

Beecher Lectures 2005: Preaching Morality in America's Civil War

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By

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Dedicated to Harry Baker Adams

Lecture Three: Discrimination: The Civilians' Civil War

We come now to a consideration of discrimination, or non-combatant immunity in the Civil War. The principal of discrimination was well understood by 19th century participants in the Civil War. As the war grew increasingly dirtier and loomed menacingly over civilian populations, Princeton theologian Charles Hodge turned to a consideration of just conduct in the war. From credible sources, Hodge had learned “that men and women [in the North], professing to be Christians, have been so demoralized or demented by passion, as to maintain that it would be just to visit the South with the fate of the Canaanites.” That would be wrong, Hodge asserted, a “sin, a violation of the law of God, for our government to disregard any of the established laws and usages of modern warfare in its efforts to suppress the rebellion.”

In time of civilized war, wrote Hodge, “the lives of non-combatants [must] be regarded as sacred.” Besides protecting the lives of non-combatants, “it is one of the humane regulations of modern warfare that private property is entitled to protection. Robbery or marauding, on the part of soldiers, is punishable with death.” Hodge conceded that sometimes food for men and horses must be taken in enemy territory, but

that was a far cry from “the doctrine that the private property of non-combatants is a lawful prize in war.”¹

Lincoln did not agree with Hodge nor with McClellan and the Democratic party, which was even more adamant on limiting the scope and conduct of the war. His sense of just means was considerably wider and grew more so with every passing battle. But unlike Hodge’s vengeful countrymen, his motives were more pragmatic and “prudential” than blood revenge.² Almost alone among his American contemporaries, Lincoln evidenced an almost other-worldly capacity to prescribe hard actions “with malice towards none.”

If Lincoln favored hard war on civilians without malice, his chief generals, Grant, Sherman and Sheridan were more than willing to prosecute a hard war with considerable malice aforethought. On May 5, 1864 as Grant was crossing the Rappahannock, Sherman’s “great campaign” was launched with Sherman’s lead army moving out toward Atlanta. Sherman proved himself to be the brilliant tactician Grant had partnered with in the West. Instead of direct assaults on well-entrenched positions, Sherman continually flanked Confederate General Joseph Johnston’s army, threatening his rear and forcing him to slowly but steadily drop back toward Atlanta. Bloody engagements took place along the way, but by successively turning Johnston out of his positions, Sherman generally avoided direct assaults and battlefield casualties were kept to a proportional minimum.

Civilian casualties were another matter. An important, if largely overlooked, episode in Sherman’s Atlanta campaign occurred in early July at two mill sites located

¹ Charles Hodge, “The War,” 157-59.

² On the prudential Lincoln see, especially, Allen Guelzo, [Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President](#).

near Johnston's fortified army at Roswell. In his memoirs, Sherman later noted innocently: "I ordered [General Kenner] Garrard's division of cavalry up the [Chattahoochee] river eighteen miles, to secure possession of the factories at Roswell, as well as to hold an important bridge and ford at that place."³

Contained within the Roswell "possession," though, was a frightful story, seldom told in the North or the South.⁴ In fact, Sherman took possession of not one but two small factory towns, Sweetwater or Factory Town and Roswell. Both of these mill towns produced cotton yarn for Confederate uniforms and were operated primarily by women serving in the place of the men who had been conscripted into the Army.

As Sherman's army swooped in to destroy the mills, Sherman issued, and then repeated, a remarkable accompanying order to a stunned General Garrard on July 7:

I repeat my orders that you arrest all people, male and female, connected with those factories, no matter what the clamor, and let them foot it, under guard, to Marietta, whence I will send them by cars to the North. Destroy and make some disposition of all mills save small flouring mills manifestly for local use, but all sawmills, and factories dispose of effectually, and useful laborers excused [from conscription] by reason of the skills as manufacturers from conscription, are as much prisoners as if armed.

Sherman closed the order with the observation:

The poor women will make a howl. Let them take along their children and clothing, providing they have the means of hauling or you can spare them. We will retain them until they reach a country where they can live in peace and security.⁵

³ Sherman, Memoirs, 536.

⁴ I am indebted to David Fellows for first calling this to my attention in "'The Poor Women Will Make a Howl' General Sherman and the Deportation of the Sweetwater and Rosewell Mill Workers During the Atlanta Campaign of 1864," unpublished Senior Thesis, Yale University, 2004. Many of the primary sources surrounding the deportation are reprinted in Michael D. Hitt, Charged with Treason: Ordeal of 400 Mill Workers during operations in Roswell, Georgia, 1864-65 (New York, 1992).

