

FOR GENERATIONS, the American Civil War has been shrouded in clouds of millennial nationalism. Few events in US history have been as susceptible to providentialist narratives of inevitable moral triumph: stories of an exceptional nation reborn into its modern form, cleansed of its original sin of slavery and ready to shoulder its redemptive responsibilities in the drama of world history. Professional historians, no less than popularisers, have succumbed to this siren song. Even historians on the left, otherwise sceptical of nationalist military crusades, have embraced the dominant narrative of the Civil War. As in the historiography of World War Two, scorched earth tactics – systematic assaults on civilians, uncompromising demands for unconditional surrender – can be justified in the name of a crusade against evil. Few Americans of any ideological persuasion are willing to question the logic of total war when it results in the victory of freedom over slavery (or Fascism).

The problem with this perspective is not that it exaggerates the significance of slavery – no one except a few neo-Confederates questions slavery's centrality in the conflict – but that it too easily blends with the self-congratulatory complacency of the American civil religion, flattening the complexity of motives and reducing tragedy to melodrama. The quest for historical understanding is engulfed by the condemnation of the obvious wrong. 'It was his business to inveigh against evils, and perhaps there is no easier business,' Trollope said of the anti-slavery MP John Bright, a theatrical orator who couldn't be bothered with political detail. Celebrating the Civil War as a triumph of freedom over slavery is equally easy.

A few decades ago, US historians tried to complicate this heroic narrative. Guided at times by Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, Eugene Genovese, Eric Foner and David Brion Davis conceived slavery as a mode of organising labour, as well as a system of racial domination. This led to the recognition that advocates of 'free labour' had economic as well as humanitarian reasons for opposing slavery, and that the Northern victory – by identifying freedom with the ability to sell one's labour in the marketplace – reinforced the cultural hegemony of laissez-faire capitalism. This was not to suggest that the South was a pre-capitalist society (as Genovese at first implied): on the contrary, slavery demanded the degradation of human beings into commodities. But it did help to explain why, after the war, most Northerners were willing to leave the freed slaves to the mercy of their former masters – to leave them with 'nothing but freedom', in Foner's phrase. The emphasis on competing ways of organising labour, however partial and problematic, allowed interpretation to reach beyond the boundaries of moralistic uplift.

Uplift had a resurgence with the rise of Reagan, whose smiley-face chauvinism encouraged the proliferation of triumphalist historical narratives. The 1980s saw the return of millennial nationalism to Civil War historiography, both academic and popular, most prominently in the Pulitzer-prize winning synthesis of James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) – whose title alone suggested that we were back on fam-

iliar terrain – and in the sepia-tinted sentimentality of Ken Burns's documentary. In McPherson's influential work, a fixation on racial rather than class relations ensured that there would be no more discomfiting questions about the ambiguities of 'free labour'. While he acknowledged the role of contingency on the battlefield, there was never any question that he was chronicling an inexorable march of freedom.

Since the 1980s this self-congratulatory mode has remained dominant. With few exceptions (notably Harry Stout's brilliant 'moral history', *Upon the Altar of the Nation*), popular big-picture accounts of the Civil War continue to create an atmosphere of moral clarity and inevitable progress. To be sure, the historiography of slavery has exploded: dozens of works have detailed the human devastation it wrought, as well as the slaves' struggles to sustain their own dignity and secure their own liberty. But as one of the leading historians of slavery, Walter Johnson, recently observed, much of the newer scholarship has been incorporated into the triumphalist narrative. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this process was George W. Bush's speech in the summer of 2003, on Gorée Island off the coast of Senegal – a notorious depot in the slave trade. By resisting injustice, Bush announced, 'the very people traded into slavery helped to set America free.' Even the traffic in human flesh could serve America's divinely ordained mission.

