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“The First Public War, 1861-1865”

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Strange that after a hundred years Americans still try to discover just what the Civil War means to them. If there is lingering confusion today, there was a good deal more in 1861 -- but much less by 1865. To the war generation, as perhaps to all war generations, conflict gave confidence; bloodshed brought a kind of rectitude. Sturdy blue men could die willingly and well on fields from Virginia to Texas because they had something worth the dying. And across the bayonets from them, gaunt gray men laid down their lives with like gallantry for a cause which lent them grandeur. How was it that two causes so ennobling appeared to call Americans to the worst of brothers' wars? How was it that willing thousands raged, fought and fell for North and South and knew they must go on to the end?

This morale, this clan, this patriotism if you will, came from a certain understanding of American ideals, an understanding provided by propaganda, by crude attempts in the field of public relations.

Virtue is the basic ingredient of patriotism - every belligerent nation claims Virtue is on its side, that its cause is just, its aims unsullied, its honor sacred. So it was with North and South. Both felt sure of Virtue, sure of sanctity, sure of God's favor. Especially they felt their triumph certain because each fought for revered American principles, fought to keep the image of America bright for the world. And curiously enough, they both were partly right in this conviction.

As things worked out, the Civil War cut between two views of America, both of which had always been part of the dream of the New World, and both of which promised more than the Old World had yet achieved. History would later blame the war on slavery, on differences between the workaday Yankee and Cavalier Southerner, on diverging economic systems, on the success of the Industrial Revolution, on the ineluctable triumph of a modern state over a decadent slavocracy. These were all part of the greater difference, a difference in mind dating from the American Revolution.

In time the views, differing governmentally, of Hamilton and Jefferson jelled into two political party ideals, became the fundamentals of policy for the later Whig and Democratic parties. But

they were also the articulation -- with modifications -- of the libertarian and equalitarian concepts of the United States. The North would stay steadfast to freedom and equality, while liberty would constantly charm the South.

Southern political leaders -- John C. Calhoun and his followers -- caught the libertarian urge of the dual ideal. The great promise of America to them was political freedom, political independence. And this was no small promise; it was, after all, the aim most cherished and most boasted during the Revolution, it had hallowed history and the virtue of success. For this ideal the Founding Fathers had pledged their lives and fortunes and had forged their sacred honor. The social ideals of the Declaration of Independence had been insinuated into the Revolution by Jefferson in a document many knew to be essentially rhetorical. In the Southern mind the real meaning of liberty was self-determination.

But self-determination did not mean self-destruction. Democratic impulses were fine when kept in hand -- the Virginia lady who said that she did not mind being democratic with people as long as they were not democratic with her -- clearly summed views of Calhoun and his cohorts.

These Southern leaders saw clearly enough that the surgent spirit of equality in the North threatened the safety of a class-based society, threatened the comfort of cotton oligarchs, the foundation of their economic order and the continuance of their system. Above Mason and Dixon's line, independence had been coupled with freedom; liberty had social as well as political significance. It was true. It had been true from the time of the Declaration. In Jefferson's sage eyes, liberty could not endure without freedom for the individual. Political independence had appeal, yes, but no thrilling summons to patriots unless it meant also that all men were equal in opportunity and free to improve their chance. He never swerved from this image of America, made it a part of the Northern mind and a lingering hope of the world.

Few Southerners doubted that if Northern nationalism triumphed, slavery more and more would feel the pressure of abolition and the cotton states would come increasingly under the domination of eastern men of money. And if this truly came to pass, Jeffersonian visions were bound to win out everywhere. Political freedom would go under in the overwash of mass democracy and valor, and mass machinery.

In the face of these possibilities, Calhoun and fellow Southern leaders began constructing elaborate defenses for the self-determination of the South. They clung to political freedom as the essence of the American dream. In their view, political freedom conferred the best type of liberty -- because with the blessings of liberty went the requirements of responsibility. The ruling class understood responsibility and politics, and acknowledged an obligation to exercise leadership, to give time to government.

It should be remembered that for some time, Southern politicians did not think of openly defending the "peculiar institution." Many of them, and this is certainly true up to 1830,

suspected that slavery might be immoral and many were willing that it should erode. But they did think the South had a calling -- a calling to preserve for posterity venerable American traditions of localism, independence, liberty and property.

