

150 Years of Misunderstanding the Civil War

By Tony Horwitz



The Battle of Gettysburg, lithograph (Currier and Ives/Wikimedia Commons)

In early July, on the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, pilgrims will crowd Little Round Top and the High Water Mark of Pickett's Charge. But venture beyond these famous shrines to battlefield valor and you'll find quiet sites like Iverson's Pits, which recall the inglorious reality of Civil War combat.

On July 1st, 1863, Alfred Iverson ordered his brigade of North Carolinians across an open field. The soldiers marched in tight formation until Union riflemen suddenly rose from behind a stone wall and opened fire. Five hundred rebels fell dead or wounded "on a line as straight as a dress parade," Iverson reported. "They nobly fought and died without a man running to the rear. No greater gallantry and heroism has been displayed during this war."

Soldiers told a different story: of being "sprayed by the brains" of men shot in front of them, or hugging the ground and waving white kerchiefs. One survivor informed the mother of a comrade that her son was "shot between the Eye and ear" while huddled in a muddy swale. Of others in their ruined unit he wrote: "left arm was cut off, I think he will die... his left thigh hit and it was cut off." An artilleryman described one row of 79 North Carolinians executed by a single volley, their dead feet perfectly aligned. "Great God! When will this horrid war stop?" he wrote. The living rolled the dead into shallow trenches--hence the name "Iverson's Pits," now a grassy expanse more visited by ghost-hunters than battlefield tourists.

This and other scenes of unromantic slaughter aren't likely to get much notice during the Gettysburg sesquicentennial, the high water mark of Civil War remembrance. Instead, we'll hear a lot about Joshua Chamberlain's heroism and Lincoln's hallowing of the Union dead.

It's hard to argue with the Gettysburg Address. But in recent years, historians have rubbed much of the luster from the Civil War and questioned its sanctification. Should we consecrate a war that killed and maimed over a million Americans? Or should we question, as many have in recent conflicts, whether this was really a war of necessity that justified its appalling costs?

"We've decided the Civil War is a 'good war' because it destroyed slavery," says Fitzhugh Brundage, a historian at the University of North Carolina. "I think it's an indictment of 19th century Americans that they had to slaughter each other to do that."

Similar reservations were voiced by an earlier generation of historians known as revisionists. From the 1920s to 40s, they argued that the war was not an inevitable clash over irreconcilable issues. Rather, it was a "needless" bloodbath, the fault of "blundering" statesmen and "pious cranks," mainly abolitionists. Some revisionists, haunted by World War I, cast all war as irrational, even "psychopathic."

World War II undercut this anti-war stance. Nazism was an evil that had to be fought. So, too, was slavery, which revisionists--many of them white Southerners--had cast as a relatively benign institution, and dismissed it as a genuine source of sectional conflict. Historians who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement placed slavery and emancipation at the center of the Civil War. This trend is now reflected in textbooks and popular culture. The Civil War today is generally seen as a necessary and ennobling sacrifice, redeemed by the liberation of four million slaves.

But cracks in this consensus are appearing with growing frequency, for example in studies like *America Aflame*, by historian David Goldfield. Goldfield states on the first page that the war was "America's greatest failure." He goes on to impeach politicians, extremists, and the influence of evangelical Christianity for polarizing the nation to the point where compromise or reasoned debate became impossible.

Unlike the revisionists of old, Goldfield sees slavery as the bedrock of the Southern cause and abolition as the war's great achievement. But he argues that white supremacy was so entrenched, North and South, that war and Reconstruction could never deliver true racial justice to freed slaves, who soon became subject to economic peonage, Black Codes, Jim Crow, and rampant lynching.

Nor did the war knit the nation back together. Instead, the South became a stagnant backwater, a resentful region that lagged and resisted the nation's progress. It would take a century and the Civil Rights struggle for blacks to achieve legal equality, and for the South to emerge from poverty and isolation. "Emancipation and reunion, the two great results of this war, were badly compromised," Goldfield says. Given these equivocal gains, and the immense toll in blood and treasure, he asks: "Was the war worth it? No."

