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Irreconcilable Differences

By Reviewed David W. Blight
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WHAT CAUSED THE CIVIL WAR?

Reflections on the South and Southern History

By Edward L. Ayers

Norton. 222 pp. $24.95

According to the late C. Vann Woodward, only irony could unleash the dark and crooked secrets of the American South. One of Woodward's most talented intellectual descendants, Edward L. Ayers, a historian at the University of Virginia, shares the ironic vision, if not the research methods, of his former teacher. In this collection of six essays, two autobiographical pieces (both charming depictions of an awareness of being Southern, here in the United States and abroad) and a reminiscence of Woodward, Ayers rejects the idea of Southern distinctiveness -- no "essences" or "central themes" hold together his version of Southern history. Neither race nor violence, poverty nor religious conservatism, can contain all the elements of the South's story, he contends. The region should not carry the burden of America's original sins, nor the weight of its ultimate redemption, and it cannot be forced into the role of backward neighbor to the modern North.

History is messy, undetermined and layered, Ayers maintains; it is made by ordinary people and rooted in changing structures discernible only in the daily records of human life. Woodward, in his 1953 classic, Origins of the New South, stressed politics and economics and found "sharp breaks" in the South's reemergence after the Civil War and Reconstruction. In his essay "Telling the Story of the New South," a revision of Woodward, Ayers treats the same era as a story of interlocking "social phenomena." In their different ways, both writers show us a South revealed through irony, its rich, multiracial and often tragic experience mocking our abiding innocence, our simple faith in progress, our facile optimism. Ayers, author of the prize-winning In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863 and The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction, sums up his own method: "I found that the sharp edges of people and their ideas kept poking holes through the conceptual bags and boxes into which we had tried to cram them."

In lucid prose, Ayers makes a case for what he calls the "deep contingency" of history, the sheer unpredictability of the past, no matter what designs or pleasing narratives we try to encase it in. The core message of this collection comes in two pieces: the title essay, "What Caused the Civil War?," and "Worrying About the Civil War." Both take on what Ayers sees as the new consensus view of the war, exemplified in the

grand narrative history of James McPherson's Battle Cry of Freedom (1988) and Ken Burns's nine-part PBS documentary film on the war (1990). According to the McPherson-Burns thesis, the Civil War was the inevitable consequence of slavery, fought nobly on both sides and a necessary, if bloody, crucible in which the American nation became "greater through suffering." It is easy to catch Burns succumbing to his epic sensibility, the sentimental drumbeats that demand resolution over complexity. But McPherson is not as easily linked to Burns as Ayers implies. In Battle Cry, as well as in other writings, McPherson does not merely sidestep the "moral problem" of the war, either in its causes or its savagery, and he has weighed in forcefully on the integrity of the postwar Confederate Lost Cause. Ayers does, however, skewer the worst tendencies of the legions of Civil War historians and general enthusiasts. "The war has become common property," he writes, "with the treacherous parts helpfully roped off." And buffs beware. Ayers knows that you "like the current story too much to challenge it" and that you "foreclose questions by repeating familiar formulas." Admit it: Too many people love the Civil War for the wrong reasons.

Ayers's boldest stroke is his effort to revive the "revisionist" interpretation of the causes of the Civil War made famous in the 1930s and '40s by James Randall and Avery Craven. According to this school, the Civil War was not the result of conflict over fundamental issues like slavery but rooted in the fury born of overwrought party politics and an irresponsible, partisan press. Ayers wants us to revisit this long-repudiated thesis and rescue its best arguments. He would have us fold slavery back into the revisionists' story, chart its path through the political crises of the 1850s and view the "irrational" in political behavior as equal in importance to the economically rational interests of slavery and free labor.

Ayers is right to remind us that questions about the origins of the Civil War have not all been settled, despite the abundant metaphors of inevitability. And he is persuasive in showing how our focus on black freedom in recent decades has rendered the war retrospectively holy. But he overreaches with the confusing claim that "Southern white men did not fight for slavery; they fought for a new nation built on slavery." His quest for contingency -- historical accident or unpredictability -- is also marred by vagueness when he contends that "all structures must be put into motion and motion into structures." And is it not carrying contingency a bit far to call the Civil War an "extraordinarily unlikely event"? Moreover, Ayers's willingness to blame the war on the "political system itself," a "machinery" that "created controversy," may leave us wondering once again whether Free-Soilers and slaveholders actually believed anything. The argument for contingency is admirable, but "rationality" and "predictability" are not identical concepts.

The volume also includes a salutary warning, titled "Exporting Reconstruction," about how blithely Americans have ventured into foreign occupations without understanding the first great occupation in their own history. In this clear-eyed account of how the Reconstruction era has become the "Bermuda Triangle of American history, a place where we lose our bearings," Ayers plays the social scientist, suggesting 10 lessons contemporary policymakers might draw from Reconstruction. Any reader confronting these lessons will surely think of the present misadventure in Iraq. Four are especially applicable: Memories of war collapse into

memories of the sufferings that follow for the vanquished; reconstructions tend to become revolutions and counterrevolutions; the clock is always ticking, and reconstructions are a "race between change and reaction"; and "freedom" is an ill-defined, mercurial ideal that deserves great care in its rhetorical use.

Ayers's call to revive a "tradition of skepticism" in Civil War scholarship is valuable and challenging. Those who would "protect" the war from exposure of its dark, ugly underbelly do not serve the ends of either good history or an informed civil society. Ayers's new revisionism would "focus on the way we relate the Civil War rather than on matters of interpretation alone." By that he must mean focusing on the war's ever-evolving public memory. If so, he has taken us to the subject he does not name but effectively implies -- the genuine sense of tragedy at the heart of the war, a subject always integral to Woodward's understanding. As Ayers says, "Movies and books that tell of Americans killing more than six hundred thousand other Americans" should not merely "convey a sense of . . . greatness." *

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"The Sick Soldier,"a photograph by the Brady Studio, ca. 1863