

Why do we  
*love* our

# CIVIL WAR

AMERICAN  
CIVIL WAR



Many nations try to forget their conflicts, but Americans romanticize the war in modern paintings like Mort Künstler's *Candlelight & Roses*.



We shot  
each other  
to pieces.  
We killed off  
a generation  
of men.  
We should  
shudder at the  
thought of the  
war. Instead,  
we celebrate it.

BY STEPHANIE MCCURRY

When we Americans talk about “the” Civil War, we know which one we mean: the brutal four-year conflict waged between the USA and the CSA that settled the question of secession and Union and defeated the South’s bid for national independence. As early as 1861 the idea that we “are in the midst of a revolution unparalleled in the histories of nations” took hold, and it never let go its grip on the American imagination. It is a truism of U.S. history: “the” Civil War we call it, a claim to distinctiveness distilled in an article of grammar.

But was ours the unique experience implied by that singular title? After all, there are many cases of civil war in the 19th and 20th centuries to which ours might be compared. Civil war was not in itself a peculiarly American experience. Our national focus allows us to forget just how common such struggles were and are, and lulls us into a false sense of the distinctiveness of “our” war. So what, if anything, is different—exceptional—about ours? It is surely ironic, but only a broader, more global perspective would allow us to appreciate what really was unique about the American Civil War.

When a group of American historians were invited to a conference at Hebrew University in June 2011, and each paired with a scholar of civil war in another part of the world, the value of that global perspective was made abundantly clear. Why, the Israeli scholars asked us, are Americans so unreservedly romantic about their Civil War? Why do they not only commemorate it but celebrate it? To historians of civil wars in Africa, the Middle East and Europe, our love for the Civil War—and our scholarly assumptions about its uniqueness—seem odd, misplaced. In most countries civil wars were such brutally horrific and divisive events that no one ever wants to remember them. But in the United States the Civil War is not only forever and lovingly remembered but reenacted. Is that, as we tend to assume, because our civil war was so different? We were forced to contemplate that question: What is, in fact, exceptional about America’s seminal conflict and what is not?

First there is the matter of definition and scope. What is a civil war and how many of them have there been? The list of such struggles waged in the modern world is staggeringly long and difficult to contemplate, as many as 59 by one count. Sad to say, civil war has been a commonplace counterpart of the age of nationalism all over the world because claims of sovereignty over people and territory are the sine qua non

conditions of nations. Abraham Lincoln was hardly alone in thinking that, as president, he incurred the obligation to maintain the authority of the government and territorial integrity of the country he was elected to lead. And, in fact, it was Lincoln’s appointee, Francis Lieber, who would first offer the definition of civil war subsequently adopted by the Geneva and Hague conventions. In 1863 Lieber was called on to write a code of conduct for the armies in the field—“the Lieber Code” as it is now known—essentially setting down the rules of war that the Union Army would observe.

“A Civil War,” he explained, “is war between two or more portions of a country or state, each contending for mastery of the whole, and each claiming to be the legitimate government.” Here we think of classic examples like the 17th-century English Civil War or the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. But that definition hardly fit the American case, so Lieber added this: “The term is also sometimes applied to war of rebellion, when the rebellious provinces or portions of the state are contiguous to those containing the seat of government.” The American Civil War was clearly the second kind. It was, as Lieber defined it, a rebellion and a civil war.

In political scientists’ typologies, civil wars come in two basic types: separatist conflicts—like that of the Confederate States—fought over the integrity of boundaries; and





statist conflicts fought for control of the state or the center. There have been plenty of both, but broadly speaking, there were far more secessionist wars in the 20th century than the 19th. Many were fought immediately after decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, as newly independent African nations struggled to resolve conflicts within territorial boundaries set by European colonial powers. The example of Biafra comes to mind, the bloodiest conflict over secession in modern history and the only one in which the death toll topped that of the U.S. Civil War. That struggle to secede from Nigeria failed only after the conflict cost a million lives.

As the Biafra example suggests, even a cursory consideration cracks open the window on the American case and sheds light on what turn out to be patterns of events, discernible in, and common to, many civil wars. First, it is not uncommon for these conflicts to be provoked by secessionist movements, as was the situation in America. In the 19th century there were more anti-colonial struggles of independence (Latin America) and of national unification (Italy and Germany) than civil wars, and in that sense the United

States was unusual for a time. But by the 20th century there were secessionist civil wars across the post-colonial and post-Cold War world. Second, most secessionist movements are defeated. The Confederate States were not alone in reaping that bitter fruit. The push for Texas independence, as it turns out, was the only successful secessionist movement in the Western Hemisphere. And third, what these cases show is that a stronger national government is usually the outcome of wars for control of the state.

