

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY
OF THE CIVIL WAR

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Of all the events in American life, none seems to have stimulated the production of a greater bulk of literature, historical or otherwise, than the Civil War. Aside from the inspiration afforded by the rather dramatic quality of the war itself, probably no other episode in American history has aroused such widespread partisan feeling or so strong a disposition to apportion blame, to excuse, vindicate, or explain, publicly, the causes and events of the conflict. Consequently, in the years immediately following the war, many participants, both actual and vicarious, kept an interested public supplied with a quantity of literature that was usually either panegyric or polemical in tone. As a result, a "correct" Northern and an equally "correct" Southern interpretation was developed rapidly; and before long, general opinion in both sections, supported by common memories and prejudices, was crystallized into an almost impervious tradition.

Time itself has tended to make brittle these accumulated myths and legends. Furthermore, new sources of information have been exploited, new generations of writers have matured, and new points of view on the subject of history itself -- its proper content, uses, and methods -- have been developed and have operated to erode the surface of the older beliefs and assumptions. For example, as a result of thorough investigation and study of newer material by

recent historians trained in the improved standards of scholarship, some of the earlier explanations of the causes of the Civil War have been extensively revised. Neither slavery as a moral issue, nor the diabolical machinations of Southern planters for control of the Federal government are accepted by modern historians as valid interpretations for the origins of the war. Equally obsolete as whole answers to the riddle are the old dogmas of states-rights and extreme sectional differences. Similarly, several hoary hypotheses concerning sectional unity, loyalty, and enthusiasm for war have been exploded and relegated to the museum of historical curios. Finally, as a further result of this modified research, some of the revisionists have begun to question seriously the traditional acceptance of the inevitability of the "irrepressible conflict".

This new trend in historical treatment of the causes and events of the Civil War not only reflects diminution of partisan sentiment, but also altered traditions in the study and writing of American history. Ideas in historiography seem to be closely linked with the spirit of their time; and changing thought regarding the complex social, economic, political, and psychological factors of the Civil War is a rather significant indication of the development of a broadened view of the scope of history and the function of the historian. Today, neither indiscriminating narration nor bare chronological recital of facts is regarded as sufficient for a full understanding of the

meaning of the past. In addition, the adaptation of the methods and techniques of science not only mirrors modern emphasis and dependence upon technology, but, in general, provides also for more critical selection and evaluation of evidence and insures a closer approximation of the truth in interpreting past events.

Probably the attainment of truth for truth's sake would be in itself a worthy end for the efforts of historians. When, however, in accordance with the democratic ideal, governmental policy and action is determined by the judgment and opinion of the voters, the practical value of the growth of American historiography can be measured best in relation to the maturity of the political and economic behavior of the American people. Naturally, judgments based largely upon an accumulation of prejudice and myth can hardly be expected to be sound or even equitable. Since the history taught in public schools is usually the source of the conceptions upon which these decisions are reached, and since this history frequently has been the primary agent for the propagation and perpetuation of legend through textbook and teaching, it is also significant that the newer historians seem more aware than their predecessors of their obligation to provide the fullest and most comprehensive interpretation of past experiments in society and social institutions.

As in the case of remote crises, the present uncertainty in

world affairs has brought into sharper focus the need for more critical study of the past in order to cope intelligently with contemporary problems in social relations. And now that the Civil War can be contemplated in better perspective, a serious re-examination of its antecedents at this time is especially pertinent in the hope that new light shed upon the complex causes for war may throw into relief some of the equally complex factors which make for peace.

Obviously, the very complexity of the nature of the Civil War would operate to narrow the scope of this paper to little more than an outline of the history of American history since 1865, illustrated by a few of the outstanding changes in the interpretations of the war and their influence on the so-called American mind through textbooks and teaching.

AMERICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY SINCE 1865

One of the many by-products of the Civil War was a rather general stimulation of both professional and lay interest in the entire field of American history. During the first twenty years following the war the important business of collecting and publishing archival material was extended by such men as Henry Harisse, Joseph Sabin, and Justin Winsor; and several periodicals dealing with biographical and historical material were introduced in Philadelphia and New York. Public interest in history was intensified also by the publication of the memoirs of leading figures in the war. Often these personal sketches were printed as serials in popular magazines and journals, and perhaps the most famous of all the series was the one published by the Century Magazine between 1885 and 1888.¹ The separate articles written by Grant, McClellan, Sherman, and others, were later edited and reissued as books which proved to be extremely popular.²

Equally marketable were the narrative accounts of officers and men who had served in the armies during the conflict. Some of these authors, possessed of a fairly keen historical sense, had kept

1. Michael Kraus, A History of American History (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1937), pp. 297-299.

2. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (eds.), Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (People's Pictorial Edition; New York: The Century Co., 1884-87), pp. 7-47 passim.

running records of their own experiences and those of the companies and regiments in which they served.³ For most of the writers, however, preservation of a record of events for future time was a secondary and incidental concern. Their primary purpose was to eulogize the honored dead, preserve the memory of heroic action, or extol the cause for which they fought. Usually, of course, the accounts reveal a combination of each.⁴

Judging from the sheer volume of the literature on the war prisons alone, the experiences of the prisoners, painful as they must have been, evidently afforded a perverse satisfaction to the reading public. Eighty-two books and articles giving the experiences of prisoners in the South were published between 1862 and 1866.⁵ Naturally, these testimonials, written by suffering men during a period of aroused feeling, did not provide a reasoned or balanced record of prison conditions or of treatment of prisoners. Yet these accounts were for some time the only source material on this aspect of the war available to serious historians attempting to write histories of the period.

3. John A. Sloan, Reminiscences of the Guilford Greys, Co. B. 27th N. C. Regiment (Washington, D. C.: R. O. Polkenhorn, Printer, 1883), preface.

4. William B. Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1930), pp. 248-249.

5. Ibid., p. 247.

Just as provocative of biased interpretations of the era were the more comprehensive explanations written by leaders on both sides. Jefferson Davis wrote and published his history of the Confederacy with the avowed purpose of proving by "historical authority" that the Southern states had the right to secede and that "the war, on the part of the Government of the United States, was a war of aggression and usurpation".⁶ An equally heavy contribution toward obscuring the truth and complicating the work of later historians was made by John G. Nicolay and John Hay in their Abraham Lincoln: A History which, of course, sanctioned the Northern antislavery view of the war.⁷ Given these types of sources, and living and writing in the North, historians understandably established a tenacious Northern interpretation of the war as the "official version".⁸

During the decade in which this diagnosis was evolved, two main currents of thought appeared to be influencing the course of American historiography. These influences reflected, on the one hand, the rising spirit of nationalism and belief in the manifest destiny of the United States; and, on the other, the near deification of the

6. Jefferson Davis, A Short History of the Confederate States of America (New York: Bedford Company, Publishers, 1890), p. 504.

7. Charles W. Ramsdell, "The Changing Interpretation of the Civil War," Journal of Southern History, III (February, 1937), 9.

8. Ibid., p. 4.

methods and techniques of science. Both notions, of course, pointed to the prevailing ideal of progress.

Until about 1900, and therefore during the period in which the first more or less professional histories of the Civil War were being written, nationalism was the dominant note in the writing and interpreting of American history. Many of the first group of historians who wrote on the Civil War era were trained to use documents and weigh evidence, but they did not believe that a mere statement of fact was the only duty and function of their profession. While they professed impartiality, nearly all of them passed judgment on the morality of slaveholding and indicted the South for defending a decadent way of life and for interrupting and retarding national progress.⁹ Completely uninterested in either social or economic history, they scarcely realized that, as a matter of fact, the Civil War was extremely fateful in precipitating social and economic change in the United States.

Among the group of writers of the "nationalist" school, Herman E. von Holst was a pioneer in writing an extensive account of the Civil War. Since his work was geared to the concepts held by his generation on the moral issue of slavery, and since he was inclined to select for his history only that material which supported his thesis, von Holst's

9. Kraus, op. cit., pp. 336-337.

conclusions have been now discarded; but he remains an important figure in the development of American historiography because he was one of the first historians to make any systematic use of newspapers, and also of the Congressional Globe and other previously ignored governmental documents.¹⁰

A contemporary of von Holst, James Schouler, who was similarly intrigued by political and constitutional history, established another precedent in American historiography by writing a continuous narrative which was published in 1899 and covered the history of the United States from the beginnings of the nation to the close of the Reconstruction era.¹¹

In addition to exploiting manuscript material from the library of Congress, Schouler depended largely upon "personal knowledge, real or assumed, of persons, places, and events" gleaned from his own intimate contacts in Washington.¹² Having served for nine months, in 1862-1863, in the Union Army, he shared the views of those who held the South responsible for the war; but he did preach and practice a greater attention to scholarly methods and impartiality, though, anticipating the followers of the subjective school of interpretation, he both recognized the difficulty of achieving objectivity and, in the fashion of his time, preferred to be biased if that were necessary to teach the

10. Charles R. Wilson, "Hermann Eduard von Holst," in The Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography, ed. by William T. Hutchinson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1937), pp. 64-82 passim.

