The Legacy of the Civil War

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In 1961, *Life* magazine invited the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, poet, and literary scholar Robert Penn Warren to ruminate on the upcoming centennial of the American Civil War. His resulting 25,000-word essay- *The Legacy of the Civil* War-remains a brilliant and timely meditation on "our only 'felt' history-history lived in our national imagination." As the War's sesquicentennial arrives a half century later, Americans prefer a degree of concision and self-assuredness to their historical legacies that would surely have been anathema to so nuanced a thinker as Penn Warren. Type in "the legacy of the Civil War" on Google, and wiki.answers.com-the third site that pops up-will tell you that: "The civil war helped unify the union and free slaves." Simple! Declarative! Forestalling debate! And certainly not incorrect.

But there is a great deal more to be said about the legacies of what Penn Warren called "the greatest single event of our history." His Southern roots-Penn Warren was after all a native of Kentucky and a leading contributor to the Southern Agrarian manifesto I'll Take My Stand-bred an appreciation for the influence of a person's birthplace, race, political beliefs, and economic station in shaping their particular point of view about the War's legacy. He also knew that despite the many different, often contradictory, meanings Americans ascribe to the Civil War, there are certain elemental legacies that no thoughtful student of the War can dispute. The Civil War irrevocably transformed the social, political, constitutional, and economic landscape of the United States to a greater extent than any other event before or since. To the historian's eye, many of these changes were immediate and dramatic. The nation became bigger, more dynamic, more aggressive internationally, and more diverse within the space of only a few decades.

The financial and human costs of this transformational conflict were staggering. In 1861, the federal budget of $80.2 million devoted $36.4 million to defense: in 1865, the comparable figures were $1.33 billion and $1.17 billion. Defense spending did not drop below $100 million again until 1871. During the four budget years most impacted by the war-1862 through 1865-a total of $3.05 billion was devoted to defense spending. By war's end, the accumulated federal deficit had grown from $90.6 million in 1861 to $2.68 billion in 1865.

Year	Federal Budget	Defense Budget	Non Defense Budget	% Devoted to Defense	Annual Deficit	Accumulated Deficit
1860	$78	$29	$49	37	$13.4	$64.8
1861	$80.2	$36.4	$43.8	45	$30.3	$90.6
1862	$485.9	$437.9	$48	90	$425.6	$524

Year	Federal Budget	Defense Budget	Non Defense Budget	% Devoted to Defense	Annual Deficit	Accumulated Deficit
1863	$726.1	$663.6	$62.5	91	$602	$1,119.8
1864	$878	$781.5	$96.5	89	$600.9	$1,815.8
1865	$1,331.3	$1,170.3	$161	88	$963	$2,680.7
1866	$536.2	$343.4	$192.8	64	-$36.3	$2,773.2

Table 1. Federal Budgets, 1860-1866
All monetary figures in millions

The cost in lives was equally stunning. Over 620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers lost their lives, two thirds of them from disease. In the Confederate states alone, one in every four males between the ages of 16 and 45 was either killed or incapacitated. Americans, both Northerners and Southerners, black and white, came face to face with battlefield slaughter and death as never before (or since) in the nation's history. A comparable loss today would result in the deaths of over 6 million Americans. And these casualty figures do not account for an undetermined number of civilians who were killed during the conflict.

This carnage dealt a mortal blow to the "slave power," an economic and social system that had horrific human consequences and had glaringly contradicted the aspirations of many of the Founders toward equality. More than four million men, women, and children who had known no other life than slavery suddenly found themselves freed. By the end of 1865, the 13th Amendment's succinct guarantee that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . . shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" made moot the provisional nature of Abraham Lincoln's wartime Emancipation Proclamation. Within five years, the 14th and 15th Amendments solidified the newly emancipated slaves' autonomy with guarantees of citizenship and the right to vote. Despite these constitutional protections, most former bondmen and women soon found themselves driven by terror, peonage, and discrimination back into a world of circumscribed possibilities. It took another century until the full force of the federal government was brought to bear on behalf of constitutional guarantees of equal protection and voting rights for African Americans.

The war's most immediate legacy was growth: 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.

The Republican commitment to aggressive federal action to spur economic development was apparent from the war's outset. In 1862 alone, Congress passed the Homestead Act, the Morrill Land Grant Colleges Act, and the Pacific Railway Act, all of which helped pave the way for postwar industrialization, urbanization, and westward expansion. In the war's aftermath, a succession of Republican administrations-only Grover Cleveland [twice] broke the party of Lincoln's hold on the White House before Woodrow Wilson's 1912 victory over a fractured Republican Party-continued the high tariffs and other economic policies friendly to business that signaled an unwavering commitment to capitalism. Legal scholars posit that this political victory of the Republicans was paralleled by a judicial revolution, a veritable "Second American Republic," with a strong nation-state governing a populace of national--not state--citizens, whose rights would be guaranteed by the federal authorities.

