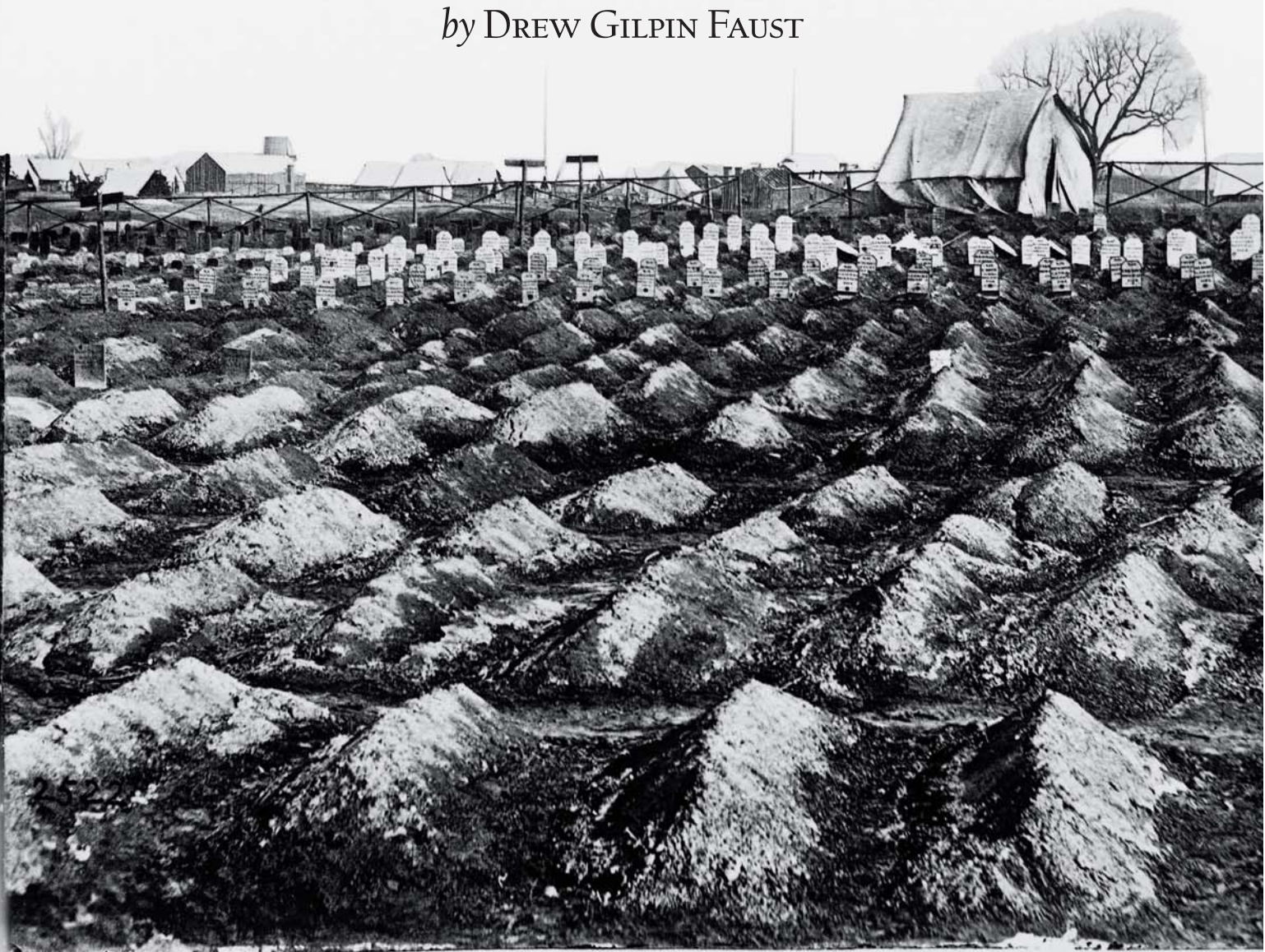


"...In My Mind I Am Perplexed"

The Civil War and the invention of modern death

by DREW GILPIN FAUST



Soldiers' graves near General Hospital, City Point, Virginia, circa 1861-1869. Photographer unknown

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THE CIVIL WAR transformed American society and institutions. It brought about the formal end of slavery (but not of racial discrimination). It empowered central, national government, and put citizens, particularly those conscripted for battle, in a new relationship to the state. It advanced the reach of industry.

