

## **The Future of Civil War Era Studies:**

### **Predictions**

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Civil War scholarship has never been in a healthier place or in broader agreement on fundamentals. Was the war destructive? Yes. Total? No. Hard? Yes. Did the home front matter? Yes. But battles mattered too, right? Yes, but you're bugging me by acting like these are two entirely different things. Did slavery cause the war? Yes. But states' rights mattered too, right? Yes, if you mean a state's right to protect its interest in slaves. Was the war won and lost in the west? Yes, militarily. Was it won and lost in the east? Yes, politically. Was the South modernizing? Yes. But not as quickly as the North, right? Well, maybe, but you're bugging me again by acting like modernization (or capitalism) has only one form. Was guerrilla warfare important? Yes. But was it decisive? We don't know yet—but it will never be ignored again. Did African Americans bring slavery down? Yes, but not without the help of the Union army. Did a divided Confederacy bring itself down? Yes, but again, not without the help of the Union army. (The Yankees, as Pickett famously said of his own defeat, had something to do with it.) Did the North fight the war with one hand tied behind its back? No, it simply had a bigger job to do, and besides, when you're fighting a war against yourself, you want to win by as little as possible. And that's why the war evolved? And that's why the war evolved.

With so many of these old debates quiescent, where does that leave us; where do we go from here? In the following forum, eight scholars make their predictions as to how their subfields will evolve over the next ten years: Michael Bernath focuses on the history of nationalism; Seth Rockman on the emerging field of capitalism and slavery; Barton Myers on the future of Civil

War military history; Anne Marshall on the fading notion that there even was a Confederate “home front”; Lisa Brady on the environmental history of the war; Judith Giesberg on northern civilians during the war, especially African American women; and Jim Downs on the history of race.

Leading off, I offer my “top ten” predictions for how broader professional trends will reshape Civil War historiography in the coming decades<sup>1</sup>:

#### #10: Civil War History Will “Go Big”

As Aaron Sheehan-Dean has recently noted in *Virginia Magazine*, the increasing volume and specialization of work on the Civil War has become a serious problem. “We are in danger of learning more and more about less and less,” Sheehan-Dean laments. “Civil War scholars need to write broader histories in both temporal and spatial terms.” I agree, and I would add that we need broader histories in thematic terms also (see below). Two factors militate against such needs being met. First, the book-buying public (to the extent that there still is one) rather likes hyper-specialized Civil War books. Second, in a business where it takes one book to get tenure and at least two to go up for full professorship, there is a perverse incentive to “go small.”<sup>2</sup>

Even so, other factors will override these. Most important, the Civil War is no longer the province of a small set of Civil War historians but a large set of historians of the Civil War era. When the latter begin to trace their varied themes across a span of time that includes but is not limited to the war itself, they will prove what the former have tended to presume: that the war *mattered*. Civil War historiography has tended to have a reputation for being behind the times. Because a wider public cared to read about it, Civil War historians supposedly muzzled their analysis, served up the stories, and drank in the fame. This was never true, but the professionally

disgruntled made a credible case to disgruntled professionals. Now they can't. As I hope to show by this list, *if* Civil War historiography was ever retrograde, it is now at the vanguard of American historiography generally.

And that is where it belongs. If the sine qua non of our discipline is explaining change over time, then we study the Civil War not because it was some national crucible, condensing us as a people, but because it was a rift in the fabric of space-time, a wormhole through which the nation passed on its way to infinite outcomes, in one of which, we live. And as any scientist will tell you, you cannot study a black hole *from inside the hole*. Rather, you must take a thing, throw it into the hole, and see what comes out the other side. *That* is how you measure an event's *gravity*. Covering three large subjects from the perspective of two races over the course of a century, for instance, David Silkenat's *Moments of Despair* earns the right to draw broad conclusions: "The dramatic changes in both behaviors and attitudes toward suicide, divorce, and debt indicate that the Civil War had lasting repercussions in the lives of and opportunities for white and black North Carolinians. From this perspective, the story of nineteenth-century North Carolina is one of deep discontinuity and revolutionary cultural change."<sup>3</sup>

Change, then, is not gradual but punctuated. Very occasionally, time becomes elastic. "It is extraordinary how completely the idea of *gradual* emancipation has been dissipated from the public mind everywhere, by the progress of events," marveled *The New York Times* in 1864. "Before the rebellion, it was accounted the very extreme of Anti-Slavery fanaticism to believe in the possibility of immediate emancipation without social ruin . . . But all these gradual methods are now hardly more thought of than if they had been obsolete a century."<sup>4</sup>

Our prime directive as historians is to explain and understand these moments of social, cultural, and political *elasticity*.

