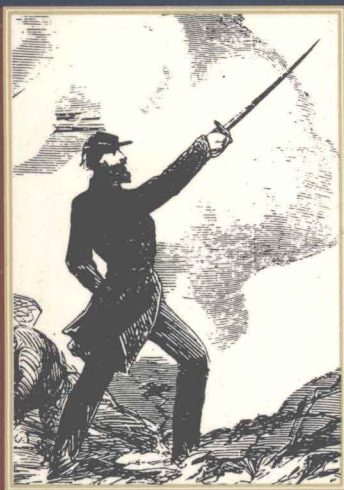


# DRAWN WITH THE SWORD

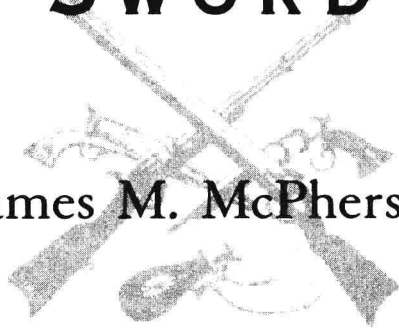


REFLECTIONS ON THE  
AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

JAMES M. McPHERSON

# **DRAWN WITH THE SWORD**

James M. McPherson



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**TO MY FATHER**

**AND THE**

**MEMORY OF**

**MY MOTHER**

*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.”*

Abraham Lincoln  
second inaugural address  
March 4, 1865

## PREFACE

IN 1976 A DELEGATION OF HISTORIANS FROM THE SOVIET UNION visited the United States to participate in commemorations of the bicentennial of the American Revolution. Upon their arrival, a local host asked them which sites they would like to visit first. He assumed that they would want to see Independence Hall, or perhaps Lexington and Concord, or Williamsburg and Yorktown. But the answer was none of the above. They wished to go first to Gettysburg. The host—a historian of the Revolution and the early republic—was dumfounded. Why Gettysburg? he asked. Because, they replied, it is the American Stalingrad—the battlefield in America's Great Patriotic War where so many gave the last full measure of devotion that the United States might not perish from the earth.

Some historians might question whether the battle of Gettysburg was as crucial a turning point in the Civil War as the battle of Stalingrad was in World War II. And many might challenge the implied comparison of the Confederacy to Nazi Germany. But few would gainsay the importance of the Civil War as a defining experience in American history equal to and perhaps even greater than the Revolu-

tion itself. The war of 1861–1865 resolved two fundamental questions left unresolved by the war of 1776–1783: whether the United States would endure as one nation, indivisible; and whether slavery would continue to mock the ideals of liberty on which the republic was founded.

Little wonder, then, that popular interest in the Civil War eclipses interest in any other aspect of American history—a phenomenon analyzed in chapter 4 of this book. One reason for our fascination with the Civil War is that momentous issues were at stake: slavery and freedom; racism and equality; sectionalism and nationalism; self-government and democracy; life and death. The crucible of armed conflict called forth leaders who have acquired almost mythical stature in the American pantheon. These issues and leaders are the subjects of the essays that follow. Several themes tie the essays together: slavery as a polarizing issue that split the country and brought war (part 1); the evolution of the conflict from a limited war for restoration of the old Union to a “total war” for a new birth of freedom (parts 2 and 4); the role of blacks in the war (parts 2 and 4); the reasons for Northern victory (part 3); political and military leadership (parts 3 and 4); the enduring impact of the war on consciousness and institutions abroad as well as at home (parts 2, 4, and 5).

All of the essays in this volume except chapter 15 have been previously published as independent articles, lectures, or review essays, but each has been modified and updated for publication here. Each is complete in itself, but if I have done the job right, they also fit together in a cohesive pattern of chapters that can be read consecutively from beginning to end. Although the essays are grounded in many years of reading and research, they are more interpretive than monographic and I have therefore confined the footnotes mainly to citations for quotations.