Amanda Foreman's remarkable new book suggests that it takes a foreigner to clear the air of cant. By taking the British perspective, she captures the full complexity of the war: the confused aims and mixed motives of the combatants, the misperceptions of the foreigners whose favour they courted so assiduously. The result is a rich account on a stunningly broad canvas, populated by a fascinating array of characters. Mythic figures (Lincoln, Grant, Lee, Jackson), seen afresh, acquire sharper outlines. Second-tier players have their moment in the limelight: the secretary of state William Seward drinks too much and blusters about invading Canada; the US ambassador Charles Francis Adams keeps a stiff and chilly distance from London society, managing to seem both unformed and overly formal; the Confederate envoy James Mason says 'chaw' for 'chew', calls himself 'Jeems' and offends British officials with his crude racist remarks; the Southern spy Belle Boyd charms influential men with her deft flirtations. Meanwhile a motley British crowd jostles for involvement in the struggle: prodigal sons down on their luck, soldiers in search of adventure, journalists eager for a scoop. And more than a few British subjects, who share the misfortune of being on US premises at the wrong time, find themselves kidnapped into the Union or Confederate army.

Divinely Ordained Jackson Learns

A WORLD ON FIRE: AN EPIC HISTORY OF TWO NATIONS DIVIDED

by Amanda Foreman.

Penguin, 988 pp., £12.99, June, 978 0 141 04058 5

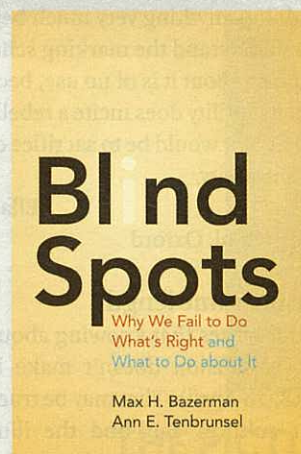
The overall effect of *A World on Fire* is to remind us that the Northern victory was a near thing. The outcome remained in doubt until November 1864, when Lincoln's reelection reinforced Union success on the battlefield, ensuring that the Federal government would refuse to negotiate peace with the Confederacy. For more than three years, British sympathy for the South had remained strong enough to supply the Confederate navy with ships and the Confederate army with ordnance, as well as to sustain substantial public support for a negotiated peace. Within the United States, Northern support for the war was ambivalent in many areas, especially as war aims widened from preserving the union to ending slavery: a move that strengthened support for the North in Great Britain. Southern opinion was divided as well, but grew more united and more embittered in response to the brutalities of the Northern invasion, which plundered cities, laid waste the countryside and left 50,000 civilians dead.

Federal and Confederate forces alike were plagued by desertions and forced to rely on incompetent, lethargic recruits to fill the mass graves that the generals were prepar-

ing for them in Tennessee and Virginia. The carnage was unprecedented as both armies repeatedly marched head on, often uphill, into concentrated fire from entrenched fortifications. By the end of the war, most participants would have no doubt agreed with Henry Morton Stanley (Dr Livingstone's Stanley), who fought for both sides. 'Glory,' he wrote, 'sickened me with its repulsive aspect, and made me suspect it was a glittering lie.' But the lie, of course, survived. 'The real war,' as Whitman said, 'will never get into the books.'

Still, *A World on Fire* does better than most. Foreman captures the confusion, futility and fear that enveloped most soldiers and many civilians as they were swept up in the slaughter. Foreman's war is not a triumphant march. It is a muddle of misunderstandings and misplaced aspirations, against a background of mass death. So it seemed from across the water. British opinion was divided from the outset. Despite widespread opposition to slavery, support for the South remained strong throughout most of the war, cutting across classes and regions.

The war began early in the morning of 12 April 1861, when Confederate artillery began shelling Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. The Federal garrison surrendered after 34 hours of bombardment. The British press, fed up with decades of Yankee bombast, pondered the death of the democratic experiment with ill-concealed satisfaction. 'Everybody is laughing at us,' Benjamin Moran, the under-secretary at the US Legation in London, complained. The *Saturday Review* jeered at



Blind Spots

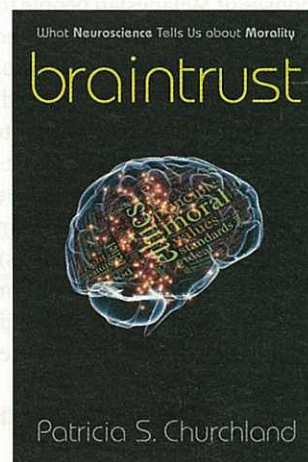
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Seward, who, 'though he cannot keep the Federal fort at Charleston, has several times announced his intention of annexing Canada'. In the *Economist*, Walter Bagehot compared the Confederate secession to the North American colonists' Declaration of Independence, warning the North against the futility of fighting to keep the South in the union; it would be 'vindictive, bloody and fruitless', he said. The first two predictions, at least, were on the mark.