And speaking of “time becoming elastic” . . .

#### #9: The “Long Civil Rights Movement” Is Getting a Whole Lot Longer

Especially as emancipation moves to the center of our military narrative, the Civil War and Reconstruction are becoming interpenetrated and inseparable. “Civil War *era*” has come into vogue for a reason: We needed a term that telegraphs our sensitivity to the degree to which a single war freed the slaves, gave them the vote, and took it away again. It was all *of a piece*. If Gettysburg was a Civil War battle, so were Hamburg and Colfax. And for the first time *ever* in the history of Civil War history, the war years *after Appomattox* are going to be the hotter ones. To be sure, much will continue to be written about Gettysburg, but fewer historians will care. They will be looking for books on comparative emancipation, on how Reconstruction scholars link up with historians of capital, labor, and race relations in the Gilded Age, on how citizenship was itself (re)made. The pivot of the Civil War era is sliding forward in time, but the nail on which everything hangs is January 1, not July 3, 1863.<sup>5</sup>

#### #8: Civil War History Will Become a STEM Discipline

History flirted with anthropology in the 1980s, linguistics in the 1990s, geography in the 2000s; we have successively taken cultural, linguistic, and spatial turns that have fundamentally reshaped our discipline. For a variety of reasons, our next love interest will be the sciences (especially public health). Partly this is the result of breakthroughs in our understanding of humanities and the brain (call it the Oliver Sacks effect). And I hope somehow it will all lead us back to emotions, family, and psychohistory—to an attempt to understand the ways the “self” can itself be historicized. Chemically, mentally, emotionally: humanity is not the same as it was. Which means that it can be more than it is.<sup>6</sup>

But probably our lean into the sciences will be the result of some cynical considerations too. As NEH and campus resources dwindle, the NSF and NIH will start to look pretty good. (The surest way to predict emerging history fields is to take a particularly thorny contemporary problem and figure out how people will create fundable ways to study it in the ‘laboratory’ of the past.)

Which is why . . .

#### #7: The Blue and Gray Will Go Green

Living on an overextended planet in an era of dwindling resources, we are reminded with new urgency that Alfred Crosby has been screaming at us for *forty years*: the environment *pushes back*. Some thematic fields are like lenses we put on or take off. Others alter *the way we see*. Gender history, for instance, was once something a smaller group of scholars focused on; now it is something the entire academy is attentive to. It is a lens *we cannot take off* (although I sometimes fear that we are doing exactly that). Environmental history has this same trajectory. In ten years, ignoring the nonhuman matrix within which human events unfold will seem as ludicrous as conflating all history with the activities of a few white men.

With respect to Civil War history, we are already learning a great deal about deforestation for fieldworks and fuel; the corduroying of roads and bridges; sapping, mining, and countermining; poisoned water supplies, including intentional biological warfare and inadequate handling of human waste (no small thing, since it killed the president’s son); human epidemics that, yes, killed four hundred thousand but were also an important part of the mental calculus of millions and a critical part of the architecture of Union victory; animal epidemics of hog cholera and glanders that, coupled with the armies’ depredations, left southern farmers in 1870 with half as many hogs, cows, and horses as they’d had in 1860 (with probably similar die-offs in wild

populations); the “violence” to the human imagination of unnatural landscapes, “soundscapes,” and smells. . . . Like the Columbian Exchange, the Civil War was a massive stir of the biotic soup, and in many ways *that stir*, more than the battles themselves, was the real story of the war.<sup>7</sup>

Which is why. . .

#### #6: Professionals Will (Finally) Study Logistics

Ironically, the environmental turn will lead us back to logistical debates we haven’t had since Roosevelt. To take but one example, Ella Lonn’s 1933 study *Salt as a Factor in the Confederacy* is starting to look fresh again. Amateurs, it is said, study tactics; professionals study logistics . . . except, apparently, professional historians, who have never shown much of an inclination to trace the flows of men and matériel through the records of a thousand quartermasters. But *as* we are “going big,” and *if* we are coming to understand history *in terms of flows* (of people, capital, commodities, energy, ideas, biota), then a logistical turn makes sense. Already *The Iron Way* is making something of a splash. What comes next? Certainly no one can write a logistical history overnight, so we’ll have to start smaller. How about a history of grass? Such a book would start with the formation of Deep South soils too acidic to support grasslands (and therefore cows and sheep) and continue to chart the impact on every link in the logistical chain that moved millions of pounds of fodder a month through St. Louis to the Union’s bovine/equine army in the (grassless) fields of the South.<sup>8</sup>

And clearly if we’re following *flows* through permeable political boundaries. . . .

