

FIRST WORD

BY RICK BEARD AND RICHARD RABINOWITZ

An Unsettled Heritage

IN 1961, LIFE MAGAZINE INVITED THE Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, poet, and scholar Robert Penn Warren to ruminate on the upcoming centennial of the American Civil War. His resulting 25,000-word essay—*The Legacy of the Civil War*—remains a brilliant and timely meditation on “our only ‘felt’ history—history lived in our national imagination.” As the war’s sesquicentennial arrives a half-century later, Americans prefer a degree of concision and self-assuredness to their historical legacies that would surely have been anathema to so nuanced a thinker as Penn Warren. Type in “the legacy of the Civil War” on Google, and wiki.answers.com will tell you that: “The civil war helped unify the union and free slaves.” Simple! Declarative! Forestalling debate! And certainly not incorrect. **BUT THERE IS A GREAT DEAL MORE** to be said about the legacies of what Penn Warren called “the great single event of our history.” In 1861, the federal budget of \$80.2 million devoted \$36.4 million to defense; in 1865, the comparable figures were \$1.33 billion and \$1.17 billion. By the war’s end, the accumulated federal deficit had grown from \$90.6 million in 1861 to \$2.68 billion in 1865. **THE WAR’S MOST IMMEDIATE LEGACY WAS** growth: the federal government, the population, and the country itself all got bigger. The size and role of the federal government began a dramatic expansion, starting a trend that has never reversed. In 1860, the last full year before the fighting began, the federal budget was \$78 million. By 1867, the first year in which the war could be eliminated as a major economic factor, the federal budget had grown almost fivefold, to \$376.8 million. Federal spending never again dipped below \$300 million a year. **THE REPUBLICAN COMMITMENT TO AGGRESSIVE FEDERAL ACTION** to spur economic development was apparent from the war’s outset. Yet neither the states of the defeated Confederacy nor the former slaves benefited from this explosion of growth or the Republican-led, business friendly economic policies. The end of slavery, however overdue, represented the largest uncompensated confiscation of property in history—“property” assigned a market value as high as \$4 billion by some economists. The planter class, which before the war had embodied more than 50 percent of the nation’s wealth, was in ruins, as were many of the South’s major cities. High tariffs worked against the export of the South’s primary staple crops—cotton and tobacco—and unsettled labor relations in the wake of emancipation created economic uncertainty throughout the region. **FORMER SLAVES PROVED ESPECIALLY** vulnerable. After Andrew Johnson revoked General William T. Sherman’s Special Field Orders, No. 15, providing 40 acres to former slaves, the federal government failed to provide any long-term, systematic support. Those blacks who stayed in the South, and most did,

quickly found themselves condemned to poverty by a system of sharecropping. Not until the Great Migration between 1910 and 1930 did blacks begin to break free of a way of life rooted in the 18th- and 19th-century plantation. It took almost a century before the South began to match the prosperity of other regions. **THE COMMONPLACE NOTION THAT** the South lost the war and won the peace was accepted because in large part it was true. The defeat of the Confederacy, ironically, fueled the defiance of white southerners. The myth of the “Lost Cause” deserves considerable credit for the “resurrection.” First postulated almost immediately after the war, and lent considerable momentum by former Confederate General Jubal Early during the 1870s and 1880s, the argument held that the South had fought for a noble cause; had a constitutional right to secede; had been led by morally superior leaders; had fallen short in its quest for independence due only to the North’s superior resources; and had been motivated by the defense of the southern homeland and states’ rights, not chattel slavery. This genteel and decontaminated narrative of the Civil War justified both massive **WHAT AMERICANS KNOW ABOUT THE CIVIL WAR AND WHAT THEY BELIEVE ABOUT THE CIVIL WAR ARE SOMETIMES UNCOMFORTABLY FAR APART.**

sistance to concepts of equality and the inferior social and economic position accorded African Americans. **THE SESQUICENTENNIAL YEARS** present an opportunity to assess the many legacies of the war. Some Americans continue to question the primacy of the federal government, especially when social and economic pressures are greatest. Others contest the landscape of historical memory, challenging one another’s narratives and too often ignoring the historical record in favor of comfortable tales passed down from one generation to the next. What Americans know about the Civil War and what they believe about the Civil War are sometimes uncomfortably far apart. In 1998, in *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory*, the noted Civil War historian Gary Gallagher presciently established a measure of success for the sesquicentennial. Americans will accomplish something of great value, he argued, if we are able to confront “the wider issue of how the Civil War should be presented to the American people, and why academic and popular conceptions about the conflict are often so different.” Narrowing that conceptual gap would create a new legacy of great value 150 years after Americans shed so much blood.

Edited excerpt from the new National Park Service publication *The Civil War Remembered*. Rick Beard is former director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum; Richard Rabinowitz is founder and president of the American History Workshop.