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Reflections: Was the Civil War a Mistake? Fifty Years of Edmund Wilson's Patriotic Gore [post-print]

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WAS THE CIVIL WAR A MISTAKE?

FIFTY YEARS OF EDMUND WILSON'S *PATRIOTIC GORE*

Scott Gac

In 2012, the American Civil War sesquicentennial continued. We were prepared for the panels on secession, Sumter, and Shiloh, and of course the books in preparation for the 2013 salute to the Emancipation Proclamation. Perhaps the film *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Slayer* caught a few off guard, but it too had precedent: in the centennial, moviegoers watched *Two Thousand Maniacs* (1964), a horror-filled Confederate revival where Yankees were “gruesomely stained in *gushing blood color*.” In April 2012, though, an important anniversary passed nearly unnoticed: Edmund Wilson’s *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* turned fifty. Since 1962, scholars have grappled with this epic. Wilson put a question mark where, today, few believe there is a question—Was the Civil War a mistake?

When *Patriotic Gore* first appeared, the shape and tenor of Civil War research was in the midst of a decade’s-long shift. Many scholars had seen the North as unjust, brutish, and mean and the war as a fight over nationhood. But by the 1960s, in the wake of World War II, the abolition of slavery started to emerge in the work of white American historians as a fateful event. Wilson published *Patriotic Gore* at a key moment—the Civil Rights Movement had turned a sharply focused lens on American race relations and, soon, the conflict in Vietnam did the same for American

militarism. Through 816 pages, Wilson spoke to both of these concerns—his grand American opus was progressive in its certainty that the war was a mistake and was reactionary in its belief that, though slavery was wrong, it had little to do with the conflict. He accomplished this in a bombastic introduction that spoke to the causes and consequences of the Civil War, and with an inspirational catalogue of nineteenth-century American authors.

In the twenty-first century, *Patriotic Gore* serves as a weigh station to inspect war, peace, freedom, and slavery in Civil War scholarship and celebration. Upon publication, however, the work, which Wilson wrestled with for fifteen years, helped to revive his reputation as one of the great twentieth-century American intellectuals—a broad-minded commentator who approached subjects as a psychologist, historian, and literary critic. *Patriotic Gore's* readers learned, for example, that the vice president of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, suffered “physical handicaps” that “seem also to have impeded his relationships with women”; that a historical view of Robert E. Lee helped situate his “classical antique virtue, at once aristocratic and republican”; and that Harriet Beecher Stowe “has a particularly exasperating habit of first narrating some episode at length, then telling it all over again in a letter or conversation” (pp. 391, 335, 33).¹ As advertised on the dustwrapper, the book united “two lines” of Wilsonian thought: “literary criticism” and “social analysis.”

The standard position on *Patriotic Gore* is that, when it was published in 1962, it was instantly acknowledged as a masterpiece. There is ample evidence to support this view. Daniel Aaron believed the book profound: “Like the productions of other original men of letters, *Patriotic Gore* discloses unwelcome truths about ourselves and our country, but it also uncovers and discovers what we forgot or never knew about our literary culture.” Robert Penn Warren christened it “a work of

art” in which “experience, imaginatively conceived, imposes itself on us” and suggested that it “may become a classic.” “Surely no book among the hundreds being published during what Wilson appropriately calls ‘this absurd centennial,’” said Southern historian Lewis P. Simpson, “will do more to rebuke the nonsense of platitudinous oratory and the false tumult of mock battles and to reveal the human dimensions of one of the great tragedies of modern history.” The *New York Times* all but sanctioned the book with three reviews over a four-day stretch at the end of April. And in Britain Robert Conquest wrote that Wilson’s “new, huge (over eight hundred pages) ‘studies in the literature of the American Civil War’ is typical of his genius on all counts.”²

For years after the book’s debut, writers, from academics to journalists, continued to note *Patriotic Gore* as spellbinding, insightful, and important. When historian Marcus Cunliffe appraised the publications of the Civil War centennial, which closed in 1965, he singled out, along with work by Allan Nevins, the “great distinction” of *Patriotic Gore*. Cunliffe went as far as to say that even if the centennial produced nothing other than the books by Wilson and Nevins, “we should have been given good measure.”³

The legend of Edmund Wilson’s Civil War did not stop with the author’s last breath. The *New York Times* obituary that announced Wilson’s death on June 13, 1972, calls *Patriotic Gore* “a masterly study . . . at once encyclopedic and profound.” In the 1980s the book still had clout: in 1984 the People’s Republic of China printed 10,000 translated copies and a *Los Angeles Times* critic on September 21, 1986, listed it among two other Wilson works as “permanent acquisitions of our culture.” By the time the Modern Library editors elected it to the “Top 100 Best Nonfiction” of the twentieth century, their coronation of *Patriotic Gore* seemed to verify what everyone already knew.

