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TAH: A More Perfect Union: The Origins and Development of the U.S. Constitution

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A Review of Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering*

The Civil War was an important turning point in American history. It was the culmination of a half century or more of sectional strife, it was the violent conclusion to the fundamentally divisive issue of slavery, and it was the insurance that the national government would perpetually reign supreme over the states. The resolution of these matters came, however, with a hefty price tag: the loss of more than a half million American lives. Faust seeks to make meaning of these numbers, which are so often repeated in American history textbooks, but which students and teachers of American history struggle to find purposeful. *This Republic of Suffering* takes a very narrow look at the Civil War. Instead of focusing on politics and battles and military strategies, she points to the unique human suffering the war imposed on those seeking to reconcile death of such magnitude and scale with the sentimental society of 19th century America. In so doing Faust looks at more than just the raw statistics of the dead, but the impact of their deaths on the living, and the ways in which they coped with such overwhelming loss.

As students of history well know, the context in which a war is waged is vital to understanding the conflict itself. Faust explores the Victorian era in America in depth, providing a foundation on which readers can begin to understand the experience of the Civil War through the eyes of a 19th century American. She explains first that, while military conflict over slavery seemed “inevitable”, most expected it to be “of brief duration” (Faust 3). When the reality of the modernity and scale of the war began to set in, Faust reveals how the ‘assault of death’ affected so many Americans. While 19th century Americans were no strangers to death, how it was conceptualized was extremely important to them. Victorian-era Americans were fixated on the idea of a “Good Death”, one that meets certain

circumstantial and religious criteria (6). In a society as fervently religious as that of 19th century America, a “Good Death” was of vital importance to the assurance of eternal salvation (8-9). The Civil War of course then presented unique challenges to the fulfillment of that notion. Americans struggled to reconcile the need for this “Good Death” with the realities of modern warfare. In addition, in a provincial society where travel and interaction with other parts of the country were relatively unusual, “perhaps the most distressing aspect of death for many Civil War Americans was that thousands of young men were dying away from home.” (9). To compound that problem was the idea that “death customs of the Victorian era centered on domestic scenes and spaces; hospitals housed the indigent, not respectable citizens” (9). As Victorian society romanticized death, Civil War death must have been intensely traumatic to experience, either as a soldier or as a loved one. It was for this reason, Faust explains, that participants in the war made such significant strides to assure those waiting at home that their soldier’s faith and spirituality had been affirmed. This helps explain why so many records exist of not only soldier’s deaths, but of their specific dying declarations – they were created in an effort to provide consolation to loved ones by communicating the specific circumstances of soldiers’ passing (14).

Faust’s evaluation of Civil War death does not occur in a vacuum, however. She equally explores the other side of death in a chapter aptly titled, “Killing”. Orestes Brownson called killing “the harder courage” because of what it demanded from a soldier in a devoutly Christian society (32). In order for soldiers (and society) to rationalize the killing understood to be requisite to winning the war, churches and government alike posited that killing was not only necessary in terms of duty to country, but also as service to God (33). Once it became clear by virtue of the Emancipation Proclamation that ending slavery was “an explicit war aim”, “northerners increasingly cited the sin of slavery as a religious justification for the use of violence” (33-34). Faust notes that the technological advances of the Civil War, however, made killing on a mass scale easier (at least tactically speaking) than ever before. With the advent of rifles, massive armies comprised of millions of (mostly unprofessional) soldiers, more

deadly and accurate artillery, but little change having been made to the actual tactical and strategic manner in which wars were fought (i.e. on an open battlefield) it is perhaps in retrospect no wonder why so many perished: “With its large volunteer armies, its longer-range weapons, and its looser military formations, the Civil War thus placed more inexperienced soldiers, with more firepower and with more individual responsibility for the decision to kill, into more intimate, face-to-face battle settings than perhaps any other war in history” (41). It is not difficult to imagine the impact such an experience – to witness both mass dying and mass killing – would have on the somewhat delicate Victorian psyche. Faust’s evaluation helps to make the contemporary trauma of the war tangible.

Perhaps one of the most notable focuses of Faust’s work is her focus on the procedures of burying the dead. In fact, her principal argument is that “the work of death was the Civil War America’s most fundamental and most demanding undertaking” (xviii). While at first this seems an odd choice for emphasis, further reading reveals how significant this process was to the preservation of humanity in Civil War-era society. To wit, “nineteenth century Americans confronted this crisis of the Civil War slain within a broader context of assumptions about appropriate treatment of the dead. Humanity, not just particular humans, was at stake. . . one of the striking indications of civilization and refinement among a people is the tenderness and care manifested by them towards their dead” (61). In an effort to combat the dehumanizing influence of armed combat, the transformation of men into “putrefied meat”, slaughtered “like so many animals” and prevent the hardening of men by indifference and apathy with regard to death, providing an appropriate burial seemed not only honorable but necessary (57-58). However, in light of just how many people inside a very short amount of time required this protocol, proper burial (or in many cases any burial at all) became an insurmountable challenge in light of the substantial lack of available resources. The unexpected quantity of carnage coupled with the needs of armies in the midst of actually fighting a war rendered “proper” conceptions of burial impossible, and most other forms at best inconvenient. In many circumstances, to take care of the dead was to neglect

