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Remembering the Civil War

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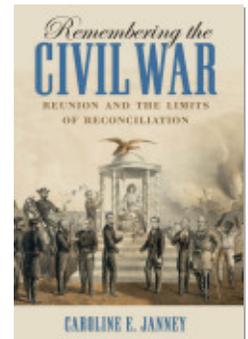
Published by The University of North Carolina Press

Janney, Caroline E.

Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation.

The University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

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PROLOGUE

In September 1990, Ken Burns's PBS documentary *The Civil War* captured the nation's attention, dramatically influencing American perceptions of the grueling war. For a week, millions watched as the eleven-hour series recounted the conflict from the first calls for secession to the final surrenders at Appomattox and Durham Station. Rejecting reenactors and other recreations of battles, Burns relied upon wartime photographs, newspaper accounts, paintings, lithographs, and quiet scenes at battlefield parks to tell the story of a nation divided against itself, brother against brother, countryman against countryman. But scattered throughout was footage from the early twentieth century showing the white-bearded veterans of both sides happily shaking hands, marching alongside each other, and posing for photographs.¹ No one could watch without being left with the strong impression that although the nation had erupted in civil war, its soldiers—its people—had managed to peacefully reconcile. Forgetting their past differences, they agreed that there was no North, no South, only a United States of America.

This fraternal camaraderie was never as thorough or as complete as the clips of hand-clasping former foes would have us imagine. Countless veterans did occasionally come together for Blue-Gray reunions at battlefields and in cities across the nation. But this was the exception, not the rule. "Every now and then there are reunions of Federal Blue and Confederate Gray on this or that battlefield, when the veterans of either side shake hands across the bloody chasm and conduct themselves as brethren once at variance but now happily reunited," observed a Confederate-sympathizing editorial in 1889. "But," it continued, "oftener than these

occasions, may be noticed exhibitions of bitter hatred manifested by northern soldiers against those of the South.” Union veterans were no less wary of the genuine sentiments expressed by former Confederates. Renewed calls for a joint reunion between the major veterans’ organization of each side, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), aroused heated consternation in 1929. “They were wrong in 1861,” declared GAR member Frank O. Cole, “and until they admit they were wrong, and not until then, will we join them.” Only when they had folded up their battle flags, “the flag we fought against and carried Old Glory against to victory,” and placed them in museums would the GAR truly believe that “they want reunion.” Well into the twentieth century, neither side was willing to forget what it had fought to preserve, even in the name of sectional reconciliation.²

As early as 1865, the veterans and civilians who survived the four bloody years of war were acutely aware that people were actively shaping what should be remembered—and omitted—from the historical record. The war generation understood what historians have come to grasp only in the past few decades: that memory is not a passive act.³ They recognized that the memorials people built, the ceremonies they made sacred, and the stories they told had immense power. They knew that shared memories held the power to unite communities over space and time, to bind people together as “Americans,” “southerners,” or even “veterans.”⁴ What individuals and communities elected to tell of the war held enormous potential for staking claims of authority and power.⁵

If most Americans agreed that they would not forget the war, the conflicts over what—and how—to remember were only beginning in 1865. Addressing a crowd at the Memorial Day services in Arlington National Cemetery in 1871, Frederick Douglass—former slave, ardent abolitionist, and the father of two U.S. veterans—identified the quandary of how a reunited nation might remember the American Civil War. “We are sometimes asked in the name of patriotism to forget the merits of this fearful struggle, and to remember with equal admiration those who struck at the nation’s life, and those who struck to save it; those who fought for slavery and those who fought for liberty and justice. I am no minister of malice, I would not repel the repentant, but may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I forget the difference between the parties to that bloody conflict. I may say if this war is to be forgotten, I ask in the name of all things sacred what shall men remember?”⁶ Two years later, former Confederate general Jubal A. Early offered a similar message at a meeting of his fellow officers. “If we were to attempt to erase all traces of the contest through which we

have gone,” he observed, “it would be a vain task.” “We could not forget if we would, and I trust that there are many of us who would not forget if we could,” he argued.⁷ Douglass and Early understood that the postwar battles over the causes and consequences of the war carried tremendous weight. Too much was a stake for it to be otherwise.