The essays were written for all three of the “audiences” described in chapter 15. I hope that they may contain insights of value to professional historians, Civil War “buffs,” and “general readers” alike. In 1873, as noted in chapter 5, Mark Twain wrote that the Civil

War had “uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, transformed the social life of half the country, and wrought so profoundly upon the entire national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations.” If readers will take away from this book a greater understanding of how and why it did so, I will have accomplished my purpose.

*Princeton, N.J.*

J. M. M.

*July 1995*



## PROVENANCE OF THE CONTENTS

ALL BUT THE FINAL ESSAY IN THIS VOLUME HAVE BEEN PREVIOUSLY published. In most cases, however, I have updated and slightly revised the essays in order to give the volume thematic coherence. I am indebted to the publications that own the copyrights to previously published articles for permission to reprint them here in their modified form. In some cases the original essay was published under a different title, as indicated below.

1. "Antebellum Southern Exceptionalism: A New Look at an Old Question," *Civil War History* 29 (1983), 230-44.
2. "Tom on the Cross," published originally as the Introduction to Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), xi-xx.
3. "The War of Southern Aggression," *New York Review of Books*, 19 January 1989, 16-20.
4. "The War that Never Goes Away," first published as "A War That Never Goes Away," *American Heritage* 41 (1990), 41-49.
5. "From Limited to Total War, 1861-1865," first published as

"From Limited to Total War: Missouri and the Nation, 1862–1865," *Gateway Heritage: Magazine of the Missouri Historical Society* 12 (1992), 4–19.

6. "Race and Class in the Crucible of War," first published as "Wartime," *New York Review of Books*, 12 April 1990, 33–35.

7. "The *Glory* Story," first published as "The 'Glory Story': The 54th Massachusetts and the Civil War," *New Republic*, 8 and 15 January 1990, 22–27.

8. "Why Did the Confederacy Lose?" first published as "American Victory, American Defeat," in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Why the Confederacy Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15–42.

9. "How the Confederacy Almost Won," first published as "How the North Nearly Lost," *New York Review of Books*, 12 October 1989, 43–46.

10. "Lee Dissected," first published as "How Noble Was Robert E. Lee?" *New York Review of Books*, 7 November 1991, 10–14.

11. "Grant's Final Victory," first published as "Ulysses S. Grant's Final Victory," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 2 (1990), 96–103.

12. "A New Birth of Freedom," first published as "Liberating Lincoln," *New York Review of Books*, 21 April 1994, 7–10, and "The Art of Abraham Lincoln," *New York Review of Books*, 16 July 1992, 3–5.

13. "Who Freed the Slaves?" *Reconstruction* 2 (1994), 35–40.

14. "'The Whole Family Man': Lincoln and the Last Best Hope Abroad," in Robert E. May, ed., *The Union, the Confederacy, and the Atlantic Rim* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1995), 131–58.

15. "What's the Matter with History?" first delivered as a paper at a conference entitled "The State of Historical Writing in North America," at the University of San Marino, Republic of San Marino, 6 June 1995.

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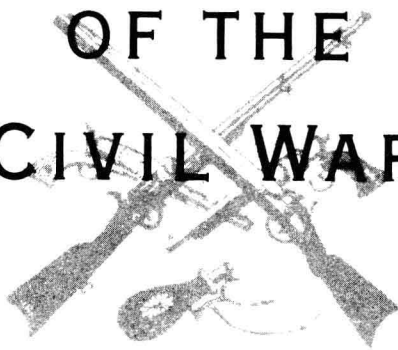
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I

