



**AMERICA IN THE CIVIL WAR ERA  
A History Institute for Teachers**

**By Trudy Kuehner, Reporter**

*On May 17-18, 2008, FPRI's Wachman Center presented a weekend of discussion on America in the Civil War Era, 1829-77, for 43 teachers selected from across the country, held at and co-sponsored by Carthage College, Kenosha, WI. Additional participants logged in for the webcast from around the country and the world. See [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org) for videocasts and texts of lectures. The Wachman Center's History Institute for Teachers is co-chaired by David Eisenhower and Walter A. McDougall. Core support is provided by The Annenberg Foundation; additional support for specific programs is provided by W.W. Keen Butcher, Bruce H. Hooper, John M. Templeton, Jr., the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. The next history weekends are What Students Need to Know About America's Wars, Part I: 1622-1919, July 26-27 (Wheaton, IL); and Teaching the History of Innovation, October 18-19 (Kansas City, MO).*

**THROES OF DEMOCRACY**

[Walter A. McDougall](#), professor of international relations at University of Pennsylvania and author of [Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829-1877](#), reviewed how, after an unprecedented economic boom, by June 1857, the *New York Herald* worried, "What can be the end of all this but another general collapse like that of 1837, only on a much grander scale?" Indeed, markets soon tumbled and banks collapsed. The Panic of 1857 was on.

During what Walt Whitman called those "melancholy days," prayer groups sprang up in New York, then Chicago and Philadelphia in a revival seen as a harbinger of the Apocalypse. The Revival of 1857-58 may not have caused our Civil War, but the spiritual message reinforced the *political* message of the new Republican Party, breeding revulsion to the corruption and vice in American society and making northern elites more receptive to antislavery agitation.

From 1861-65, America risked its future potential and very survival in a civil war that killed 600,000 of its citizens. Why? Alexis de Tocqueville suspected that Americans had sustained democracy by pretending to uphold diversity while in fact imposing a breathtaking *conformity* shaped by

Protestant public opinion. Americans might make a pretense of tolerance, but displayed rigid intolerance in matters of public behavior. Religion and liberty were "intimately united" in America, and civil society a sort of church.

Jacksonian democracy hallowed the Union, but divided Americans poor against rich, white against black, Protestant against Catholic, native against immigrant, Whig against Democrat, abolitionist against nearly everyone, and North against South against West. What could imbue the nation with purpose? That was one source of anxiety in antebellum America; another was that some faction might corner the market in power. This anxiety erupted into panics over threats posed by Freemasons, Wall Street, the Second U.S. Bank, a "Christian Party in Politics," Slavocrats, Abolitionists, immigrants, Papists, and Mormons. But pretense provided the glue for this huge democracy constantly buffeted by demographic, social, and technological change. To Americans, God's whole plan for America's destiny depended on its preservation. That made secession an unforgivable sin. Pretense also obligated citizens to respect others' rights to pursue their happiness. So antebellum Americans compromised their convictions. When crises erupted, the brokers in Congress cut deals such as the Missouri Compromise, Compromise of 1833, Indian Removal Act, and Compromise of 1850.

By the 1850s, the pretenses holding the country together grew too outrageous. By 1860 Northerners had flocked to the Republican Party's program for industry, tariffs, and free soil in the West, while Southerners formed a sectional party devoted to states' rights, free trade, and slavery. It is tempting to interpret the Civil War as a triumph of truth, but what really triumphed was pride. Anger, fear, and self-righteousness moved Americans to damn the evils on the other side of the Mason-Dixon Line while ignoring their own.

**WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT: THE  
TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICA, 1815-1848**

[Daniel Walker Howe](#) of UCLA and Oxford University, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning *What Hath God*

*Wrought: The Transformation of America 1815-48* (2007), spoke about the consequences of 19th century innovations in communications. In May 1844, Samuel F.B. Morse tapped out a message in Washington. Using a code he had recently devised, he spelled out “What Hath God Wrought.” Thirty miles away in Baltimore, Morse’s associate, Alfred Vail, received the electric signals and telegraphed the message back. As those who witnessed it understood, this demonstration would change the world. For thousands of years, messages had been limited by the speed with which messengers could travel and the distance that eyes could see signals like flags or smoke. Now, instant long-distance communication would become possible for the first time.

America was in 1815 what we would call a third-world country. Most people lived on isolated farmsteads. The difficulty of transportation and communication kept their lives primitive, and information from the outside world was a precious luxury. By 1848, the U.S. had become a transcontinental major power. With improvements in transportation such as the Erie Canal, the railroad, and the steamboat, Americans were much more integrated into a global economy, and America was extending its territory westward. The tsar of Russia worried about the democratic implications of the telegraph, just as the rulers of China today worry about the democratic implications of the internet. Instant long-range communications and improvements in transportation revolutionized American life. Innovations in printing and transportation facilitated the production and dissemination of books, while the newly efficient post office carried the cheap newspapers and political tracts that made nationwide mass politics possible.

Almost all Americans expected their country to change and grow; some of them thought of this in terms of geographical expansion across the continent, others in terms of enriching the quality of American life through industrialization, increased educational opportunities, and better treatment of women or racial minorities. These rival visions of the future dominated the political debates of that era.

It is not by accident that the text of Morse’s demonstration message was taken from the Bible (Numbers 23:23). Religious revivals were quite common in rural America in this time. Morse’s synthesis of science with religion represented the predominant American attitude of this time. In the intellectual universe of the early 19th century, practically everybody believed in intelligent design.

When gold was discovered in California in 1848, newspapers publicized regularly scheduled passenger trips. Suddenly hundreds and then thousands of people want to make the trip across the continent. No logistical effort comparable to this had ever been undertaken before except for raising an army. So the Gold Rush is the first truly global popular response of its kind.

American people of that time believed in progress, and most of them believed in a divine providence that would guide their progress. They fully expected the telegraph to be part of the divinely supervised progress that would promote democracy, peace, and justice, not only in America but all over the world.

## TEACHING ABOUT SLAVERY

[Michael Johnson](#) of Johns Hopkins University presented ways to teach slavery, which lasted for 250 years in U.S. territory, expanding dramatically during the 19th century. Virtually all of the 10 million enslaved Africans who were brought to the New World came before 1807, when the African slave trade closed. Of them, only about 400,000 came to what is now the U.S. Slaves comprised about one fifth of Americans in 1790, the first census year, when there were about 700,000 slaves.

By 1860, there were 4 million slaves in America, and the U.S. was the world’s largest slave-holding republic. Slavery had been concentrated in the slave states and eliminated north of the Ohio and Missouri Compromise line, but it had also moved west, owing to the enormous development of cotton. Roughly 0.5 million African Americans were free, most of them living in the slave states. Most white people in the North had never encountered a black person, but in the South, where slaves comprised a third of the population, slaves and whites encountered each other frequently. That has two corollaries for teaching the history of slavery: first, the histories of whites and blacks were inextricably intertwined; and second, we know more about masters, of which there were only 385,000, than slaves, because masters wrote. Only a few slaves like Frederick Douglass were able to learn to read and write.

The belief in white superiority was virtually universal among whites, and it justified slavery in their eyes. Even whites who recognized some evils about slavery shrugged them off as necessary evils. White racial prejudice shielded slavery from assault, both political and moral. Legally, slaves could not marry, own property, or testify in courts against whites. The law defined slaves as property, and economically, slaves were very valuable property.

The first of the three autobiographies written by Frederick Douglass (1818-95) was published in 1845, just before he gained his freedom. Over the course of his works Douglass develops his argument that slavery forces both slaves and masters to violate their natural impulses. “Nature has done almost nothing to prepare men and women to be either slaves or slave holders. Nothing but rigid training, long persisted in, can perfect the character of the one or the other.”

