ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Death and the American Civil War

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Death suffuses virtually every topic on the Civil War. Photography, military technology, culture, economics, battle tactics, political developments, life on the home front, the soldiers' experience—each of these was intimately intertwined with the fundamental reality of death, which extended its reach into nearly every component of wartime life. Yet death was more than just fundamental to the war—it was a culturally-constructed and socially-experienced phenomenon for Civil War era Americans. Indeed, their cultural conception of death prior to the war created the organizing framework through which they understood, experienced, organized, and mourned the massive amount of violent death wrought by the Civil War. And more than that, in the post-war period, that massive amount of violent death altered the ways that Americans experienced the nation-state—and even death itself.

Understanding Death in Antebellum America

In the antebellum United States, death was a specter both familiar and welcomed. In the early 19th century, Americans faced a world of deadly epidemics, high mortality rates, and short life-spans, all of which were only exacerbated by urban and economic growth. As a result, people experienced death frequently and understood it intimately. Antebellum Americans' familiarity with death was expressed in their cultural productions. Death emerges as a key topic or protagonist in nearly every type of publication, including literature, lithographs, poetry, newspapers, diaries, magazines, political speeches, photographs, and more. And within this wide range of sources emerges a clear cultural understanding of death that allowed Americans to organize, cope with, and even celebrate the mortality that permeated their lives.

These prevailing cultural understandings of mortality in antebellum America were expressed in terms of the "Good Death." Deriving in particular from Protestantism, the Good Death was shared broadly across the United States, transcending the lines of North and South that increasingly divided the country. The Good Death prescribed how people should die, offering a window into the future salvation—or lack thereof—of the dying individual. More specifically, people died surrounded by family, who clustered around the death bed and bore witness to the death. In this act of seeing death, loved ones would search for signs of salvation in the dead's last words and acts, a salvation which promised

the possibility of family reunion in heaven. These signs of salvation included calm facial expression, bodily repose, or resigned last words, all of which signified that the dying had made peace with the imminence of death, and was prepared to ascend to heaven and surrender himself or herself to God.

But the Good Death did not only offer a way to cope with the reality of dying in the first half of the 19th century. It also enabled Americans to see death as positive, something to which the dying were not only resigned, but enthusiastically welcomed. A key component of this celebration of death was the way in which Americans imagined heaven. Rather than an ethereal place, heaven was a physical space—and so were its inhabitants. Heaven contained a blissful and ever-improving landscape where deceased men and women, possessing identifiable but perfected bodies, could happily reunite with friends and family members. And heaven was the space on to which Americans projected their fantasies of an ideal world, imagining that only in death could they reach such a perfect place and inhabit bodies free of sin and decay.

Moreover, this idealized vision of heaven and peaceful embrace of death was intensified within the context of Southern slavery as Black Americans looked even more closely to the afterlife for salvation from the suffering of everyday life. The numbers and violence of death experienced in antebellum more broadly was ever exacerbated within the context of slavery. The bodies of enslaved African-Americans were subject to physical, sexual, emotional, and social violence, and death became a sight even more familiar to Black slaves than to other antebellum Americans. In order to escape the intensive suffering and brutal violence of slavery, the enslaved African-Americans often co-mingled death and freedom, imagining heaven as a place where liberty might finally be claimed and the evils of slavery might finally be escaped.

This celebration of death and heaven did not remain confined to private spaces. Rather, it manifested in public places, and privileged specific dead bodies over others. In the 1830s and 1840s, the rural cemetery movement arose to venerate the dead in beautified spaces that would facilitate human contemplation of death and heaven. That contemplation was guided specifically toward great military heroes, focusing on young men who died heroically in combat as the greatest of all possible deaths. Despite its major divergence from popular notions of the Good Death, the military death emerged as a focal point for the continued health of the nation. In this way, although it occurred far from the typical setting for death and dying, it was celebrated as not simply another Good Death, but a great death – one that would be memorialized and forever remembered, not just by familial witnesses, but also by country and by history. Contemporary poetry and literature underscored this point, idealizing the moment of death and applauding great men who died Good Deaths. Crucially, writers scorned historical military heroes who died without the signs of salvation or requisite resignation to God—while ensuring that those who participated in a version of the Good Death, even so far from the traditional death bed surrounded by family, were glorified, celebrated, and forever remembered.

Death in the Civil War

The Civil War produced a massive amount of death—traditionally numbered at 620,000, the death toll has recently been revised, increasing that number to nearly 750,000.[1] That number of fatalities nearly equals the number of Americans killed in all the other wars fought by the United States from the Revolution through to the Korean War. New technology of war changed the way death was written on the body—rifled guns and heavy artillery tore bodies apart. Limbs were lost or amputated from injury, and entire bodies could simply disappear, completely obliterated by the new technology. Moreover, the specter of death was more widely accessible, as newspaper reporters and photographers on the battle lines captured scenes of death and destruction—and delivered them into homes far away from the field of battle. Death in battle was sudden, unpredictable, and often brutally violent—and Americans, North and South, knew it.

