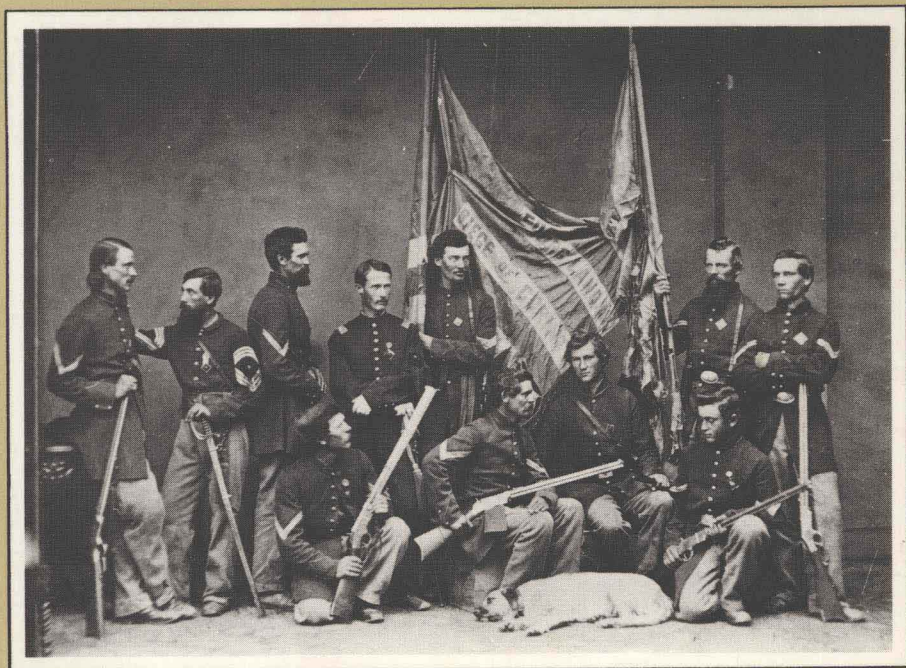


EARL J. HESS



LIBERTY, VIRTUE, AND PROGRESS

*Northerners and Their War
for the Union*

LIBERTY, VIRTUE, AND PROGRESS

*Northerners and Their War
for the Union*

EARL J. HESS



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

1988

Copyright © 1988 by New York University
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hess, Earl J.

Liberty, virtue, and progress.

(American social experience series ; 10)

Includes index.

1. United States—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—
Social aspects. 2. United States—Politics and
government—Civil War, 1861–1865. I. Title. II. Series.

E468.9.H57 1988 973.7 88-1620

ISBN 0-8147-3451-0

New York University Press books are Smyth-sewn and printed
on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

The American Social Experience Series

GENERAL EDITOR: JAMES KIRBY MARTIN

EDITORS: PAULA S. FASS, STEVEN H. MINTZ,
CARL PRINCE, JAMES W. REED & PETER N. STEARNS

1. *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns*

JOSEPH T. GLATTHAAR

2. *Childbearing in American Society: 1650-1850*

CATHERINE M. SCHOLTEN

3. *The Origins of Behaviorism: American Psychology, 1870-1920*

JOHN M. O'DONNELL

4. *New York City Cartmen, 1667-1850*

GRAHAM RUSSELL HODGES

5. *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights: Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party, 1910-1928*

CHRISTINE A. LUNARDINI

6. *Mr. Jefferson's Army: Political and Social Reform of the Military Establishment, 1801-1809*

THEODORE J. CRACKEL

7. *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs*

MARGARET WASHINGTON CREEL

8. *"A Mixed Multitude": The Struggle for Toleration in Colonial Pennsylvania*

SALLY SCHWARTZ

9. *Women, Work, and Fertility, 1900-1986*

SUSAN HOUSEHOLDER VAN HORN

10. *Liberty, Virtue, and Progress: Northerners and Their War for the Union*

EARL J. HESS

Acknowledgments

This book began as a dissertation for the American Studies Committee at Purdue University. Work for the completion of the dissertation was facilitated by two David Ross Grants, in 1984–85 and 1985–86, from the Graduate School of Purdue University. Further financial support came from the American Studies Program and the History Department at Purdue University. All of this support was not only gratefully accepted but essential to the completion of the work. In addition, an Advanced Research Grant from the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, greatly aided in the final stages of research.