David Blight, the expert on Civil War memory, stood on firm ground with his claim in *American Oracle* (2011) that, “upon publication in the spring of 1962, *Patriotic Gore* became a literary sensation.”⁴ It was a fact reified for nearly fifty years.

Perhaps we are shortsighted, lazy, or yearn for greatness, but the celebratory narrative—the notion that, as a major Wilson biography declared in 1995, *Patriotic Gore*’s “leading reviews recognized Wilson’s achievement”—doesn’t reflect the actual historical record.⁵ From the start, the book’s import and value has been challenged.

In 1962, preeminent academics—from historians such as Henry Steele Commager and C. Vann Woodward, to literary scholars such as Perry Miller—wrote harsh critiques in national publications. “The note of grandeur rarely sounds in Mr. Wilson’s pages,” said Commager at the end of his April 29, 1962, piece in *The New York Times*. Woodward, agog over Wilson’s disengagement of ethics from history, wrote, “He not only refuses to pass moral judgment on individuals but on societies and institutions as well, including slavery and antislavery.”⁶ “The substance of the book is indeed disappointing,” said Miller in the April 26 *Christian Science Monitor*, “the original reviews gave promise of a major study of the Civil War.” And, on May 27, in the *Los Angeles Times*, Irving Ramsdell pronounced the book fit “for those who want to toss a flower of acknowledgement to the centennial.”

The battle over *Patriotic Gore* continued in the 1970s. On Wilson’s death in 1972, several notable obituaries, such as ones in *The Hartford Courant* (June 13, 1972) and *The New Yorker* (June 24, 1972), made no mention of his Civil War writing, and others did so only in passing—*The Times* in London on June 13th mentioned twelve of his other books by name and then that, in another

publication “Wilson looked at the American Civil War.” Later, Joseph Epstein in 1986 singled out parts of the work as “misbegotten,” the product of Wilson’s foul temper.⁷ Even the Modern Library’s editors’ list of the top 100 nonfiction works of the twentieth century brings the legacy of *Patriotic Gore* into question. The same list as compiled by a public vote ignored Wilson’s book. As for David Blight in his complimentary 2011 *American Oracle*—to support his claim for the centrality of Wilson’s Civil War, he relied on a series of reviews from 1962 located in the Edmund Wilson Papers at Yale. But this collection, mainly items reserved by Wilson or his family, apparently excludes Commager’s piece in the *New York Times*, Woodward’s in the *American Scholar*, and Miller’s in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Over time, celebrators of Wilson’s work have acted as if there is consensus, but it’s clear that this is not the case. Today the book is most useful to Civil War scholars within the context of this debate.

Back in 1947, Oxford University Press fronted Edmund Wilson a \$2,000 advance in expectation that, by 1950, he would deliver a grand work on the literature of the American Civil War. When the manuscript was finally provided, it was a mammoth—and twelve years late. Wilson even asked his young editor Sheldon Meyer for help with cuts. Meyer returned a document that was 200 pages lighter; however an angered Wilson demanded that he “put back in everything” that had been taken out.⁸ Meyer did. And though the 1962 publication of *Patriotic Gore* took readers by storm, it was anything but a surprise. Wilson had shared bits and pieces of his work along the way at institutions like Princeton, where in 1952 he previewed his Grant, Lincoln, and Stowe sections, in publications such as *The New Yorker* (“Abraham Lincoln: The Union as Religious Mysticism,” 1953), and in private through innumerable conversations and letters with American intellectuals

Leon Edel, William Faulkner, Robert Lowell, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. If anything, *Patriotic Gore* bore the burden of anticipation.

Wilson told his editor he intended for the book “to show the *whole career* of all my major subjects, how they lived, what they thought about and what their personalities were” and to tie together chapters with themes such as “the corruption of the post-war period,” “the crisis in Calvinism,” and “the psychology of the men committed to war.”⁹ The doyen of American literature had lived through World War I, which left him a budding socialist, hopeful for political and social change, and World War II, which infused in him disillusionment: “extremely depressing,”¹⁰ he wrote. One senses in Wilson’s ambition for *Patriotic Gore* “to cover all the literature of any distinction inspired by first-hand experience of the war.”¹¹ He looked to illustrate, as he had in the Greek tragedy *Philoctetes*, that “genius and disease, like strength and mutilation, may be inextricably bound together.”¹² The bulk of *Patriotic Gore* is located in this part of the project, upon which readers and critics directed the most praise.