BRITISH SUPPORT for the South stemmed from complex sources: nationalistic rivalry, relief that the brash upstart was receiving his comeuppance, admiration for 'Southern honour' and other Confederate pretensions to aristocratic values. Many English aristocrats simply did not like the Northern style, or lack of it. Henry Adams, secretary to his father the ambassador, admitted that both the older and younger generations of American diplomats felt 'awkward in an English house from a certainty that they were not precisely wanted there, and a possibility that they might be told so'. Beyond snobbery lay material concerns, especially the fear that a Northern blockade of Southern ports would cripple the British cotton industry – this led most of Liverpool to back Southern independence. They opposed what they saw as the sacrifice of English labour to the interests of Northern capital. Still, none of this would really have mattered, Foreman suggests, if the British could have believed that this was a war to end slavery. But they couldn't. So popular opposition to the war persisted, even as a parliamentary majority managed to block formal recognition of the Confederate States of America.

Make the war about slavery, the pro-Northern British urged Lincoln: that would change everything. But Lincoln knew how politically divisive it would be at home to turn the war into an abolitionist cause. As the *Economist* observed, with only some hyperbole, 'the great majority of the people in the Northern states detest the coloured population even more than do the Southern whites.' In October 1861, when General John C. Fremont freed the slaves in the parts of Missouri his troops had occupied, Lincoln publicly repudiated him and the larger goal of abolition. Meanwhile the Confederacy was acquiring some influential allies – among them Gladstone, who was then chancellor of the exchequer and would soon after the war become prime minister.

After the stunning casualties at Antietam, Gladstone and the foreign secretary, Lord John Russell, agreed that a humanitarian crisis was at hand in America; Gladstone feared one in Lancashire as well, among the cotton mill workers. He called for an end to the war through arbitration, declaring that the Confederates 'have made a nation'. Charles Francis Adams shuddered, conceding privately that the South had made themselves seem underdogs and victims and had made ending the war look like a humanitarian cause. The rest of the cabinet voted against Gladstone and Russell's proposal for a joint foreign intervention (with France and Russia) to end the war, but this episode still suggested how much legitimacy the Confederate cause possessed in the highest circles of the British government.

Part of the Confederates' appeal was rooted in British revulsion against the sort of spreadeagle Northern nationalism that fostered Seward's threats to invade Canada. But Seward worked more effectively behind the scenes than his public bloviations suggested. This became apparent during the Trent affair, which nearly led to war between the Union and Great Britain. On 8 November 1861, Captain Charles Wilkes of the USS *San Jacinto* came alongside the British mail steamer *Trent*, forcibly boarded her, and removed the Confederate diplomats James Mason and John Slidell, along with their secretaries. Wilkes 'had the reputation of being a bully and a braggart', Foreman observes, and 'had clearly violated international law' in taking political prisoners by force from a neutral vessel.

But Wilkes became an overnight hero in the American North. Even Lincoln was jubilant, until he realised the gravity of the rift with Great Britain. Lord Lyons, at the British Legation in Washington, declared the seizure of Mason and Slidell 'a direct insult to the British flag'. The Admiralty issued a worldwide alert, and the War Office drew up strategic plans. London and Liverpool erupted in pro-Confederate demonstrations; street-corner salesmen hawked rebel banners while Adams fretted ineffectually and Moran ground his teeth. In Washington, at a ball for the Portuguese minister, Seward warned Britain against war with the US. 'We will wrap the whole world in flames!' he announced. There was 'no power so remote that she will not feel the fire of our battle and be burned by our conflagration'. He had been drinking again.

Yet Foreman shows that Seward wanted reconciliation, not war. He worked with Lyons behind the scenes, realising that it was politically unpopular but legally necessary to return Mason and Slidell. Seward's moderation won him the undying enmity of Senator Charles Sumner, the treasury secretary Salmon Chase and the other Radical Republicans in Lincoln's cabinet. Eventually they forced Seward to offer his resignation, which Lincoln refused. Meanwhile the Confederate envoys did minimal damage to the Union cause. Slidell, the son of a New York candlemaker who fled a scandal involving a pistol fight and reinvented himself as a New Orleans lawyer, cultivated a suavity that went down well in Paris. But the French wouldn't make a move towards recognition unless Britain led the way. It was Mason's job to persuade them, and he bungled it. A scion of the Virginia slaveryocracy, he affected a 'chomping heartiness' (in Foreman's phrase) that didn't sit well with London society. He consistently overplayed his hand.

