The Legacies of the American Civil War

Any understanding of this nation has to be based, and I mean really based, on an understanding of the Civil War. I believe that firmly. It defined us. The Revolution did what it did. Our involvement in European wars beginning with the First World War did what it did, but the Civil War defined us as what we are, and it opened us to being what we became — good and bad things. And it is very necessary if you're going to understand the American character in the [21st] Century, to learn about this enormous catastrophe in the mid-19th Century. It was the crossroads of our being, and it was a hell of a crossroads.
—Shelby Foote, 6/29/2005

The war was huge in breadth and scope. It was a war not just of arms but of ideologies, a war that penetrated all levels of politics, economics, culture, and social institutions. Many on both sides considered it existential to national survival. Its battlefields stretched across fully half of the nation, their scale new to the North American continent, indeed to the Western Hemisphere. It extended into the surrounding oceans and even crept into the air above us. Destruction of property and institutions crippled the South; death and serious injury touched every family in the nation in one way or another. Social hierarchies changed. The Republic survived but at great cost physically and culturally; its effects reverberating with us even today. Many changes, advancements, and trends came out of the Civil War, along with some situations that did not change. Some of the changes were of great importance to the continuing development of our Republic, others were of lesser importance but significant nonetheless. Many were legacies that led us to who and what we are today, and that still guide and shape us.

Transitory impacts versus long term legacies

Let's begin by defining *legacy* for our purposes here. Drawing upon Yale University Professor David W. Blight, a legacy is "what remains after debates, struggles, and filterings, and is where the past and present meet. There is no event in American history that has caused more discussion and debate and with greater passion as to how the past and present meet than our Civil War. Take, for example, emotional legacies. The number of dead in the war equate per capita to some 13 million Americans today. Slavery was gone; anger at its loss had no end, just as anger that it had existed in the first place. In the South, the economy and the physical landscape was in collapse. Two-thirds of Southern wealth was destroyed in four years. The largest segment of that wealth was slaves—some $3.5 billion worth. Some 40% of all Southern livestock were dead at the end of the war and 50% of all farm machinery destroyed. There was an enormous refugee problem. Mobilization on both sides of people and resources occurred at a level that would be unmatched until World War II. In the South, the war had killed or incapacitated approximately one of every four males from the age of 16 to 45. How do you process that kind of loss and destruction and violence in a society—a nation—that after war's end had to find a way to reconcile? How would this reconciliation happen? The war had been monumental; recovery even more so." [1]

Legacies are enduring, discernible long-term trends that shaped our core identity, values, and institutions. They encompass fundamental political, social, and cultural principles that persist over time and influence our nation's governance, societal norms, and collective memory and which require monumental change to alter their course or be replaced altogether. *Transitional impacts* are changes

that are a hastening or a surge of a trend that was already underway, change that occurs as part of a gradual, ongoing process of adaptation and improvement—ephemeral changes that reflect specific trends, technologies, or practices that are important in the short to medium term but are themselves overtaken by subsequent advancements, innovations, or shifts in needs and preferences. Some events that appear to be legacies are, upon closer reflection, little more than one-time events that reflect change but are not the agents of change themselves.

For example, the Civil War is often called the "first railroad war" because both sides moved unprecedented numbers of troops and supplies long distances to support their military campaigns (think *mass, maneuver, and strategy*). Rail systems would prove their usefulness in the war, but they were already an established part of the commercial infrastructure when the war began. The 1850s had seen enormous growth in the railroad industry. By 1861, some 22,000 miles of track had been laid in the Northern states and 9,500 miles in the South. Rail systems were more extensive in the North because the rivers there did not support the movement of commerce in the same way as river systems did in the South. Little track had yet been laid west of the Mississippi. Our rail systems continued to expand after the war, but not due to our experience in the Civil War per se. As the nation and its transportation needs expanded, rail systems expanded as well. President Lincoln, for example, was pushing the idea of the transcontinental railroad early on, more from a national unity perspective—linking the West more closely to the rest of the Union—than for military advantage. Contrast that, for example, with the growth of our interstate highway system after World War II. Dubbed the Defense Highway System, this was a project initiated by President Eisenhower in the 1950s based on his military assessment of the effectiveness of Hitler's autobahn system built in the 1930s.

The extent to which some trend or change is a legacy of the Civil War must be considered in terms of how the war caused that trend to occur and what the alternatives would have been had the war not occurred. One approach is to consider "what ifs." Many shy away from counterfactuals, but two can be important in determining Civil War legacies, their extent, and their context:

- What would the next several decades have been like had the South not seceded but instead stayed within the Union in spite of Lincoln's election?
- What would the next several decades have been like had secession succeeded? What kind of country did Secessionists want to build, and how might the Union have evolved had the South become a sovereign nation?

The Civil War affected all aspects of our nation. Broadly speaking, legacies can be grouped into three categories: military, cultural and social, and political, albeit several cross over into more than one of these categories. With this framework, let's examine some of the ways the Civil War has affected us over the ensuing 160 years.

MILITARY

Given the scale and duration of combat operations, impacts on military technology, systems, and battlefield management are prime candidates for discussion. Innovations and improvements in these fields, along with the application of principles of warfare (including military strategy, operational art, and

battlefield tactics), were important, as were lessons learned and increases in skills and capabilities, but little set them apart from similar advancements occurring elsewhere in the Western world. Technology increased the tempo and lethality of battles. This would continue in future wars around the globe. The giant leap in terms of range, accuracy, and lethality of weapons systems occurred not in the Civil War but around the world between 1865 and 1914. Our experiences in the Civil War were simply part of the mix.

Moreover, military advancements during the Civil War should be looked at in conjunction with the Crimean War of 1853-1856. Often categorized as a *transitional* war, it is considered the first of the modern wars because it incorporated technologies and practices that foreshadowed later warfare. The US sent a military team to Europe "for the purpose of obtaining information with regard to the military service in general, and especially the practical working of the changes which have been introduced of late years into the military systems of the principal nations of Europe." [2] Their findings fed innovations and improvements in the military forces on both sides in the Civil War. That said, the US was picking up on military technologies and their applications that were already in the works. The Civil War boosted them along, perhaps, and validated their potential, but didn't cause them to become legacies of their own.