While quibbles persist over whom Wilson included and excluded (Frederick Douglass, for one, is absent) and over his apparent Southern sympathies, the greatest controversy in 1962 over *Patriotic Gore* centered on the introduction. Written after Wilson finished with the Civil War’s literary impulse, the opening chapter declares Lincoln—like German Otto Von Bismarck, and Russian Vladimir Lenin—an “uncompromising dictator.” It lays out the biological origins of human violence (“All animals must prey on some form of life that they can capture, and all will eat as much as they can”), and it divulges that humans use their advanced capacity for “morality” and “reason” for nothing other than to rationalize their animalistic, warring impulse in the name of “virtue” and

“civilization” (pp. xviii, xi–xii). This, apparently, is what Wilson intended when he wrote of the introduction that “I shall have to try to put the Civil War in the perspective of our whole foreign policy before and after.”¹³

In *Patriotic Gore*, Edmund Wilson marked the Civil War as “foreign policy” by virtue of his interpretation of the antebellum United States. The North and South of the mid-nineteenth century were two distinct nations, one slave-bound and the other industrial, and each “trying to expand at the other’s expense” (p. xv). He situated the Civil War within a broad sweep of American imperialism, where wars are fought for “the American dream,” “the American way of life,” and “the defense of the Free World.” Wilson noted “how very difficult” it is “for us” (and by “us” he identified 1960s Americans as products of a Union victory) “to recognize that we, too, are devourers” (p. xiii). The traditional explanations for the conflict—as an expression of states versus the federal government, an inevitable clash between backward- and forward-looking societies, and a battle between the forces of freedom and slavery—did not wholly serve for him. The last reason particularly infuriated Wilson. The North created “the myth that it was fighting to free the slaves” to supply itself “with the rabbleroising moral issue which is necessary in every modern war to make the conflict appear as a melodrama” (pp. xv–xvi). Wilson was certain that behind theatrical linguistics lay the real reason for modern war: mankind’s biological mandate for conquest and authority.

“The unanimity of men at war is like that of a school of fish, which will swerve, simultaneously and apparently without any leadership, when the shadow of an enemy appears,” Wilson said, “or like a sky-darkening flight of grasshoppers, which, also compelled by one impulse, will descend to consume the crops.” A Civil War frenzy made the men and women on both sides

“more and more ferocious” and “ready to fight to the death” (pp. xxxii). The beast of the North ultimately succeeded not because it was any more violent than its Southern counterpart, but because it was better supplied and organized.

The theory is mesmerizing, capable of explaining why the nation opted for civil war—Americans are endowed with violence as much as “certain unalienable rights”—and how each side justified westward territorial expansion. The North cloaked its power drive in the morality of antislavery and religious salvation; the South in “aristocratic freedom, fine manners and luxurious living” as well as the self-victimization offered by states’ rights and military defeat (p. 438). To follow the shorthand of *Patriotic Gore’s* opening epigraph, the North is defined by quoting John Brown: “Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins,” while the Confederate song “Maryland, My Maryland” defined the South: “The despot’s heel is on thy shore . . . Avenge the patriotic gore / That flecked the streets of Baltimore” (p. iii).¹⁴

Historians Daniel Aaron, Stuart Hughes, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., warned Wilson against the publication of *Patriotic Gore’s* introduction—they saw it as a polemic and questioned its accuracy. Aaron and Hughes even called on Wilson in upstate New York to change his mind. Thirty-three years later, in 1995, Schlesinger still found the book’s first words “troubling” while Aaron clung to the belief that the “introduction was not really an intrinsic part of the work.”¹⁵ Wilson disagreed. Many of his doings in spring 1962 attest to the fact that he saw the piece as central to the larger project. To Helen Muchnic he wrote: “The book is supposed to develop the theme that I stated in the Introduction,” which is the section he directed John F. Kennedy to read when the president asked about *Patriotic Gore*.¹⁶

Wilson, of course, went ahead and included the dogmatic, pessimistic introduction. At the start of 1962, the author, in a letter to Van Wyck Brooks, blamed a protracted depression on the very project he tackled in *Patriotic Gore*: the past—“the mainly negative character” of my “Civil War book”—and the present—“I think the country is a mess and I don’t approve of anything that the government is doing.”¹⁷ Soon, negative reviews of *Patriotic Gore* in three important publications would no doubt add to his woe.

Perry Miller was one of the first to blast Wilson’s work. Miller’s review, which appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor* on April 26, 1962, scored the book a disappointment, a series of “fulminations about the familiar” that result in “journalistic, and on the whole pretentious, forays into an area already explored by a much more critical scholarship.” The tenor of the piece leads one to interpret “critical” here as both “analytical” and “important.” Indeed, even of the parts of *Patriotic Gore* that he enjoyed, Miller wrote in an underhanded manner. He was taken by Wilson’s bold effort to analyze the “most shopworn” American authors and to treat them “with an engaging freshness.” But Wilson, Miller said, wrote “as though he were the first, and the most sophisticated, commentator.”