Spanning more than seventy-five years, this book examines the deliberate efforts of the war generation, and to some extent their children, to craft and protect memories of the nation’s greatest conflict and the central event in their lives. Various individuals and groups would consciously and unconsciously highlight certain aspects of the war while reshaping and neglecting others, but forgetting was what they all feared most. Despite pronouncements by some that the past needed to be forgotten in the interest of national healing, every monument, Memorial Day, Emancipation Day, soldiers’ reunion, or textbook campaign was about remembering. It was the reason national cemeteries were established, the reason “Lest We Forget” adorned marble statues throughout the nation. And it is the reason bumper stickers stating “Hell no, I’m not forgettin!” can still be found in the South. It is why the Civil War still resonates and still incites heated debate today. Remembering was—in many cases still is—paramount.⁸

Remembering was not merely a sentimental act. Indeed, it had powerful social and political connotations, not the least of which was at the very heart of the conflict: how would a nation that had been so divided that it went to war move forward as a truly *United States of America*? After Confederates laid down their guns in the spring of 1865, Unionists understood that they could not carry retribution too far if they were to truly fulfill their war goal of reuniting the nation. This is what led President Abraham Lincoln and his most important general, Ulysses S. Grant, to offer such magnanimous terms to the defeated rebels. The need to make sure that the union truly was secured tempered treatment of leading Confederates such as Gen. Robert E. Lee and even President Jefferson Davis. A lenient peace was necessary in large part because reunion *was* the Union cause. But the victorious North had vastly underestimated the tenacity of Confederate bitterness and insolence.

Even as Unionists promoted reunion, they were not necessarily calling for reconciliation. Although the words were (and are still) sometimes deployed as synonyms, subtle yet important differences existed between the two.⁹ Reunion, or the political reunification of the nation, had been the chief goal of the overwhelming mass of loyal white citizens. With the rebellion suppressed, the Confederacy destroyed, the work of the founding generation preserved and made safer by the destruction of slavery, reunion

was achieved in the spring of 1865 and refined during Reconstruction. Reunion occurred immediately and unequivocally after the Civil War. It was the legal reality for which Unionists had fought and died, and which former Confederates accepted—even if grudgingly.

Reconciliation was harder to define, subject to both multiple and changing interpretations. “Reconciliation,” observed a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1872, “is more largely an affair of the emotions and impulses than of reason, and hence it defies calculation.”¹⁰ Even those experiencing or pushing for it often did not know precisely what it meant. It could be a sentiment, an expression of amicable harmony between Union and Confederate sympathizers.¹¹ For some, reconciliation implied forgiving one’s enemies for their transgressions. For others, it suggested a mere silence on the issues.¹² It could serve as a mutual determination by veterans, politicians, and northern and southern boosters to gloss over past differences in order to build a prosperous political and economic future. It could be a performance, a gesture, or a ritual. Reconciliation was not necessary for reunion. But many Americans believed that only when the wounds of war had been left to the past would the United States be free to achieve its true potential greatness.

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, reconciliation had also evolved into a memory of the war that emphasized the shared American values of valor and devotion to one’s cause. Lauding the courage and sacrifice of white soldiers from both sides, a reconciliationist memory helped sell popular magazines like *The Century*; was evoked at Blue-Gray reunions; and was used to sanctify the dedications of the first national military parks. But contrary to popular notions portrayed by Burns’s documentary and reinforced by much of the scholarly literature on Civil War memory, reconciliation was never the predominant memory of the war among its participants.¹³ Though hand-clasping veterans served as the chief symbol of a reunited and reconciled nation, deep bitterness and a refusal to cast aside judgments about the worthiness of the two causes remained throughout the lives of the generation that had survived the war. This lingering acrimony, however, did not preclude either Unionists or former Confederates from espousing reconciliation. Indeed, both Union and Confederate veterans favored national unity—if on their own terms. Loyal citizens, including the majority of Union veterans, embraced reconciliation of a sort that left no doubt about who had been right (and by extension who had been wrong). For their part, ex-Confederates refused to concede that their cause had been unworthy. In fact, gestures of reconciliation, be they calls to return captured battle flags or appeals for a

joint encampment of the GAR and UCV, often tended to reinforce sectional loyalties more than diminish them.