Small arms and field artillery

Before the Civil War began, the Union was already industrializing. The war accelerated that, and along with the associated advancements in engineering, metallurgy and casting, made the Union a leading producer of arms and related technology. Industrialization has continued apace ever since.

The increase in firepower expanded the battlefield by lengthening the range of individual weapons and artillery. Troops dug in and built trench systems in depth, often adding obstacles to the defensive systems. This slowed attacks, often stalling them altogether, and increased the casualties of attacking forces.

A case in point is the infantry's shoulder-fired weapon, the *long gun*. The predominant infantry weapon before the Civil War was the smoothbore musket. These lacked rifling, resulting in limited accuracy and range. Their effective range was typically around 80 yards, and they needed to be fired in massed volleys to be effective. Originating in the early 1500s in Europe and becoming a standard for military firearms during the Crimean War, rifled barrels were less common for military use early on due to the difficulty and slower process of loading them compared to smoothbore muskets. The bullet had to fit tightly in the barrel to engage the rifling, making loading difficult, especially after the barrel became fouled with powder residue. With its invention in France in 1849, the Minié ball represented a significant turning point. With a hollow base that expanded upon firing, thus engaging the rifling, this innovation paved the way for the widespread adoption of rifled barrels in military arms.

Rifled muskets significantly improved the accuracy and range of individual soldiers. Combined with the Minié ball, riflemen could achieve accuracy out to 500+ yards, thus increasing lethality at longer distances. 3 Along with easier loading and thus increasing the rate of fire, this contributed to high casualty rates as soldiers were still using tactics designed for the shorter range and lower rate of fire of

smoothbore muskets. The war also saw the development of early repeating rifles, such as the Spencer and Henry rifles, though they were not as widespread as rifled muskets. With the increased lethality, Napoleonic-era linear tactics became less effective, forcing armies to adapt and adopt more defensive positions and increased reliance on fixed and field fortifications.

The Civil War laid the groundwork for further advancements in firearms technology, such as magazine-fed rifles and more reliable repeating mechanisms, which would come to dominate military arsenals in the late 19th century, but this was part of a trend among all industrialized militaries, as were concurrent advancements in field artillery. These changes in weaponry (going from muzzle loading smooth bore muskets to rifles, from muzzle-loaded cannon to breechloaders, from smoothbore solid shot and shells to more advanced projective types) added to increasing use as the war progressed of field and permanent fortifications often turned the Napoleonic tactics taught at West Point at the time into a slaughter-fest.

A New Kind of War Takes Shape

Similarly, the organization and employment of large forces was new to the American way of fighting but not to European powers. With the Civil War, we developed and refined concepts and procedures to fight "big" wars requiring national mobilization, the implementation of the draft, the concept of total war, continental blockade, the handling of large formations (corps level and above), and the "transformation of war from an art to a science, and generalship from the realm of individual inspiration to rigorous study and procedure." [4] These skills were slow to catch on and were virtually lost after the war when we went back to coastal defense and small, constabulary-type of operations against the Indians in the west. World War I brought the need back to us.

An example is the use of joint operations (operations involving two or more military departments working together under a single command). While not foreign to the US military, these were used extensively in the Civil War (for example, Grant's operations down the Mississippi in 1862-3, and amphibious operations at various points along the Atlantic coastline in 1862-1864). They were used effectively but did not come of age until World War II.

Much the same on the ocean and on navigable river systems. The steam-driven ironclads *USS Monitor* and *CSS Virginia* fought one another in the Virginia Capes, and ironclad river craft brought a new dimension to many land battles and campaigns. But in the years immediately following the end of the Civil War, the US Navy quickly fell behind. While the more powerful nations of Europe forged ahead in the building of steam-powered, steel-hulled warships, the US Navy—after a great post-war purge of many of the ships it had acquired during the war—looked much as it had before the war, with wooden hulls and the traditional array of sail-bearing masts dominating the remaining fleet. And so, it went for approximately the next 25 years. [5] In the air, while observation balloons, already in use in Europe since the 1790s, provided faster collection of intelligence about the enemy, aerial technology advanced little until the advent of fixed-wing aviation in pre-World War I days.

Better Communication

Prolonged combat operations drove improvements in technical support of warfare, such as reliance on the telegraph to speed communications; improvements in visual battlefield communications, such as semaphores (two flags) and wigwag (one flag); and the use of railroads to support operations in the field.

The telegraph transformed the way armies communicated and strategized. It provided near-instantaneous two-way communication over long distances, thus facilitating centralized command, real-time battlefield monitoring, swift issuance of orders, and frontline updates that enabled commanders to adjust plans based on current information. It facilitated rapid troop and supply movement, allowing commanders to quickly assess situations and allocate resources. Rapid information dissemination influenced public opinion and supported the war effort. The U.S. Military Telegraph Corps was established soon after the war started to take advantage of this new technology. It was a learning ground for the use of technology in military operations.

Telegraphy also changed the way diplomacy was conducted in the 19th century. Until that time information was exchanged at the speed of a sailing ship or a galloping horse. Even with the additional time required for coding and handling, telegrams were typically available within a few hours of being sent. This speed brought many advantages to policymakers who found that they could respond rapidly to far off crises of whose very existence they would previously have remained ignorant for weeks. (Think of the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 being fought some two weeks *after* the Treaty of Ghent officially ending the War of 1812 had been signed.) Telegraphy increased the centralization of foreign ministries and brought diplomacy into the high-speed age of electricity. [6]

Blacks in Uniform

A crucial legacy was that henceforth African Americans could and would serve in the US military. After the war, four all-Black Regular Army regiments were formed (the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry regiments). They served in the Indian Wars, often facing harsh conditions and prejudice from white officers and soldiers. Black soldiers and sailors (and later, airmen) went on to serve in all the nation's wars. Despite facing segregation and unequal treatment (including unequal pay, limited opportunities for advancement, and social prejudice), their service was often officially recognized with individual and unit decorations and awards.