The members of my dissertation committee, Lester H. Cohen and Robert E. May of the Department of History and Leonard Neufeldt of the Department of English, provided thoughtful evaluations of the work, which aided in its improvement. Other individuals who offered me their advice and personal encouragement at the dissertation stage included Darlene Clark Hine of the Department of History, John H. Thompson of Oklahoma Christian College, Oklahoma City, Dennis L. Noble of Port Angeles, Washington, and Richard J. Sommers, Archivist-Historian of the U.S. Army Military History Institute.

I also wish to thank several individuals who read the manuscript and kindly offered helpful suggestions for turning it into a book. They include: John J. Contreni, head of the Department of History, Purdue

University; James M. McPherson of Princeton University; George M. Fredrickson, Edgar E. Robinson Professor of United States History, Stanford University; Reid Mitchell of Princeton University; and Charles W. Royster, T. Harry Williams Professor of American History, Louisiana State University.

It is almost a truism that the dissertation director is the individual singled out for special acknowledgment. The major professor usually bears the brunt of his student's follies, flights of fancy, triumphs, and tragedies. In this case, I can assert that Harold D. Woodman has borne his share. In addition to chairing the American Studies Committee, teaching, and working on major research projects of his own, he always had time to discuss whatever was on my mind. His scholarly ability, patience, dedication to his profession, and his personal kindness to one who needed all these things in a mentor were greatly admired and appreciated. His example taught me not only what a historian should do in the classroom and when formulating a research project, but how a scholar should act in all facets of his profession. I hope that the extent to which this work offers something worthy to the scholarly community will serve as a testimony to his skill as an educator and historian and to his personal commitment to achievement.

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	i
1. Freedom and Self-Government	4
2. The Nation's Crisis	18
3. Coming to Terms	32
4. Liberty and War	56
5. White Dissent, Black Freedom	81
6. Continuity and Change	103
Notes	129
Index	151

Introduction

This study grew from a desire to understand how a society emotionally conducts a long, costly war effort. I wanted to discover what factors motivated Northerners to support the war to save the Union and then to sustain their war effort in the face of the unexpectedly high cost in battlefield suffering. After reading numerous personal sources from both soldiers and civilians, it became clear that ideas and cultural values played a highly significant role. I argue strongly for ideology and culture as major—if not key—motivations for any society engaged in a war that is large enough to demand the support of a majority of its citizens. I concentrate on one society and one war effort to illustrate this generalization.

The cultural values that motivated Northern society and the ideas that were connected with those values were at the basis of American identity. Self-government, democracy, individualism, egalitarianism, and self-control did not necessarily complete the list of cultural values underlying the Northern war effort, but they were the values most consistently discussed by a wide variety of people in and out of uniform. These values were the common property of the Northern people; they were instrumental in promoting a consensus and provided a commonly understood language that served to explain the Southern rebellion and why it was important for Unionists to crush it. War was an enterprise containing forces that could tear a people apart just as

easily as draw them together. Ideology possessed great potential for halting the disintegration of purpose. Ideas that were basic to the very definition of American nationalism were reasserted; the war forced Northerners to rethink their sometimes automatic allegiance to them, conclude they were still valuable, and use them to justify their war effort.

Even as ideology brought people together, it worked to separate them when battlefield defeat and a realization of the tremendous effort needed to defeat the Confederacy became apparent. By the summer of 1862, a fracture between those Northerners who supported new, more radical policies to prosecute the war and those who could not condone such measures as conscription, confiscation of private property, and the emancipation of slaves began to turn the Northern war effort into one of the most divisive in American history. Those who protested such policies retained their belief in the fundamental cause for prosecuting the war; their devotion to the Union and the ideal of self-government remained strong. But they feared the new measures might weaken or destroy liberty in the North, and they framed their objections in ideological terms. Dissenters were in the awkward position of opposing the means while continuing to support the ends of the war. The dissenters' harassed plea for common faith in their definition of American values will be discussed, but the vigorous prosecutors of the Union war effort—those who supported the new policies and justified them through ideology—are the main subjects of this study.

To sustain a major conflict such as the Civil War, even dissenting Northerners had to assert their belief in the principles of their national existence. Rather than being guided by events, Northerners made a conscious decision to pursue and sustain their effort to save the Union. A sense of purpose, a clear belief in the value of their cause, and a strident faith in their own ability to suffer without losing either of those things brought Northerners through the most difficult war America has fought.