Few contemporary scholars go as far as Goldfield, but others are challenging key tenets of the current orthodoxy. Gary Gallagher, a leading Civil War historian at the University of Virginia, argues that the long-reigning emphasis on slavery and liberation distorts our understanding of the war and of how Americans thought in the 1860s. "There's an Appomattox syndrome--we look at Northern victory and emancipation and read the evidence backward," Gallagher says.

Very few Northerners went to war seeking or anticipating the destruction of slavery. They fought for Union, and the Emancipation Proclamation was a means to that end: a desperate measure to undermine the South and save a democratic nation that Lincoln called "the last best, hope of earth."

Gallagher also feels that hindsight has dimmed recognition of how close the Confederacy came to achieving its aims. "For the South, a tie was as good as a win," he says. It needed to inflict enough pain to convince a divided Northern public that defeating the South wasn't worth the cost. This nearly happened at several points, when rebel armies won repeated battles in 1862 and 1863. As late as the summer of 1864, staggering casualties and the stalling of Union armies brought a collapse in Northern morale, cries for a negotiated peace, and the expectation that anti-war (and anti-black) Democrats would take the White House. The fall of Atlanta that September narrowly saved Lincoln and sealed the South's eventual surrender.

Allen Guelzo, director of Civil War studies at Gettysburg College, adds the Pennsylvania battle to the roster of near-misses for the South. In his new book, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*, he identifies points when Lee's army came within minutes of breaking the Union line. If it had, he believes the already demoralized Army of the Potomac "would have gone to pieces." With a victorious Southern army on the loose, threatening Northern cities, "it would have been game over for the Union."

Imagining these and other scenarios isn't simply an exercise in "what if" history, or the fulfillment of Confederate fantasy fiction. It raises the very real possibility that many thousands of Americans might have died only to entrench secession and slavery. Given this risk, and the fact that Americans at the time couldn't see the future, Andrew Delbanco wonders if we ourselves would have regarded the defeat of the South as worth pursuing at any price. "Vindicated causes are easy to endorse," he observes in *The Abolitionist Imagination*.

Recent scholarship has also cast new light on the scale and horror of the nation's sacrifice. Soldiers in the 1860s didn't wear dog tags, the burial site of most was unknown, and casualty records were sketchy and often lost. Those tallying the dead in the late 19th century relied on estimates and assumptions to arrive at a figure of 618,000, a toll that seemed etched in stone until just a few years ago.

But J. David Hacker, a demographic historian, has used sophisticated analysis of census records to revise the toll upward by 20%, to an estimated 750,000, a figure that has won wide acceptance from Civil War scholars. If correct, the Civil War claimed more lives than all other American wars combined, and the increase in population since 1860 means that a comparable war today would cost 7.5 million lives.

This horrific toll doesn't include the more than half million soldiers who were wounded and often permanently disabled by amputation, lingering disease, psychological trauma and other afflictions. Veterans themselves rarely dwelled on this suffering, at least in their writing. "They walled off the horror and mangling and tended to emphasize the nobility of sacrifice," says Allen Guelzo. So did many historians, who cited the numbing totals of dead and wounded but rarely delved into the carnage or its societal impact.

That's changed dramatically with pioneering studies such as Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering*, a 2008 examination of "the work of death" in the Civil War: killing, dying, burying, mourning, counting. "Civil War history has traditionally had a masculine view," says Faust, now president of Harvard, "it's all about generals and statesmen and glory." From reading the letters of women during the war, though, she sensed the depth of Americans' fear, grief, and despair. Writing her book amid "the daily drumbeat of loss" in coverage of Iraq and Afghanistan, Faust's focus on the horrors of this earlier war was reinforced.

"When we go to war, we ought to understand the costs," she says. "Human beings have an extraordinary capacity to forget that. Americans went into the Civil War imagining glorious battle, not gruesome disease and dismemberment."

Disease, in fact, killed roughly twice as many soldiers as did combat; dysentery and diarrhea alone killed over 44,000 Union soldiers, more than ten times the Northern dead at Gettysburg. Amputations were so routine, Faust notes, that soldiers and hospital workers frequently described severed limbs stacked "like cord wood," or heaps of feet, legs and arms being hauled off in carts, as if from "a human slaughterhouse." In an era before germ theory, surgeons' unclean saws and hands became vectors for infection that killed a quarter or more of the 60,000 or so men who underwent amputation.