But in personal terms, the war's largest and most lingering effects lay elsewhere. "In the middle of the nineteenth century," writes Drew Gilpin Faust, "the United States embarked on a new relationship with death" as 620,000 soldiers lost their lives between 1861 and 1865. The scale of the killing—a sum equal to the fatalities in all other American wars from the Revolution through Korea—widowed spouses and orphaned children to an unimaginable degree, particularly in the Confederate states.

Beyond the sheer number of the dead, the experience of mortality itself was exploded. In place of the "Good Death"—at home, surrounded by loved ones, at peace with God—husbands and sons were cut down en masse, or literally cut up by desperate surgeons, or their remains were left to rot on battlefields, or be buried by the score in unmarked ditches. Frantic relatives had no official way, often not even informal means, to confirm the deaths. Many soldiers who survived were themselves driven nearly mad by the carnage they had caused and seen. However they were engaged, Faust writes, all were involved in "the work of death in the American Civil War." In a collective sense, the result was, in Frederick Law Olmsted's phrase, a "republic of suffering."

From sources including letters, newspapers, photographs, official postwar reports of reinterments, and literature,

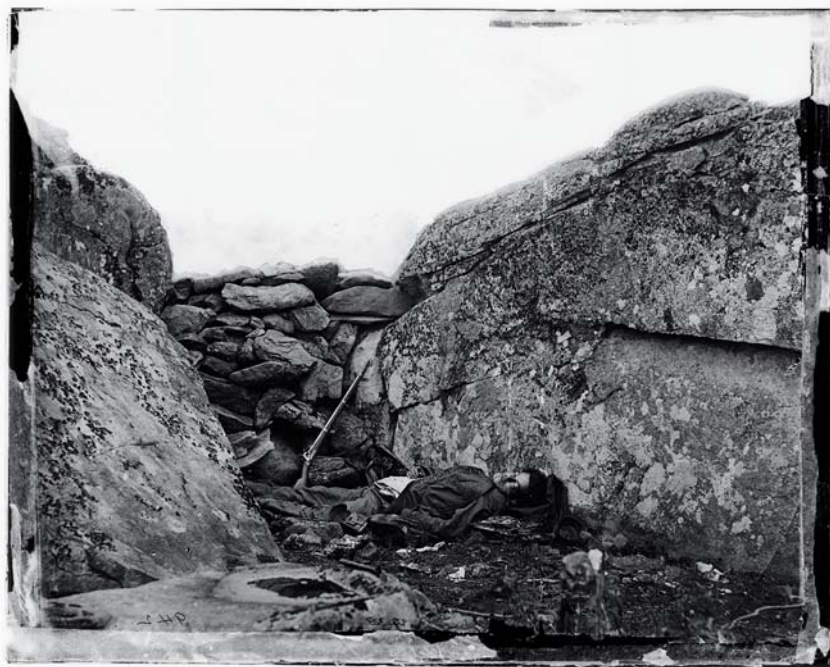
Faust, who is Lincoln professor of history, has made that "work" and its harvest the subject of her new book, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. Based on a decade of scholarship that preceded her arrival as founding dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study in 2001 and concluded in the winter weeks just before her appointment as Harvard's twenty-eighth president last February, the book documents a society transformed. From the war's bloodshed came government responsibilities for military cemeteries (initially for the Northern dead, at least), for veterans' pensions, and other institutional changes. The ghastliness of the war impelled a search for meaning, a quest to justify what had been wrought, and challenges to religious faith that mark the beginnings of a modern, skeptical outlook on a newly fearsome and cold cosmos.

