Slavery, Emancipation, and Veterans of the Union Cause: Commemorating Freedom in the Era of Reconciliation, 1885–1915

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In July 1913, veterans of the United States and Confederate armies gathered in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of the Civil War’s bloodiest and most famous battle. The four-day “Blue-Gray Reunion” featured parades, reenactments, and speeches from a host of dignitaries, including President Woodrow Wilson. Striking among the event’s activities was the lack of a comprehensive remembrance of the war’s causes and consequences. Veterans and other public figures highlighted only the virtuous aspects of soldiery such as courage, valor, and selfless devotion. Thousands of spectators enthusiastically approved of President Wilson’s remarks to former Yankee and Rebel alike: “Valor? Yes! Greater no man shall see in war; and self-sacrifice, and loss to the uttermost; the high recklessness of exalted devotion which does not count the cost.” Any mention of slavery or emancipation was conspicuously absent.1

For many scholars, this event typifies the robust commemorative impulse undertaken by both Union and Confederate veterans celebrating newfound

nationalism in the wake of civil strife—an impulse that necessarily minimized antebellum sectionalism and war causation. Scholars focusing on collective memory and emphasizing sectional reunification contend that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, regimental and state monument dedications, patriotic speeches, personal narratives, “Blue-Gray” reunions, and even combined support for the American war effort against Spain in 1898 yielded a triumphal, national, and, most important, a reconciled version of Civil War memory. Veterans selectively drew from the past to validate the present. In so doing, they left sectionalism behind.\(^2\)

A conventional interpretation illustrating the shortcomings of national reconciliation has emerged from the growing body of memory scholarship. Many have concluded that the dominant themes of war commemoration marginalized issues concerning slavery and emancipation; white Northern and Southern proponents of war commemoration welcomed reconciliation at the expense of racial change. Edward Tabor Linenthal’s analysis of American battlefields, for example, examines Civil War commemorations through the lens of “tacit forgetfulness” and characterizes the “elaborate rituals of reconciliation” as a “moral myopia that ignored the real legacy of the [Civil War].” Similarly, Gaines M. Foster, in his study of Confederate memory, laments that the “sense of triumph derived from [the 1913 reunion at Gettysburg] involved little that had been at issue in the war,” and Stuart McConnell’s work on Union veterans reminds readers that “the question of blacks and slavery received scant mention in celebrations of the war’s outcome.”\(^3\)

2. For example, see Michael Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991). Kammen admits that many Northern and Southern veterans remained “unreconciled” due in large part to “regional chauvinism” and “spasmodic bursts of Northern aggressiveness;” but he suggests that in time, “selective memory helped eventually to facilitate reconciliation” (109–15, 121). John Bodnar, Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992). Conclusions in these works dovetail well with earlier work on tradition and memory, suggesting that people strive to establish continuity with a suitable historic past in order to “use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion.” See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 1, 12. Further, illuminating a vast separation between past and present, many scholars have amplified how people in the present shape the vestiges of the past through today’s predilections. Thus, Civil War remembrance illustrates how “past discord [was] simplified or played down, making times of violent strife seem remarkably benign and orderly.” See David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), xvii, 345.

The most eloquently expressed account of the implications surrounding the supposed enthusiastic and widespread support for national reconciliation appears in David W. Blight’s capstone work, Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory. Blight examines how participants at events geared toward reconciliation, such as the 1913 Gettysburg Reunion, did in fact ignore the principal issues leading to war and the Union war aim of emancipation. White supremacists and reconciliationists, Blight argues, “locked arms” and by the “turn of the century delivered a segregated memory of the Civil War on Southern terms.” He concludes, “Forces of reconciliation overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national culture [and] the inexorable drive for reunion both used and trumped race.”

While painting a distinctly darker portrait of reconciliation than many of their predecessors, these recent analyses resemble works such as Paul H. Buck’s 1937 publication, The Road to Reunion, 1865–1900. Although a celebratory study venerating the “positive influences” paving the way for the “promise of ultimate peace” and applauding the breakdown of sectional animosity during the postwar years, Buck’s work otherwise anticipates future scholarship. He admits that reconciliation ushered in a “period where [black people] would no longer figure as the ward of the nation to be singled out for special guardianship or peculiar treatment.” Buck pays tribute to reconciliation but questions “the tremendous reversal of opinion” regarding freedmen. These historians have crafted an influential reconciliation historiography remarkably narrow in scope, maintaining that slavery and emancipation were effectively written out of Civil War memory.

A reconciliation premise fundamentally informs these scholars’ interpretive framework. Recognizing the profound racial inequalities coinciding with widespread support for both reconciliation and nationalism, scholars use the reconciliation era as a vantage point from which to delineate and lament a moment forgotten in historical memory—a lost chance for the nation to capitalize on the promises of Union victory. In so doing, they place historical actors in categories hindered by analytical limitations. Developing a di-


4. Blight, Race and Reunion, 2. According to Blight, the emancipationist vision of war memory recalled the fight to end slavery in terms of a commitment to citizenship rights guaranteed by Union victory and the postwar constitutional amendments.

chotomy between the reconciled and unreconciled, historians illustrate how the few vehemently opposed to reconciliation were cast aside and considered embarrassing anachronisms by their contemporaries. Their studies thus stress that the overwhelming majority of those who had survived disunion agreed (for better or worse) to remember selectively whatever supported newfound national unity. This analysis obscures the tense, often vituperative negotiation processes of a nation’s formerly warring sections suddenly thrust back together, each staking claim to a nationalist spirit. Many Northern veterans favored national unity, but did so on their own terms. Careful study of the confrontation between former enemies actively working to shape their own version of nationalism reveals episodes of national cohesion under pressure—when those considered reconciled worked against the very unity they proclaimed.

