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Venture into violence – a campaign to free the slaves or the right to secede from the Union?

A World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided by Amanda Foreman
Allen Lane, £30

by Geoffrey Goodman
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The American phenomenon, if never the American dream, has fascinated and baffled me for as long as I recall. The United States remains a massive landmark that defies easy analysis. It is, to be sure, a remarkable country; enormously creative, irrepressibly energetic, violent as it copes with corrupt fringes jostling with a biblical morality, yet also a unique nation, the first on the planet to try and mould a multicultural society into a single unified nation and then world power. Without doubt unique. And yet...

The principal quality of this extraordinary book on the American Civil War, circa 1861 to 1865, is that it offers an explanation of the American enigma. The deep message emerging from Amanda Foreman's magnum opus is that the brutal uprising a century and a half ago provides a clue to the mystique at the heart of the American psyche; it was a dis-United States battling with its own developing conscience more than Lincoln's determination to free the slaves. One thing is clear – the Civil War didn't end in 1865 and many of the ingredients which led to that volcanic eruption stay rooted to this day in American society.

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Thousands of books have been written about American history since the 13 colonies broke away from Britain. Yet few come closer to an explanation of the American enigma than Foreman's riveting 988 pages. Her great achievement lies in opening new doors to an understanding of the American puzzle. Her relentless 12 years of research to produce this book provides a remarkably detailed account of the war, with its internal as well as external implications, bringing fresh insights into American polymorphic society. It suggests a nation which has not fundamentally changed in character from that period or, indeed, since the Pilgrims turned their back on England.

Contemporary attitudes have little to do with any special relationship but are entombed in a love-hate attitude toward Britain and Europe going back to independence. The Civil War was a deep internal psychological battle first, to re-state independence from England and, second, to oppose any form of central government authority from a remote, even alien, place called Washington and, third, to establish a new localised aristocracy based on the settlers' discontent with traditional Englishness. Then they sought – and perhaps still seek – an illusory biblical morality with all its endemic violence.

The Civil War and Abraham Lincoln's magnificent campaign to free the black slaves of the South was an exceptional venture into violence. Lincoln himself may not have recognised this at the outset though he clearly did when, with victory in the air, he stood at Gettysburg in November 1863 looking across a battle zone where 23,000 federal casualties fell in the bloodiest battle of the war.

A fatigued, ageing and perhaps despairing President then made his historic speech. In it, as Foreman says, "Lincoln had captured the essential nature of the war. In a mere 272 words, the President had defined the moral purpose of the country's existence – democracy, freedom, equality – not only for the mourners of Gettysburg but for every subsequent generation of the American people." All this, according to Foreman, was rooted in the Revolution of 1776 that freed the pioneers from the English embrace. Except that it never entirely achieved that goal.

She reminds us how that conflict was one of the most brutal, savage and dehumanising events of all time. Quite as cruel as the Spanish Civil War, to read her descriptions of the epic battles at Bull Run, Antietam, Vicksburg, Chikamauga and Gettysburg, ending with the surrender by Robert E Lee's depleted Confederacy at Appomattox in April 1865. In modern terms, the carnage can be paralleled with the Somme, Stalingrad or the last days of Berlin. Deserters, on both sides, when recaptured faced water torture not dissimilar from that which happened in Iraq. Tens of thousands of those slaughtered were British volunteers who joined one side or the other – sometimes swapping in mid-bloodstream.

Foreman's tapestry weaves in reaction to the Civil War across the rest of the world, especially Britain. The English, in particular, were as divided as the Americans, albeit in a different manner.

Foreman sums up English public opinion by quoting William Michael Rossetti, who said he had never seen his compatriots so animated "in connection with any other non-English occurrences". The entire country, Foreman, adds, "divided over the merits of the Civil War and whether abolition, democracy, the Union or the right of self-determination had been the real principle at stake".

The same was true of the government. Technically, the British under Palmerston remained neutral. The reality was very different. Lincoln's emissaries in London and, still more, the Confederacy's envoys used every device of diplomacy and duplicity to involve Britain, and France, on their side.

The Royal Navy was frequently involved against blockade-runners from both sides. After one trigger-happy event, a US Navy boat boarded a British ship, the Trent, off the Bahamas bound for Europe carrying two former US senators turned Confederacy agents. Palmerston, outraged, was on the brink of declaring war against America. He sent 11,000 troops to Canada in 1862, one year into the Civil War, ready to invade the dis-United States to protect Canada, then still known as British North America.

At that stage, Palmerston believed the Confederacy was winning and shrewdly recognised that the southern aristocracy would do all they could to bring Britain into the war on their side, not least for a resentment of the North where, Confederate leaders claimed, "the dregs of Europe" – meaning immigrant Irish, Italians, Swedes, Dutch, German, Russian and Polish Jews, et al – had washed up. Everything resonated back to the break with England.

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The American Civil War, ostensibly to free the South from slavery, was bitterly contested in England, too. The ruling elite mainly backed the South while the masses supported the North, not least because the famine in cotton supplies to the mills of Lancashire and northern England led to huge unemployment.

America came close to tearing itself to pieces. The miracle is that it survived and then prospered to become the dominant world power. Yet it is a nation retaining many of those old doubts and uncertainties, still searching for an identity in a mould which contains its own forms of civil war.

About The Author

Geoffrey Goodman is a former industrial correspondent for the Daily Mirror