This was certainly true of the reunited United States, where ex-Confederates were subject to a set of federal initiatives—the massive expropriation of property by the federal government in its program of slave emancipation, military occupation and rule, and a series of postwar constitutional amendments—that literally remade the nation's people and government. This tectonic shift of power from the states to the center turns out to be a classic consequence of civil wars. Indeed, it seems to be the case whether the victorious forces are the progressives or the reactionaries in their politics—all move to consolidate power in the center. As in Fran-

## SPANISH CIVIL WAR



Picasso's cubist painting *Guernica* evokes the suffering of residents in that Spanish town during a bombing raid in the Spanish Civil War.



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co's Spain, so in the United States, victor states typically move to make structural changes designed to strengthen territorial integrity by weakening the regional parts, destroying autonomist movements and concentrating power and authority in the center. When U.S. historians talk of the Civil War as the birth of the modern American state, they are describing a process common to civil wars almost everywhere. In a structural sense, then, it seems safe to conclude there is little distinctive or exceptional about our Civil War but much that was characteristic of civil wars in general.

**But the question of American exceptionalism** obviously goes far beyond structural matters to touch profoundly on the conduct and meaning of the Civil War. Here the assumptions of distinctiveness go deep, all the way to the war itself, when men like General Robert E. Lee, President Jefferson Davis and President Abraham Lincoln fused the human cost of war to the value of the political principles contested in it. The duration of the war (four long years); the toll of war (as many as 750,000 dead); the level of mobilization for it (75-85 percent of military age white men in the South), the ferocity with which it was waged (guerrilla warfare in the border states); the hard war policy against civilians (Sherman's March to the Sea): Surely other wars were not like this in the price honorable men were prepared to pay for their political convictions.

Few assumptions are more important in Civil War history and memory than the belief that this was a war fought by heroic men for honorable causes: political liberty, self-determination, the preservation of the Union, the defense of democracy, the abolition of slavery. Take your pick.

It was Lee's point, in his farewell speech at Appomattox Court House in April 1865, that his soldiers, no less than their Yankee opponents, were valiant men dedicated to their country; that the Confederate loss was not a failure of principle or will but an exhaustion of resources in the face of a relentless enemy—honorable men, as he put it, “compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.” It is what makes our war different, worth celebrating, worth the horrifying toll in blood and treasure.

And surely there is some truth in this.

Few if any wars in the modern world reached the levels of mobilization of the Confederacy, few civil wars exacted a comparable death toll, or could claim such a clearly redemptive purpose: the new birth of liberty Lincoln spoke of at Gettysburg. But there were other, less elevated views of the war that compared it less favorably to similar wars of national independence. Edward Pollard, a Richmond editor and diehard Confederate nationalist, judged his own countrymen's commitment to independence and found it wanting.

In 1865, as the Confederacy collapsed, he complained that “a large portion of our people have fallen below the standards of history, and hold no honorable comparison with other nations that have fought for and struggled for independence.” Perhaps he was thinking of the American War of Independence, or the Dutch in the United provinces in the 17th century who fought for 80 years for national independence from the Spanish. Reflecting on the Dutch case, a nationalist movement that succeeded despite imbalances of population and resources far exceeding those faced by the South, one historian said that “‘war weariness’ alone cannot provide a convincing explanation for the South's loss of their war for national independence in a mere four years.” To these historians what is striking is that the Civil War did not last far longer, that Rebels were not willing to fight harder and sacrifice more.

Indeed, other civil wars put the toll of ours in perspective. Civil wars are often protracted and inconclusive because neither rival force has enough military power to establish full control over a large area. “The big country small war problem,” as one sociologist put it. But this was obviously not the case in the United States, with its two mammoth military forces. And while one can hardly diminish the significance of the death toll in the Union and Confederate ranks—America's war was the bloodiest conflict in the Western world between the Napoleonic Wars and World War I—it is *not* regarded as particularly barbaric, in large measure because, unlike the majority of such conflicts, it was fought mostly by conventional means. Where violence reached egregious levels—in the widespread guerrilla warfare within the border states, for example—it



confirms another time-tested pattern of civil war: Violence is always greatest in zones of irregular warfare. The conventionality of methods used in our war explains the comparatively low level of atrocities reported.

