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TAH – A More Perfect Union

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*This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* by Drew Gilpin Faust was published in 2008 by the Vintage Civil War Library. Faust is currently the President of Harvard University, but she is also a noted historian who has focused on the antebellum South and the Civil War era. Her recent book, *The Republic of Suffering* is a brilliant and engaging study of the impact of death on American society during the Civil War and in the years that followed. Faust maintains that it was our concept of death that affected how individuals both approached dying and how their families dealt with their losses. She contends that the Civil War challenged American society in multiple ways. For example, the United States had to figure out how to handle the technology that allowed for the mass slaughter; they also had to create a bureaucracy to not only deal with the burying and memorializing of the dead, but also to assist the living. Faust persuasively argues that death was central to fundamental changes in American society.

In the Preface, Faust discusses the scope of the conflict. She estimates that the 620,000 American fatalities were equal to the total American fatalities in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II and the Korean War combined. (xi) And it was not only the soldiers who died; it was also civilians who succumbed to disease, food shortages, the reprisals taken by guerrillas roaming the countryside and the urban populations suffered in events like the New York Draft Riots. (xii) But for generations who were not unfamiliar with early death usually through high rates of infant mortality, the Civil War was different. “Death’s significance for the Civil War generation arose as well from its violation of prevailing assumptions about life’s proper end – about who should die, when and where and under what circumstances.” (xii) The shared republic of suffering would also have a social impact through the growing numbers of widows and orphans who

needed to be assisted. It would have broad political implications including changing definitions of citizenship and ideas of equality. It would also have spiritual implications as the country attempted to find meaning in the slaughter and the rebirth of the nation. (xv-xvi)

The book is organized in eight chapters including ‘Dying: “To Lay Down My Life”’, ‘Killing: “The Harder Courage”’, ‘Burying: “New Lessons Caring for the Dead”’, ‘Naming: “The Significant Word UNKNOWN”’, ‘Realizing: Civilians and the Work of Mourning, Believing and Doubting: “What Means this Carnage?”’, ‘Accounting: “Our Obligations to the Dead”’, ‘Numbering: “How Many? How Many?”’, and the ‘Epilogue: Surviving.’ In ‘Dying’, Faust elaborates on the many causes of death, but she also emphasizes the fact that young men had to be “both willing and ready to die” for the cause. In both the Union and the Confederacy, men had to be willing to sacrifice themselves for both God and Country. Christianity and the idea of salvation were clearly important to Americans in the nineteenth century and the Civil War tested Americans’ preconceived notions of the “Good Death.” As sinners, individuals would prepare for salvation, and usually died at home surrounded by their family. (9-10) The Civil War clearly tested these assumptions and many families awaited condolence letters that included a checklist of elements of the Good Death: that their loved one was conscious of his fate, that they were willing to accept death and they expressed a belief in God. (17) “As the war continued... soldiers on both sides reported how difficult it became to believe that the slaughter was purposeful and that their sacrifices had meaning.” (30) One of the main strengths of Faust’s work is its relevance and connection to other conflicts. Students of history can often find examples of countries, individuals and soldiers attempting to make sense of what many feel is the unnecessary slaughter of a generation.

The chapter ‘Killing’ addresses the issue of agency. “The carnage was not a natural disaster but a man-made one, the product of human choice and agency.” (55) Soldiers rationalized their actions in many ways including duty, self-defense, a desire for revenge and as a form of justice. (35-37) Faust also explores the issue of race and killing. For many soldiers in the Confederacy race made killing easier, and for black soldiers killing was viewed as a means to their eventual liberation. And once a soldier had

overcome his fear of killing, the new weapons of war such as new rifles with a longer range and the ability to reload rapidly made the job easier. (39) This chapter also explores the effects of religion. Since killing violated biblical law, both Northerners and Southerners needed to believe in a “just war.” For the South this was often described as a war based on self-defense, while the just cause for the North became the fight to save the nation from the sin of slavery. (33)

The chapter on ‘Burying’ was particularly interesting. Faust explains the eighteenth century fear of premature burial with special coffins with bells inside to prevent the interment of the living. (75-76) The Civil War heightened these concerns and created an immediate challenge. Most soldiers wanted to have their bodies returned home for decent burial rituals, but there were often too many problems for this to occur. One major challenge was a lack of time after a battle along, with inadequate manpower resources. (62) The haste and carelessness demonstrated by mass graves dehumanized the dead and appalled the living. (74) For many Americans the issue of a decent burial would have to wait until the end of the Civil War. One of the strengths of Faust’s work is her use of primary sources: letters, diaries, photographs, songs, poems and paintings. This chapter includes two photographs by Alexander Gardner from the Battle of Antietam. “A Burial Party After the Battle of Antietam” representing a Union regiment and “Antietam. Bodies of Confederate Dead Gathered for Burial” provide an opportunity to contrast different treatments of the dead following the battle. (67-68) The painting, *The Burial of Latane*, by William D. Washington commemorated the burial of a young lieutenant who was the only casualty of the Peninsula Campaign in 1862. (83) In an area surrounded by Union forces, “slaves built his coffin and dug his grave, and a white Virginia matron read the burial service over his remains. The women in attendance were all socially prominent, and the story became well known in nearby Richmond.” (83) Women and civilians were often the ones responsible for the burying of bodies, especially in the South. In the North, the Sanitary Commission, a voluntary philanthropic organization, helped to arrange burials or provide for the shipment of bodies. (87) And finally the government became involved through the creation of a

national cemetery system that was “intended to memorialize the slain and celebrated the nation’s fallen heroes.” (99)