Scholars working within the conventional interpretive framework have thus played down or overlooked evidence that suggests divergence from the nationalist/triumphal reconciliatory drive that marginalized controversy. Granted, testimony such as President Wilson’s 1913 Gettysburg remarks ignoring slavery and emancipation in favor of valor and “exalted devotion” of all Civil War soldiers shows that individuals could and sometimes did suppress prickly issues. Further, shared enthusiasm at certain gatherings illustrates how moments of nationalist celebration could promote good feelings between former enemies. Further still, the conspicuous absence of black participants at many of these events reveals the extent to which white Americans’ racist customs directed and manipulated “rituals” of reconciliation. Yet, the strain

6. For example, Northern newspapers published reconciliationists’ testimony opposing Southern efforts to minimize the slavery issue. See “War Produces Awful Horrors,” Wisconsin Democrat, ca. June 5, 1905. While the author supports an ebbing of “the bitterness of feeling between north and south,” he nevertheless condemns the “earnest appeals . . . made by southern writers since the civil war, to place the four years of devotion and heroism of the south on a higher plane than that of a mighty effort to perpetuate an institution condemned alike by christianity and morality. [What] was said by speakers in the south in the first years of the secession movement made it clear that their prime object was the preservation and extension of slavery.”

7. I do not conceive of memory functioning as merely a reflection of the culture around it. Rather, people use memories to shape their culture. I suggest that vehemently defended sectional interpretations of the war were not inconsistent with the promotion of reconciliation or nationalism but nevertheless fostered an unstable national culture during the reconciliation period. For a further discussion of what people “do” with their memories, see Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, eds., The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2002).
of commemoration devoid of contention represents only a fraction of the broader drive to integrate the experiences of disunion with a strong sense of nationalism. Emphasizing exceptional events and implying extensive rejection of the causes and consequences of the war conceals important features of Northern Civil War memory. Veterans of the Union cause, despite their racist assumptions, undertook a sustained fight to include sectional terms in a national commemorative ethos. Long after reconciliationists had allegedly expunged the cause of freedom from Civil War commemorations, politicians, editorialists, individual former soldiers, and groups of white Northern veterans singled out the sectional row over slavery as the fundamental origin of the war and praised emancipation as its righteous consequence.

Some scholars are beginning to assess sectional Civil War memories and challenge the assertion that the fight for freedom was relegated to the shadows. Barbara A. Gannon’s work on black and integrated Grand Army of the Republic posts shows that Northern celebrations of the war’s outcome often included both black and white participants. Memorial Day and other celebratory events attended by black and white veterans frequently revered emancipation as a worthy result of the war. William Blair’s Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865–1914 discusses the political implications of Emancipation Day celebrations and suggests that blacks’ demands for citizenship rights kept the fight against slavery in public view well into the twentieth century. Joan Waugh’s assessment of Ulysses S. Grant’s Personal Memoirs illustrates how Grant welcomed reconciliation but on terms that acknowledged the Union fight for freedom. Finally, John R. Neff has recently argued in his compelling study, Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation, that the necessarily sectional remembrance of those killed defending the Union’s “cause victorious” functioned as a key challenge to reconciliatory efforts. In the context of the commemoration of the dead, Neff finds the clearest evidence of a lack of reconciliation.8

These historians have made valuable contributions to the field of historical memory by analyzing contemporary interpretations of the war opposed to

the influential “Southern terms” argument. However, evidence suggests that the acknowledgment of slavery as the cause of the war and the commemoration of emancipation as a crucial part of the Union cause was far more extensive. North of the Potomac, a vibrant and powerful voice emanated from a diverse (and sometimes surprising) collection of veterans, politicians, and other Unionists. Some were disinterested in racial change, while others demanded it. But whether or not they embraced an expressly emancipationist legacy of war memory, veterans of the Union cause articulated and fought to preserve memories of a war that pitted a Northern vision of Union against the institution of slavery—efforts that ultimately undermined the movement toward reconciliation.

The compelling evidence supporting the assertion that former Confederates dominated the national memory of the war should not be ignored. For example, editorials and reports of reconciliatory events at Gettysburg and elsewhere offer clues that some veterans might have been willing to forget the tensions over slavery that sparked warfare. Since the 1870s, white Northerners and Southerners had gathered to highlight the virtues of soldiers and “reunite the bonds of fraternity those sections of our country so unhappily estranged by the war.” Early twentieth-century correspondence between the preeminent Union veterans’ organization, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), and their Confederate counterparts, the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), was astonishingly amicable when discussing the possibility of a future Blue-Gray gathering. High-ranking GAR officials proclaimed that a reunion would solidify a “permanent establishment of harmonious and fraternal relations between the North and South,” whereby the UCV leadership responded with the intention to “earnestly and heartily unite in the hope that [the] event [would] mark the final and complete reconciliation of those opposing armies of fifty years ago.” Newspaper coverage of the 1913 Gettysburg reunion confirmed an “extraordinary festival of reconciliation” free from contention where former enemies met and “immediately became friends.”

9. John Tregaskis, Souvenir of the Re-Union of the Blue and Gray on the Battlefield of Gettysburg, July 1, 2, 3, and 4, 1888 [sic 1887] (New York: American Graphic, 1888), 2–3. The twenty-fifth commemoration of the battle included among its participants survivors of Gen. George E. Pickett’s famous Virginia division and LaSalle Corbell Pickett, the general’s widow. It was primarily an event commemorating the bravery of Union soldiers who repulsed “Pickett’s Charge” on Cemetery Ridge. However, the presence of former Confederates gave the event a reconciliatory flavor; issues concerning slavery and emancipation were excluded from the ceremony. See Reardon, Pickett’s Charge in History and Memory, 97–101.

10. “Address of the Commander-in-Chief, Reports of National Officers also Reports of Committees of the Forty-Sixth National Encampment, Grand Army of the Republic,” Los
Beyond simply dismissing the Union cause of freedom, some Northern veterans seemed in agreement with former Confederates over the slavery issue and explicitly denounced the emancipationist strain of war memory. During the war, a great number of white Union volunteers opposed all association with blacks, even those who had served in the Union army, rejecting any semblance of racial equality. In the postwar decades, some publicly condemned what they considered distasteful attempts by radical Republicans to eclipse the fight for national integrity. Across the North, those who had opposed or had been indifferent to emancipation launched an attack that dovetailed well with certain aspects of Lost Cause interpretations of the war. Some echoed the sentiments of nationally published ex-Confederates such as Gen. Richard Taylor. “Slavery was not the ultimate or proximate cause of the war,” he asserted, “and Abolitionists are not justified in claiming the glory and spoils of the conflict.” One highly vexed Northerner empathized with Southerners who “[expressed] displeasure” regarding remarks made to GAR members by President Roosevelt early in 1902 equating secession with anarchy and defining the Union cause as emancipationist. “The soldiers of the Union in the war of the early ’60s fought for the preservation of the Union of States. The government did not make war for the purpose or intent of freeing a single slave.” Criticizing the president’s “lack of historical knowledge,” he concluded, “The comrades of the G.A.R. and their fellow-soldiers fought for and saved the Union. That is glory enough.” While this testimony is significant in terms of a national culture of reconciliation, the sentiments of veterans who took a favorable view of emancipation deserve equal attention. Those who suggested that slavery had nothing to do with the outbreak of war or who excluded emancipation from war commemoration met stiff resistance from many veterans of the Union cause.

