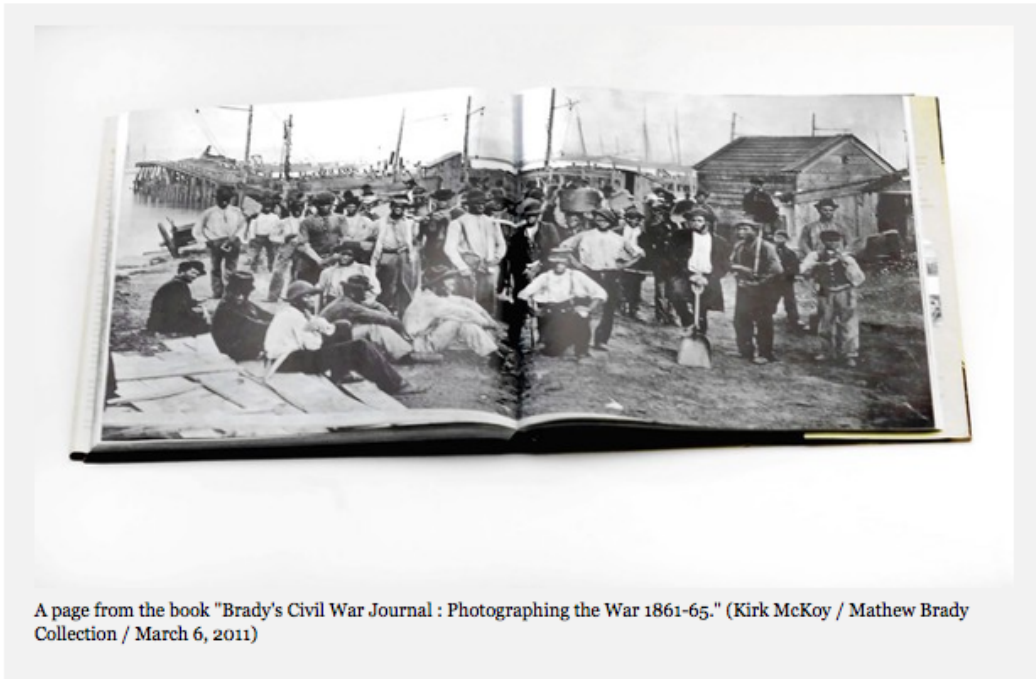


# Los Angeles Times

## Lessons of America's Civil War

A rush of new books suggests the lessons of the conflict between North and South remain relevant 150 years after the war's start.



By Nick Owchar  
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Can anything new be said about the American Civil War?

Though the causes and campaigns have all been examined by ranks of historians, many books are coming this spring for the 150th anniversary of the war's start on April 12, 1861, when Confederate guns fired on Fort Sumter. More than 100 books — new works and reissues, visual guides and comprehensive histories — offer unexpected angles and fresh interpretations of the battles and key figures we thought we knew.

The lessons of the Civil War, these books suggest, remain relevant.

"The political process was so polarized that democratic compromise was almost impossible. Is our politics less polarizing today? Not really," explains David Goldfield, author of a monumental new appraisal of the war, "America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation" (Bloomsbury Press). "Can we learn from this? I hope so."

A history professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Goldfield said two questions have hovered over his 30-year academic career: Why wasn't there a better way? How did we get to the point of solving disputes only by war? He found his answer and a fresh angle for his book in examining how evangelical Christianity drove a wedge between Southern and Northern interests.

"It intruded into the political process so that there was no middle ground. There was only good and evil," he says. "Self-righteousness doesn't make for good public policy. It poisons the process. That's the theme that frames my book, from the war's start to its aftermath."

Other new books also taking on the entire period include Louis P. Masur's "The Civil War: A Concise History" (Oxford University Press), "The Great Struggle: America's Civil War" by Steven E. Woodworth (Rowman & Littlefield), Amanda Foreman's "A World On Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War" (Random House) and Adam Goodheart's "1861: The Civil War Awakening" (Alfred A. Knopf), which, though tied to the war's first year, shows readers how American identity would be remade during this agonizing chapter in the nation's history. Jeffry D. Wert also narrows his focus to a group that struck fear in Union hearts, the Army of Northern Virginia, in "A Glorious Army: Robert E. Lee's Triumph, 1862-1863" (Simon & Schuster).

Nothing speaks more dramatically of the horrors of slavery than the sight of jagged whip scars on the back of a slave named Peter, whose 1863 photograph is included among many in "Discovering the Civil War" (Foundation for the National Archives/Giles). This coffee table-size book draws from "one of the richest reservoirs of records in our holdings," writes David S. Ferriero, archivist of the United States. Other visual records are "Brady's Civil War" (Lyons Press) and "Brady's Civil War Journal" (Skyhorse Publishing) edited by Theodore P. Savas, both of which collect the work of famed photographer Mathew B. Brady not only during battles but in between them, as troops felt boredom and dread as they awaited the next fight.

"The New York Times Complete Civil War: 1861-1865" edited by Harold Holzer and Craig Symonds (Black Dog & Leventhal) reproduces the paper's coverage, including reports and eyewitness accounts (with accompanying DVD). A Lincoln scholar, Holzer lends his editorial efforts to several other books for the war's sesquicentennial, including "Lincoln on War: Our Greatest Commander-in-Chief Speaks to America" (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill) and "Hearts Touched by Fire: The Best of 'Battles and Leaders of the Civil War'" (The Modern Library).

"The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It" (Library of America) also provides a wide-ranging selection of eyewitness accounts. The student of the Civil War might turn to Michael Shaara's Pulitzer-winning novel "The Killer Angels" and the two subsequent books by his son Jeff, "Gods and Generals" and "The Last Full Measure," all reissued by Ballantine.

In the "unexpected angles" category, a reissue of William C. Davis' "A Taste for War: The Culinary History of the Blue and Gray" (Bison Books) shows how soldiers, far from the cooking of wives and mothers, made their own meals. The book comes with many recipes — including pork and parsnip hash and how to cook rabbit, rat and squirrel — for a truly intimate (sometimes gross) understanding of soldiers' lives.

Bevin Alexander's "Sun Tzu at Gettysburg: Ancient Military Wisdom in the Modern World" (W.W. Norton) analyzes the key battle of the Civil War — along with other battles in American history — through the eyes of Sun Tzu, an ancient Chinese royal advisor who composed "The Art of War" more than 2,000 years before Lee's disastrous defeat (if Lee had clung to certain principles, Alexander shows, the battle's outcome could have changed the course of the war).

Or, for a purely impressionistic record of the war, try a new Library of America edition of Stephen Crane's poems. Though born after the war, Crane is treated almost as its literary spokesman because of the novel "The Red Badge of Courage." His poems give us vivid imagery of 19th century warfare that could have been written on the fields of Antietam. The wicked tone in his poem, "War is Kind," still crackles with grim irony today:

*Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom—*

*A field where a thousand corpses lie.*