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The Civil War Sesquicentennial

The goal should be an enlightening commemoration

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In 1961-65, the centennial commemoration of the Civil War was a political and historical debacle. Fraught, to say the least, by cold-war nationalism, racism among its leadership as well as the general populace, an enduring hold of the Lost Cause on popular imagination, and a country violently divided by the civil-rights movement, the official Civil War centennial refused to face the challenge of causes and consequences. Instead, a reconciliationist, Blue-Gray celebration of soldiers' valor and re-emergent national greatness forged out of conflict dominated the scene. At 100 years, North and South had managed a long, complex reconciliation rooted in a master narrative of mutual heroism in a war in which everyone had fought for their sense of the "right." But the national reunion of the sections had been purchased by the Jim Crow system and a racially segregated, tragically stunted national memory.

Now fast forward to the kickoff of a commemoration of the sesquicentennial. Jumbotrons in basketball arenas and panels of academic historians are not normally associated with each other. But an event held at the University of Richmond recently, "America on the Eve of the Civil War," was anything but normal. Planned and moderated by Edward L. Ayers, president of the university and a distinguished historian of the South and the Civil War, the all-day symposium, with 16 of us, historians, on panels of four each, attracted an extraordinary audience of some 2,000 people from Virginia and 26 other states. It was the first of six annual events planned by the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission. No state suffered more loss and devastation than Virginia during the Civil War, and nowhere have people remembered that conflict with as much reverence and controversy. The Virginia commission opted to begin the sesquicentennial early to stress the theme of the war's causation.

What would bring so many people on a weekday to listen to historians reflect on why the United States collapsed into disunion in the late 1850s? First, the symposium drew its energy and vision from Ayers himself. An advocate of what he calls "deep contingency" (keeping our understanding of history within its own changing context), Ayers instructed all panelists to focus on the year 1859 and to discuss nothing that happened after that year. We were to be in that time, of its conditions and circumstances, not yet aware of the impending secession crisis and war. By and large that approach worked, as Ayers posed questions and the historians delved into details as well as debated the political and economic situation on the ground. The novel approach prevented us from quoting or referring to other scholars, which is our habit. It also led to some awkwardness as many panelists jokingly spoke of "the great events to come which will go unmentioned."

A second reason for the popularity of the symposium is simply that the Civil War still attracts legions of "buffs," a term that is sometimes far too dismissive and encompasses serious readers, collectors, reenactors, battlefield preservationists, and educators at all levels. With the sesquicentennial looming in 2011-15, we are likely to experience a flood of attention to the Civil War

era from film and publishing, tourism and school curricula, and possibly even from American political culture.

But a third, and perhaps most important, reason for the turnout in Richmond may be that in recent decades, powerful new winds have been blowing through Civil War history, from the academy to the furthest reaches of public memory. Revolutions in social, African-American, and women's history, as well as the advent of new modes of military history — treating the war from the perspectives of common soldiers, homefronts as well as battlefronts, slaves and captive prisoners, as well as generals and strategy — have transformed a field once seemingly dominated by the "view from headquarters" or the valor of the Blue and the Gray. An increasing number of historians, moreover, have written about the memory of the Civil War in American culture as one of the most dominant elements of an ever-changing American national identity and as a driving force in the history of race relations. And most significant, these new winds have been felt deeply and widely in public-history forums. It is not your father's or your grandmother's Civil War history anymore, even — and especially — in the South.

Or is it? We shall see.

The Lost Cause tradition — as both a version of history and as a racial ideology — is certainly still very much alive in neo-Confederate organizations, on numerous Web sites, among white-supremacist groups, in staunch advocates of the Confederate battle flag, and even among some mainstream American politicians. Multitudes still cannot bring themselves to confront the story of slavery as both lived experience and as the central cause of the Civil War.

But countless others have done so, often overcoming the essence of their early education or family lore. Above all, the greatest challenge for academic historians of this pivotal era has been to persuade the interested public, including some politicians and public historians (those who work in museums and at historic sites), that the causes and consequences of the Civil War are easily as important as the drama of the third day at the battle of Gettysburg. In other words, the deepest answers to why that terrible war occurred, and why we have struggled as a people to face and solve its eternal legacies, may have more lasting meaning than the heartfelt pathos one feels standing today on the "sacred ground" of one of its beautiful battlefields.

Such was the tenor and purpose of the Richmond symposium. We were there to understand the society, South and North, the political and economic systems, the ideologically driven defenders of slavery as well as its fierce opponents, and especially the lives of ordinary people (white and black, free and enslaved, slave-owning and not, bankers and dirt farmers) living at a time when their country teetered on the edge of the abyss of fratricidal war. The conference opened with welcoming remarks by Ayers, who urged everyone to look back at the Civil War era with "fresh eyes," but also made it clear he was thrilled this could happen in the "former capital of the Confederacy." When William J. Howell, the Republican speaker of the House of Delegates in Virginia and chairman of the state's sesquicentennial commission, announced openly that this anniversary season would focus on the "causes" and "enduring legacies" of the conflict, I had to pinch myself and drop my cynical guard, realizing that 50 years earlier such a remark would never have been uttered by the leader of a Southern state legislature. This was not to be a remembrance of the Lost Cause. Then Gov. Tim Kaine, a Democrat, addressed us and demanded that this time the Civil War must be treated with "analysis and commemoration" and that the events of 1861-65 were "not in the past at all," but alive in our present every day. Analysis? Bravo, I said, under my breath.