This type of carnage was horrific and unfamiliar to antebellum Americans accustomed to rehearsing the Good Death. Men died far away from their homes, making it difficult for family members to read the guarantees of salvation—and reunion—on the faces and in the last words of their dying loved ones. Attempts were made during the Civil War to replicate some of the forms of the Good Death, enabling family members and soldiers to understanding death on the battlefield in terms of cultural norms of death and dying. Condolence letters, written by surviving friends or a commanding officer, assured families on the home front that their sons, husbands, and brothers had died peacefully, willingly surrendering to death. Similarly, female nurses in Civil War field hospitals took the place of mother or wife, bearing witness to a soldier's salvation at the moment of death and communicating that act of witnessing to the family of the deceased. On a larger scale, the Union and Confederate military tried to institute regularized burial details—partially to mitigate the spread of disease, but also to help protect the individuality of the soul of the deceased and usher him into heaven. This process of burial—and occasionally, when a family was wealthy enough to pay for it, transportation of the dead back home—combated and actively resisted the dehumanization wrought by mass battlefield death. Voluntary associations—in particular, the Christian Commission and the Sanitary Commission in the North—collected names of dead soldiers when the military failed to do so systematically. Notifying kin of a loved one's death proved an important link between family and fallen soldier, a way to re-institute the Good Death's emphasis on familial knowledge of a loved one's death. Moreover, these notifications often conveyed a sense of a soldier's religious feeling upon his death, suggesting his imminent entry into heaven and promising a familial reunion in there. Together, these efforts to reinstate the Good Death helped link home front and battle front ever closer, and, in so doing, helped both dying soldiers and mourning families understand the profound changes wrought by Civil War.

1 Guy Gugliotta, "New Estimate Raises Civil War Death Toll," *New York Times*, April 2, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/civil-war-toll-up-by-20-percent-in-new-estimate.html .

But this attempt to inscribe the forms of the Good Death onto these new forms of battlefield death was far from the only way that civilians and soldiers could comprehend the Civil War. It was not simply that Northerners and Southerners now had to cope with a new way of dying—but that the Good Death itself prepared Americans to die in the Civil War, and may have even encouraged them to do it. The conception of bodies resurrected in heaven in a perfected state dissipated anxieties about the destruction of earthly bodies that occurred in Civil War battles. Instead of fearing bodies rent apart, soldier and civilians alike were able to imagine a heaven in which bodies would be recreated as viable, whole, and identifiable. Moreover, the promise of reunion with family members in heaven made a soldier's death on a remote battlefield less terrifying, as knowledge of future reunion allowed far-off family members at least some sense of comfort. To be sure, this was facilitated by efforts to connect battlefront to home front, to give family members confidence in soldiers' salvation. But nevertheless, this conception of resurrection in heaven, of both bodily integrity and family networks, enabled soldiers to fight and families to support the war, to look beyond the suffering of the battlefield and toward eternal bliss in heaven.

But more than simply preparing Americans to fight, antebellum understandings of death may have even inspired them to do so. Literature, poetry, popular lithographs, and cemetery monuments all celebrated the military heroes of the past. By actively emphasizing the importance of martial glory—and its relationship to an honorable death—these public and popular images that applauded fallen soldiers may have animated Northern and Southern men to go to war. Moreover, pre-war culture offered models of martyrdom, of death-for-cause, that may have urged soldiers on. Perhaps the clearest and most significant of these was John Brown, a man who galvanized political opinion, both North and South, and whose raid on Harper's Ferry seemed a harbinger for all-out war. And in Northern abolitionist circles, John Brown became more than simply a "meteor of war," as Hermann Melville described him, but a martyr for the cause of slavery.[2] This conception of death and martyrdom—particular that of John Brown—to serve the anti-slavery cause continued into the Civil War in the Union marching song, "John Brown's Body," claiming that "John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave [but] his soul is marching on." This song, however, extended Brown's symbolic representation of death for the cause of abolitionism to include the end of the rebellion and the preservation of the Union—as the latter stanzas of the song went, "they will hang Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree … now, three rousing cheers for the Union!"[3] By musically following in the footsteps of the martyred Brown, Union soldiers proclaimed their willingness to die in order to save the Union—but to create one that was not only reunited, but purified, expunged of the sin of slavery that Brown so evocatively attacked.

[2] Herman Melville, "The Portent" in *Battle Pieces and Aspects of War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1866), 1.

3"John Brown's Body," 1861 originated with soldiers of the Massachusetts 12th Regiment and soon spread to become the most popular anthem of Union soldiers during the Civil War. Many versions of the song exist. The Brown tune inspired Julia Ward Howe, after she heard troops sing the song while parading near Washington, to write her lyrics for the same melody, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

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And Confederate soldiers, too, while not fighting for the same purposes of anti-slavery purification, fought with similar conviction, willingly dying for their nascent nation.