True, they came finally to an active defense of slavery, to a full-blown rejection of much they once held inviolate. But when this happened, it happened because of external pressures and the imminent prospect of oblivion. And it happened swiftly.

The South was Jefferson's section, but it turned against him and his ideas with a vengeance after 1831 -- the year of Nat Turner's Insurrection. Following that year, abolitionist propaganda shoved the Southerner into a new philosophy: all men are *not* created equal; the black man is inferior. With this new conviction in mind if not in heart, the Southerner found the North more alien than ever. Southerners now felt compelled to preserve their special "way of life," as well as their old concept of American independence. Newspapers spewed forth the latest catechism day after day; ministers found Biblical support for slavery, medical men found biological proofs of Negro inferiority. Everyone rallied round a system increasingly insulated from outside ideas. Mails were censored; abolitionist books burned. Freedom of thought gave way to compulsion to conform.

Conformity added to Southern strength, at least on the surface. The whole section entered into a frenzied demonstration of single-mindedness. All Southerners became myrmidons of state rights and of Southern nationalists.

The Confederate States of America, proudly proclaimed at Montgomery, Alabama, in February 1861, seemed the personification of old ideas of state rights. The very name implied the nature of the government -- a confederation, with the states remaining sovereign. At Montgomery, however, in the deliberations over the Confederate constitution, a strong strain of federalism cropped out among the delegates, and the document which emerged bore striking resemblance to the Constitution of the United States. Many members of the Provisional Congress spoke in Federalist phrases about law and order and fear of mass revolution. But the words were for a time lost in the fervor of Southern patriotism. A president was elected to lead the new nation, and hopes were high for liberty and Southern independence.

Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, the Confederacy's Chief Executive, had the requisite experience and public prestige for the job, but never had he camped with fire-eating secessionists -- he was a moderate, and so his administration. Although he had fought in the United States Senate for state rights, he soon saw the need for a strong government and became a Confederate nationalist. As such, he strove for aims remarkably like those beguiling the President of the United States.

In working to perfect a cause, make a government and win a war, Davis and Abraham Lincoln were the central figures of the years 1861-1865. Each gave voice to one of the dual ideas of democracy, each typified his nation to a large degree and each had an image of his country's

destiny and fought to forge that destiny with every tool available. Forming government is, after all, largely an executive function. And it was especially so in 1861, for never before had Americans faced efforts so prodigious, war so total. No previous experience offered guidance, not even the career of post-revolutionary France with its *levee en masse*. For the French had faced outsiders, could count on solid patriotism. But Lincoln and Davis faced civil war, consequently the possibility of defection and blurred patterns of loyalty. Davis faced, too, the special problem of building a nation while constructing a war effort.

It is not surprising then, that the Civil War became largely a war of opinion, a war to win people's approval, a truly public war. Victory might well go to the people who responded first and with the fullest national effort.

Even a cursory glance at statistics showed that the South stood little chance in a test of resources. But Americans had faced worse odds and won, so statistics failed to cool Southern blood. Jefferson Davis, more of a realist than most of his confreres, feared the outcome of a war of attrition and worked to win public support early. Quick mobilization, an undivided dedication to independence and an olive branch extended in a strong hand might win Northern consent to secession.

Be it said for the embattled Rebel President that he knew how to begin. From the outset, the need to put the South in proper public posture was clear to him. In his inaugural address -- given on the picturesque portico of Alabama's white-columned capitol -- he sketched an image of his cause. "We have changed the constituent parts," he said, "but not the system of government." The Confederacy stood as the bulwark of constitutional government in America; it had been formed to preserve the political compact and to resist the dictatorship of the masses. In essence it represented a return to first American principles. Davis repeated the timeless call for sacrifice to sustain the new nation: "Doubly justified by the absence of wrong on our part, and by wanton aggression on the part of others, there can be no cause to doubt that the courage and patriotism of the people of the Confederate States will be found equal to any measure . . . which their honor and security may require We have entered upon the career of independence, and it must be inflexibly pursued Reverently let us invoke the God of our fathers to guide and protect us in our efforts to perpetuate the principles which by His blessing they were able to vindicate, establish and transmit to their posterity." Lest the more optimistic Southerners feel too sure of peaceful separation, Davis urged the likelihood of a terrible war.

