war. Finally, Phillips stresses the breadth and depth of anger, fear, and doubt that most Americans experienced living through the war years. All "sensed that the war exceeded everyone's power to harness it: the soldier on the march, the expectant slave, [even] the new President" (203). But still the war came.

Looming Civil War is a big, bold book. The sophisticated originality that is its greatest strength may also prove challenging for some readers. The topical analysis can be jarring, and the casual way that Phillips uses interdisciplinary insights on time, temporality in social contexts, and the cultural underpinnings of interpreting a shared past or imagining a coming future require patience to grasp. Readers are also asked to believe that material objects matter, and that the changing ownership of things can offer insights into way that past peoples understood time. For

some that request might prove a bridge too far, but in the main this book works on almost every level. Indeed, *Looming Civil War* is a sparkling addition to the literature, pointing towards new directions in Civil War scholarship, and seemingly destined to win awards, while also being read by a wide array of specialists, enthusiasts, and people that just enjoy good history. It is a book that should not be missed.

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