Even clearer is the way in which contemporary understandings of death — particularly in its wartime relationship to equality and freedom—motivated African-American men to fight. Enslaved men and women had long associated death with freedom, finding hope for liberty in the next world. They also consistently risked their lives to fight the systemic injustice of slavery. Outright revolts like that of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey were joined with quieter but no less crucial forms of resistance. Fleeing from masters, committing suicide, working slowly, claiming religious autonomy, forging secret trade and communication networks all constituted ways in which Black slaves challenged the circumstances of their enslavement—and they were often undertaken at great risk to one's life. The actions of Black soldiers in the Civil War operated, at least in some ways, along this continuum of slave resistance. African-Americans were willing to take up arms to fight slavery in order to resist the horrors of that institution—and were prepared to face the possibility of death, finding in it the very freedom for which they had been fighting. But even beyond this understanding of death-as-freedom, Black soldiers used the act of fighting, and its risk of death, in order to lay claim to some semblance of equality. Despite initial lower salaries, racial hierarchies in the military ranks, assignment to some of the most demeaning physical labor required of the Union army upon his death, the Black soldier was respected as an equal, sacrificing as much as any white soldier by dying for the Union. Thus even abject military losses in which Black regiments played a part, like Fort Wagner or the Battle of the Crater, were celebrated throughout the North as articulating African-American participation in preservation of the Union. In this way, the act of dying in the war was a way for Black soldiers to lay claim to citizenship in the nation that was being born from the war. Perhaps death in the Civil War, for African-American soldiers, could be something like the great equalizer.

Remembering the Dead and Reconstituting the Nation

Although antebellum understandings of death may have persisted through the war —and even encouraged soldiers to fight in it—Civil War death nevertheless did provoke a massive reorganization of the ways in which Americans understood death in the post-war era. In particular, even if Americans were ideologically positioned to accept the numerical scale of death, the now rejoined nation was bureaucratically incapable of dealing with the amount of Civil War death. With the end of the war, the dead could suddenly be holistically accounted for, and the exigencies of battle no longer precluded assessing, locating, naming, burying, and honoring the bodies of the dead. Clara Barton, a nurse who had participated in wartime efforts to provide families with information about wounded or dying soldiers, almost immediately took up the mantle of counting and identifying the dead. Her efforts preceded and eventually coincided with that of the federal government, who embarked on an effort to name, catalog, rebury, and count the dead. Yet even as federal officials began to explore temporary grave-sites and engage in the work of assessing and identifying the dead, they increasingly encountered an intransigent white South. Heartened by President Andrew Johnson's lax Reconstruction

policy and antagonistic toward any effort to alter the white supremacy that fundamentally underwrote their society, white Southerners resisted and resented Northern encroachment. Increasingly, this meant that white Southerners would attack Union grave-sites or leave Union soldiers unburied—particular Black Union soldiers. These men had died for the cause of the Union, and family members of the deceased—particularly wives and mothers—lobbied the federal government, claiming that it had an obligation to protect the bodies of the dead and provide for the families of the deceased. If these dead men had saved the government, didn't the government have a duty to provide for those left behind?

Both in response to Southern intransigence and the pleas of family members, the federal government embarked on several programs to assist Union soldiers. By 1866, the federal government embarked on a program to rebury all Union dead in federal cemeteries. It also instituted a pension system, which would provide financial assistance to the families of deceased soldiers. This required counting of deaths, and the federal government embarked on an effort to name and number dead Union soldiers in order to effectively administer pensions. These efforts constituted a massive expansion of federal power in the wake of the Civil War, functionally creating massive bureaucracies that had not existed in antebellum life. More than that, the federal government, by counting, naming, and otherwise quantifying the dead, in some way claimed jurisdiction over all of the deceased. Thus it was not just the power of the national government that grew in this administration of the dead—it also grew in scope. That is, by counting and assessing the dead, the federal government extended its reach into the individual lives of everyday Americans, redefining its role in terms of obligations toward citizens who sacrificed—by losing lives and the lives of family members—for the nation.

But while accounting for the dead let to a growth in the size and reach of the federal government, that bureaucratic numbering only extended to Union soldiers. As a result, in order to bury, number, and assess the Confederate death, Southerners had to form their own mechanisms for dealing with the dead. In particular, white Southern women were at the forefront of this effort to rebury the dead, count the number of casualties, and provide for the families of veterans. Unlike federal government efforts, the Southern campaigns to rebury and collectively mourn the dead were fundamentally community-based efforts, emerging out of voluntary associations and other organizations. As such, the Southern work of dealing with death had a different impact than it did at the federal government level: it created communal cohesion among white Southerners, the project of section-wide mourning feeding into and intensifying efforts to resist Reconstruction, reinstate the social conditions of slavery, and celebrate the Old South.

Yet mourning, both North and South, did not always tap into post-war sectional discord. The efforts to mourn, bury, count, and assess death also created a broader understanding of the dead. As Drew Gilpin Faust astutely argues, "Civil War death and the Civil War Dead belonged to the whole nation. The Dead became the focus of an imagined national community for the reunited states, a constituency all could willing

serve."[4] Although the sectional character of mourning manifested in Reconstruction-era efforts to quantify the dead, by the 1880s, the nation had reunited and so had its dead. No longer Union dead or Confederate dead, these men simply became the dead—or the Dead, as Faust puts it. White Southerners and Northerners collectively reunited on the shared experienced of wartime death, building a new sense of nationalism and national identity from the Civil War dead.

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4 Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).