If Miller’s attack appears personal, it was. Wilson, who had worked many winters on the Civil War at the Widener Library, accepted a year-long appointment in 1959–60 as Harvard’s Lowell Professor of English. His brusque interactions and poor instruction manner (in class, he read aloud from manuscript and, by name, called out students whose work he found second-rate) initiated the English Department’s scorn. In particular Perry Miller, a member of the English faculty, was bothered by Wilson’s dogged questions—to the extent that he felt a bit manipulated by

them. Wilson made things worse when he, a known womanizer, tried to seduce faculty wives. The position of Lowell Professor, which had been reserved for outsiders, was permanently set aside for Harvard insiders after Wilson's term.

Miller's review reveals the two wellsprings of his *Patriotic Gore* discontent. On the personal side, the slim Harvard professor clearly found the rotund Wilson a bear. In the *Christian Science Monitor* review, he remarked on Wilson's "characteristically massive manner" and "the tremendous weight of his analytical powers." He titled his examination of the Civil War book "Wilson"—as if the author himself supplanted the written word. Miller even rebuked fellow scholar Daniel Aaron, who had embraced *Patriotic Gore* in *The Massachusetts Review*. Wilson's book vexed Miller on a professional level too. The expert on American Puritan thought, Miller took pride to understand the viewpoint of his historical subjects. Few things were more important to the Puritans than morality and piety, which, he argued in *The New England Mind* (1939), was a double-edged sword that "inspired Puritan idealism and encouraged Puritan snobbery."¹⁸ In *Patriotic Gore*, Wilson argued against such an approach. Instead the cranky literary critic dismissed the rhetoric of both the North and South as "pretensions to moral superiority" and sought "to remove the whole subject from the plane of morality and to give an objective account of the expansion of the United States" (p. xxxi).

In the turmoil that ensued after *Patriotic Gore's* publication, Wilson showed that he understood, in his refusal to lend credence to his Civil War subjects' moral view, that he replaced theirs with his. "The Introduction is full of moral indignation," he wrote to Robert Penn Warren and admitted that he wanted to consider the Civil War "from the point of view of an anti-war morality."¹⁹ Wilson later confessed that he aligned best with the Copperheads, the nineteenth-

century Democrats who opposed the Civil War and held that the Lincoln government wrongly exchanged the goal of Union for the abolition of slavery. But such private admissions did not reach the broader public. Indeed, in 1962, only one reviewer, Marius Bewley in *The Hudson Review*, fully grasped Wilson's antiwar stance: "Taking the book as a whole, Mr. Wilson is not for the South as much as he is against the whole disastrous fact of the Civil War."²⁰

With Wilson's more complex view on morality and Civil War pacifism hidden, reviewers struggled to come to terms with the tensions embedded in the work. "The attempt to write a completely amoral history of this conflict is destined for trouble from the start," said C. Vann Woodward in *The American Scholar*. "It was a generation tormented by moral conflict." Though people, politicians, and governments "made a shameless and hypocritical mockery of these conflicts," Woodward declared, "the moral issues were real nonetheless."²¹ Judged from his own work, the Amherst College historian Henry Steele Commager was likely to agree with Woodward. In his 1950 *The Blue and the Gray*, Commager wrote, "Americans thought themselves a moral people and carried their ordinary morals into the conduct of the war";²² and, also in 1950, he opened *The American Mind* with a quote from George Santayana: "To be an American is of itself almost a moral condition, an education, a career." Yet Commager's analysis of *Patriotic Gore* avoided an engagement of Wilson's so-called "plane of morality." In *The New York Times* on April 29, 1962, Commager started in praise: "it is original, skeptical, allusive, penetrating." Then he changed course. Step-by-step his piece struck at the historical arguments presented in the introduction. The parallels drawn between the Civil War and modern events garnered particular attention. Commager refuted the use of F.D.R.'s supposed ploy to encourage Japan's Pearl Harbor attack (which, for Wilson, was akin to

slavery in that both events provided the United States the moral thunder needed to join a fray), as well as the parallel of the Russian clampdown on the Hungarian revolution. (An unrestrained despot like Lincoln stifled freedom, Wilson implied). Read through Commager's eyes, interpretation, not moralism or a lack thereof, is *Patriotic Gore's* biggest flaw.

Over time, scholars have given Wilson a pass on the far reach of the introduction's interpretive sweep; the ire once raised over his comparison of Abraham Lincoln to Bismarck and Lenin has subsided. It is Wilson's attempt to remove ethics from history that remains visible.