11. Kraus, op. cit., p. 349.

12. Lewis Ethan Ellis, "James Schouler," Jernegan Essays, p. 90.

moral lessons of history.¹³

Edward Channing was another historian who conceived the idea of writing a "complete" history of the United States. His plan was to begin with the era of discovery and end at the close of the nineteenth century. Channing, too, had tremendous faith in progress; and the single hypothesis which permeated his work presupposed a relentless march of events toward national unity.¹⁴

Although his preoccupation with one general theme led him to neglect many vital factors in American history, Channing did include much new material found in manuscript collections and foreign archives. He especially liked to unearth curiosities and often attached importance to them simply because they had been previously unexplored. Despite the fact that this habit frequently led him to include somewhat unreliable and prejudiced information, Channing's delight in confounding tradition may qualify him perhaps as one of the forerunners of the more recent revisionists.¹⁵

Perhaps the giant of this group of patriotic historians was James Ford Rhodes. His monumental History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 was concluded finally in nine volumes, published during

13. Ibid., pp. 93-98.

14. Ralph Ray Fahrney, "Edward Channing," Jernegan Essays, pp. 295-307 passim.

15. Ibid., pp. 309-310.

the years 1893 to 1922. Superficially, Rhodes, coming as he did from the West, might have been expected to develop a thesis diverging somewhat from the conventional antislavery theme. However, his birthplace, Cleveland, was the center of much of the western activity of the abolitionist societies before the war; and, in addition, he had inherited a New England conscience which inclined him to cling stubbornly to fixed ideas long after New England itself had become considerably more tolerant. His action in returning to New England in his mature life and entering Boston literary circles did not help to mitigate his persuasion that slavery was a sin against God and man.¹⁶

But Rhodes, let it be said to his credit, was unusually fair in his treatment of Confederate leaders. In Rhodes's pages, Jefferson Davis loses many of the satanic attributes which the earlier and more impassioned writers had assigned to the Confederate President.¹⁷

Actually, his distortion of the character and personality of Stephen A. Douglas is the most serious charge against him. He intended to be impartial, but his entanglement in the affairs of the Douglas family as

16. Raymond Curtis Miller, "James Ford Rhodes," Jernegan Essays, pp. 171-174; p. 184.

17. William A. Dunning, "Rhodes's History of the United States", Educational Review, XXXIV (September, 1907), 112.

executor of the Douglas estate prevented a more characteristically balanced analysis of the "Little Giant".¹⁸

Rhodes entertained some notions about history, which, because of his position as a leading historian of his day, had considerable influence on American historiography. He was determined to achieve unity in his work by paying less attention to particular facts than to the dramatic quality and sweeping movement of the whole, and the Civil War period provided just those epic elements necessary for his purpose. Unfortunately, the weaknesses in his work stem from the fact that unity could be achieved only by omitting material which seemed irrelevant to his antislavery theme. As a result, he produced a history of the slavery struggle which was thoroughly subjective, but he differed significantly from Schouler and von Holst in that he claimed at least to have reached his opinion on the slavery question after an impartial investigation of facts.¹⁹

Objective investigation of facts had hitherto been paid scant heed in American historiography, although some restraint in judgments

18. Frank H. Hodder, "Propaganda as a Source of American History," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, IX (June, 1922), pp. 3-18 passim.

19. Raymond Curtis Miller, "James Ford Rhodes," Jernegan Essays, p. 176.

and caution in language were evident in the historical writing of the eighties. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, this idea was strengthened and spread by students who, having attended German universities, had returned to American schools and colleges determined to apply the methods of physical science to historical investigation and writing then in vogue in Europe. Thoroughly imbued with the principles of Charles Darwin, August Comte, and Leopold von Ranke, these young men established seminar courses at Hopkins, Harvard, Cornell, and Michigan, where advanced students of history were trained in the new techniques of research.²⁰

According to the tenets of the German historian von Ranke, the function of history was to show only what had actually occurred at any given time. In order to accomplish this, all the facts involved in an event were to be ascertained wherever they could be found, tested and weighed for validity, and then narrated without attempting to draw conclusions or determine cause and effect. Von Ranke's theory was both challenged and extended by the English historian and disciple of Comte, Henry Thomas Buckle. With true nineteenth century faith in science, Buckle believed that it was possible, and even necessary, to deduce from

20. Kraus, op. cit., pp. 302-304.

carefully accumulated facts certain underlying laws in history which would both explain past events and enable the historian to predict future developments.²¹ Almost from the time of their introduction into the field of American historiography until the present, these two ideas have been followed, criticized, challenged, rejected, and restored with successive swings of the pendulum.

The intellectual activity and discussion evoked by these ideas has stimulated a more thorough study and constant re-examination of history itself as an organized body of knowledge and as a discipline. Manifestly, everything that has ever been said, thought, done, or happened to man, is history.²² And, of course, even if it were possible to determine and evaluate all these facts, the bulk of the material would be of little interest and value in the recorded history of man. History as a body of knowledge, therefore, has been delimited by the selection of those facts which the historian deemed interesting or useful.

For centuries, histories were written either to give pleasure to readers or to teach one or more "lessons". In these circumstances, facts were selected because they were interesting, curious, or perhaps memorable; or, they were selected to support a cause or theory which

21. Henry Johnson, Teaching of History (Rev. ed.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), pp. 12-13.

22. James Harvey Robinson, The New History (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), p. 1.

seemed fundamental to the historian.²³ Such methods of selection, of course, would tend to distort the true picture of any past occurrence. The nineteenth-century scientific historians who attacked the old didactic and story-telling procedure attempted to correct these perversions by employing only those facts which could be tested for truth.

But this course led to other complications. Only certain facts -- and a very few of them -- can be established by experiment and direct observation. Unfortunately, most of the facts of history can be learned only indirectly from records, documents, and artifacts which have survived. These sources can never be complete; nor, in the case of written records, can the mind and times of the writer be delineated with certitude. The importance and reliability attached to almost all the facts of history, therefore, depend upon the historian's point of view, his training, and his background. These factors are inevitably bound to those of his generation and environment, just as the "source" writers of the past reflect their own Zeitgeist. In addition, the historian must perforce fill in the omissions and gaps

23. Johnson, op. cit., pp. 10; 16-18.

in his facts. He can do this only by adduction from other facts -- at best, a good guess; and here again the personal predilections of the historian are the primary components in his speculation. ²⁴

Hand in hand with the problems of determining facts is the question of what the historian is to do with them when he has accumulated and evaluated them. The nineteenth century writers gave two answers to this question. One was merely to narrate the facts objectively, letting the reader infer what he would or could. From this viewpoint, the political activities of man were regarded as most significant in his life and history. As a result, his social and economic relations were almost completely ignored, and such human attributes as ideals, aspirations, and creativeness, had no place in history. ²⁵ Once again the very narrow view of history as past politics only led to distortion -- not so much of the facts used, as of the representation of man himself. And again, though more subtly, the historians, attempting to realize the ideal of objectivity, seemed as much as their predecessors to respond to the prevailing temper of their age.

24. Ibid., p. 20.

25. "Conclusions and Recommendations of the Commission," Report of the Commission on the Social Studies of the American Historical Association (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 9.

In the light of the nineteenth-century belief in the analogy of history and natural science, it is not surprising that the other answer to the question of purposeful use of accumulated facts was the prediction of future events based upon acquired knowledge of the laws of causation. To this purpose historians set for themselves the overwhelming task of determining fundamental causes and results of human activity in the mass. This idea was soon criticized by scholars who recognized the complexity of history and the difficulty of determining even the private motives of one individual with any degree of finality.²⁶ Furthermore, implicit in this notion is the idea that history repeats itself; but, ironically enough, critical scholars following the methods of science have proved that, while events may be similar, no two have ever been identical, since the surrounding conditions of an event tend to determine it; while, of course, the milieu is always in a state of change.

Therefore, since change is the fundamental fact of history, development seems to be the ruling idea in modern historiography.²⁷ Actually, the developmental idea of history -- that is, as a process of

26. George Macaulay Trevelyan, Clio, A Muse (London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1930), p. 147.

27. Johnson, op. cit., p. 9.

continuous change in which everything has antecedents and consequences -- does partake of the scientific dogma of the nineteenth century, in that it recognizes laws of change and of continuity with the past.²⁸ From this point of view, history is a chain of events; and the historian is obligated to select those facts which truly represent or explain the process -- and not necessarily progress -- of human development.²⁹

Explaining the process of development involves interpretation and generalization by the historian. The more recent historians, recognizing the impossibility of complete objectivity, have tended to write so-called "subjective" histories. Followers of this school generally adopt definite hypotheses and select and organize their material around the central theme,³⁰ but, in keeping with the scientific ideal, they usually offer a clear-cut statement of their theses; and by this procedure this group comes closer, in a sense, to the techniques of experimental science than many of the avowedly scientific historians, for the historian as a human being is probably the most variable factor in historiography. By acknowledging and attempting to control this

28. Edward P. Cheney, "Law in History," American Historical Review, XXIX (January, 1929), pp. 235-237.

29. Johnson, op. cit., p. 10.

30. Kraus, op. cit., p. 453.

variable, the subjective historians may have succeeded, in the long run, in making their facts more constant.

