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What Drove the Terrible War?

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James M. McPherson

A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War
by Amanda Foreman
Random House, 958 pp., $35.00

The Union War
by Gary W. Gallagher
Harvard University Press, 215 pp., $27.95

1861: The Civil War Awakening
by Adam Goodheart
Knopf, 481 pp., $28.95

America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation
by David Goldfield
Bloomsbury, 632 pp., $35.00

God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War
by George C. Rable
University of North Carolina Press, 586 pp., $35.00

Library of Congress

'Fate of the Rebel Flag'; lithograph published by William Schaus in 1861, based on a painting by William Bauly

As we begin to move through four years of commemorating the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, the outpouring of new books will add to that conflict's status as the most-written-about event in our history. One of the largest of these volumes—in length as well as scope—is Amanda Foreman's spacious narrative of Anglo-American and Anglo-Confederate relations during the war. Born in England, raised in Los Angeles, and residing in London and New York, Foreman is well qualified to

write about “Britain’s crucial role in the American Civil War.” This subtitle as well as her main title (“A World on Fire”) might strike some as an exercise in hyperbole. The book mainly covers the North Atlantic world, and the British government and armed forces did not intervene in the Civil War.

But many British subjects did: as soldiers of fortune who fought on both sides (often in violation of Britain’s Foreign Enlistment Act); as officers and crews of blockade-running ships carrying supplies into Confederate ports and cotton out of them; as Confederate financial agents in Liverpool and in transshipment ports for blockade runners in the Bahamas, Bermuda, and Halifax; and as crew members (commanded by Confederate officers) in a half-dozen commerce-raiding ships built in Britain that captured or destroyed most of the 257 merchant ships and whalers lost to raiders during the war. And the fires that sank these ships did light up many of the world’s oceans from the waters off the Brazilian coast to the Bering Sea.

These activities were probably not “crucial” to the war’s outcome. But Britain’s official nonintervention was like the dog that did not bark in the Sherlock Holmes story. It played an important part in the North’s ultimate victory because any such intervention would have favored the Confederacy. Some form of intervention did come close to happening more than once, however. When Britain (followed by other nations) granted the Confederacy status as a belligerent power under international law in May 1861 and declared its neutrality in the conflict, Union Secretary of State William H. Seward thundered his protest and warned of war if the British took the next step and recognized Confederate nationhood.

But the Lincoln administration had already in effect recognized the Confederacy’s belligerent status by proclaiming a blockade of Southern ports, and this crisis passed. It was replaced by a new one in November 1861 when a zealous Union naval captain, Charles Wilkes of the USS *San Jacinto*, stopped the British passenger and mail steamer *Trent* on the high seas and took off James Mason and John Slidell, Confederate emissaries on their way to London and Paris. The British government angrily condemned this violation of neutral rights and threatened war with the United States unless the diplomats were released. The Lincoln administration, acknowledging its ability to fight only “one war at a time,” backed down and released them the day after Christmas 1861.

By the late summer of 1862 a new crisis in Anglo-American relations had arisen. The US government was incensed by Britain’s lax enforcement of its own Foreign

Enlistment Act, which forbade the construction and fitting out of warships in British yards to be used against a nation with which Britain was at peace. The escape of the CSS *Florida* and CSS *Alabama* from Liverpool shipyards owing to loopholes in the law and British officials who looked the other way enabled these ships to get to sea and destroy nearly one hundred American merchant vessels and whalers during the next two years.

Meanwhile a "cotton famine" caused by the war and the blockade had reduced the amount of cotton coming to British and French mills to a pittance and thrown hundreds of thousands of workers and their families onto the dole. Confederate military victories in the summer of 1862 seemed to prove that the North could never crush this rebellion. As Southern armies invaded Maryland and Kentucky in September, the British and French governments planned to offer mediation to bring the American war to an end on the basis of Confederate independence. If the Lincoln government refused such an offer (as surely it would have), the British and French intended to recognize the Confederacy. France wanted to go ahead with this project even after Confederate armies were turned back at the battles of Antietam and Perryville. But the British backed off, and the French emperor Napoleon III did not want to act alone. Once again the dog did not bark.

It almost did a year later as two powerful ironclad ships being built at the Laird works in Birkenhead neared completion. Known as the "Laird rams," these double-turreted vessels with a seven-foot underwater spike attached to the prow had been commissioned by Confederate agents who disguised their ultimate destination with a series of subterfuges. The American consul in Liverpool, Thomas Dudley, and the American minister in London, Charles Francis Adams, presented reams of intelligence showing that the vessels were intended to be used as Confederate warships against the American navy. One of Adams's notes to British Foreign Minister Lord John Russell warning of the consequences if the government allowed these ships to escape concluded simply: "This is war." But Russell had already ordered the ships detained, and they were eventually purchased by the Royal Navy.