⁵ O.R., Ser. 1, v. 36:5, 76-77

Later, in explaining his actions to General Halleck, Sherman remarked, “They were tainted with treason...I will send all the owners, agents, and employees up to Indiana to get rid of them there. I take it a neutral is no better than one of our own citizens engaged in supplying a hostile army.” For Sherman, in fact, there were no “neutrals” in the Confederacy, and what he did or did not do was his decision to make. He could deport civilians or ignore them, but either way, he deemed all white southerners guilty traitors. There were no innocents, no not one.

Sherman’s orders were duly carried out. After the mills were destroyed the female workers were arrested, charged with treason, and sentenced to be deported with their children to the North under Federal guard. The Sweetwater town would never be rebuilt. In fact, the women never made it north but wound up in a Female Military Prison constructed just for them in Louisville, Kentucky, where they remained with their children until the end of the war.⁶

The charge Sherman invoked to justify the mass arrests and trials was “treason.” The justification for this removal was “military necessity”—a blanket term employed by Francis Lieber to allow the nation state virtually any leeway it required to preserve its integrity. Military necessity, in other words, superceded all other rules of engagement, just as the state superceded all competing claims. For the sake of his army, the “traitors” were to be deported from their homes and country for the “crime” of laboring in factories left vacant by their soldier husbands and fathers. It was an evolving logic that would grow ever darker through his southern campaigns and into the campaigns of Indian extermination in the 1870s and 80s. In Sherman’s view, his coercive actions were not

⁶ By war’s end, many of the women had become sufficiently habituated to their new home that they remained rather than return to their devastated home sites.

“punitive” or brutally intimidating, but strategic and merciful—a favor to the stranded women and an act that helped to end the war sooner.

Northern moralists learned of the imprisonment through outraged southern newspapers, but said nothing. A correspondent for the New York *Tribune* observed simply:

The refugees from the Sweetwater Factory and from Roswell are going North by train as fast as transportation can be afforded. Meanwhile, Major Tompkins, of General Sherman’s staff, who is charged with the care of these multitudes of homeless people, is looking after their comfort.⁷

When it became clear that the “refugees” or “prisoners” were not being moved to Indiana after all, but to prison in Louisville, the *Tribune* cited military necessity, but then went on to concede the brutality of it all: “Only think of it! Four hundred weeping and terrified Ellens, Susans, and Maggies transported, in the springless and seatless Army wagons, away from their lovers and brothers of the sunny south, and all for the offense of weaving tent-cloth and spinning stocking yarn! However, I leave the whole business to be adjudged according to its merits by your readers.”⁸ All understood the severity of the measure, but none wanted to make “judgments.”

For Sherman, God had long ceased to be the governor of this war. The cause was just and indeed holy, but the conduct profane and disconnected to God and the Suffering Savior. Sherman’s religion was America, and America’s God was a jealous God of law and order, such that all those who resisted were reprobates who deserved death. To make this war work, Sherman argued in a follow-up letter to Charles Dana, “we must and will harden our hearts. Therefore when preachers clamor, and sanitaries wail don’t join in, but

⁷ Quoted in Mills, 70

⁸ New York *Tribune*, July 21, 1864.

know that war, like the thunderbolt, follows its laws, and turns not aside even if the beautiful, the virtuous and charitable stand in its path.”⁹ Thus absolved of all responsibilities or accountability, Sherman could blame the enemy for anything and everything that happened to them. They deserved it.

Meanwhile Republican Christians continued to clamor for a constitutional amendment invoking God that would do the Confederacy one better by adding Jesus Christ, and the scriptures as “supreme authority.” Although unwilling to proclaim America a Christian nation on the grounds of the separation of church and state, and aware of the Confederacy’s boasted Christianity, Lincoln agreed to a compromise that would strengthen the links between Christianity and America’s civil religion, while keeping each distinct. Without seeking to amend the Constitution to create a Christian republic, he would create a national motto invoking trust in God and have it struck on the nation’s coinage. On April 22, 1864 the first coins were struck with the new Federal motto, “In God we Trust,” a calculated response to clerical and evangelical demands for a Christian Constitution. Given the materialism condemned in northern pulpits, Lincoln could not possibly have picked a more ironic symbol to represent Christianity than the nation’s cash.

Where Lincoln thought he was Christianizing the republic, one fast day preacher argued the reverse. Though he lacked the contemporary terminology of “civil religion,” Worcester’s James Cruickshanks did perceive that the war was elevating America as its own religion. In words that captured the transformations wrought by the war, he asked: “If indeed God be a God of peace, and he is Almighty, we ask, why is war, with its untold evils, permitted to brood over this fair land?” The answer: “Instead of trusting in

⁹ Quoted in Stephen E. Bower, “The Theology of the Battlefield,” 1024.

