ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965

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In April 1961 white southerners launched the eagerly awaited one hundredth anniversary commemoration of the American Civil War with a spectacular fireworks 'bombardment' of Fort Sumter. The Confederate attack on this Federal outpost in the harbour at Charleston, South Carolina, had initiated four years of ghastly fighting that saved the Union and liberated 4 million black slaves at a cost of at least 750,000 combatants on both sides.

The U.S. government's Civil War Centennial Commission had scheduled its fourth annual meeting in Charleston to coincide with the events in South Carolina. Having assumed that the centennial was of interest largely to whites, the commission's leading officers were taken by surprise when New Jersey's state centennial agency demanded that one of its delegates, a black woman named Madaline A. Williams, be accommodated in the same downtown hotel as the commission's other guests. For Charleston was a racially segregated town and predictably the hotel could find no space for Mrs Williams, a Democrat who was married to the president of the Newark branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Rightly sensing that liberal New Jerseyans were trying to undermine their lilywhite commemoration, the centennial commission's leading officials insisted publicly that they had no control over a state's racial customs. The story quickly became front-page news, inducing the new president, John F. Kennedy, to criticise the agency in a press conference on 21 March. Wiser heads on the commission eventually prevailed and the delegates reconvened at Charleston's desegregated U.S. Navy base. But the damage had been done. The Civil War centennial was a national embarrassment before the event was underway. "Just where in the first place the idea of the Civil War Centennial came from we don't know," mused one commentator, "but we suspect the Russians." Another described the commemoration as "the emptiest and most tedious event ever inflicted upon a free people."[1]

It had all gone horribly wrong. The centennial had been planned in the late 1950s as a way of preventing ordinary TV-obsessed, hamburger-munching Americans from going

[1] Cleveland Armory, "First of the Month", *Saturday Review*, April 1, 1961; *New York Post,* March 30, 1961.

soft in the battle against the godless Soviet Union and its communist allies. Several high-profile heritage projects in the era were designed to highlight America's commitment to liberty and freedom. The Freedom Train, a traveling collection of the republic's canonical documents and the Colonial Williamsburg project in Virginia were prime examples of how public and private elites tried to craft carefully constructed historical memories to build support for the anti-communist crusade in the midst of the Cold War. The approach of the Civil War centennial offered national policymakers another chance to forge a usable past in order to promote contemporary goals.

The one hundredth anniversary of a bloody civil war might have seemed an unstable foundation on which to build a virile national consensus, particularly as that conflict had left southern whites embittered by defeat and post-war Reconstruction. Happily for national planners in the 1950s the uneven process of North-South reconciliation in the late nineteenth century had healed many of the wounds, including those caused by President Abraham Lincoln's emancipation policy and the arming of 180,000 black troops to fight against the rebel Confederacy. By 1900 the United States was an industrial power-house and a major player on the international stage. Most northern whites, beset by problems arising from rapid social and economic change, had come to accept that African Americans were an inferior race and that the South's new system of statutory racial segregation was best for both races. Even white Union veterans, who frequently acknowledged their African-American peers as comrades, did little to contest the advance of Jim Crow. The onetime abolitionist Frederick Douglass endeavored to sustain the memory of black service to the Union. But by the time the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in Washington in 1922, few whites were listening. It was not Lincoln the Great Emancipator they remembered, but Lincoln the charitable advocate of sectional reconciliation.

After the death of Walter W. Williams, a Texan widely (but probably falsely) believed to be the last surviving veteran of the Civil War, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was moved to issue a special statement in which he observed that '[t]he wounds of the deep and bitter dispute which once divided our nation have long since healed, and a united America in a divided world now holds up on a larger canvas the cherished traditions of liberty and justice for all.' Once a vessel for deep internal hatreds, the 'War of the Rebellion' or the 'War of Yankee Aggression' had been rebranded in national memory as the moment when the United States had been reunited and the modern superpower, the vaunted Leader of the Free World, had been born.[2]

Major General Ulysses S. Grant, III, a grandson of the Union's paramount commander, and his deputy Karl Sawtelle Betts, a public relations expert and former high-school friend of the president, were the two leading figures on the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, set up in 1957 as an agency under the authority of the National Park Service and the Department of the Interior. Both men were hard-line anti-communists, conservative northern Republicans who conceived the centennial as a compelling national

[2] *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1959,* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1960), 865.

pageant that would genuinely excite Americans, young and old, while simultaneously educating them about the courageous and patriotic deeds of their forebears. To opponents who sensed in the wake of mob violence at Little Rock that the centennial might be undone by rising African-American protest against segregation, Karl Betts responded tellingly that black slaves had been loyal to the proslavery Confederacy. 'A lot of fine Negro people,' he told a journalist from *The Nation*, 'loved life as it was in the old South.'[3]

By 1961 white southerners had overcome their reservations about the centennial and were ready to celebrate the Confederacy. Initially, they had been wary of the centennial hype because they feared the event would be a celebration of Yankee victory. But once Grant and Betts had assured them that they were free to make their own plans, they began organising for the centennial in earnest. One reason for this was their expectation that efficient marketing and organisation would bring automobile tourists flocking to the neatly preserved battlefields of the South. Politics, however, also played a central role in southern whites' enthusiastic embrace of the centennial project. Celebrating the historic moment when the southern states seceded from the Union made perfect sense to the embattled segregationists who dominated the region's state centennial agencies. What better way to mobilise grassroots opposition to court-ordered public school desegregation and black civil rights activism than to remind ordinary whites of their ancestors' uncompromising resistance to federal tyranny and unlawful abolitionist assaults on southern institutions?

