



ROBERT PENN WARREN
INTRODUCTION BY HOWARD JONES

THE LEGACY OF THE CIVIL WAR

THE CIVIL WAR is, for the American imagination, the great single event of our history. Without too much wrenching, it may, in fact, be said to *be* American history. Before the Civil War we had no history in the deepest and most inward sense. There was, of course, the noble vision of the Founding Fathers articulated in the Declaration and the Constitution—the dream of freedom incarnated in a more perfect union. But the Revolution did not create a nation except on paper; and too often in the following years the vision of the Founding Fathers, which men had suffered and died to validate, became merely a daydream of easy and automatic victories, a vulgar delusion of manifest destiny, a conviction of being a people divinely chosen to live on milk and honey at small expense.

The vision had not been finally submitted to the test of history. There was little awareness of the cost of having a history. The anguished scrutiny of the

meaning of the vision in experience had not become a national reality. It became a reality, and we became a nation, only with the Civil War.

The Civil War is our only "felt" history—history lived in the national imagination. This is not to say that the War is always, and by all men, felt in the same way. Quite the contrary. But this fact is an index to the very complexity, depth, and fundamental significance of the event. It is an overwhelming and vital image of human, and national, experience.



MANY CLEAR AND OBJECTIVE FACTS about America are best understood by reference to the Civil War. The most obvious fact is that, for better or worse, and despite any constitutional theorizing by Governor Almond of Virginia, we are a united nation. Before the War there had been, of course, a ferocious love of the Union, but the Union sometimes seemed to exist

as an idea, an ideal, rather than as a fact. There was a sense that it had to be struggled for, to be won and re-won against many kinds of enemies—not only the Burrs and Wilkinsons and Houstons and the conventioners of Hartford, Connecticut, and the nullifiers of South Carolina, but also distance, sprawling space, apathy, selfishness, ignorance, the westward slope of the watershed beyond the Appalachians.

This unionism was, we remember, particularly ferocious in the South, as the old Jackson, the young Calhoun, and many a Whig planter, even in 1860, would testify. We can recall with what reluctance Jefferson Davis or Stonewall Jackson took the step toward disunion, and lately some historians find the corrosive of a crypto-unionism deep in many a Confederate breast less eminent than that of General Lee. When General Pickett, leading his division on the road to Gettysburg, passed a little Dutch girl defiantly waving the Federal flag, he took off his hat and bowed to her. Asked why he had saluted the flag of the enemy, he replied: "I did

not salute the enemy's flag. I saluted the heroic womanhood in the heart of that brave little girl, and the glorious old banner under which I won my first laurels." True or not, the tale, reported by LaSalle Corbell Pickett, points to a truth. Shared experiences of the past and shared hopes for the future could not easily be expunged; and I myself have heard an old man who had ridden three years with Forrest, and never regretted that fact, say that he would have sadly regretted the sight of this country "Balkanized."

That old unionism was, however, very different from the kind we live with now. We do not live with an ideal, sometimes on the defensive, of union. We live with the overriding, overwhelming fact, a fact so technologically, economically, and politically validated that we usually forget to ask how fully this fact represents a true community, the spiritually significant communion which the old romantic unionism had envisaged. In any case, the "Union"—which we rarely refer to as a union any more, so obvious is the fact—gives us our most signifi-

cant sense of identity, limited as that may be, and the best and most inclusive hope for our future, and that of mankind.

A second clear and objective fact is that the Civil War abolished slavery, even if it did little or nothing to abolish racism; and in so doing removed the most obvious, if perhaps not the most important, impediment to union. However we may assess the importance of slavery in the tissue of "causes" of the Civil War—in relation to secession, the mounting Southern debt to the North, economic rivalry, Southern fear of encirclement, Northern ambitions, and cultural collisions—slavery looms up mountainously and cannot be talked away. It was certainly a necessary cause, to use the old textbook phrase, and provided the occasion for all the mutual vilification, rancor, self-righteousness, pride, spite, guilt, and general exacerbation of feeling that was the natural atmosphere of the event, the climate in which the War grew. With slavery out of the way, a new feeling about union was possible.

Despite bumbling and vindictiveness and deprivation, many a Southerner, in one part of the soul at least, must have felt much as did the planter's wife who referred to the War as the time Mr. Lincoln set her free. As there had been crypto-unionism in the Confederate psyche, so there had been a crypto-emancipationism, or at least a deep moral, logical, and economic unease. After 1865 the terms of life were a little clearer, and one of the things clearer was the possibility of another kind of relation to the union.



THE NEW NATION came not merely from a military victory. It came from many circumstances created or intensified by the War. The War enormously stimulated technology and productivity. Actually, it catapulted America from what had been in considerable part an agrarian, handicraft society into the society of Big Technology and Big Business. "Parallel with the

waste and sorrows of war," as Allan Nevins puts it, "ran a stimulation of individual initiative, a challenge to large-scale planning, and an encouragement of co-operative effort, which in combination with new agencies for developing natural resources amounted to a great release of creative energy." The old sprawling, loosely knit country disappeared into the nation of Big Organization.

It is true that historians can debate the question whether, in the long run and in the long perspective, war—even wars of that old pre-atomic age—can stimulate creativity and production. And it is true that there had been a surge of technological development in the decade or so before 1861, followed, some maintain, by an actual decline in inventiveness during the War. But the question is not how many new inventions were made but how the existing ones were used. The little device of the "jig," which, back in 1798, had enabled Eli Whitney to make firearms with interchangeable parts led now to the great mass-production factories of

the Civil War—factories used not merely for firearms but for all sorts of products. The Civil War demanded the great American industrial plant, and the industrial plant changed American society.

To take one trivial fact, the ready-made clothing industry was an offshoot of the mass production of blue uniforms—and would not this standardization of fashion, after the sartorial whim, confusion, fantasy and individualism of an earlier time, have some effect on man's relation to man? But to leap from the trivial to the grand, the War prepared the way for the winning of the West. Before the War a transcontinental railroad was already being planned, and execution was being delayed primarily by debate about the route to take, a debate which in itself sprang from, and contributed something to, the intersectional acrimony. After the War, debate did not long delay action. But the War did more than remove impediment to this scheme. It released enormous energies, new drives and