Many historians have chronicled the ebb and flow of Anglo-American and Anglo-Confederate relations, which left both sides embittered toward Britain. The contribution of *A World on Fire* lies in its richness of description, vivid writing, and focus on individual personalities, including not only public officials but also (mostly on the British side) a wide variety of editors, reporters, cartoonists, aristocrats, labor leaders, soldiers of fortune, and retired naval officers commanding blockade runners.

Some two hundred people figure with varying degrees of prominence in Foreman's story.

And a gripping story it is. British public opinion was divided between those who favored the Union and those who sympathized with the Confederacy. While these two categories cannot be precisely quantified, and there were significant shifts toward the North after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, what particularly struck Foreman was the number of Britons who "thought the slaveholding South had the moral advantage over the antislavery North." Trying to understand "how the Confederacy had managed to achieve this ascendency" with people "who might generally be considered as belonging to the 'progressive' classes in Britain —journalists, writers, university students, actors, social reformers, even the clergy —became one of the driving obsessions behind this book."

There seems, however, to be a disjunction between this obsession and the actual evidence Foreman presents in the book. There were doubtless numerous journalists, writers, clergymen, and so on who sympathized with the Confederacy. But how many of them were "progressives" is open to debate. On the whole, those most likely to express pro-Confederate or anti-American sentiments tended to be conservatives and members of the aristocracy or gentry. The Earl of Shrewsbury looked upon "the trial of Democracy and its failure" in America with pleasure. "I believe that the dissolution of the Union is inevitable, and that men before me will live to see an aristocracy established in America."[1] The voice of the British establishment, *The Times*, considered the downfall of "the American colossus" a good "riddance of a nightmare…. Excepting a few gentlemen of republican tendencies, we all expect, we nearly all wish, success to the Confederate cause."[2] Charles Francis Adams believed that "the great body of the aristocracy and the wealthy commercial classes are anxious to see the United States go to pieces. On the other hand the middle and lower class sympathize with us."[3]

The leading spokesmen in Parliament for these middle and lower classes—the foremost "progressives" in Britain—John Bright (for whom Foreman has little respect), Richard Cobden, and William Forster, were strongly pro-Union. The famous liberal political philosopher John Stuart Mill believed that Confederate success would be "a victory of the powers of evil which would give courage to the enemies of progress and damp the spirits of its friends all over the civilized world."[4]

It is quite true that the slavery issue initially inhibited the support of British liberals

for the Union cause. As Lincoln repeatedly insisted during the war's first year, that cause was the restoration of the Union, not the abolition of slavery. Many Britons failed to appreciate the constitutional and political constraints that hindered efforts toward emancipation. "People do not quite understand Americans or their politics," observed Charles Francis Adams in June 1861. "They do not comprehend the connection which slavery has with [the war], because we do not at once preach emancipation. Hence they go to the other extreme and argue that it is not an element in the struggle."[5] An editorial in a British labor newspaper declared that since the North was "not fighting for the emancipation of the slaves, we are relieved from any moral consideration in their favor, and as the Southerners are not any worse than they are, why should we not get cotton? Why should we starve any longer?"[6]

The Emancipation Proclamation changed these attitudes almost overnight. Lincoln's edict on January 1, 1863, did "more for us here than all our former victories and all our diplomacy," wrote Henry Adams from London, where he served as private secretary to his father. "It has created an almost convulsive reaction in our favor."[7] Mass meetings in every part of the United Kingdom roared their approval of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Union cause. These meetings, reported Richard Cobden, "had a powerful effect on our newspapers and politicians. It has closed the mouths of those who have been advocating the side of the South…. Recognition of the South, by England, whilst it bases itself on Negro slavery, is an impossibility."[8]

Gary Gallagher's *The Union War* analyzes the relationship between Union and emancipation, not in its connection with foreign relations but with respect to the meaning of Union for the Northern people. We rarely speak of the "Union" today except when referring to a labor organization. But to mid-nineteenth-century Americans "Union" carried powerful meanings, analogous with "nation" and "country." It "represented the cherished legacy of the founding generation, a democratic republic with a constitution that guaranteed political liberty and afforded individuals a chance to better themselves economically," writes Gallagher. In this view of the Union, "slaveholding aristocrats who established the Confederacy…posed a direct threat not only to the long-term success of the American republic but also to the broader future of democracy."