In February 1961 the white population of Montgomery, Alabama—the first capital of the Confederacy and more recently the scene of a world-renowned bus boycott led by a previously unknown black preacher named Martin Luther King—joined in carefully staged celebrations to mark the centenary of Jefferson Davis's inauguration as Confederate president. They took part in beard-growing contests, dressed up in period costume, purchased tickets for a Confederate belle beauty contest, and flocked to see a week-long secession pageant that culminated in a rousing fireworks display over the city's Coliseum building. State judge Walter B. Jones, a committed foe of the NAACP in Alabama, was heartened greatly by the community turnout. The events in Montgomery, he thought, had given local whites 'a deeper appreciation of the things the Confederacy fought for, and helped them to realize that unrestrained federal power is destroying this nation.'[4]

Similar events were held in several other southern towns that spring. In Jackson, Mississippi, Governor Ross Barnett, another outspoken opponent of black civil rights, led the city's secession-day parade, riding in a horse-drawn carriage while scores of white Mississippians clad in rebel grey watched him pass. There was so much enthusiasm for the Confederacy in the South at this time that one anxious American serviceman wrote to

[3] Dan Wakefield, 'Bull Run With Popcorn', *The Nation*, January 30, 1959, 97.
[4] *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 27, 1961.

President Kennedy expressing his alarm that the centennial 'could endanger our country so great it might cause the fall of our great nation.'[5]

The combination of neo-Confederate spectacle and the embarrassing fiasco at Charleston proved disastrous for the centennial, discrediting the event in the eyes of white liberals and African Americans. The coup de grâce was administered by national press outrage at a re-enactment of the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1961. The event, staged with the full backing of the federal commission, attracted thousands of paying tourists who doubtless enjoyed what they saw. But the sight of hamburger stalls parked on a field sanctified with the blood of dead Americans sickened many watching journalists already appalled by the ease with which segregationists had taken control of the centennial for their own ends. That summer Grant and Betts fell victim to an internal coup led by the southern historian, Bell Wiley, who may have been the wisest member of the national commission. They were quickly replaced by two level-headed professional historians, Allan Nevins and James I. ('Bud') Robertson.

Nevins, one of the most highly regarded Civil War historians of his day, was a political ally of John F. Kennedy. An indefatigable worker based primarily at the Huntington Library in California, he could be counted on to save the centennial from total meltdown. Together he and his young hands-on deputy, Bud Robertson, worked effectively to take the heat out of the whole exercise, prioritizing public education, historic preservation, and academic scholarship over what they regarded as empty (and potentially damaging) spectacle and making some moves to accommodate valid African American concerns over the whole event.

On 22 September 1962 the reorganized commission hosted an event at the Lincoln Memorial to commemorate the issuing of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. On this occasion Nevins chose to equate emancipation with the anti-communist crusade for human freedom rather than the intensifying (and politically divisive) fight for racial justice at home. His failure to invite a single African American to speak at the ceremony resulted in more negative publicity and commission officials hastened to limit the damage by allowing the renowned black jurist and civil rights activist, Thurgood Marshall, to say a few words on the day. Nevins, however, was politically savvier than his predecessor, Major General Grant, and broadly sympathetic to the goals of the nonviolent civil rights movement. White supremacist violence in 1963 and 1964, which embarrassed the United States in the Cold War, increased his opposition to the defenders of Jim Crow and rendered him unsympathetic to the fears of southern centennial organisers that the federal commission had become a mouthpiece for civil rights. Nevins insisted, against the advice of Bud Robertson (who was understandably keen to prevent the southern commissions from abandoning the official centennial observance), that the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address should be marked with an academic symposium and that blacks attending official centennial events should be treated with dignity.

[5] Bill Wallace to John F. Kennedy, February 7, 1961, Box 69, Subject File 1959-66, Records of the Civil War Centennial Commission, National Archives.

By late 1962 southern whites' interest in centennial events had waned. The absence of battlefield victories to celebrate contributed to this trend and Americans in general were preoccupied with a new war in Vietnam and the direct-action campaigns of an increasingly self-confident and assertive civil rights movement. The outspoken defender of Jim Crow, Alabama governor George C. Wallace, tried to make political capital out of the centennial by appearing at the July 1963 Gettysburg centenary. However, in the wake of segregationist violence in Birmingham the previous spring, many white Americans shared Allan Nevins's conviction that southern segregation was a national liability. In this altered climate of opinion African-American efforts to use the centennial for their own benefit began to make genuine headway. Martin Luther King failed in his 1962 attempt to prod President Kennedy into issuing a new version of the Emancipation Proclamation, but his contention—rendered memorably in his 'I Have a Dream' speech at the March on Washington in August 1963—that the Civil War was unfinished business now resonated with white moderates and progressives alike.

By the time the centennial drew to a close in the spring of 1965 most Americans had forgotten about it. Yet despite its faltering progress it did leave a positive legacy. The event saw the publication of two particularly thoughtful books, Robert Penn Warren's *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961), and Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore* (1962). The much-derided commercialism, moreover, generated real popular interest in the Civil War. American children in particular were excited by the war's raised media profile, the sudden appearance of war-related souvenirs, historian Bruce Catton's highly accessible books and articles on the conflict, and family visits to the battlefields. Many adults today recall the centennial fondly. According to William Piston, a prominent military historian, the commemoration was 'such a wonderful experience. Every newspaper and magazine was flooded with pictures. We traded bubble-gum cards. Every restaurant's placemat had a Civil War theme and every packet of Dixie Crystal sugar on the table told a Civil War story on the back.' In most respects Karl Betts's bloated and racially blinkered pageant was an object lesson in how not to conjure the past. In its capacity to capture the imagination of young people, however, it may have had the edge over the low-key sesquicentennial of 2011–2015.[6]

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[6] Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (New York: Random House, 1961); Edmond Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); William Piston quoted in Robert J. Cook, *Troubled commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial , 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).