Douglass prophesied that former slaveholders could become humane if they were “in a free state, surrounded by the restraints of a free society,” seriously underestimating the longevity of the destructive moral and political culture of slavery for former slaves and masters. The destructive legacy of slavery tragically persists. Still, Douglass offers an unsurpassed beginning point for teaching about slavery, and for challenging students to think about the causes and consequences of slavery, freedom, and moral accountability in the Civil War era and in our own time.

## THE TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

[Maury Klein](#) of the University of Rhode Island noted that few American high schools, colleges or universities offer courses on technology, notwithstanding the dominant role it has played in our history. When we talk about the role of

religion in American life, it's important to remember that vast numbers of Americans were non-religious, and very few Americans were not materialistic. This country was about the opportunity to get ahead and build a better life. You did this by getting ahead in material terms.

In the 19th century, Americans were coming up with an incredible number of innovations, both enhanced technologies (improving an existing invention) and replacement technologies (where one technology replaces another, using entirely different principles, and renders the first one obsolete, which often causes economic chaos).

Technology's effects are unpredictable. Inventors themselves often don't know what's going to be done with the thing they've invented. Thomas Edison himself was wrong on his inventions as often, if not more often, than he was right. He was absolutely convinced that the only way to go was DC power, but for numerous reasons, he was wrong. When he invented the phonograph, he was convinced that its sole function was as a business machine. When he came back to the phonograph later in life, he was absolutely convinced that the future of the technology lay in the cylinder, not in the flat disk. When the telephone came along, *Scientific American* assured readers that it would never catch on: the art of conversation, it said, consisted of having a listener. Even the telephone companies were long convinced that it was only businessmen who were interested in the telephone.

Technology introduced industrialization, and with it came the mass migration of people out of rural areas and into cities. It speeded up American life and awoke the promise of a better tomorrow, a better life, with material advances. More things, more goods, for more people. Of course it came at a huge price tag. But it happened, and most Americans saw it as the march of progress to the point where they came to expect that whatever they had today, there would be something new and better tomorrow.

The first, key foundational revolution was the power revolution, followed by the communications revolution, the transportation revolution, and the organizational revolution, which literally changed the way America organized itself and its activities. The power revolution came in two phases. first the steam engine, and then the electric revolution. The communications revolution too came in two phases: the telegraph and then the telephone. The transportation revolution began with the steamboat, and then the railroad.

Prior to the railroad, when it was mentioned that a boat would leave from San Francisco to come east or vice versa, that was a six-month trip around the Cape, or if it went through Panama, assuming you survived the fever, a couple of months. After the transcontinental railroad opened, by as early as 1869-70 you could get from New York to San Francisco in seven days. Technology obliterated our sense of time and the meaning of the term "travel."

The telegraph was key in the Civil War. Much of the wartime correspondence on both sides was telegraphed. The railroad played its first major role in the Civil War, too, and a surprising number of weapons then in their infancy made their first appearance in this country in the Civil War: rifle muskets and cannons. A rifle piece goes farther, straighter, and is therefore more deadly. There were the first repeating

rifles, early versions of hand grenades, rockets, the first primitive submarine, and of course the first primitive ironclad ships. All of these technologies are important not just for what they did in the Civil War but because they marked the beginning of a new type of warfare, one that's going to come to its head in savage, bloody, horrible terms in WW I. Generals expended huge numbers of lives trying to fight wars the old-fashioned way, so the technology of war became the dark side of the promise of American life in material terms.

A rocket when it's first launched seems hardly to move because it's gathering thrust, then as it gathers thrust its momentum goes upward, and then it just shoots off. That's basically the image of the history of technology. Once it gathers that initial momentum, with all kinds of innovations to it, it takes off and goes to places people know not where.

