

A More Perfect Union: The Origins and Development of
the U.S. Constitution
Second Year

Paper #3: Book Review: This Republic of Suffering; Death
and the American Civil War

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Drew Gilpin Faust's, of *This Republic of Suffering (Death and the American Civil War)*, writes a compelling scholarly book on death, dying, killing, and sorrow during the Civil War and the years after the war. For anyone studying the American Civil War Faust's book is a must read. She examines and details how the death of 620,000 citizens and soldiers or 2% of the population (equivalent to 6 million people today) both individually and collectively reshaped Americans and America. (No country or region during any time period with the exception of Western Russia during World War II lost a greater percentage of its population to war.) She carefully details the topics of dying, killing, burying (the dead), naming (the graves), realizing (and acknowledging the dead), believing and doubting (in life and death), accounting (for the dead) and finally surviving. She details how individuals and society both confronted dying and killing during this highly Christian world and how those experiences transformed society, culture, and government into a republic of suffering. Wives became widows, children became orphans, African-Americans hoped to win citizenship and equality. There was a philosophic and spiritual transformation as Americans sought meaning and explanation to war's destruction.

As for myself it helped me to find meaning and closure to my only personal experience with war and death. In May of 1968, my last year of elementary school the sixth grade, I was walking home from school with the "boys" when we came to Deano's house, (one the "boys"). That day there were more cars than normal and Deano's older sister was crying. News had come that day that Deano's older brother Paul Czerwonka was killed in Vietnam (his body was not recovered). His base had been overrun by North Vietnamese

regulars and only a handful of soldiers were able to evacuate, some dead were left behind. We often stopped at Deano's house afterschool to play ball and snack on Deano's mother's cookies. We would never stop there again to play. It would be six years later before I would set foot in his house. It was some time shortly before graduation and Deano's mother still wore black and the parlor looked like a shrine with many of Paul's pictures, commendations, and medals. It would be the summer of 2005 when Mrs. Czerwonka would finally get closure when Paul's remains were discovered and identified in Vietnam. Paul would be laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. Watching Deano's mother on the national news made me realize how important closure is in our culture. Not having anything to bury is incomplete. I cannot imagine a large segment of the population suffering from lack of closure as Mrs. Czerwonka did. *This Republic of Suffering*, would give me added closure and meaning in regards to the Paul Czerwonka's combat death in Vietnam.

Faust first introduces the reader to the art of dying or *ars moriendi* of the mid-1800s in Christian America. How important it was to die a "Good Death." For the white population of America being separated from your family and most particularly at death was uncommon, thus particularly dying away from family put a strain on the concept of a "Good Death." Thus many nurses substituted as a mother, sister, or wife for a dying soldier. It was comforting for the family to know someone was there. For most soldiers, death was on the battle field not a hospital, with no one to comfort them. Fellow soldiers often wrote comforting account of a soldier's death to be sent to the family to offer the family the "Good Death". Again it was to try to preserve the notion of the "Good

Death”, *ars moriendi*. The Bad Death was for deserters and was a family tragedy. In the Civil War there were more executions for desertion and other crimes of murder or rape than any other war. Military executions often were a large public event in front of other soldiers, a reminder of the Bad Death. Faust also explored why so many both Union and Confederate went to battle with little hesitation knowing they most likely would die and not return to their families. The Christian concept of afterlife and the strong belief in the resurrection when they would be reunited with loved ones gave most solace in the face death. There was a strong belief on both sides that god was on their side. For many in the Union, God was further leading the cause against slavery and to save the world’s greatest hope for mankind our way of governing. This created profound upheaval and chaos in society. In the end the Good Death could not annul the killing that the war required or ease the unforgettable battlefield scenes of carnage. It questioned the humanity of those slaughtered and those who did the slaughtering.

Dying was one thing but killing was something else. “Man is not by nature a killer” 1 stated by Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, US Army Retired, specialist in military psychology of West Point and most military commanders would agree to that statement. Faust again examines how both sides overcame the natural obstacle to kill as illustrated by this soldier of the Massachusetts regiment “ I felt bad at first when I saw what I had done, but it soon passed off and as I had done my duty and I was not the aggressor. I was soon able to fire again and again.”2 Faust found that duty and self-defense released most from the initial sense of guilt. Revenge was another strong motivation. Watching their friends killed as was the case of the previous Massachusetts soldier, lead to strong

feelings of revenge. Again killing challenged the strong Christian principles that most held. Though war was considered an exception to murder as noted in the Bible, the amount of killing in the Civil War called that exception into question. Winfield Scott, first Union commander, was clear about his view “everyman killed beyond the number absolutely required is murdered.”³ He and many others would be stunned by the staggering large casualty count from many of the battles. Faust points out that killing is the essence of war but the enormity of the killing and the lack of care for the dead challenged the most fundamental assumptions about the sanctity of a soldier’s own life and that of other human lives. The killing produced a transformations that was not readily reversible; the most obvious, the living into the dead, and survivors into very different men, a numbness to basic human feelings. This is a cost that would be paid for decades. This indifference to suffering and death was demoralizing. This hardening represented the abandonment of the core human and Christian values. Others described the loss of feeling as a loss of self. The slaves were transformed into former slaves, into vengeance on white people, liberator, personal empowerment, and to claim a human right. For others manhood was defined by and was achieved by killing. The killing of Negro soldiers and civilians was the most brutal. Negro soldiers were not treated as prisoners of war but rather executed. Sharpshooters were another class of soldiers hated because of the coldness of their killing. How they could kill a man eating breakfast or during other non-direct battle activities was for many just murder. Dehumanizing the enemy was and is common to breakdown the natural restraints against killing. Faust documents many of the changes in warfare that would challenge killing yet allow for the human carnage to be enormous; new weapon technology, non-professional soldiers, minimal training, size and