More resistant to reconciliation, and in many instances even to gestures toward that end, were women's organizations. Without the fraternal bonds of soldiering or political and financial incentives, members of the Ladies' Memorial Associations (LMA), United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), Woman's Relief Corps, and Ladies of the GAR found little reason to commiserate with their counterparts across the Mason-Dixon Line. In fact, it seemed in many instances that southern white women in particular actively sought to hinder the lovefest promoted by veterans. They could air their true feelings with little fear of the consequences. Praise for such sentiments by their respective veterans suggests that perhaps these were equally the true feelings of many men. While reunion was a legal reality, far less certain was the degree to which former Confederates and advocates of the Union had agreed to forgive and forget—to embrace true, heartfelt reconciliation.

Even when former foes came together in the name of reconciliation, most were not compelled to do so because of shared ideas about white supremacy or a tacit willingness to forget slavery on the part of Union veterans.¹⁴ On the contrary, debates about slavery sometimes proved to be among the most powerful obstacles to reconciliation. In regimental histories, Memorial Day speeches, and even at battlefield dedications, white Union veterans recalled the centrality of the slaveholders' rebellion to the war. While some former abolitionists like Douglass believed that emancipation was being forgotten by the white North, for many white veterans the task of saving the Union could not be separated from slavery. At the eleventh reunion of the Army of the Cumberland in 1879, brevet brigadier general and U.S. congressman from New York Anson George McCook sounded a familiar and convenient moral theme when he declared that "the National authority had been reasserted over every foot of the Nation's soil, and the stain of human slavery had been washed away, and standing under the flag of the Union was a nation of freemen." Slaveholders had undermined the Union, and only slavery's demise could ensure its survival. As the years passed, white U.S. veterans not only refused to forget that slaveholders had precipitated the war, but many also increasingly highlighted their role in emancipation. The Federal armies had saved the Union, helped to abolish slavery, and now one flag would once again wave over the *United States*. Emancipation had been a crucial means and happy result of Union victory.¹⁵

Although race and slavery were intertwined, nineteenth-century

Americans understood that they were not one and the same. As the following chapters will show, the attitudes of white Union veterans toward slavery, African Americans, and race were exceedingly complex and varied. White veterans admitted black veterans into the posts of the GAR; in some cases white women worked alongside the wives, widows, and daughters of United States Colored Troop (USCT) veterans; and Union statues from Boston's Shaw memorial to Indianapolis's grand monument recollected the role of both African American soldiers and slaves in the conflict. White Unionists had not forgotten that African Americans—or slavery—had been part of the war. But this does not mean that most white U.S. veterans or white northerners in general sought civil and political rights for newly freed men and women. Slavery and race were not interchangeable in the minds of white Union veterans and should not be conflated by us today.

This is not to suggest that race did not shape how individuals and groups memorialized the war. For African Americans, race and slavery could not possibly be separated. Black men had fought in the U.S. armies to secure both their own freedom and the rights of citizenship. Union victory had ensured the freedom of, and promised equality for, more than 4 million men, women, and children. How could the war's memory possibly be severed from the hopes of their race and the promise of freedom? After the war, black communities staged Evacuation Day ceremonies, attended Memorial Days, celebrated Emancipation Days, and collected donations for memorials all in the name of being treated as equal citizens. African Americans waged their own battles to control the war's memory when they denounced Confederate memorials, heralded the bravery of USCT soldiers, called for a national Emancipation Day, and debated efforts to enshrine Lincoln as "the great emancipator."¹⁶

Both slavery and race likewise played prominent roles in the Confederate memory of the war, the Lost Cause.¹⁷ Beginning in the war and continuing well into the twentieth century, white southerners grappled with the role of slavery in their cause. Some former Confederates, like Jubal A. Early and John S. Mosby, readily admitted that slavery had been the cornerstone of their short-lived nation. But by the 1880s and 1890s, a growing chorus of white southerners vehemently denied that their quest for independence had been anything other than a constitutional struggle to protect state rights. While Lost Cause proponents increasingly denied slavery as a cause of the war, celebrations of white supremacy escalated. Tributes to so-called faithful slaves and mammies who had "understood" their proper role in the race hierarchy became common at monument dedications and in the pages of the *Confederate Veteran* as state-sanctioned segregation and dis-

enfranchisement became the norm in the last decades of the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, ideas about race had gained a newfound prominence in Confederate memory. When a new generation of white southerners led by the UDC took the reins of the Lost Cause, an emphasis on Reconstruction—or more specifically the white South's triumph over it—brought with it a more emphatically white-supremacist memory of the war.

