Producing mass suffering is one of the main objectives and most prominent outcomes of modern wars. Whatever the political or moral results that wars seek to promote, and whatever else they produce, to inflict pain and suffering is war’s means and its consequence. Yet until relatively recently, this obvious fact was not of central concern or interest to historians of war. As John Keegan complained half a century ago, most studies of war depicted their subject as a gigantic chess game in which disembodied actors—faceless and immune to complex emotions—moved here and there seeking strategic advantage. Suffering appeared only in its most sanitized form, as lists of names or numbers of dead and wounded. Since then, scholars working on conflicts in every time and place have taken up Keegan’s call to study the “face of battle.” Many have also embraced the agenda of critical war studies that Keegan’s work helped to inspire—namely, that of connecting what happens on battlefields to wider structures, cultures, and populations beyond them. In the field of American Civil War history, certain aspects of this shift have caused more than a little unease. In this forum, we take up the question of how the immense suffering produced by this conflict has been analyzed, redefined, and contested over the past few decades.

I first began studying the Civil War in the late 1990s, in the midst of a burgeoning interest in the field. Social and cultural historians had recently discovered this conflict, producing the first sizeable output of books focusing on politics and life on the home front, draft riots, ordinary soldiers, newly freed slaves, southern women, guerrilla war, voluntarism, labor relations, and postwar memory. The cause of this interest
was varied, ranging from international trends in the study of war, the release of new source material, the publication of a number of groundbreaking studies, and the unexpected popularity of Ken Burns’s Civil War series, which attracted forty million viewers on its first airing in 1990. The overriding imperative for many scholars at this time lay in challenging the lost cause myth, which held Confederates to be noble freedom fighters standing up for states’ rights against the oppressive power of an industrializing North. Erasing the suffering of the enslaved, this myth depicted slavery as a benign and temporary institution, destined to wither of its own accord. By the end of the 1990s, a new body of Civil War scholarship had laid waste to this myth while also showing that Southern and Northern home fronts were less united, soldiers more ideologically driven, slavery more central to the coming of the war, and freedmen and women more active in the conflict’s unfolding and meaning than previously assumed.

Yet in popular culture, older versions of the Civil War have continued to hold considerable sway. According to a Pew Research poll conducted in 2011, almost half of the respondents (48 percent) suggested that states’ rights were the main cause of the Civil War, while far fewer (38 percent) believed that slavery played the most fundamental role. Overall, those who identified as white were more likely to accept the states’ rights argument than those who identified as African American (48 percent to 39 percent). Alarmingly, the states’ rights interpretation has been gaining credibility among the young, with a full 60 percent of Americans under the age of thirty viewing the struggle in these terms. Yet in popular culture, older versions of the Civil War have continued to hold considerable sway. 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ern America and not an exception, and to “understand what it means to live in a country that will never apologize for slavery, but will not stop apologizing for the Civil War.”

A hopeful reading of the recent debates over the Confederate flag would suggest that America might at last be moving toward a more honest accounting. Four years ago, most white Southern respondents in the abovementioned Pew Research poll saw nothing inappropriate in politicians praising Confederate leaders, and the vast majority expressed no reaction one way or another to the Confederate flag. Quite different results came through in surveys conducted immediately after the massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston this year, in which a Confederate flag waver shot ten church members, nine of whom died. In the wake of this event, even some long-term supporters of Confederate symbolism belatedly acknowledged that, in the eyes of their black neighbors, displays of Southern “heritage” celebrated a regime that subjected their own ancestors to appalling violence and unremitting subjugation.

Yet even as Confederate flags come down from courthouse lawns and are removed from Walmart shelves, it seems unlikely that this limited reckoning will lead to an equally speedy embrace of the scholarly consensus about slavery’s centrality to the Civil War’s cause and consequences. The reason is simple: this conflict resonates in the present day like few other historical topics because the momentous issues on which it turned—slavery and its legacies; the balance between state and federal governments; definitions of citizenship; and the military’s role in a democracy—have never been resolved. Expressing support for one side or another on various questions related to the conflict thus acts as a kind of political shorthand, where “states’ rights” tacitly refers not simply to the purported views of one’s ancestors (who, in truth, would have found it nonsensical to separate “states’ rights” from slavery) and more to hostility toward the federal government today, just as attitudes toward the legacies of slavery often reveal much about one’s stance on race in contemporary America. The fact that interpretations of this conflict speak so powerfully to the present, and that so many Americans continue to hold positions that scholars have disproved along ago, has freighted Civil War scholarship with particularly heavy baggage.