God, the people placed their faith in armies, scanning newspapers daily, looking at little else but the movement of armies: “In a word, the army is the people’s God. They idolize it—they worship it.” Faced with such powerful nation-worship, Cruickshanks could draw only one conclusion: “We are then as a people a nation of idolaters. We are at once, the most religious, and the most idolatrous people on the globe.”¹⁰ Significantly, Cruickshanks did not move from condemnations of nation-worship to moral questions about the war itself.

By 1864, wars deliberately waged on innocent civilians cut both ways. On May 15, 1864, at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania’s, English Lutheran Church, the Reverend F. W. Conrad delivered a fast sermon blasting the Confederate army for unjust conduct: “They have shot down our pickets, fired into our hospitals, bayoneted our wounded, and dispatched our soldiers without quarter...They have seized non-combatants and imprisoned them.” The conclusion was obvious: “The pages of history are examined in vain, to find examples of meanness and infamy, of cruelty and barbarity, comparable with those inflicted by the rebels...”¹¹ Little could Conrad have realized how prescient he was. Even as he preached, Confederate general Jubal Early contemplated a direct retaliatory attack on innocent civilians—Chambersburg’s civilians.

On July 30, as the Sweetwater women and children were being sent to prison in Louisville, Early dispensed Confederate forces under General John McCausland to the defenseless town of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. In 1863, Robert E. Lee had protected Chambersburg’s citizens on his march to Gettysburg. But by 1864 the rules had changed. Military necessity dictated raids of revenge on civilians. In retaliation for Union general

¹⁰ James Cruickshanks, A Sermon Preached (Worcester, 1864), 11-13.

¹¹ F. W. Conrad, Thanksgiving Discourse (Chambersburg, Pa., 1864), 14.

David Hunter's tactics in the Shenandoah Valley, McCasuland imposed an impossible demand on the citizens of Chambersburg: come up with a cash payout of \$500,000 specie in compensation for Hunter's destruction of V.M.I. and the governor's mansion, or see their town burned to the ground. Unable to raise the money, and disbelieving the threat as too callous even for men at war, the citizens waited. A reluctant McCausland, on orders from Early, then put the inner city to the torch, leaving only the home of a respected veteran and the Masonic Temple standing. Before the fires subsided, 278 houses, factories, and businesses lay in rubble.

Though later uneasy with his actions, McCausland claimed the work as "fair retaliation" for Hunter's destruction of V. M. I. (his alma mater). An outraged President Lincoln—who had no qualms about destroying Confederate property—ordered Grant to move on Early, which he did by sending his most trusted General Philip Sheridan into the Valley with orders to "follow Early to the death."

As the generals held sway in their relentless grip, the conflict rapidly degenerated into a war of raids on civilian properties, North and South. Years later, Early remained unrepentant. The act was "just" because "retaliation" was part of the "laws of war." Writing in 1887, Early recalled that it "afforded me no pleasure to subject non-combatants to the rigors of war, but I felt that I had a duty to perform to the people for whose homes I was fighting and I endeavored to perform it, however disagreeable it might be."¹²

Based on this form of just war theory, fully articulated as well in the North, the way was clear for southern citizens to celebrate the destruction as just and estimable. In an editorial from the *Charleston Courier*, the writer asserted: "If our Government is

¹² Frank E. Vandiver, ed., Jubal Early War Memoirs (Bloomington, 1960), 478.

unable to protect their property and the persons of those most dear to them, it should permit them and their comrades to strike avengeful blows, to burn, devastate and destroy.”¹³ President Davis also approved of the raid and endorsed subsequent assaults on civilian property, even as this citizens’ war careened increasingly out of control.

Predictably, northern generals responded to Early in kind, continuing the spiral of attacks on civilian property. On August 1, 1864, Grant commanded Sheridan to take all able-bodied men under 50 as “prisoners of war” and to “take all provisions, forages and stock wanted for the use of your command. Such as cannot be consumed, destroy.” Grant’s orders specifically exempted buildings from the swath of destruction, but with no food, the buildings meant little. Still, in Sheridan’s view, this was a sound strategy, both in retaliation for Chambersburg and for civilian demoralization. “Reduction to poverty,” he later claimed “brings prayers for peace more surely and more quickly than does the destruction of human life.”¹⁴ Here, in a nutshell, was the essence of the new northern strategy of hard war—a strategy that encompassed soldier and civilian alike and that treated all as the “enemy.”