Improved Battlefield Care, Medical Advances

Estimates of soldiers killed or died of disease during the war vary but are in the range 620,000 to 750,000 (with approximately 58% of those being Union and 42% Confederate), a number approximately equal to the deaths in all other American wars from the Revolution to the Korean War combined.[7] To these numbers can be added wounded and prisoners of war. Despite this toll, there was no official system on either side for notifying next of kin.

Soldiers did not wear dog tags or have any standardized system of personnel records. Hundreds of thousands of bodies remained unidentified, leaving families with no knowledge of how their loved one died, or where they might be buried. When officials did attempt identification, it was often unreliable, resulting in live soldiers being recorded as deceased and dead soldiers being marked as only slightly

wounded. The Civil War highlighted the need for effective soldier identification, leading to the development and eventual standardization of Army dog tags. In the spring of 1865, Clara Barton established the Missing Soldiers Office in Washington, D.C. Her organization eventually helped provide information for about 22,000 soldiers who would have otherwise remained unknown.

Another legacy was the treatment of battlefield wounds, and the general healthcare provided to troops on active duty. With increased lethality on battlefields, medical support assets not only had to be more efficient and effective, they had also to be pushed forward to save lives. This led to the formation of the US Ambulance Corps and the Red Cross. [8] The war led to new surgical techniques primarily because surgeons had so much experience doing amputations. For the first time, many doctors became familiar with what was inside the human body, which led to improved medical education. Field amputations demonstrated the importance of immediate treatment for wounds and fractures. While battlefield trends were already moving in these directions, these improvements were relatively new to the United States and were given a significant boost by the Civil War.

Out of necessity, women on both sides became integral workers caring for the wounded. They played critical roles in the Union's Sanitary Commission providing battlefield care, assisting in surgeries, administering medicines and food to patients, and dressing wounds. Prejudices initially barred women from helping because it was deemed indelicate and improper, but necessity opened the door, allowing them to prove their mettle and giving rise to the organized profession of nursing. [9]

The war brought major advances in the use of anesthesia during operations and bromine for treating gangrene and led to the development of improved prosthetics. Ultimately, the war's lessons led to better design of hospitals, a system of organized medicine, and pensions for veterans. These changes would likely have happened anyway, but the war hastened them and created institutions that we benefit from today.

Embalming in the United States became widespread. Prior to the war, it was not a common practice, but the conflict created a demand for preserving bodies, leading to the adoption of embalming techniques by funeral directors. The war created a need to transport bodies long distances for burial, and embalming was seen as a way to achieve this while minimizing decomposition. The embalming of President Lincoln after his assassination further popularized the practice, solidifying its place in American culture. [10]

CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Culture and society are two aspects of human life that are closely related. Culture is the shared beliefs, values, and behaviors of a group, while society is the structure of the groups and how people interact with each other. For our purposes here, it's easiest to combine them into a single category.

Cultural Identity

Since the first colonies were established along the Atlantic coast, we have been a nation on the move. By and large, that was accomplished in waves of new arrivals, some of whom settled in or near populated

areas, but many pushing through, headed westward to the frontier and new lands. Those heading west were often accompanied by those that were not faring well economically or socially in the eastern communities and were looking for a new start. We were constantly expanding our frontier, learning what the land was about. With the Civil War, this became even more pronounced as men and women left their farms and their locales, joined the army, and went on extended campaigns in states they would not have otherwise taken the opportunity to see. They and the nation became more sophisticated for it.

When Confederate soldiers returned to their homes, they were greeted by a society significantly changed from the way of life they had left. For many, resuming their former vocations proved extremely challenging, rife with difficulties in sustaining a livelihood. They coped with the Federal occupation, the emancipation of slaves, and wartime ruin. The emancipation of slaves posed an almost insurmountable problem. What was to be done with nearly four million people, largely illiterate and lacking training in anything but tending crops, if they left the farms as many did? There were palliative efforts made by both Southerners and Northerners, but sharecropping (a form of slavery closely related to wage slavery in the industries of the time) became a mainstay for many, black and white. There was widespread disorder and a breakdown of government.

The North had to deal with the dispersal of the great armies and the challenge of occupation duty. Adding to the mix, Union soldiers typically respected their defeated foes. As some Union soldiers went home, others had to maintain order, protect the formerly enslaved, cope with debt and judicial matters, and provide social services for both African American and white Southerners.

The war created a large population of veterans, leading to the establishment of veterans' organizations and the commemoration of battles and soldiers through monuments and memorials. This has shaped how Americans remember and honor their military history. It was Southern veterans that developed and initially sustained the Lost Cause narrative.

The Lost Cause

That Southern view manifested itself as the Lost Cause, a narrative created by white Southerners to preserve their honor, control the historical narrative, and justify the cause for which they fought and for their subsequent loss. It also served to suppress local dissent and restrict African American freedom and political power. It was a move to harness the power of culture to shape public consciousness and, by extension, political ideals and political power. The story of the South, the Confederacy, did not die. It was continually taken up, revised, and retold in every post-war generation. It carried great weight in the nation's perceptions of the conflict for the next 100 years. [11]

> *Surrender means that the history of this heroic struggle will be written by the enemy; that our youth will be trained by Northern school teachers; will learn from Northern school books their version of the War; will be impressed by all the influences of history and education to regard our gallant dead as traitors, and our maimed veterans as fit subjects for derision.*
>
> *Major Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne*
> *Division Commander, Army of Tennessee*
> *January 2, 1864*

For many with roots in the South, the Lost Cause was ancestral history that represented the Confederacy in a positive, chivalrous, honorable light versus others that use it as a metaphor for conservativism (depending on how one defines it) and a theme for resistance to an overreaching, overly liberal federal government—a battle cry, as it were. Antebellum Southerners were morally superior individuals that had to buckle under the greater force of the Union.