This was the purpose that sustained the Northern people and especially their president through four years of bloody war. Gallagher recaptures the meaning of Union to the generation that fought for it. He rescues the "Cause" for which they fought from modern historians who maintain that the abolition of slavery was the

only achievement of the Civil War that justified all that death and destruction. Perhaps he spends a little too much time criticizing those historians—and even occasionally sets up a straw man to attack—but he does make his point with force and clarity.

In the process, however, he overstates the case against emancipation as an avowed purpose of the war for the Union. The very first sentence of the book states his thesis: "The loyal American citizenry fought a war for Union that also killed slavery." "Also" is the key word here; it implies that the death of slavery was a mere byproduct of the war. "Intention did not drive the process" by which the presence of Union soldiers in the South liberated slaves, Gallagher maintains.

'Not Up to Time; or, Interference Would Be Very Welcome'; a cartoon in favor of British intervention in the US Civil War, Punch*, September 13, 1862*

> Troops commanded by officers who cared nothing about black people…proved as destructive to slavery as those led by ardent advocates of emancipation. No matter how prejudiced their own attitudes, Union soldiers functioned as cogs in a grand military mechanism that inexorably ground down slavery.

Intentionality may have had more to do with the abolition of slavery than Gallagher is willing to grant. The invasion of slave states by the British army in the American Revolution liberated a good many slaves, but it did not end slavery because the British government had no intention of doing so. But from the beginning of the Civil War there were abolitionists and Republicans who believed that this war against a slaveholders' rebellion must end slavery, and their numbers grew as the war escalated. Congressional legislation confiscating the slave property of "rebels," the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution expressed a growing determination that slavery and the Union were incompatible. Despite enormous pressure to drop abolition as one of his conditions for peace when the war was going badly for the North in the summer of 1864, Lincoln refused to do so. By that time more than one hundred thousand black soldiers were fighting for the Union. "If they stake their lives for us they must be prompted by the strongest motive—even the promise of freedom," said Lincoln.

> And the promise being made, must be kept….

> Why should they give their lives for us, with full notice of our purpose to betray them?
>
> I should be damned in time and eternity for so doing.
>
> The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends and enemies, come what will.[9]

Gallagher acknowledges that by 1864 the Lincoln administration "added emancipation to Union as a nonnegotiable condition of any peace following United States victory." The seeds of that nonnegotiable condition were sown in the first months of the war, according to *1861: The Civil War Awakening*, Adam Goodheart's rich multitiered history of the North and its people as war first descended on the land. At Fortress Monroe, a Union garrison in Virginia at Hampton Roads where the James River flows into Chesapeake Bay, three slaves sought asylum on May 24, 1861. They had escaped from a Confederate camp across the Roads where they had been building fortifications for the rebel army. Major General Benjamin Butler met with them and heard their story. On Butler's staff was Theodore Winthrop, who had told his family as he departed for the front: "I go to put an end to slavery." When a Confederate officer, Major John Cary, came under flag of truce to ask General Butler to return the three slaves, the following exchange took place:

> Cary: "What do you mean to do with those negroes?"
>
> Butler: "I intend to hold them."
>
> Cary: "Do you mean, then, to set aside your constitutional obligation to return them?"
>
> Butler: "I mean to take Virginia at her word, as declared in the ordinance of secession passed yesterday. I am under no constitutional obligations to a foreign country, which Virginia claims to be."
>
> Cary: "But you say we cannot secede, and so you cannot consistently detain the negroes."
>
> Butler: "But you say you have seceded, so you cannot consistently claim them. I shall hold these negroes as contraband of war, since they are engaged in the construction of your battery and are claimed as your property."

Contraband of war! This novel description of escaped slaves was like a shot heard round the world. “An epigram abolished slavery in the United States,” wrote Theodore Winthrop shortly before he was killed in action on June 10, 1861. Butler’s epigram turned out to be the thin edge of a wedge driven into the heart of slavery. From that moment, slaves who came within Union lines—and there were soon thousands of them—were known as contrabands. Some abolitionists complained that this word dehumanized Negroes by equating them with property. But contraband soon meant freedman. The term became acceptable and universal, even among freed slaves themselves. “Never was a word so speedily adopted by so many people in so short a time,” marveled a Union officer.