Besides endorsing all of Lincoln’s policies, the Republicans had no comment on the conduct of the war or the ways in which Sherman and Sheridan were treating non-combatants. The streams of homeless refugees multiplied and historian James McPherson estimates that as many as 50,000 Confederate civilians probably perished.¹⁵ Still, no one asked hard questions.

¹³ New York Times, August 8, 1864.

¹⁴ Philip Sheridan, Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan, 2 vols., (New York, 1888), I, 462, 488

¹⁵ James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 619.

When, on October 3, Sheridan's engineer officer, Lieutenant John R. Meigs, was reportedly murdered by three men dressed in Union uniforms, Sheridan's response was swift and harsh. The people must suffer:

The fact that the murder had been committed inside our lines was evidence that the perpetrators of the crime, having their homes in the vicinity, had been clandestinely visiting them, and had been secretly harbored by some of the neighboring residents. Determining to teach a lesson to these abettors of the foul deed—a lesson they would never forget—I ordered all the houses within an area of five miles to be burned. General Custer...was charged with this duty, and the next morning proceeded to put the order into execution.¹⁶

Left unsaid by Sheridan was the obvious fact that many innocents suffered alongside those guilty of harboring saboteurs. Even more disturbing is the fact that he wrote this account years later, by which time it was well known that Lieutenant Meigs had not, in fact, been murdered by local guerrillas. He died while attempting to flee his Confederate captors.¹⁷ The whole rationale had been a ruse to pummel innocent civilians.

Thus began "Red October" in the Valley, when the "the work of destruction" began and civilians howled. In all, Sheridan calculated that in a matter of weeks, "I have destroyed over 2,000 barns filled with wheat, hay and farming implements; over 70 mills, filled with flour and wheat; have driven in front of the army over 4,000 head of stock, and have killed and issued to the troops not less than 3,000 sheep." He then added ominously, "The people here are getting sick of the war."

While right about the destruction he wrought in the Valley, Sheridan was wrong to assume that "the people" were broken. The people were tired of war but their will had not been broken—especially not those of the women left to view the devastation. The refrain, "we are all loyal," rang throughout the zones of desolation. In Harrisonburg, 28

¹⁶ P. H. Sheridan, *Memoirs*, 52.

¹⁷ James M. Greiner, et. al., *A Surgeon's Civil War*, 261.

women petitioned Secretary of War James A. Seddon to raise and arm a regiment of ladies "to leave our hearthstones—to endure any sacrifice—any privation for the ultimate success of our Holy Cause."¹⁸

As the 1864 national election loomed, northern clergymen employed the pulpit to promote a vote for the Republican party as a sacred duty. A handful demurred. For New York's Democratic Presbyterian minister, Henry J. Van Dyke, it was an open question of whether the church could ever recover a prophetic, spiritual voice. Asking whether the apostles "entered into the political and military contests of the countries through which the saints were scattered abroad," he vented his spleen. Emancipation became the badge of lost innocence, a tool that was shamelessly employed to gain political advantage under the cloak of righteousness: "What I assert and propose to prove, is, that in connection with this subject of slavery, and under the cover of it, the Assembly has handled and determined a question which is purely political, and entirely beyond its appropriate province...and invaded the liberty wherewith, according to our standards, Christ has made his people free." The General Assembly, he continued:

had no [ecclesial] constitutional right to step in between these two political parties and take sides with the Republicans in regard to the great question by which they are divided...it throws the whole moral influence of the Assembly in favor of one political party and...if its recommendations were faithfully carried out in the true spirit and intent, every minister and every member of the Presbyterian Church would be an adherent of that [Republican] party."¹⁹

Van Dyke was probably right. Rarely, if ever, has a major denomination officially endorsed one party over another since the Civil War. But in 1864, when passions ran high, "the whole moral influence" of the church had become captive of the state and its

¹⁸ Quoted in Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War*, 77.

¹⁹ Henry J. Van Dyke, *The Spirituality and Independence of the Church* (New York, 1864), 13, 15, 18.

Republican orthodoxy. Lincoln's wager paid handsome dividends as participants redefined the "cause" of the war to mean emancipation, thereby justifying not only total war for unconditional surrender, but also Republican campaigning in the pulpit.

As Sheridan and Early roamed the Valley, Sherman embarked on an unprecedented journey into his own heart of darkness. Instead of chasing after General Joseph Johnston's army in Tennessee, he had Union General Thomas, the "Rock of Chickamauga," pin Johnston down, and proceeded to march his army in the opposite direction, where the only human beings in his path were civilians. By brutalizing the civilians Sherman, like Sheridan, was sure he could break the "will" of the south and achieve unconditional surrender.

