

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO



The
**AMERICAN
CIVIL WAR**

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erudite, and to the point. Bravo!”

SIR TOM STOPPARD

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW
IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Adam I. P. Smith

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Introduction

The war in North America between 1861 and 1865 is estimated to have cost three quarters of a million lives. Few societies in world history have lost a higher percentage of their military-aged men in battle than did the white South. Unsurprisingly, its scars have lain deep on the American soul – especially so in the former Confederacy.

Yet the war's historical significance is based on more than just the scale of the violence. It is *the* great American story. “I am large, I contain multitudes,” wrote Walt Whitman, the great poet of American democracy, but the war through which he lived, nursing devastatingly injured soldiers, contains even more “multitudes” than him. It is a story that can be told in a million different voices; it contains heroism and cowardice, craven injustice and heart-warming redemption; above all, it is the great American story because it seems to matter so much.

It was the “crossroads of our being”, in the words of Shelby Foote, a historian who found popular fame through an extraordinarily successful 1991 TV documentary made by Ken Burns. Foote implied that all American roads led to and from the great conflict of the 1860s. In so many ways, this is surely true. Whether the issue is the continuing struggle for racial equality, the scope of government, the place of violence in American life or the potential for war to achieve noble ends, the paths

the United States has taken can indeed be traced back to those brutal battles 150 years ago.

If the war was a crossroads, one road not taken was disunion: the break-up of the United States and, as has often been imagined, the death of free government everywhere. In the view of Abraham Lincoln, the man whose figure looms more than any other over this great crisis, the American Union was the “last, best hope of earth”. Speaking at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in November 1863, at the ceremony to dedicate a cemetery to those who had died in the three-day battle earlier that year, Lincoln claimed that at stake in the conflict was not just the territorial integrity of his nation but the question of whether government of, for and by “the people” would “perish from the earth”.

These universal claims were not just the chauvinism of a nationalist American leader. They were more interesting than that because they were echoed around the world, by men and women who knew America only through what they had heard and read. When the news of Lincoln's assassination reached western Europe some 12 days after the event, the impact was extraordinary. The meeting of “condolence” in Hyde Park in London was the largest anyone could recall. Even obscure towns in rural France sent petitions praising the slain president to the American minister in Paris.

Lincoln's death mattered because America mattered. Consequently, the war was followed with obsessive interest in Europe and Latin America.

While some foreigners saw the conflict primarily in terms of its impact on trade and manufacturing (the American South was the near-monopoly provider of raw cotton) and conservatives could not hide their *schadenfreude* at the apparent failure of an impudent young experiment in democratic rule, many identified wholly with the Union cause. The western world was still living in the shadow of the failure of the 1848 European revolutions. Would the one great hope of liberal, popular movements – the “Great Republic of the West” – now also collapse?

The struggles in Virginia and Tennessee were seen as the latest front in an ongoing global contest between despotism and democracy. As Lincoln was aware, it mattered not just for Americans but for “the whole family of man”. In 1865, Professor E.S. Beesly, a left-leaning historian at University College London, argued that “with the defeat of the Confederacy, a vast impetus has been given to Republican sentiments in England”. America was a “standing rebuke to England. Her free institutions, her prosperity, the education of her people, the absence of a privileged class, are in too glaring a contrast with our own position to be forgiven.”* This perception that their cause had been the cause of freedom has provided Americans – those who wanted it – with what the poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren, a Southerner born exactly half a century after the guns fell silent, called a “treasury

* *Bee-Hive* April 29, 1865.

of virtue”. The Civil War, one of the most destructive conflicts in western history, was immediately imagined as a “Good War”, reaffirming the fundamental “goodness” of America.

Since Warren coined the phrase in the 1960s, the “virtue” Americans could find in the war has been seen less through the prism of perpetuating democracy (which at the time meant government by white men) and more through the moral accomplishment of ending slavery. Some four and half million men, women and children were no longer legally regarded as property after the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution came into effect in the aftermath of the war. But self-congratulation on that undoubted advance in human freedom should be tempered by two considerations. First, the end of slavery was only the first in a long and twisted path toward equality; and, second, abolition was the result of contingency as much as intent, and happened because it was expedient as much as right.

Slavery, its eventual abolition and its legacy are inextricable from any discussion of the war’s causes, course and consequences. But although slavery is in some ways a very American story (it fuelled the new nation’s spectacular economic growth), the United States was far from the only place to see a revolutionary transformation in labour relations in the 19th century. Wage labour, once rare, became the norm. Across the New World property in humans was abolished – in the British, French, Portuguese,

Spanish, Dutch and Brazilian empires. And elsewhere in the world, too, other forms of unfree labour came to an end, whether serfdom in Russia and Prussia or other forms of slavery in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. In this sense, the “great American story” of the Civil War should not solely be told with reference to the United States: it is part of a global story as well.