Faust also focuses on the difficulty in identifying all of the dead on both sides. “Since more than 40 percent of deceased Yankees and a far greater proportion of Confederates – perished without names, [they were] identified only, as Walt Whitman put it, ‘by the significant word UNKNOWN.’” (102) This was clearly unacceptable and systems changed as a result of this. During the Civil War soldiers might have pinned pictures or notes to the inside of their uniforms to try to provide some form of identification, but this was clearly proven to be insufficient so by the time the United States entered World War I this had evolved into the standard use of “dog tags” as a form of identification. The individual stories, letters, drawings and photographs continue to bring Faust’s work to life for the reader.

It also dealt with the survivors, and their attempt to make sense of the carnage while still honoring their loved ones. The chapter on ‘Realizing: Civilians and the Work of Mourning’ tackled this aspect. Mourning is still, and always will be a process, but in the nineteenth century it came with strict rituals that were expected to be performed, especially by the upper classes in America. Faust discusses the war’s disruption of the standard mourning process since especially in the Confederacy women had difficulty purchasing the proper color clothing or cloth to fulfill their obligations. In the early months of the war “many Civil War funerals were also occasions for displays of patriotism...when soldiers’ deaths were novel and often marked with elaborate public ceremony.” (153) This is easily compared to conflicts today where entire communities attend and honor America’s fallen soldiers in conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Mourning was individual, but it also became national after the assassination of President Lincoln in April, 1865. In a country that was strongly rooted in religious imagery, it was easy for Lincoln to be portrayed with parallels to Jesus Christ. Some of the examples focused on the sacrifice of the nation and Lincoln, and redemption of the nation following the Civil War. (156-157) Walt Whitman was used as a central example by using three of his poems that were written at different times that reflected “the cultural work of mourning – on behalf of the nation, and in this instance, for its beloved leader.” (161)

'Believing and Doubting' reflected the feelings of a highly spiritual and religious nation. Even though there had been questions about biblical interpretation and questions of science that challenged earlier ideas of Christianity, the Civil War led to a rise of spiritualism that included attempts to contact the dead. (182) Faust's discussion of the planchette would remind a reader of a certain age of the Ouija board and later attempts at séances. Here again, Faust uses poems, popular songs, the Gettysburg Address and the use of irony to strengthen her arguments. For example, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Again* written in 1864 was an attempt to console women. In her book, "[h]eaven is reconceived as a more perfect Earth: Victorian family and domesticity are immortalized, and death all but disappears." (187) These ideas would later be satirized by Mark Twain. It was particularly interesting to read how irony emerged from the carnage as a way to instill "distance and doubt in relation to [the] experience." (194) This chapter was rich in primary source examples.

Finally, 'Accounting' discusses the obligations of the nation and fundamental policy changes that come about as a result of the war. Most of these changes are taken for granted today, such as the "dog tags" mentioned earlier, but it took the horrific carnage of the Civil War to make changes that would include "legislative authorization and funding to create an enormous and comprehensive postwar reburial program intended to locate every Union soldier across the South and inter all within a new system of national cemeteries." (217-218) Congress passed legislation creating national cemeteries throughout the nation, the most famous being Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. Even before the Great Depression redefined the obligations of the federal government, the Civil War already made it clear that all obligations could not be met by state and local governments. "The program's extensiveness, its cost, its location in national rather than state government, and its connection with the most personal dimensions of individuals' lives all would have been unimaginable before the war created its legion of dead, a constituency of the slain and their mourners, who would change the very definition of the nation and its obligations." (237) The Civil War finally ended slavery and, at least for a time, ended the debate over national versus states' rights, but as Faust so brilliantly points out, it did much more. It affected the

personal lives of arguably everyone in the country and redefined the nation's obligations to those who serve.

*This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* is extremely well researched and accessible to everyone, not just scholars of history. This book could be used in many ways in a high school classroom. Specific chapters or excerpts could be used to focus on individual concepts. For example, the issue of numbers could be contrasted to the Holocaust where students also have a problem reconciling the irreconcilable – six million Jewish deaths and eleven to twelve million concentration camp deaths overall. The primary sources used, and Faust's descriptions of them, are also very adaptable to the classroom. For example, the three Walt Whitman poems, written at different times that deal with the death of Lincoln could be analyzed by a United States History class. Photographs, paintings, journals and letters all enrich the experience. Faust's book is an excellent read and an excellent resource.