When it first appeared, *Patriotic Gore* challenged a growing consensus among white historians that the Civil War could not be isolated from the moral specter of American slavery, a consensus that rules to this day. But in 1962, such analysis was almost brand new—indeed the Civil War's moral pendulum had swung back and forth through the years. After Appomattox, several Northern historians conceived of the Civil War in abolitionist terms. James Ford Rhodes, for instance, opened his *History of the Civil War, 1861–1865* (1917), with a candid antislavery statement: “The great factor in the destruction of slavery was the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860.” The response to such Civil War interpretation was stark. Spurred by ex-Confederates and Southern sympathizers in lectures, memoirs, and novels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Lost Cause ideology held Northern aggression as the reason for the Civil War, with Lincoln a tyrant and slaves as puppets whose actions, against their best interests, were inflamed by abolitionists. The Lost Cause, in scholarship and memoir, often focused on Constitutional matters and, in popular culture, on enflamed racial contest. “No moral nor sentimental considerations were really involved in either the earlier or later controversies which so long agitated and finally ruptured

the Union,” said Jefferson Davis in his 1881 war chronicle. “They were simply struggles between different sections, with diverse institutions and interests.”²³ To preface *The Clansmen: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), which was the basis for the celebrated film *The Birth of a Nation* (1918), Thomas Dixon noted that it was “the second book of a series of historical novels planned on the Race Conflict.” Lost Cause notions gripped the minds of many in and out of the ivory tower for most of the first part of the twentieth century.

By 1960, the basis for Civil War scholarship had started to shift. Today historians often credit African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois for the return of slavery to its rightful place at the heart of the Civil War. His magisterial *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935), reframed the nineteenth-century conflict in moral terms: “Easily the most dramatic episode in American history was the sudden move to free four million black slaves in an effort to stop a great civil war, to end forty years of bitter controversy, and to appease the moral sense of civilization.”²⁴ But the work of Du Bois was largely unread until the 1980s. World War II, with its genocide and weapons of massive destruction, bore more influence in the push for American historians, particularly white historians, to confront the moral matters of the Civil War in earnest.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was one who led the charge. In his famous *Partisan Review* piece, “The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism” (October 1949), he depicted the war as a moral test, a battle of Good versus Evil, and wrote: “human slavery is certainly one of the few issues of whose evil we can be sure.” The correspondence of Edmund Wilson and Arthur Schlesinger reveals them at loggerheads. In 1958, after he first read Schlesinger’s essay, Wilson wrote: “The Abolitionists were fanatical about slavery, but this moral issue, again, was merely something

like Hitler's atrocities, that was useful for propaganda." "All our idealism is eyewash," Wilson said, and then offered Schlesinger a rebuke: "The historian must have a moral point of view, but it ought to be his own, not that of the participants in the events he is describing."²⁵

If Schlesinger was ahead of a Civil War scholarship in transition from Lost Cause analysis and its revisions, which claimed in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s that the conflict was a mistake, Wilson can be said to have been behind. But the problem was not so much that he loved the Confederate South as that, from the Marxist tendencies of his younger days, he feared the modern state. Wilson thus found solace in the work of Civil War revisionists like Avery Craven, who wrote in *The Repressible Conflict, 1830–1861* (1939), of a time when "individuals and localities might have realized a more satisfactory democracy."²⁶ Craven, James G. Randall, and Charles and Mary Beard blamed the Civil War for the commercial, industrial, and bureaucratic nation of the twentieth century. It was a world characterized by Robert Penn Warren in his *Commentary* review of *Patriotic Gore* as one "of easy victories, TV dinners, and bonded bourbon in every 'living area,' and three cars in every 'carport.'"²⁷ Wilson, in horror, agreed. He was disturbed "by the exactions of centralized bureaucracies" (p. 434) and, in his darkest moments, found modern American culture "synthetic," "arbitrary," "cold and dead," and filled with "arid rubbish."²⁸

Scholars like Du Bois and Schlesinger held little affection for many aspects of modern America. Yet they unearthed promise in the Civil War, where Wilson and company found peril. Of the postwar period, Du Bois noted in *Black Reconstruction* how "two theories of the future of America clashed and blended"—one was "based on freedom, intelligence and power for all men; the other was industry for private profit directed by an autocracy." Schlesinger was more steadfast in

denial that the conflict was senseless. The Civil War violence had wrought freedom and “nothing,” he wrote in 1949, “exists in history to assure us that the great moral dilemmas can be resolved without pain.”²⁹

Of course Wilson rejected the idea that Lincoln and his Northern cohorts genuinely believed slavery a moral dilemma. Instead he worked back from the civil rights battles of the 1950s and 1960s to find a nation beleaguered by the exact troubles in the past as it was in the present.

