

Eric Foner: American Historian

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This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War

By Drew Faust. Alfred A. Knopf.

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One of the most arresting lectures I have ever heard at a historians' convention was delivered four years ago by Drew Gilpin Faust at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. Taking as her starting point Robert E. Lee's possibly apocryphal remark, "It is well that war is so terrible--lest we should grow too fond of it," Faust blamed historians for succumbing to war's seductive power. By ascribing moral purposes and profound causes to what is really pointless slaughter, she insisted, historians obscure war's horror. Exhibit A was the American Civil War. More than 60,000 books dealing in one way or another with that conflict have been published since it ended, she observed. That's an average of more than one per day. If historians need war to add drama to their grand narratives, Faust suggested, then war, if it is to be more than pointless slaughter, very much needs historians.

Faust, of course, is best known today as the first woman president of Harvard University in its 371-year history. (She was inaugurated in October.) But before reaching this milestone, she established a reputation as a leading scholar of nineteenth-century Southern history. Indeed, one of her more recent books, *Mothers of Invention* (1996), accomplished something nearly impossible--coming up with a genuinely new explanation for Confederate defeat. Faust attributed it to the withdrawal of support by women on the Southern home front, who abandoned the fight because of the damage the war was inflicting on their families and on traditional gender relations. Now, with *This Republic of Suffering*, a work by turns fascinating, innovative and obsessively morbid, Faust returns to the task of stripping from war any lingering romanticism, nobility or social purpose.

Faust begins by reminding us of the Civil War's appalling harvest of death. In a nation of 31 million people, 620,000 died as members of the Union or Confederate armed forces, a total nearly equal to the deaths in all other American wars combined, and the

equivalent of 6 million in terms of today's population. This figure does not include the thousands of civilians who became collateral victims of battles or who perished in disease-ridden camps for runaway slaves or in internecine conflict between Unionist and Confederate families that raged in parts of the South. The slaughter of the young could not be assimilated into the cultural ideal that Faust calls the Good Death--the passing at home of a man or woman of advanced age, surrounded by family members and imparting last words of religious and social wisdom.

Of course, untimely death was hardly unknown in mid-nineteenth-century America, given the primitive state of medicine. During the course of his life, for example, Abraham Lincoln lost a baby brother and two sons to disease and saw his sister die in childbirth. But the scale of loss in the Civil War dwarfed anything in the American experience. And unlike today, when the government carefully shields images of the war dead from public view, the new art of photography, in the words of one newspaper, "brought the bodies and laid them in our dooryards." Drawing on a wide range of sources, including sermons, memoirs, newspapers, poetry and soldiers' letters, Faust probes how Americans tried to cope with mass death and how the experience affected everything from business practices to religious attitudes, literary culture and the organization of the state.

In some ways, Faust points out, death was good for business. Transportation companies, North and South, made tidy profits bringing the remains of soldiers home for burial. Embalmers operated near the battlefields, preserving bodies and then demanding payment from grieving families. Entrepreneurs promised, for a fee, to locate information about missing loved ones. A burgeoning market developed in mourning attire made from various fabrics with names unrecognizable today: bareges, challies, balzerines. There were elaborate rules, for the upper classes at least, about how to remain part of fashionable society while in mourning. Faust even takes note of the extensive sales of the "planchette," a kind of Ouija board that supposedly enabled the living to communicate with the dead.

War, Randolph Bourne would write during World War I, "is the health of the state." One of the most profound changes wrought by the Civil War was the creation of a powerful national government, evidenced by the mobilization of economic resources, conscription, the issuance of the first national currency and the emancipation, by presidential decree, Congressional action and constitutional amendment, of more than 4 million slaves. Coping with death, Faust shows, also required unprecedented state action, from notifying next of kin to accounting for the dead and missing. The Union and Confederacy established elaborate systems for gathering statistics and maintaining

records of dead and wounded soldiers, efforts supplemented by private philanthropic organizations.

After the war ended, Washington embarked on what Faust calls "the most elaborate federal program undertaken in nearly a century of American nationhood": the location and reburial of hundreds of thousands of Union soldiers in national military cemeteries. The scale of death in engagements like Shiloh, Antietam, Gettysburg and many others was so vast that many bodies lay untended for days, eventually buried in unidentified shallow graves near the battlefield. Between 1865 and 1871, the federal government reinterred more than 300,000 Union (but not Confederate) soldiers, including black ones, buried, as they had fought, in segregated sections of military cemeteries. Faust points out that officials seeking to locate the remains of deceased Union soldiers often found that they had been buried, and their graves cared for, by local African-Americans in the South.

If the mass death of the Civil War "demanded an explanation," Americans increasingly found one in religion. The pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes first pointed out that man creates God in his own image. The same is true of heaven. Of course, equating death with eternal life was a central tenet of Christianity. But mass death, Faust argues, led to a "transformation of heaven," as Americans imagined celestial family reunions that seemed more and more like decorous gatherings in Victorian living rooms. "I don't like Paradise," the poet Emily Dickinson jested, in response to this domestication of heaven, "Because it's Sunday--all the time." Some Americans could not wait until their own death to see the departed. Spiritualism--belief in the ability to communicate with the dead--proliferated. Mary Todd Lincoln held seances in the White House to experience again the presence of her young son Willie, who succumbed to disease in 1862.