the living as the patient populations of hastily erected field hospitals rapidly surpassed their capacities (64-65). The Union Army itself recognized these challenges, using language like “as far as possible” and “when practicable” with regard to directives on appropriate burial of the dead (65). In the reality of warfare, most of the dead were interred by their fellow soldiers in mass graves, or hastily constructed cemeteries, some marked, some unmarked, many so shallow that they would be later revealed by animals or rain (73). In light of the hundreds of thousands of Civil War deaths, soldiers sought to combat the erasure of the individuality of each loss: “soldiers paid homage to their dead comrades out of respect for the slain men, endeavoring to reclaim the individual. . . from the impersonal and overwhelming carnage, [and to] reassert their own commitment to the sanctity of human life and the integrity of the human self” (79). Faust explains that the inefficiency and lack of satisfaction in these wartime practices would ultimately yield the expansion of the national government bureaucracy to encompass caring for the nation’s war dead, a service which modern Americans largely take for granted.

Faust’s work also reveals one of the most common difficulties of modern warfare: adequate and accurate record keeping. In the same manner it was difficult for soldiers in combat to take time to bury the dead, it was similarly difficult for them to account for them. The challenge of adequate record keeping given the newness of modern warfare with its accompanying massive casualty count was enormous. This is demonstrated by one startling statistic: that 40% of deceased Yankees, and an even greater proportion of Confederate soldiers, died without a name, known only by the word “unknown” (102). Even of those soldiers whose names were supposedly accounted for in the aftermath of a significant battle, lists were “notoriously inaccurate and incomplete” (104). Most of the work of accounting, at least at first (and for the duration of the war for the Confederate dead), was completed by private entities who travelled to battlefields and crude burial grounds in the aftermath of a confrontation to take stock of who had perished and who may have survived. Given the requirements for the so-called ‘Good Death’, dying without so much as one’s name would seem being likened to an

animal. Because of the incompleteness of so many of the records, and the lack of viable system with which to communicate home the fates of soldiers engaged in combat, many were left with lingering questions about what happened to their loved ones, a “dread void of uncertainty”, which for so many was never relieved (170). It wasn’t until after the war that any large-scale official action was taken (and even then only after reports of desecration of Union dead on behalf of angry Confederates) to properly name, number and inter the scores of dead, largely through the actions of such tireless crusaders as Clara Barton and James Moore (214; 224). This movement (the National Cemeteries Act) came about largely from a sense of duty and obligation to those whose “last full measure of devotion” was given on behalf of the nation, and a strong desire to recognize and acknowledge their sacrifice. Faust notes that this was a change from previous government actions and policies in previous wars, perhaps as a result of the powerful “intimacy of this all-American war” (129).

The end of the war did not of course bring an end to hostilities. In the midst of the massive campaign undertaken to preserve and protect the Union dead, no such action was taken by the government on behalf of the Confederate soldiers. As bad as record keeping was by the Union, an army which had a tremendous resource-based advantage, it was worse for the Confederates, who suffered proportionate worse losses. Loss estimates were at best educated guesses. Despite the message of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, a nation reeling from its president’s assassination at the hands of a southerner and of over 300,000 Union lives lost felt that “it seemed unimaginable that those who had tried to destroy the Union should be accorded the same respect as those who had saved it” (238). Faust’s book thus sheds light on why the work of Reconstruction after the war’s end was so difficult.

Ultimately, Faust’s work is valuable for the questions it answers. She explains how a religious society reconciled the carnage of mechanized warfare with a benevolent god; how the advent of industrialized warfare created a society saturated with death and fixated in a perpetual state of mourning; how survivors dealt with the guilt of surviving when so many didn’t; and how families found

the courage to move on in the face of unspeakable tragedy. She also explains how the Civil War and its mass of death changed the nation: bureaucratically, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

“The number of soldiers who died between 1861 and 1865, an estimated 620,000, is approximately equal to the total American fatalities in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II and the Korean war combined. . . a similar rate, about 2%, in the United States today would mean six million fatalities” (xi). As a resource in a history classroom or curriculum, this book is useful for a variety of purposes. While there was a noticeable (and disappointing) lack of attention paid to the impact of photography, specifically that of Mathew Brady, in this first “living room war” (which is warranted given the subject matter), Faust does include an array of primary sources – pictures, poetry, music, letters, etc. which are usable, along with excerpts of her accompanying text, in a history classroom setting. They offer an opportunity to look at the impact of the Civil War from a perspective under-utilized in a classroom setting. In addition, her attempt to make meaning of a number, 620,000, is an important reminder to teachers and students of history alike. It is interesting for students to understand this number, especially in the context of other wars. In an age where fighting student apathy is a constant battle, she makes it possible for history teachers to put a human face on a long since dead conflict, but one whose relevance and significance still resonates today.