Clearly, it was the people who sustained the war for the Union. Notions concerning the cultural values and ideas that were connected with the war effort were pondered and commented upon in diaries, letters, and memoirs. The expressions of educated, thoughtful citizens were important in my understanding of the role played by these

values, but the common people were given equal consideration. War offers the historian every opportunity to discover the thoughts of commoners, for it forces people to work through the reasons for disrupting their lives and gambling with their futures. In the case of the Civil War, America's costliest conflict, we have an abundance of published and unpublished personal accounts, which are the foundation of this study.

A strong sense of moral purpose underlay the Northern war effort, and perhaps it is safe to say that that type of purpose is essential to sustain any major war effort. Northerners believed that the conflict was a grand struggle to preserve free government in North America, a struggle which had implications for the preservation of political freedom in the world at large. When they also came to realize that slavery had to die along with the Confederacy, yet another self-satisfying moralistic element was added to their conception of what the war meant. Robert Penn Warren described this as a "treasury of virtue" accumulated in Northern consciousness that served as a bank account of morally righteous attitudes toward what had been accomplished by the Confederacy's defeat.¹ This treasury has long since been emptied. Today the Civil War seems to be little more than a historical pageant portrayed in hackneyed formulas on television mini-series. The myth of the Lost Cause, through romanticizing what was destroyed by the North, has sapped the war for the Union of its moralistic implications. This study is an effort to recapture a sense of that heady experience when people throughout the North were convinced that the fate of ideals depended upon the success of their war effort.

CHAPTER I

Freedom and Self-Government

Only three weeks after his country split apart and went to war with itself, a Cincinnati editor tried to compare the opposing values at stake.

On one side is arrayed the doctrine of Secession—with its inevitable consequences of disintegration, disorder, lawlessness, public robbery, and repudiation of all obligations, public and private: on the other, is arrayed the Constitutional Government of the country, with its adjuncts of public order, obedience to law, security to property, and fidelity to all obligations. On the one side is an established and beneficent government, resting on the democratic principle of the will of the majority; on the other, is a disorganizing usurpation, resting on the ambition of a political faction, and deriving no authority whatever from the people. On the one side, is a free Constitution, consecrated by the patriot fathers of the Republic, and approved by seventy years of successful trial; on the other, is an odious innovation, hatched by a band of conspirators at Montgomery, whose chief end is the perpetuation and extension of human slavery. On the one side, is a government hitherto obeyed at home, and respected abroad; on the other is an upstart oligarchy, reluctantly submitted to within its own borders, and justly despised by every foreign power. On the one side, the struggle is unequivocally one for the rights of the people; on the other, it is just as plainly one for the supremacy of a slave propaganda.¹

This editor, to a significant extent, encapsulated the issues of the war and expressed them in terms that his readers would have had little trouble understanding. Contained in this quote are references to the rebellion as involving a contest between democracy on the Northern

side and tyranny on the Southern side. Slavery, the basis of the Confederacy, constituted the power base of the aristocracy that had destroyed free government in the South through its accumulation of power. With the firing on Fort Sumter, the conspiracy of the slave power attempted to spread its system of black bondage and white political slavery to the North. The attack on Sumter, which represented an attempt to control the whole nation and not just the South, represented the most serious breakdown of law and order the nation had ever witnessed. Thus, order versus chaos, democracy versus tyranny, the virtue needed for self-government versus the selfishness that made tyranny possible were all wrapped up in the very definition of the Southern rebellion.

From the very beginning, Northerners made use of the language and values available to them in order to make sense of the rebellion. This process branded the South as the antithesis of what Northerners believed their country stood for. The process of defining the national crisis also assured Northerners that their region retained a firm grasp on those values that made America unique. The sides were being formed in the collective and individual minds of the North; lines were being drawn in those first confusing months of the war, and issues were condensing into guide posts for belief and motivation for action. A consensus in favor of war against the rebellion was swiftly formed.