ORIGINS  
OF THE  
CIVIL WAR





# 1

## ANTEBELLUM SOUTHERN EXCEPTIONALISM

### *A New Look at an Old Question*

THE THEME OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM PERMEATED WRITING about the United States from its beginning but has come under attack in recent years. Ever since Hector St. John Crèvecoeur asked his famous question in 1782, "What Is the American, This New Man?" native and foreign commentators alike have sought to define what supposedly makes the United States exceptional, indeed unique, among peoples of the world. Reaching the height of its influence in the 1950s, the exceptionalist school argued that something special about the American experience—whether it was abundance, free land on the frontier, the absence of a feudal past, exceptional mobility and the relative lack of class conflict, or the pragmatic and consensual liberalism of our politics—set the American people apart from the rest of humankind. During the last three decades, however, the dominant trends in American historiography have challenged and perhaps crippled the exceptionalist thesis. Historians have demonstrated the existence of class and class conflict, ideological politics, land speculation, and patterns of economic and social development similar to those of western Europe which placed the United States

in the mainstream of modern North Atlantic history, not on a special and privileged fringe.<sup>1</sup>

While the notion of American exceptionalism has suffered considerable damage, another exceptionalist interpretation remains apparently live and well. Even though America may not be as different from the rest of the world as we thought, the South seems to have been different from the rest of America. In this essay, "Southern exceptionalism" refers to the belief that the South has "possessed a separate and unique identity . . . which appeared to be out of the mainstream of American experience."<sup>2</sup> Or as Quentin Compson (in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*) expressed it in reply to his Canadian-born college roommate's question about what made Southerners tick: "You can't understand it. You would have to be born there."

The idea of Southern exceptionalism, however, has also come under challenge. The questions whether the South was indeed out of the mainstream and, if so, whether it has recently been swept into it have become lively issues in Southern historiography. The clash of viewpoints can be illustrated by a sampling of titles or subtitles of books that have appeared in recent decades. On one side we have *The Enduring South*, *The Everlasting South*, *The Idea of the South*, *The Lasting South*, *The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness*, and *What*

1. For the pros and cons of the exceptionalism thesis, the following are valuable: Laurence Veysey, "The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered," *American Quarterly* 31 (1979), 455-77; Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement," *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (1984), 1-24; Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism* (Oxford, 1991); Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review* 96 (1991), 1031-55, 1068-72; Michael McGerr, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History,'" *American Historical Review* 96 (1991), 1056-67; and Michael Kammen, "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration," *American Quarterly* 45 (1993), 1-43.

2. Monroe L. Billington, ed., *The South: A Central Theme?* (Huntington, N.Y., 1976), p. 1.



*Made the South Different?*—all arguing, in one way or another, that the South was and continues to be different. On the other side we have *The Southerner as American*, *The Americanization of Dixie*, *Epitaph for Dixie*, *Southerners and Other Americans*, *The Vanishing South*, and *Into the Mainstream*. Some of these books insist that “the traditional emphasis on the South’s differentness . . . is wrong historically.”<sup>3</sup> Others concede that while the South may once have been different, it has ceased to be or is ceasing to be so. There is no unanimity among this latter group of scholars about precisely when or how the South joined the mainstream. Some emphasize the civil rights revolution of the 1960s; others the bulldozer revolution of the 1950s; still others the chamber of commerce Babbittry of the 1920s; and some the New South crusade of the 1880s. As far back as 1869 the Yankee novelist John William De Forest wrote of the South: “We shall do well to study this peculiar people, which will soon lose its peculiarities.” As George Tindall has wryly remarked, the Vanishing South has “staged one of the most prolonged disappearing acts since the decline and fall of Rome.”<sup>4</sup>

Some historians, however, would quarrel with the concept of a Vanishing South because they believe that the South as a separate, exceptional entity never existed—with of course the ephemeral exception of the Confederacy. A good many other historians insist not only that a unique South did exist before the Civil War, but also that its sense of being under siege by an alien North was the underlying cause of secession. A few paired quotations will illustrate these conflicting interpretations.

In 1960 one Southern historian maintained that “no picture of the Old South as a section confident and united in its dedication to a neo-feudal social order, and no explanation of the Civil War as a conflict between ‘two civilizations,’ can encompass the complexity

3. Charles Grier Sellers, ed., *The Southerner as American* (Chapel Hill, 1960), pp. v–vi.

4. George Brown Tindall, *The Ethnic Southerners* (Baton Rouge, 1976), p. ix.