To large segments of American society [including me], embracing the Lost Cause narrative was a path toward reconciliation, of accepting the Civil War as a part of our history and Secessionists and Confederates as Americans. But as the civil rights movement progressed, a view became prevalent that embracing Confederate icons smacked too much of acceptance. The nation could accept the Confederacy, Secession, and the Civil War as history but not as something to be celebrated. That conflict continues today. [12]

Improved US Postal Service

The war saw a dramatic increase in the volume of mail as soldiers and their families sought to communicate with one another. Letters became a vital means of maintaining connections, sharing news, and providing emotional support during the war. The Army established military mail services to facilitate communication between soldiers and their families. This included the use of special postal routes and the establishment of post offices near military camps and along supply lines. The use of railroads for mail delivery became more prominent. In 1863, Congress established uniform postage rates for letters and packages, which simplified the mailing process and made it more accessible to the general public. The war also saw the introduction of prepaid postage stamps, which became widely used after the war.

An interesting twist in improving the mail system for soldiers in the field came about as the Union headed into the 1864 presidential election. President Lincoln was running a tight reelection campaign. He knew he had widespread support among soldiers in the field, most of whom would be unable to vote in person in their home precincts. A system of mail-in ballots was inaugurated. Its successful use and popularity led to its use during subsequent wars and spread to the use of absentee balloting in general. Concerns about its fairness and accuracy were matters of contention in 1864, but it proved itself. Despite its successes over the years hence, the extent of use of absentee balloting remains problematic.

Memorial Day

After the burial of many Union and Confederate soldiers, “Decoration Day” rituals began to spring up, which included placing fresh flowers on soldiers’ graves. In the spring of 1868, General John A. Logan, commander of the Grand Army of the Republic (the largest Union Army veterans’ organization), officially designated May 30 “for the purpose or strewing flowers or otherwise decorating the graves or comrades who died in the defense or their country,” and what eventually came to be known as Memorial Day was born.

Marriage Patterns, Gender Roles, and Women’s Rights

In many regions, especially in the South, the war resulted in a notable surplus of women, condemning many to spinsterhood. Estimates are that the South mobilized 75-85% of its white male population of military age by the end of the war versus some 50% in the North. [13] In the South, up to 25% of white

men of military age were dead. In 1870, some Southern counties had 20-30% more women than men in certain age groups. Given the large number of men killed, women faced challenges in finding partners. This imbalance led to increased competition among women for available men, potentially altering marriage dynamics. [14]

The impact was not uniform across the country. In the South, the shortage of men was more pronounced, leading to a slower recovery in marriage rates compared to regions less affected by the conflict. Moreover, many young men enlisting in the military postponed their plans for marriage. Soldiers returning home often faced psychological challenges, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD (then referred to as "soldier's heart" or "nostalgia") that could hinder their ability to engage in relationships and commit to marriage.

The war also resulted in a significant number of widows. Many faced economic hardships as they lost not only their husbands but also their primary breadwinners. This economic strain could limit their prospects for remarriage as some prioritized financial stability over marriage. Widows sometimes faced social stigma, which could affect their ability to remarry. The societal expectations surrounding widowhood and remarriage varied, but many women found themselves in precarious positions.

The war brought about shifts in gender roles and societal expectations. With many men away at war, women took on roles traditionally held by men, including managing farms and businesses. This shift empowered women and changed their perspectives on marriage and independence, leading a reevaluation of what marriage meant. Loss during the war made many people seek deeper emotional connections and stability in relationships, potentially changing the criteria for choosing a partner.

The Civil War dramatically changed perceptions of women's capabilities and roles in society—not necessarily by choice, but by circumstance. The push for women's rights, including the right to vote (the Suffrage Movement), gained momentum in the post-war years. The XIX Amendment, ratified in 1920, was a significant milestone in this ongoing movement. Women’s activism continues today, addressing issues such as reproductive rights, workplace equality, and gender-based violence. It took many years for public opinion to catch up and for laws to be changed, but the old idea of women as chattel was destroyed by the realities of the war and life afterward.

The Press

With the advent of the telegraph, newspapers were able to quickly receive reports from great distances. Thus, newspapers both North and South were able to provide the public with updates on political issues, battle results, large-scale troop movements, and casualty reports.

Arguably little different before the war (going back to our earliest days as a nation) and afterwards (through today), newspapers were the propaganda machines of the day. Though not universally true, many published biased accounts of events, “factual” testimonials of enemy atrocities, articles proselytizing for specific political and military goals, and emotionally charged letters from citizens affected by the conflict. Conscription, use of slaves as soldiers, and the validity of total war were hotly

debated in the papers. The newspapers controlled the ebb and flow of public opinion, and a particularly popular circulation could determine the outcomes of city or state politics.

Our view of ourselves as a nation

Words matter. They reflect our values. The political crises of the antebellum period strained the concept of the official motto of the United States: *E pluribus unum* – out of many, one. The Union's victory in the Civil War reaffirmed it. We no longer referred to ourselves as "*the Union*." "*These* United States" became "*The* United States." We changed from a collection of independent states to a single nation (or national unit). [15] Moreover, Union soldiers traveling back and forth over huge segments of the country gave them a sense of nation. Occupation of the South during Reconstruction strengthened it. Conversely, Southern resistance was brought on, at least at some level, not just by political and economic concerns but by a fear of losing Southern (cultural) identity.

> *[W]e became a nation only with the Civil War.*
> *Robert Penn Warren*
> *"The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial"*

Literature and Art

Even today, the Civil War and its aftermath is a significant theme in American television, movies, and plays; fiction and nonfiction literature; paintings, drawings, and photos; discussion groups and historical reenactors. Works by authors like Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and contemporary writers reflected upon the complexities of the war and its aftermath. African American influence spread into the national culture—literature, music, dance, and political philosophies. Each of these influenced American narratives and the ways the Civil War is remembered—through monuments, memorials, and commemorative events. They continue to spark debates about race, history, and national identity.

Education and Historical Scholarship

The Civil War permeated all aspects of our education, becoming a central influence in how history is taught at all levels in public schools and higher education. Historians examining various perspectives, including those of marginalized groups, continue to shape public understanding of American history and the narratives surrounding the war, slavery, and civil rights.

Of particular note is the Morrill Act of 1862, which set aside 30,000 acres of Federal land in each state for the purpose of building colleges or universities. [16] Among the most significant pieces legislation of the period, it proved invaluable following the war in helping the country rebuild by educating a new generation of men in agriculture, mechanics, and military tactics (the beginnings of today's ROTC programs) because it made higher education accessible to the "common man" for the first time. Previously, higher education had been the purview of the elite.