Still the South sustained British support, much of it based on the assumption – or, more plausibly, the wish – that they would free their slaves as soon as they won independence. Take the case of Lt Col. Arthur Fremantle of the Coldstream Guards. An opponent of slavery, Fremantle initially supported the North but was repelled by Seward's early bombast and soon developed a fascination with the rebel cause. He applied for leave of absence to visit the scenes of war in Mississippi and Virginia, and met many Southerners, not one of whom could imagine freeing his slaves under any circum-

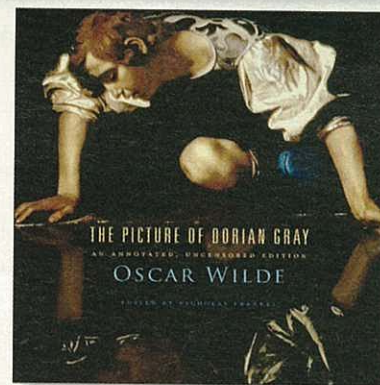
stances. Even so Fremantle concluded: 'I think that if the Confederate states were left alone, the system would be much modified and amended.' This belief was so widespread among Southern sympathisers in Britain that when Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 (declaring slaves in the rebel states 'forever free' from 1 January 1863), the pro-Confederate Liverpool businessman James Spence was inspired to imagine that the South should issue one, too.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, few British enthusiasts for the South could believe that it was fighting for slavery. So it was easy for them to sanitise the conflict as simply a war for Southern independence, and celebrate the grandeur of its heroes. Robert E. Lee was an Olympian figure, always described as 'magnificent' by English visitors, and Stonewall Jackson was a martyr – to what it was not clear. Jackson's death evoked an outpouring of sympathy and admiration from the entire British population, including fierce opponents of slavery. In their eyes, the South stood for something more than slavery. The region, one British observer noted, was full of contradictions: 'its people combined genteel manners with ancient barbarism, they were brave in the face of appalling deprivation, and personally charming even when proclaiming their bitterness at their betrayal by their British cousins,' who still refused to grant them diplomatic recognition.

Then there was the war itself, the effects of which were horrific to behold, even from afar. So British antiwar groups survived and flourished. Spence's Southern Independence

Association combined anti-slavery and pro-secession views, while the Rev. Francis Tremlett joined with the Confederate naval officer and oceanographer Matthew Fontaine Maury to found the Society for Promoting the Cessation of Hostilities in America, a group with overtly pacifist aims. In August 1864, the British public went wild for a petition demanding an end to the bloodshed – the 'peace address' – signing it by the tens of thousands, and in October that year a Confederate Bazaar in Liverpool raised £17,000 for the Confederate army. Support for the South died hard.

This was partly because the North continued to send mixed messages. To be sure, the importance of the Emancipation Proclamation gradually seeped through. Books and pamphlets proliferated, making the case for the North, insisting that the war now had a moral purpose beyond mere nationalism. But the Northerners themselves seemed less and less sure that the struggle was worthwhile. Their opposition to the war persisted and spread, especially as the Union army failed repeatedly on the battlefield and at times dealt clumsily with domestic opposition. On 4 May 1863 General Ambrose Burnside arrested Senator Clement Vallandigham of Ohio, at his house in Dayton. Vallandigham was the leading antiwar Democrat, but he didn't consider himself a Confederate sympathiser. Burnside charged him with treason and arranged a kangaroo court that found the senator guilty and sentenced him to imprisonment in an army fort. Vallandigham became a hero throughout the Midwest. Lincoln, embarrassed, commuted the sentence to banishment,



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and Vallandigham fled to Canada, but his popularity underscored the widespread Northern disillusionment with the war.