His army was a marvel. Hardened veterans all, with sick and wounded sent back, it was arguably the most powerful human machine ever assembled. Grant recognized rightly that Sherman's forces were "as good soldiers as ever trod the earth; better than any European soldiers, because they not only worked like a machine but the machine thought. European armies know very little what they are fighting for, and care less."²⁰

Among the enlisted men, John Emerson Anderson of Worcester, Massachusetts, shared Grant's sense of Sherman's awesome martial machine: "I will not attempt to describe our feelings of astonishment when it was rumored, or announced, that we were going to sever our communications with the north and march right out into the enemies country."²¹

In a general order issued on November 9, Sherman had addressed the coming campaign and the subject of just conduct. Foraging would be necessary, but "soldiers

²⁰ Grant, *Memoirs*, 638.

²¹ John Emerson Anderson, "Letters," in "Civil War Papers, Box 1 Folder 2," AAS

must not enter the dwellings of the inhabitants, or commit any trespass.” In areas where the army was left unmolested, the army was to show restraint. But in areas of guerrilla activity or burned bridges, the army should respond in kind, including the destruction of homes: “Army commanders should order and enforce a devastation more or less relentless, according to the measure of such hostility.” As for “horses, mules wagons, etc., belonging to the inhabitants, the cavalry and artillery may appropriate freely and without limit...”²² How these limitations were to be enforced with 60,000 vengeful soldiers in residential streets and neighborhoods Sherman never addressed.

Sherman embarked from Atlanta in February after burning most of the remaining buildings in the city down to the ground. Wherever they roamed they consumed or destroyed everything along a 60-mile wide swath of devastation. Columbia, South Carolina, the “seedbed of secession” offered an especially attractive target. By Monday, Sherman’s forces could see the city and could not resist firing batteries inside the city’s habitations. Though not massive, the bombardment succeeded in terrorizing the population. All day Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, those who could flocked to the trains in a “contagious panic” to flee Sherman’s uncontested rumbling legions. Among the fleeing was the New Orleans firebrand Benjamin M. Palmer, whose sermons had done so much to promote Confederate independence.²³ The poor and feeble remained left behind. On February 17, the scanty Confederate forces ran as well, leaving Sherman to accept the mayor’s surrender and enter the city.

During the afternoon soldiers did their best to loot and terrorize citizens, but few reports of physical assaults on white civilians exist. As the wind continued, fires spread

²² Sherman, Memoirs, 652.

²³ Royster, The Destructive War 9-10.

throughout the city, especially in the northern section, where the wind blew most directly. Some of the fires occurred accidentally, but others were set deliberately by soldiers moving from house to house, tossing turpentine pots or burning balls of cotton. Freed Union officers from the prisoner of war camp at Columbia were especially bent on revenge. Slaves also joined in the rampage, a relatively small measure of retribution for centuries of violent abuse.

When one woman pled with provost marshal Jeremiah Jenkins to protect her house, Jenkins replied coldly: “The women of the South kept the war alive—and it is only by making them suffer that we can subdue the men.” Another woman got more of the same for saying she would willingly send all of her sons to die (in fact two already had) if it meant defeat for the enemy. The unsurprised Yankee soldier replied harshly: “Yes, damn you women, you are the ones keeping up the war.”²⁴

Suffer the women did, and the elderly, and the children, as they fled their burning houses all along Main Street to the unfinished capital building. As the white citizens panicked and the former slaves plundered, the soldiers continued to drink and cheer the destruction of Columbia. Predictably, the scene descended into bedlam. In historian Charles Royster’s account:

Some men grew more and more frenzied with the destruction; it became their sole purpose. They seized possessions only to throw them into the flames. While one group gave finery and valuables to passing black people, another pillaged slave quarters and destroyed blacks’ belongings. While one set of men looted banks systematically and extracted buried silver with an experienced touch, others smashed mirrors, slashed paintings, and broke furniture that women had hauled into the streets...Men who were too drunk and too intent on spreading the fire passed out in burning buildings, and the flames closed over them. A few men murdered.²⁵

²⁴ Quoted in Royster, The Destructive War, 20, 22.

²⁵ Royster, The Destructive War, 23.