Contemporary testimony ranging from the celebration of Blue-Gray “love-fests” to open hostility toward emancipation assumes a Southern tenor by illustrating both implicit and explicit rejection of the fight for freedom. However, such evidence provides only a glimpse of Union war commemora-


tion undertaken throughout the reconciliation era (1885–1915). While proponents of the conventional interpretation suggest that white participants at sites of historical memory should have dismissed slavery and emancipation, the dominant themes of many dedication addresses illustrate the virtues of Union and emancipation with the same degree of emphasis. Veterans and other dignitaries honored rank-and-file war heroes not only as saviors of Union but also as liberators—eliminating the stain of slavery from the national fabric. For example, the 1887 monument dedication address at Gettysburg honoring the 13th New Jersey Volunteers shows considerable and equal dedication to both components of the Union cause: “This monument shall stand, among the many which are to be erected here, as a silent sentinel to indicate to future generations where soldiers of bravery and renown gave up their lives in defense of their country; to show where are the graves of the true patriots who dared to die for the hopes of man and the redemption of a race from slavery.”

Similarly illustrating the impulse to emphasize Union and the eradication of slavery together, an 1888 monument dedicated on the Gettysburg battlefield to the 8th New Jersey Infantry celebrated the men who defended both “great principles” of the Union cause: “The result of the battle decided that the Republic would be saved. That this was to be a land of freemen. That the shackles of the slaves should be sold for iron. That the auction block should be burned. That all free men should breathe the fresh air of heaven direct, and not by inhalation from a master.” These excerpts typify an extensive

14. Most historians agree that this period represents the most vibrant reconciliationist activity between veteran groups from both North and South. Included within this time frame are numerous Blue-Gray events and the war with Spain. Many consider the Spanish-American War to be a crucial (for some the most important) factor in facilitating sectional reconciliation. See David F. Trask, The War With Spain in 1898 (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1981), 137; Nina Silber, The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900 (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1993); Thomas J. Pressly, Americans Interpret Their Civil War (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1954), 137. Others regard the 1913 Blue-Gray reunion at Gettysburg to be the pinnacle of reconciliatory activity. See, for example, Blight, Race and Reunion. While recognizing that reconciliationist efforts can be traced to the immediate postwar years, I frame my analysis of the reconciliation era beginning with the publication of Ulysses S. Grant’s nationally respected Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant and then extend the period to include the release of D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation, a film with a decidedly reconciliationist bent that nevertheless engendered a great deal of sectional controversy throughout the nation.


collection of testimony stressing emancipation alongside Union. Although it is true that many, if not most, Federal soldiers enlisted in the army in defense of Union rather than as soldiers of a racial crusade against slavery, emancipation and Union together provided the foundation of Northern war remembrance. White Union veterans routinely extolled slavery’s demise and a Union comprised entirely of free men.17

Union veterans involved in monument dedications and other forms of war memorialization unquestionably shared the racist assumptions common among most white Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the tendency to overlook racial inequities left unsettled by war was inconsistent with neither veterans’ frequent assertions insisting that slavery had provoked sectional conflict and weakened the Union nor orations praising emancipation as a worthy and righteous act fundamental to national progress. Many tailored speeches to promote progress in a reconciled nation with nods toward emancipation. Memorializing the illustrious career of William Tecumseh Sherman, for example, former governor of Ohio and Union Army veteran Capt. J. B. Foraker addressed the Fred. C. Jones Post, GAR, in February 1891: “Those who suffered most from his operations are now rejoicing in the fruits of his labors. Where, twenty-five years ago, his name was spoken only to be execrated, a just measure of his character and a profound respect for his lofty patriotism are spreading in the minds of men, and ere long the time will be when, in the pride of a common country, a common greatness and a common destiny, the people of the Southern States will thank all who aided to save them from slavery, disunion and political death.”18

Perhaps exceedingly optimistic, Foraker’s message is significant nonetheless. Foraker and the other veterans paying tribute to their recently deceased commander were promoting reconciliation, but on manifestly Northern terms that few (if any) former Confederates could willingly accept. Indeed, one cantankerous ex-rebel attacked such “Northern writers” for engineer-

17. The Wisconsin Veterans Museum in Madison, for example, holds a vast collection of manuscripts, including personal correspondence between Union veterans, speech transcriptions, and GAR meeting minutes at both the state and national levels. The favorable view of the fight against slavery is a central theme of this invaluable testimony and appears throughout the collection. (Collection hereafter cited as GAR Records, Dept. of Wisconsin; repository hereafter cited as WVM.)

ing “a perfect perversion of the truth, and a positive fraud on the public.” Foraker articulated neither demands for racial equality nor empathy for the plight of former slaves. Still, similar to many orators during this period, he explicitly linked slavery to disunion and emancipation to the Union cause.

Beyond dedicating regimental monuments and memorializing individuals, veterans used the power of the written narrative to frame nationalism from a distinctly Northern perspective. Modern historians have time and again underscored autobiographical and other narrative works that minimized the fight against slavery in favor of a vision of national unity. Admittedly, some Northerners who intentionally produced works to facilitate reconciliation, with an eye toward touting the virtues of their Confederate adversaries, avoided the slavery issue altogether. Magazines such as The Century issued a series of Confederate and Union recollections in this vein during the 1880s. Later released in book form as Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, these reconciliationist tracts rarely mentioned slavery or emancipation and instead focused on the “good temper and unpartisan character of leading writers on both sides.” However, Northern war narrative provides numerous examples highlighting the connection between slavery and disunion. Carl Schurz’s Reminiscences of Carl Schurz, published in 1907, carefully illustrates the centrality of slavery to sectional discord and secession: “The secessionists had set up an independent confederacy, not to vindicate the constitutional liberty of the citizens and the right of man to govern himself, but to vindicate the right of one man to enslave another man, and, as they themselves boastingly confessed, to found an empire upon the cornerstone of slavery.”

