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Dead Reckoning

By *EDWARD L. AYERS* JANUARY 11, 2008

Drew Gilpin Faust confronts the grisly realities of tallying, tidying, and mourning the Civil War fallen

Long before she became the first female president of Harvard University in July 2007, Drew Gilpin Faust showed herself to be an inventive, energetic, and restless historian. Her first book, in 1977, focused on a subject many people had doubted was a subject, "the intellectual in the Old South." Five years later, she produced what is still the fullest — and most disturbing — portrayal of a white Southern planter, a man who sought complete mastery over the white women in his charge as well as over the enslaved people he claimed as property.

Soon after that, in a series of brilliant lectures, Faust challenged historians to rethink another topic many had written off as an oxymoron: Confederate nationalism. The founders of the Confederacy, she argued, adopted the latest ideals and strategies of the modern nation-state. In 1996 she published the prize-winning *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, her most controversial book. There she put elite white Southern women in starring roles as skeptics and victims of the Confederate cause. Along the way, Faust published important essays in books edited by other scholars.

In her new book, Faust does something no one has done before: She puts us face to face with death in all its dimensions in the Civil War. Books about war can hardly fail to touch on death and dying, but they can fail to look at death steadily, without blinking or looking away, as Faust has done. It is hard to imagine the sheer determination required to research such a book over a decade, the grit required to read thousands of letters from dying young men, the depth of compassion necessary to join heartbroken mothers and fathers in confronting the loss of their children. In all honesty, reading the book requires some of the same fortitude. It is customary praise to say that one can't put a book down; it is even greater praise to say that one simply must set this book aside periodically.

This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War (Knopf, 2008) puts little distance between the bloodstained letters and the reader of the 21st century. Faust does not judge or criticize or claim to see through anguish to some deeper motive or concern. This is a book about death without villains or heroes — or even victims; it is like an ancient epic in its frank and frontal acknowledgment of death in

war. The writing resembles the photographs that appear throughout the book: carefully framed, unflinching, uncolored.

Faust shifts our focus on the Civil War. The war "matters to us today," she observes, "because it ended slavery and helped to define the meanings of freedom, citizenship, and equality. It established a newly centralized nation-state and launched it on a trajectory of economic expansion and world influence." Those are the good reasons to study the conflict. "But for those Americans who lived in and through the Civil War," Faust reminds us, "the texture of the experience, its warp and woof, was the presence of death."

The scale of death in the American Civil War is beyond imagining. The number of people who died — 620,000 — equals the total deaths of Americans in every other war from the Revolution through the bloodshed in Korea. The rate of death in the Civil War, relative to population, was six times that of American soldiers in World War II. If that same rate of loss was inflicted on the nation today, six million people would die. The Confederacy lost a greater share of its population than any nation in World War I. Without tanks, planes, bombs, or poison gas, Americans killed each other in incomprehensible numbers, eye to eye.

Fighting was strangely intimate in the Civil War, where battlefields remained much smaller than they would become in the world wars of the 20th century. As a result, Faust notes, the Civil War "placed more inexperienced soldiers, with more firepower and with more individual responsibility for the decision to kill, into more intimate, face-to-face battle settings than perhaps any war in history." As horrible as the battlefield might have been, soldiers feared disease just as much, for disease killed twice as many soldiers as battle wounds did. Ten times as many black soldiers died from illness as died from injuries on the battlefield.

The central theme in this book, somewhat surprisingly, is "work." Killing did not come naturally, Faust argues. It required enormous psychological, emotional, and ideological effort to overcome the ingrained teachings of a lifetime. Americans had not prepared themselves for war. Over the preceding four generations, the United States, North and South, had become widely and deeply evangelical. People went to church in ever-growing numbers and defined themselves as Christian above all else; in 1860 four times as many people attended church as voted. The Sixth Commandment forbade killing, and people could not ignore Scripture without profound reservation, especially when killing at such close quarters often felt as much like murder as warfare.

The American Civil War descended on a nation proud of its tenderheartedness. This strange war, at once so intimate and so dehumanized, came to a people who prided

themselves on their delicacy of Christian feeling, who wept over novels and pets, who strolled through bucolic cemeteries for pleasure. Far more than their grandparents, Americans of the 1850s made no secret of their feelings. Generals wept at revivals. Soldiers carried ambrotypes of their sweethearts, wives, and children into battle, clutched Testaments, and preserved strands of hair. Americans of the Civil War era were no Spartans.

Northerners and Southerners, blacks and whites, built their lives around family and faith. No peculiarly modern Yankees fight honor-bound archaic Rebels in Faust's book. There was no Union or Confederate culture of death — instead a mass of Protestants faced death with common ideals and hopes and faith. Quotes from Faust's Northerners and Southerners lie together in the same paragraphs, just as their bones occupy the same unmarked graves.

Americans of the Civil War era thought they knew what to expect from death and how to manage it. Death was supposed to come at home surrounded by family. Loved ones were to watch closely for signs of salvation, for peaceful and even joyful entrance into heaven. Dying words gave final shape to life, brought its story to a fitting end. After death the body was to be lovingly washed, dressed, adorned, and encased in a coffin. The funeral was to mark a passage for both living and dead alike, bridging today and eternity. Ministers were to say final words, and grieving was to unfold gradually, in carefully marked stages of dress for women, for months and years to come.