One of the most important values that came to be associated with the war effort in Northern minds was individualism. As a concept it was new, having been first discussed at length by the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville when he visited America in the 1830s. "Every individual is always supposed to be as well informed," Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*, "as virtuous, and as strong as any of his fellow citizens." This feeling bred a strong belief in the autonomy of the citizen, no matter how lowly in station. Only if his actions harmed the equal right of his fellow was the individual to be hindered by forces larger than himself. No laws, social organizations, or governmental interference were called for as long as the citizen respected the rights of all, while he enjoyed his own. While on the public level the individual had certain obligations to society—to obey the law, to contribute to mutual defense, to participate honestly in the political life of the people—he had no obligations to anyone but himself on the

private level. As Tocqueville put it, the individual "is the best and sole judge of his own private interest."²

There certainly existed at least the potential for an aggressive kind of individualism in mid-nineteenth-century America. Once recognizing the right for personal development, the citizen would be hard pressed to keep his demands to a minimum. The Union soldier and novelist Albion Tourgee wrote that the "individual clamors for self-direction, equality of right, of privilege, of opportunity." But just as certainly there were limits to self-development. Although rich by the standards of most of the rest of the world, mid-nineteenth-century America was still an economy of relative scarcity. There were no large, nationally based corporations, no assembly lines producing huge amounts of consumer goods, or a large white-collar working force. Most Americans lived a modest life of subsistence working on farms, in factories, or in small shops. Wealth and happiness—as in all eras and nations—were difficult to achieve. All society could realistically offer the hard-working individual was the freedom to choose a mode of livelihood, to dispose of the results of his labor, and to have a say in the running of government. Individualism did not mean real control over one's life but the opportunity to attempt it. Thus, Northerners praised their nation for supporting an individual's basic need to feel in control of his destiny. "There is no other country in the world," asserted Mortimer D. Leggett, a civilian general of the Union army, "that affords such facilities and inducements for developing individuality, manly independence and ready adaptability to surrounding circumstances, and no other where the individual man stands out so distinctively as an institution by himself."³

Because the focus was on the individual, not on a class, egalitarianism became equally important in the definition of America. Even as they de-emphasized class distinction, Northerners strove to show they were not social levelers. They sought to equalize the opportunities for distinction based on merit. Those individuals who were able to advance more rapidly in the financial, political, and social world did so not because of artificial advantages, such as inherited wealth or class legislation. It was important to believe that the American system was one in which intelligence, hard work, and a bit of luck merited one's rise. Northerners were not concerned with inequalities of wealth or

social station, as long as the system of equal opportunity was operating to prevent rigid class lines. There was little to fear from a system in which the lowly could rise and the high could fall.⁴

The egalitarian ideal was most appropriate to a society of middle- and working-class citizens. George Sidney Camp, who wrote one of the most incisive and clear-headed treatises on American society to appear in the antebellum period, pointed out that a principle such as equality was plain and simple; it was thus easily accepted by everyone. It was the simplicity of such values that made manifest the "characteristics of truth and justice" in them.⁵

The values associated with the American brand of democracy played a large role in Northern conceptions of the rebellion. Latent during the colonial period, the concept of democracy gained wide currency during the turmoil of the Revolution and the Confederation period. From that point on, and particularly with the advent of Jeffersonian republicanism in 1800 and the triumph of Jacksonianism in the 1830s, a distinctively egalitarian twist was added to the concept of democracy. In America, it became impossible to separate equality from democracy. Not only would the latter word denote a system of self-government, but it would also imply a social commitment to equality of opportunity among individuals in all other areas as well. The right of the citizen to participate in politics, for example, would be equal to the right to participate in the economic opportunities offered by the nation.⁶

Abraham Lincoln was probably the most important spokesman for democracy in America during the Civil War. The conflict was fought to preserve, in his words, "that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of man—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." Like his fellow Northerners, Lincoln automatically connected political democracy, embodied in the government, with opportunity in nonpolitical areas as well.⁷

Democracy, egalitarianism, and individualism were all part of the middle- and working-class culture of mid-nineteenth-century America. The middle ranks of society were generally viewed as the backbone of the nation. Known variously as "the people at large," the whole

community, the Nation, the commonality, the generality," the benefits and responsibilities of democracy, egalitarianism, and individualism rested on their shoulders. As the historian and Jacksonian Democrat George Bancroft noted, it was a stable foundation. "The multitude is neither rash nor fickle. . . . The people is firm and tranquil in its movements, and necessarily acts with moderation, because it becomes but slowly impregnated with new ideas." Conservatism of this type was reinforced by offering to individuals a system based on the maximum use of their most coveted possessions. Andrew Carnegie, who came to America before the war and who tried years later to explain to Europeans what made America tick, offered an insight into why so many immigrants crowded the nation's entry ports.

They have developed in the United States into one of the most conservative communities in the world; conservative of their powerful government, of their Supreme Court and of their Senate, and of all that makes for the security of civil and religious liberty, of the rights of property and the constitutional right of each individual citizen to the pursuit of happiness in his own way.