In the years following, the Confederate president worked to sustain morale by using accepted methods of public appeal. Often he spoke to Congress, outlining policy and fostering cooperation. Increasingly, it grew difficult for him to persuade and cajole as the cause faded on the battlefield; increasingly he preached and demanded. Consequently, contemporaries, hence historians, regarded him as unable to lead and branded him a latent dictator. Close scrutiny of many of his speeches to Congress, his public proclamations, his direct appeals to the Confederate people, shows this stereotype to be just that. True, he lacked the warmth and humanness of Lincoln, had no talent for enshrining his cause in ringing words, but he did have

a certain charm and deathless devotion to his country. Always during the war he spoke of independence, heralded the horrors of defeat and finally advocated emancipation to ensure liberty. He tried to win the Southern press to his administration and at first succeeded. But the Richmond papers, powerful because they were close to the mighty, soon showed the contempt of familiarity and several became vitriolic voices of opposition. Many other papers in the Confederacy followed suit, especially when the president sponsored such un-Confederate measures as conscription, tax in kind, impressment of private property, mild regulation of private industry and public transportation, and the use of slaves as soldiers. When the press turned against the government, Davis fell back on more speeches himself and on requests to governors for appeals to their own citizens. He sought, too, approval from the pulpit -- long a standard method of reaching large segments of the populace. Southern clergymen, most of them, proved staunch Rebels: paeans of patriotism rose each Sunday, and countless sermons to civilians and soldiers praised the country, the cause, the government, and called down the wrath of the Old Testament's Jehovah on barbarous, unchristian Yankees.

Southern governors were not nearly as helpful as Southern ministers. After all, one of the things many Southerners felt they fought to sustain was state rights; none thought so more fervently than Governor Joseph E. Brown of Georgia -- a larger Confederate millstone. Often at odds with Davis, often in direct conflict with Confederate war policies, state righter Brown did much to wreck the Southern effort. But even Brown could be fired to nationalism by an occasional presidential plea. Following the disasters of 1863's summer, Davis urged the governors to even more Herculean efforts. John Milton of Florida, John Shorter of Alabama and one or two other state executives reacted with typical dedication, and this time Brown reached into his large store of rhetoric to assist the government. He issued a proclamation "To the People of Georgia" which illustrates accepted propaganda practice-leaves virtually nothing unsaid, touches every sentiment sacred to Southerners. "Georgians, you who remain in this state owe further volunteering to the gallant men who have left their homes and gone to distant fields to meet the foe. You owe it to the orphans of the immortal dead who have lost their lives in your defense. You owe it to the noble women of Georgia, who, with hearts full of patriotism, have, by their untiring energy, clothed the naked and contributed millions of dollars to the support of our cause, and who, like guardian angels, have ministered to the comfort and soothed the agony of the sick and wounded You owe it to your own wives and children, to the families of our soldiers now in service . . . and to unborn posterity." Exhortations of this kind usually had some measurable effect.

That Davis asked for them, though, shows how chancy was the business of molding public opinion. The president tried direct methods himself and three times made a "swing around the circle," toured the Confederacy speaking to as many Rebels as could be gathered to hear him. He did this to bolster morale, to nerve people for bad news, or to call for more money and men. When he spoke informally, he generally scored. Only when he read from a prepared text did he sound like a pallid Calhoun arguing an abstruse point of order. In person he had force, breathed some of his verve into his words and carried listeners with him. But he could reach just so many.

Some local efforts by loyal Rebels occasionally helped to prop up morale. Many Southern school textbooks offered sound lessons in Confederate superiority: Arithmetic problems, for example, were often put in propaganda terms. "If one Confederate soldier can whip seven Yankees, how many soldiers can whip 49 Yankees?" A few private societies appeared, dedicated to caring for soldiers' families and to encouraging the home front. But for the most part, Davis had to rely on haphazard methods of morale-building -- the church, whimsical governors, disorganized civilian activities. Even the Press Association of the Confederate States, which disseminated news via telegraph, did not cooperate with the government -- was not asked to do so, in fact.

