



An American Tragedy

By Edward Ball

HUNDREDS of Confederate re-enactors moved into tent cities around town this week, and it is not uncommon to see men in gray uniforms, with prop rifles, at the Burger King. They have been camping out, waiting for the hour before sunrise today, when an antebellum 10-inch mortar is to fire a starburst shell over Charleston Harbor, just like in 1861, in effect bombing Fort Sumter a second time.

The Civil War is that paradoxical thing in history, a kind of memory screen. Large numbers of white Southerners mark the rebellion by celebrating its imagery, but other Americans recast this singular disaster to fit their needs, too. Instead of a wide view of the war we — white and black, North and South — prefer hot, local pictures: John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theater, or black soldiers marching south, or plantations and weeping slaves.

It is not for lack of trying: something like 65,000 books have been published on the war, more than one a day since it ended. But between the study and storytelling, we entertain ourselves with notions that preserve a tremendous lack of consensus about what the Civil War means.

We cannot come to terms with the Civil War because it presents us with an unacceptable kind of self-knowledge. We think, as Americans, that we possess a heroic past, and we like to think of our

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history as one of progress and the spread of freedom, even transcendence. But the Civil War tells us that we possess a tragic history instead, over which we must continually paste a mask of hope.

Now, you might regard the Civil War as the birth hour of modern liberty and equality. In this view, a quarter of Southern white men of military age, and one in 50 of all Americans, were killed for justice. The war redeemed a barbaric society in which the whole nation tolerated slavery into the salvation of widening rights and freedoms.

Except, of course, that it did not: the stream of blood that started at Fort Sumter passed through Jim Crow and into the

Race defines how we remember, and forget, the war's meaning.

civil rights era, right down to the present. Southern whites, having gone down in the fight, turned their recollections into rage and resentment at being displaced — fuel for politicians ever since.

Likewise, for blacks emancipation was not a jubilee, but rather the beginning of a long season of bitter disappointment. Black national memory in some ways is still commensurate with despair. Redemption turns out to be a false idol.

It is said that the South lost the Civil War, but won the peace. That is, while slavery was ended, white supremacy grew into the law of the land. Here is the central scene in the national tragedy, the

part we can't face and can hardly speak about without censoring ourselves.

The 20-year-olds who fired the first shots here at Charleston were less circumspect: they would have seen themselves as warriors on behalf of whiteness; their ministers and politicians told them as much. They did not know, however, that they had started an open and unending fight over race. Census figures show that whites comprise a shrinking part of the population. What is heroic about the racial anxiety this seems to cause?

They are sad, these memories and this knowledge, and Americans don't wish to occupy a landscape of sorrow. Many people stick to the military story of the Civil War, especially in the South. But not all is playtime in the commemorations here. During the pre-dawn hour of the re-enactment's first shots, the Charleston Symphony, sitting under the oaks near the site of one of the gun batteries, is to perform sorrowful songs in a concert called "When Jesus Wept."

Meanwhile, black Southerners do not care to rehearse the sad fight, except perhaps through the ballot. In the 2008 election, Charleston County went to President Obama, largely on black votes. And yet, given the enduring reach of the Civil War, if he is re-elected it would not redeem the tragedy at the core of American history. □

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