The Act did not mandate that states accept the land grants or establish colleges. It left the decision to each state's legislature. This approach respected the principle of states' rights, a key concern for those who questioned the act's constitutionality. No state in rebellion or insurrection against the government of the United States could qualify for this land grant, which eventually provided another incentive to rejoin the Union after war's end. [17] States did, of course, take advantage of the opportunities presented.

The Act was the first delegated federal program in our history. For the first time, states implemented a federally legislated and funded program to achieve the shared objective of higher education. This early cooperation between the federal and state governments was the beginning of a grant-in-aid program and established a foundation on which much future legislation was based. [18] The act was amended in 1890 to create what are known today as Historically Black Universities, including Tuskegee and Alabama A & M. Seventy schools were created originally, and many have become some of our best—Alabama University, Auburn University, Ohio State, MIT, Cornell, University of California.

Heroes and National Symbols

Many became famous and infamous for their roles in the war, their names echoing in the histories and popular stories of the war and its aftermath—men and women, North and South. Two were paramount: Abraham Lincoln and Robert Edward Lee—models of command qualities, leadership skills, and political and military virtues. [19] Lee was a hero of reconciliation, did everything possible to achieve it, and was respected by Lincoln. Lincoln was the savior of the Union and the Great Emancipator.

Lee has been on five US postage stamps. In all, a total of eight Confederates have been subjects on US postage stamps. This contrasts with about thirty Northern personalities similarly honored. (Confederates On US Postage Stamps - Sons of Confederate Veterans Secession Camp #4.)

POLITICS

International Influence and "America First"

The outcome of the war resulted in a strengthening of US foreign power and influence, as the definitive Union defeat of the Confederacy firmly demonstrated the strength of the federal government and restored its legitimacy to handle the sectional tensions that had complicated external relations in the antebellum period. For example, the renewed strength of the government, now with a united military, led to the defeat of French intervention in Mexico and hastened the confederation of Canada in 1867. [20]

Union victory solidified the idea of a unified nation with a unique destiny, a core tenet of American exceptionalism. "America First," initially a non-interventionist stance, also came to be seen by some as a manifestation of American exceptionalism by prioritizing domestic interests and national sovereignty over all matters relating to foreign relations, and a desire to lead the world while focusing on prioritizing the nation's own interests. Moreover, for internal ("non-international") armed conflicts going on around the world, the Civil War became a reference point because it contributed to a body of international law specifically regarding internal conflicts. [21]

The end of slavery

Some disagree even today as to why the war was fought: states' rights versus ending slavery. Slavery was the *sine qua non* of the war; it stood at the center of the conflict. A central legacy of the war is the imprint slavery and the enslaved left with us. It is woven into the fabric of who we are, how we see ourselves, and how we are perceived by others around the world. Abolition was not the original goal, albeit many in the South worried that it was. Nonetheless, the war ended slavery in America. While it

came to pass with the XIII Amendment (1865), African Americans (prior slaves as well as those of slave ancestry) did not achieve full equality, either legally or socially, for another 100 years or so. The ideological and cultural conflict was not over; it just changed form.

What were the ideologies? The tension between the commitment to equal opportunity and the quest to protect property (in this case, slaves), created a vicious cycle. The country was enthralled to a political pattern: Southern states (agrarian, ruled by a pro-slavery elite) were essentially autonomous with limited immigration versus a more (but certainly not completely) egalitarian Northern states with their industrializing economy sans slavery, that welcomed European immigration to feed industrial workforce needs, and a stronger federal influence vis-à-vis individual states. [22] The South had a social hierarchy with white male elites at the top, led by Southern plantation owners, and the subordination of non-whites and women. [23] The view held by this small group of Southern elitists was that some people were better than others and had the right to rule versus the view held by many (but by no means all) in the North that all should be treated equally before the law and have the right to a "saner" government. [24] Southerners generally held that government must be limited solely to the protection of life, liberty, and property. [25] The seeds of this dichotomy were planted in the Declaration of Independence—all men are created equal, yet slavery was an accepted practice. These ideologies can be traced from colonial times down through the centuries to today. [26]

From the secessionist point of view, the Civil War had been a principled struggle against tyranny, especially the tyranny of a federal government increasingly disassociated with the institution of slavery and enamored with crony capitalism. When the fighting ended and Confederate field forces surrendered and went home, there was no peace treaty, no formal abnegation of the Southern antebellum social and cultural principles. Confederate soldiers and government officials were reintegrated into the Union via various amnesty programs and oaths of allegiance; Confederate states were reintegrated into the Union through the process of Reconstruction. Both were regarded in the South with varying degrees of repugnancy. The profound tension between America's two fundamental beliefs, the quality (extent) of opportunity and protection of property, remained, however, having moved from the battlefields back to the political arena where it had been before secession. [27] Secession leaders believed the South, not the North, upheld the values of the Constitution. The outcome of the war did not change that view. If anything, it reinforced it.

> *Wars don't end just when people sign a paper to say they are no longer going to fight. That just moves the war to another space.*
> *—Jeremiah Suri, University of Texas at Austin*

Civil Rights

Slaves were freed, but they remained in America and began a quest for equal rights. The immediate aftermath of the war saw the Reconstruction era, a formal if politically disjointed effort to integrate the formerly enslaved people into society. It faced significant backlash and ultimately failed, but it laid the groundwork for future civil rights movements. The struggle for civil rights surged throughout the nation in the mid-20th century, leading to landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and continues today.

The Civil War led to the abolishment of slavery, but not of racism—nationwide, not just in the South. Reconstruction, which ran from 1865 to 1877, ultimately failed, overtaken by a resurgence of political power in the South. This led to exploitation of Black Americans across the land—sharecropping (which ensnared poor whites as well), segregation, and the inequality of economic opportunities and political power, for example—the establishment of the Ku Klux Klan, widespread violence, the Great Migration in the early 1900s, and Jim Crow laws. [28] Segregation remained a way of life into the 1960s, with racial violence, including lynchings, well into the 20th century. Only with the Civil Rights movement beginning in the 1950s have we seen a slow but steady turnaround with key Supreme Court decisions (e.g., Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954) and substantive legislation (e.g., various extensions and amendments to the Voting Rights Act). In the 1990s and gaining strength in the past two decades, we have seen growing public outcry of Confederate symbols and monuments to Confederate leaders in municipal and state facilities. This has not been without controversy and backlash and continues today.