In July 1863, disillusionment flared into violence, as 50,000 rioters roared through New York City for five days, protesting the inequities of the new military draft (among other provisions, the law allowed men to purchase substitutes for \$300). As usual in US history, race displaced class as the governing social category. The rioters focused their rage, as Foreman observes, 'on the two classes of persons they considered most responsible for the war: negroes and those who defended them'. Fremantle, who had just arrived in New York, 'saw a negro pursued by the crowd take refuge with the military; he was followed by loud cries of "Down with the bloody nigger! Kill all niggers!" etc.' Clearly the North was not united in an effort to free the slaves – or even to save the union.

Still Lincoln was determined to see the struggle through to victory. In November 1863, in his Gettysburg Address, he widened his war aims to include 'a new birth of freedom'. This was not a mere rhetorical flourish. It meant that full emancipation was on the agenda. No wonder black recruits began to flock into the Union army. Whether the white North shared their enthusiasm remained to be seen. Certainly racism was rampant on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, as was weariness with the war. Widespread desertions and failures to meet draft quotas led to the practice of 'crimping' for both armies – kidnapping recruits, mostly foreigners, who were shot if they tried to desert. Those who stayed were often determined to avoid a fight if possible. Robert Neve, an Englishman who had joined the Union army, noticed amid the carnage at Chattanooga that 'several officers and men got sheltered behind the trees, and kept waving their hats and cheering men up to a great degree, not even caring about firing a shot at the enemy.' As Foreman observes, 'nothing was ever uniform in battle' – least of all the conduct of the cannon fodder.

From across the Atlantic, the moral meaning of the war seemed nowhere near as clear as a struggle between freedom and slavery. This was not just a matter of Englishmen being in denial over Southern complicity with human bondage. The confusion and division of Northern war aims also made for a murky moral picture. And so did

the emerging Northern strategy of total war – which included a devastating assault on Southern civilians.

AS EARLY AS May 1862, in New Orleans, Southerners got a taste of what they could expect from a Union military occupation. Benjamin Butler, the commander of the occupying forces and a lawyer in private life, had a well-deserved reputation for military incompetence and political corruption. He immediately set up what Foreman calls a 'judicial ransom system': affluent men were arrested on trumped up charges, and released only after bribes were paid by their wives or children. Everything was set up for systematic plunder. 'Federal officers treated private property in the Crescent City as though it was theirs for the taking,' Foreman writes. Families were evicted without notice; the next day their houses were ransacked. It is hard to see such practices as part of the march of moral progress.

Like most occupying forces, the Federal garrison in New Orleans faced the unremitting hostility of the subject population – who, with so many men gone to war, were mostly women. 'They wore Confederate colours,' Foreman writes, 'sang songs, hissed, spat, turned their backs and on one famous occasion dumped the contents of a chamberpot on Union soldiers.' Butler responded with his Woman Order, which stated that 'hereafter, when any female shall by word, gesture or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation.' The vision of genteel ladies reduced to common prostitutes inflamed the chivalric imagination. Butler could not have more effectively provoked Southern rage and determination to resist the occupiers had he deliberately set out to do so. But the British public, too – including opponents of slavery – were appalled by Butler's conduct. It undermined Northern claims to high moral purpose and provided another argument for negotiating an end to a barbarous war.

The destruction of civilian society quickly became a key part of the Northern invasion – with the shelling, looting and burning of cities from Vicksburg, Mississippi and Alexandria, Louisiana in the west to Atlanta and Savannah in the east, not to mention innumerable towns and homesteads in be-

tween. When he torched Atlanta, General Sherman let his 'bummers' loose among the civilian population, telling them to do what they would, short of mass rape and murder. When he set out on his march to the sea from Atlanta, he promised to 'make Georgia howl!' and 'make its inhabitants feel that war and individual ruin are synonymous terms'. By 'ruin', he meant everything from homelessness and impoverishment to starvation and death. General Philip Sheridan was equally straightforward about his intentions. 'The people must be left with nothing but their eyes to weep with over the war,' he said, as he turned the Shenandoah Valley into a wasteland of burned fields and ruined homesteads.