And so the analysis commenced, with panels on "Taking Stock of the Nation in 1859," "The Future of Virginia and the South," "Making Sense of John Brown's Raid," and finally, "Predictions for the

Election of 1860." Only rarely did panelists veer off into arcane subjects; Ayers kept us on course. In most cases, the audience was spared the certainty of well-honed interpretations in favor of open discussion of the unsettled and huge character of American expansion in the 1850s, of that era's swirling issues of immigration and anti-Catholicism, of a transportation and communication revolution that boggled the imagination of its time even more than the Internet does in our age. And I suspect many were stunned at what they learned of the scale of the domestic slave trade, in Richmond's own streets and across the South. (One recent study concludes that in 1859-60, the value of slaves sold in the domestic market was $9.56-million, many millions more in today's dollars.)

As it turns out, we had to admit that Americans of the late 1850s were as confused, excited, and frightened about their futures as people in any other era. Their politics consisted of a raucous, transforming party system, quickly dividing over the slavery question and thriving on huge voter turnout. Virginia had a booming and diverse economy, despite growing very little cotton and exporting to the deep South ever-increasing numbers of slaves, the nation's single largest financial asset. A couple of the panelists on the John Brown session waxed somewhat romantic in their defense of the radical abolitionist, stimulating a useful exchange about what constitutes justifiable revolutionary violence.

The rise of that relatively unknown lawyer from Illinois to the presidency in 1860 was imagined only by a few Midwestern political managers at the end of 1859. As our historian-pundits handicapped the impending election with both deep knowledge and a sense of wonder, most suggested William H. Seward as the likely candidate of the new Republican Party. And slavery and race certainly seemed to be tearing the nation apart, while not everyone thought about those issues every day. The past, much less the future, most of us historians concluded, is an unstable story even when we know a great deal about it. Back in the green room and over lunch, we chuckled over our strange roles as near occupants of an actual 1859, but out on stage displayed our humbled expertise.

Audience members submitted hundreds of questions through the course of the day that were processed by graduate students. Ayers has kindly provided me with the full list of questions, including many submitted online from the Webcast audience. As a whole, the queries reflect an informed audience eager to know more. Many asked about the anomalous situation of free blacks in the South, and several were fascinated by John Brown and violence. Even more pushed for a longer discussion of "states' rights" as a cause of America's predicament in the 1850s. In a Q&A during one of the panels, we confronted the issue of states' rights, most of us trying to demonstrate that the significance of the doctrine is always in the cause to which it is employed, whether by Northerners or Southerners in antebellum America or by judges and politicians today. The relationship of states' rights to slavery in all discussions of Civil War causation appears to be an eternal riddle in American public memory. Federalism and "state sovereignty," as Southerners tended to call it, demands an understanding beyond slogans and uses that often skirt the deeper issues at stake in the 1850s — slavery, race, and the future of labor in an expanding republic. The sheer range of audience questions indicated a serious desire to stop, take stock, and comprehend why that war came about when it did.

If the self-selected audience can be any kind of model, and if the Richmond event can be even modestly duplicated elsewhere, the sesquicentennial will be very different from the fiasco of the centennial of the Civil War in 1961-65 (a story detailed in the excellent book by Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, published by Louisiana State University Press in 2007). Gen. Ulysses S. Grant III, retired, chairman of the federal centennial commission, declared his "close feeling" for the Civil War in 1960 as though it were a family inheritance. "The war did not divide us," he announced.

"Rather, it united us, in spite of a long period of bitterness, and made us the greatest and most powerful nation the world had ever seen." To Grant, the centennial provided a nationalistic celebration among white people, full of "colorful ceremonies ... exhibitions of war trophies," and plenty of "memorials, parades, and new historical markers."

Such language would have been utterly out of place at the Richmond sesquicentennial opening in April. But we should approach this anniversary and its myriad events with caution born of the past. We are living in a new era, inspired by the election of an African-American president and by widely disseminated new understandings of the causes and consequences of the Civil War. But how wide? We do not fully know.

The Lost Cause still endures in the 21st century because it serves many sentimental and racial desires in the present. And I suspect that if we could conduct a national referendum on why and how Americans want their Civil War history and memory served up, the majority would still opt for the military drama, for the narrative of battles and leaders. We still need that history too, but this time the story ought to be as much about emancipation as it is about Robert E. Lee's daring invasions of the North or Ulysses S. Grant's determination in the Wilderness Campaign. This time, we need events and publications with mass appeal that will explain not only the complex causes of the war, but its legacies as well.

In his "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, in the midst of the centennial, Martin Luther King Jr. took his time getting to the "dream" metaphor. The central metaphor of the beginning of that speech was the "promissory note" that had come back labeled "insufficient funds" in the "bank of American justice." One hundred years after emancipation, said King so memorably, "the Negro is not free." Last November 4, as Barack Obama strode onto the stage in Grant Park in Chicago, something in excess of 50 percent of the people all over America were cheering or weeping uncontrollably. In his speech that night, Obama declared his political lineage by invoking King as well as Lincoln. The next morning in *The New York Times,* the columnist Thomas Friedman declared November 4 the day the Civil War ended in America. As the sesquicentennial nears, we are likely to witness the foolishness of Friedman's exuberant claim. With jobless numbers soaring and the poverty rate among all children predicted to reach 27 percent in the next year — and among African-American children, a frightening 50 percent — we should declare nothing truly ended in our history.

Legacies can take endless forms — physical, political, literary, emotional. This time, we must commemorate our Civil War in all its meanings, but above all we must commemorate and understand emancipation as its most enduring challenge. This time, the fighting of the Civil War itself should not unite us in pathos and nostalgia alone; but maybe, just maybe, we will give ourselves the chance to find unity in a shared history of conflict, in a genuine sense of tragedy, and in a conflicted memory stared squarely in the face.

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