Year	Population	Growth over past decade	% Growth over past decade	% urban population
1860	31,443,321			19.8
1870	38,558,371	7,115,050	22	25.7
1880	50,189,209	11,630,838	30	28.2
1890	62,979,766	12,790,557	25	35.1
1900	76,212,168	13,232,402	21	39.6

Year	Immigration totals over past decade	Immigration as % of growth over past decade
1870	2,134,824	32.5
1880	2,812,191	24
1890	5,246,613	41
1900	3,687,564	28

Year Range	Growth over range	% Growth over range	Immigration totals over range	Immigration as % of growth over range
1860-1900	44,768,847	142	14,061,192	31

Table 2,3 and 4 U. S. Population Growth and Immigration, 1860 through 1900

As the table above illustrates, the nation's population growth kept pace with that of the central government. The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the elimination of the threat of the extension of slavery, and the surge of immigration in the four decades after the war all spurred expansion to the Pacific coast. In the thirty years after the war's end, ten new states were admitted into the union. The country's population grew 142 percent between 1860 and 1900; 31 percent of that growth was due to immigration. The percentage of the population that was classified as city dwellers doubled, from 19.8 percent in 1860 to 39.6 percent in 1900, marking the emergence of an industrial, urban, increasingly diverse and economically dynamic nation.

Neither the states of the defeated Confederacy nor the former slaves benefitted from this explosion of growth or the Republican-led, business-friendly economic policies. The end of slavery, however overdue, represented the largest uncompensated confiscation of property in history-'property' assigned a market value as high as $4 billion by some economists. The planter class, which before the war had embodied more than 50 percent of the nation's wealth, was in ruins, as were many of the South's major cities. High tariffs worked against the export of the South's primary staple crops-cotton and tobacco-and unsettled labor relations in the wake of emancipation created economic uncertainty throughout the region.

Former slaves proved especially vulnerable. After Andrew Johnson revoked General William T. Sherman's Special Field Orders, No. 15, providing 40 acres to former slaves, the federal government failed to provide any long-term, systemic economic support. The Freedmen's Bureau provided short-term assistance and sought to secure work opportunities for the former slaves, but the widespread opposition of former Confederates rendered the Bureau's efforts largely ineffectual. Those blacks who stayed in the South, and most did for the first fifty years after the war's end, quickly found themselves condemned to poverty by a system of sharecropping. Not until the Great Migration between 1910 and 1930, when over 1.75 million African Americans left the states of the former Confederacy, did blacks begin to break free of a way of life rooted in the 18th- and 19th-century plantation. It took almost a century after the signing of the surrender accords at Appomattox before the South began to match the prosperity of other regions of the nation.

Social and cultural factors exacerbated the regional differences already taking shape as a result of the growing economic disparity. The abrupt end of Reconstruction in 1877 removed federal troops and with it the guarantee of protection for former slaves in the South. In less than two decades, Southern political leaders had constructed the "Jim Crow" regime of racial segregation. In its 1896 *Plessy v Ferguson* decision, the Supreme Court posited the constitutional doctrine of "separate but equal " in public facilities and accommodations. Although its enforcement varied from state to state, "Jim Crow" came to define social interaction between whites and blacks throughout the former Confederacy as well as several states that had never seceded. It took the combination of the Supreme Court's landmark decision *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954, the willingness of both the Republican President Eisenhower and the Democrat President Kennedy to deploy federal troops to enforce it, and a series of legislative triumphs by President Johnson in the early 1960s, to put an end this long legacy of inequality.

The long struggle of ex-slaves and their children to reclaim their Reconstruction-era civil and political rights ultimately proved successful, but it met with stubborn resistance from Southern whites for decades. The commonplace notion that the South lost the war and won the peace was accepted because in large part it was true. The defeat of the Confederacy, ironically, fueled the defiance of white Southerners. The myth of the "Lost Cause" deserves considerable credit for the "resurrection." First postulated almost immediately after the war, and lent considerable momentum by former Confederate General Jubal Early during the 1870s and 1880s, the argument held that the South had fought for a noble cause; had a constitutional right to secede; had been led by morally superior leaders; had fallen short in its quest for independence due only to the North's superior resources; and had been motivated by the defense of the Southern homeland and states' rights, not chattel slavery. This genteel and decontaminated narrative of the Civil War justified both massive resistance to concepts of equality and the inferior social and economic position accorded African Americans.

The sesquicentennial years present a unique opportunity to assess anew the many legacies of the American Civil War. Some of these, such as the economic and physical growth spurred by the war, are beyond contesting. Others are not. The question of whether African Americans now may enjoy their full constitutional freedoms continues to vex many in public and private life and is often a contentious source of political and social debate. Some Americans continue to question the primacy of the federal government and sound the alarm on behalf of states' rights, especially when social and economic pressures are greatest. And still others contest the landscape of historical memory, challenging one another's narratives and too often ignoring the historical record in favor of comfortable tales passed down from one generation to the next. What Americans know about the Civil War, and what they believe about the Civil War, are sometimes uncomfortably far apart.