Other historians have exposed the savagery and extent of the war that raged far from the front lines, including guerrilla attacks, massacres of Indians, extra-judicial executions and atrocities against civilians, some 50,000 of whom may have died as a result of the conflict. "There's a violence within and around the Civil War that doesn't fit the conventional, heroic narrative," says Fitzhugh Brundage, whose research includes torture during the war. "When you incorporate these elements, the war looks less like a conflict over lofty principles and more like a cross-societal bloodletting."

In other words, it looks rather like ongoing wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan, which have influenced today's scholars and also their students. Brundage sees a growing number of returning veterans in his classes at the University of North Carolina, and new interest in previously neglected aspects of the Civil War era, such as military occupation, codes of justice, and the role of militias and insurgents.

More broadly, he senses an opening to question the limits of war as a force for good. Just as the fight against Nazism buttressed a moral vision of the Civil War, so too have the last decade's conflicts given us a fresh and cautionary viewpoint. "We should be chastened by our inability to control war and its consequences," Brundage says. "So much of the violence in the Civil War is laundered or sanctified by emancipation, but that result was by no means inevitable."

It's very hard, however, to see how emancipation might have been achieved by means other than war. The last century's revisionists thought the war was avoidable because they didn't regard slavery as a defining issue or evil. Almost no one suggests that today. The evidence is overwhelming that slavery was the "cornerstone" of the Southern cause, as the Confederacy's vice-president stated, and the source of almost every aspect of sectional division.

Slaveholders also resisted any infringement of their right to human property. Lincoln, among many others, advocated the gradual and compensated emancipation of slaves. This had been done in the British West Indies, and would later end slavery in Brazil and Cuba. In theory it could have worked here. Economists have calculated that the cost of the Civil War, estimated at over \$10 billion in 1860 dollars, would have been more than enough to buy the freedom of every slave, purchase them land, and even pay reparations. But Lincoln's proposals for compensated emancipation fell on deaf ears, even in wartime Delaware, which was behind Union lines and clung to only 2,000 slaves, about 1.5% of the state's population.

Nor is there much credible evidence that the South's "peculiar institution" would have peacefully waned on its own. Slave-grown cotton was booming in 1860, and slaves in non-cotton states like Virginia were being sold to Deep South planters at record prices, or put to work on railroads and in factories. "Slavery was a virus that could attach itself to other forms," says historian Edward Ayers, president of the University of Richmond. "It was stronger than it had ever been and was growing stronger."

Most historians believe that without the Civil War, slavery would have endured for decades, possibly generations. Though emancipation was a byproduct of the war, not its aim, and white Americans clearly

failed during Reconstruction to protect and guarantee the rights of freed slaves, the post-war amendments enshrined the promise of full citizenship and equality in the Constitution for later generations to fulfill.

What this suggests is that the 150th anniversary of the Civil War is too narrow a lens through which to view the conflict. We are commemorating the four years of combat that began in 1861 and ended with Union victory in 1865. But Iraq and Afghanistan remind us, yet again, that the aftermath of war matters as much as its initial outcome. Though Confederate armies surrendered in 1865, white Southerners fought on by other means, wearing down a war-weary North that was ambivalent about if not hostile to black equality. Looking backwards, and hitting the pause button at the Gettysburg Address or the passage of the 13th amendment, we see a "good" and successful war for freedom. If we focus instead on the run-up to war, when Lincoln pledged to not interfere with slavery in the South, or pan out to include the 1870s, when the nation abandoned Reconstruction, the story of the Civil War isn't quite so uplifting.

But that also is an arbitrary and insufficient frame. In 1963, a century after Gettysburg, Martin Luther King Jr. invoked Lincoln's words and the legacy of the Civil War in calling on the nation to pay its "promissory note" to black Americans, which it finally did, in part, by passing Civil Rights legislation that affirmed and enforced the amendments of the 1860s. In some respects, the struggle for racial justice, and for national cohesion, continues still.

From the distance of 150 years, Lincoln's transcendent vision at Gettysburg of a "new birth of freedom" seems premature. But he himself acknowledged the limits of remembrance. Rather than simply consecrate the dead with words, he said, it is for "us the living" to rededicate ourselves to the unfinished work of the Civil War.