In some degree, the developmental concept of history also has didactic overtones. In a secular age, historians rarely try to inject moral lessons into their histories; but the body of knowledge that constitutes history is regarded by most of them as a tool for solving social problems and judging and guiding political action. Because powers of government derive ultimately from the people, either actually in the case of democracies or by tacit approval under dictatorships, it seems essential, to historical writers at least, that public opinion be informed not only about current problems but also about the forces and events which created them. It is hoped, therefore, that an understanding of past social, political, and economic institutions will lead to more critical judgment of present problems and make them intelligible.³¹

The influence of the idea of applying scientific methods to historical study and writing was not especially noticeable in American

31. Frederic Harrison, The Meaning of History (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1921), p. 20.

historiography until about 1900. At that time, almost the only subject on which there was substantial agreement was that the Civil War had been the pre-eminent event of American history. Since the South had been too greatly occupied with other problems to produce much historical writing, the majority of historians accepted the orthodox Northern interpretation.³² But, the nationalizing spirit and approach at this time did produce some significant changes in the treatment of the Civil War theme. Less influenced than others by sectional differences, historians living and writing in the Middle Atlantic states tended to write histories which were increasingly national in scope.³³

Of this group, John Bach McMaster is the most important contributor to the development of American historiography. A younger contemporary of Schouler and Rhodes, McMaster, like them, held strong anti-slavery views. But, unlike them, he felt that political activities were not the only theme worthy of the historian's pen; and he believed that it was possible to write a history of the American people apart from the history of the United States as a

32. Ramsdell, op. cit., p. 11.

33. Ollinger Crenshaw, "Urban and Rural Voting in the Election of 1860," Historiography and Urbanization, ed. by Eric F. Goldman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), pp. 215-217.

political entity. In his History of the People of the United States, published in eight volumes, beginning in 1883, he gave as much space to the South as to New England, emphasized the part played by the West in American history, and stressed the economic and social aspects of life. Finally, he introduced the extensive use of newspapers and pamphlets in American historiography.³⁴

McMaster's method of merely reporting events from day to day or month to month, unbiased though it might have been, has been discarded now, but his emphasis upon the importance of the common man and his extension of the boundaries of historical inquiry led Albert B. Hart to call McMaster "the founder of the modern school of historians of the United States".³⁵

Woodrow Wilson was another member of this group of writers tempered by the more neutral environment of the Middle Atlantic states. His Division and Reunion appeared in 1893; and as a college text, it was a noteworthy publication at this time because it was relatively unbiased. As a native Virginian, Wilson believed that the South was right in theory, but wrong in history; but as a trained historian, he presented an unusually fair account of the Northern position and of Northern leaders.³⁶

34. William T. Hutchinson, "John Bach McMaster," Jernegan Essays, pp. 139-143 passim.

35. Albert B. Hart, "The Writing of American History," Current History, XXXIII (March, 1931), 859.

36. Louis Martin Sears, "Woodrow Wilson," Jernegan Essays, pp. 109-110.

More and more literature sympathetic to the Southern cause appeared after 1900 as graduate schools were established and expanded. Many of the students undergoing training in scientific methods were Southerners who were interested in studying their own section. During the process of searching for facts, great quantities of forgotten records, newspapers, and documents were uncovered furnishing proof that many suppositions of the older historians were faulty because of inaccurate or insufficient information.³⁷

Spadework in Southern history was done at the new seat of higher learning, The Johns Hopkins University. At other universities, men like William A. Dunning, John Spencer Bassett, and William E. Dodd devoted themselves to Southern history and through their teaching trained an excellent group of scholars who carried on their work.³⁸

The time was now ripe for revised interpretations of all phases of Southern history and particularly the period of the Civil War. The tension of passionate feeling was being lessened; many of the problems posed by Reconstruction had been solved; and newer information became increasingly available. One of the most important of the new sources

37. Ramsdell, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

38. Kraus, op. cit., pp. 533-534.

was the Official Records of the War of The Rebellion. This monumental series of Confederate and Union army records was published under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of War and was authorized by act of Congress in June, 1874. The one hundred thirty volumes are divided into four series which include formal reports of military operations, general orders relating to prisoners of war, and annual and special reports of chiefs of staff of the corps and departments of both armies.³⁹ Invaluable as these formal records are for historians of the period, the informal correspondence -- letters and telegrams -- exchanged among military leaders and National and state authorities have provided a wealth of new material for students interested in dispelling the old myths about such matters as loyalty and devotion to the Southern cause, cooperation among the state and National leaders, and conditions and treatment in both Northern and Southern prisons.

Among the first of the Southerners who rewrote Southern history was Ulrich B. Phillips, a student of William A. Dunning. His Life and Labor in the Old South is regarded by one critic as "perhaps

39. War of The Rebellion:...Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), preface passim.

the best book yet published on the South as a whole".⁴⁰ After careful examination of plantation records and other related documents, Phillips concluded that slaves were generally not mistreated as the abolitionists had charged. All humanitarian considerations aside, Negroes were too valuable economically to be seriously abused.⁴¹ He also pointed out that the majority of Southern people owned no slaves at all, and were therefore far less concerned about property rights than about the racial and social problems which emancipation would create.⁴²

Another revisionist, Dwight R. Dumond, demonstrated that although Southern leaders were justified in believing that the South was in real danger from the free states, they faced great difficulties in uniting the section on a course of action.⁴³ Advancing a new trend in historical interpretations, Charles and Mary Beard in their Rise of American Civilization have explained the Civil War in economic terms: differences in "class arrangements", accumulation and distribution of wealth", and changes "in the course of industrial development".⁴⁴ Meanwhile, within

40. Kraus, op. cit., p. 541.

41. Ramsdell, op. cit., p. 13.

42. Ulrich B. Phillips, "Central Theme in Southern History," American Historical Review, XXXIV (October, 1928), pp. 30-43 passim.

43. Ramsdell, op. cit., p. 14.

44. Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, The Rise of American Civilization (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), II, 53.

the past twenty years, Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond have made an outstanding contribution to the historical literature of the abolition crusade. In their analysis of the campaign, they have placed the activities of the abolition societies within the framework of the larger humanitarian movement which had developed in the United States during the eighteen-thirties. These revisionists have carefully distinguished the group of radical abolitionists from the more moderate reformers and have exploded the theory that William Lloyd Garrison was the source and inspiration for all abolitionist activity. Barnes and Dumond have concluded instead that the work of the moderate abolitionists was more significant in arousing anti-slavery sentiments, and they have pointed out the hitherto almost unknown Theodore Dwight Weld as the most influential figure in the American abolition movement.⁴⁵

Several other historians during the nineteen-twenties and thirties have made special studies of several aspects of the Civil War which had been previously neglected. In approaching the problem of leadership for example, Philip G. Auchampaugh, in his James Buchanan and His Cabinet, has succeeded in his "attempt to give a fairer and

45. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, "Introduction," Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844 (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1934), p. xix.

more sympathetic account of President Buchanan and his Administration than is usually available to the general historian."⁴⁶ Similarly, Ella Lonn has investigated the problem of desertion in the Union and Confederate armies during the war and has exploded many of the myths of the loyalty and devotion of Northern and Southern soldiers. It is now apparent that desertion was so extensive that it was regarded as one of the major problems in the conduct of the war and an important contributory factor in the failure of the Confederacy.⁴⁷ In his excellent treatment of the subject of Civil War prisons, William B. Hesseltine has presented fresh evidence on the questions of the exchange of prisoners, the feeding and care of prisoners, and actual prison conditions in both the North and South. As a result of the work of this revisionist, most of the older broad generalizations based upon stories of atrocities have been rejected, and the whole subject is regarded now as one of the more complex phases of the war.⁴⁸

Probably the most noteworthy of the latest contributions toward a better understanding of the causes for the Civil War has been fostered by a greater attention to psychological considerations. According to

46. Philip G. Auchampaugh, James Buchanan and His Cabinet (n.p., 1926), p. v.

47. Ella Lonn, Desertion During the Civil War (New York: The Century Co., 1928), pp. v-vi.

48. Hesseltine, op. cit., p. viii.

James G. Randall, the cause of the war can be stated in a word -- "fanaticism". Unfortunately, the emotional instability of the period was made potentially more dangerous by the lack of real statesmen in government.⁴⁹ Avery Craven also stresses emotionalism as a major cause -- perhaps the fundamental cause of the conflict.⁵⁰ From this point of view, the Civil War was not at all inevitable; and the term, "irrepressible conflict", coined by William H. Seward and since his day widely used by historians, is patently unsuitable.

Like Craven and Randall, most of the latter-day revisionists at work on the reinterpretation of the Civil War have concerned themselves with its causal antecedents. Some, of course, have addressed themselves to the war itself. Interestingly enough, a considerable amount of work in revising Southern history has been done in Southern universities by Southern historians. Whether or not this fact betokens a recognized need for critical self-examination on the part of the South, or simply an impulse toward "turn-about is fair play" after years of Northern domination is a moot question. In any case, the present rewriting of American history is indisputable proof of progress in the historian's craftmanship.

49. James G. Randall, "The Blundering Generation," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXVII (June, 1940), 3.

50. Avery Craven, The Coming of the Civil War (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 30.

CHANGES IN INTERPRETATIONS
OF THE CAUSES OF THE CIVIL WAR

The three generations of historians who have written histories of the Civil War have distinguished causes which range from one simple phenomenon to complex patterns that include all the important intellectual, political, social, and economic developments in America prior to 1861. At different times, and in different places, they have cited conspiracy and human wickedness, constitutional developments, economic interests, political ambition, "irrepressible conflict", emotion, cultural differences, chance, and high moral principles as forces which brought on the war.¹

Perhaps the earliest and most persistent explanation of all the causes of the Civil War is slavery. As it was first formulated, the slavery thesis was stated in ethical terms. The Civil War was an inevitable moral conflict between right, that is, freedom, and wrong, or slavery. This theme, as may be expected, originated with the Northern historians. For Rhodes, "...slavery was the cause of the war

1. Howard K. Beale, "What Historians Have Said About the Causes of the Civil War," Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1946), pp. 55-56.

between the States. Slavery could not bear examination. To describe it was to condemn it."² Schouler was considerably more violent in his denunciation of the institution and of the people who obstructed national progress.

And nothing, moreover as events went on, but the downfall and destruction of the whole pernicious system which was at the root of all the great troubles of the century, and obstructed the destiny and growth of the American people in homogeneous grandeur, would have made the Union worth sustaining the long, costly, and calamitous strife, or kept the North constant to bear it through.³

Here was righteous indignation combined with the prevailing spirit of nationalism.

These historians of the nationalist school were, of course, sincerely convinced of the veracity of their theory that slavery as a moral issue was the single, immediate, and underlying cause of the war. It is interesting, however, that a Southerner, writing on this subject in 1864, anticipated the more recent procedure of attempting to separate immediate from underlying causes.

2. James Ford Rhodes, History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), I, 63; VI, 27.

3. James Schouler, History of the United States of America (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1894), V, 511.