There are two situations involved which work against one another in a way that makes it unrealistic for Northerners to talk, as they often do, in terms of simple right and wrong. The Negroes are rebelling against the whites, who are afraid of them, as they have always been, and do not want them to better themselves because they do not want to have to compete against them, but the white Southerners themselves are rebelling against the federal government, which they have never forgiven for laying waste to their country. [p. xxi]

Wilson’s version of racial and regional politics maps out well in his theory—if one understands whites, blacks, Northerners, and Southerners as distinct groups innately opposed to one another. They each exhibited an animalistic desire for expansion and control.

To build a direct link from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement, Edmund Wilson ignored the foundation of antislavery morality and the fact that the era of American segregation exhibited only a passing similarity to that of American slavery. Like most research that privileges the white men in power—as opposed to the power of white men—*Patriotic Gore* missed the central role

of enslaved blacks before and in the Civil War. Slaves—who broke tools, slowed the pace of work, rebelled, and, of course, ran away—signaled a hatred of slavery. It was this hatred that granted truth to Northern antislavery positions and deceit to Southern proslavery ones.³⁰ Abraham Lincoln, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe voiced but did not validate antislavery. That role was reserved for the enslaved. Without a significant number of fugitive or otherwise renegade slaves, the position of slaveholders, who held their bondsmen happy or at least content, was right. A similar phenomenon occurred in the war. And when tens of thousands of recently freed slaves took up Union arms, they substantiated both the black freedom and black militancy embedded in the Emancipation Proclamation.

It is just as important for us to reframe Wilson's understanding of the postwar era. In drawing a line of black oppression from slavery to Selma, Wilson treated as static more than one hundred years of political, economic, and racial history. Yes, black Americans stood at or near the bottom of the social and economic scale in both schemes and, yes, racial notions helped to bolster such schema. But after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, no white bigot in the North or South could legally fracture a family, obtain labor through violence, or treat a human being as a commodity.³¹ One of the few shared impulses of the two eras was the possibility for interracial alliance and protest. Yet this, Wilson, for all his sensitivity to commercial processes and curiosity of minority positions, ignored. (See his work on Haitians in 1956, *Red, Black, Blond, and Olive*, or Native Americans in 1959, *Apologies to the Iroquois*). He appeared unaware of the fallout from his Civil War stance—blacks can never unite with whites; Southerners can never embrace the federal

government; and Northerners, who are devoid of legitimate morals, can never sympathize with anyone.

Such tensions and contradictions make *Patriotic Gore* an enigma to this day. Written in 1962, it remains the last gasp of a branch of scholarship to critique the Civil War as wrong—and, by extension, to point out flaws in the modern world. Many of the book's initial reviewers were drawn to Wilson's work for precisely this take: "his underlying conviction," Marcus Cunliffe wrote, was "that the war represented an enormous wrong turning in the life of his nation." "Mr. Wilson hates the modern state," said Marius Bewley. "He hates bureaucracy, governmental anonymity, the absorbent power of the Federal authority. . . . It is difficult not to hate with him." But how far did Wilson's hatred extend? One issue in celebrating *Patriotic Gore* is clear: how did Wilson define the government that he so abhorred? Mindful that Wilson's legacy as a liberal was at risk, Arthur Schlesinger, along with Daniel Aaron, came to his defense during a conference in honor of Wilson's 100th birthday. "Wilson was concerned about the imperialist state, but I don't think he was concerned about the social welfare state," Schlesinger said.³²

Whether, as some claim, Wilson wore a McGovern button before he died, in *Patriotic Gore* he was most concerned with the power of Civil War memory: "When the federal government sends troops to escort Negro children to white schools and to avert the mob action of whites, the Southerners remember the [1865] burning of Atlanta, the wrecking by Northern troops of Southern homes, the disenfranchisement of the governing classes and the premature enfranchisement of the Negroes" (p. xxii). Here, for Wilson, the state is Lincoln's administration, which stood close to the end of the transformation of American government from the "necessary evil" of the Revolution to

the welfare state of the twentieth century. It existed for him perhaps much as it did for his Southern subjects—as an abstract sin. A more careful definition robs the image of myth, the symbol of power.

Read *Patriotic Gore*, though, and you sense that Wilson’s stance on ethics and history is complicated by his method. As many have remarked over the ages, Edmund Wilson was a genius when set to navigate among multiple perspectives. If *Patriotic Gore* refuted scholar’s post–World War II moral turn, it looked ahead in its grasp of experience—an understanding that perception is rooted in the historical, cultural, political, and personal. *Patriotic Gore* thus resides in the historiographical space between a modern narrative, with a singular storyline and privileged storyteller, and a postmodern one, where authority and authorship are tested, challenged, and diverse. The book’s form works with the author’s stated intent to beg the question, Whose morality? For instance, Wilson saw, through the eyes of Frederick Law Olmstead, that the enslaved have “no interest whatever in working for the white man who has made him a slave,” that they were “always sabotaging, dawdling, malingering, revolting, or running away,” and “*are*, after all, human beings” (pp. 224–26). He saw too, through slaveholders such as Alexander Stephens, that “there is a hierarchy among human beings, which is based on natural differences, and these differences have been ordained by God” (p. 408). It’s no wonder then that Wilson compared *Patriotic Gore* to Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, “in which the same story,” he said, “is told from the points of view of nine different persons” (p. x).