#### HONEST ABE: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE MORAL CHARACTER

Prof. Howe spoke of how no story in American history has captured the popular imagination more than that of Lincoln's youth. A poor boy growing up in a remote area, whose mother died when he was young, realizing that he had no inclination to become a farmer like his father. Not only the means but even the end of Lincoln's quest for self-realization may not be readily comprehensible to us anymore.

America's open society brought new opportunities for Lincoln and his contemporaries to leave home--often their father's farm--and seek to find themselves, as Lincoln left his father's. The revolutions in transportation, commerce, and industry multiplied the occupational options available.

When we use the term "self-made," we usually are thinking in financial terms. In Lincoln's time, it had a more comprehensive meaning--a self-conscious development of one's human potential. Scientists, inventors, and statesmen were making the world anew during the era of industrial revolution, geographical expansion, and knowledge explosion. The creation of their own identities was the first step in their innovation and accomplishments.

Like a Horatio Alger hero, Lincoln determined to prepare himself for the right moment when it came along. With no formal schooling available to him, Lincoln developed himself through reading. He read not only to learn what others had thought and said, but to find out how they did it. No better example existed for Emerson's ideal American scholar than Lincoln.

Moral integrity occupied Lincoln's core--financial honesty and, as a lawyer, combating his profession's reputation for dishonesty. Colleagues ranked him "at the head of his profession in the state" in part because of their absolute confidence that he never told a lie. Later, he was consistently honest when dealing with the explosive subjects of slavery and its expansion into the western territories. It is for good reason that Honest Abe remains an exemplar for students and adults, while even the real accomplishments of contemporaries like "Polk the Mendacious," as he was called, are largely unknown.

## WOMEN IN THE CIVIL WAR

[Jane Schultz](#) of Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis explained how in recent years, historians have documented the lives of women immersed in military operations in camp, field, and hospital, so that we are now able to dispel common myths about women's roles in the Civil War.

While the stories of the several hundred women passing as soldiers in the ranks are intriguing, more significant were the domestic laborers, the thousands who provided hospital relief services in urban centers, military camps, and the field. We now know that we have undercounted the number of women who served in the war. At the National Archives, Schultz analyzed the records of Union hospital attendants and found that more than 21,000 women had been on Union payrolls as nurses, cooks, matrons, laundresses, seamstresses, waitresses, and chambermaids; we can project that as many as 10,000 or more Confederate women did similar work.

We also now know that white middle-class women constituted a minority of relief workers in both North and South. We were under the impression that they were a majority because most of our information about relief work came from books written by white middle-class women. In fact, they were no more than one-third of the entire group of hospital workers, even fewer in the South.

While women are often portrayed as having been motivated to serve by patriotism, the vast majority sought a wage to sustain themselves and their families in their men's absence.

Though nurses, usually upper class, were given responsibilities related to their literacy skills, the domestic nature of their work differed little from that of cooks and laundresses. Even the doyennes of Philadelphia society stooped to mop floors, wash clothes, ride cattle-style in boxcars, and tote cauldrons and washtubs where wagons were scarce.

Wartime relief work is often depicted as demonstrating a model of women and men working together harmoniously. But primary sources indicate that conflict between relief workers and surgeons was common and harmony rare. As self-appointed guardians of soldiers' well-being, nurses leveraged morality, and surgeons chafed at their self-righteousness and scrutiny. The relations among women in military hospitals were fraught, as well. When they had the opportunity, elite women sought to direct the work of social "inferiors," and even northern white women were only too willing to assign particularly vile tasks to "colored girls."

Clara Barton has generally been depicted as an exception in her wartime service, but in fact, Barton was exceptional in being a brilliant self-promoter. Hundreds of women spent more time than she in strenuous relief work, and scores of them in battlefield roles.

We are left with no clear sense that the war advanced women's interests. To be sure, individual actors found the war a transformative class leveler. But there is little evidence of a galvanic shift in women's lives after the war. What seems to emerge out of four years of war is a wish to return to domestic life and to assuage the psychic wounding that

was inevitably the result of the conflict.