For all those reasons, this original, unsettling interpretation of the war that did so much to shape America commands attention. That *This Republic of Suffering* appears during what has now become the nation's longest war makes it unexpectedly topical, its approach unusually pertinent. That it is dedicated to the author's father, McGhee Tyson Gilpin (1919-2000), who earned the Silver Star, Purple Heart, and Croix de Guerre as a captain in U.S. Army Intelligence during World War II, underscores as perhaps nothing else the personal nature and meaning of war, even in the twenty-first century.

The excerpts that follow come from the end of chapter 2, "Killing," and the epilogue, "Surviving." ~The Editors

"A Realizing Sense of War"

IN THE AFTERMATH OF BATTLE, when the intensity and the frenzy dissipated, when the killing at least temporarily ceased, when reason returned, soldiers confronted the devastation they had created and survived—"the unmistakable evidence," as one soldier put it after Spotsylvania, "that death is doing its most frightful work." William Dean Howells later wrote of the lasting impact of the Civil War on James Garfield, a Union general and later U.S. president: "at the sight of these dead men whom other men had killed, something went out of him, the habit of a lifetime, that never came back again: the sense of the sacredness of life and the impossibility of destroying it." Dead men whom other men had killed: there was the crux of the matter. Battle was, as a North Carolina soldier ruefully put it, "majestic murder." The carnage was not a natural disaster but a man-made one, the product of human choice and human agency. Neither North nor South had expected the death tolls that Civil War battles produced, and the steadily escalating level of destruction continued to amaze and horrify. The Mexican War had claimed approximately 13,000 U.S. lives, of which fewer than 2,000 had been battle deaths; the First Battle of Bull Run in August 1861 had shocked the nation with its totals of 900 killed and 2,700 wounded. By the following spring at Shiloh, Americans recognized that they had embarked on a new kind of war, as the battle yielded close to 24,000 casualties, including approximately 1,700 dead on each side. Shiloh's number of killed and wounded exceeded the combined totals of all the major en-



Gettysburg, July 1863. Photograph by Timothy O'Sullivan

gagements of the war that had preceded it. The summer's fighting on the Virginia Peninsula would escalate the carnage yet again. "We used to think that the battle of Manassas was a great affair," Confederate Charles Kerrison wrote home to South Carolina in July 1862, "but it was mere child's play compared with those in which we have lately been engaged." By the time of Gettysburg a year later, the Union army alone reported 23,000 casualties, including 3,000 killed; Confederate losses are estimated between 24,000 and 28,000; in some regiments, numbers



Antietam, September 1862. Photograph by Alexander Gardner

of killed and wounded approached 90 percent. And by the spring of 1864 Grant's losses in slightly more than a month approached 50,000.

Faced with the Civil War's unprecedented slaughter, soldiers tried to make sense of what they had wrought. As they surveyed the scene at battle's end, they became different men. For a moment they were relieved of the demand to kill; other imperatives—of Christianity, of humanity, of survival rather than courage or duty—could come again to the fore. And now they had time to look at what was around them. Union colonel Luther Bradley described this transformation:

Of all the horrors the horrors of the battlefield are the worst and yet when you are in the midst of them they don't appal one as it would seem they ought. You are engrossed with the struggle and see one and another go down and say, "there goes poor so-and-so. Will it be my turn next." Your losses and dangers don't oppress you 'till afterwards when you sit down quietly to look over the result or go out with details to bury the dead.

Dealing with the "afterwards" required work lest, as a Confederate soldier worried after Shiloh, the spectacle "dethrone reason or pervert the judgment." Henry C. Taylor wrote to his parents in Wisconsin after a grim night collecting the dead and wounded from an 1863 battle in Kentucky, "I did not realize anything about the fight when we were in action, but the battlefield at midnight will bring one to a realizing sense of war. I never want to see such a sight again. I cannot give such a description of the fight as I wish I could.