Americans tried to preserve their self-interest, thought Bancroft, by retaining what they cherished "as the most precious of possessions"—self-government.⁸

This was not mere rhetoric. For mid-century Northerners, self-government was a living ideal. They were acutely conscious of the role America played in what many of them referred to as a grand experiment to see if a people could govern itself. There was a theoretical as well as a practical level to discussions about self-government. Northerners spoke of self-government as a glittering possibility whose practical evolution was being worked out right in their own country. It became solidly identified with the most basic definition of America.

The rebirth of self-government, after its brief moments in ancient Greece and Rome and its long absence since, coincided with the creation of America. The concept of republicanism, originating from many points and periods of time but reaching its peak in Anglo-American politics of the eighteenth century, helped to explain the theory of self-government. It posited an inevitable opposition between the governed and the ruler. Power, the domain of the ruler, had an inherent tendency to encroach on liberty, the domain of the governed.

Given this fact of political life, the best form of government, it was thought, was one controlled by the people themselves. But man's nature, which made him susceptible to the temptation always found in power, posed a threat to the working of free government. Tyranny, or the excessive use of power, resulted when individuals in government abused liberty by transgressing the bounds of power assigned them. Anarchy, or the absence of government, resulted when the people themselves abandoned moral restraint and worked for the good of themselves as individuals or as cliques rather than for the good of the whole, thus abusing the delicate nature of free government.⁹

This was a fear of all who believed in political freedom: how to maintain the balance between a government strong enough to perform the duties of government but not strong enough to destroy freedom. Conversely, how far was one to trust the masses with power, short of endangering political and social stability? Republicans of the eighteenth century argued that the only way was to rely on the virtue of the people. If citizens recognized the need to safeguard both liberty and a sufficiently strong government, self-government would be possible. If they had the moral stamina to maintain the balance between power and civic responsibility, self-government would be assured. When the founding fathers wrote the Constitution, their faith in the wisdom and virtue of the people had been shaken by the confusion and social unrest of the Confederation period. The result was the system of checks and balances that became the foundation of American governance. They believed that if the people were not trustworthy then government itself had to have built-in safeguards against popular abuse, even as the people governed themselves.¹⁰

By the 1860s a host of other cultural influences had taken hold in America to weaken formal republican theory,¹¹ but the general ideas of self-government did not disappear. The war raised anew questions historically asked of self-government in America. Northerners asked if their character was adequate for the maintenance of free government, which was the formal, institutionalized form of liberty. They asked if their cultural traits of individualism, democracy, and egalitarianism threatened or supported self-government. They wondered if individually and collectively they had the required self-control to preserve freedom.

Historically, one of the most serious threats to virtue was prosperity. The temptation to acquire personal fortune was viewed by earlier republicans as a threat to the welfare of the community.¹² A constant theme throughout the commentary of the Civil War generations was the question of whether or not prewar prosperity had sapped the sense of civic responsibility needed to maintain the collective experiment of self-government.

Virtue, then, was still seen by the time of the Civil War as a significant trait in a free people. Members of the war generations were not naive about man's nature. As General John Logan put it, a problem as old as man himself had been to "live together in obedience to the better instincts of humanity and to repress the selfishness, avarice, ambition, injustice of the nature" of man. Logan saw it as an opposition of "individual ambition against the prerogatives, rights, and interests of mankind in general."¹³

Yet, while they mused about the inherent clash of good and evil, Northerners also asserted their faith that good, on the whole, would win out. They had to assert this if they wanted to believe in the perpetuity of self-government.¹⁴ In an essay written in 1854, George Bancroft strove to explain how man's capacity for good inevitably led to the continuous progress of humanity. Improvement came about due to a constant interaction of each man's peculiar, individual characteristics and the possibility inherent in all men for achieving "the ideal man."¹⁵

Every one . . . perpetually feels the contrast between his own limited nature and the better life of which he conceives. He cannot state a proposition respecting a finite object, but it includes also a reference to the infinite. He cannot form a judgement, but it combines ideal truth and partial error, and, as a consequence, sets in action the antagonism between the true and the perfect on the one side, and the false and the imperfect on the other.

Bancroft saw the struggle of sordid self and ideal model as boding well for the future of free government.

Virtue was a faith for many who believed in the possibility of free government, but it was also a concept that was abused as much as it was honored. Contemporary observers noted that it played a utilitarian role in America. Alexis de Tocqueville defined this as the "principle of