#### #5: The Transnational Trend Will Continue

Obviously, contemporary globalization has everything to do with our historiography’s transnational turn. You can’t drink a cup of coffee these days without thinking about Brazilian bean-pickers, Nicaraguan sugar-harvesters, the kids who live in the Chinese landfill where the

espresso machine will find a grave, and the albatrosses that dine and die in the chemical sludge of the great Pacific Trash Vortex where the milk jug will turn *forever*. Having sensitized ourselves to such things, we cannot help but look back into the past and see global flows of connections and consequences; this too is a *new way of seeing*. And that is why dissertators will never again privilege political boundaries (county lines, state lines, country lines) when studying phenomena that are not particularly bound by them. Instead, they will find or invent boundaries that themselves have explanatory power—John Majewski’s “Limestone South,” for instance—or they will find and follow phenomena that flow over and around this vast layered network of semipermeable boundaries, searching for connections and consequences.<sup>9</sup>

Such mapping, analyzing, and visualizing of “networks” and “flows” may require some computing power, however, which is why . . .

#### #4: It Is No Longer “Cute” to Be a Luddite

Digital Humanities is in its second iteration. Version 1.0 (if you will) revolutionized how we store and access information—massive archives of raw data were made searchable via the web. If the data were more available, however, they were not more digested; the mess of the past had merely been reproduced in digital form. Digital Humanities 2.0 revolutionizes how we sift, render, visualize, and analyze information. It uses computing technologies not to reproduce the mess but to find (and display) new patterns and meanings within it.

In the first iteration, historians had only to type into a search window to participate. In the second iteration, participation requires more technical skills and digital savvy. In the coming decades, single-author monographs will yield space to online collaborations; dissertators may equally be archival road warriors or students of crowd-sourcing, database design, and geographic information systems (GIS). The question of how such digital dissertators and collaborators get

academic credit in the existing tenure system may seem a difficult one until one remembers that, medieval origins notwithstanding, the whole existing system must either reboot itself or itself get the boot.<sup>10</sup>

### #3: Political Correctness Will Become Less Important than Correctness

Quite logically, the first steps in producing a bottom-up social history of the war focused in broad and sympathetic terms on the experiences of those who had gotten the least attention: women, African Americans, and common soldiers. These groups will continue to get attention, but the new portraits will be *themselves diverse* and occasionally cut against type. We will hear from confused slaves and Democratic freedmen; we will hear from Kentucky's "good Union men" who sold African Americans into slavery, even after Emancipation; we will hear from Abraham Lincoln's own brother-in-law, who made a fortune in crooked war contracts; and we will hear from the cowards and shirkers who created their own masculine subculture in the rear of the armies. We have, after all, heard a great deal from those who sacrificed and struggled; we have heard a great deal less from those who made all kinds of killings in the war: from the soldiers who tortured and looted bodies and joyfully blew things up; from the madams who trafficked in the war's wake; from the gougers, hoarders, speculators, and stock-jobbers who guiltlessly made money making war; and from the African American troops who decided, and not without right, that desertion was the better part of valor.<sup>11</sup>

Which is why in the next decade of Civil War fashion . . .

### #2: Sacrifice Is Out. Selfishness Is In.

As Drew Gilpin Faust complained in 2004, social historians, when they finally found the war, proved just as susceptible to its seductions as the military historians had been. "The war," she noted, "as moment of truth, as occasion for decisive action, as laboratory for agency—even for



heroism—was a war both old and new Civil War historians could love.” She called for, and now we are getting, a war with fewer heroes and victims, more opportunists, unintended consequences, and mixed motives.<sup>12</sup>

But, let’s be honest, there are other reasons we will continue getting a war we cannot love: recent quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Great Recession, the diminishing expectations of what it means to be an American, the tenor of the times, the rise of postmodernism—take your pick. As Clio’s torch passes from the Baby Boomers to Gen X, we will get more history that can’t even be called disillusioned, because, as I’m “talking about my ge-generation,” we never had any illusions to lose. We have yet to fight a war that makes sense to a majority of us in our lifetime. The wars we’ve witnessed aren’t even tragic; they just reek of farce and failed policy. Like torture, we tend to condemn war most because it doesn’t usually work. To us, Clausewitz seems simply wrong; war is (with rare exceptions) politics not by *other* but by *less effective* means.