As a case in point, Nottoway Plantation. A historic plantation house located near White Castle, Louisiana, Nottoway became a popular resort destination and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. On May 15, 2025, a fire broke out in the plantation home, destroying the main house. The owners stated they plan to rebuild and restore the historic mansion, but opposition immediately arose. Many said they were glad to see it burn. As one said, "Some call it a tragedy, but for many Black folks, it feels like a small act of justice. That house was built by enslaved hands and later turned into a wedding venue that profited off our pain." That view was typical of many, but not all Blacks whose ancestors were slaves. As of June 30, 2025, Nottoway remains closed and its future is uncertain. (After Nottoway Plantation burned down, what should come next - Axios New Orleans.)

Economic impacts

The economy of the South, which relied heavily on slave labor and agriculture, was destroyed by the war. It struggled to recover in the decades following, facing challenges related to labor, infrastructure, banking, and finance. In the North, however, the economy prospered after the war. The population grew, agriculture flourished, and new industries emerged. An era of rapid economic growth began.

Slaves had been the most valuable segment of property in the South, cumulatively valued at more than $4 billion. It was replaced by paid labor (as poorly paid and exploited as it may have been) without remuneration to slave owners. Emancipation also resulted in an economic loss of almost $2 billion to Southern planters due to the decline in cotton production associated with the end of slavery and the breakup of the plantation system.

By virtue of the quality and quantity of its cotton, the South had long been an informal economic lynchpin of Britain. By the mid-19th century, the cotton South was to industrial Britain what Saudi Arabia and the other oil-producing nations became in the late twentieth century to the industrial nations of the West and eastern Asia—the source of a key industrial raw material, ruled by an elite as reactionary as it was rich. Appeased by the cotton-mill capitalists of New England, the Southern planters used their domination of the federal government to thwart plans for the state-sponsored industrialization and modernization of the United States, preferring a regime with a weak center and powerful states. [29]

The reign of cotton gave way to the rule of rail. Forged by President Lincoln and Congress during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the United States became a continental nation with an increasingly industrialized economy, not a decentralized confederation with an agrarian economy. The federal government, the population, and the country itself all got bigger. The size and role of the federal government began a dramatic expansion, starting a trend that has never reversed. In 1860, the last full year before the fighting began, the federal budget was $78 million. By 1867, the first year in which the war could be eliminated as a major economic factor, the federal budget had grown almost fivefold, to $376.8 million. Federal spending never again dipped below $300 million a year. [30]

Before the war, the South was stronger than the North economically. The burgeoning war production in the North and the devastation in the South wrought by the war caused a decisive shift in regional economic power that lasted into the 1950's as the South slowly rebuilt its economic base. The shift was hastened by the advent of air conditioning after WWII, which allowed heat-sensitive industries to take advantage of lower labor costs in the South.

The war destroyed the South's banking system and eliminated a major part of the South's antebellum capital stock. The sudden disappearance of both capital and labor meant that the agricultural economy of the South had to be completely restructured. The country's commercial aristocracy changed, from Southern slave-owning plantation elites to industrial magnates and financiers, and saw the rise of labor unions. The population began shifting northward, from rural to urban—a shift that didn't abate until the aforementioned advent of air conditioning in the 1950s.

Manifest Destiny

The war bolstered the philosophy of Manifest Destiny, "the belief that it was our duty to settle the continent, conquer, and prosper." [31] More than any other president, President Polk pursued Manifest Destiny. [32] The term was first published in the July issue of the Democratic Review in 1845, in an editorial by a journalist named John L. O'Sullivan, but O'Sullivan had been writing of the concept for at least six years. In 1839, in the November issue of *The United States Democratic Review*, O'Sullivan wrote an article titled "*The Great Nation of Futurity*". This would involve conquering lands held by Mexico and various American Indian tribes, and in the 1850's was intertwined with the westward expansion of slave states. The racial undertones of Manifest Destiny cannot be ignored.

The war and its aftermath reinforced the belief that the United States had a unique role in the world, furthering the notion of Manifest Destiny. The United States continued westward migration and commerce. Westward expansion led to numerous military campaigns against American Indian tribes. The pursuit of Manifest Destiny was often used to justify these actions, portraying Indigenous peoples as obstacles to progress and civilization. The completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 facilitated this expansion, making it easier for settlers to move westward and fulfill the vision of Manifest Destiny.

The purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, often referred to as "Seward's Folly," was part of this expansionist vision. Its acquisition was justified by the belief that the US should control more land and

resources.

Cuba, having been in rebellion against Spain for 10 years, became a target. It was previously a slave-holding colony administered by Spain. It was a luring target of opportunity. The Army quickly organized to fight and finished its war with Spain in less than a year—a war brought on in no small part by “Yellow journalism” in the 1890s. The American public felt the pride of victory as a symbol of the responsibility to spread the American model of democracy to other parts of the globe, beginning with the Spanish holdings in the Philippians, Guam, and Cuba.

Pursuit of Manifest Destiny was not so much a legacy as it was an acceleration of a philosophy already in play (e.g., the Monroe Doctrine and westward expansion). It was a significant impact of the war, nonetheless.

In the thirty years after the war's end, ten new states were admitted. The country's population grew 142% between 1860 and 1900; 31% of that growth was due to immigration. The percentage of the population that was classified as urban doubled, from 19.8% in 1860 to 39.6% in 1900, marking the emergence of an industrial, increasingly diverse, and economically dynamic nation. Even those poor white men who survived the war could not rebuild into prosperity. The war took from the South its monopoly of global cotton production, locking poor southerners into profound poverty from which they would not begin to recover until the 1930s, when the New Deal began to pour federal money into the region. [33]

Strengthening of the Federal Government

Ours is a representative democracy within a constitutional federal republic. It is a federal system characterized by a sharing of power between the national government and the governments of the individual states. Governmental power is limited by the Constitution, which is the supreme law of the land; and the national government is structured with a system of checks and balances across its three branches of government.