In the past decade or so, increasing numbers of historians have elected to ditch this baggage by affirming slavery’s significance in the past while adopting new perspectives and asking new questions about the war. Two major trends are evident in recent Civil War scholarship,
neither of which pivots on issues of causation. The first includes a range of efforts to situate the war in a transnational, comparative, or long-term historical perspective, driven in part by the recognition that the suffering produced by this conflict was not uniquely catastrophic, nor was it confined in time and space. The second is manifest in a growing body of work that seeks to lay bare the conflict’s viciousness, venality, and long-term destructiveness. Both of these trends implicitly or explicitly reconceptualize wartime suffering in ways that have raised alarm bells for those concerned with defending interpretations of the war that portray emancipation as its most critical, unassailable legacy.

Placing the violence of the Civil War era in the context of long-term global and national trends can serve either to highlight or undercut an emphasis on wartime suffering, depending on one’s perspective. Recent scholarship examining this war as part of a worldwide struggle for representative government that began in 1848 and continued throughout the nineteenth century, for instance, de-emphasizes national suffering even as it highlights the broader costs of consolidating liberal democracies.6 Likewise, Sven Beckert’s examination of how the Civil War transformed cotton production around the world—drawing vast new areas into an unequal global economy and subjecting millions beyond America’s borders to newly intensive labor regimes—diverts attention from war’s immediate victims while pointing to its less obvious yet no less pervasive and enduring impacts.7 The same can be said of recent efforts that connect wartime violence to the implementation of racial apartheid across the South, or to the Indian wars that continued in the American west.8 In these histories, war produced new policies, discourses, tactics, or capacities that extended suffering in direct and indirect ways from formal battlefields to distant states or populations. Some critics have recently suggested that to understand the progress and outcome of the Civil War, the focus must remain on military institutions and the clash of armies.9 But the war’s progress and outcomes cannot be so neatly contained in time and space: to those Indian tribes confronting federal troops after 1865, for instance, the most significant battles were only just beginning, and their outcomes would presage tremendous suffering rather than victory.

A growing body of work has also challenged traditional assumptions about the conflict’s significance and outcomes by decentering narratives of the Civil War as a “good war.” Undoubtedly influenced by a generation of failed American war making in the Middle East, many scholars have grown more circumspect in characterizing this conflict as a confrontation between slavery and freedom in which the right side eventually tri-
umphed. Like all wars, this one authorized acts of appalling brutality. It involved guerrilla fighting, mass violence against civilians, the spread of epidemic disease, environmental destruction, draft dodging, cowardice, and incompetence, while granting cover to those seeking personal profit or pleasure. This “dark side” of the Civil War has received substantial attention in recent literature. So, too, has the prolonged suffering of Civil War veterans—a development that no doubt bears some relation to the contemporary context, in which the ongoing and dire effects of service in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have been the focus of much media scrutiny. “The Civil War emerging from this new scholarship is just another messy, ghastly, heartless conflict between two parties who were both, to some degree, in the wrong,” Yael Sternhell has recently concluded: “Historians writing in this vein underscore the war’s bleakest facets while exposing the tragedies underlying even the most uplifting moments. There are few winners and fewer heroes, little glory and scant justice.” If this is the new metanarrative of the Civil War, he asks, where does that leave us in terms of understanding emancipation as the war’s greatest achievement?