## TEACHING MILITARY HISTORY: THE CIVIL WAR AS CASE STUDY

Karl Walling of the Naval War College had participants analyze how the South might have won the war. Strategy is about means to achieve aims, which for the South was to secure its independence. One looks at the actual course of action chosen, and then at the result, asking whether there were alternative courses of action. Students can be assigned to teams, the Blues and the Grays, to look at the feasibility of alternative strategies. They can look at costs and risks. Some blacks at the end of the war were conscripted to fight for the rebel cause. Could the Confederates have done that earlier? No, it would have cost them too much. They're not going to destroy the society they're trying to save in order to win this war.

Along the way, students will learn a lot of reasons why the South lost this war. Starting at the diplomatic level, the South wanted to secure independence. What could it have done diplomatically to get there? Force compromises on the North. But if Lincoln negotiated with them, he'd be treating them as an independent nation. The South did try that, but Lincoln was not going to play into it.

What the South wanted from England and France was diplomatic recognition, possibly aid, and in a utopian world, an alliance. At the beginning of the war, the South embargoed cotton, trying to push the Europeans into recognizing it. If cotton didn't work as a stick, could it have worked as a carrot? The South could have drawn the Union into a confrontation with England or France should the Union impose its blockade against them. Instead, the South imposed the Union's blockade for it. Could the South have continued its cotton trade, to sustain its economy and draw France and Britain in?

The South tried to present its cause to the world as 1776 all over again—they were freedom fighters, defending the right of states to govern themselves. They posited that slavery was actually good for the slave, that masters were benevolent. Students can explore what the result of this communication strategy was. The North didn't see the South as freedom fighters, and while British aristocrats might have some sensitivity for the paternalistic version of slavery, the working class did not.

The Southern military strategy was to win by not losing, to hold on until the North gave up and undermine its legitimacy by letting the war appear to be a northern war of aggression. But this raised the costs—the South would have needed a series of Union defeats. The war did test the North, and had Sherman not taken Atlanta, the outcome of the 1864 election could have been different. But the South was simply spread too thin to complete its strategy. It could no longer hold the North back in northern Virginia, Tennessee, along the Mississippi, and at major ports.

## POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTION

[Herman Belz](#) of the James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation discussed the various historiographies of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The interpretation made famous by Charles Beard is that Republican business

interests used the war to seize power from the planter class and promote industrial capitalist development, reducing the South to colonial status in service of the northern economy. The more recent progressive thesis holds that this “second American Revolution” was an idealistic civil rights revolution, undertaken in reaction to the “counterrevolution” of southern secession, which abolished slavery and conferred equal citizenship on the country’s African American population.

To Belz, a constitution-minded interpretation of the Civil War era as a non-revolutionary turning point in American political development provides a more accurate account. At the point in their evolution where it was necessary to clarify the future direction of the country, Americans decided not to change course. They chose rather to extend the nation’s founding principles by creating a more racially integrated national democracy based on the principles of liberty, equality, and consent. Republican policies in war and reconstruction signified the perfecting of the principles, forms, and institutions of republican society and government on which the nation was founded. The sectional conflict over slavery was in reality a debate over how to preserve the Union by reconstructing it to accommodate changing social conditions.

In the course of winning the war the United States adopted a policy of military emancipation in the rebellious states. The Constitution and Union were preserved, and uncertainty about the nature of the Union was resolved along two constitutional axes: the federal principle of divided sovereignty—distribution of power between the national and state governments—and the republican principle of equal citizenship based on natural rights. Reconstruction carried forward and completed the work of constitutional revision and reform begun during the war.

When the fighting stopped, the preeminent problem, as Lincoln described it in his last public speech, was how to “re-inaugurate the national authority” and get the seceded states back into “their proper practical relation with the Union.” No provision in the Constitution explained how this should be done. Observing that there was no authorized government to make a treaty with, as in a war between independent nations, Lincoln said: “No one man can give up the rebellion for any other man. We simply must begin with, and mould from, disorganized and discordant elements.”