Schurz’s goal was to accent slavery as “the guilty cause of the whole mischief” and to remind his readers that a powerful slave-owning conspiracy had threatened to destroy the Northern vision of Union. “Nobody could be more certain of the sanctity of slave property than [Senator Robert Toombs of

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20. Robert Underwood Johnson, ed., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: Being for the Most Part Contributions by Union and Confederate Officers, 4 vols. (New York: Century Co., 1887–88), 1:ix. For an example of a reconciliationist war and postwar narrative concerning the activities of a particular Union officer, see Ada B. Hancock, Reminiscences of Winfield Scott Hancock (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1887). There is no mention of slavery as a cause or emancipation as a consequence of the war in this book. There are, however, a number of reconciliatory messages, particularly those highlighting Hancock as a national political figure: “[Hancock’s presidential nomination] will be alike acceptable to the North and South, will thrill the Republic, will crush the last embers of sectional strife” (171).
Georgia]. The righteous victory of the South was to him above doubt, and it would be so overwhelming that he would live to call the roll of his slaves in the shadow of the Bunker Hill Monument.” Anticipating Schurz’s sentiments, John McAllister Schofield, commander of the Army of the Ohio during the war, diplomat, politician, and, in the late 1880s, lieutenant general commanding the U.S. Army, published his memoirs soon after his retirement in 1895: “I regard emancipation as one of the necessary consequences of the rebellion, or rather as one of the means absolutely necessary to a complete restoration of the Union—and this because slavery was the great cause of the rebellion, and the only obstacle in the way of a perfect Union.” Late in the nineteenth century, Schofield maintained that the loyal people of the North, “without complaint,” eagerly accepted eventual freedom for black people. Unquestionably hyperbolic, his testimony nevertheless shows a clearly articulated expression of Civil War memory on Northern terms.

Other high-profile public figures similarly bolstered an explicitly Union narrative that included the fight for freedom by indicting the Southern master class. Shortly after his death in December 1886, former Union major general, U.S. congressman, and founder of the GAR John A. Logan’s published testimony regarding slave power and the outbreak of war explained how Southern slaveholders had threatened the future of the nation and thus triggered the conflict: “Believing in the theory of slavery, [the master] denied the doctrine of universal equality. A disbeliever in the government of the masses, his ideal was achieved in the rule of the many by the few. In the year 1861, amidst exuberant growth of republican principles, he cultivated the heresy of caste, and was ready to commence the work of undermining a structure that had been reared by the irresistible forces of human evolution.” Including morality to further exemplify the role of slavery in the outbreak of war, former major general and congressman Benjamin F. Butler’s war narrative, Butler’s Book, concluded, “Slavery was repugnant to the moral feelings of a great many citizens” and reduced the “causes and events which led to the War of the Rebellion [to a] single phrase—the perpetuation of slavery.”

Perhaps the most significant Civil War narrative published in the nineteenth century was Ulysses S. Grant’s exceedingly popular *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*. Grant was revered by Union veterans and respected by many ex-Confederates for his magnanimity at Appomattox. His efforts to ease bitter sentiments in the former Confederacy, as proposed in his impressive account of the war, awarded him further admiration from reconciliationists. “I feel that we are on the verge of a new era,” he wrote shortly before his death, “where there is to be great harmony between the Federal and Confederate. I cannot stay to be a living witness to the correctness of this prophecy; but I feel within me that it is to be so.” But coupled with Grant’s reconciliationist bent was a steadfast devotion to the Union cause of freedom. He explained to a nation of readers: “The cause of the Great War of the Rebellion against the United States will have to be attributed to slavery,” and he reminded Americans that the Confederate cause was “one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.” Grant favored and worked diligently for reconciliation, but he did so keenly aware of the triumph over the evils of the Southern institution.

Republican ideology figured prominently in postwar commentary and was frequently invoked in war narratives and commemorative addresses equating the Union cause of freedom with national progress. For example, Grant’s estimation that it was “well that we had the war when we did” underscored the institution of slavery as a hindrance to rapid expansion of trade and infrastructure that formed much of the Republican Party’s “free soil” platform. Similarly, John Hay, diplomat, assistant secretary of state, and President Lincoln’s former executive secretary, touted free-soil principles early in the twentieth century. He regarded the Republican Party and its


25. Ibid., 2:549, 489. On Grant’s far-reaching reconciliationary legacy, see Joan Waugh, “Pageantry of Woe? The Funeral of Ulysses S. Grant,” *Civil War History* 51 (2005): 151–154. On the significance of Grant’s memoirs illustrating the causes of Union and freedom, see Waugh, in Fars and Waugh, *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, 5–38. Grant was also praised internationally for the positive conclusion to the Union war effort. See L. T. Remlap, *General U.S. Grant’s Tour Around the World* (Chicago: J. Fairbanks, 1879), 21, in which Remlap predicts that future generations “will remember that he acted a foremost part in the most notable events of the century; supporter and right hand of Lincoln in the emancipation of the slaves [and] restorer of peace.”

26. Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2:544. Citing the significance of national progress, Grant argues, “We are better off now than we would have been without [the war], and have made more rapid progress than we otherwise should have made.”
supporters as virtuous in their moral victory over slavery; his collection of
speeches reminded those willing to look beyond the “forgetfulness” of Blue-
Gray reunions that since the [Republican] soldier “checked the aggression of
slavery, the humblest old Republican in America [had] the right to be proud
that in the days of his youth in the presence of the momentous questions
he judged right; and if he is sleeping in his honored grave his children may
justly be glad of his decision.”

Equally important, members of Congress representing loyal Union states
often linked the commemoration of prominent Union Civil War heroes
to memory of the war on Northern terms. During a turn-of-the-century
congressional reception honoring a GAR presentation of General Grant’s
likeness, Michigan’s representative Washington Gardner, veteran of the
65th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, who had suffered severe wounds at Resaca,
Georgia, in 1864, recalled the antebellum Union as “two irreconcilable
civilizations—the cornerstone of one, freedom; of the other, slavery.” The
government, suggested Gardner, deprecated war, but “for loyal men there was
no honorable alternative.” An unnamed representative from Pennsylvania
added his voice, suggesting that the demise of the Southern institution only
strengthened the integrity of Union. “With the overthrow of the Confederacy
went the downfall of slavery and the extreme doctrine of State rights. With
the triumph of Union came the political equality of men in the States and
of States in the Union. There is now a true national sovereignty and a true
national citizenship.”

