Shelby Foote, native southerner, calls it the Civil War. Among many of his fellow white southerners in times past, it was the “war between the states,” or “the war for southern independence,” even “the war of northern aggression.” White northerners had other names, and these names predominated: “war of the rebellion” or “war of secession.” It might also be called, but seldom is, the “war for emancipation” or the “war to end slavery”; that is certainly how many black southerners remembered it. But for most of the first one hundred years after Appomattox, the voice of black southerners on the subject were muted. By any name, as James McPherson notes, it is the “war that will not go away.”

I.

We are now in the midst of a sesquicentennial observance, which has seemed, on the whole, remarkably subdued, especially when contrasted with the centennial celebration fifty years ago. Perhaps this is a result of our present condition, perhaps simply a reflection of time and distance from the event. Perhaps we are less certain today than we once were about right and wrong, good and evil, even winner and loser. We are more aware of nuance and ambiguity. We are more skeptical when we hear grand pronouncements.

We also are more aware than ever that, if the story of the war is to be told in its totality, the narrative needs to incorporate not only the Union and Confederate perspectives but also the African-American. Fifty years ago the director of the Civil War Centennial Commission, Karl S. Betts, noted that any mention of the John Brown raid or, for that matter, any reference to slavery “might have the effect of antagonizing the entire South to the great damage of the proposed Civil War Centennial observances.” Now the principle of inclusion appropriately prevails. Among the goals of the Virginia Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission are “Diversity: The commemoration will be inclusive of, and meaningful to, all Virginians, including diverse racial and ethnic groups” and “Inclusiveness: The commemoration will seek to portray a balanced story of Virginia’s participation in the American Civil War that encompasses many perspectives, including African-American, Union, and Confederate perspectives.”

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Thus we come to realize just how important is the element we call “historical memory”—what we choose to include in, and what we also choose to exclude from, our understanding of what the war fully entailed. In his pioneering study, *Race and Reunion* (2001), David Blight has recounted well how the choice facing the country in 1865 led to fundamental decisions about remembering—and forgetting. The road from Appomattox forked. Two different destinations lay in the distance. One fork led to reconstruction, and along its bumpy hazardous path lay social justice, economic progress, and political equality for those who had been enslaved. The other led to reconciliation, a route straighter and smoother, that sought to bring the seceded states as quickly as possible back into the Union.

The price of reconciliation, Blight writes, was reconstruction; the price of reconstruction, reconciliation. It was one or the other. It could not be both. After a brief reconnoitering of the distance and risks of the journey to reconstruction, the country—North and South—chose the shorter easier path. Within a generation the white South, which had lost the war, won the peace. The nightmare of segregation, disenfranchisement—a place of seemingly permanent social and economic inferiority for African-Americans—became the ugly underside of the dream of a speedy and complete sectional reconciliation. And so it remained for almost a century.

Reconciliation had clear ground rules. There would be no discussing the war’s causes, no rehearsing of the arguments for and against slavery, no more John Browns or Simon Legrees, no more debates over the equality of the white and black races. Writers, politicians, educators, and public officials who accepted the deal had less to discuss, but gained the freedom to explore what was left, what remained permissible, far more deeply.

And so began a cascade of reminiscences. Memoirs, unit histories, intense debates over strategy and tactics reminded northern and southerners that valor came clad in both blue and gray. Veterans’ organizations kept battlefield memories alive. Reunions of old Union and Confederate soldiers, even as they dwindled in numbers year by year, served as vivid reminders of bravery and courage, abundant on both sides.

As the war’s centennial approached, great plans were revealed. “The Civil War did not divide us,” announced the chairman of the Civil War Centennial Commission, General Ulysses S. Grant III, in 1960. “Rather, it united us.” He goes on to describe what lay ahead: “Battles will be re-enacted, many on a huge scale. Colorful ceremonies will be held, exhibitions of war trophies and mementoes organized. There will be memorials, parades, new historical markers, and a great many special ceremonies.” Yet, ironically, that celebration, begun in the reconciliationist spirit, quickly jumped the tracks. In the days leading up to the reenactment of the firing on Fort Sumter, a dispute arose over whether a black member of the commission would be permitted to stay in a Charleston hotel. This controversy anticipated future unrest as a country that set out to observe the anniversary of a war found itself face-
to-face with the war's unsettled questions. Most dramatic was the march on Washington in August 1963, in which a crowd of more than 200,000 heard Dr. Martin Luther King deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech. Among its many memorable lines are the following: "We've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men—yes, black men as well as white men—would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. . . . America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'" As Robert J. Cook concluded in *Troubled Commemoration* (2007), "If the Civil War centennial tells us anything, it is that seemingly entrenched historical memories are not always a match for the onrush of time."