The cause does not lie so near the surface as is generally supposed. No doubt the immediate provocation is correctly assigned; but the negro agitation is symptomatic merely, and has been the occasion, not the cause, of the war.⁴

While not denying the significance of slavery as a cause, the new generation of historians after World War I were inclined to shift their emphasis from ethics to economics.⁵ Charles and Mary Beard popularized this view in that brilliant interpretation of our history, The Rise of American Civilization. According to the economic interpretation, the "peculiar institution" should be regarded merely as a labor system -- the principal system of labor in an outmoded agrarian economy.⁶ The war, so runs the argument, was actually a class conflict between the older rural, agrarian order and the rising urban, industrial interests.⁷ In these circumstances, most economic historians find that "the slavery issue, which toward the last overshadowed the conflict, was only incidental until dragged forth as a camouflage for more fundamental sectional interests."⁸

4. C. C. S. Farrar, The War Its Causes and Consequences (Cairo, Ill.: Blelock & Co., 1864), p. 7.

5. Beale, op. cit., p. 63.

6. Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, The Rise of American Civilization (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), I, 36.

7. Craven, op. cit., p. 43.

8. Fred A. Shannon, America's Economic Growth (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 300.

This revised interpretation, which ignored the moral implications of slavery, was in turn challenged in the nineteen-thirties by Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond. As a result of their study of the abolition crusade as but a segment of the larger religious and humanitarian movement of the period, not, as the older accounts had it, as a self-contained movement, captained by Garrison and deploying out from a New England focus, Barnes and Dumond concluded that the moral issue of slavery was a genuinely significant force in bringing on the war.⁹

The economic interpretation was further qualified by James G. Randall, but this time the challenge was presented within the framework of economic developments. According to Randall, although "the stretch and span of conscious economic motive was much smaller than the areas or classes of war involvement", economic diversity might just as well have inspired unity as conflict. The now acknowledged interdependence of agrarian and industrialized sections should have created harmony; but, unfortunately, rivalry developed because of emotional tensions created and inflamed by abolitionist propaganda and the extremism of politicians in quest of votes.¹⁰

9. Beale, op. cit., p. 63.

10. Randall, op. cit., pp. 9-10; Idem. The Civil War and Reconstruction (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1937), Chaps. iv-vi passim.

However, regardless of the current crop of revisions of the slavery thesis, almost all historians now have admitted the complexity of the issues involved and have ceased to fix upon slavery as the sole cause of the war.

Most historians have agreed also that the western migrations during the eighteen-forties and -fifties precipitated most of the crises in the sectional dispute.¹¹ Southern leaders did consistently object to any proposal to exclude slavery from United States territories or states to be created from them, even in regions where, because of geographical factors, the slavery system would never have entered even if there had been no legal impediments. The reasons for this objection have not yet been fully explained, although an earlier New England historian characteristically accounted for it in the usual terms of wicked conspiracy of slaveowners.¹² Actually, almost all the earlier writers had agreed with the famous dictum in Lincoln's 'House Divided Speech' that the government could not have permanently endured 'half slave and half free' and that it was fated to become at last 'all one thing, or all the other'. Recently, however, historians interested in

11. Beale, op. cit., p. 64.

12. Edward Channing, A History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), VI, 152.

the geography and agricultural problems of the West have concluded that it would have been impossible to establish the plantation system further west than the limits it had already reached -- the easternmost portion of Texas. The Kansas and Nebraska territory was equally unsuited to cotton farming or sugar growing. In fact, the Census of 1860 revealed only two slaves in Kansas and fifteen in Nebraska.¹³ In other words, "...by 1860 the institution of slavery had virtually reached its natural frontiers in the west. There was, in brief, no further place for it to go".¹⁴ It is interesting to note that Daniel Webster, fully a decade before the war came, struck hard to hammer home this point in his celebrated 'Seventh of March Speech' on the floor of the Senate when that body was considering the compromise proposals of Stephen A. Douglas and Henry Clay. It is significant, too, that Jefferson Davis noted that the climatic conditions which long before had caused the transfer of slaves from the Northeast to the South would have barred any permanent establishment of the institution in most of the western areas.¹⁵

13. Charles W. Ramsdell, "The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XVI (September, 1929), pp. 156-162 passim.

14. Ibid., pp. 163-164. Ramsdell believes that in the case of the Kansas-Nebraska controversy "though many of them [the Southerners] doubted whether slavery would ever take permanent root in Kansas, they feared to yield a legal precedent which could later be used against them."

15. Davis, op. cit., p. 11

The conspiracy hypothesis, it would appear, does not suffice to account for the continued Southern resistance to all attempts to limit the boundaries of slavery. Historians who attribute all causes and events to a sort of psychosis or hyperemotionalism are not so bothered by this question;¹⁶ and it is entirely probable that, even if these facts had been well publicized long before 1860, the majority of people in both sections would have held tenaciously to what they believed to be right, particularly as tensions mounted.

The importance of the abolitionist societies as agencies for arousing and stirring emotions having been recognized in recent years, considerable interest has developed in the men and women sponsoring these groups. For decades, historians attributed the whole abolitionist movement to one man, William Lloyd Garrison; and, as a result, were fortunate in being able to note specifically the place and even the day the movement began.¹⁷ Only the hour and minute were lacking. Some modern historians still find that Garrison was one of the most important forces working for the abolition of slavery.¹⁸ Even historians with an economic

16. Roy F. Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), pp. 513-514.

17. Rhodes, op. cit., p. 53.

18. John H. Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 241.

bent characterize Garrison as "the chief moral energizer of a nation which vowed itself to total and instantaneous emancipation."¹⁹

Garrison, through his Liberator, was highly vocal, not to say obstreperous; but, as a consequence of the discovery and study of some hitherto unexplored letters written by Theodore Dwight Weld, the accumulated legends surrounding Garrison have been somewhat dispelled. Among other things, it now appears that Garrison's reputation and his demands for immediate emancipation were a positive embarrassment to the American Anti-Slavery Society. His newspaper, formerly felt to be as influential as Uncle Tom's Cabin, actually had few subscribers in the North, and many of these were northern negroes whose influence was slight. The sheet was far less successful in winning converts in the North than in stirring up hatred in the South, where exchange copies regularly came to the desks of newspaper editors. After careful consideration of Weld's letters, Gilbert H. Barnes has concluded that, although most of the agitation of the abolitionists was accomplished by corps of obscure people moved by religious and evangelical impulses, actually the greatest figure in the movement was Theodore Weld.²⁰

19. Broadus Mitchell and Louise P. Mitchell, American Economic History (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), p. 516.

20. Barnes and Dumond, op. cit., pp. viii-xix passim. "...Weld did not originate and dominate the antislavery agitation, as people a generation ago supposed William Lloyd Garrison to have done, still he was the movement's man of power, the greatest individual factor in its triumph."

Weld's leadership in the movement was quiet but effective. He established abolition centers in the South and West, personally converting prominent leaders, holding meetings, and lecturing wherever he could. Meanwhile, he guided the organization and work of the American Anti-Slavery Society as well as writing the three greatest tracts published by that body. One of these, Slavery As It Is, Harriet Beecher Stowe claimed to have used as the basis for her famous book.²¹

Since the publication of the Weld letters, the figure of Garrison as the abolition hero has shrunk considerably. Incidentally, the reception accorded these volumes by the historical profession is an excellent illustration of the earnest desire to obtain as much accurate information as possible about people and events of the past. The influence of Weld can no longer be ignored by a conscientious historian; and the old pat and easy explanation of the abolition movement is no longer acceptable. And, despite the new complications for the historian, a reviewer for the official organ of the American Historical Association concludes that these "...volumes constitute one of the most important additions to our

21. Ibid., p. xvii f.

knowledge of the abolitionist movement that has been made in many years," and that "one may expect to see these volumes frequently quoted in the future, for all who have occasion to deal with the slavery controversy will have to take this evidence into account."²²

If slavery was the most generally accepted causal agent in Northern interpretations of the origins of the Civil War among the first generation of historians, disputes over constitutional theory were the cause most frequently advanced by earlier Southern writers. From their point of view, while slavery might actually have been the catalyst that precipitated the explosion, fundamentally the South seceded and fought to escape the consequences of what they considered an unconstitutional concentration of power in the Federal Government.²³ That the control of that government, long held by the Democratic party (normally under the strong influence of Southerners and pro-Southern Northerners) was to be shifted, when Lincoln was inaugurated, to the Republicans, an avowedly sectional Northern party committed to a policy of slavery "containment," was an important consideration bound up with

22. Fred Landen, Review of the Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844 by Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, American Historical Review XXXXI (October, 1935), p. 164.

23. Beale, op. cit., pp. 61-62.

the Southern opposition to federal aggrandizement, but that aspect of the dialectic was, naturally, not stressed. As might be expected, Jefferson Davis carefully spelled out the doctrine of states rights, drawing a parallel between the position of the Southern states in 1861 and the British colonies in America in 1776 and 1789.

After a time the Constitution was ratified by eleven States, and the "more perfect Union" was organized, leaving two States--North Carolina and Rhode Island--sole representatives of the Confederation which had raised the Colonies to statehood and independence. The position of these two States conclusively proves that the sovereignty of each State was an admitted fact, and that it was a voluntary compact to which their assent was requested and from which it was withheld.²⁴

Constitutional issues continued to be stressed until about 1900, even by Northern historians. This doctrine was, moreover, widely disseminated in popular histories of the period. John Ridpath, who wrote popular accounts of the type that enjoyed a long vogue as a standard household appurtenance, insisted that the first and most general cause of the conflict was "...the different construction put upon the national Constitution by the people of the North and South."²⁵

24. Davis, op. cit., p. 5.

25. John Clark Ridpath, A Popular History of the United States of America (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1888), pp. 486-489. It is interesting that Ridpath anticipated recent economic interpretations of the slave issue when he cited as a second cause the "different system of labor in the North and South."

