

BOOK

This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War

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SYNOPSIS/APPLICATION

In the introduction we read that, "mortality defines the human condition." We Americans struggle to reflect on the massive impact the Civil War made on our country. In the midst of the many social arguments that stem from this conflict, Faust suggests that the very way that we perceive death was altered as a result. While this is a weighty read, there are some facts that even the uninterested would find fascinating.

QUOTES ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE CIVIL WAR

"The Civil War matters to us today because it ended slavery and helped to define the meanings of freedom, citizenship, and equality. It established a newly centralized nation-state and launched it on a trajectory of economic expansion and world influence. But for those Americans who lived in and through the Civil War, the texture of the experience, its warp and woof, was the presence of death. At war's end this shared suffering would override persisting differences about the meanings of race, citizenship, and nationhood to establish sacrifice and its memorialization as the ground on which North and South would ultimately reunite. Even in our own time this fundamentally elegiac understanding of the Civil War retains a powerful hold."

"Death created the modern American union – not just by ensuring national survival, but by shaping enduring national structures and commitments."

"The nation was a survivor, too, transformed by its encounter with death, obligated by the sacrifices of its dead. The war's staggering human cost demanded a new sense of national destiny, one designed to ensure that lives had been sacrificed for appropriately lofty ends. So much suffering had to have transcendent purpose, a 'sacred significance,' as Frederick Douglass had insisted in the middle of the war. For him, such purpose was freedom, but this would prove an unrealized ideal in a nation unwilling to guarantee the equal citizenship on which true liberty must rest. Slavery had divided the nation, but assumptions of racial hierarchy would unite whites North and South in a century-long abandonment of the emancipationist legacy."

QUOTES ABOUT DEATH

"Of all living things, only humans consciously anticipate death; the consequent need to choose how to behave in its face – to worry about how to die – distinguishes us from other animals. The need to manage death is the particular lot of humanity."

“In Civil War death the distinction between men and animals threatened to disappear, just as it was simultaneously eroding in the doctrines of nineteenth-century science.”

“The Good Death was the foundation for the process of mourning carried on by survivors who used the last words and moments of the dead soldier as the basis for broader evaluation of his entire life. More considered, more polished than condolence letters written from the front, the published funeral sermon was intended for distribution to a wider audience than simply next of kin or even those who might be able to attend a funeral service. The lost life, the soldier’s death no longer belonged just to that individual and his family but was also to be understood and possessed by the community – even the nation – at large.”

“Last words also imposed meaning on the life narrative they concluded and communicated invaluable lessons to those gathered around the deathbed. This didactic function provided a critical means through which the deceased could continue to exist in the lives of survivors. The teachings that last words imparted served as a lingering exhortation and a persisting tie between the living and the dead. To be deprived of these lessons, and thus this connection, seemed unbearable to many nineteenth-century Americans left at home while their sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers died with their words unrecorded or even unheard.”

“Sudden death represented a profound threat to fundamental assumptions about the correct way to die, and its frequency on the battlefield comprised one of the most important ways that Civil War death departed from the ‘ordinary death’ of the prewar period. When two soldiers calmly eating dinner in a tent in South Carolina were instantly and unexpectedly killed by a shell lobbed from nearby Sullivan’s Island, Samuel A. Valentine of the legendary Massachusetts 54th wrote that although he had seen many comrades die, this incident was especially upsetting, and he declared that he had ‘never had anything to rest on me so much in my life.’ The suddenness, the lack of preparation, made these deaths a particularly ‘awful sight.’”

“By convention, a mother mourned for a child for a year, a child for a parent the same, a sister six months for a brother. A widow mourned for two and a half years, moving through prescribed stages and accoutrements of heavy, full, and half mourning, with gradually loosening requirements of dress and deportment. A widower, by contrast, was expected to mourn only for three months, simply by displaying black crape on his hat or armband. The work of mourning was largely allocated to women.”

“There ever has been, in all places, in all ages, among all classes and conditions of mankind, a deep-feeling in respect to the remains of our earthly mortality.’ The body, the essay continued, is not simply a possession, ‘like a picture, a book, a garment, or any thing else that once belonged to the deceased.’ In the corpse, rather, there remains ‘something of the former self hood.’ And, in the terms of prevailing Protestant doctrine, something of the future and immortal selfhood as well. The human body is ‘not like any other portion of matter,’ for it ‘will be raised again – yea, the same body.’”