From the beginning, there has been a growing tension *between* the powers of the federal government vis-à-vis those of the states, as well as *within* the federal government between the powers of the executive branch vis-a-vis the legislative and judicial branches. This tension spurred not only the formation of formal political parties. It was also integral to secession and an increasing use of unenumerated authorities by the federal government. As originally ratified, the Constitution focused on prohibitions and limits of government power more than it provided for it—"Congress shall make no law…” and such. Restrictions to government power were at the heart of the Bill of Rights (particularly the X Amendment) and can also be seen in the XI and XII Amendments. This changed with the Civil War and the passage of the XIII, XIV, and XV Amendments (collectively known as the *Reconstruction Amendments*), which expanded federal power at the expense of states’ rights and autonomy. It established precedents for federal intervention in various aspects of governance, civil rights, and economic policy. This continued to evolve in the years following the war, fundamentally altering the relationship between the states and the national government.

Throughout the war, President Lincoln issued numerous executive orders and directives to manage the war effort, including the organization of the military, allocation of resources, and management of wartime industries. Their use continued after war's end, reaching new heights in the 21st century.

The war led to creation of new federal agencies, which expanded the executive branch's administrative capacity. This allowed the President to exert greater control over the war effort and federal resources, often without legislative oversight or approval, and reduced Congress's ability to influence executive actions. Moreover, the judiciary's role in overseeing these new agencies was limited as courts typically deferred to executive authority in matters related to national defense and wartime governance. This created a situation where the executive branch operated with significant autonomy.

The Civil War also solidified federal authority to intervene in state affairs, particularly regarding civil rights and liberties. Examples include President Lincoln's suspension of the *writ of habeas corpus*, suppression of dissent, and the use of military tribunals to try civilians accused of crimes, the use of federal troops to occupy southern states and directly intervene in state governments, the establishment of national banks and a national currency via the National Banking Act of 1863, the institution of a national draft via the Enrollment Act of 1863, the subsequent compelling of citizens to serve in the military regardless or state laws or preferences, the partial freeing of slaves by executive decree via President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the abolition of slavery altogether and the securing of rights for African Americans via the *Reconstruction Amendments*, which extended to intervening in state laws that sought to restrict the rights of African Americans (e.g., Black Codes). The fight for equality and justice for Black Americans continued long after the war. [34] These measures were inevitable due to normal modernization of society—economic industrialization, westward expansion, population growth, increasing international involvement, and national financing of the war—but the war certainly hastened them along.

Union victory did not lessen *ante bellum* political polarization. Broad issues of race, states' rights, and federal authority continued to be contentious. The Democratic and Republican parties both survived the war and have held their spots as the dominant national political parties ever since.

While the first twelve amendments limited the power of the national government, the XIII Amendment increased it by putting Congress in charge of guaranteeing freedom. It did not just free the slaves. Some argue it freed the nation (the "common man") from oligarchy. It transformed America. [35]

The war saved the Union

The most important legacy was survival of the Union. American exceptionalism continued, and we prospered as a unified nation. Note that Secessionists believed they were upholding the Constitution while the North was perverting it. This friction continues today; e.g., was secession legal under the Constitution, what is the right balance of centralized government control versus states' rights, the applicability of the X Amendment, and so on.

How long would the Union have lasted had secession succeeded? President Lincoln's paramount goal was the preservation of the Union. He recognized that if secession succeeded, the Republic might soon disappear altogether. In the 1810's, New England had had strong secessionist sentiment based on their economic need for close relations with Great Britain. If London were to have recognized the sovereignty of the Confederacy, would this secessionist tendency in New England be reborn? The economic livelihood of the upper Mississippi and Ohio River basins depended on the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans for export of its agricultural products. Had the South seceded, they would have been more beholden to Richmond than to Washington to keep that flow open. And given the geographic distance of the Pacific Coast from the eastern half of the United States —its virtual isolation due to the Great Basin, the Badlands and the Rockies—how long would it have been before California, Oregon, and Washington decided to chart their own course?

President Lincoln knew that to preserve the Union, it had to remain united. That was the point of his "United we stand, divided we fall" mantra in his *House Divided* speech in 1858. This was the focus of his national strategy. It was a political decision. His opposition to slavery notwithstanding, preservation of the Union came first.

SUMMING UP

The Civil War transformed the nation in terms of its cultural and political landscape and redefined the structure and dynamics of federal authority, establishing legacies that would resonate throughout American history. It also confirmed the concept of permanency for the nation rather than it being a union of convenience. The US maintained its status as a single, increasingly powerful republic and went forward in a way that economically, militarily, and culturally wielded an enormous amount of influence that would not have been possible for either component had the Confederacy emerged victorious. Had the Confederacy seceded, we would have had at least two republics in North America. Each would have been vying for greater roles on the continent and on the world stage, but those two as a pair would not have wielded the same amount of influence that a single republic, *the* United States, could and would wield. [36]

The net impact of the Civil War was positive in that it reaffirmed the values included in the Preamble of our Declaration of Independence, which recognized the unalienable rights and basic equality of humans, including their right to political expression. The full realization of these values would still be a long time coming, but Union victory kept that light burning.

Constitutional issues still come into play. This has been the case since the first day of the Constitutional Convention—wording, intent, interpretations, and how to make it work to further the accomplishment of goals. Its guard rails were its checks and balances between the establishment and implementation of authority and policies. The most important Civil War legacy is that the republic survived, and our pursuit of American exceptionalism continued.

That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles -- right and wrong -- throughout the world.

They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings.

