And the War Came
And it was about slavery, and nothing else
By Algis Valiunas

ONE HUNDRED fifty years ago, on April 12, 1861, Confederate batteries opened fire on Fort Sumter, the Union garrison just off the coast of Charleston, and the Civil War began. To mark the anniversary, the Library of America has issued The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It. The volume actually covers the period from November 1860 to January 1862 and includes writings by Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, William Tecumseh Sherman, Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman—as well as an assortment of newspaper editorials, magazine articles, diary entries, letters, political orations, and sermons by lesser known or even quite unknown figures. The book represents the Library of America at its best, and one hopes that this and subsequent volumes (the Library plans three more) will help a large readership better understand why the war was fought, what it cost, and why the end was worth the terrible price exacted.

Algis Valiunas, a frequent contributor, last wrote for us about Michel de Montaigne in the April issue.

Certain intellectual sophisticates of the left, led by Charles A. Beard in the 1920s, have preferred to emphasize as a cause of war the increasingly industrialized North’s economic oppression of the agricultural South: Yankee capitalism with its unjust tariffs and unsavory favors to railroad interests was as morally culpable for the war’s outbreak as Southern racist feudalism. More recent historians unwilling to grant any Americans but themselves credit for basic humanity argue instead that the North fought strictly for the sake of preserving the Union.

But as the Library of America volume reveals, every serious person and every raging hothead at the time of war understood that the real issue at stake was slavery, slavery, and nothing but slavery. The sort of matter that moves men to kill and die more readily than any other lay at the core of the dispute: it was not a question of economic interest or Constitutional interpretation but of right and wrong.

Of course, the patently wrong believed themselves manifestly in the right, and those in the right were slow to embrace their righteousness fully. In his Cooper Union Address on February 27, 1860, Abraham Lincoln combined a grave moral denunciation of slavery with a capitulation to prudence. He understood...
that Southerners would never stop in their efforts to extend slavery not only to the territories but also to the free states: “Holding, as they do, that slavery is morally right, and socially elevating, they cannot cease to demand a full national recognition of it, as a legal right, and a social blessing. Nor can we justifiably withhold this, on any ground save our conviction that slavery is wrong.” Thus Lincoln a year before the war: slavery was wrong, but there it was, enmeshed in the national fabric, and it could not be removed without awful distress. Therefore he advised not to push for its abolition in the South. To prevent its spreading elsewhere was as much as he could argue for.

In his First Inaugural Address on March 4, 1861, Lincoln reiterated his disinclination to root out the worst demons. His administration would recognize Southerners’ right to own slaves and would “cheerfully” discharge the obligation to enforce Article IV, Section 2 of the Constitution, the so-called fugitive slave clause. All the worse, Southern fears about “Black Republicans” were unfounded, he assured them. At this point, for the sake of prudence and national unity, Lincoln could not even publicly acknowledge the depth of the injustice he had earlier recognized. His temperate acceptance of things as they stood was intended to represent his countrymen’s supposed moderation. Few Northerners or Southerners were so adamant in their feelings about slavery, he declared, that they were bent on overturning the current compromise. Northerners might be somewhat reluctant to send escaped slaves back to their owners, but they would do so; Southerners for their part would put up with the ban on importing more slaves from Africa.

Defenders of slavery were certain that the Republicans intended to take their slaves away, and confident in the justice of their own claim to keep them.

“The great body of the people abide by the dry legal obligation in both cases, and a few break over in each,” Lincoln said. “This, I think, cannot be perfectly cured; and it would be worse in both cases after the separation of the sections, than before.” Here, Lincoln the president left behind the frightful vision of looming disaster that Lincoln the candidate summoned up at Cooper Union. Things could always get worse, to be sure, but Americans knew how to keep that from happening. To amend the Constitution by due process remained an option if the present standoff became intolerable. Indeed, divine will would make itself heard through American legality: “If the Almighty Ruler of nations, with his eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth, and that justice, will surely prevail, by the judgment of this great tribunal, the American people.” Lincoln was arguing, in effect, that the Lord believes in majority rule.

