



Lessons from the Civil War 150 Years Later

By Doug Bandow

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America's worst conflict ended 150 years ago. On April 9, 1865 Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia, the South's most successful fighting force.

Lee's meeting with Union commander Ulysses S. Grant was both the practical end of Confederate resistance and essential beginning of national reconciliation. The conflict killed perhaps 750,000 Americans, ravaged much of the South, malformed the national government, and destroyed America's political checks and balances. The Civil War offers important lessons for Americans today.

Never has a war better illustrated the adage that the victors write the histories. What could possibly justify four years of death and destruction?

Southerners contended that states had a constitutional right to secede. But the more important question was: what could warrant killing those on the other side of the debate? In particular, why should a democratic republic with a limited government built on a commitment to individual liberty respond to dissatisfied citizens desiring to join a new political community by killing them?

Eliminating slavery would have offered a powerful moral cause for war. Human bondage was no minor blemish, but a fatal flaw of Southern society. And no government which uses its power to hold people in slavery can be either moral or limited.

However, abolition isn't why the two sections fought. The seven Deep South states left out of fear for the security of their "peculiar institution." But Abraham Lincoln called out the troops to maintain the Union. A call to arms for liberating slaves would have brought forth a trickle rather than flood of army recruits.

After Lincoln raised troops to invade the seceding seven, another four slave states left. Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia had been inclined to stay in the national union, but not if doing so meant waging war on their Southern brethren.

Of course, Lincoln adroitly maneuvered the South into firing the first shot. But that single act of war did not justify general war. The North invaded to reclaim the South, not just Fort Sumter.

Few on either side had any conception of what they were getting into. Many thought a small battle or two would end the affair.

The conflict started small. By the summer of 1864 the slaughter was epic, with Gen. Grant's Army of the Potomac alone losing close to 60,000, roughly as many soldiers as Lee had in uniform. Lee's losses, about half as many, were shocking enough.

Indeed, this bloody toll sobered many early enthusiasts for war. Sen. Henry Wilson of Massachusetts reflected on the carnage: "If that scene could have been presented to me before the war, anxious as I was for the preservation of the Union, I should have said: 'The cost is too great; erring sisters, go in peace!'"

Indeed, before the shooting started some Americans presciently opposed war. Leading Unionist editor Horace Greeley wrote in the New York Tribune: "We hope never to live in a republic whereof one section is pinned to the residue by bayonets."

Despite the unnecessary casualties and destruction of the Civil War, most Americans today reflexively call Lincoln a great president who "saved" the country. He did end slavery, a notable achievement, yet war probably wasn't necessary to do so.

In fact, only one other nation abolished human bondage through violence—Haiti decades before. Every other slave society ended the awful practice peacefully. Brazil abolished the deeply rooted institution legally in 1888.

Nor did Lincoln save "America." Rather, he preserved the national political union.

One can argue that Americans are better off as a result, but that conclusion is not self-evident. Two smaller, less centralized and intrusive governments, competing for the loyalty of citizens able to freely move between the North and South, almost certainly would have better respected Americans' liberties.

In any case, it's unlikely that whatever advantages came from a national union warranted the high human cost of the Civil War. The U.S. government now usually criticizes foreign governments which similarly use force to prevent secession. Few advanced industrialized states would imagine using force to prevent citizens from leaving, whether Scots in Great Britain, Catalonians in Spain, Flemish in Belgium, or Quebecers in Canada.

What is history to us was reality for tens of millions of Americans, especially the three-quarter million who died in the conflict. We should learn from the conflict. Americans should pledge never again to use military force to compel people to stay together politically, either at home or abroad.

Moreover, Americans should not go to war anywhere absent genuinely compelling stakes. The cost of releasing the dogs of war is simply too great.

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