Among the earlier professional historians, John W. Burgess presented the most outstanding refutation of the Southern argument. He argued that the doctrine of state sovereignty under the compact theory of government was both contrary to canons of Republican political philosophy and an unsound constitutional interpretation.²⁶ Later historians, influenced by economic interpretations, have regarded the states rights doctrine simply as a defense brought forward by an agrarian society contending for supremacy with new urban-industrial groups. Before the slavery issue was introduced into the picture, the conflict was basically a "nation-wide class struggle".²⁷

Probably the final word on the subject of differing constitutional theories as a cause of the Civil War has been said by Arthur M. Schlesinger. In his essay "The States Rights Fetish", he pointed out the fact that the doctrine was an old shibboleth which had been used again and again in many eras in American history, and that even the expression itself had had different meanings in different

26. Beale, op. cit., p. 62.

27. Avery Craven, The Repressible Conflict 1830-1861 (University: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), p. 73.

periods or among different leaders in the same period. "...almost every state in the Union has declared its own sovereignty and denounced as almost treasonable similar declarations in other cases by other states."²⁸ In 1845, the legislature of Massachusetts refused to acknowledge the act admitting Texas into the Union; and again, in 1847, the legislature of the same state declared the Mexican War unconstitutional. The numerous Personal Liberty Laws passed after 1850 by individual state legislatures in the North to counteract the Federal Fugitive Slave Act are further illustrations of the divergent uses found for this convenient theory. The last fling with the idea taken by any Northern legislature before the war came from Wisconsin in 1859. That state legislature passed a resolution to the effect that " 'sovereign and independent' " states had formed the Union and therefore they had the right to resort to " 'positive defiance' " of acts of the Federal government which they considered illegal.²⁹ Schlesinger concluded, therefore, that, although the states rights doctrine did see its major development in the South, it is necessary to treat the idea in the light of its own time and circumstances in order to arrive at a proper understanding of any controversy on the subject.³⁰ Devotion to the principle of majority

28. Arthur M. Schlesinger, "The State Rights Fetish," New Viewpoints in American History (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), pp. 221-223.

29. Ibid., pp. 230-231.

30. Ibid., p. 243.

rule is notably weakened in the circles of aggrieved minorities. But rather than launch a frontal attack upon the principle itself, the dissenters have time and again in the American past preferred a flank attack by denying that the proposed policy which they are determined to forestall lies within the constitutional powers of the government whose jurisdiction they defy.

No doubt Schlesinger, the historian, derived some amusement from the clear-cut illustration of his thesis during the campaign for the last Presidential election. Less amusing and more significant was the fairly general acceptance of the notion that the doctrine of states rights was an indigenous product of the South, originated during the Civil War and dug out and dusted off by Thurmond in 1948.

One of the most comprehensive of all the single or complex explanations for the coming of the Civil War ever offered was what may be called the conspiracy theory. According to this theme, the war was caused by the fiendish, deliberate and calculating machinations of politicians, (either Northern or Southern, depending on the writer), abolitionists, slaveowners, bankers, clergymen, newspapermen -- in other words, anyone and everyone who might have held an opinion of any kind on national affairs.³¹ Almost the only group not mentioned and included

31. Beale, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

in this category was the military. At least militarism was not a force to be reckoned with in mid-nineteenth century America.

This "devil theory" was an amazingly convenient device, for almost any event or activity by an individual or whole group from 1830 on could be and was attributed to the wicked contriving of either Southerners or Northerners. This theory was dominant in the years closest to the war, when writers were trying to lay blame for the tragedy and recriminations were hotly tossed from one side of the line to the other. These oversimplified and emotional interpretations tended to disappear with the passage of time and advances in historical research and writing, and since the publication of Charles A. Beard's essay The Devil Theory of War, a conspiracy thesis will probably never again satisfy serious American historians as an explanation for any war.³² According to Beard's analysis, the widespread conviction that evil men make war while the masses of people pursue peaceful interests is entirely fallacious, for politicians do not act in a vacuum. Rather, the majority of them come from among the people and are responsive to group or class interests.³³ War, says

32. Edwin C. Rozwenc (ed.), "Slavery as a Cause of the Civil War," Problems in American Civilization (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1949), p. vi.

33. Charles A. Beard, The Devil Theory of War (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1936), pp. 22-23.

Beard, "...comes out of ideas, interests, and activities cherished and followed in the preceding months and years of peace". And again, "war is not the work of a demon. It is our very own work, for which we prepare, wittingly or not, in the ways of peace."³⁴ Perhaps this is what produced the political ineptitude among the leaders of the "Blundering Generation".

Despite the general amelioration of the sectional bitterness which had created "the devil theory", within the last ten years an isolated historian has presented an almost typical conspiracy interpretation of the war, presumably for the edification of modern students. In attempting to provide "a general synthesis of causes", Frank R. Owsley attacked with surprising vehemence the earlier abolitionist attack on the South, stating that no one has "...as yet been able to plumb the depths of vulgarity and obscenity reached...by...abolitionists of note." Under such conditions, war was inevitable in 1860, for "...peace between sections as between nations is placed in jeopardy when one nation or one section fails to

34. Ibid., pp. 28-29.

respect the self-respect of another section or nation".³⁵

While Owsley singled out sectionalism, particularly the self-centered attitude of the North, as the one basic cause of the conflict, other historians since World War I usually have included cultural, economic, and political differences between the North and South as possible facets of the impulse toward war. The powerful force of nationalism had been stirring in the United States; and, according to this interpretation, the South was either largely untouched by it, or the South assumed an extremely aggressive nationalism peculiar to itself.³⁶ As Nathaniel W. Stephenson has pointed out, "...that such an idea [of sectional consciousness] was somehow formed, that what may be called 'Southern Nationalism' was not so old as the Union but older than the Civil War, few students today will have the rashness to deny."³⁷

The problem then for the historian was to discover the reasons for these Northern and Southern differences. The institution of slavery in the South was the most outstanding and obvious one;

35. Frank L. Owsley, "The Fundamental Cause of the Civil War: Egocentric Sectionalism," Journal of Southern History VII (February, 1941), pp. 15-17.

36. Beale, op. cit., pp. 65-66.

37. Nathaniel W. Stephenson, "Southern Nationalism in South Carolina," American Historical Review XXXVI (January, 1931), p. 314.

and earlier historians, convinced of the moral wrong of human bondage, looked upon slavery as the basis for the differences in societal organization. The Southern society was based upon the production of staple agricultural crops by slave labor; on the other hand, Northern society was developing a system of diversified industrial activity carried on by wage labor.³⁸ Using this premise, they elaborated the old right-versus-wrong theme again -- this time in terms of an aristocratic way of life in conflict with the democratic-republican tradition. Recent historians seem to feel that the presence of the negro as an unassimilated foreign element in the population, rather than the institution of slavery, was the fundamental cause for sectional differences. The negroes, furthermore, were unskilled laborers at the bottom of the social ladder; and most important of all, they were considered a constant menace to the peace and security of the South.³⁹ For these reasons, one outstanding historian has designated the South's pre-occupation with keeping the negro population under control the "central theme of Southern history".⁴⁰

38. Channing, op. cit., p. 3.

39. Avery Craven, The Repressible Conflict 1830-1861, pp. 23-25.

40. Phillips, op. cit., p. 43.

Some historians have offered as reasons for sectional differences such factors as Southern romanticism, contrasts in manners, in climate and in soil, Southern dependence on only one or two staple crops, and the backwardness and provincialism which seem to be common to rural societies.⁴¹ Others, with an economic bent, have found that "the economic inferiority of the South...was of overwhelming importance in bringing about the economic sectionalism that led to secession and war between the states."⁴² and even though slavery should not be completely overlooked, "...in 1860, sectional animosity on economic differences other than slavery had reached a stage acute enough for secession."⁴³

As pointed out before, the latest group of revisionists do not feel that any of these sectional differences were intense enough or important enough to warrant war; and, in fact, economic sectionalism could have operated to produce greater accord rather than division. At any rate, most of the principal differences had existed in other times and places without causing war.⁴⁴ This has led some historians to turn to the political phases of the dispute in quest of the reasons for sectional controversy, and recent interpreters have found that

41. Beale, op. cit., p. 67.

42. Shannon, op. cit., p. 300.

43. Harold U. Faulkner, American Economic History (4th ed.; New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), p. 378.

44. Nichols, op. cit., p. 513.

political activity prior to the war was an important factor in the conflict. Originally, the national parties had served to unify all sections. When the old national parties failed in their efforts to cope with national problems and the sectional Republican Party emerged to compete with older loyalties, national unity was no longer possible,⁴⁵ and "war came when the American people for the first time refused to abide by a national election. The parties which had been promoting the cohesive attitudes had broken down, and their disorganization had permitted the new Republican organization to win through direct appeal to the divisive attitudes."⁴⁶

This theme does seem to account for the immediate provocation of the war; most historians have credited the Republican victory in 1860 as the immediate cause for secession; but, on the other hand, there had been splits in national parties before 1850, as there were to be later, without producing anything more serious than perhaps some localized, egg-tossing demonstrations.

Many historians throughout the years have continued to search for the one factor or factors which might have caused the war and which

45. Ibid., p. 517.

46. Ibid., p. 516.

would still stand in the face of all the new evidence being offered on such matters, for example, as sectional divisions within individual states,⁴⁷ positive opposition to negroes in the North,⁴⁸ and exaggeration of the treatment of negroes in the South by the abolitionists.⁴⁹ In the case of most of the older interpretations, historians, consciously or unconsciously, had accepted at least some of the earlier conventional beliefs in order to support their theses. But within the last twenty years a new hypothesis has been brought forward which has been called a psychological interpretation. This idea, which is as important a contribution to American historiography as the older economic interpretation, was developed principally by Avery O. Craven and James G. Randall; and it grew out of their questioning of the theories concerning the 'irrepressibility' of the war and the factitious pretexts in the name of which it was invoked. Neither of them ignore any of the various conflicts and sectional differences previously offered to explain the war.⁵⁰ Furthermore,

47. Roger W. Shugg, Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana (University: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), pp. 157-168 passim.

