ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

How the Civil War Created a Nation

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Walt Whitman caught a glimpse of the new nation the Civil War was creating on a train journey from Washington, DC to New York City in November 1863. When Whitman stepped out of his rail car in Manhattan, the pace of the city nearly overwhelmed him. Southerners had predicted that the loss of the cotton trade would beggar New York. The city scarcely missed a beat. Shipyards boomed, building vessels for the naval blockade. Local contractors and manufacturers supplied the army. Brooks Brothers, a Manhattan clothier already notable for its ready-made clothing, won a contract to provide 12,000 blue uniforms at $19.20 apiece in four sizes for the state's soldiers. The sewing machines of Elias Howe and Isaac Singer mechanized the garment trade. Shoemaking machines allowed manufacturers to produce several hundred shoes a day instead of the few finished by hand.

The city's railroad companies handled record shipments of grain from the West, sending manufactured goods back in the other direction. Crop failures in Europe and the feeding of one million soldiers spurred a lively grain trade. New York became the export center for petroleum, a new industry that emerged after the discovery of oil at Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1859. Thousands of northern families lit their homes with kerosene lamps during the war, a marked improvement over other forms of illumination such as candles and whale oil. "There never was a time in the history of New York when business prosperity was more general," the *New York Sun* boasted in early 1865.

Had Whitman visited Chicago, he would have seen the western version of New York's energy. The crop bonanza, the need to feed a large army – the beginning of the city's reputation as "hog butcher of the world" – and the line of boxcars heading east generated a construction boom. Chicago shipped twice as much grain and meat east in 1862 as it did in 1860. The *Chicago Tribune* reported, "On every street and avenue one sees new building going up: immense stone, brick, and iron business blocks, marble palaces and new residences everywhere. . . . The unmistakable signs of active, thriving trade are everywhere manifest." Men became wealthy overnight. One enterprising young man, Philip Armour, became a millionaire selling pork to the army.

In the Far West, gold and silver generated an economic surge. The Pike's Peak gold rush of 1859 set off a stampede to Colorado. Two years later, Congress granted Colorado territorial status, and Denver was the nation's newest instant city, a raucous

boomtown where every fifth building was a saloon. In Nevada, the Comstock silver strike in 1859 touched off another wave of migration. Nevada became a state in 1864. By then, silver mines had produced $43 million for the U.S. Treasury. Gold flowed from Montana, Idaho, and the Dakotas as well, all benefiting the Union cause.

The federal government was a willing and enabling partner in many of these enterprises. The Republican-dominated Congress passed a series of measures that transformed the nation's economic landscape for all time. The weakness of the northern Democratic minority and the defection of southern lawmakers enabled Republicans to enact a legislative agenda that significantly expanded the role and financial reach of the government and helped to create a national economy that dwarfed its predecessor both in scale and in wealth.

When Abraham Lincoln took office, the main role of the federal government was to deliver the mail. The government also conducted foreign policy, defended the frontier with a small army, and collected import duties, but primarily, Washington was a post office. By the end of the Civil War, the government supported an army of a million men, carried a national debt of $2.5 billion, distributed public lands, printed a national currency, and collected an array of internal taxes. This transformation in national power was not the "new birth of freedom" Lincoln envisioned at Gettysburg, but it overshadowed the liberation of four million slaves in terms of its long-range impact on all Americans.

The Republicans did not set out to establish a strong national state or to facilitate the industrial revolution. They believed strongly in the American dream of hard work and upward mobility. They saw no contradiction between capital and labor, between wealth accumulation and equality. Even in the exigencies of war, they directed their legislation to their political base, the farmers and the small-town merchants. Their vision assumed the virtue of rural and small-town America. The majority of Republicans who enacted the legislation grew up on farms. Yet they created an industrial juggernaut that flung railroads across the continent and grew great cities from seaboard to seaboard that attracted thousands from those small towns and farms. These results must be counted as among the most sterling examples of unintended consequences in American history.

The Union became a synonym for "modern," and a ready counterpoint to the "unmodern" South. Slavery was not a progressive institution. It was a relic from a bygone era that strangled man's ambition. Herbert Spencer, the British philosopher who would coin the phrase "survival of the fittest," believed that slavery's elimination was emblematic of man's progress. An American admirer wrote to him in affirmation in 1864: "The great slave system . . . had well nigh paralyzed the mind of the nation, but the war has broken the spell." Like the Indian, slavery and the slaveholder were stale mementos from a primitive past that must be eliminated if mankind were to progress.