The violence grew so extreme that Sherman was forced to order a roundup of drunken soldiers. In all, three hundred and seven were arrested, and in the process, two were killed and 30 more wounded.²⁶

When faced with the ravages of Sherman's army, Confederate women did not evidence the demoralization that Sherman assumed would ensue. Instead, as with soldiers in the field, after the initial shock their hatreds and determination to fight on were renewed by the violence. Women on farms and refugees in cities may have urged their husbands to desert the war and come home. But women experiencing violence directly urged their soldier husbands to remain in the army and repay the Yankees for their outrages, eye for eye.²⁷

Remarkably, neither Grant nor Sherman made any moral commentary except to say, in effect, "You deserved it." No matter what the level of destruction, "You deserved it." In a telling concession, Grant argued that even if Sherman's troops had started the fires, or been deliberately delinquent in failing to put them out, they were justified in so doing. In other words, their actions would require no moral defense: "The example set by the Confederates in burning the village of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, a town which was not garrisoned, would seem to make a defence [sic] of the act of firing the seat of government of the State most responsible for the conflict then raging, not imperative."²⁸

In this war, two moral wrongs apparently made one moral right. Sherman agreed:

"Though I never ordered [the destruction] and never wished it, I have never shed any

²⁶ OR, XLVII, Pt. I, Ser. I, 309.

²⁷ In Mothers of Invention, 238-44 Drew Faust describes demoralization among elite Confederate women that set in during the war's final year. See also Laura F. Edwards, Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era (Urbana, 2000), 83-85. But Jacqueline Glass Campbell discovers a different pattern among South Carolina women, especially the women of Columbia. See Jacqueline Glass Campbell, When Sherman Marched North from the Sea, 69.

²⁸ Grant, Memoirs, 681.

tears over the event, because I believe that it hastened what we all fought for, the end of the war.”

As with Atlanta, Columbia was effectively “not garrisoned,” but the people got what they deserved anyway. It was guilty by geographical association with South Carolina, the state that started the rolling secession of the South in the first place. The moral guilt lay not with the soldiers, no matter what they did, but with the people of the South—in particular South Carolina. For Sherman, the Confederacy’s Original Sin of secession meant that the entire population deserved wrath and damnation:

I know that in the beginning, I too, had the old West Point notion that pillage was a capital crime, and punished it by shooting... This was a one sided game of war, and many of us... ceased to quarrel with our men about such minor things, and went in to subdue the enemy, leaving minor depredations to be charged up to the account of the rebels who had forced us into the war, and who deserved all they got and more.²⁹

Few Republicans or soldiers objected to the new rules of war. But some voices were heard. C. C. Coffin, correspondent for the *Boston Journal*, wrote a letter to Governor John A. Andrew of Massachusetts from Hilton Head, South Carolina, marked “private and confidential.” In it he wrote: “I am sorry to say that the Mass. 24th has been acting outrageously here, robbing, burning houses, killing cattle, etc.—ravishing negro women—beating their husbands who attempted protection.”³⁰

Union chaplain, William Scandlin, made known his objections to the new war. In an unpublished sermon delivered in the field at Camp Charlestown, Virginia, Scandlin used John 21:22 (“What is that to thee? Follow then me.”) to confirm the moral call of a higher law than military orders and condemn what he termed the “apparent sanction” of

²⁹ Quoted in Lance Janda, “Shutting the Gates of Mercy,” 15.

³⁰ Quoted in James D. Richardson, ed., *The Messages and Papers of Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy*, 2 vols. (New York, 1966), introduction by Allan Nevins, I, 29.

orders to plunder and destroy civilian property. Even if other soldiers “trample upon human rights and...the sacred sanctity of other homes, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.” The present behavior of Union troops was unjust:

Glance with me over the history of our forces in this vicinity for the past week. 1 the shelter of home no protection 2 private property ruthlessly plundered 3 churches used for stables and dwellings. And some of you had a part in our portion of this evil guilty of what I blush to think of. Think of our feelings when we read the history of the British action in Boston. We are doing the same for others to read...Men of New England as you respect yourselves and have the culture and affection of our dear old Commonwealth discountenance and condemn all such action. Remember that the evil course of this is nothing to them and that trampling upon the laws of honesty and right to uphold the authority of the nation is a complete burlesque. Leave all who have rebelled to the laws they have violated and follow thou Christ.³¹

Such words undoubtedly did not endear Scandlin to officers and soldiers bent on destruction, but they do confirm that moral conscience was not wholly absent. That confirmation condemns the conduct of the majority who celebrated the new policy.

Conclusion

Three lectures can barely dent the moral issues surrounding the Civil War, but, like Mathew Brady’s photographs, they can approximate a sense of the larger whole. We have seen issues of proportionality on the battlefields and discrimination in the treatment of civilian populations. We have seen clergy shamelessly abandon all prophetic distance from their society, and preach politics and the hatreds of war. We have seen the outrages on both sides of the conflict enough to know that, far from romantic stereotypes, this war that stands as the axis of American history was a very dirty war. But was it just? To paraphrase Lincoln at Gettysburg: Did 620,000 men, and thousands more Confederate women, die in vain?

³¹ William Scandlin, “Diaries, 1849-64,” 2 octavo vols., AAS.