A related development has been the recent attention to death and to the numbers of the dead in the Civil War. In a widely noted article, J. David Hacker convincingly suggested that the long-cited total of men who died in the Civil War—some 620,000—is at least 130,000 too low. He argues that such a reassessment demonstrates that the “war touched more lives and communities more deeply than we thought, and thus shaped the course of the ensuing decades of American history in ways we have not yet fully grasped.” While this is undoubtedly true, the privileging of combatants’ deaths as the primary way of gauging wartime suffering is still deeply problematic. As the essays in this forum make clear, there is actually no way to tell a single, coherent story about Civil War suffering. We cannot, like accountants, take a balance sheet approach to war. For whom would we include? There is nothing inherently logical about counting those in uniform among wartime sufferers while ignoring a child hit by a stray bullet, a woman raped by passing soldiers, or a newly freed slave felled by the same diseases that killed those in uniform. Nor is it logical to discount the war’s effects on people or cultures that played no direct part on the battlefield yet were nevertheless profoundly affected by the transformations it wrought. War made sufferers of them all. Those who focus solely on the deaths and injuries of men in uniform reinforce the notion that their suffering mattered most, presumably because it was most courageous and hence most profound. But this posi-
tion does not withstand scrutiny. Large numbers of soldiers died of disease without ever seeing a battlefield. Some spent the war filling out paperwork while others experienced the war as thrilling or dull. There was no singular war experience, just as there is no way to compare in some impartial way whether the war-induced suffering of, say, a soldier dying in battle was equal to or greater than that of a newly escaped slave wasting away from disease in a contraband camp. Still less can we tally up all the pain produced by the war and compare it to the misery that would have ensued among millions of slaves if the war had not taken place.

Assessing whose suffering matters in history is inherently political. To state a truism, there is no Archimedean point in history: from the voices we include to the questions we ask, every study is written from a particular perspective. And no wartime suffering was historically insignificant: pain, death, and suffering altered demographics and social structures, transformed families, compelled legislation and redress, and, in the case of the Civil War, generated politicized memories that lasted into the present. Instead of asking whose suffering matters, we might better query why and how some forms of suffering came to be seen as meaningful, necessary, or worthy of remembrance and compensation, while the suffering of others was ignored.

Each writer in this forum takes up this question from a different angle. In her analysis of the plight of children during the war, Catherine Jones points to the fact that “not all Civil War suffering was equally visible or equally vested with moral value.” Race and class, combined with proximity to the fighting, helped to determine whether a child was subjected to violence or offered the protection of sentimental concern. Similarly, some children’s suffering was transformed into powerful symbols or stories that signified the enemy’s inhumanity or moral turpitude, while that of vast numbers of others—especially if they were African American—was erased from the historical record. Moving from individual experience to social structures—from the pain of a single child to the way age, race, class, and gender both determined experiences of suffering and came to be counted as culturally or politically salient—Jones insists that we pay attention to how our historical subjects narrated experiences of suffering, and to the stories that we tell ourselves about suffering when we attribute meaning to the Civil War.

The records that we use to construct our histories are no more politically neutral than the stories we tell. Trying to reconstruct the health conditions of freed people during the transition from slavery to freedom, Jim Downs recounts being confronted with records of the Medical Division of
the Freedmen's Bureau that stubbornly refused to yield the experiences and subjectivities he hoped to examine. Like all historical sources, the documents he found were written for a purpose. They provided evidence not of the scope and totality of freedpeople's afflictions but of their authors' design, in which suffering was worthy of note only to the extent that it related to the bureau's official objective of creating a black labor force. But can such records be read subversively to reconstruct the suffering of those who left no written trace, he asks. Despite the difficulties of reading against the grain, Downs suggests that the failure to do so causes us to recapitulate the categories, concerns, and accounting encoded in our sources, thus leaving us mired in the racist perspectives of the past.

Katherine Meier faces almost the opposite set of challenges in her study of the Confederate leader and lost cause architect Jubal Early, who left copious records detailing his pain and suffering. Rather than trying to wrest human experience from a mass of data, she aims to reveal the larger political significance embedded within his highly individual and idiosyncratic narratives. Highlighting Early's "stunningly self-productive martyrdom," Meier argues that suffering is not just a physical or psychological phenomenon but can also serve as the foundation of identity. For former Confederates like Early, reveling in suffering and assuming the identity of a misunderstood and besieged martyr was not necessarily self-destructive or paralyzing. Rather, it had productive effects, insofar as nurturing hatred allowed them to evade the failure of Confederate ideology, which would have meant acknowledging that their cause was not ordained by God, their population was not united, and their slaves were neither grateful nor content. As Meier shows, in an age that still attributed meaning and value to suffering, self-appointed martyrdom enabled men like Early to claim honor, reputation, and the coveted status of veteran, transforming themselves from "mere mortals" to "heroes." Her essay thus offers an important counterexample to recent histories of Civil War soldiers and veterans tormented by the physical or psychological impacts of war—histories that at times too facilely map contemporary categories like PTSD back onto historical subjects.