The artisan shop and the small factory employing a dozen or so operatives were characteristic of manufacturing in antebellum America. The war demanded volume and speed, which privileged size and technology. Machinery was more important than artisanal skill, and uniformity more prized than individual handicraft. The Civil War did

not create the industrial revolution in America; it accelerated it and gave it the shape of what was to come: large, mechanized factories manned by low-skilled workers turning out products for both domestic and foreign markets.

The war also expanded the white-collar middle class: managers, salesmen and clerks to run the railroads, distribute goods, solicit orders, maintain account books, and analyze price trends. The professions, especially medicine and engineering, profited significantly from the war, adding considerably to the knowledge of bridge and railroad construction, surgical practice, and nursing. Union engineers constructed a bridge over the Chattahoochee River near Atlanta more than 740 feet long and 90 feet high in just four days, facilitating General William T. Sherman's capture of that city in September 1864.

Government contracts, generous land grants, financial legislation and policy, and tax and tariff legislation contributed greatly to the economic expansion and to the Union war effort. John D. Rockefeller's Cleveland office became an important gathering point for colleagues during the war, and not only to receive the latest news from the front off the telegraph. Rockefeller had installed a telegraph connection in order to react quickly to price changes in oil, commodities, and transportation. The federal government helped Western Union string telegraph wires across America, facilitating contact with armies in the field, and also enabling entrepreneurs like Rockefeller to receive timely information to make their businesses more efficient and profitable. By the beginning of 1865, Rockefeller had built Cleveland's biggest oil refinery, one of the largest such facilities in the world.

The war also transformed the men who fought. The civilian armies, comprised of young men, few of whom had heretofore ventured beyond their farms and towns, confronted horrible scenes. When they engaged the enemy, this thought was common: "I didn't know it was like this." A soldier wrote another universal sentiment to his mother after his first battle, in June 1862: "I don't believe I am the same being I was two weeks ago." A Pennsylvania soldier expressed the feelings of many of his comrades when he walked over the Antietam battlefield at dusk: "No tongue can tell, no mind conceive, no pen portray the horrible sights I witnessed this morning. . . . Of this war I am heartily sick and tired." The hope was that all the dying would transform a nation, but as future president James A. Garfield exclaimed, "My God, what a costly sacrifice!"

These comments represented less a loss of faith – America remained a religious nation – than a belief that God did not have His hand in this bloody war. Rather than the personal, interventionist God of evangelical Christianity – a mainstay doctrine of the Second Great Awakening that swept across America during the first half of the nineteenth century -- this Supreme Being was more detached and more inscrutable. Soldiers maintained their personal piety even as they grew increasingly skeptical of God's role in the war. Any soldier who participated in battle and looked out over the field afterward found it difficult to fathom what God had in mind. "War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it," General Sherman explained. He advised his men not to look for God on the battlefield. "When preachers clamor don't join in, but know that war, like the

thunderbolt, follows its own laws, and turns not aside even if the beautiful, the virtuous and charitable stand in its path."

Evangelical religion had not prevented America from going to war; to the contrary, it fueled the passions for a dramatic solution to transcendent moral questions. Evangelical religion did not prepare either side for the carnage, and its explanations seemed less relevant as the war continued. The Civil War destroyed the Old South civilization resting on slavery; it also discredited evangelical Protestantism in the North as the ultimate arbiter of public policy. Ideas, soldier Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. believed, must be adaptable to survive. Ideas should never become ideologies. A new nation would emerge from the carnage of war.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), became a major moral and literary event, believed she was witnessing the unfolding of the Book of Revelation as the nation broke apart. The Civil War was a millennial war, she and many fellow evangelicals believed, "the *last* struggle for liberty" that would precede the coming of the Lord. "God's just wrath shall be wreaked on a giant wrong." At the end of the war, she became an Episcopalian. No need to be born again in Christ. One biological birth was enough. Tired of wrestling with God and losing, she opted for a more sedate spiritual life.

Stowe moved to Florida. She came to teach former slaves to read and write and stayed to promote Florida real estate. She co-authored a book with her sister Catharine, *The American Woman's Home* (1869), which served as the middle-class bible for home design through World War I. Stowe's kitchen resembled a medical operating theater with its bright lighting, extensive ventilation, and immaculate surfaces. If the Civil War had taught Stowe anything, it was that dirt was bad. Cleanliness was godliness. While southern women decorated graves, northern women renovated their homes.