War shattered all those conventions. Screaming shells drowned out hope for a peaceful death. Severed arteries, blasted faces, and protruding intestines left no time for carefully formed last words. Solitary death left no witnesses. No one could know how an individual died when so many died at one time, nor what peace they may have found or anguish they may have expressed. No one caressed or dressed the body; no one closed the eyes or straightened the limbs. Some soldiers could never be buried at all, for they were blown into nothingness, their bodies disintegrated by shells.

How was one to grieve when one did not know when or how or where a loved one had been lost, when the letters simply ceased to come? How was one to care for a body when a body did not exist? How was one to imagine a resurrection, a re-embodiment in a celestial environment, when a body might have been eaten by hogs?

The bureaucracy of death proved primitive in the American Civil War. Neither the Union nor the Confederacy formed regular burial details or grave-registration units. Every battle forced officers to decide all over again how and where to bury thousands of bodies or their parts. The treatment of the dead became more chaotic and inhumane as the war rumbled on, as graves increasingly remained unmarked and unremembered.

More than 40 percent of Union burial places — and a far larger proportion of Confederate ones — bore the bodies of men who would forever be "unknown."

Every day that passed after a battle made the job of burial more gruesome. After Gettysburg, Faust tells us, a Union surgeon reported "stretched along, in one straight line, ready for interment, at least a thousand blackened bloated corpses with blood and gas protruding from every orifice, and maggots holding high carnival over their heads." Burial details of soldiers and civilians confronted about six million pounds of human and horse remains on the Pennsylvania fields in stifling summer heat after Gettysburg. For months a stench hung in the humid air.

Officers sometimes escaped the worst ignominy. Embalmers, appearing in large numbers during the Civil War, preserved the bodies of men of high rank long enough for them to be shipped back home. Undertakers used metal coffins guaranteed to keep noxious smells from escaping into the parlors where the dead would rest at their end of the journey. Some of the coffins came equipped with windows so that loved ones could observe the faces within without opening the coffin. "Bodies Embalmed by us NEVER TURN BLACK! But retain their natural color and appearance," one full-page advertisement reassured potential customers.

Grieving survivors found ways to communicate with the dead. (This was the period in which Mary Todd Lincoln regularly held séances in the White House to reach out to her son Willie, who died of a fever.) Millions wanted to believe when spiritualists assured their readers of the "imperishability of the individual and the continuation of the identical ego" after death. "You will never lose your identity," an often-republished book promised. "Physical death does not affect the identity of the individual."

The second-best-selling book of the 19th century, after Uncle Tom's Cabin, was Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*. Begun during the war and appearing three years after its end, the book was reprinted 55 times over the next two decades. Phelps, 20 years old when she began her work, just having lost a beloved soldier at Antietam, wanted "to say something that would comfort some few ... of the women whose misery crowded the land."

After her book appeared, thousands wrote to thank her for the glimpse of heaven she offered. Her heaven held no harps and praying (a heaven where it was always Sunday, as Emily Dickinson coolly put it) but was like home, with trees and streams. In such a place, a lost one felt "somehow or other to be as near as — to be nearer than — he was here — really mine again." A familiar heaven consoled a nation in mourning.

As the war finally fell silent, a remarkable work began. The United States Army sent soldiers, many of them African-American, back to the battlefields of the South to make proper provision for the dead. For years after the war, men led by James Moore and Edmund Whitman toiled across the South to accomplish the gruesome work necessary to heal the nation. Their teams found bodies abandoned in ditches and ravines. They went through the pockets on the clothes of skeletons, looking for any kind of identification. They pored over secret records from the prison camp at Andersonville, identifying nearly all of the 13,000 buried in the Georgia dirt. Between Natchez and Vicksburg, the burial crews discovered 40,000 bodies. Formerly enslaved people told the visiting soldiers of burial pits or isolated graves whose location Southern whites would not divulge. Local farmers had often plowed up bones in their fields or built roads over the Yankee graves.

By 1871, when the work had been completed, the United States had reinterred more than 300,000 of its soldiers in 74 national cemeteries, identifying slightly more than half of those who had been reburied. The federal government had invested over \$4-million, extending the power of the state into intimate parts of people's lives in an unprecedented way.

Vast as it was, the reburial effort affected only Union soldiers. Across the South, former Confederates had to take care of their own dead. Women raised money, sought donations of land, and urged their men to action. Without the power of the government or the aid of soldiers, white Southern women organized themselves to recover bodies and create cemeteries. They arranged for those who had fallen in the North to be disinterred and shipped home for somber celebration. In the spring of 1866, Confederate memorial days began, surviving for generations since.

Faust's book stands strangely isolated. No coherent body of literature has developed around the theme of death, and no burning debates animate the field. Historians have paid the most attention to memory and memorialization, generally picking up the story where Faust ends. No one has done the sort of synthetic, broad-reaching study she has provided.

Is there something in our own time that makes us especially interested in wartime death? Judging from the way death in the current war comes to us — as aggregate numbers tallied at the end of the year, as reports of blasted vehicles and roadside bombs — it seems unlikely that we are somehow primed by our own experience to look the devastation of death squarely in the face. Our averted eyes look beyond present as well as past suffering.

Our avoidance of thinking about death makes Drew Gilpin Faust's accomplishment even more impressive. Her book is, in many ways, a culmination of the selfless work

begun after the first death in the Civil War, when strangers did what they could for the shattered young men whose bodies lay on battlefields from Pennsylvania to Texas. Like the toil of those who came before, Faust's is a work of naming and numbering and ordering. It is a work of remembering what we have worked hard to forget. It is a brave work, and we should be grateful.