What makes the Civil War so important, even to us now, is what it tells us about the great struggles and the big historical forces that have shaped the modern world. The ending of slavery as part of a series of other emancipations is one example. So



HOW WAS THE HISTORY OF THE WAR WRITTEN IN THE FIRST 50 YEARS AFTER 1865?

The first generation to write histories of the war were those who had served. Not surprisingly, they tended to emphasise the higher purposes for which men had died. For those on the winning side this meant the survival of the Union. The ending of slavery was not ignored altogether, but

it was subsidiary to the main achievement of the conflict, which was keeping together the United States, with its supposedly unique commitment to liberty. African Americans and a few former abolitionists kept alive the memory of the struggle for black freedom, of course. Frederick Douglass gave powerful speeches in the post-war years calling on the nation not to walk away from its sacred pledge to the freedmen.

By the time of the 50th anniversary, something like a cross-sectional consensus on how to remember the war had emerged. By removing slavery from the story and focusing

too is the importance of nationalism – the idealisation of the nation-state (by both North and South) as the vehicle through which to advance great ideals. And ultimately, the Civil War, by vindicating “free government” – as Lincoln and millions of others saw it – played a powerful role in validating liberal and democratic ideas, with huge consequences for the even greater military struggles of the 20th century. If the Civil War is the crossroads of America’s being, it is also, in a different sense, one of the major crossroads over which the world has travelled in its journey to the present.

Crossroads, by their nature, force people to

entirely on national reunification, white Northerners and white Southerners found a shared way to recognise each others’ valour and celebrate the United States’s unprecedented strength. The war that the United States launched against Spain in 1898 was an important staging post in this process of national reconciliation as Northerners and Southerners fought together against a common foe.

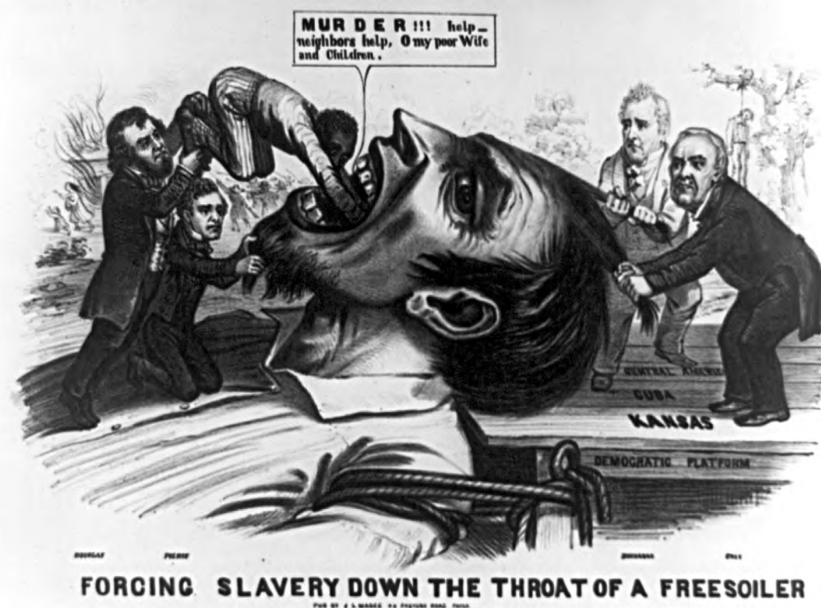
In the aftermath of the First World War, the Lincoln Memorial was built in Washington DC, a monument not to the moral cause of emancipation but to the nation.

“In this temple,” runs the inscription carved into stone above the massive recumbent statue, “as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.”

It would be an exaggeration to say that by this point Lincoln had become a universal hero – he remained hated by many in the South – but, by casting him as a nationalist and not an emancipator, the process of canonising him as a unifying figure was well under way. In parallel, Robert E. Lee became a symbol of nobility and heroism, a reluctant rebel whom Northerners, too, could revere. ■

make choices. The Civil War made people choose: between loyalty to the North or the South; between the perpetuation of slavery or its abolition, making harder some fudged compromise between the two. It is too easy for us, with the benefit of hindsight, to see this great crisis and its outcome as inevitable. How could tension between an anti-slavery North and a slaveholding South *not* end in war, we might think? And how could that war then *not* end with abolition? Was it ever really possible that the United States, so dominant a force in world history ever since, might have broken apart?