I have deliberately saved this question for last because I don't believe any single answer is possible. At the outset, I found it more compelling to lay out the evidence. But truth in lending perhaps requires one personal response. Despite many immoralities that went largely unchecked and were even applauded by both sides at the lowest and highest levels, I cannot bring myself to say that 620,000 men died in vain. Why? In part, because, for the most part, *they* did not say it. By the close of the Vietnam war, soldiers aplenty condemned the war as unjust. But this did not happen after the Civil War. Winners and losers alike would concede almost anything, it seemed, except the idea that their internecine war was ultimately meaningless or unjust.

Why did they hold on to its justness? I can only conclude that they supported the rightness of the war because at some profound level they believed in Lincoln's characterization of America as the world's "last best hope," and further, that for reasons Americans don't deserve or understand, we are.

The greatest guarantor of America's claim to global hope as it emerged in the Civil War was surely abolition. In my book, I have counter-weighted abolition with the tragic perpetuation of racism in American society down to our present. But that in no measure diminishes the enormity of the achievement. Indeed abolition represented the indispensable prelude to equal civil rights, however long that might take to achieve.

In claiming America as the world's last best hope, I certainly do not have in mind particular battles or wars fought in the name of patriotism. There is no lack of such conflicts that were (and are) demonstrably unjust and immoral. Many American wars of

conquest and imperialism merely confirm the impalpable truth that because we are the world's last best hope, we are for the same reason, the world's greatest threat.³²

From the start, the meaning of “we the people” was contested. The Constitution itself was a compromise reflecting that contest, and slavery public exhibit number one. In the Civil War, soldiers on both sides self-consciously fought for freedom, even as they differed mortally on the definitions and applications of that “freedom.” Ideas. Ideas to die for. Ideas to kill for. This was the innermost meaning of the Civil War, no less than of the American Revolution.

As an idea, America was uniquely situated to assume a sacred identity as a chosen nation. An American civil religion of patriotism incarnated in the war has continued to sacralize for many Americans the idea of American freedom. In fact, for many it enjoys more powerful sway over their lives than the sometimes competing, sometimes conflicting ideas of supernatural religion contained in America's many denominations.

For the Civil War to achieve its messianic destiny and inculcate an ongoing civil religion, it required a blood sacrifice that appeared total. While the term “baptism in blood” did not originate in the Civil War, it enjoyed a prominence in the war rhetoric of both nations that had no precedent. Speakers and readers came to accept the term literally as the lists of war dead continued to lengthen and civilians watched lives and properties destroyed by invading armies. The Civil War was indeed the crimson baptism of our nationalism, and so it continues to enjoy a mythic transcendence not unlike the significance of Eucharist for Christian believers. For the unbeliever, both blood sacrifices seem irrational. But for the true believer, blood saved. Just as Christians believe that

³² See Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America 1500-2000 (New York, 2005).

“without the shedding of blood there can be no remission for sins,” so Americans in the North and South came to believe that their bloodletting contained a profound religious meaning for their collective life as nations.

The incarnation of a national American civil religion may finally have been the great legacy of the Civil War. How could a people of such diversity, who had more than adequately demonstrated their capacity to live at war, possibly come together in peace without some functioning civil religion? And how does any real religion come into being without the shedding of blood?

Having said all this, I have to add that in the process of exploring the morality of America’s Civil War for clues to our identity today, it has become irrefutably clear to me that some moral judgments need to be made, judgments that most Americans have been reluctant to make. We have preferred a violent, but glamorized and romantic Civil War.³³ Military histories have focused on strategies and tactics and the sheer drama of battles in action. Political histories have focused—especially in the present—on slavery and emancipation, accounting the evil so complete and pervasive as to justify even murder. In this sense, Lincoln’s war strategy was and remains genius. That does not make it right.

All too often the moral calculus perfected in the Civil War has been applied to other wars, often in cases involving nothing as noble as abolition. By condoning the logic of total war in the name of abolition—and victory—Americans effectively guaranteed that other atrocities in other wars could likewise be excused in the name of “military necessity.” While Lincoln passed tragically from the American scene, Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan remained to carry moral logic forward. When Grant became president and

³³ See Edward L. Ayers, “Worrying about the Civil War,” in Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, eds., Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History (New York, 1999), 144-65.

commander in chief, his new General of the Army was General Sherman, and the commander of the Department of the Missouri was Philip Sheridan, supported by George Custer. Together they would pursue wars of extermination in the Indian campaigns of 1868 to 1883, employing the same calculus their commander in chief, Lincoln, had approved in the Civil War.³⁴ Just as Sheridan wreaked vengeance in the Shenandoah Valley, so he would wreak vengeance on the Native Americans—and with the same moral justification.

