

Teaching the American Civil War in the Twenty-First Century

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Not long ago a historian wrote, "A paradox confronts professional historians in the United States today—although there is intense interest on the part of the public in matters historical, there is yawning apathy toward history in the college classroom among traditional-aged students" (1). We should not overdo the part about interest among the general public; it is usually only when we get ourselves in a jam that we collectively look to the past for guidance. Yet recently there have been public outbursts over the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian, the quincentennial of Columbus's first voyage, and the national history standards produced at U.C.L.A. Certainly the Civil War still arouses passionate feelings; recall the so-called "Third Battle of Manassas" in the late 1980s over the plan to construct a mall adjacent to the Manassas Battlefield, or the recent imbroglio between the Disney Corporation and Civil War enthusiasts—again in Virginia—raising fears that this hallowed conflict was about to be trivialized on the altar of commercialism. Ask Governor Zell Miller of Georgia what happened when he suggested altering the state flag to remove the Confederate emblem placed there in the 1950s. And in South Carolina a similar battle is heating up over a proposal to haul down the Confederate flag that still flies over that state capitol.

Popular interest in the war appears to be as strong as ever. Indeed, a good deal of commercialism already bolsters our collective memory. The manager of a bookstore in Falls Church, Virginia, said in 1988, "For the last two years, Civil War books have been flying out of here. It's not [just] the buffs who buy; it's the general public, from high school kids to retired people" (2). There was for a time a Civil War 900 hotline number with up-to-date information on reenactments, meetings, and other events. Books, videos, memorabilia, autographs, roundtables, reenactments—the Civil War has become a virtual "industry" in this country.

And yet, the ignorance and apathy of our students are nicely captured in a recent cartoon. It appears to be a junior high school class. It's

the end of the school year, the kids are running out of the room, and the teacher is yelling, "And by the way, the North won the war!"

As we now hurriedly approach the new millennium and this conflict recedes further into our past, what's a history teacher to do? No small part of the problem in a survey course is that the Civil War must compete for time with so many other pieces of our national memory. Moreover, in a two-semester course, the war comes at the end of semester one, when time may be very limited. If a traditional textbook is used as the main source of information about the war, this may further compound the problem. More stimulating readings on the war may or may not make an impression on this generation of non-reading students. Videos, CDs, the Internet, and other new technology have their place, but rarely do they put the war in a larger historical context.

There are a number of approaches that an instructor may take in addition to covering the usual material concerning the causes of the Civil War, its role in ending slavery, and the preservation of the Union. Indeed, these traditional items may well be left to the textbook and ancillary readings and videos. The goal here is to use classroom time to relate the Civil War to more current events and issues in recent American society, even to events our youngest students have lived through.

1) Some attention can be given to the old question of the impact of the Civil War on the American civilian economy—whether it retarded or advanced business and industry. It did both, of course. While this in itself may not be a compelling topic for most students, the instructor can use it as an example to illustrate that America's wars have always spawned positive and negative consequences for civilian life. All wars have commercial, technological, and scientific spinoffs for the future. In the North, the Civil War gave a tremendous boost to certain segments of the civilian economy, such as clothing and food production (including the first canning of food). The war also gave us our first income tax, a governmental revenue tool with profound future implications. The two World Wars produced not only advanced weaponry but radar, rocketry,

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and nuclear power—all with vast civilian implications: some good, some not so good. The Vietnam War saw great strides in military medical care. The rapid evacuation and treatment of wounded soldiers saved lives in that war which would have been to st in earlier conflicts. Many of the same techniques and procedures are now routinely used by medical emergency services. The flush of victory in the Persian Gulf War has been tempered by the much-publicized maladies among veterans of the conflict (the “Persian Gulf syndrome”). The value of any war must be weighed in the good and bad that it leaves to successive generations.

2) Wars have always shaken up the roles of women in American society. Women in the Civil War contributed mightily to both sides, as nurses, hospital administrators, couriers, spies, and even in combat. Particularly in the Confederacy, they sustained the homefront on farms and in businesses. Subsequent wars have further advanced the roles of women, both in the military and in office and industrial jobs. Not all of the Rosies who riveted wanted to go back to being housewives in 1945. The current national debate over just how fully women should be integrated into all aspects of military life is simply a continuation of a struggle that began well over a century ago.