Newspaper editorials recounting veteran events and private GAR post
activities, ranging from celebratory banquets to the promotion of historically
“accurate” textbooks, offer additional insights illustrating how the death of
slavery and the preservation of Union were celebrated together. For example,
one New York newspaper’s editorial of a banquet honoring U.S. Grant’s
birthday, where Union general Horace Porter declared that “the last gun
[of the Civil War] sounded the death knell of rebellion and put an end to
slavery,” exemplified how both Union causes flowed naturally together to
provide a lesson for posterity:

28. Proceedings in Congress on the Occasion of the Reception and Acceptance of the Statue of
General Ulysses S. Grant Presented by the Grand Army of the Republic, May 19, 1900 (Washington,
D.C.: GPO, 1901), 59, 72.
Not merely the people of the United States, but all the freed peoples of the future, will hold Washington the founder, Lincoln the liberator, and Grant the savior of the Union, in equal love. In the universal Republic, which soon shall be, the three greatest Americans will hold a place above all the other great men of any time and clime, because of this fact: They lived there lives for others, and when duty, even though it should be to death, was revealed to them, they were not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.°

Journalists often praised veterans’ efforts to both save the Union and destroy slavery by emphasizing key battles. The Union victory at Antietam in September 1862 figured most prominently as the precursor to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. “The battle freed the slaves,” described one report, and “the stake for which your battle was fought was the Republic itself. The reward you received was liberty for 3,000,000 slaves.” Offering an additional argument promoting economic and cultural expansion, vital components of America’s emergence on the world stage in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, the press saluted former U.S. soldiers and sailors for bringing about the death of an institution regarded by many as directly antithetical to the spread of liberty. “What fields of gold or wide expanse of land have done mankind one thousandth of the real good of the Proclamation of Emancipation?”

Published journals of Grand Army National Encampments further illustrate the commemoration of both Union and emancipation. The Department of the Potomac, GAR, for example, held celebratory banquets at each yearly encampment, where speakers took turns paying homage to their departmental

commanders. While toasts to such men as GAR commander-in-chief Samuel R. Van Sant generally lauded the virtues of heroism and patriotism, many speeches also linked Lincoln, his soldiers, the preservation of Union, and “the granting of freedom to an enslaved race.”  

Stressing slavery as the fundamental cause of the war, GAR veterans such as Nelson Miles pointed out to his comrades amidst enthusiastic applause that “you left your homes [to] sustain Abraham Lincoln and the Government; you held the Nation together; you destroyed the very cause of that war; you swept for all time the accursed institution of slavery.” Additionally, while official GAR etiquette enumerated the multiple virtues of a brave soldiery, authors of correct GAR ritual emphasized the significance of emancipation in terms of national progress. One publication outlining the appropriate dialogue for Memorial Day services included these mandatory spoken words: “To us, this is the memorial day of stalwart bravery, of patriotic heroism, of national faith. It is the freedom day of a race emancipated from bondage, and of a nation redeemed from iniquity.”

Civilian publications echoed the sentiments of former soldiers by adding the memory of antebellum abolitionism to the vast body of testimony preserving a Northern vision of Union. Boston’s Atlantic Monthly, for instance, featured numerous articles in the 1880s and 1890s celebrating Bostonians’ midcentury penchant for abolition. One author recalled her father’s selfless response to the outbreak of war: “My father was over sixty when the war broke out and threatened him with financial ruin, but he said that he did not care if poverty awaited him at his age, ‘if only the slaves got free.’” Abolitionists, the author explains, were “possessed of an assured hope that the country would be saved,” but only “after freedom could her bells ring peace.” Together with the veterans’ testimonials written during the reconciliation era, articles of this tone offer a significant challenge to the conventional interpretation suggesting that former Confederates wrote the terms for national Civil War memory.

In 1954, the historian Thomas J. Pressly perceptively captured the mood in

34. Services for the Use of the Grand Army of the Republic (Toledo: Headquarters of the GAR, 1884), 16.
the victorious North during the initial months of peace. In his historiographical study, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War*, Pressly asserted that supporters of the Union had “confident assurance of the evil of their late foes and of their own virtual faultlessness. The victorious Unionists of 1865 would have been less than human,” Pressly commented, “if their triumph of arms had not strengthened their belief in the rightness of their opinions.” Even leniency toward the former Confederate states could not diminish many Unionists’ moral rectitude. Union veterans were well aware that they put down an act of rebellion intricately linked with slavery. Carrying on the tradition of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address promising “malice toward none and charity to all,” George Bancroft’s eulogy in April 1865 for the recently assassinated executive advocated a reconstruction policy so mild that it “aroused the ire” of radical Republicans such as Charles Sumner. Yet despite Bancroft’s apparent lack of animosity, he nevertheless expressed “a feeling of triumph at the outcome of the war.” Northern armies had thwarted the malevolent designs of “a confederacy with slavery at its cornerstone supported by all the worn out aristocracies of Europe.” “Heaven,” Bancroft confirmed, “has willed it that the United States shall live.” The Unionists of 1865 taught a moral lesson: “The forces of darkness had attempted, unsuccessfully, to destroy the best government in the world with the purpose of erecting a new nation founded upon slavery.”

“Moralizing self-righteousness” pervaded the minds of victorious Unionists in 1865 based in part on firsthand recollections of slavery in practice. During the war, many who saw slavery up close found it appalling. One soldier wrote his sister shortly after he heard of the Emancipation Proclamation: “The curses of slavery has become knowledge and instead of thinking les of a negroe I have learned to think them better than many wight meen.” Even Gen. George B. McClellan, a vocal opponent of the abolition movement, who avowed he “[would] not fight for the abolitionists,” described to his wife the conditions under which slaves suffered. “When I think of some of the features of slavery I cannot help shuddering,” he distressingly wrote, “when the day of adjustment comes I will throw my sword into the scale to force an improvement in the condition of these poor blacks.”

of war, many would thus celebrate the demise of slavery alongside the preservation of Union as a cause worthy of their efforts. As Pressly suggests, the “position of abolitionists was enhanced after the war and their viewpoints given greater prestige.” The 1880s, for example, saw a well-received spate of writings by such professionally trained historians as Hermann Eduard Von Holst, which mirrored the writings of “oldtime free-soiler” Henry Wilson and James G. Blaine’s “bloody shirt” interpretations of the war’s causes. In their pages, the “South was exclusively responsible for the war and right was exclusively upon the side of the North.” “Good,” according to Von Holst, “was represented by the principles of nationality and freedom, whereas evil was linked with slavery.”