48. Charles H. Wesley, Negro Labor in the United States 1850-1925 (New York: Vanguard Press, 1927), p. 83.

49. Avery Craven, The Repressible Conflict, p. 3.

50. Beale, op. cit., p. 83. See especially Randall, Civil War and Reconstruction, pp. vi-vii; chap. iv-ix passim; and Craven, Repressible Conflict, and The Coming of the Civil War.

their thesis apparently can encompass most of the new material which has tended to shatter older interpretations. What appears to be more important in the quest for the truth of the past, however, is the fact that they make an effort to account for the prevailing thought and attitudes of the Civil War period itself. After all, most of the "new" information now being aired has been obtained from the contemporary literature of the era, and was available then, though perhaps not so conveniently, for rational use in averting war. Nonetheless, people, North and South, in mid-nineteenth century America, held beliefs, which, since they were thought to be true, proved to be more important as determinants of attitudes and action than the truth itself.⁵¹

These more recent revisionists submit that the war came when the common beliefs were inflamed by emotion; and issues became intermingled with hatred, pride, religious enthusiasm and other passions.⁵² As Craven puts it, "the Civil War was the product of emotions slowly intensified through the years, and not of natural factors inherent in the early sectionalism of either the North or South."⁵³

51. William A. Dunning, "Truth in History," American Historical Review XIX (January, 1914), p. 19.

52. Beale, op. cit., p. 84.

53. Avery Craven, The Repressible Conflict, p. 30.

Once again the introduction of a new interpretation has raised additional problems and questions for historians. When did the war psychosis develop, and what or who was responsible for it? Craven finds that "politicians used the moral fervor generated by abolitionists to enhance the sectional rivalry from 1830 to 1860."⁵⁴ Since this formula may appear to smack too much of the conspiracy theme, Randall contents himself with the view that, although politicians were responsible for arousing feelings, emotionalism was really the result of a general lack of able leadership rather than of deliberate political scheming.⁵⁵

A very recent writer has provided still another explanation for what he calls "hyperemotionalism". In addition to poor statesmanship, the sheer number of election contests in the eighteen-fifties tended to stimulate constant agitation on all issues. Nichols maintains that the unusual number of political contests scheduled in one state or another every month of the year, save four, "aroused passion to such a pitch that only bloodletting, occasional or wholesale, could relieve the tension."⁵⁶

The revisionists seem to agree that, beyond the point where

54. Ibid., p. 62.

55. Randall, The Civil War and Reconstruction, pp. 145-148.

56. Nichols, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

reason gave way to passion, the war was inevitable; but they appear to be convinced that prior to that point war could have been avoided. Within the past few months, however, a youthful historian has criticized the revisionists for their failure to particularize and clarify the forces which should have operated to forestall the conflict. Among other things, he feels that the revisionists have sidestepped the fundamental moral problems implicit in slavery, and "have resorted instead to broad affirmations of faith".⁵⁹

It is, of course, too soon to tell whether or not this attack presages a new development in American historiography -- really a return to late nineteenth-century views of the function of history and the role of the historian. One thing seems fairly certain -- each generation has rewritten its own history in the past; and succeeding generations of historians will, in all probability, continue to do so, incorporating in the process whatever ideas in historical interpretation are currently dominant.

59. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. "The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism," Partisan Review (October, 1949), pp. 972-975.

III

CHANGES IN INTERPRETATIONS OF CONDITIONS DURING THE COURSE OF THE WAR

In the same manner in which revisionists have re-examined the origins of the Civil War in the hope of shedding light on the causation, both of war and of peace, others have reconsidered some of the conditions and events which occurred during the course of the war, also with the hope that, by revealing more of the truth of war -- its ugliness and sordidness --, further steps might be made in the direction of peace.¹ One by one, the older and more romantic pictures of Northern and Southern eagerness for war and loyalty to a cause, made legendary in novels and ballads, have been redrawn and replaced by sounder and more accurate accounts.

For many years, the idea of unity within the rival sections had been one of the more widely accepted generalizations about the war. Older writers, overemphasizing the Civil War as the most outstanding event in American history, tended to create an illusion of a close-knit, homogeneous "Solid South", and an equally united Northern population feverishly engaged in defending either slavery

1. Lonn, op. cit., p. v.

or freedom. Actually, "the assumption of unity ignored a sharp division of opinion that had been constantly manifested through the years of conflict."²

Opinion in the North was divided on the subject of the negro and emancipation. Northern laborers and farmers feared competition from free negroes; and as late as July, 1863, a dozen negroes were lynched during the draft riots in New York. Recent investigations have also led to the conclusion that, while many Northerners were ready to fight to restore the Union, few were willing to fight for the abolition of slavery.³

Opinion in the North was divided also on the question of national or state sovereignty. The majority of Northern citizens were not at all convinced in 1861 that the Federal Congress should take precedence over the individual state legislatures. Dunning pointed out as early as 1898 that "if a vote had been taken in this area at this time on the abstract question of constitutional interpretation, the President's opinion [that the nation was supreme] would probably have been defeated."⁴

2. Avery Craven, The Repressible Conflict, p. 3.

3. Fred A. Shannon, The Organization and Administration of the Union Army 1861-1865 (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1928), II, 145.

4. William A. Dunning, Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898), p. 12.

It is now clear too, as a result of fresh investigations, that, in 1860, Northern capitalists, bankers, and merchants were frightened by the prospect of Lincoln's election, and that election returns from urban voters revealed a surprisingly strong opposition to him. Likewise in the South, city real estate owners, merchants, and capitalists were opposed to the idea of disunion, and the majority of urban votes were cast for the pro-Union, moderate candidates, Bell and Douglas.⁵

Furthermore, it now seems evident that there never was absolute unity and agreement in the South either. Three fourths of the Southerners owned no slaves at all and many of them were relatively uninterested in the institution.⁶ In addition, people living in the mountain regions or the so-called "up-country" sections of the South generally opposed secession.⁷ However, under the pressure of attack from the North, the South apparently did develop a high degree of unanimity on this question. Nonetheless, there was sharp conflict in several individual Southern states during the eighteen-fifties between certain extremists who advocated immediate

5. Crenshaw, op. cit., pp. 49-54 passim.

6. James G. Randall, The Civil War and Reconstruction, pp. 61-62.

7. Frank L. Owsley, "Defeatism in the Confederacy," The North Carolina Historical Review III (July, 1926), p. 446.

secession and other more moderate men who urged delay until all the Southern states could agree to act together.⁸ And, it should be remembered that four of the slave states (Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas) did not secede until after the provisional Confederate Government had been formed and President Lincoln had called up Union volunteers to resist it, and that four others (Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky) never seceded at all.

These are only a few of the internal sectional conflicts which most of the earlier historians had ignored, either because they lacked information or because the facts would not have supported their hypotheses.

But recent historians, particularly those interested in effects of emotionalism and war psychosis, usually have confirmed the older view that, despite the previous dichotomy of opinion, enthusiasm for war was nearly unanimous and was impassioned in both sections in the spring of 1861. In the North, Lincoln's call for 75,000 militia to serve for three months was met immediately; and many states were prepared to provide twice as many for two-year enlistments.⁹ In the South, there was a similar, almost overwhelming, rush to volunteer for army service.¹⁰

8. Stephenson, op. cit., pp. 315-335 passim.

9. Fred A. Shannon, The Organization and Administration of the Union Army 1861-1865, I, 31.

10. Bell Irvin Wiley, The Life of Johnny Reb (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1943), p. 123.

Since these facts, at least on the surface, appear contradictory in the light of newer evidence on intrasectional disagreements, several recent historians have sought to find clues to the problem of the causes and effects of emotionalism in the reasons given by the average soldier for his participation in the war and in the causes for which he thought he was fighting.

As a result of his study of letters and diaries written by common soldiers in the Confederate armies, Bell I. Wiley has concluded that, on the whole, soldiers were moved to enlist for many different reasons. Unquestionably, many were motivated by an intense hatred of the North, because the majority of Southerners, both actual slaveholders and those who hoped to own slaves eventually, believed that the Northern attitude toward the institution was completely unreasonable. Many others volunteered in 1861 because enlistment was the current fashion and social pressures were intense. For many others, particularly those from the lower social and economic classes, army service was regarded either as a great adventure or as a lark. At least there would be opportunity for travel and a chance to get away from the dullness of routine occupations.¹¹ Many others,

11. Ibid., pp. 15-17.

of course, joined the army when they were thrown out of work as trade and shipping came to a standstill following secession.¹²

Regardless of the fundamental grounds for enlistment, however, hatred of the Yankees was an emotion common to the majority of Southern soldiers, but the reasons for this feeling were varied. Interestingly enough, few of the ordinary soldiers were disturbed by threatened violations of states rights or property rights.¹³ Rather, the Federal soldiers were hated because they were thought to be "an unsavory sort of people" who "made a fetish of money" and who were "tricky and deceitful" as well as brutal and cowardly.¹⁴ And, as is usually the case when a very large number of people are lumped together for purposes of generalization, it was possible to document the Southern viewpoint.

Although no careful study of the reactions of Northern soldiers has been made, judging simply from the type of literature produced in the North immediately after the war, the feeling must have been mutual, and, as in the case of the South, diverse interests

12. Shugg, op. cit., pp. 170-171.

13. Wiley, op. cit., p. 309. Wiley believes that "it is doubtful whether many of them either understood or cared about the Constitutional issues at stake. The threat to slavery was resented rather widely, not so much as an unwarranted deprivation of property rights, but as a wedge for 'nigger equality'."