Still, the picture is not all bad. Davis did have one propaganda success. With the wisdom born of war, he and his shrewd Secretary of State, Judah P. Benjamin, saw the desperate need of providing favorable views of the Confederacy to Europe. They sent an experienced journalist, Henry Hotze, to England, financed him in establishing the London *Index*, and aided in making this paper a highly respected source of pro-Confederate news.

At home, though in the absence of continuing encouragement and persuasion, Confederate morale sank in direct ratio to military defeat. Things at length so deteriorated that numerous peace societies sprang up and did their deadly business without serious opposition. About the only voices raised against this sort of sedition were Davis' and those of a few members of Congress. But Congress had always been too far away and Davis had lost his luster in the backwash of disaster. Still, he kept on trying. And he showed best when everything crumbled around him. At the very end, after Lee had given up the Richmond-Petersburgh siege lines and his army trudged wearily to Appomattox and to history, Davis -- president on the run -- made his most eloquent appeal to his people. He told of Richmond's fall, of Lee's retreat, of Yankees ringing round, but spoke, too, of the future. "Animated by the confidence in your spirit and fortitude, which never yet has failed me, I announce to you, fellow-countrymen, that it is my purpose to maintain your cause with my whole heart and soul If by stress of numbers we should ever be compelled to a temporary withdrawal from Virginia or ... any other border State, again and again will we return, until the baffled and exhausted enemy shall abandon in despair his endless and impossible task of making slaves of a people resolved to be free. Let us not then despond, my countrymen, but, relying on the never failing mercies and protecting care of our God, let us meet the foe with fresh defiance, with unconquered and unconquerable hearts."

Liberty and independence lingered as the Confederacy's dream. For this dream, Southerners were willing to change everything about the South, to submit to regimentation, to cooperate with Confederate nationalists, and finally to alter their social structure and abandon slavery. But this willingness was individual, without direction and often unspoken. The reasons for final Confederate collapse were many, but surely among the most important was the absence of a clear understanding of war aims and the absence of an articulate national purpose.

Lincoln faced similar problems in public relations himself. When the Southern states began to leave the Union, the North reacted variously. Many in New England and the Midwest voiced relief that the South at last had gone its way. Others felt secession to be illegal but felt coercion to be equally beyond the law. Some called for preservation of the Union at any cost. How could these discordant elements be welded into a national opinion? It could be done; it turned out, by reminding Northerners of a common dream -- the dream of equality and freedom. Abraham Lincoln recalled it, refurbished it, and made it the buckler of the Union.

Means and measures available to Lincoln were not very different from those used in the South: speeches, textbooks, and newspapers -- even Greeley's anti-abolitionist N.Y. *Tribune*. Lincoln had to rely on the same media for public information as did Davis, but he had a few significant advantages.

The Northern people had long been addicted to private associations as a means of getting things done; the craze for joining hit the North much more forcefully than the South. And as a consequence, such voluntary organizations as the Union League and the Loyal Publication Society became important adjuncts of the Northern war effort. Private funds and private zeal made the League one of the most successful morale builders for the Union Army. Volunteers went with the troops, ministered to their comforts, offered small luxuries midst the crudities of camp. And always these zealots provided rations of propaganda in the form of articles, books, poems, and speeches. The Loyal Publication Society, founded in New York City, was especially energetic in distributing patriotic reading matter. It raised over \$30,000 during the war, published 90 pamphlets, and distributed 900,000 documents. Associations of this sort were not officially recognized nor under government direction, but they had wide membership and did much more useful service than disorganized Southern citizens.

Like Davis, Lincoln also appreciated the importance of winning Europe's favor. Early in the war, he dispatched a propaganda commission to France and England charged with presenting the North in favorable guise. The main task of this commission turned out to be constant efforts at counteracting Hotze's *Index*.

But Lincoln's greatest asset was himself. True, some Northern governors emulated Southern ones in issuing proclamations and in summoning heroics by the pen, but their activities were insignificant in comparison to the President's.