Patriotic Gore is the Civil War told from the points of view of more than twenty-eight different people. This fact has helped to cloud what gets attributed to Wilson as opposed to what gets attributed to one of his subjects. The question for us now, however, is what is at stake when we

commend *Patriotic Gore*? Historical memory gains authority and meaning through an alignment with present ideals. On one level there is the psychological want to read “great” works, which is served by placing Wilson’s Civil War book on a pedestal. His attention to context and position aligns well with current scholarly method, as does the foundational belief of *Patriotic Gore* that the crucible of war imparts serious psychological consequence. Wilson’s introduction, his take on slavery, and his refusal of a moral past, though, serve us in a much different respect. Unlike many of the works that ignore slavery as a cause of the Civil War, *Patriotic Gore* was penned by a Northerner, one who saw fit to deride both North and South. The work acts as an ideal, non-regional whipping post to current interpretations of Civil War causation or, in milder moments, to show how far historical interpretation has come. In a statement that ignores Wilson’s exchange with Schlesinger, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, in *Patriotic Gore*’s defense, recently described 1960s Civil War scholarship as a time when “slavery was seldom stressed as the war’s precipitating cause.”³³ “Given Wilson’s radical proclivities,” questioned David Blight in *Slate*, “one might think he would have read W. E. B. Du Bois on Reconstruction, or at least have encountered John Hope Franklin on the whole of black history or Kenneth Stampp on slavery in his voracious reading.”³⁴ Of course, Wilson did not. Instead it was left to the 1963 reviewer for the *Journal of Negro Education* to point to the omission of Frederick Douglass and to Bruce Catton, who in August 1962 suggested in *American Heritage* that “for relief” from the “impassioned and pontifical objectivity” of *Patriotic Gore* readers, turn to black historian Benjamin Quarles on *Lincoln and the Negro* (1962).³⁵

The comments of Brundage and Blight reveal the problem of Wilson’s position. His work strikes a contrarian pose, a radical edge that provides allure; but to stand against the Civil War in the

twenty-first century is to stand against the abolition of slavery and against black freedom. These two strands of Civil War study are current central concerns. In 1963, Louis Rubin, Jr., understood. In the *Sewanee Review* he tried to reconcile Wilson's antiwar position with a moral approach to the conflict—"One can agree heartily that the holocaust of Civil War was an almost unmitigated evil." In choosing war, Rubin argued, Americans selected the worst remedy to their moral dilemma. "The Civil War was not the action of a sea slug ingurgitating a smaller sea slug, but a human tragedy."³⁶ Rubin's solution to Edmund Wilson failed to resonate. And this, mind you, was in the 1960s, when Wilson's antiwar stance would have seemed to strike a chord. But, as Edward Ayers has said, black liberation and militancy won out over war opposition in Civil War research.³⁷ Today this trend has reached the mainstream. In a passage reminiscent of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Barack Obama, in *Audacity of Hope*, explained the moral purpose of the Civil War: "The blood of slaves reminds us that our pragmatism can sometimes be moral cowardice. Lincoln, and those buried at Gettysburg, remind us that we should pursue our own absolute truths only if we acknowledge that there may be a terrible price to pay."³⁸

In the Civil War sesquicentennial, the legacy of *Patriotic Gore* points intellectuals to a new generation of critical scholarship, research that bears the skepticism of one of the great American skeptics. Wilson believed that the Civil War was wrong—and there is no need to return to such resolute interpretation. However, the past decades of Civil War scholarship frame the conflict as right. A more balanced, ethical Civil War history unearths the conflict's failures as much as its successes. For the most part, this analytical burden has been carried by the era of Reconstruction, when the mandate for national healing won out over justice for laborers and African Americans. But

for the Civil War alone, such a critical lens is harder to find. Perhaps it will be discovered in the medical tents and refugee camps that swarmed the Union army. Or maybe it lies within the environmental disaster of 1861–65.³⁹ Wherever and whenever it appears, Edmund Wilson will approve. “I am not myself a pacifist,” he said in April 1962 when he offered his support of the American Revolution. “I approve of the use of force if I sympathize with the people resisting.”⁴⁰ Four months later he explained his *Patriotic Gore* introduction: “What you are supposed to ‘applaud’ is my anti-war ‘message.’”⁴¹

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1. In text, citations are from Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (1962).