The Lincoln administration approved Butler’s policy. The President was hearing from many of his constituents and Republican leaders that slavery must not survive this war for the Union. Senator James Doolittle of Wisconsin told Lincoln that the war “is to result in the entire abolition of Slavery.” The President’s private secretary, John Hay, who opened Lincoln’s mail, told him on May 7, 1861, that “his daily correspondence was thickly interspersed with such suggestions.”[10] The cause of Union and freedom would not be completely fused for another three years, but as Goodheart neatly puts it, when those three slaves showed up at Fortress Monroe in May 1861 “they joined the Union”—and the fusion began.

Goodheart quotes a sermon preached by a Baptist clergyman in Albany, New York, early in the war. If the North was “to give up her sons, simply that we can place the old flag-staff again in the hands of those who ask protection to slavery,” he told his congregation, then

> you will see an inglorious termination to the campaign. But, if we are to fight for freedom, if we are to wipe out the curse [of slavery] that infects our borders…then will our soldiers be animated by a heroic purpose that will build them up in courage, in faith, in honor.

It was rhetoric like this, according to *America Aflame*, David Goldfield’s sweeping narrative of the Civil War era, that brought on this “cruel and senseless war” in the first place. Goldfield places his interpretation in the tradition known as “revisionism” after a school of historians in the 1930s and 1940s. The revisionists denied that sectional differences between North and South were genuinely divisive. Disparities that existed did not have to lead to war; they could have, and should have, been accommodated peacefully within the political system. But self-serving politicians—a

"blundering generation," as one revisionist historian described them—whipped up passions in North and South for partisan purposes. The most guilty were antislavery radicals, even moderates like Lincoln, who harped on the evils of slavery and expressed a determination to rein in what they called the Slave Power. Their rhetoric goaded the South into a defensive response that finally caused Southern states to secede to get rid of these self-righteous Yankee zealots. [11]

Although not as stark in his presentation of a similar thesis, Goldfield makes clear his conviction that the war should have been avoided. His villains, however, are not self-serving and blundering politicians, but "the invasion of evangelical Christianity into the political debate as an especially toxic factor in limiting the options of political leaders." The "elevation of political issues into moral causes," especially antislavery, "poisoned the democratic process."

Goldfield never defines precisely what he means by evangelical Christianity. He mainly refers to social reform movements like temperance and abolitionism generated by the Second Great Awakening among Protestant denominations in the first half of the nineteenth century that injected moral fervor into politics, "especially in the Republican Party." His use of evangelicalism, however, tends to be loose and expansive. He tries to connect Lincoln with this tradition, but it is an uphill battle.

Lincoln's "House Divided" speech in 1858 "reflected a growing messianic sentiment" in his views, Goldfield maintains, because the metaphor was taken from a biblical passage in Matthew 12:25. "Lincoln not only identified the Republican Party with the forces of liberty and freedom," Goldfield asserts, "but also framed the debate as a contest between good and evil." "As I view the contest," he has Lincoln say, "it is not less than a contest for the advancement of the kingdom of Heaven or the kingdom of Satan." These words were not Lincoln's, however; they were written to Lincoln by an antislavery farmer. [12] Another example of careless attribution of evangelicalism concerns the "Secret Six" abolitionists who supported John Brown's raid in 1859 and their "close ties to evangelical Protestantism." Four of the six were Unitarians.

Goldfield is not consistent in his revisionist position. Summarizing what he considers the trumped-up debates over slavery's expansion in the 1840s and 1850s, he asserts that all too often "reality fled." In the controversy over the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which opened Kansas Territory to slavery, "reality, a rare commodity since the introduction of the Wilmot Proviso, became ever more

elusive…. Most of [the] issues worked little harm or benefit to either side," but "the reality, again, no longer mattered. In this atmosphere, demagogues prospered, and moderates faltered."

In a change of tune, however, Goldfield declares that the secession crisis of 1861 was concerned with "the core of the sectional problem," slavery. "It had always been thus." The war that ensued abolished slavery. "There may have been other means to achieve that noble end," Goldfield writes in what amounts to wishful thinking, for while noting that all of the slaves could have been purchased and freed for half the cost of the war, he acknowledges that there were almost no willing sellers in the slave states. And "a new and stronger nation emerged from the fire of war," he writes, a "nation energized and inspired by the war's ideals…. The war unleashed an economic revolution, unparalleled innovation, and a degree of affluence across a broader segment of society than any Western nation had known." Perhaps the Civil War was not so senseless after all.