But of course no one at the time knew what was about to hit them. While slavery had been abolished in the British Empire in the 1830s, twenty years later it was more firmly established in North America than ever before, the cotton grown by enslaved labour a major source of wealth for some of the most powerful people in the country. There was every reason to imagine that slavery, notwithstanding the rising anti-slavery movement, had become simply too important for it to be abolished. And unlike in Britain, where ultimately Parliament had the authority to abolish slavery, the federal nature of the American constitution meant that no Congress or president in Washington could do the same. The best hope of those who wished to see a United States free of slavery seemed to be that if they could exclude slaveholders from the national government and then surround the slave states with a cordon of freedom, pressure could eventually be



A cartoon from 1854 depicting a giant free soiler being held down while Stephen Douglas pushes a black man down his throat.

exerted that would lead slave states to embrace some sort of gradual abolition, sweetened – as emancipation had been in the United Kingdom – with a massive bribe to slaveholders to compensate them for the loss of what was, legally if not morally, their human property.

Such an eventuality was wished for and prayed for, but there were few concrete reasons to believe it would happen. There was, however, one circumstance in which all historical precedent and most legal argument suggested that the Federal government *could* legitimately forcibly emancipate slaves and even formally abolish the laws that made slavery sustainable. It was the circumstance in

which, back in the 1770s, the Royal Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, had issued a proclamation promising freedom to enslaved people who demonstrated their loyalty to the King: war.

Was slavery the cause of the war?

No serious historian would contest this, although a majority of the US public in opinion polls reject the claim. The popular unwillingness to accept that slavery was at the root of the conflict is partly a reaction to the efforts made by educationalists and academics since the 1960s to place it there. The insistence of slavery's centrality feels, to some Americans, like a liberal conspiracy to impose on the Civil War a narrative that will prop up present-day efforts to tackle racial inequality, or, still worse, an attempt to make white people feel "guilty".

Such is the continuing toxicity of race in American society that the Civil War can never escape its politics. But there are also two arguments against the proposition that slavery caused the war: most white Southerners, including most of those who fought for the Confederacy, were not slaveholders; and most white Northerners were certainly not abolitionists. Neither of these facts, in themselves, however, show that slavery was not the cause of the war. They merely illustrate what is

definitely true: that the war was no straightforward fight between humane abolitionists on the one hand and slaveholders on the other. Our challenge is to understand how slavery came to be such a difficult problem that it led to war, even though the abolitionist movement remained small.

The stubborn fact is that, simply put, had slavery not existed there would have been no war. Alternatively, had slavery been distributed evenly over the United States, with all of the states having a similar investment – legally, financially, culturally and emotionally – in slavery, there would have been no war either. As everyone in America understood at the time, slavery created a culture in the South that was discernibly different from that which existed in the free states to the North. It also created a different kind of politics, and ensured that Southern economic development was on a distinctively different trajectory from that of the North. As Abraham Lincoln put it in 1865, reflecting on the origins of the conflict: "All knew that [slavery] was *somehow* the cause." The question, then, is *how*?

The economic problem was in a way the most obvious, although also more complicated than it has seemed since in some respects slavery bound together Northern merchants and manufacturers with Southern cotton planters. But at the same time, there was a clash between powerful Southern economic interests and those of the rest of the country.

The political problem was that slaveholders seemed increasingly to threaten the republican freedom of white Americans by demanding more and more Federal control, and to shut out the opportunities otherwise available to free white labourers in the west. In this sense the conflict became both one over the nature of American democracy and at the same time a fight over access to resources – basically, land.

The cultural problem could also be expressed as a moral problem. It was that slavery – since it was not just a particular sort of economic interest but was also a claim about the nature of humanity – generated distinct cultures in North and South. This point can be exaggerated, but it cannot be denied: the religious awakening of the early part of the 19th century affected both sections, but only in the North did it foster an evangelical reform movement that generated mass sympathy for the plight of the enslaved.

When we talk about what caused the Civil War, we are really talking about three separate questions. First, what caused the sectional tension between North and South that made war possible? Second, why did first seven and then eventually a further four slave states leave the Union in 1860-61? And third, why did the North respond to secession with the use of massive state violence to hold the nation together?

Slavery is at the heart of the answer to the first question, although historians debate exactly *how*

and *why* slavery created those tensions. As for the second question, defence of slavery was quite explicitly the reason given by the seceding states themselves. The answer to the third question is complicated, but even though most Northerners definitely did not say they were fighting to end slavery (they said they were fighting for the Union), they all understood that since slavery was – in the contemporary phrase – “the tap-root of the rebellion”. Ultimately only by uprooting it could the nation live.

How different were North and South on the eve of war?

As measured by religious affiliation, language, or culture, not significantly. Even the economic differences can easily be exaggerated: most people in both the free states and the slave states were farmers. Americans in all sections revered a common moment of national origin and shared a republican sensibility which prized the equality and independence of free (white) men and was deeply suspicious of concentrations of power.

But there were differences – in the higher rate of urbanisation, industrialisation and immigration in the North – that were a direct consequence of the reliance of the South on slave-produced cotton. It was this distinction – one that had been growing