II.

Civil War scholars have long participated in one of historiography's great parlor games—the causes of the war. The explanations have varied across time, and no one view has ever prevailed for very long. Graduate students for generations have sooner or later had to explain the game, identify the players, give a play-by-play, and, since the game goes on, venture a prediction of the outcome.

Here's how the debate goes. On one side are those who believe the war had fundamental causes, that the North and South faced an "irrepressible conflict," in the words of William Seward in 1858. That conflict may have been rooted in slavery; it may have been the result of different economies; it might have been traceable to the Celtic origins of so many Southerners—or to the difference, as William R. Taylor put it, between "Cavalier and Yankee," or Virginia royalist and New England roundhead. Whatever the source, this war, these historians believe, had to happen eventually between what were, by 1860, two separate nations.

Some of the most recognizable names in the historical profession have lined up on this side of the field. James Ford Rhodes, for example, in *Lectures on the Civil War* (1913), argues that "there was a single cause, slavery." Charles A. Beard, in *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), calls the Civil War "the second American Revolution" and saw its causes as "differences in climate, soil, industries, and labor systems, in divergent social forces" resulting in "the unquestioned establishment of a new power in government, making vast changes in the arrangement of classes, in the accumulation and distribution of wealth, in the course of industrial development, and in the Constitution." Frank Owsley, writing in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), puts it more simply: "The North was commercial and industrial, and the South was
agrarian.” In his magisterial eight-volume *The Ordeal of the Union* (1947–1971), Allan Nevins concludes that the cause of the war was “slavery with its complementary problem of race adjustment,” which caused the “fundamental assumptions, tastes, and cultural aims” of North and South to diverge.

From this perspective Frederick Douglass could argue, as he did repeatedly, that the Civil War was “an Abolition war instead of . . . a Union war.” “Our work will not be done,” he continues, in an address delivered in 1863 before the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, “until the colored man is admitted a full member in good and regular standing in the American body politic.” Staking out an unequivocal position in defining why the war was necessary and what its outcome must be, Douglass spoke of those who continued to believe that the old Union could be restored. “They delude themselves,” he declares. “That old Union, whose canonized bones we so quietly inurned under the shattered walls of Sumter, can never come to life again. It is dead, and you cannot put life in it.”

On the other side are those who believe that this war, like all wars, was avoidable, a repressible conflict. North and South, according to this view, were much more alike than different. They shared language, history, a mostly agricultural economy, a set of common experiences, similar racial attitudes, and a deep commitment to a constitution. Only a “blundering generation” of politicians, according to James G. Randall, created a void of leadership quickly filled by extremists on both sides, who seized the moment of dysfunction, brought about disunion, and started a war. “If one word or phrase were selected to account for the war,” he writes in 1940, “that word would not be slavery, or economic grievance, or states’ rights, or diverse civilizations. It would have to be such a word as fanaticism.” Echoing this view, Avery Craven, in 1950, attributes the war to “a breakdown of the democratic process.”

This interpretative school emerged in the years immediately after World War I and claimed to have learned that war’s lessons. Needless and vast loss of life had produced no real change or benefit. As David M. Potter wrote in 1975 about the effect of the American Civil War, “Slavery was dead; secession was dead; and 600,000 men were dead. That is the basic balance sheet of the national conflict.” Left unasked but surely implied is this question: Was it worth it?

In the intervening half century since the centennial observance, the debate continues, though with greater nuance. For example, Eric Foner, in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (1970), depicts a North and South of similar racial attitudes, even though the North, especially the Republican party, saw itself as the guarantor of capitalism. Eugene D. Genovese limns the South as a world of slaveholders, possessing an ideology shaped by the peculiar institution and a preindustrial culture increasingly at odds with that of the bourgeois North. Political historians, among them Michael F. Holt and William Gienapp, blame the breakdown of the political party system for bring-
ing about the war. The historiographical battlefield remains contested. By 2011, on the eve of the sesquicentennial, a poll taken by the Pew Research Center revealed that approximately half of all Americans identified states’ rights, not slavery, as the cause of the Civil War.

III.

And now, 150 years later, this war, by whatever name it may be known, is still very much with us. Since 2011 there have been battlefield reenactments, symposia, exhibits, lectures. It is a good and profitable time to be a Civil War historian or a publisher of just about any volume that includes the words Civil War in its title. Estimates of the total number of Civil War volumes written are as high as 65,000 (Alexander Atkins). Since January 2011 more than 600 titles have appeared, with 68 already projected for 2014. An estimated 300,000 people came to Gettysburg during the first week of July 2013 alone.