Knowing that the western Indians could roam and attack freely over the warm weather months, separated from their wives and children, Sheridan began attacking the Indians in their winter camps. The braves would have to remain to protect the women and children or see them killed before their eyes. Sheridan also used starvation as a tactic already tried and proved in the Valley campaign of the Civil War. By destroying winter foodstuffs (and later exterminating buffalo), Sheridan forced the Indians to flee through the brutal winter cold and snow, where most died of starvation or froze to death.

The system of total war employed in the West aimed at subjugating entire races of people. Incredibly, as in the Civil War, Sheridan defined the Indians as the “aggressors” deserving destruction. In a letter to Sherman in 1873, Sheridan drew on their Civil War experiences as justification for the Indian wars:

In taking the offensive, I have to select that season when I can catch the fiends; and, if a village is attacked and women and children killed, the responsibility is not with the soldiers but with the people whose crimes necessitated the attack. During the [Civil] war did any one hesitate to attack a village or town occupied by the enemy because women or children were within its limits? Did we cease to throw shells into Vicksburg or Atlanta because women and children were there?”

³⁴ See Lance Janda’s “Shutting the Gates of Mercy: The American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880,” 7-26; and Philip Weeks, Farewell, My Nation: The American Indian and the United States, 1820-1890 (Arlington Heights, IL, 1990).

General Sherman agreed. In response to the Fetterman massacre of December 21, 1866, Sherman had dictated: “We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, and children.”³⁵ If Sherman did not literally intend extermination, the rhetoric certainly succeeded in bringing terror to the life of every Indian—man, woman, and child.

Americans don’t want to concede the wartime wrongs committed by the likes of Lincoln, Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Lee, Forrest, Early, and Davis. Individual acts of immorality occur in all wars. But armies are hierarchies, and responsibility ultimately resides at the top. The web of lies, suppression, and evasion that developed in the Civil War not only shock, but also bear witness to the power of war to corrupt—especially at the top. Predictably, as the war continued, the abuses grew ever greater. These were not a rational “measured response” to essentially political challenges, as justifiers of the carnage would like to believe. Rather the abuses reflected a feeding frenzy of blood for blood’s sake. Nobody significant on either side was ever held to account. Privates may have been executed for rape, but no commanding officer was ever executed for creating the orders and culture in which rape could easily take place. No commanding officer that we know of ordered the death of prisoners of war. But by creating a war with no thought for prisons and prisoners and by refusing all attempts at exchange and amelioration, they again created the environment in which unimaginable suffering and death took place.

Why is it important to finally write the moral history of the Civil War? It’s important because we are its legates, and if we question nothing from that costly conflict, then we need question nothing in conflicts of the present and future. Issues of discrimination and proportionality recur in every war. The Civil War does not provide an

³⁵ Quoted in Philip Weeks, Farewell, My Nation, 144-45.

especially encouraging model in this regard, especially if the crimes go largely unnoticed beneath the natural urge to forget and move on. But as with the holocaust, if we forget, we do so at great peril to our own humanity.

In locating the American people at their defining moment Lincoln powerfully pointed out that “we cannot escape history.” While Lincoln’s words are inspiring, the fact is that if participants in American wars cannot escape history, they most certainly can forget it. And this lays the basis for ongoing adventures leading to ongoing tragedies. A recent story in the New Yorker told of a father’s response to the death of his soldier son, Private Kurt Frosheiser, in Iraq. After ruminating for a while he settled back and pronounced his moral verdict:

I was thinking of that song the other day, ‘Ain’t Gonna Study War No More.’ [by Willie Dixon]. Maybe we should study it. Otherwise, we’re going to screw it up. Because it’s going to be our kids and grandkids doing it.” He had heard the new Bush foreign policy described as Wilsonian, an inspiring term. “There’s this phrase, ‘america the great and the just.’ Reagan used to talk about ‘the city on the hill.’ The first time I heard Condi Rice talking about democracy in Iraq, I got chills up my back. But then you ask, ‘How do you do it? Is it necessary?’” Frosheiser drove in silence for a while, and when he spoke again his voice was quieter. “That’s where I kind of run up against a wall with regard to Kurt.” I asked him what he meant. “Kurt’s life—was it worth that? I’d say no. He was more important than that. So I pull back.”

Judging the Civil War is not a brief for pacifism. Rather, it is an endorsement of the idea of a just war. There are no ideal wars. Peace is the only ideal, and every war at some level a perversion of it. In a less than ideal world, however, in which we sometimes labor under a moral imperative to war, we cannot afford to do less than demand a just war and a merciful outcome.

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