But religion also gave a larger meaning to wartime sacrifice. What Faust calls "the United States's new and elevated sense of destiny" emerged from the war, a belief that God had willed the conflict to purge the nation of the sin of slavery, and that America's manifest destiny to serve as a worldwide embodiment of freedom had been hallowed by all the blood that had been shed. Lincoln, in his magnificent second inaugural address, invoked biblical language to explain the war but warned that ultimately God's will cannot be known by man: "The Almighty has His own purposes." The North's Protestant clergy had no such doubts. To them, God's purposes were clear, and the soldiers' deaths merged with the Union's triumph in what Faust calls a "consoling narrative of divine purpose and sacrifice." The dead had not died in vain.

Faust sees this providential view of the war as essentially a device to make sense of pointless slaughter. In a chapter on the way American writers responded to the bloodshed, she gives pride of place to Dickinson, Ambrose Bierce and Herman Melville, each of whom tried, through ironic detachment, to "undeceive" readers by stripping the war of comfortable, exalted meaning. The short stories by Bierce, who had seen action in numerous battles, including Shiloh, as a member of the Union army, stripped various kinds of wartime death--battlefield, suicide, execution--of any romantic meaning. Melville's poetry collection *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* rejected the idea that the war had served a glorious purpose. For Faust too, war remains, as it was in her 2004 lecture, meaningless violence.

Except, that is, for the more than 200,000 black men who served in the Union army and navy. Faust notes the special dangers black soldiers confronted. The Confederacy viewed them not as legitimate soldiers but as rebellious slaves (unlawful combatants, to use a current phrase). "We cannot treat negroes...as prisoners of war without a destruction of the social system for which we contend," one Southern newspaper declared. Many atrocities took place in which black soldiers were massacred after surrendering, most infamously at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, where nearly 200 perished at the hands of Southern soldiers under the command of Maj. Gen. Nathan Forrest. Nor were white officers of black troops spared; and Confederates did not return their bodies to the Union army for proper burial, as they did for other officers. "Black soldiers," Faust writes, "approached war's violence differently from white Americans." They saw the war as a righteous struggle against slavery, offering not only spiritual redemption but an equal place in American society. The struggle for freedom gave the war a "special meaning" for blacks.

But her treatment of black soldiers stands in sharp contrast to her account of the white combatants, Northern and Southern. They regularly wrote home of service to nation, God and their comrades; yet Faust seems to see in such sentiments little more than a rationalization of violence that gives it a nationalist and Christian overlay. Indeed, her chapter on white soldiers' response to death mixes letters by Union and Confederate soldiers to show the essential sameness of their responses. Here she diverges from Chandra Manning's *What This Cruel War Was Over* (2007), an examination of soldiers' letters that demonstrates that as time went on, more and more Union soldiers saw the war as a struggle over the future of slavery in a nation dedicated to freedom. For Faust, pointless violence and mass death compelled Americans to seek meaning in the war; for Manning, what led Northerners and Southerners to be willing to lay down their lives was a meaningful difference in essential values.

All history, the saying goes, is contemporary history. Current concerns affect the questions we ask of the past and, frequently, the answers we find. The Civil War offers a striking example. During the 1930s and '40s, in part because of a revulsion against what they saw as the needless slaughter of World War I, historians presented the Civil War not as an irrepressible conflict between two societies with fundamentally different systems of labor and social outlooks but as an unnecessary struggle brought on by a blundering generation of politicians. In the aftermath of World War II, historians reinterpreted the Civil War in light of the struggle against fascism and a growing civil rights consciousness. Refracted through the lens of those experiences, the moral was clear: if it was worth a war to destroy the Third Reich, it was worth one to rid the nation of slavery.

Today, war has taken on a different aspect, and historians have followed suit. Like Faust's book, *Upon the Altar of the Nation* (2006), a work by the Yale scholar of religious history Harry Stout, condemns the Civil War clergy for justifying slaughter. It is hard not to see the shadow of Iraq--a prime example of senseless carnage cynically overlaid with exalted rhetoric--hovering over these books. And at a time of the increasing militarization of our society and politics, any reminder of the true costs of war is certainly welcome.

Yet on the question of whether the Civil War had any larger meaning, *This Republic of Suffering* is oddly agnostic. At one point, Faust does refer to "a war about slavery." But overall, the war's meaning for her lies in death, not life; in destruction and suffering, not any other outcome. The Civil War was, indeed, a terrible tragedy. But because of her unrelenting preoccupation with death, Faust strips the war of political meaning. She never steps back to ask what the price of avoiding war might have been.

A look at the unsuccessful "compromise" proposals advanced in Congress during the secession winter of 1860-1861 suggests that war could have been averted only at a very high cost, if not in lives then in the nature of American society itself. To try to bring the South back into the Union, these plans included, among other things, a ban on Northern criticism of Southern institutions, a Southern veto on national policies and the recognition of slavery as a permanent feature of American life. What about letting the "erring sisters depart in peace," as Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, advocated? Confederate leaders were bent on expanding their slave-based empire into Mexico and the Caribbean. Either way--a compromise settlement or peaceable disunion--the United States and, indeed, the entire Western Hemisphere would be very different today if the Civil War had not taken place. In other words, the price of peace would have been a different harvest of death--the death of freedom of speech,

political democracy and any hope for an end to slavery.