Gone also was Stowe's passion for the African. She applauded William Lloyd Garrison's decision to dissolve the Anti-Slavery Society. Now that the slave was free, God would take care of the rest. God would finish the "great work [of Liberty] he has begun among us," she wrote to Garrison, for the task was clearly beyond her abilities. Attempting to educate the freedmen, Stowe concluded they were suitable only for manual labor. The bright side was that they would find considerable work in Florida, as the tropical climate debilitated whites. The white settlers were fortunate to have "a docile race who both can and will bear [the climate] for them."

Her brother, the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, had sent rifles ("Beecher's Bibles") to anti-slavery forces in Kansas in the 1850s, and had preached the story of Exodus to his congregation at the outset of the war, of how Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt to the Red Sea, and how the sea parted and allowed the Chosen People to escape while burying their pursuers. "And now our turn has come," he exclaimed. "Right before us lies the Red Sea of War" to drown the South.

After the war, Beecher mellowed and advised fellow northerners to ignore newspaper reports of southern whites attacking former slaves. "You must not be

disappointed or startled because you see in the newspapers accounts of shocking barbarities committed upon these people [freedmen]." Forbearance was a Christian virtue, and northerners should understand that southern whites required a period of adjustment to the sudden reality of freedom. "[A]bove all," northerners must have "patience with Southern men as they are, and patience with Southern opinion as they have been, until the great normal, industrial, and moral laws shall work such gradual changes as shall enable them to pass from the old to the new." Like his sister, Beecher believed that southern problems were beyond mortal solution. Things would work out, whether through God or immutable "laws."

Sentiment was out; reality was in. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., a Union veteran scarred by the war, angrily attributed the conflict and its bloody train to Harriet Beecher Stowe and "that female and sentimentalist portrayal . . . that the only difference between the Ethiopian and the Caucasian is epidermal." White Americans would not make the same mistake again. They would not allow a cloying, feminine Christianity, tugging at the heartstrings to lure young men to their graves for a cause not grounded in reason. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. remarked that the war pushed him across "the threshold of reality." The businessman, not the philosopher, now received Holmes's admiration. "Business," he declared "often seems mean, and always challenges your power to idealize the brute fact – but it hardens the fibre and I think is more likely to make more of a man of one who turns it to success." Philosophy will only get you killed.

Who can blame them? To dwell on a bloody war, the loss of comrades, the carnage of the battlefield, the stench of the hospital, and the hopelessness of the prison was to invite nightmares without end. Military doctors at the time reported soldiers who suffered from extreme "exhaustion" so severe that it was difficult to rouse them from sleep in the morning. They also noted "disordered actions of the heart," a type of arrhythmia traumatized soldiers experienced after combat. When the soldiers returned home after the war, the symptoms persisted. The first professional paper diagnosing what is now termed post-traumatic stress disorder appeared in 1876.

It was much healthier to engage in selective forgetting, to remember courage rather than carnage. Remembering the war in this manner eased the personal pain and facilitated reconciliation.

It was reasonable for northerners to move on. The war generated a booming economy. A beneficent government primed businesses with currency and credit reform, land subsidies, and protective tariffs. The scale and efficiency of Union military operations transferred to the new industries of oil, steel, and railroads, creating new workforces, disorienting for some, but exhilarating and remunerative for many others. Great cities flexed their economic power, and great entrepreneurs demonstrated their creativity. Americans, northerners in particular, had no time for caring about government policies toward the South – a region forgotten, if not gone. Leave to the South its peculiar race relations, its evangelical culture, and its backward economy. If southerners marched backward into the future, northerners hurried forward, unknowing and uncaring.

The new industries, due to their size and the extent of their markets, required a white-collar army to manage and grow their business. The expansion of such jobs in cities was crucial to the creation of a national economy. Although such positions accounted for only 7 percent of total employment by 1880, they ranked among the fastest-growing sectors of the labor force. During the 1870s, the number of clerks in offices quadrupled, and the number of bookkeepers and accountants doubled. Similar spurts of growth occurred in insurance firms, banks, and railroad offices. Traveling salesmen fanned out across the country on the new rail network. Department stores, relatively rare prior to the war, provided employment for clerks, managers, and buyers. A new professional and managerial class emerged – salaried administrators, accountants, bankers, brokers, advertisers, and magazine editors and writers. It also included new professions requiring technical expertise, such as engineers, landscape architects, and interior designers.