This experience of wars of occupation, insurgency and counterinsurgency, refugees, hearts and minds, atrocities, war contractors, ill-gotten fortunes, mission creep, terrorism, torture, and child soldiers will continue to be reproduced in our work, along with a darker understanding of how the sausage of war in a democracy gets made.

Which is why . . .

#### #1: The Civil War Is about to Have a Very Gloomy Birthday

Despite some very noble efforts, the Civil War at 150 will be remembered as having been met by a collective national shrug, even in the South. Apparently Americans are happy enough to celebrate their past but not that interested in commemorating (or, better yet, understanding) it. The reason is not far to seek: the war and its racial legacy remains a can of worms most states

don't want to open publicly. Why shine a light or build a stage just so neo-Confederate dead-enders can perform their ludicrous one-man shows? In a house full of roaches, it is better to leave the lights off.

This is unfortunate in a sense—a “teachable moment” is about to go begging. But by comparison to the centennial celebrations, ambivalence is a victory. Ambivalence is the proper response to war. War is about *damage*, even at its most heroic, even when certain people and things deserve to be damaged. The destruction of slavery was a good thing and a great thing. Having to fight our bloodiest war to end it is neither good nor great. It is just sad. And remembering that the end of slavery was only the beginning of a longer battle for the kind of freedom that really matters is sadder still. Soon enough, if not already, the Civil War will be understood not as a test this country passed—a kiln in which the nation was fired—but as a test we failed when we couldn't, short of war, give up our original addiction to “black gold.”

This “victory” of American ambivalence belongs to us, to academe. We have killed, or are killing, the war our fathers and grandfathers built. But no one, including ourselves, feels like celebrating, because it is already clear that our version of the war is an unlovely mess—sordid means serving varied ends, some good, most unforeseen; our version is a longer slog, less politically correct, less inspiring, and more befitting a chastened nation.

## Notes

1. “Top ten” lists are chirpily designed to rankle, and readers will (I hope) debate what I have chosen to include and exclude. A quick caveat: this is a list not of what I *wish* were so but of what I *think* is true. And for whatever it's worth, I also think memory and gender are somewhere south of the “top ten” on their way down, and religion and social-network analysis

are somewhere south of the “top ten” on their way up. I wish to thank Brian Drake, Amy Murrell Taylor, and Aaron Sheehan-Dean for their constructive comments on this essay.

2. Aaron Sheehan-Dean, “The Long Civil War: A Historiography of the Consequences of the Civil War,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 119, no. 2, (2011): 106-7.

3. David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, and Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 218.

4. *New York Times*, February 25, 1864.

5. It is staggering to consider how little has been written on comparative emancipation since Eric Foner’s pioneering *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983). Important exceptions are Steven Hahn, “Class and State in Postemancipation Societies: Southern Planters in Comparative Perspective,” *American Historical Review* 95, no. 1 (1990): 75–98; and Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

6. For great examples of where a focus on public health will take us, see Joan E. Cashin, “Hungry People in the Wartime South: Civilians, Armies, and the Food Supply,” in *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War’s Ragged Edges*, ed. Stephen Berry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 160–75; Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Kathryn Meier, “No Place for the Sick: Nature’s War on Civil War Soldier Health in 1862 Virginia” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2010).

7. To see how the Civil War might be recast as an environmental trauma, see Lisa Brady, *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

8. Ella Lonn, *Salt as a Factor in the Confederacy* (New York: W. Neale, 1933); William G. Thomas, *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

9. Calls for papers (CFPs) are often good predictors of future historiographical trends. On the attempt to situate the Civil War in wider geographies, for instance, see the *Journal of the West*'s recent CFP for a special issue on the Civil War in the West; a second CFP for "The Transnational Significance of the American Civil War: A Global History" Conference <<http://www.gcw.uni-jena.de/Home.html>>; or the recently concluded "Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development" Conference <<http://brown.edu/web/slaveryconf/>> (at which John Majewski delivered "Defining the National Mainstream: Slavery, Capitalism, and the Limestone South").

10. On GIS and the humanities, see David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M. Harris, *The Spatial Humanities: GIS and the Future of Humanities Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). Possible and incipient models for the future of online scholarship and collaboration include the University of Richmond's Digital Scholarship Lab <<http://dsl.richmond.edu/>>, Stanford University's Spatial History Project <<http://www.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/>>, and the University of Georgia's Center for Virtual History <[eHistory.org](http://eHistory.org)>.

11. For a collaborative attempt to put selfishness at the center of the Civil War, see Berry, *Weirding the War*.

12. Drew Gilpin Faust, “‘We Should Grow Too Fond of It’: Why We Love the Civil War,” *Civil War History* 50 (December 2004): 379.