Gettysburg, July 1863. Photograph by Alexander Gardner



My head is so full that it is all jumbled up together and I can't get it into any kind of shape." But he could draw one clear and revealing conclusion: "Tell Mrs Diggins not to let her boy enlist."

Soldiers struggled to communicate to those eager to know their fate at the same time that they themselves struggled to understand what they saw. Why indeed were they still alive? As one Indiana soldier wrote in his diary in 1864, his "best men" had fallen around him, yet "I am not better than they." William Stilwell of Georgia confessed to his wife the day after Antietam, "I am in good health this morning as far as my body is concerned, but in my mind I am perplexed." Unable to explain, soldiers tried to describe, invoking the raw physicality of carnage and suffering. Even as survivors they could not escape the literal touch of death, which assaulted the senses. First there was the smell. "The dead and dying actually stink upon the hills," W. D. Rutherford wrote his wife after the Seven Days' battles around Richmond. For a radius of miles, the "mephitic effluvia" caused by rotting bodies ensured that even if the dead were out of sight, they could not be out of mind. And

then there were the thousands of bodies. Men had become putrefied meat, not so much killed as slaughtered, with "nothing to distinguish them from so many animals." Stepping accidentally on a dead man's leg felt to James Wood Davidson's "boot-touch like a piece of pickled pork—hard and yet fleshy," and he leaped back with alarm. Soldiers looked with horror upon bodies that seemed to change color as they rotted, commenting frequently upon a transformation that must have borne considerable significance in a society and a war in which race and skin color were of definitive importance. "The faces of the dead," one northern Gettysburg veteran described, "as a general rule, had turned black—not a purplish discoloration, such as I had imagined in reading of the 'blackened corpses' so often mentioned in descriptions of battlegrounds, but a deep bluish black, giving to a corpse with black hair the appearance of a negro."

Witnesses to battle's butchery often wrote of the impossibility of crossing the field without walking from one end to the other atop the dead. "They paved the earth," a soldier wrote after the Battle of Williamsburg in 1862. Grant found the same after Shiloh: "I saw an open field...so covered with dead that it would have been possible to walk across the clearing, in any direction, stepping only on dead bodies without a foot touching the ground." With grim precision Eugene Blackford described a two-acre area at Fredericksburg containing 1,350 dead Yankees;

others estimated stretches of a mile or more at Antietam or Shiloh where every step had to be planted on a dead body. Men were revolted both by the dishonor to the slain beneath their feet and by the pollution represented by such distasteful contact with the

“I had no more feeling for him, than if he had tripped over a stump and fallen...”

dead. Like a modern snapshot, this oft-repeated representation of battle's horror graphically portrayed in the freeze-frame of a picture what soldiers could not narrate in a sequence of words. With vividness and detail, for the senses rather than for the reason or intellect, this recurrent image communicated the unspeakable.

Men wept. Even as he acknowledged that “it does not look well for a soldier to cry,” John Casler of the Stonewall Brigade knew “I could not help it.” Benjamin Thompson of the 111th New York affirmed that after Gettysburg “no words can depict the ghastly picture.” He “could not long endure the gory, ghastly spectacle. I found my head reeling, the tears flowing and my stomach sick at the sight.” Colonel Francis Pierce confessed that “such scenes completely unman me.” Battle changed the living to the dead, humans into animals, and strong men into “boys...crying like children”—or perhaps even into women with their supposed inability to control their flowing tears. As Walter Lee wrote his mother from the front in June 1862, “I don't believe I am the same being I was two weeks ago, at least I don't think as I used to and things don't seem as they did.”