Salaries from these jobs fueled dramatic economic growth. Industry churned out a dazzling array of goods for eager and able customers. Between 1865 and 1873, the nation's industrial production increased by 75 percent. To speed these products and the information to market and sell them efficiently, the nation's railroad and telegraph networks expanded significantly. By 1880, 128,000 miles of railway and 760,000 miles of telegraph traversed America – more mileage of each than in all of Europe. The jobs created by economic expansion drew many from Old Europe to the New World. More than eight million immigrants entered the nation during that same time, many absorbed into the burgeoning industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest. One of those immigrants, Andrew Carnegie, declared, "The old nations of the earth creep on at a snail's pace; the Republic thunders past with the rush of the express."

America's future lay in its cities and suburbs. In 1870, for the first time in American history, a majority of citizens no longer lived on farms. Americans were beginning to live a modern life, a life more recognizable to residents of the twenty-first century than to those who lived in the early nineteenth century. Work, living arrangements, leisure activities, and access to technology separated the eras. As journalist and novelist Henry Adams wrote: "In essentials like religion, ethics, philosophy; in history, literature, art; in the concepts of all science . . . the boy of 1854 stood nearer the year one than to the year 1900." The Civil War was the great divide. Though elements of modern life existed before the war, they flourished afterward.

Americans before the war believed they could transcend history and attain perfection as God's Chosen People living in His Chosen Nation. After the war, transcendence, at least in the North, came in the form of science and technology, the visual, verifiable proof of man's conquest of Nature. Not angels but engineers, not saints but scientists, lifted the new American nation. Nature was beautiful so long as it could be made useful. "Nature unadorned is not its highest type of beauty," *Scientific American* explained. "A scene of wildness appeals more powerfully to the senses when it is relieved by the sight of a monument of man's ingenuity in a magnificent bridge or an aqueduct. . . . Nature exists for man."

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) had an enormous impact on American thought and practice in the post-Civil War era. Darwin's theory of natural selection transferred power from God to nature. Scientific laws governed the universe, and as natural and social scientists discovered those laws, people could act in harmony with nature. People once sought faith to uncover truth; now they pursued the scientific method. Andrew Dickson White, president of Cornell University, announced his institution would "afford an asylum for Science [often capitalized] – where truth shall be sought for truth's sake, where it shall not be the main purpose of the Faculty to stretch or cut sciences exactly to fit 'Revealed Religion.'"

Darwin's theory came as a revelation even to those steeped in evangelical theology. In November 1865, Charles Francis Adams Jr. was convalescing from what we would today describe as post-traumatic stress disorder. He came across an essay by the positivist August Comte and it "revolutionized" his "whole mental attitude. I emerged from the theological stage, in which I had been nurtured, and passed into the scientific. I had up to that time never heard of Darwin. . . . From reading [Comte] I date a changed intellectual and moral being."

For the realists of the postwar age, Darwin shattered faith. Andrew Carnegie described the revelatory process he went through after his first introduction to Darwin's work in 1867. "Not only had I got rid of theology and the supernatural, but I had found the truth of evolution. 'All is well since all grows better' became my motto, my true source of comfort."

The concept of evolution suited the prejudices of the age. Evolution implied a slow inexorable process that established a hierarchy of living organisms. Though Darwin made clear that natural selection occurred by chance and that not all adaptations were useful, popularizers of his theory focused on the progressive nature of evolution. These ideas comported with general notions of racial differences. The full title of Darwin's book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, made the racial connection explicit. Human societies evolved much like organisms. At the apex stood western Europeans and Anglo-Americans. The African persisted on the lower end of the evolutionary continuum.

Politics must adhere to scientific truths, and the distinction among races was self-evident. Evolution was impersonal and inexorable. These ideas did not posit a laissez-faire policy toward inferior races. Interventions grounded in scientific research were appropriate to protect the lesser races for their own survival and for the order of the greater society. Both racial segregation and disfranchisement were examples of suitable policies toward the African. Legislation promoting black suffrage and office holding, and land ownership was not appropriate given the inherent limitations of the race. The new discipline of social science, employing empirical research to discover the natural laws through which society operated, could calibrate what policies would benefit the races' different capabilities.