Frank Vizetelly was in the neighbourhood, reporting and drawing (as he had been throughout the war) for the *Illustrated London News*. 'The sight of emaciated women pleading with soldiers for bread to feed their children led him to accuse Union troops of deliberately causing mass starvation among the civilians,' Foreman writes. The charge was accurate, and provided British observers with another humanitarian argument for bringing the war to a close. Vizetelly himself embodied another reason for the persistence of pro-Southern sentiments in Britain. The English press, led by the *Times*, was nearly unanimous in its scepticism towards Northern war aims and its sympathy for the South. This was partly because their reporters on the ground were as likely as not to be Confederate sympathisers. Vizetelly was among the most interesting. He was the *Illustrated London News*'s star war correspondent and artist, as well the brother of the editor. 'A big, florid, red-bearded bohemian', according to Foreman, he loved imitating accents, telling stories, and singing boisterous songs with his mates in the pub. He constantly teetered between depression and mania, and when he wasn't distracted by the thrill of danger became self-destructive and reckless. Somehow he survived the war.

Originally pro-Northern, Vizetelly had a change of heart early in the war, after he socialised with some Southerners in Memphis and saw how wide and deep their commitment to separation was. Unable to believe that the North was determined to end slavery or the South to defend it, he saw the war as a fight for Southern independence and asked: why not just let the Confederacy go? The question hung in the minds of many British observers, planted there by Vizetelly and other pro-Southern journalists but nourished by revulsion at the Northern invasion.

The Confederate army's foray into the North was another matter. Lee had given strict orders against straggling and looting, and managed to enforce them most of the time. Fremantle was there, and according to Foreman he believed he was witnessing 'a rare event in military history: an invasion unadorned by mass rape and murder'. Lee's behaviour was almost comically punctilious: when he noticed some fence rails had been knocked askew, he dismounted and tidied them up himself. His respect for civilian lives and property was real, a remnant of the West Point code he had learned in the days before the war, when men still believed that war had rules. This chivalric ideal,

however easily sentimentalised or exaggerated, nevertheless marked a sharp contrast between Lee's army en route to Gettysburg and the Union invaders anywhere else.

To complicate that contrast, it is worth remembering what Foreman makes clear: Confederate soldiers were perfectly capable of atrocities themselves – particularly towards surrendering black soldiers, whom they routinely shot rather than take prisoner. Confederate guerrilla fighters made few distinctions between soldiers and civilians, and General Jackson might well have become the South's version of General Sherman, had he had the resources and opportunity. Towards the end of the war, a Confederate terrorist called Jacob Thompson set up a cell in Canada: he and his fellow plotters planned to set New York City ablaze by planting fire bombs in 19 hotels, two theatres and Barnum's Museum. But they forgot 'the basic rule of arson' (that fire needs oxygen), planting the bombs in closed bedrooms and cupboards, where they soon fizzled out. The smoke and fumes created mass panic, but no one died. The intention was mass murder, but the outcome was opera bouffe – a far cry from Sheridan's ride and Sherman's march.

In the end, the logic of total war drove all before it. This became most apparent when in December 1864 the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, sent his Congressional ally Duncan Kenner to Britain with a proposal that the South would abolish slavery in exchange for diplomatic recognition. Kenner arrived in London in February 1865, and on 14 March the oafish Mason insisted on delivering the request to Palmerston, who was then prime minister. It was well past the time when any such proposal might have succeeded. By 1865, the US Congress's approval of the 13th Amendment had made emancipation an official consequence of the war, which the Union armies had already won on the battlefield. The day before Mason met with Palmerston, the Confederate Congress voted to recruit slaves into the Confederate army, recognising (as the Confederate secretary of state, Robert Hunter, put it) that 'to arm the negroes is to give them freedom.' The irony was exquisite, not to say tragic. In order to continue fighting for independence, Confederate leaders were ultimately prepared to dismantle the institution they had started the war to defend. The pro-slavery revolution consumed itself.

The dénouement of the war portended the shape of things to come. When the defeated Confederates surrendered their arms and regimental flags in Richmond on 12 April 1865 (three days after Lee surrendered at Appomattox), Foreman writes, 'the Federal guard stood to attention and presented arms, inspiring the Confederates to do the same – "honor answering honor", in the words of the attending Federal general, Joseph Chamberlain.' There is something moving about this ritual of mutual respect between bitter combatants. But there is also something a little troubling about it. The scene prefigures the ways the war would be conventionally commemorated for more than a century to come: an epic struggle between the white North and the white South, resulting in a reborn nation, ready to play its divinely ordained role on the world stage. □

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