

Forbes

America's Civil War: Unnecessary But Transformational

Doug Bandow, Contributor

9/19/2011

One hundred and fifty years ago the young American nation suffered its greatest failure. “The political system could not contain the passions stoked by the infusion of evangelical Christianity into the political process,” argues University of North Carolina historian David Goldfield. Americans collectively jumped into the abyss of bloody, destructive civil war.

Much blood was shed, especially at this time of the year. The single costliest day in American military history was Sept. 17, when the Army of Northern Virginia and Army of the Potomac met in battle near the town of Sharpsburg along Antietam Creek.

By the time night fell around 26,000 men had been killed, wounded, or captured. The fight was a stalemate, though Robert E. Lee later retreated, ending his invasion of Maryland. On no other day in no other war have so many Americans suffered in combat.

A year later, on Sept. 19, began the two-day battle along Chickamauga Creek between the Confederate Army of Tennessee and the Union Army of the Cumberland. In one of the rare clashes where the South held a numerical advantage, the Northerners were driven from the field, though the Confederates failed to effectively follow up their advantage. Around 35,000 men became casualties or captives.

Deaths accumulated in many other battles, big and small. After four years 620,000 people had been killed, enormous wealth had been destroyed, and southern states had been ravaged. America was on its way to becoming a modern nation state closer to the strong, centralized European model, a dubious achievement. The war’s one serious benefit — the freeing of 4 million slaves — was inadvertent, beginning as an incidental war measure.

The tale of American disunion is familiar to anyone conversant in U.S. history. However, in his new history *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (Bloomsbury Press), Goldfield writes more as a novelist than an academic, making the familiar engaging.

There were many fractures in the young republic, but slavery took center stage as the sectional gap grew. The North was determined to turn slavery into a contained regional

institution. The South insisted on preserving slavery as a protected national system. Both sides fought over the symbolic and the abstract.

Were these differences worth mass death and destruction?

There would have been no war if either side understood the bloody deluge to come. No one imagined battlefields covered with bloated corpses, hospitals with mounds of amputated limbs and rows of suffering wounded, newspapers filled with casualty lists, and families and communities with forever absent young men.

Was the conflict necessary to end slavery? Writes Goldfield: “there may have been other means to achieve that noble end. In fact, the United States was the only country to require a civil war in order to abolish slavery.” In every other nation except Haiti slavery was eliminated peacefully.

Why, then, civil war? Goldfield looks beyond the conventional wisdom. For instance, he points to evangelical Christianity in stoking America’s political fires. He explains: “The elevation of political issues into moral causes poisoned the democratic process. Just as evangelicals did not distinguish between the Catholic Church and Catholic immigrants, so they did not separate the sin of slavery from the slaveholder. In a crusade, the enemy is the infidel, and eventually both sides viewed the other as apostates to God and the constitution.”

Of course, other factors also radicalized the political debate. But evangelical Christians split along sectional lines, many giving their loyalty to politics before the Gospel.

Goldfield writes: “Americans were also children of the Second Great Awakening. They had grown up believing in an omnipresent God who touched their lives and guided their countries’ destiny. He would take sides in the coming battle. In protecting the Revolutionary ideals, northerners would preserve God’s plan to extend democracy and Christianity across an unbroken continent and around the world. Southerners welcomed a war to create a nation more perfect in its fealty to God than the one they left.”

America was transformed, but not in the way either side expected. Slavery was abolished, but “Redemption,” which followed “Reconstruction,” forced the Freedmen into something akin to servitude. There was only a brief interruption in white supremacy. It took a genuine social and political revolution nearly a century later to free the descendants of the slaves.

More enduring was America’s transformation into a modern centralized state. Pre-war Washington was little more than a post office, argues Goldfield. In contrast, “By the end of the Civil War, the government supported an army of a million men, carried a national debt of \$2.5 billion, distributed public lands, printed a national currency, and collected an array of internal taxes. This transformation in national power was not the ‘new birth of freedom’ Lincoln envisioned at Gettysburg, but it overshadowed the liberation of four million slaves in terms of its long-range impact on all Americans.”

Finally, the public role of religion, especially evangelical Christianity, changed. As the war ended “Sentiment was out; reality was in,” Goldfield writes. Hundreds of thousands of dead will do that to people.

Looking back some Americans blamed the sentimentalism of evangelicalism for the conflict. “White Americans would not make the same mistake again. They would not allow a cloying, feminine Christianity, tugging at the heartstrings, to lure young men to their graves for a cause not grounded in reason,” Goldfield writes. In fact, this transformation was less enduring than the rise of the centralized state—eventually evangelicals reemerged politically, even pushing for costly wars abroad. Nevertheless, the Civil War changed America’s religious as well as political and economic landscape.

The Civil War ended 146 years ago, but the “battle of memory” continues. Ever fewer Americans, even in the South, fixate on the conflict’s meaning for America, but important disagreements persist. In *America Aflame* David Goldfield offers a wonderful portrait of a nation scarred yet transformed by a war that in retrospect seems as unnecessary as it was destructive.