2. Daniel Aaron, “Edmund Wilson’s War,” *The Massachusetts Review* 3 (Spring 1962): 570; Robert Penn Warren, “Edmund Wilson’s Civil War,” *Commentary* 34 (August 1962): 158, 151; Lewis P. Simpson, review in *The Journal of Southern History* 28 (November 1962): 488; Robert Conquest, review in *The Listener* (July 12, 1962): 69.

3. Marcus Cunliffe, “Recent Writing on the American Civil War,” *History* 50 (January 1965): 34–35.

4. David Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (2011), 152.
5. Jeffrey Meyers, *Edmund Wilson: A Biography* (1995), 412.
6. C. Vann Woodward, review in *The American Scholar* 31 (Autumn 1962), 640.
7. Joseph Epstein, "Never Wise—But Oh, How Smart," *The New York Times Book Review*, August 31, 1986.
8. E.W. in Sheldon Meyer, "Patriotic Gore and the Introduction" in Dabney, ed., *Edmund Wilson: Centennial Reflections* (1997), 215.
9. E.W. to Sheldon Meyer, April 17, 1961, in Wilson, ed., *Letters on Literature and Politics* (1977), 615.
10. Wilson, *Europe Without Baedeker: Sketches Among the Ruins of Italy, Greece, and England* (1947), 419.
11. E.W. to Sheldon Meyer, April 17, 1961, in Wilson, ed., *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 615.
12. Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (1941), 289.
13. E.W. to Max Nomad, June 20, 1961, in Wilson, ed., *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 616.
14. Wilson attributed the epigraph to John Brown; however, it is a biblical citation from Hebrews 9:22. See Lawrence Dugan, *Notes and Queries* 56 (September 2009): 426.
15. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Patriotic Gore and the Introduction" in Dabney, ed., *Edmund Wilson: Centennial Reflections* (1997), 210; Daniel Aaron, "Patriotic Gore and the Introduction" in Dabney, ed., *Edmund Wilson: Centennial Reflections* (1997), 216 .

16. E.W. to Helen Muchnic, April 4, 1962, in Wilson, ed., *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 617.
17. E.W. to Brooks, 2 Jan. 1962, in Wilson, ed., *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 622-623.
18. Perry Miller, *New England Mind* (1939), 5.
19. E.W. to Robert Penn Warren, August 12, 1962, in Wilson, ed., *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 620.
20. Marius Bewley, "Northern Saints and Southern Knights," *The Hudson Review* (Autumn 1962): 434.
21. Woodward, *American Scholar*, 640.
22. Henry Steele Commager, *The Blue and the Gray: The Story of the Civil War as Told by Its Participants* (1950), xix.
23. Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, vol. 1 (1881; 1990), 3.
24. W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935; 1998), 3.
25. E.W. to Schlesinger, April 13, 1958, in Wilson, ed., *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 567.
26. Avery Craven, *The Repressible Conflict, 1830-1861* (1939), 97.
27. Warren, "Edmund Wilson's Civil War," 153.
28. Wilson, "Ambushing a Best-Seller" in *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (1950), 317.

29. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 182; Schlesinger, Jr., “The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism” (1949) in *The Politics of Hope and the Bitter Heritage* (1963; 2008), 64.

30. For slaves and the foundation of antislavery morality, see, for example, John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, vol. 1: *Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850* (1995); and vol. 2: *The Coming of the Civil War, 1850–1861* (2007).

31. See James Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (1990), 198.

32. Arthur Schlesinger, “Patriotic Gore and the Introduction” in Dabney, ed., *Centennial Reflections* (1997), 218. 33. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “African American Artists Interpret the Civil War in a Post-Soul Age,” in *Remixing the Civil War: Meditations on the Sesquicentennial*, ed. Thomas J. Brown (2011), 158.

34. Blight, “Edmund Wilson’s Patriotic Gore: One of the Most Important and Confounding Books Ever Written About the Civil War,” *Slate.com* (March 22, 2012).

35. Philip Butcher, “The Literature of the Civil War,” *Journal of Negro Education* 32 (Winter 1963): 57.

36. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., “Edmund Wilson and the Despot’s Heel,” *Sewanee Review* 71 (Winter 1963): 114.

37. Edward Ayers, *What Caused the Civil War: Reflections on the South and Southern History* (2005), 116.

38. Barack Obama, *Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006), 98.

39. New work on the war's human rights dilemma leads the way. See Jim Downs, *Sick for Freedom: African American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (2012). One recent environmental study of the Civil War includes Lisa M. Brady, *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War* (2012).

40. E.W. to Barbara Deming, April 11, 1962, in Wilson, ed., *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 618.

41. E.W. to T. S. Matthews, August 25, 1962, in Wilson, ed., *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 620.