QUOTES ABOUT FAITH AND THE CIVIL WAR

“Civil War death thus narrowed theological and denominational differences. The shared crisis of battle yielded a common effort to make the notion of a Good Death available to all.”

“Patriotism and piety converged in what was at once a newly religious conception of the nation and a newly worldly understanding of faith.”

“The rhetoric of service – to nation, to God, to comrades – rationalized the violence of this devastating war by casting it as the instrument of both nationalist and Christian imperatives: soldiers

would die for God and Country.”

“Once again religion and patriotism united in the ritual observance of the passing of one who embodied popular hopes and sacrifices. Lincoln died on Good Friday, less than a week after Lee’s surrender, just as the war’s killing promised to end. His death was the ultimate death—and became in many ways emblematic of all the losses of the war.”

“The parallels between Lincoln and Christ were powerful and unavoidable, reinforcing belief in the war’s divine purpose, realized through the sacrifice of the one for the many. When Congregational clergyman Leonard Swain proclaimed in an Easter Sunday sermon in Providence that ‘one man has died for the people, in order that the whole nation might not perish,’ he invoked the Christian narrative of redemption as well as the very words of Lincoln himself, uttered two years earlier at Gettysburg. Lincoln’s death had both broadly transcendent and specifically national significance, tying American purposes to those of God.

“Americans on the eve of civil war found their traditional systems of belief both powerfully challenged and fervently reaffirmed. Although the United States had been established as a secular state by founders wary of religious influences upon government, religion defined the values and assumptions of most mid-nineteenth-century Americans. Nearly four times as many attended church every Sunday in 1860 as voted in that year’s critical presidential election.”

“Some historians have argued that, in fact, only the widespread existence of such beliefs made acceptance of the Civil War death tolls possible, and that religion thus in some sense enabled the slaughter. Confidence in immortality could encourage soldiers to risk annihilation. Civil War Americans themselves would not have questioned what one Confederate chaplain called the “military power of religion.”

“As southerners amassed evidence of scriptural support for slavery, antislavery northerners sought and found different meanings. These divisions in interpretation marked more than just sectional disagreement; they represented a new uncertainty about the undisputed and indisputable power of the Bible itself, an unsettling contingency that struck at the very bases of conviction . . . Rather than emphasizing the compatibility of new discoveries with older beliefs, some Americans sought to fuel skepticism about revealed religion.”

THE CIVIL WAR LAUNCHES AMERICA’S MATHEMATICS STUDIES

“Counting had grown in importance in the decades that preceded the war. A population that had been largely innumerate—basic arithmetic was not even required for entrance to Harvard until 1803—began to count and calculate, to teach mathematics in schools, to regard numbers as a tool of mastery over both nature and society. The American Statistical Association, founded in 1839 by five Bostonians, grew within months into a nationwide organization with a constitution, bylaws, and regular publications. Americans had by the middle of the nineteenth century entered into what historian Patricia Cline Cohen has called an ‘infatuation with numbers.’”

RANDOM FACTS ABOUT THE CIVIL WAR

“Twice as many Civil War soldiers died of disease as of battle wounds.”

“Union sharpshooting units customarily wore green uniforms to serve as camouflage, and Confederates came to refer to these marksmen as ‘snakes in the grass.’”

“Approximately 2.1 million northerners and 880,000 southerners took up arms between 1861 and

1865. In the South, three out of four white men of military age became soldiers. During the American Revolution the army never numbered more than 30,000 men."

"The number of soldiers who died between 1861 and 1865, an estimated 620,000, is approximately equal to the total American fatalities in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War combined."

"Confederate men died at a rate three times that of their Yankee counterparts; one in five white southern men of military age did not survive the Civil War."

"More than 2 percent of the nation's inhabitants were dead as a direct result of the war – the approximate equivalent of the population in 1860 of the state of Maine, more than the entire population of Arkansas or Connecticut, twice the population of Vermont, more than the whole male population of Georgia or Alabama."

"John Palmer carried the bullet that killed his son with him to the grave; Henry Bowditch habitually wore a watch fob fashioned from his fallen son's uniform button; Mary Todd Lincoln dressed in mourning till she died; Walt Whitman believed the war had represented the "very centre, circumference, umbilicus" of his life; Ambrose Bierce felt haunted by "visions of the dead and dying" Jane Mitchell continued to hope for years after Appomattox that her missing son would finally come home; J. M. Taylor was still searching for details of his son's death three decades after the end of the war; Henry Struble annually laid flowers on the grave that mistakenly bore his name. Civil War Americans lived the rest of their lives with grief and loss."