Von Holst and others worked diligently against formidable opposition. Literature in the former Confederate states proved a solid foundation for an interpretation of the war that at once venerated Confederate commanders and looked despairingly at the results of emancipation. A number of writers shaped a strain of Civil War memory that would eventually reach a national audience. In the South, the popularity of romanticized “Lost Cause” histories such as Thomas Nelson Page’s *Robert E. Lee: Man and Soldier* helped deify the rebel chief and enshrine his image in the former Confederacy as the symbol of American soldierly virtue. Lee, explains Page, was “not only the greatest soldier of his time, but the loftiest character of his generation; one rarely equaled, and possibly never excelled, in all the annals of the human race.”

Thomas Dixon’s vastly popular pro-Southern fictions *The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden, 1865–1900* and *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* worked partially to vindicate the Southern states and confirmed for many the noble Confederate struggle against vast armies of Yankee hirelings and ignorant ex-slaves. Dixon’s “worn and

39. Charles E. Curtis Post no. 34, GAR, Whitewater, Wisc., Meeting Minute Book, folder 6, box 23, GAR Records, Dept. of Wisconsin, WVM. A good example of a Union veteran recalling the fight for Union and freedom is the entry for Sept. 14, 1923. The author describes how “Comrade Unkrick,” a German immigrant, “entertained the Post with reminiscences of his arrival in the U.S.—the desire of the family to avoid that portion affected by slavery & his final enlistment with the ‘Lincoln Soldiers’ to help destroy that evil and save the Union.”


dispirited tramping soldiers” faced “desolation everywhere, grim chimneys [that] once marked the site of fair homes, hedgerows of tangled blackberry briar where a fence had stood before war breathed upon the land.” But worst of all, defeated Confederates confronted “the freed Negro, transformed by the exigency of war from a Chattel to be bought and sold into a Beast to be feared.”

Despite the blighted landscape and upended social structure, Dixon praised the “spirit of the South like lighting leaped forth, half startled at itself, its feet upon the ashes and the rags, its hands tight-gripped on the throat of the tyrant, thug, and thief.”

The literary portrait of Confederate history that enthralled Southerners in time found its way northward. Some found Dixon’s fictionalized Southern vindications “wholly admirable” and chastised the “policy of revenge pursued by Congress after amnesty had been offered and accepted.”

Informed by the influential Lost Cause writings of “reconstructed” rebels, popular Civil War anecdotes, and Confederate imagery flowing from the Southern states, some Northerners were willing to respect the virtues of their former adversaries and acknowledge reconciliation on Southern terms. However, despite the literary victories of Southern authors, many in the North looked askance at Southern claims of vindication, the purported shortcomings of Reconstruction, and the horrors of racial brutality as perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan. While certain Southerners claimed to have “won the war with the pen,” the literary victory professed over the North was far from universal. Racist conventions meant


45. Many high-profile ex-Confederates, including John Brown Gordon, Fitzhugh Lee, and John Warwick Daniel, had publicly voiced their desire for sectional reunification and thus should be considered among the “reconstructed.” They considered “unreconstructed” rebels such as Jubal A. Early embarrassingly anachronistic. However, speeches and other testimony of the former group bore a remarkable resemblance to that of the latter individual. For an interpretation of Early’s impact on Civil War memory, see Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1998), 199–226.


that Union veterans did not necessarily mix bronze and marble with pleas for black citizenship rights guaranteed by the postwar Constitutional amendments but denied by “redeemed” Southern local governments. Yet efforts to counter the work of former Confederates often addressed the plight of the Southern freemen in ways that illustrated significant disparity between sections.

Not surprisingly, some of the most strident detractors of Southern vindication were black Americans. Frederick Douglass, the nation’s foremost black abolitionist, not only condemned some Northerners’ respect for Robert E. Lee but also harbored great animosity toward the process of political redemption in the South. He feared the “North [would] turn away from the ghastly scene of war and the past [and] let bygones be bygones.” But more important, Douglass “did not want national reunion; he wanted racial justice, promised in law, demonstrated in practice, and preserved in memory.”

George Washington Williams was among the many black writers during this period heavily influenced by Douglass’s claims of a “war undertaken and brazenly carried on for the perpetual enslavement of colored men.” A veteran of the United States Colored Troops (USCT), Williams wrote similar passages deriding the Confederate cause. In his 1883 publication, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*, he predictably pointed to the institution of slavery as the war’s cause and emancipation as the moral justification for fighting: “Like some loathsome disease it spread itself over the body politic until our nation became the eyesore of the age, and a byword among nations of the world. The time came when our beloved country had to submit to heroic treatment, and the cancer of slavery was removed by the sword.”

This view was not limited to black abolitionists and veterans of the USCT. Many white veterans and GAR members such as Nelson Monroe wrote of the slave-power conspiracy and its centrality to the war while stressing the positive effects of emancipation. Moore’s 1893 “souvenir,” *The Grand Army Button*, suggested that “Southern leaders, accustomed to control Congress by their demands and threats,” were chiefly to blame for the conflict. They “sought to make slave territory all of the region. They claimed also the right of reopening the slave trade.” Monroe’s treatise placing blame squarely on Southern shoulders had an additional component that bore a striking


resemblance to antebellum abolitionist sentiment. His “abhorrence for slavery and the poor bondmen flying from its torments, its indignities, and its vicious indulgence” began an intriguing narrative that concluded with a salient moral lesson justifying the staggering cost of the war. “Thus ended the rebellion. It had cost more than half a million of lives, and in the debts of the two sections and the destruction of property and values not less than eight thousand millions of money; but fearful as its expense had been, it is worth all the cost. Slavery has been destroyed.”