Passionate minorities, however, often do not. In the Inaugural Address, Lincoln had not reckoned with the intensity of hatred that powered Southern self-righteousness. Three days before the presidential election, in November 1860, a fire-eating editorial in the Charleston Mercury called for prompt action by the South Carolina legislature toward the establishment of a Southern Confederacy: “The issue before the country is the extinction of slavery. No man of common sense, who has observed the progress of events, and who is not prepared to surrender the institution, can doubt that the time for action has come—now or never.” By the end of November, secession conventions were called in South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and Georgia. By and by Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee joined them to form the Confederate States of America.

The defenders of slavery were certain that the Republicans intended to take their slaves away, and could not have been more confident in the everlasting justice of their claim to keep them. The political intellectual and magazine editor James D.B. DeBow averred in December 1860 that no one in the South had moral objections to slavery: “All such scruples have long since been silenced by the profound and unanswerable arguments to which Yankee controversy had driven our statesmen, popular orators, and clergy. Upon the sure testimony of God’s Holy Book, and upon the principles of universal polity, they have defended and justified the institution.”

Slavery had kept the South pure-minded; fidelity to the time-honored social and religious institutions that endorsed slavery had preserved the region from the dangerous fads of modernity. Alabama state legislator Stephen F. Hale blanched at the thought of the chaos that would ensue should the divinely ordained racial hierarchy be upset:

What Southern man, be he slave-holder or non-slave-holder, can without indignation and horror contemplate the triumph of negro equality, and see his own sons and daughters in the not distant future associating with free
negroes upon terms of political and social equality, and the white man stripped by the heaven-daring hand of fanaticism of that title to superiority over the black race which God himself has bestowed?

Speaking in Atlanta two weeks after Lincoln's inaugural address, Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, who had been elected vice president of the Confederacy, established black inferiority and just bondage as the "corner-stone" of the newly constituted slave-holding nation. The Founders of "the old constitution" had generally agreed that black slavery violated the natural order—"that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically." But these proponents of racial equality had been wrong. And their Northern descendants were worse than wrong; they were insane and based their moral conclusions on lunatic premises: "They were attempting to make things equal which the Creator had made unequal." All whites were equal in the eyes of God, and for one white man to enslave another was abomination; but blacks were inferior "by nature, or by the curse against Canaan." God intended them specifically to sweat under white mastery, and the Southern way was thus best for whites and blacks alike: "It is, indeed, in conformity with the ordinance of the Creator. It is not for us to inquire into the wisdom of his ordinances, or to question them."

Unembarrassed racism was readily evident in the North as well. Senator Benjamin F. Wade, a prominent Republican from Ohio, insisted in December 1860 that Southern politicians slandered his party, which did not advocate racial equality by any stretch. Given the chance, decent Republicans would unload the North's free blacks and cart them off to Central America, thereby opening the field for poor and industrious whites to prosper in accordance with the prerogatives of their race. Then the economic inadequacy of the slave system would become unmistakable, and the Southerners, too, would wise up and divest themselves of their dark burden. A magnificent white man's empire, which Canada would likely hasten to join, would thereupon astonish the world.

In the Annual Message to Congress in December 1861, Lincoln sketched a colonization plan of his own. Congressional legislation "to confiscate property used for insurrectionary purposes" included slaves in its purview, and these freed slaves were dependent on the government for their food, clothing, and shelter. Relieving the government of that onerous responsibility, by resettling the former slaves "at some place, or places, in a climate congenial to them," seemed like a shrewd move.

Behind the colonization idea, economic constraints were not the sole, or even the foremost, consideration. As abolition became a more and more likely prospect, the problems of incorporating a black slave population of four million into the body politic appeared insuperable to Lincoln himself. On August 14, 1862, Lincoln addressed a gathering of black freemen in Washington, D.C. Although Lincoln grieved with his audience—"Your race are suffering, in my judgment, the greatest wrong inflicted on any people"—he did not spare their feelings, and his frankness now comes across as cold and repellent.

Northern racism got much uglier than that. When the North instituted conscription in July 1863, white mobs, mostly Irish, in New York City lynched blacks, destroyed their homes, and torched the Colored Orphan Asylum. Those Northern whites who

The problems of incorporating a black slave population of four million into the body politic appeared insuperable to Lincoln himself.
casually despised blacks came to violently hate them when the law required white men to risk their lives for blacks’ freedom. The war was being fought over slavery all right, and some of those compelled to fight for black liberty and equality did not go for the idea.