By arguing that the divisive issues of the war such as slavery and emancipation were forgotten in the name of white supremacy, both popular culture and scholars have suggested that white northerners eventually capitulated to the Confederate memory. The Lost Cause, this line of thinking goes, projected a rhetoric and imagery of battlefield bravery and valor that the North came to embrace.¹⁸ This formulation, however, overlooks two key facts. First, Union veterans could embrace both reconciliation and emancipation. One did not preclude the other. Second, in order for reunion—the Union Cause—to triumph, the victorious North had to welcome white southerners back into the national fold. But Union veterans never forgot that they had fought against treason. Union soldiers did not “sell out” to Confederate memories. Instead, they maintained their own distinctly northern version of the Civil War in which preservation of the Union—and in many cases emancipation—remained integral to northern memories of the war well into the twentieth century.¹⁹ Not only did Unionists fiercely celebrate what they had achieved, but they also continued to condemn the Confederate cause well into the twentieth century (just as Confederates continued to rant about barbaric and heartless Yankees). Former enemies might come together for battlefield dedications where they remained silent on the divisive issues, but beyond these occasions, Union and Confederate veterans tended to maintain that *their* cause was the virtuous one.

Like the veterans, both Union and Confederate women insisted that theirs was the righteous cause. But the women of both sides would come to play decidedly different roles in the war's commemorations. Though numerically more active than Confederate women, Union veterans largely neglected to see their women as essential to either the war or its memory. Alternatively, southern white women proved to be even more recalcitrant than their husbands and fathers in resisting the reconciliationist gush. Having in many ways initiated the Lost Cause in 1865 and 1866 through LMAs, by the turn of the century they appeared to be gaining ever more influence over the war's memory. Praised by their men for their unflinching loyalty to the Lost Cause, they remained intent on vindicating the Confed-

erate cause and keeping its memory alive among future generations. And they succeeded marvelously. In no small part because of these women, Confederate nationalism morphed into a white, southern identity.

Although most northerners did not succumb to the Lost Cause, by the 1920s and 1930s it seemed as if the Confederate memory of the war had eclipsed that of the Union. Not only had groups like the UDC worked vigilantly to keep the Lost Cause alive, but, ironically, the very success of the Union Cause had led to its steady demise in the popular imagination. Having fought to preserve the nation, Unionists had encouraged former rebels to embrace the Stars and Stripes and identify themselves as Americans. The Union had continued to expand both in space and time. It had transformed into an American Cause, especially during the Spanish-American War and the First World War. Loyalty to the Union became enveloped in the national allegiance and patriotism of all Americans, and it was all but impossible to separate the United States of 1861–65 from the United States of the 1880s or 1920s. Even as the Union Cause became more amorphous and obscure, the Confederate Cause remained distinct. Its memory and symbols continued to stand apart, suspended in time and inseparable from the war. Increasingly, it appeared as though the Confederacy *was* the Civil War.

What follows is an examination of how a nation came to understand the Civil War between 1861 and 1939. It is not a general history of Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, or the Progressive Era. Nor is it a chronicle of every memorial organization, battlefield and monument dedication, or veteran reunion. Instead, it is a story about the contentious nature of memory, of the battles fought by men and women, white and black, Confederates and Unionists. Largely focused on the veterans who survived the war and their children, it ends in the late 1930s when most of the war generation had passed, in their parlance, to the other side of “the great divide.” Their stories reveal that the categories of those who recalled a Unionist, Emancipationist, Lost Cause, or Reconciliationist memory of the war were never clear-cut, nor did they remain static.²⁰ Though Civil War commemorations reached a high point of visibility between the 1880s and 1910s, the understandings and interpretations of the conflict and its meaning were continually being created, negotiated, and renegotiated from the moment the first guns were fired in 1861. Perhaps most important, these stories remind us that the memory of the war had profound implications for partisan politics, government policy, citizenship, ideas about gender and race, and the future of the nation.

At the fiftieth anniversary of Gettysburg in 1913, Confederate veteran

and Virginia governor William H. Mann declared, “There is no North and no South, no rebels and no Yanks.” The sectional divisions of the past had been healed, he argued, so that “all is one great nation.”²¹ Throughout the 1890s and early 1900s others would offer the same sentiment, many employing the same words. Despite such pronouncements, sectional divisions and discord could hardly be declared vanquished. Under the mantle of Civil War memory, they had festered for too long. The notion of two separate cultures, one north and one south, had been developing well before the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter. But it was in the four bloody years of war that those ties were cemented, identities were crafted, and the memory of the war first took shape.