One way soldiers became different men was by resisting and repressing the unbearable horror. “The feelings of a soldier walking over his first battle-field and over his second, are widely different,” a southern newspaper observed. Men wrote of “hardening,” numbing, or becoming “calloused” or even indifferent to others' deaths as well as to the prospect of their own. A Union surgeon, surrounded in Virginia by “a horrible spectacle of human misery,” saw this transformation in attitude as a blessing, regarding it as a “wise provision of divine providence that man can accommodate himself to any & every circumstance, at first no matter how revolting.” A seasoned soldier could sleep or eat amid the bodies of the dead; “all signs of emotion...or ordinary feelings of tenderness and sympathy” disappeared. With a gesture that reflected either a jocular insensitivity or an ironic anger that may well have shocked and surprised his wife, Isaac Hadden of New York invited her to join him at dinner “in the enemy's rifle pits where the dead lay around crawling away with dear little worms called maggots...I was kind of hungry and got used to the pretty sights.” Union Colonel Charles Wainwright reported that when another soldier fell against him proclaiming himself a dead man, “I had no more feel-

ing for him, than if he had tripped over a stump and fallen; nor do I think it would have been different had he been my brother.” Private Wilbur Fisk of Vermont resorted to irony in his attempt to depict soldiers' changing attitudes: “The more we get used to being killed, the better we like it.”

Soldiers acted with as little concern as if it were not men but “hogs dying around them.” Human life diminished sharply in value, and the living risked becoming as dehumanized as the dead. Soldiers perhaps found it a relief to think of themselves not as men but as machines—without moral compass or responsibility, simply the instruments of others' direction and will. As a common soldier, Angus Waddle believed he was “but a machine by which fame and glory is manufactured for some great Gen.” Texan Elijah Petty explained to his wife that “we have no right to think. Others have been appointed to think for us and we like the automation must kick (or work) when the wire is pulled.” Civilians caring for the fallen in battle's immediate aftermath adopted a similar strategy. Katherine Wormeley, who served on a hospital ship during the Peninsula Campaign, believed that to permit herself to “feel acutely at such times is merely selfish.” It was imperative

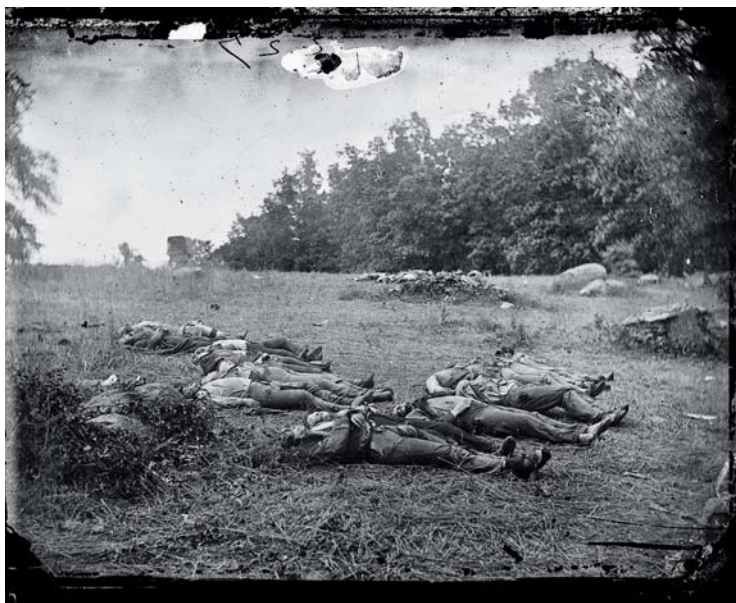
“to put away all feeling. Do all you can, and be a machine—that's the way to act; the only way.”

While many soldiers welcomed this numbing as a means of escaping the horrors around them, others worried about the implications of such detachment. “The fact that many men get so accustomed to the thing, that they can step about among the heaps of dead bodies, many of them their friends and acquaintances[,] without any particular emotion, is

the worst of all,” a Federal officer observed. Indifference to suffering and death was “demoralizing,” a failure to care about what should matter most in human life. A religious tract widely distributed in the Confederate army issued a stern “warning to soldiers.” “Guard against unfeeling recklessness,” it cautioned. “By familiarity with scenes of violence and death, soldiers often become apparently indifferent to suffering and anguish, and appear to be destitute of the ordinary sensibilities of our humanity.” Hardening represented in the eyes of the church an abandonment of the compassion that lay at the core of human and Christian identity. Loss of feeling was at base a loss of self—a kind of living death that could make even survivors casualties of war.