14. Ibid., pp. 310-314.

also motivated Northern enlistments. Shannon has found that

The abolitionist would fight to free the slaves, the Kentuckian to save the Union so that slavery might be preserved. The capitalist would fight, by proxy, to preserve the Southern market and to exclude therefrom the competition of foreign states. The frontier states would fight to keep the far West negroless and open for their settlement. The older settlements west of the Alleghenies and north of the Ohio would fight, when at all, for sentiment or for various of the other mentioned motives. The wage victims of the industrial revolution would fight, if at all, by compulsion or for pay.¹⁵

Other modern writers have found in these diverse public and private reasons for fighting at least a partial explanation for the gradual decline in enthusiasm which began almost immediately in both sections. By 1862, the pace of volunteering had slowed to such an extent that the Confederate government was compelled to resort to conscription; and in 1863, the Federal Congress found it necessary to enact the first of a series of draft laws.¹⁶ Opposition to these measures in both sections apparently became more overt in inverse ratio to the decline in public morale. Recent investigators have discovered that on both sides the poorer classes objected vigorously

15. Fred A. Shannon, The Organization and Administration of the Union Army, I, 21.

16. James G. Randall, The Civil War and Reconstruction, pp. 354; 410.

to the provisions in these laws which permitted the hiring of substitutes. In the South, the catch-phrase "rich man's war, poor man's fight" became a popular slogan, and this belief had a devastating effect upon civilian and army morale. Indeed, one recent historian has concluded that the feeling aroused over favoritism toward the rich on the part of the Confederate government was "the most fundamental and far-reaching cause of the defeatism" which led eventually to the almost complete collapse of the Confederacy at the close of the war.¹⁷

Another important cause for Southern failure was the appalling amount of desertion from the armies. In a recent study of the whole problem, based largely upon the documents made available in the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, Ella Lonn has indicated that the heavy toll of desertion already had become apparent when Lee was forced to retire from Maryland in the fall of 1862. By 1865, deserters were counted by the thousands as whole companies and even regiments departed without leave. Official figures indicate that at least 103,400 Confederate soldiers deserted during the course of the war (the Articles of War, by the way, defined the crime as punishable by death); or, to put it another way, roughly one

17. Frank L. Owsley, "Defeatism in the Confederacy", loc. cit., p. 450.

soldier in ten who entered the service later fled from the ranks.¹⁸ Furthermore, desertion seems to have been prevalent among all ranks, social classes, and areas of the Confederacy.¹⁹ In view of this new evidence, it would appear that there is no cause so sacred (even if it is thoroughly understood) that will sustain the average human being through the trials of homesickness and general war weariness.

It is now evident that the Northern forces were no more immune to the problem of desertion than the Southern armies. Actually, a clear parallel has been drawn between the extent of desertion and the causes for it in both sections.²⁰ Although the records are inaccurate and incomplete, apparently about 5,500 soldiers deserted each month from the Union armies between 1863 and 1865.²¹ In addition, many of the men, eager to collect the bounties offered by Federal, State, and local governments, deserted repeatedly and traded professionally in enlistment and desertion.²²

None of these factors is very attractive; and, of course, none of them appeared in the earlier romanticized versions of the war. From the Northern point of view, of course, the war was won by

18. Lonn, op. cit., pp. 120, 124, 231.

19. Ibid., p. 123.

20. Ibid., p. 143.

21. Ibid., p. 152.

22. Ibid., p. 139.

gallant and heroic men fighting for a very righteous cause. Naturally, Southern writers explained that, although the South had been defeated, even more gallant and heroic men had magnificently defended a holy cause against overwhelming odds.

Later writers, while they have conceded the very real courage evidenced by men on both sides, have cited other causes to account for the Confederate failure in 1865. As a matter of fact, Charles A. Wesley has concluded that the Confederacy was not actually defeated, but rather collapsed from complex internal causes. Among these causes were army desertions, demoralization of civilian morale, and poor facilities for transporting both the troops and the actually abundant food resources. At the governmental level, the lack of cooperation and personal quarrels between the President and Vice President on the one hand, and between the Richmond government and individual state governments on the other -- quarrels which, in their post-war public airing, served to obscure the real issues, were additional elements contributing to the collapse. The doctrine of states rights -- the very cause for which the South was ostensibly fighting -- turned on the central government and helped to bring on the disaster. But, despite all the complex elements involved in the collapse, Wesley, in the current vogue of psychological interpretations,

has concluded finally that "of the factors contributing to this collapse, the psychological factor of morale was one of the most influential in the complex scene."²³

Still another important aspect of the Civil War has undergone considerable revision in recent years. For a long time, the truth about Northern and Southern prison conditions and treatment of prisoners was clouded by the atrocity stories and other types of propaganda current during the war, and by the flood of diaries and personal memoirs published after 1865. Once again, the documents published in the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion have been the principal source for the new material with which historians have refuted the older fictions.

Of course, the first generation of historians, writing only in terms of black and white, presented, at their best, one-sided pictures of the conditions in Civil War prisons, and at their worst, essays of vituperation and recrimination. According to these versions, Southern prisoners in the North were treated humanely, even kindly, at all times; while in the South, prisoners received harsh and even

23. Charles H. Wesley, The Collapse of the Confederacy (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1937), pp. 168-171 and passim.

barbarous treatment. Furthermore, all Southern prisons were infested with filth and disease, whereas Northern prisons were built and maintained "with due regard to health and sanitary conditions."²⁴ Naturally, Southern writers made similar assertions and accusations in their own behalf.²⁵

Once again, recent investigators have disproved such sweeping generalizations. In his book on Civil War prisons, William B. Hesseltine has decided that neither side was in a position to blame the other, for prisons, both North and South, were overcrowded, filthy, and overrun with vermin. Each section was guilty of bungling and mismanagement, and there was much suffering and misery in almost all of the prisons, regardless of locale.

Apparently conditions in Southern prisons grew worse as the war progressed. Food of any kind became increasingly scarce, and supply became an acute problem as battle lines drew closer to prison areas. On the other hand, though the system of handling prisoners gradually improved in the North, the practice of feeding captives as

24. See e.g., James Schouler, History of the United States of America, VI, 413-414.

25. Davis, op. cit., p. 453.

cheaply as possible produced numerous cases of scurvy and other diseases among the inmates in all the prisons. But here again, it appears that conditions varied from time to time and place to place; and, although the whole subject is apparently far more complex than it formerly was thought to be, it now seems evident that willful atrocities were not committed in either section.²⁶

Unquestionably, the loss of life in the Northern and Southern prisons was tragic, but the matter was made worse by the intensification of impassioned feelings produced by the tales of atrocities often deliberately circulated, and usually widely believed, during and after the war. In the North, aside from the prison memoirs that were being published, the Government itself provided a stimulus for continued recrimination. The propaganda resulting from the Nuremberg trials was mild, apparently, in comparison with the sensations produced by the Federal trial, in November, 1865, of the commander of the Andersonville prison.²⁷

Furthermore, in the earlier era of "return to normalcy" following the war, Congress also indulged in the device of "investigating

26. Hesseltine, op. cit., chaps. iii, vi, vii, viii passim.

27. Ibid., pp. 233-236 passim.

committees" on the subject of Southern prison conditions. In 1869, one of these committees published its findings in a volume entitled Treatment of Prisoners of War by the Rebel Authorities, in which the committee proposed to record the proofs of "Rebel cruelty" for posterity, in order to provide a necessary authoritative condemnation of slavery.²⁸

It seems unfortunate, also, that the prison issue was kept alive by the literary efforts of ex-prisoners and by organized groups, such as the Andersonville Survivors' Association;²⁹ for propaganda on the subject of war prisons seems to have had a far more lasting influence on public opinion than all the heated arguments on the more abstract questions of war. Sentiments aroused over causes of the war or even over wholesale slaughter in battle, no matter how intemperate they might have been at the outset, seem to have faded steadily after peace was restored; but the emotion generated by tales of suffering individuals appears to have penetrated more deeply and receded less quickly -- perhaps because individual suffering is more easily comprehended and more readily captures the imagination.

28. Ibid., pp. 252-253.

29. Ibid., pp. 255-258.

In any event, people in the post-Civil War period believed what they read and heard about the war; and as these beliefs became legends, the attitudes of mind developed during the war were perpetuated. For many years, the effects of these sectional attitudes were marked, even though sectional bitterness gradually subsided. Now, of course, public attitudes have changed considerably, and are still in the process of undergoing change. Obviously, these revised attitudes are the result of many varying influences and events; but, at least one of the factors making for change appears to be the new appraisals of history made possible by advances in historical methods and scholarship.

EFFECTS OF HISTORICAL REVISION
ON TEXTBOOKS

The interest in American history accelerated by the Civil War and the resurgent nationalism which came in its wake also tended to stimulate the study of American history in public schools. Prior to 1860, only six states required that social studies be taught in elementary and high schools; but, by 1880, the desire to inculcate patriotism and good citizenship had inspired the enactment of laws by nearly all the state legislatures to include history in the school curricula.¹ Naturally, this increased emphasis upon the teaching of history created a new and widespread market for textbooks of United States history.

As might be expected, the earliest textbooks published in response to this demand reflected many of the sentiments aroused by the war as well as the prevailing spirit of nationalism and faith in progress. If any causes for the war were cited at all, the usual explanations for its origins -- the moral issue of

1. Bessie Louise Pierce, Public Opinion and The Teaching of History in the United States (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), pp. 12-14.

slavery, the conspiracy of wicked men, differences in constitutional interpretation, and sectionalism -- were presented. Actually, many of the early texts, in accordance with the older historical method of chronological recitation, were so condensed and so concerned with events that superficially, at least, they appeared to be free from partisan bias.² If, however, the pro-Northern or pro-Southern views of the writers were not always blatant, evidences of their prejudices often appeared in their terminology and choice of words to describe the War.