—Abraham Lincoln
October 15, 1858, at Alton, Illinois

Many thanks to April Harris for her valuable guidance and editorial support and to the Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table's "Little Round Table" for their cogent insights. --Emil

Notes –

[1] *HIST 119: The Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1845-1877; Lecture 27, Legacies of the Civil War, Overview, circa 2017. Blight is a Sterling Professor of History, African American Studies, and American Studies at Yale University. He is also the director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. Blight has written several books, including Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom, which won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 2019.*

[2] *What started as a war between Czarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire in October 1853 soon expanded to include Britain and France on the Ottoman side, the two nations declaring war on Russia on March 28, 1854. A US Military Commission to Europe and the Crimean War was formed by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis (yes, that Jefferson Davis). A small commission of three officers: Major Richard Delafield, Corps of Engineers, as the chief of the Commission, Major Alfred Mordecai, Ordnance Corps, and Captain George Brinton McClellan, Corps of Engineers (who would later play a senior leadership role in the US Army during the Civil War). Traveling through Europe and Russia, they arrived in Crimea on October 8, 1855, and remained until November 2. They viewed the conflict from the British and Ottoman sides; they were refused inspection of Russian and French lines. Their individual reports were submitted somewhat tardily from 1857 through 1860. Together, these reports probably provided the most comprehensive guide to European warfare of the period. (Frame, 48-65.)*

[3] *Still, the effect of rifled firearms was less than is often portrayed for two reasons: 1. the muzzle velocity was low, ~ 1000 fps, which has a significant effect on the size of the beaten zone at longer ranges. For instance, to hit a standing man at 500 yards, the shooter's range estimation (not often taught) had to be accurate to less than 30 yards; otherwise, the round would pass overhead or fall short. 2. Visibility was severely limited by black powder smoke after the first volley, degrading accuracy. Thus, even on open ground, distances between opposing formations often were 70 – 80 yards. Interestingly, modern infantry engagements average less than 150 yards.*

[4] *"A Day in September; The Battle of Antietam and the World It Left Behind," Stephen Budiansky.*

[5] *Lt. Cmdr. Thomas J. Cutler, US Navy, "Metamorphosis: The Navy at the End of the Nineteenth Century: 1865-1900 - Part I," Naval History, April 2025.*

[6] *Hochfelder, "The Telegraph."*

[7] *See Civil War Casualties | American Battlefield Trust and New Estimates of US Civil War mortality from full-census records - PubMed.*

[8] *Florence Nightingale an English social reformer and statistician, and founder of modern nursing, came to prominence while serving in the Crimean War. She organized care for wounded soldiers and significantly reduced death rates by improving hygiene and living standards. (Wikipedia.) Also, see U.S. Ambulance Corps - Wikipedia.*

[9] *The United States Sanitary Commission, published by the American Battlefield Trust at battlefields.org.*

[10] *Wiki AI and When You Die, You'll Probably Be Embalmed. Thank Abraham Lincoln For That, Brian Walsh, Smithsonian Magazine, November 1, 2017.*

[11] *Stephanie McMurry, "Legacies of the Civil War." C-SPAN*

[12] *The Lost Cause narrative is a sensitive, contentious issue today. The brief discussion given to it here does not do it justice. For more detail, see "The Lost Cause: Moonlight and Magnolias" at www.tvcwrt.org/nooks-crannies.*

[13] *Gary Gallagher, as cited in The Effect of the Civil War on Southern Marriage Patterns - PMC.*

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Gary Gallagher, "Legacies of the Civil War." C-SPAN.*

[16] *One of three historic bills, the other two being the Homestead Act, which promised 160 acres of free public land largely in the West to settlers who agreed to reside on the property for five years or more, and the Pacific Railroad Act, which made construction of a transcontinental railroad possible. Doris Kearns Goodwin, "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln; New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005; 461.*

[17] *Judi Masson-Pickel, "Morrill Act of 1862," Center for the Study of Federalism, 2006, Morrill Act of 1862 | Center for the Study of Federalism.*

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *See https://images.app.goo.gl/zEtdnriaEVEFc55YA.*

[20] *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian.*

[21] *John Witt, "Legacies of the Civil War." C-SPAN.*

[22] *Heather Cox Richardson, "To Make Men Free: A History of the Republican Party," xxvi.*

[23] *Heather Cox Richardson on "How the South Won the Civil War" - YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTvlDSMQqeQ).7[24] Heather Cox Richardson In Conversation with Charlotte Clymer, November 1, 2024.*

[25] *William F. Buckley, Jr., Heather Cox Richardson on "How the South Won the Civil War" (video).*

[26] *Andrew Delbanco, "Legacies of the Civil War." C-SPAN.*

[27] *Richardson, "To Make Men Free: A History of the Republican Party," xi.*

[28] *The KKK was not the only secretive society formed in the wake of the Civil War. There were several others, among them the Union League, or Loyal League. Chapters formed in states throughout the South during Reconstruction. Their purposes included securing the Black vote for the Republican Party, mobilizing labor protests, and promoting voter registration. Their protests and agitation activities fed social unrest but did not include deliberate violence and intimidation, as was the case with the KKK. Union League influence waned as Reconstruction ended.*

[29] *Lind, Land of Promise, 13.*

[30] *Legacy - The Civil War: 150 Years - The National Park Service.*

[31] *"America's Manifest Destiny," America's Manifest Destiny | The American Experience in the Classroom.*

[32] *James K. Polk | Miller Center.*

[33] *Heather Cox Richardson, Letters from an American (Substack), November 8, 2024.*

[34] *The Revenue Act of 1861 was an initial attempt to raise funds for the war. Among its provisions, it levied the first income tax ever levied on American citizens. It proved insufficient to meet the government's needs and was replaced the Revenue Act of 1862, which, in turn, was replaced by the Revenue Act 0f 1864. Congress repealed the income tax in 1872, but the concept did not disappear. The XVI Amendment, ratified February 3, 1913, established Congress's right to impose a Federal income tax, and they have been with us ever since. (16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Federal Income Tax (1913) | National Archives.)*

The Legal Tender Act of 1862 authorized the issuance of paper money to finance the war. It made these notes ("greenbacks") legal tender for most debts, both public and private, marking a significant shift from the long-standing policy of using only gold and silver coins or local specie. The constitutionality of the act was challenged in the courts, and the Legal Tender Cases eventually upheld Congress's power to issue paper money as legal tender. (Wiki AI.)

[35] *Heather Cox Richardson, "To Make Men Free: A History of the Republican Party," 50-51.*

[36] *Gary Gallagher, "Legacies of the Civil War**."** C-SPAN.*

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