Lincoln had a terrific advantage over Davis in public relations because he had long been a stump-speaking office seeker, had for years wheedled country voters and coaxed canny politicians, while Davis' honors came by appointment or unopposed election. Experience taught the North's leader how to talk to people, how to engage their help, win their confidence, use their talents, accept their opposition. In the early stages of his administration, Lincoln felt his way into the Northern mind. When the North was uncertain and confused about secession, about Fort Sumter and about the cause, Lincoln waited, selected the moment, and moved in to explain what the war was about, to mold the will of the Union. He began the process with the

First Inaugural, March 4, 1861. "I hold that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these states is perpetual It follows from these views that no state, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union ... and that acts of violence, within any state or states, against the authority of the United States, are insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances." After thus explaining his political philosophy, he moved to the issue of the moment, the one that then and later seemed the cause of all the trouble: "One section of our country believes slavery is *right*, and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is *wrong*, and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute." The last part of the inaugural address is often quoted as an example of Lincolnian prose at its best; and is also superb propaganda. "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves, the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to 'preserve, protect and defend' it."

In this one speech, Lincoln took a stand for perpetual Union, focused on slavery as the evil in dispute, and fixed war guilt squarely on Southern shoulders -- no small achievement for a presidential neophyte.

In this address, as in most of his early utterances, the president harped on maintaining the Union. All else, even abolition, could be deferred or abandoned -- indeed, he once wrote Horace Greeley that "I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." But unlike most of his Northern contemporaries, and unlike Davis and Southern leaders, Lincoln kept an open mind on objectives to be gained by the war; he regarded objectives as weapons, as catalysts for public morale. If one failed him, another would he found. When, for instance, after the long string of Confederate successes in the summer of 1862, he found the "Union forever" a tiring theme, he issued his Emancipation Proclamation. This proved a master stroke. It freed no slaves at once, but it killed the dream, hence crushed the power of the rabid abolitionist element in the Republican Party. And it made human freedom part and parcel of the crusade to preserve a government "whose leading object is," said Lincoln, "to elevate the condition of men -- to lift artificial weights from all shoulders -- to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all -- to afford all an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." So now he gave voice to the old American promise of freedom and equality and human betterment -- the goal of Jefferson, the Transcendentalists, and of the waves of immigrants who came to the North. Once articulated, the theme would not die. It sustained the Union through long, dark days and it touched the hearts of oppressed thousands in England and Europe. Freedom and liberty and man's dignity has lasting compulsion. The Southern aim of independence seemed shoddy by comparison.

Public addresses, proclamations and messages to Congress could accomplish just so much. Politician Lincoln had learned back in Illinois that suasion could often be exercised by mail, and so from the White House issued hundreds of letters. Some went to urge friends to sustain

a point, others to enemies to soothe a ruffled feeling, some to party leaders to cajole a reluctant vote. In these ventures in personal propaganda, Lincoln showed his great human appeal. To a lady he thought had lost five sons in the war he opened a boundless heart; to a New York Democratic leader who loved the Union but thought Lincoln trampled on the Constitution in order to save it, the president showed himself a hard, logical politician, one whose honesty and realism could not be questioned.

At his best when delineating the deeper meaning of the war, Lincoln relied often on impromptu talks to sharpen his own conception of the cause. The Gettysburg Address was not impromptu, but it gave Lincoln's final perception of the war as a crucible of freedom. In this, his shortest speech, his eloquence reached the ages. The United States, he recalled, had been "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." He chided listeners with the admonition that "the world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

And since the forming of a government, the molding of a cause, is an executive function, it must be concluded that Lincoln ranks as a consummate executive. More than that, he ranks as a practical politician, a prescient political theorist. These qualities elevated him above his time, made him one of the people and yet the people's conscience. They made him, too, perhaps the most effective fashioner of public opinion in American history. It was Lincoln, rhetorician, master of public relations, and poet of democracy who conjured the menace of the future for an uncertain North in 1862: "Fellow citizens, *we* cannot escape history. We . . . will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation... We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth."

Fate gave the North a leader whose language would echo down to history with timeless luster, a leader whose vision of freedom and whose conception of the Union transcended the moment to capture the future; it gave the Confederacy a leader whose wisdom none could doubt but whose appeal was muffled in legalistic phrase. It may well be that in selecting voices so aptly tuned to each cause, fate foredoomed one and evoked the other.