Of all the studies published during this sesquicentennial season, the most sobering and profound is, undoubtedly, This Republic of Suffering (2008) by Drew Gilpin Faust. The war brought Americans, Faust writes, into a “new relationship with death.” The total number of fatalities, approximately 620,000, equaled the death toll of the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, and the Korean War combined. This was a fatality rate of about two percent of the total population, which would be the equivalent of six million deaths today.

Faust’s book reminds armchair Civil War buffs that, interesting and important as the debate over causes and battlefield strategy may be, only the survivors are able to join the debate. The dead, though numerous, are silent. We of course will never know how they might have answered the causational question. But we can be pretty certain they would have a different perspective than ours. Her work further suggests that the question might be framed a bit differently; not what caused the war, or how different really were the North and South, but instead what was it about this conflict that caused so many men to risk their lives and, for more than 600,000, to lose their lives? This has less to do with repressible or irrepressible conflicts than with the motivation of the common soldier, only a few of whom, on the northern side, sought the end of slavery, and fewer of whom, on the southern side, actually owned slaves.

Why, then, did they fight? In a letter written by Andrew Brooks of Virginia to his sister Susan on January 23, 1861, he writes: “it must be Lincoln’s intention to compel the South to remain in the Union, if he can. And if he attempts that, the whole South will and ought to unite and oppose it.” James McPherson quotes an Irish-born soldier, a corporal in the 28th Massachusetts of the famous Irish Brigade. To his wife in Massachusetts and
his father-in-law in Ireland, he writes, "This is my country as much as the man who is born on the soil. This being the case I have as much interest in the maintenance of the integrity of the nation as any other man. This is the first test of a modern free government and the act of sustaining itself against internal enemies. . . . If we fail, then the hopes of millions fall and designs and wishes of all tyrants will succeed. The old cry will be sent forth from the aristocrats of Europe that such is the common end of all Republics. Irishmen and their descendants have a stake in this nation. America is this Ireland's refuge, Ireland's last hope. Destroy this Republic and Ireland's hopes are blasted." A Texas private, writing in 1864, made his motives clear: "We are fighting for matters real and tangible, our property and our homes. They, for matters abstract and intangible, for the flimsy and abstract idea that a Negro is equal to an Anglo-American."

IV.

In short what the war was about, and why it mattered, had, and has, everything to do with the perspective of the particular commentator. That is no less so when those commenting are the heads of the rival governments. And yet, as we examine carefully the efforts of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis each to define the meaning and purpose of the war, we can begin to understand not only why there may never be full reconciliation, but also why this is a war that will never go away. The two presidents sought to frame historical memory. And thus their words may help us today understand both why the war occurred and why it will not, perhaps ever, go away.

First Davis. Speaking in Montgomery in February 1861, Davis, in a long legalistic inaugural address, made clear to his audience, and to posterity, why the southern cause mattered:

When they entered into the Union of 1789, it was with the undeniable recognition of the power of the people to resume the authority delegated for the purposes of that government whenever, in their opinion, its functions were perverted and its ends defeated. . . . Through many years of controversy with our late associates, the Northern states, we have vainly endeavored to secure tranquillity and obtain respect for the rights to which we were entitled. As a necessity, not a choice, we have resorted to separation. . . . With a constitution differing only in form from that of our forefathers, in so far as it is explanatory of their well known intents, freed from sectional conflicts which have so much interfered with the pursuits of the general welfare. . . . We have changed the constituent parts, not the system of our government. The constitution formed by our fathers is the constitution of the "Confederate States."
Some twenty years later, Davis published *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, in which, from the distant shore of war, he again tries to explain both the decision to secede and the justness of the Confederate cause. "Sectional issues appear conspicuously in the debates of the Convention which framed the Federal Constitution, and its many compromises were designed to secure an equilibrium between the sections." "It was the systematic and persistent struggle to deprive the Southern States of equality in the Union . . . culminating in their exclusion from the Territories, the common property of the States, as well as by the infraction of their compact to promote domestic tranquility." Yet "still forbearing, still hoping, still striving for peace and union, we waited until a sectional president, nominated by a sectional convention, elected by a sectional vote—and that the vote of a minority of the people—was about to be inducted into office, under the warning of his own distinct announcement that the Union could not permanently endure 'half slave and half free'; meaning thereby that it could not continue to exist in the condition in which it was formed and its Constitution adopted."