Amusing now in its triviality, but illustrative of the type of texts written before the turn of the century, was the variation in titles given to the war itself. Officially, according to the government, it was the "War of the Rebellion."³ Southern writers termed it the "War between the States."⁴ Northern writers called it either "The War of Secession"⁵, or "The War for the Union."⁶

2. William Swinton, Condensed United States History (New York: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor and Company, 1871), passim.

3. Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, The Rise of American Civilization, II, 53.

4. Alexander H. Stephens, History of the United States (Columbia, S.C.: W. J. Duffie, Publisher, 1872), p. 427ff.

5. Swinton, op. cit., p. 235ff.

6. William H. Mace, A School History of the United States (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1904), p. 334ff.

A later Northern historian, determined to write a more just account of the episode, compromised with the expression "The War for Southern Independence."⁷ The term "Civil War" became standard usage apparently only after more professional historians entered the field of textbook writing. It seems that the problem of proper nomenclature still persists, however, despite advances in historiography and scholarship, for, in preparing their college text published in 1945, Oliver P. Chitwood and Frank L. Owsley were "...left in a quandary as to how to designate the war between the North and South." They felt that, since the question of whether or not secession was in violation of the Constitution was still open to dispute, "...to be strictly correct [they] should have used only such names as the War for Southern Independence and the War of Secession, which are noncommittal on this point, rather than Civil War, which if used in the ordinary sense, implies the acceptance of the Northern contention that secession was illegal." Interestingly enough, this discussion follows immediately a statement promising objectivity and "neutrality".⁸

Other indications of biased points of view appeared even in the most skeletal accounts by earlier writers. Southern authors,

7. Edward Channing, A Student's History of the United States (3d ed. rev.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917) passim.

8. Oliver P. Chitwood and Frank L. Owsley, A Short History of the American People (Toronto: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1945), I, v-vi.

for example, were inclined to employ local place names and at least to mention nearly every Confederate officer present on any battlefield.⁹ Furthermore, short biographical sketches of Southern leaders were incorporated in the text, while the principal figures of the North were merely named where necessary.¹⁰ Of course, Northern writers were prone to similar treatments of the subject in their turn. The more aroused writers seldom failed to preface the names of Northern leaders with a complimentary adjective, whereas Southern leaders were dismissed with the word "insurgent".¹¹

In other words, the earlier textbook writers, moralized, judged, indicted, or supported their particular cause, and expressed their loyalties just as freely as any of the other writers of historical literature during the nationalistic period. If they were writing from the Northern point of view, as most of them were, they saw only the courage and heroic exploits of the Union armies. They sincerely believed that all Southerners were wicked and capable of murdering Northern captives and they said so in their books. If

9. George F. Holmes, New School History of the United States (New York: University Publishing Company, 1884), passim.

10. Susan Pendleton Lee, A School History of the United States (Richmond, Va.: B. F. Johnson Publishing Company, 1895), passim.

11. Benson J. Lossing, A School History of the United States (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1884), passim.

they were writing one of the so-called "state" histories which were so popular in the post-war South,¹² textbook writers tended to eulogize the local heroes, and to cite figures to prove that that particular state had contributed more men, or companies, or regiments, as the case might be, than any other state. These figures were derived, of course, from the most accessible sources -- the personal and partisan accounts of the war leaders; but they were convenient for supporting almost any point of view, for this was an era when statistics carried increasing conviction. Doubtlessly, these techniques and devices of presentation, though not necessarily intended to be misleading, did foster and perpetuate impressions sympathetic to existing sectional attitudes.

The idea of the war as a positive good was another attitude nourished by these early textbook writers. One popular writer, probably influenced by current nationalistic tendencies, concluded that the war "...though terrible in its effects, has not been without some good results. The extinction of slavery is already proving a benefit to the people of the South, while it has taken away the long-standing subject of political dispute between the great sections of the Union." An additional benefit of the war was

12. Pierce, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

that it brought about closer understanding and greater mutual respect between the North and South; and, as a final fillip, the author added that "the war has also made Americans less puffed up and sensational than formerly, and has given a more earnest and manly cast to the American character."¹³

This extreme nationalistic point of view was pre-eminently Northern, but, since Northern textbooks were used in the majority of public schools throughout the country, both this view of the results of the war and the anti-slavery interpretation of its causes and character tended to become firmly fixed in the popular mind.¹⁴ But, while these central themes were generally predominant, certain textbook writers of the period at least hinted at some of the ideas which have now replaced the older interpretations. Underlying economic differences were pointed out by some;¹⁵ others interpreted slavery as a system of labor.¹⁶ Still others indicated that Northern businessmen found the "peculiar institution" profitable and became interested in maintaining slavery.¹⁷ The newer

13. Swinton, op. cit., pp. 229-230.

14. Charles W. Ramsdell "The Changing Interpretation of the Civil War", loc. cit., p. 7.

15. See e.g., Mace, op. cit., p. 296ff.

16. See e.g., Swinton, op. cit., p. 237ff.

17. See e.g., D. H. Montgomery, The Leading Facts of American History ("The Leading Facts of History Series"; Boston: Ginn & Company, Publishers, 1891), p. 223.

psychological interpretation was anticipated by one writer who pointed out that "...the passions excited by the bitter debate over questions relating to slavery lay at the bottom of the struggle."¹⁸ As early as 1904, a farsighted historian prepared a list of causes for his text in which aroused feelings appeared first, and lack of able leadership after the deaths of Clay and Webster, second.¹⁹

In view of the prevailing attitudes, it is not surprising that, although textbooks of this type were often the most balanced and impartial, some of them were indicted by such patriotic organizations as the Grand Army of the Republic. One fairly popular text of this variety, Leading Facts of American History, by D. H. Montgomery, was found guilty of pro-Southern bias on seven counts at the Twenty-Ninth National Encampment of the G. A. R. held in 1895. On the whole, the main objections seem to have been that Montgomery had alluded to the courage and devotion of the Southern people, and had slighted the efforts of the Union armies -- or so the G. A. R. thought.²⁰ On the other hand, some of the Southern states were no

18. Edward Eggleston, A History of the United States and its People (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1888), p. 310.

19. Mace, op. cit., pp. 324-325.

20. Pierce, op. cit., pp. 166-167.

more willing to accept Montgomery's books -- this time on the grounds that they stressed pro-Northern views.²¹

Despite the efforts of patriotic organizations, textbooks after 1900 began to reveal very gradually the influence of advances in historical research and methods. Less space was devoted to political activities and military campaigns, and more emphasis was placed upon social and economic affairs. Economic interpretations of the Civil War appeared in textbooks written shortly after World War I. Following the pattern set by "subjective" historians, one writer stated that he had made "...an effort to show the influence of economic conditions on the politics of the country throughout its entire history...". Conforming with this thesis, he informed his potential students that "...the slavery contest was economic in its origins and development. It became eventually a moral issue."²² Furthermore, the experiences of World War I seemed to have exerted a considerable influence on the attitude toward war. Even though he regarded the Civil War as inevitable, at least one outstanding writer indicated that he was not "inspired" by the spectacle of war between the North and South.²³

21. Ibid., p. 159.

22. John H. Latané, A History of the United States (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1918), p. vi.

23. David S. Muzzey, The United States of America (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1922), p. 551.

Although textbook writers often have been among the last to accept new historical interpretations with the result that the myths and attitudes nurtured by early writers have been the most real and pervasive, the latest results of fresh investigations and newer trends in historical thought generally have appeared first in textbooks intended for college students, probably because the writers of these texts are usually trained historians. As a result, these texts now reveal most of the present trends in historical treatment of the Civil War. In the first place, the episode is reduced to more proper proportions in relation to the whole development of the United States, and more space is devoted to causes and effects than to military campaigns. Furthermore, at least an equal amount of the discussion is given to the Southern and Northern cases, and there seems to be a general tendency to treat Northern and Southern conditions together, drawing parallels wherever possible. In addition, modern writers have tended to stress the complexity of the causes and character of the war, and in general have sought to achieve understanding rather than to pass judgment. It is also noteworthy that recent textbook writers usually have adopted the policy of indicating the sources for their statements and conclusions, particularly where they have drawn upon the more or less definitive studies of the conditions of the war itself.

Since interpretations of the causes of the war are necessarily speculative and have been continuously revised, some of the latest writers have pointed out the interpretations of other historians in addition to their own.²⁴ Obviously, an historian who has advanced a new hypothesis in monographic publications and specialized volumes will not omit his interpretation in preparing a textbook any more than other writers have omitted their beliefs in the past. In his recent textbook (written in collaboration with his faculty colleague, Walter Johnson) Avery Craven, for example, stresses the same causative factors which he elaborated in his more celebrated works, and repeats his familiar thesis that the war was a "repressible conflict".²⁵

The training received by modern textbook writers and historians does not necessarily rule out prejudice. Historians, like all individuals, are influenced by their own values, background, and environment; and, apparently, they influence and are influenced by prevailing attitudes. And there is, of course, no sure way of measuring the effect on public attitudes of newer interpretations or more conscientiously verified accounts of the Civil War. Time itself has been a fundamental factor in tempering with reason mutual

24. H. U. Faulkner, American Political and Social History (New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., 1941), p. 317ff.

25. Avery Craven and Walter Johnson, The United States (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1947), pp. 362ff.

group hatreds of the North and South. In addition, there is probably some correlation between the recent efforts of Southern leaders to deal more effectively with problems of health, education, soil exhaustion, share-cropping, and race relations, and the revised interpretations of the role of the South in the Civil War. It may, perhaps, even be hoped that a more significant result of such intense study of only one phase of American history will be an increased wisdom and capacity for maintaining peace, which may come from a better understanding of the human activities and motives which seem to promote war.

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