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KILLING WAS THE ESSENCE OF WAR. But it also challenged men's most fundamental assumptions about the sanctity of their own and other human lives. Killing produced transformations



Gettysburg, July 1863. Photograph by Alexander Gardner

that were not readily reversible—the living into the dead, most obviously, but the survivors into different men as well, men required to deny, to numb basic human feeling at costs they may have paid for decades after the war ended, as we know twentieth- and twenty-first-century soldiers from Vietnam to Iraq continue to do; men who, like James Garfield, were never quite the same again after seeing fields of slaughtered bodies destroyed by men just like themselves.

“The Whole of Life Has Been Not-Dying”

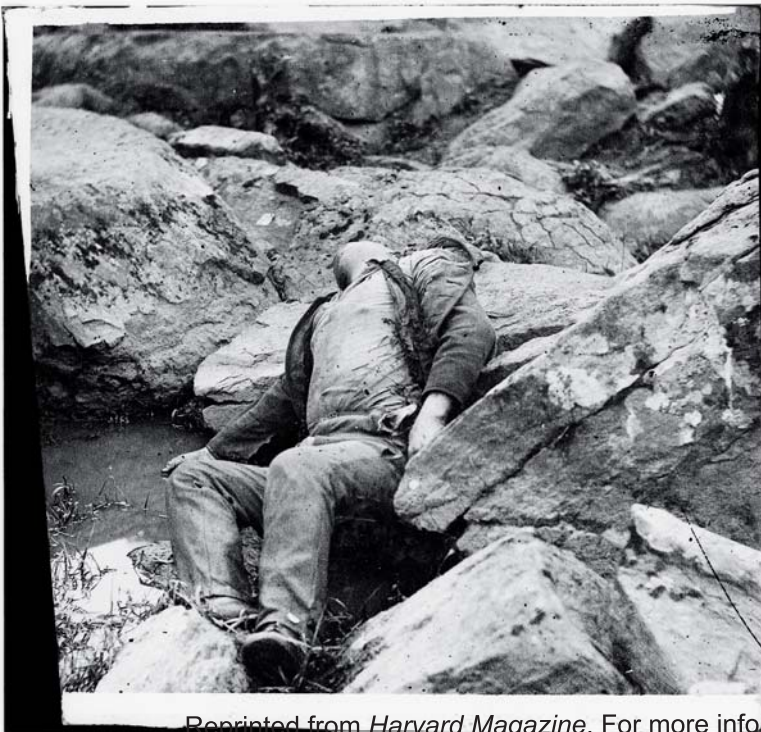
*Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle, as with companions, and as holding the hand of com-
panions...*

Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

JOHN PALMER carried the bullet that killed his son with him to the grave; Henry Bowditch habitually wore a watch fob fashioned from his fallen son’s uniform button; Mary Todd Lincoln dressed in mourning till she died; Walt Whitman believed the war had represented the “very centre, circumference, umbilicus” of his life; Ambrose Bierce felt haunted by “visions of the dead and dying”; Jane Mitchell continued to hope for years after Appomattox that her missing son would finally come home; J.M. Taylor was still searching for details of his son’s death three decades after the end of the war; Henry Struble annually laid flowers on the grave that mistakenly bore his name. Civil War Americans lived the rest of their lives with grief and loss.

More than 2 percent of the nation’s inhabitants were dead as a direct result of the war—the approximate equivalent of the population in 1860 of the state of Maine, more than the entire population of Arkansas or Connecticut, twice the population of Vermont, more than the whole male population of Georgia or Alabama. These soldiers had experienced what many Americans called “the great change,” the uncharted passage from life to

Gettysburg, July 1863. Photograph by Alexander Gardner



Collecting bones, Cold Harbor, Virginia, April 1865. Photograph by John Reekie

death. No longer fathers or brothers or sons, they had become corpses and memories, in hundreds of thousands of cases without even identifiable graves.