A consensus was forming in the 1870s that transcended party lines. The consensus was that Reconstruction was over. The consensus was stronger for the fact

that northerners connected the unrest and discord fomented by immigrants, crooked politicians, and laborers in their midst to the persistent disorder in the South. Poet and diplomat James Russell Lowell expressed the sentiment of many northern intellectuals, noting, "What is bad among ignorant foreigners in New York will not be good among ignorant natives in South Carolina."

The Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition was a snapshot American consensus in 1876. It was not a summary of the events, ideals, and peoples of the previous century. Yet it offered the visitor a summation of sorts. The fair was a paean to progress. It exalted technology and the making and the inventing of things. It appealed overwhelmingly to the white urban middle class who, though still a minority in the nation, was coming to be synonymous with the national culture.

The first one hundred years of American life were over, the really hard work of building a nation accomplished. America had gone through a gruesome civil war and then a difficult adjustment to peace. And now, the country could focus on consolidating its continental empire, broadening the opportunities for its ambitious citizens, improving their lives with science and industry, all watched over by the benevolent government of a united republic. A new nation had arisen from the crucible of war, and Americans were trying to make sense of the urban, industrial behemoth arising in their midst, for which the giant Corliss steam engine – the Exhibition's centerpiece -- was a fit metaphor. The new nation as a mighty machine powering prosperity and generating opportunity for anyone who could harness its energy. America, realizing the promise of its creation, heralding a century of untrammeled progress.

NOTES

[1] Quoted in Emerson David Fite, *Social and Industrial Conditions in the North During the Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), 151.

[2] Quoted in ibid., 213.

[3] The definitive account of the expansion of the federal government and its partnering with private enterprise during the Civil War is Mark R. Wilson, *The Business of Civil War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

[4] For an excellent discussion of Civil War legislation and its impact, see Heather Cox Richardson, *The Greatest Nation of the Earth: Republican Economic Policies During the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Peter A. Coclanis, "The American Civil War in Economic Perspective: Basic Questions and Some Answers," *Southern Cultures* 2 (Winter 1996): 165-68.

[5] Quoted in John Fiske, *Edward Livingston Youmans: Interpreter of Science for the People* (New York: D. Appleton, 1894), 179. Google Books.

[6] Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (New York: Random House, 1998), 78, 99.

[7] First quote in Ellen Glasgow, *The Battle-Ground* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002; first published in 1902), 175; second quote in Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 58; third quote in E.B. Long, *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 268; final quote in Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 117.

[8] First quote in William Tecumseh Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 601; second quote in Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 209.

[9] See Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), preface.

[10] Quoted in Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 300.

[11] Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002; first published in 1869).

[12] First quote in Hedrick, *Stowe*, 325; second quote in Laura Wallis Wakefield, "'Set a Light in a Dark Place': Teachers of Freedmen in Florida, 1864-1874," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 81 (Spring 2003): 413.

[13] Quoted in Hedrick, *Stowe*, 300.

[14] Quoted in Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 88.

[15] First quote in Michael De Gruccio, "Manhood, Race, Failure, and Reconciliation: Charles Francis Adams, Jr. and the American Civil War," *New England Quarterly* 81 (December 2008): 673; second quote in G. Edward White, *Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: Law and the Inner Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 206.

[16] David Goldfield, et al., *The American Journey: A History of the United States*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2011), 422.

[17] On urban and industrial growth in this era see David Goldfield and Blaine A. Brownell, *Urban America: A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), chapter 7.

[18] Andrew Carnegie, *Triumphant Democracy: or, Fifty Years' March of the Republic* (Boston: Elibron, 2006; first published in 1888), 1.

[19] Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Forgotten Books, 2008; first published in 1919), 44, http://www.forgottenbooks.org

[20] "Useful Improvements Not Opposed to the Harmony of Nature," *Scientific American*, September 29, 1866, 221.

[21] Quoted in Mark A. Noll, "Science, Theology, and Society: From Cotton Mather to William Jennings Bryan," in *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective*, ed. David N. Livingstone, D. G. Hart, and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105.

[22] Quoted in De Gruccio, "Charles Francis Adams Jr.," 670.

[23] Andrew Carnegie, *The Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie and His Essay "The Gospel of Wealth,"* ed. Gordon Hunter (New York: Signet, 2006; first published in 1920), 291.

[24] Michael Les Benedict, "Reform Republicans and the Retreat from Reconstruction," in *The Facts of Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of John Hope Franklin*, ed. Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 69.

[25] See William Dean Howells, "A Sennight of the Centennial," *Atlantic Monthly*, 38 (July 1876): 96.

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