One cannot know how Lincoln would have dealt with these disorganized elements. His wartime speeches, however, state essential principles of republican liberty that preservation of the Union signified and which the Reconstruction amendment defined and constitutionalized. Most notably at Gettysburg in 1863, Lincoln spoke “a new birth of freedom” in a nation “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Defeat of the rebellion presumed the reintegration of seceded states to their “proper practical relations with the United States.” Far more controversial was the problem arising out of wartime military emancipation of integrating the country’s African American population into republican society.

Equally important in shaping Reconstruction was commitment to the Constitution as fundamental law. The Constitution invited pluralistic interest-group competition.

Somehow public sentiment and government policy on issues arising out of the war would have to be determined through the operation of majority-rule constitutional orthodoxy.

Moderate Republicans generally desired to limit the power of the former slave-holding class, protect the country against future rebellion, and secure the liberty and basic civil rights of the freed people. Radical Republicans, more high-minded and idealistic, wanted to rule the South indefinitely and transform it into a liberal, free-labor market society. Democrats wanted to recognize the end of slavery, hold elections, organize loyal state governments, and get the seceded states readmitted to Congress.

In 1866 a power struggle ensued between Democratic President Andrew Johnson and Congressional Radical Republicans. The eruption of racial violence against blacks in the New Orleans riot in July 1866 proved decisive. Republicans won large majorities in the Fall elections and went on to adopt the Military Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and 1868. These measures enforced the Reconstruction policy previously adopted in the 13th and 14th Amendments in 1865 and the Freedmen’s Bureau and Civil Rights Acts of 1866.

The election of General Ulysses Grant as president in November 1868 signaled the end of the first phase of Reconstruction, the focus of which now shifted from Washington to the former Confederate states. A biracial coalition of black and white southerners, under the protection of federal military authority, formed the Republican party. As historian Orville Vernon Burton writes, “On the local level former slaves and rebels could do little except feel their way forward tentatively, staking claims to new ways or old habits in their communities, defending their choice on a daily basis to those they ran up against in the course of labor and community life. In this way ordinary Americans reconstructed their nation according to their own uncertain, conflicted ideas.” (*The Age of Lincoln*, 2008)

But the issues posed in Reconstruction were intractable, the policymaking process venal, the results controversial. Southern Democrats were determined to restore white political control through a combination of partisan electoral and violent paramilitary means, and the new Republican party was unable to compete with opposition Democrats committed to maintaining the norms of racial superiority.

In the face of white resistance, W.E.B. DuBois wrote, “the plain common-sense of the nation” determined that to protect the freedmen they would have to be armed with the ballot. Equality at the ballot box was “the very least a guilty nation could grant a wronged race, and the only method of compelling the South to accept the results of the war.”

Contemporary historians, dispirited by the theory of intrinsic racism, view Reconstruction as a lost opportunity to achieve real liberty and genuine racial equality for African Americans. At every step, this view holds, Republicans faltered in the face of the southern racism, and although differing in degree from the southern variety, white supremacy in the North vitiated and compromised the will of the people. But this failure-of-Reconstruction narrative rests on flawed logic. The implicit criterion of successful reconstruction would be the elimination of racism and white



supremacy resulting in real equality right away, not formal equality to be achieved over time. The premise is an abstract concept: the belief that racism is an intractable force, the animating spirit of the laws in America. In positing racism as intrinsic to historical development, the failure narrative denies the reality of the historical record itself. It does not take into account the significant changes in American

politics and society that have followed from the integration of blacks into national democracy based on Reconstruction civil rights amendments and laws. Although in their immediate historical context these measures can be described as exigent, superficial, and expedient, a century of history discloses them as prudent, principled, and wise.

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