But the fallen had solved the riddle of death, leaving to survivors the work of understanding and explaining what this great change had meant. And the living had been changed too, by what they had seen and done, what they had felt, and what they had lost. They were, like Bierce, “sentenced to life” and to making sense of how Civil War death had redefined what life might be. Sidney Lanier, the Confederate poet who had fought in the bloody Seven Days’ Battles in 1862 and later suffered in a Union prison camp, commented in 1875 that for most of his “generation in the South since the War, pretty much the whole of life has been not-dying.”

Managing Civil War death was made all the more difficult by the mystery that so often surrounded it. Nearly half the dead remained unknown, the fact of their deaths supposed but undocumented, the circumstances of their passage from life entirely unrecorded. Such losses remained in some sense unreal and thus “unrealized,” as the bereaved described them, recognizing the inhibition of mourning that such uncertainty imposed. The living searched in anxiety and even “phrensy” to provide endings for life narratives that stood incomplete, their meanings undefined.

This crisis of knowledge and understanding extended well beyond the problem of the unidentified dead to challenge, in Melville’s words, “the very basis of things.” Individuals found themselves in a new and different moral universe, one in which unimaginable destruction had become daily experience. Where did God belong in such a world? How could a benevolent deity countenance such cruelty and such suffering? Doubt threatened to overpower faith—faith in the Christian narrative of a compassionate divinity and a hope of life beyond the grave, faith in the intelligibility and purpose of life on Earth. Language seemed powerless to explain, humans unable to comprehend what their deaths—and thus their lives—could mean.

Man had been at once agent and victim of war’s destruction. Both as butcher and butchered, he had shown himself far closer to the beasts than to the angels. The vaunted human soul had seemed to count for little in the face of war’s fearsome physicality, its fundamental economy of bodies, of losses and casualties, of wounding and killing. Mutilated and nameless corpses challenged notions of the unity and integrity of the human selves

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they once housed, for by the tens of thousands these selves had fragmented and disappeared. Death without dignity, without decency, without identity imperiled the meaning of the life that preceded it. Americans had not just lost the dead; they had lost their own lives as they had understood them before the war. As Lucy Buck of Virginia observed, "We shall never any of us be the same as we have been."

The nation was a survivor, too, transformed by its encounter with death, obligated by the sacrifices of its dead. The war's staggering human cost demanded a new sense of national destiny, one designed to ensure that lives had been sacrificed for appropriately lofty ends. So much suffering had to have transcendent purpose, a "sacred significance," as Frederick Douglass had insisted in the middle of the war. For him, such purpose was freedom, but this would prove an unrealized ideal in a nation unwilling to guarantee the equal citizenship on which true liberty must rest. Slavery had divided the nation, but assumptions of racial hierarchy would unite whites North and South in a century-long abandonment of the emancipationist legacy.

Instead, the United States' new and elevated destiny became bound up with the nation itself: its growing power, its wealth, its extent, its influence. Debates about nationalism had caused the war; national might had won the war; an expanded nation-state

with new powers and duties emerged from war's demands. And both the unity and responsibilities of this transformed nation were closely tied to its Civil War Dead.

The meaning of the war had come to inhere in its cost. The nation's value and importance were both derived from and proved by the human price paid for its survival. This equation

cast the nation in debt in ways that would be transformative, for executing its obligations to the dead and their mourners required a vast expansion of the federal budget and bureaucracy and a reconceptualization of the government's role. Na-

tional cemeteries, pensions, and records that preserved names and identities involved a dramatically new understanding of the relationship of the citizen and the state. Edmund Whitman had observed with pride after his years living among the dead that the reinterment program represented a national commitment to a "sentiment." In acknowledging that decent burial and identifiable graves warranted such effort and expense, the United States affirmed its belief in values that extended beyond the merely material and instrumental. Soldiers were not, as Melville articulated and so many Americans feared, "operatives," simply cogs in a machinery of increasingly industrialized



Union dead buried and Confederate dead unburied, where they fell. Antietam, September 1862. Photograph by Alexander Gardner

warfare. Citizens were selves—bodies and names that lived beyond their own deaths, individuals who were the literal lifeblood of the nation.