The moral victory over slavery was not always articulated in public settings. Many late-nineteenth-century gatherings were celebrations of union and not only served to facilitate reconciliation but also frequently included former Confederates as guests of honor. “We have not now,” wrote the author of a souvenir program, “nor have we at any time since the war closed, had any disposition to open again the bloody chasm which once unhappily divided this people.” However, moral sentiment celebrating emancipation often made its appearance at large national gatherings just beneath the surface. While the Twenty-sixth National Grand Army Encampment, held in Washington, D.C., was geared primarily to avoid controversy, the GAR nevertheless endorsed an often-overlooked and highly contentious moral lesson. Distributed among the veterans, the “GAR creed” reminded all to “[cherish] tenderly the memory of the heroic dead, who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foes. Their soldier lives were the reveille of freedom to a race in chains, and their deaths the tattoo of a rebellious tyranny in arms.” The presence of these words in an official GAR document indicates that morality, slavery, and the lifeblood of the nation remained connected in the minds of many Grand Army veterans. Further, the explicit connection between commemorating soldierly virtues and honoring dead Union soldiers underscores significant efforts to perpetuate Northern war memory—efforts that could amplify sectionalism despite clear attempts to suppress discord.

Published celebrations of Lincoln’s presidency invoked the powerful moral legacy of emancipation. One editorialist reminded readers, “Lincoln

dared proclaim that the United States could not live half free and half slave; that one or the other must perish, and that slavery would perish and the Union survive.” Assessing the greatest events of the last hundred years, the author commented, “The distinguishing characteristic of the nineteenth century is emancipation of the soul from bigotry and dogma, emancipation of the mind from dead forms of the past, [and] emancipation of the individual from slavery.”

Similarly, an address given in February 1895 by former brigadier general Bishop Samuel Fallows at a “memorial meeting” of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (MOLLUS) strengthened the connections between Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and the “unending work of the Republic”: “[Lincoln] knew after the first shot against Sumter that freedom and union would ultimately have the grip of life. With the Union, slavery had ultimately nothing to hope.”

Others published documentation of their personal realignment in favor of universal emancipation. These men acknowledged subsequent to the outbreak of hostilities that slavery was fundamentally detrimental to the Union and that the destruction of the institution was not only worthwhile but also was a significant factor in Union morale. Gen. John M. Schofield, like many of his contemporaries, was “not an abolitionist before the war” and had not entered the conflict to fight against slavery. Late in the 1890s, Schofield made public the correspondence testifying to his wartime reversal and argued, “It is true that the slavery question was a very powerful factor in our Civil War, and became more and more so as the war progressed.” Many agreed with Union veterans such as Theodore Ayrault Dodge’s assessment of the intricate connections between the “Casus Belli” and the institution of slavery. Although he argues that emancipation had not inspired the initial call to arms, and that the “contest was solely a War for Union,” as the “struggle grew in intensity, the final extirpation of slavery became an element in the calculations of the North, and even a means of encouraging its people.”

The noticeable “change of heart” among Northerners did not necessarily preclude the rampant racism of the period. Even former slaves who had

54. Schofield, Forty-Six Years in the Army, /4, 235.
fought with the Union Army sometimes faced ostracism from their white comrades in Grand Army posts, often to the point where GAR post commanders or commanders-in-chief had to intervene on behalf of black veterans and circumvent unwritten policies of segregation. But despite racist sentiment concerning individual blacks, the end of the nineteenth century saw a number of white veterans who resented ex-Confederates’ hostility toward freemen in general insisting that all blacks be guaranteed their rights as American citizens.

Typical of these veterans was Pennsylvania’s general Powell Clayton. Following the war, Clayton left the Keystone State to begin his tenure as the Republican governor of Arkansas. Although scorned by ex-Confederate Arkansans as a notorious carpetbagger, Clayton nevertheless took a liking to the state and settled there. Eager to resolve differences between former enemies, he avowed before a group of Bostonians, “When the people now in control of the Southern States come to the North, and in good faith, ask for your sons not as hostages but as equals, and see to it that they are so welcomed and treated, then the flood gates of emigration will open.” However, Clayton insisted that blacks be treated equally. “The ballot does not execute the negro’s will,” Clayton complained, “but has been filched from him and turned against him. If we do not intend to protect the negro’s title to his ballot, then it was a national crime to have given it to him.” Clayton associated the unwillingness “of those who followed the stars and bars” to give up “dark and bloody crimes” such as lynching with a rejection of equal citizenship rights guaranteed by Union victory.

The Ku Klux Klan, the White Camellia, and other groups’ hostility toward former slaves infuriated Northern civilians intent on perpetuating the moral aspects of the Union fight for freedom; many vehemently criticized the terror wielded by hooded nightriders. Much of this disapproval emerged in the form of literary attacks launched during the reconstruction period. For example, early in the 1870s, The Living Age lambasted the “horrid barbarism of the Ku Klux Klan Society which puts to death a negro who committed

58. For a particularly vivid account of a KKK lynching, see Henry Cleveland Wood, “Kentucky’s Pioneer Town,” New England Magazine 13 (Feb. 1893): 756. Wood describes the Klan’s “vicious acts which did much to give the town a reputation neither enviable nor just to the citizens.”
the ‘crime’ of marrying a white woman” and denounced all those professing to be “Christian communities” who practiced such “fiendish barbarity.”

Similarly, publications such as Scribner’s Magazine reported in the mid-1890s of “awful mysteries and gruesome rites [that] spread utter panic through superstitious negroes” and censured those who would among other things “carry a flesh bag in the shape of a heart and go around hollering for fried nigger meat.”

Even the most severe condemnations from magazine editorialists could not match those issued from the upper echelons of Washington political circles. Many protested passionately in their autobiographies against Southern machinations to impede the promises of emancipation. John Sherman, for example, brother of Gen. William T. Sherman and a senator from Ohio from 1861 to 1877, objected to former Confederates regaining power in the post-Reconstruction South and the oppression of black Southerners: “I heartily joined with my political associates in the measures adopted to secure a loyal reorganization of the southern states. I was largely influenced by the harsh treatment of the freedmen in the south under acts adopted by the reconstructed legislatures. The outrages of the Ku-Klux Klans seemed to me to be so atrocious and wicked that the men who committed them were not only unworthy to govern, but unfit to live.”

Benjamin Butler similarly detested the “numerous large bands of organized marauders called the Ku Klux, who were dressed in fantastic uniforms, and who rode at night and inflicted unnumbered and horrible outrages upon the negro.” Desirous of “letting bygones be bygones,” Butler insisted, he was not writing “for the purpose of reviving old controversies.” He nevertheless adopted a distinctly Northern position: “The murdering of negroes by Ku Klux riders was a conspiracy [punishable] by imprisonment.”