But the level of barbarity and violence reached in the United States pales even in comparison to the other major example of a civil conflict fought conventionally. In the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), there were, in addition to 300,000 battlefield deaths, at least 200,000 extrajudicial killings of civilians—including the purposeful killing of many women and children behind the lines. Three-quarters of them were killed by Franco's forces in mass executions, shot

by firing squads in bull rings, died in concentration, slave labor and POW camps, in bombing attacks on refugees, in the siege of Madrid, or other episodes. More than half a million refugees were forced into exile, and many died in French concentration camps. The truth about Spain's war is still coming to light today as citizens excavate mass graves and try to recover, reburial and count the dead. There is little in the American record to compare to this systematic targeting, terrorizing and extermination of civilians for purposes of political repression. It certainly puts in perspective Ben Butler's infamous "Woman's Order" in New Orleans.

It is a sad truth that the civil wars of our

## RWANDAN CIVIL WAR



Corpses of Rwandans are strewn in the debris of a refugee camp. Could color photos like this have changed how we remember our war?



It is a sad truth that the civil wars of our own time constantly force “the” Civil War into new perspective.



own time constantly force the Civil War into new perspective. Observers of recent genocidal wars in Africa or Yugoslavia are unimpressed with the violence of the American war. What strikes them most is the level of restraint observed by Union troops in their treatment of enemy soldiers and civilians. What other country, they ask, adopted rules of war in the midst of the fighting? Indeed. It is one of the most impressive and—yes—unique features of our war: that the Lincoln administration was willing to bind itself to a set of regulations limiting the latitude of the Union Army in its operations, including in occupied territory and guerrilla warfare. It says something profound.

There are real limits to this view, more than we are yet aware. For the record holds abundant evidence of one kind of violence to which we have yet to do justice: the torture, rape and murder of enslaved men, women and children by both armies, but especially Confederate forces. While the Spanish have undertaken a belated accounting, in the United States there has been no such effort to estimate the extrajudicial dead. We know of Fort Pillow and other massacres of black POWs. But that death toll must pale in comparison to the number of noncombatant slaves killed. Official and personal records are littered with casual references: to slaves, including children, beaten to death on plantations, runaways hanged, male slaves executed, insurrections repressed by mass execution, and to torture, mutilation and murder by Southern “scouts,” even after the surrender. In Pineville, S.C., in late March and April 1865, Confederate scouts hunted down a “slave rebel band,” shooting Pringle (and 28 others), hanging his brother Harry, and also killing the reputed ringleader Rosa, Pringle and Harry’s mother. For these war dead there has been no accounting.

**There is much about America's Civil War that** is not as peculiar or particular to that conflict as we might think. But a few critical features mark it as unique. The conclusive military outcome; the adoption of rules of war in the heat of war; and above all, the belief on both sides, victor and vanquished, that this struggle had a redemptive purpose. To this day the pattern holds and helps explain the romantic aura that surrounds our memory of

the war. Liberals and progressives have their new birth of liberty. The war they celebrate and reenact not only defended the Union, it accomplished the emancipation of 4 million slaves and vindicated the principle of democracy not just in the United States but in the world. Confederate descendants have their redemptive fight for political liberty. The war they celebrate and reenact was waged for states’ rights, defended the Constitution’s original intent and resisted the tyranny of the federal government. These remain enduring principles today.

It is common for victors to valorize their cause, purge the archives of incriminating material, write histories that inscribe their view and build monuments to their heroes, even as they dig mass graves and build prison camps for their defeated enemies. That’s what Franco did in Spain, pursuing a postwar political purge—as many as 500,000 executed, imprisoned, exiled—to consolidate his regime and hide the truth. But it’s not what happened here. There was no such purge, no mass trials for treason, no political repression across the South. Jefferson Davis served two years in prison and was released. Andrew Johnson issued blanket amnesties. Opposition political parties reformed. Confederate memory flourished. Everyone was free to tell their story of the war and did, sustaining a culture of selective remembering that 150 years later shows no sign of flagging. Even African Americans, who long viewed memorializing the war with distaste, are now urged to claim the war as their “own.”

In thinking about civil wars, the main difference between ours and theirs seems to be not so much the war but the postwar. We love our Civil War as no other people do. This fondness for the war, as historian Drew Gilpin Faust reminds us, is a peculiar but essential part of American culture. For better or for worse, our culture not only permits but encourages divergent rememberings of the war’s causes, principles and consequences. That is why we can all love it, and why Americans still want to reenact it. And that is what sets us apart from every other people with other bloody pasts.

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