Without agendas, without politics, the Dead became what their survivors chose to make them. For a time they served as the repository of continuing hostility between North and South,



Antietam, September 1862. Photograph by Alexander Gardner

but by the end of the century the Dead had become the vehicle for a unifying national project of memorialization. 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 willingly serve—"the dead, the dead, the dead—*our* dead—or South or North, ours all (all, all, all, finally dear to me)," Walt Whitman chanted.

In 1898 President William McKinley announced to the South, in a much-heralded speech in Atlanta, that "the time has now come in the evolution of sentiment and feeling under the providence of God, when in the spirit of fraternity we should share with you in the care of the graves of the Confederate soldiers." The sons and grandsons of "these heroic dead" had in the preceding year risked their lives in a new American war; the brave Confederates should be officially honored alongside their Union counterparts.

To Frederick Douglass's despair, the reasons for which men had died had been all but subsumed by the fact of their deaths. "Death has no power to change moral qualities," he insisted in a Decoration Day speech in 1883. "Whatever else I may forget," the aging abolitionist declared, "I shall never forget the difference between those who fought for liberty and those who fought for slavery." But many even of those who had fought felt otherwise. "The brave respect the brave. The brave/Respect the dead," Ambrose Bierce wrote in a poem chiding one "Who in a Memorial Day oration protested bitterly against decorating the graves of Confederate dead."

*Remember how the flood of years
Has rolled across the erring slain;
Remember, too, the cleansing rain
Of widows' and of orphans' tears.*

*The dead are dead—let that alone:
And though with equal hand we strew
The blooms on saint and sinner too,
Yet God will know to choose his own.*

*The wretch, whate'er his life and lot,
Who does not love the harmless dead
With all his heart and all his head—
May God forgive him, I shall not.*

And Oliver Wendell Holmes, who had as a young soldier facing death so resolutely rejected the solace of Christianity, came to embrace war's sacrifice as the one foundation for truth. His "Soldier's Faith" speech, delivered on Memorial Day 1895, became emblematic of the elegiac view of the war that hailed death as an end in itself. "I do not know the meaning of the universe," Holmes baldly declared. "But in the midst of doubt, in the collapse of creeds," he had found one certainty: "that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use." The very purposelessness of sacrifice created its purpose. In a world in which "commerce is the great power" and the "man of wealth" the great hero, the disinterestedness and selflessness of the soldier represented the highest ideal of a faith that depended on the actions not of God but of man. "War, when you are at it," Holmes admitted, "is horrible and dull. It is only when time has passed that you see that its message was divine." War may have shattered the young Holmes's beliefs, but for the old man, war became the place where man's confrontation with annihilation had made him "capable of miracle, able to lift himself by the might of his own soul." Man's ability to choose death became for both Holmes and Bierce the most important experience and memory of the war.

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WE STILL LIVE in the world of death the Civil War created. We take for granted the obligation of the state to account for the lives it claims in its service. The absence of next-of-kin notification, of graves registration procedures, of official provision for decent burial all seem to us unimaginable, even barbaric. The Civil War ended this neglect and established policies that

For a time the Dead served as the repository of continuing hostility between North and South.

led to today's commitment to identify and return every soldier killed in the line of duty. But even as the Civil War brought new humanity—new attentiveness to "sentiment"—in the management of death, so too it introduced a level of carnage that foreshadowed the wars of the century to come. Even as individuals and their fates assumed new significance, so those individuals threatened to disappear into the bureaucracy and mass slaughter of modern warfare. We still struggle to understand how to preserve our humanity and our selves within such a world. We still seek to use our deaths to create meaning where we are not sure any exists. The Civil War generation glimpsed the fear that still defines us—the sense that death is the only end. We still work to live with the riddle that they—the Civil War dead and their survivors alike—had to solve so long ago.