How can such moral failures be made good? They were made good only in blood.

A MERICAN blood was shed in the Civil War as in no war before or since. In fact, the 620,000 dead equal the total American losses in all the other wars from the Revolutionary War to the Korean War. Two percent of the national population died in the Civil War; death at that rate today would bury six million. Most of the fighting took place at a distance of 100 yards or so, and rifle balls caused nearly all the damage. As Drew Gilpin Faust puts it in her excellent 2008 book, This Republic of Suffering: Death and the Civil War, infantry combat “remained essentially intimate; soldiers were often able to see each other’s faces and to know whom they had killed.” Combat at such close quarters could turn appallingly savage, as the New York Tribune noted after Shiloh, the first torrential bloodletting, in April 1862: “Men lost their semblance of humanity, and the spirit of the demon shone in their faces. There was but one desire, and that was to destroy.” The efforts soldiers made to preserve their decency in the face of such madness are a poignant theme in Faust’s book.

But nothing less than war would do to kill off slavery and perhaps even to atone for its stain on the nation. There are injustices that words alone will never right. Words after all too easily serve the purposes of the unjust as well. The knots of legalisms into which the slavers tied themselves to rationalize secession, the attitudes of sanctity they struck to convince themselves of their righteousness: supposedly serious thought has rarely been put to so repulsive an end. Even the thoughts and words of some of the best men—of Lincoln himself—fell far short of justice for much of the war.

Letter to the Christian Recorder, the newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church:

To suppose that slavery, the accursed thing, could be abolished peacefully and laid aside innocently, after having plundered cradles, separated husbands and wives, parents and children; and after having starved to death, worked to death, whipped to death, run to death, burned to death, lied to death, kicked and cuffed to death, and grieved to death; and, worst of all, after having made prostitutes of a majority of the best women of a whole nation of people…would be the greatest ignorance under the sun.

General devastation was the price to be paid for belated justice.

No other general of the Civil War is so notorious for sowing devastation as William Tecumseh Sherman, who led 60,000 Union troops on the march through Georgia to the sea. To some degree Sherman shared the principal fault of his time and place: in July 1864 he wrote a widely published letter to a Massachusetts recruiting agent opposing the use of black soldiers in the army, because, he said, they were unequal in courage and fighting ability to whites. Yet it was ultimately for the black slaves that he was fighting, as a passage about the Georgia campaign from his Memoirs (1875) makes clear:

The white people came out of their houses to behold the sight [of the conquering army], spite of their deep hatred of the invaders, and the negroes were simply frantic with joy. Whenever they heard my name, they clustered about my horse, shouted and prayed in their peculiar style, which had a natural eloquence that would have moved a stone. I have witnessed hundreds, if not thousands of such scenes; and can now see a poor girl, in the very ecstasy of the Methodist “shout,” hugging the banner of one of the regiments, and jumping up to the “feet of Jesus.”

He goes on to describe his conversation with an old slave of a distinguished countenance. Sherman asked him whether he understood why the war was being fought. “He said he did; that he had been looking for the ‘angel of the Lord’ since he was knee-high,
and, though we professed to be fighting for the Union, he supposed that slavery was the cause, and that our success was to be his freedom. I asked him if all the negro slaves comprehended this fact, and he said they surely did.”

The slaves rejoiced at the war for their freedom. Yet Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, the document that freed them at a stroke, is perhaps the most rhetorically austere of his major writings; it contains no trace of moral triumphalism or emotional display, but simply lays down the new law.

Moral triumphalism was never Lincoln’s way. He understood that the entire nation bore responsibility for the sin of slavery, and nowhere does his anguish over the sin and its expiation reach such eloquence as in his Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1865:

Fondly do we hope fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

These are the noblest words ever spoken by an American president—words equal to the justice of the cause, the frightfulness of the sacrifice, and the hope of concord. On April 11, 1865, Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House. On April 14, Lincoln was shot; the next day he died. And 150 years after the outbreak of civil war, Americans strive on to finish the work we are in.