scale of armies and battles, more independence of soldiers during battles. Many could not discharge their weapons; many were less likely to fight in close range. At Gettysburg 24,000 rifles were found loaded and sometimes with two balls in the chamber implying they never discharged their weapons. After World War II the military estimated that 20% of the soldiers did 80% of the killing in battle. That may have been similar for the Civil War. Faust's writing on dying and killing was very extensive throughout and well documented. Her last sections also greatly influenced the theme of transformation in the book.

Her documentation of the burial of dead soldiers during the Civil War soldiers was astonishing. It was a logistical catastrophe. There had never been a war with the total dead numbering this magnitude. How do you wage constant warfare and still care for the burial of the dead. The most obvious and compelling problem was the disease caused by unburied bodies along with the problem of wolves and wild hogs. Society believed deeply about redemption and the resurrection of the body, not just in a met-physical way, but physically as well. There was a belief, to preserve the "surviving identity", the body required "sacred reverence and care" the absence of such would indicate "a demoralized and rapidly demoralizing community."⁴ To be human with the promise of eternal life is what separated human remains from that of the carcasses of animals. Our place in the universe mandated what was called a "decent" burial and the rituals fitting for the dead. Civil War soldiers were deeply concerned about their own remains as battle made customary reverence all but impossible. In the beginning of the war, hospitals were in charge of burying the dead. Very quickly that task was impossible due to the enormity of

the task and the speed in which the task had to be carried out. Thus military commanders began assuming the task which led to military General Orders number 75 and 35 requiring company commanders to be responsible for the burial of dead soldiers within their jurisdiction and to submit records of their deaths to the adjutant general. This was not carried out with the care and precision required. One of the main premises of Faust is the transformation of responsibility of the dead from families to the government. Faust documents carefully that prior to the Civil War the government took no responsibility for killed soldiers it was entirely upon the families to trace their remains. During the Mexican War only a small number of American soldiers were taken back to Texas for burial on American soil. There was no formal notification to the families. During the Civil War again there was no formal notification to the families of soldiers killed in battle. Most families read about their loved one killed in the newspaper or from letters by a comrade. The haste and lack of infrastructure, in the Union and Confederate army, to deal with the wounded or dead led to poorly buried soldiers, only to have their bodies and skeletons reappear due to rain and wind. Often soldiers were buried in group ditches the same as animals or vegetables. The dead were often stripped of their possessions and clothes by needy soldiers. Thieves and scavengers also preyed on the corpses. Other practices that challenged the notion of a decent burial were the dismembering of limbs and the relatively new practice of embalming the dead. Embalming as an industry became lucrative and often preyed upon families, but was highly sought after by the wealthy.

Gettysburg becomes the turning point for the government to accept responsibility for giving dead soldiers a "proper burial". Of course this is what the population was

demanding from their government. It also marked a change in protocol whereby every soldier regardless of rank was buried with same markings and similar cemetery locations. Officers had previously been given preferential markings and locations. As Lincoln had claimed every death was equally important and their loss belongs to the nation not just to the family.

Faust uses the remainder of the book to detail how the public dealt with the lack of closure; forty per-cent of the Civil War dead were buried with no identification and no grave markings. This would not allow for the “good death” which families needed. It becomes a national obsession with leaders like Clara Barton and Walt Whitman spending years trying to connect families with the location of their dead soldiers.

Clara Barton ran newspaper ads contacted fellow soldiers to try receive accounts where when and how a soldier died. She was inundated with thousands of letters from families trying to locate a loved one. Eventually the government would give her government recourses to help complete this task.

Faust further documents how both the Union and Confederate went to great length after the war to rebury and identify the dead. Considering the large number of unmarked, unidentified, and unburied there were it was a giant financial and logistical task. The killed would finally enjoy the “Good Death” and families would also gain closure and comfort. The post war reprisals on Union graves by former confederates necessitated the task also. Failure to protect or preserve the Union graves would further distance families from achieving the “Good Death”. This act of government responsibility was first born

out of the need to attain *ars moriendi* but was furthered by the central governments growing power and new roles of reasonability to the people. Lincoln enhanced and defined this concept by stating that every death in this great cause was equally important. Thus every effort should be made by the government to honor and every felled soldier with proper burial as tribute to their sacrifice, for this great cause to advance equality.

In conclusion Faust clearly examines the individual and national transformation caused by the Civil War. Paul Czerwonka and his mother are examples and recipients of this great transformation. Now the government has extended that no soldier will be left unaccounted for. It took thirty-seven (37) years for Paul to come home and for his mother and the rest of us to have closure. The Civil War redefined the government's relationship to its citizens and to its dead.

1

From Drew Gilpin Faust., *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (2008. New York: Random House Publications, 2008), pp. 33

2

From Drew Gilpin Faust., *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (2008. New York: Random House Publications, 2008), pp. 66

3

From Drew Gilpin Faust., *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (2008. New York: Random House Publications, 2008), pp. 45

4

From Drew Gilpin Faust., *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (2008. New York: Random House Publications, 2008), pp. 71

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