

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Sesquicentennial: A Retrospective on the Civil War

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The coming of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War in 2011-2015 begs for looks backward and forward to gauge both how that conflict has shaped America as it is today, and to speculate on what its influence may continue to be in the next century and a half.

One thing that cannot be denied is that the war was the making of American mythology. To be sure our frontier experience gave rise to a number of icons whose legends far outstrip their historical exploits and import, men such as David Crockett and James Bowie, or Buffalo Bill Cody. But the Civil War produced a virtual *Iliad* of epic figures whose legends continue to grow despite the best work of historians to contain them to their historical boundaries. Indeed, it says something about Americans' relationship with that era that by and large most of us continue to prefer the myths to the realities.

Abraham Lincoln towers above all others, closely followed by Robert E. Lee. Both have been all-but-worshipped as Christ-like figures of sacrifice and nobility. Lee's great lieutenant Stonewall Jackson's capabilities have been so exaggerated—and they were great enough in reality—that he is perhaps the only man in the Civil War whose death is made responsible for the Confederacy losing the war, as if Lincoln, Grant, Sherman, and close to 2 million other Union soldiers had no influence in that outcome.

The growth of the post-war “Lost Cause” myth continues unabated despite its repeated explosion by historians North and South. The Confederacy is still regarded romantically in many quarters as a land of moonlight and magnolias, knightly cavaliers, blushing belles, and happy slaves who loved their masters and felt no inner call to freedom. Indeed, the Lost Cause myth has long ago jumped its bounds as a palliative to help the South deal with the emotional trauma of defeat, and is now almost as widely believed—indeed yearned for—north of the Mason-Dixon Line as it is below.

The impact of such mythology on attitudes today is evident almost daily in the press and other media. Every politician at some point conjures Lincoln, either to use his eloquence, or claim his posthumous endorsement. Millions of Americans, and not just those in the new South, cling to discredited arguments that secession and the war that

followed had little or nothing to do with slavery, despite the straightforward declarations of Southern leaders in 1860 and 1861 that issues surrounding slavery were exclusively the cause for their actions. The hoary old myths are kept alive to support and advance social and political attitudes of today in a classic example of the universal habit of humans of misrepresenting the past in order to support viewpoints of the present. And of course, there is no more potent example of this than the growing and militant use of the Confederate battle flag as an emblem of all manner of attitudes, from resistance to federal taxation, to opposition to universal civil rights.

Despite the fact that in the last few generations Americans have given up spending lifetimes in one place, and migrated all across the map, no one can travel the country without still encountering regional prejudices against lingering stereotypes that date to the war era and before. Yankees are still cold and calculating, Southerners are still lazy and in-bred. If anything, the war entrenched those views, and as always, people tend only to see what reinforces the particular stereotypes operating on them.

Beyond the war's lasting impact on our perceptions of ourselves, good and bad, right or wrong, we also live in a framework vastly shaped by that experience. Today the federal government is undoubtedly supreme to the states, even though as recently as 2010 some states began trying to resurrect the discredited old idea of nullification in order to allow the states to overturn an unpopular act of Congress. The display of the Confederate flag still causes repercussions in state houses and in Washington. Memorials and monuments to Confederate leaders spark controversy, while a statue of Lincoln in Richmond, Virginia has done the same, and the debate rages on about the role played by Negroes in the war, with even numerous claims that Southern slaves fought for the Confederacy. All of these issues and more are not just arcane squabbles about historical interpretation; they are arguments growing out of attitudes of today that seek to use the past as precedent.

Americans in the 21st century live very much in a culture of the Civil War. Indeed, we cannot escape it. The subject dominates the book publishing industry as never before, with hundreds of titles coming out every year. Half a dozen periodicals deal solely with the war era. Film and television still portray the war and its peoples—inaccurately for the most part, though occasionally a producer really strives for authenticity. Computer games and internet sites abound, and the web itself is awash in Civil War material, much of it unfortunately evidence of the aptness of the old aphorism about “garbage in, garbage out.” Preservation efforts have never been more aggressive or successful in saving significant battlefield land for future generations to explore. Seminars and symposia and that peculiar phenomenon known as the Civil War Round Table all flourish as never before.

In short, while from time to time people have spoken of a current phenomenon of interest in the Civil War, the fact is that the fascination began even before the war was over, and has continued unabated ever since. It is our 150-year-old hobby, and it shows no signs of facing old age just yet. As long as that interest continues, we hope that the

adaptation of current technology to its study via the Essential Civil War Curriculum, will help sift fact from fiction and allow people of today and tomorrow to continue to draw both interest and meaning from an understanding of the war and its issues and individuals as they really were. Surely the myths will continue. We cling to them, for reasons that say far more about ourselves than our past, but through the glamour and romanticism the Essential Civil War Curriculum will strive to cast illumination on the essential truths of our most fascinating era.