Many Americans—perhaps most of them according to George Rable's *God's Almost Chosen Peoples*—would have seen the bad as well as the good accomplished by the war as God's will. "Men, women, and children, free and slave, Protestants, a growing number of Catholics, Mormons, and even the small number of Jews…shared a providential outlook on life" and "saw God's hand in the war's origins, course, and outcome." Religion in the Civil War has been an understudied subject, but Rable's thorough study goes a long way toward rectifying the neglect. In a heroic feat of research he has read hundreds of sermons, scoured scores of religious periodicals, studied the proceedings of hundreds of church conferences held during the war, and read scores of diaries and thousands of letters from soldiers and civilians to synthesize the providential meaning of the war to the people who experienced it.

Most clergymen, as well as their parishioners in both North and South, viewed the war as a holy crusade. With little or no debt to Saint Augustine, they came up with their own just-war theology. Unionists and Confederates alike believed fervently that God was on their side. Devout Confederate commanders like Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee, and similarly committed Union commanders like William S. Rosecrans and Oliver O. Howard, gave credit to the Lord for their victories. Defeats were God's judgment on the sins of His people in order to humble and discipline them to greater devotion and effort. Victories brought forth presidential proclamations for days of thanksgiving; defeats elicited decrees for days of fasting,

humiliation, and prayer.

People in both North and South became more religious as the war went on and on, the toll of death and destruction mounted, and God's will for His almost chosen peoples became more inscrutable. Soldiers facing death or maiming experienced religious conversions; many revivals occurred in the armies, especially in the Confederacy. Jefferson Davis was baptized in May 1862 and joined St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond. Two years later Bishop (and Lieutenant General) Leonidas Polk baptized Joseph E. Johnston, John Bell Hood, and several other Confederate generals in the Army of Tennessee.

Union general officers Francis Barlow, Winfield Scott Hancock (seated), John Gibbon, and David B. Barney, 1863; photograph by Mathew Brady

Abraham Lincoln also became more religious under the stresses of war. He occasionally attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, but he never joined a church. He did meditate more profoundly on the will of God in this war, however, than almost anyone else. Unlike most Northerners and Southerners, he did not claim that God was on his side. "It is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party," Lincoln mused in an undated private memorandum sometime in 1864. He could have "saved or destroyed the Union" without war, but He had not. And "he could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds."

In his second inaugural address on March 4, 1865, with the war near its victorious conclusion, Lincoln expanded this idea. "Both [parties] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other…. The prayers of both could not be answered," he said. "The Almighty has His own purposes," Lincoln continued:

> Let us suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came…. Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth

> piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether." [13]

At such moments, Lincoln would have agreed with Gary Gallagher. Human intention did not fully drive the process of emancipation. In the end, it was, somehow, God's will.

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1. 1
   Quoted in Ephraim D. Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (Russell and Russell, 1925, in two volumes), Vol. 2, p. 282. ↩

2. 2
   Quoted in Frank L. Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* , second edition, revised by Harriet C. Owsley (University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 86. ↩

3. 3
   Charles Francis Adams to Charles Francis Adams, Jr., December 25, 1862, in *A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861–1865* , edited by Worthington C. Ford (Houghton Mifflin) , in two volumes, 1920), Vol. 1, pp. 220–221. ↩

4. 4
   Quoted in *Europe Looks at the Civil War,* edited by Belle Becker Sideman and Lillian Friedman (Orion, 1960), p. 118. ↩

5. 5
   Charles Francis Adams to Charles Francis Adams, Jr., in Ford, *Cycle of Adams Letters* , Vol. 1, p. 14. ↩

6. 6
   The Working Man , October 5, 1861, quoted in Philip S. Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (Holmes and Meier, 1981), pp. 27–28. ↩

7. 7
   Henry Adams to Charles Francis Adams, Jr., January 23, 1863, in Ford, *Cycle of*

Adams Letters , Vol. 1, p. 243. ↩

8. 8
   Cobden to Charles Sumner, February 12, 1863, in Sideman and Friedman, *Europe Looks at the Civil War* , p. 222. ↩

9. 9
   In *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* , edited by Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), Vol. 7, pp. 500 and 507. ↩

0. 10
   Inside Lincoln's White House; The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay , edited by Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettlinger (Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), p. 19. ↩

1. 11
   For a discussion of the revisionists, see Thomas J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret the Civil War* , second edition (Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 291–328. For two examples of revisionist writings, see Avery Craven, *The Repressible Conflict* (Louisiana State University Press, 1939) and James G. Randall, "The Blundering Generation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* , No. 27 (June 1940). ↩

2. 12
   Quoted by Robert Johannsen, in his introduction to *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 9. ↩

3. 13
   Basler, *Collected Works of Lincoln* , Vol. 8, p. 333. ↩