3) If we become jaded or cynical today with our national political leadership, a quick look at the woes faced by Presidents Lincoln and Davis, both trying to preside over unruly nations in wartime, should give students some reassurance that the challenges of leadership really haven't changed very much. Both Lincoln and Davis were mercilessly

attacked by the press in their own nations. *Harper's Weekly* characterized Lincoln as, among other things, a “filthy story-teller,” “despot,” “liar,” “thief,” “buffoon,” “monster,” “tyrant,” and “fiend-butcher.” Both men had to deal with cantankerous senators, congressmen, and governors who were convinced of the utter incompetence, if not imbecility, of their respective presidents. According to Mississippi politician James L. Alcorn, Jefferson Davis was a “miserable, stupid, one-eyed, dyspeptic, arrogant, tyrant” (3). President Truman was attacked and ridiculed mercilessly in his day, at least in part because he was guilty of not being the man who preceded him in the Oval Office; today he is one of our more revered presidents. Or consider the calumny heaped on Lyndon Johnson struggling with the Vietnam conflict; Johnson was surely the most abused president since Lincoln. President Clinton has been accused of everything from abuse of the U.S. Constitution to sodomy to tax evasion to drug dealing and murder. Students who have witnessed recent presidents such as George Bush and Bill Clinton being badgered, bashed, ridiculed, hamstrung, and investigated by Congress and the press, should come to team that some things are eternal in American politics, be it in wartime or in peace.

4) The tightening of civil liberties during the Civil War can easily be replicated in the two World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf conflict. As is well known, Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus, allowed for trials by court martial of civilians, and permitted the arrests of over thirteen thousand persons by military authorities. Only a few days after denouncing Lincoln's suspension of the writ, Jefferson Davis received from his Congress the same power, which he too wielded, though less forcefully. We can remind students of wartime harassments of pacifists, socialists, labor activists, and German-Americans in the first World War. The incarceration of Japanese-Americans (and to a lesser degree Italian-Americans) in World War II speaks for itself. It is no coincidence that Joseph McCarthy's heyday came during the Korean War. And as we have come to learn, groups expressing dissent were also harassed and infiltrated during the Vietnam War. When a nation at war fears that not only its security but its very existence is at stake, there may emerge a willingness to forego traditional liberties “for the duration.” Students can debate whether the Bill of Rights can be turned on and off like a spigot, depending on the national mood.

Even during the Persian Gulf conflict, which ended quickly and in no way threatened the existence of the United States, there was time for probes of dubious legality against U.S. residents with ethnic ties to the Middle East, as the FBI questioned Arab-Americans about their political beliefs, associations, and knowledge of terrorist plots.

5) Students can compare the aggressive stand taken by black Americans in the Civil War to advance the cause of freedom to the roles of blacks in the two World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam. No longer can the slaves be viewed as merely passive recipients of the gift of freedom (4). In the World Wars and Korea, black soldiers stepped forward to fight and die in segregated units in defense of a democracy they did not enjoy at home. Not until the Persian Gulf War can we boast of having fought a truly color-blind conflict abroad.

From these and other examples, students can gain a realization that the Civil War generation experienced many of the stresses and strains

ever present in American society. In their wonderful 1986 book, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, Richard Neustadt and Ernest R. May argued that history is a stream from which policy-makers may draw "in the process of deciding what to do today about the prospect for tomorrow" (5). While we can hardly hope that our students will learn to think like historically informed policy-makers, it would suffice if we could help them to think as historically literate citizens. Professor George Ticknor of Harvard said in 1869 that the Civil War had opened a "great gulf between what happened before in our century and what has happened since, or what is likely to happen hereafter." Or as Robert Penn Warren put it, "The Civil War is, for the American imagination, the great single event of our history. Without too much wrenching, it may, in fact, be said to *be* American history" (6). Shelby Foote, the historian, novelist, and engaging commentator in the PBS *Civil War* series, said it another way: "Any understanding of this nation has to be based, and I mean really based, on an understanding of the Civil War. I believe that firmly. It defined us . . . as what we are and it opened us to being what we became, good and bad things. And it is very necessary if you're going to understand the American character in the twentieth century, to learn about this enormous catastrophe of the nineteenth century" (7). Our task is to help our students realize that how we Americans act and believe today has been forged to no small degree by that great conflict of some 130 years ago. The very first generation of the

next millennium is among us already. We can recapture for them and future generations the relevance of the Civil War, so that they will understand what Shelby Foote meant when he said of the war, "It was the crossroads of our being, and it was a hell of a crossroads . . ." (8).

Endnotes

1. David S. Trask, "Teaching History in Historical Times: A Side Stage Approach," *Teaching History* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 59.
2. Quoted in James M. McPherson, "A War That Never Goes Away," *American Heritage* (March 1990):41.
3. Quoted in J.G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1969), 270.
4. For dramatic examples of slaves taking the initiative in gaining their freedom, see Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Free at Last. A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* (New York: The New Press, 1992).
5. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York. Free Press, and London: Collier Macmillan, 1986), xxii.
6. Quoted in Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Knopf, 1990), xvi.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*

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The Monument to the fortieth New York Infantry Regiment, located near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. (Photo by Sam Abell.)