The development of new media in the early twentieth century offered additional venues for sites of memory analogous to war monumentation where sectional contention could surface. Film, in its infancy during this period, did not escape controversy. D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation, based on Dixon’s novel The Clansman, for example, both harnessed reconciliationist

themes and visually re-created war memory from a Confederate perspective. Yet the reaction to this “sensational photoplay” prompted many in the North to reject a narrative so “partial to propaganda.” Shortly after its premiere in 1915, many editorialists denounced the film’s content. One reviewer, whose “father and grandfather marched with Sherman to the sea,” lambastes the depiction of the “Ku Klux as exalted seraphim, members of a righteous and indifferent hierarchy who did no wrong.” Citing Griffith’s relation to a “confederate brigadier,” he berates a “juvenile, maudlin, and incredible” film.63 Similarly haranguing Birth of a Nation as “history distorted,” reviewer Annette Wallach Erdmann illustrates the film’s potential to exacerbate both racism and sectional tensions. Criticizing the depiction of the former slave as “unjust, showing him as a cruel, inhuman, almost demented being, [which] cannot help but create prejudice against a race that needs all possible sympathy,” Erdmann attacks: “A biased point of view that overemphasizes the mistakes of reconstruction days (in regard to carpet-baggers and their influence on negroes, &c.) on the one hand and glorifies the Ku Klux Klan on the other. Thus it rouses the feelings of resentment and hatred that almost shattered our country a half century ago.”64

That same year, just across the Potomac from Washington, D.C., in Arlington, Virginia, public war commemoration added fuel to persistent sectional flames at a site of memory significant to Northerner and Southerner alike. The former home of Robert E. Lee, where the U.S. government had acquired surrounding lands for use as the final resting place for fallen Union soldiers, became a focal point for sectional controversy. Prominently displayed in the Arlington mansion, a collection of Union orations sparked the indignation of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). Endorsed by both the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) and the UCV, the UDC’s protests focused on former commander of the 11th Illinois Cavalry Robert G. Ingersoll’s Memorial Day oration:

The past rushes before us—we see four millions of human beings governed by the lash, we see them bound hand and foot, we hear the strokes of cruel whips, we see the hounds tracking women through tangled swamps. We hear babes sold from the breasts of mothers. Cruelly unspeakable!

Outrage infinite!
The past rushes before us—we hear the roar and shriek of bursting shell. The broken fetters fall. There, heroes die. We look—instead of slaves we see men. The wand of progress touches the auction block, the slave pen, and the whipping post . . . and where all was want and crime we see the faces of the free.

The author of this piece in the Grand Army newspaper, the *National Tribune*, points out that most orations on display at Arlington could depict “one war as well as another, [yet] these paragraphs are the ones that make the Daughters of the Confederacy hate us.”

Former Union colonel and GAR member Stuart Taylor once asked the crowd attending an 1887 Memorial Day gathering at Grant’s tomb, “Was the appeal to war unproductive, oh! soldiers?” Not surprisingly, Taylor expressed his utter satisfaction with the war’s results: “We had solved the great problem which had been too hard for civic wisdom. With a territory unmutilated, our Constitution uncorrupted, a united people crowned with added glory the immortal truths of the Declaration of Independence of a race. Liberty stood erect without a frown.” At the same event, the poet Red Emerson Brooks offered his opinion in verse:

An army sprang up as the storm comes at sea;  
O’er the peace-laden air, when the winds are set free!  
Gath’ring fury anon,  
This fierce cyclone moved on—  
Till down went the foes of this heaven-cherished Nation!  
And Slavery lay buried ‘neath wild desolation.

The words of these individuals provide testimony highlighting the confluence of two great causes that were for many inextricably linked. These sentiments were part of a larger endeavor to preserve a distinctly Northern version of Civil War memory in a national setting. Despite some efforts by those in both the North and South to distance their respective causes from slavery and emanci-

pation, their efforts ultimately failed. The hue and cry over slavery emanating from a significant number of Northern veterans of the Union cause—battle veterans, soldiers-turned-politicians, and civilians—reminded Americans of the causes and consequences of the most profound conflict the nation had ever endured. Some Northerners were unwilling to embrace the commemoration of freedom. Yet, to imply that Civil War memory on Southern terms prevailed is a gross misstatement. Assessment of news editorials, war narrative, film reviews, and events at sites of public memory clearly reflect the unremitting efforts by many in the North to articulate a national commemorative ethos on the foundation of a distinctly Northern version of war memory.

Veterans’ efforts to remember and commemorate the Union cause of freedom further served to undermine the proposition of a national culture of reconciliation. Conflicting, sometimes-incompatible, and vehemently defended versions of war memory necessarily meant that embracing reconciliation on their former enemy’s terms could be troubling for some, while for others it was an impossibility. Former Union officers such as Wisconsin’s Henry Harnden resolutely maintained Confederate culpability and Union righteousness when he asked late in the 1890s, “Did not the sin of slavery bring this nation to the verge of ruin, and did not the righteous act of Abraham Lincoln, in emancipating the slaves, exalt it?” Many, such as Union veteran George E. Sutherland, would always insist, “Had it not been for Negro slavery, we should have had no rebellion to put down.” But the particularly vehement condemned the Confederate cause—with slavery as its cornerstone—with vicious acrimony. Respectively comparing the Union and Confederate causes with “paradise and hell,” these men condemned former Confederates “in whose hearts smolder the fires of secession.” Some lashed out further by attacking the South’s most exalted soldier, Robert E. Lee. Characterizing Lee as a “traitor to his flag and country,” some would link his treasonous sin to the perpetuation of slavery. One bitter Union veteran announced, “[Lee] was a breeder of human cattle, and was ready like other Virginians to shed human blood for the ‘liberty’ of human slavery.”

69. C. C. Washburn Post no. 11, Madison, Wisc., Meeting Minute Book, folder 8, box 15, GAR records, Dept. of Wisconsin, WVM. The entry for July 5, 1887, further illuminates the voice of the Confederate cause as a “language of ingratitude and a disregard of the facts of history.”
testimony indicates that proponents of sectional memories of the Civil War sustained a heated competition for prominence on a national stage. In many ways, their memories compete still.