For Davis secession was the inevitable response by an aggrieved section to what he, and they, believed to be violations of the constitutional compact. Indeed that word, *compact*, had been a central feature of one strain of constitutional interpretation dating almost from the moment of ratification. Until the establishment by the Marshall Court in 1801 of the principle of judicial review, the question of how and by whom the constitutionality of legislative enactments was to be determined had been a matter of considerable uncertainty. In 1798 and 1799, in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson had promulgated the theory that, since the constitution was an instrument made binding by the process of state ratification conventions, then the states, and only the states, could "interpose" themselves to prevent the execution of an unconstitutional enactment. This doctrine of state interposition, based upon the belief that the states had existed before the constitution and had voluntarily entered the constitutional compact, represented a strain of constitutional thought that extended from Jefferson and Madison to John C. Calhoun and the principle of nullification, to the decision taken by South Carolina in December 1860 to "repeal" its 1788 ratification of the constitution and thus become once more an independent state.

More important, this view assumed that the United States began its national existence with the ratification of the constitution and the establishment of the government thus created. And the abridgment of that compact by depriving "the Southern States of equality within the Union" not only upset the "equilibrium between the sections" but threatened domestic tranquility and made secession not a choice, but a necessity. The resulting conflict, therefore, was all about the violation of the terms of a contract. Once one party to a contract reneges, the deal is void.
The reference point for Davis, then, was 1787. And the constitution of the Confederate States of America was a virtual duplicate of the United States constitution, a point made explicitly by Davis in his inaugural address. Secession, then, was not a revolution in the conventional sense; it was, instead, an attempt to restore a balance disrupted. It would become, as the poet Stephen Vincent Benêt writes in his epic poem *John Brown's Body*, a failed effort to create "the America we have not been."

Lincoln's view was fundamentally different. The sixteenth president spoke and wrote frequently on the subject. But, as Garry Wills so clearly demonstrates in his prizewinning study, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, in a mere 272 words Lincoln gives profound and enduring meaning to the struggle in which so many lives had been lost and would be lost. He begins with what, on reflection at least, is a startling pronouncement: that "four score and seven years ago"—in 1776—"our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." These words are permanently etched in our collective memory. They are radical words, especially in their assumption that American nationhood could be traceable to 1776. To Davis and many southerners that would seem a stretch. There had been no union until the ratification of the Articles of Confederation in 1781. To what nation could Lincoln possibly have been referring?

Not a nation of written agreements, not a compact, not a contract, not a document signed by parties in order to make a deal—no, Lincoln's nation was "dedicated to a proposition." The key word, the word that makes the Gettysburg Address so powerful and the war to which it speaks a test, is *proposition*. In 1776 the Declaration of Independence boldly states as a *self-evident truth* that all men are created equal. By 1863 that *truth* has become, instead, a *proposition*—a question before the house, a statement to be put to the proof, an idea that might not survive. This proposition is fragile. The war is a test of "whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure."

Frederick Douglass understood. "The saying that revolutions never go backward," he states in his Cooper Institute address in 1864, "must be taken with limitations. . . . Though the portents are that we shall flourish it is too much to say we cannot fail and fall. . . . The Proclamation of January, 1863, . . . settles nothing. It is still open to decision by courts, canons, and Congresses." And so it would be for another century.

V.

To Lincoln, the American nation, indissoluble, is based upon an idea; to Davis it is the result of a contract. To note these conflicting views is to begin to understand why, as Lincoln so eloquently puts it in his second inaugural,
"Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. . . . Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came."

It is, furthermore, to say that in the parlor game of causation, both sides are right and both sides are wrong. North and South in 1861 were in fact very much alike. Indeed the Confederate Constitution was a virtual duplicate of the United States Constitution. And thus it is, finally, to say that perhaps the best way to think of the Civil War is as a quest for nationality—as a conflict between two very different definitions of American nationhood rooted in two very different understandings of when that nationhood began and of what it was composed. Both northerners and southerners in 1861 thought of themselves as Americans. As parties to a contract, representatives of both sides strove mightily to keep the contract binding. But, as truth became less self-evident when measured against reality, the "mystic chords of memory" invoked by Lincoln in 1861 could not hold the Union together and made the resulting conflict truly a brothers' war and a national tragedy.

By 1861 North and South had become very different in one quite fundamental way, and that way made all the difference. It lay at the core of a proposition, which, though fragile, carried with it a logic that led to Fort Sumter and Gettysburg and Appomattox. The proposition survived, but it would remain fragile for at least another century. The Civil War would not be its last test. It is being tested still.

CONFESSIONS OF A MILITARY HISTORIAN

CHARLES CARLTON

About a dozen years ago I was invited to a formal dinner at the Australian National University in Canberra. Before the meal, sherry was served, and the guests mingled. I happened to meet a botany professor from the Midwest, and we chatted, as academics do, about our research. She told me that she was traveling throughout Australia examining its unique plants. "And what do you do?" she asked. I explained that I was a visitor at the Australian Defence Forces Academy studying war in early modern Britain. "And are you in favor of it?" she inquired.

At this point I have to make a confession. Ignoring the prods from my