Finally, Nicholas Marshall tackles the question of how to assess the significance of the mass suffering that accompanied the Civil War. He argues that this question cannot be answered by reference to statistics, for the answer resides not in the numbers themselves but in the meanings that people in the past attributed to them. One might imagine that few historians would dispute such a proposition. Yet Marshall discovered otherwise as he sought to challenge the frequently repeated claim that
the Civil War is the single most destructive and catastrophic event in American history. Trying to contextualize Civil War suffering in terms of the meaning that death held for people in the past, he notes, brought him up against the meaning of death in the present, particularly with the way scholars have come to empathize with veterans’ suffering in the modern era. Is it possible for historians simultaneously to foster empathy for past injustices and disrupt naive identifications by mapping the distance between past and present? The trouble that Marshall faced in trying to do the latter suggests the difficulty of achieving both goals at once. Yet each seems equally necessary: past suffering should provoke empathy, but not if it ultimately refers back to ourselves.

Collectively, these essays constitute an appeal to think anew about how we count this war’s physical and emotional costs. They urge us to pay more attention to when and why suffering enters the historical record and less to its quantification; to be more critical and self-consciousness in asking whose suffering is included; and to give greater consideration to how the present shapes historical interpretation. Attending to such questions will necessarily produce a less coherent narrative of the Civil War, since not all suffering can be folded into a single tale: one individual’s pain and misery, after all, was frequently another’s triumph. This lack of coherence may seem problematic, particularly in light of the weight that myopic and anachronistic views on the Civil War continue to carry today. But the best response to those who hold simplistic positions on history is not to replicate their either/or reasoning by adopting the opposite view but instead to affirm the inherent complexity of the past, while querying how such simplistic interpretations became meaningful in the first place.

Notes

5. On the declining public support for Confederate iconography represented in recent polls, see Tom McCarthy, “Is the Confederate Flag a Racist Symbol?,” Guardian, June 22, 2015.
6. Recent studies placing the war in a comparative or transnational context are canvassed in Patrick J. Kelly, “The European Revolutions of 1848 and the Transnational Turn in Civil War History,” Journal of the Civil War Era 4, no. 3 (2014): 431–43; Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, “Total War and the American Civil War Reconsidered: The End of an Outdated ‘Master Narrative’,” Jour-


10. This trend is exemplified in the essays contained in Stephen Berry, ed., Weirthing the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).


13. The quote is from J. David Hacker, “Recounting the Dead,” New York Times, September 20, 2011, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/20/recounting-the-dead/summaries, which summarizes the findings of his article appearing in the journal Civil War History. Hacker's piece made newspaper headlines across the world and was discussed extensively by scholars and the broader public. Why did a work adding to existing death tolls rouse such sustained positive notice while studies querying how we assess and measure war time suffering received no such response? This question is worth asking today, as scholars debate ways to assess the costs of America's recent wars, notably by broadening the categories used to assess such costs, or querying the logic that underpins war making. A wealth of scholarship on the former topic is available on the Cost of War project website: http://watson.brown.edu/costofwar/costs; and, on the latter, see Judith Butler, Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? (New York: Verso, 2010).

Children and the Meanings of Suffering in the Civil War Era

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In June 1866, visitors to Campbell’s exhibition hall in Newark, New Jersey, could view Lilly Martin Spencer's recent painting The War Spirit at Home; or, Celebrating the Victory at Vicksburg.1 The canvas has the dense materiality of other genre paintings of the era: plumply upholstered chairs, stacks of dishes, full cupboards, and lush folds of ample skirts. While comfortable abundance sets the frame, the