If war were not so terrible, Robert E. Lee observed as he watched the slaughter at Fredericksburg, “we should grow too fond of it.” Lee’s remark, uttered in the very midst of battle’s horror and chaos, may be his most quoted—and misquoted—statement. His exact words are in some dispute, and it seems unlikely we shall ever be able to be certain of precisely what he said to James Longstreet on December 13, 1862. But in every rendition of the quotation, the contradiction between war’s attraction and its horror remains at the heart. War is terrible and yet we love it; we need to witness the worst of its destruction in order not to love it even more. And both because and in spite of its terror, we must calibrate our feelings to ensure enough, but not too much, fondness. It is Lee’s succinct, surprising, and almost poetic expression of a too often unacknowledged truth about war that has made this statement so quotable. Lee, the romantic hero of his own time and the marble man of ages that followed, displays here a complexity, an ambivalence, a capacity for irony that suggest cracks in the marble. His observation seems to reach beyond his era and its sensibilities into our own.¹

¹. The most-often-quoted version of this remark—“It is well that war is so terrible—we should grow too fond of it”—is from Douglas Southall Freeman, R.E. Lee: A Biography, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934–35), 2:462. But Freeman seems to have altered an earlier rendition of the statement: either “It is well this is so terrible! We should grow too fond of it!” from John Esten Cooke, A Life of Gen. Robert E. Lee (New York: D. Appleton, 1871), 184, or “It is well that war is so terrible, or we would grow too fond of it,” from Edward Porter Alexander, Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical Narrative (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907), 302. Gary Gallagher carefully traces this history and notes that Longstreet, to whom the remark was made, never mentioned it in his own writings. See his The Fredericksburg
Lee was not alone among his contemporaries in articulating a fondness for war, though few had his sense of irony. Many Americans North and South looked forward to battle in 1861, anticipating a stage on which to perform deeds appropriate to a Romantic age but believing, too, that war would be salutary for both the nation and its citizens. Judah P. Benjamin, attorney general of the new Confederacy, reassured a New Orleans crowd in the winter of 1861 that war was far from an “unmixed evil,” for it would “stimulate into active development the nobler impulses and more elevated sentiments which else had remained torpid in our souls.” *De Bow’s Review* anticipated from war “a sublime and awful beauty—a fearful and terrible loveliness—that atones in deeds of high enterprise and acts of heroic valor for the carnage, the desolation, the slaughter.” Others were not so rash in their estimates of the likely balance between glory and horror yet nevertheless found in the coming of war welcome opportunity for self-definition and fulfillment. In the North, Henry Lee Higginson later looked back on his hopes for the conflict: “I always did long for some such war, and it came in the nick of time for me.”

Northerners and Southerners alike saw in imminent war the possibility for a cleansing corrective to the greed and corruption into which Americans had fallen. Historian Francis Parkman wrote to the *Boston Advertiser* that American society had been “cramped and vitiated” by “too exclusive a pursuit of material success,” but he was certain that through war the nation would be “clarified and pure in a renewed and strengthened life.” In a June 1861 editorial, the *Richmond Enquirer* rhapsodized that “a season of war . . . calls out new ideas and kindles new and more elevated emotions and sentiments. It appeals to all that is noble in the soul . . . it revives the slumbering emotions of patriotism, with all their generous joys. It restores the general brotherhood. It destroys selfishness. It begets the spirit of self sacrifice. It gives to sufferers a portion of that ecstasy which martyrs feel.” The paper

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*Campaign: Decision on the Rappahannock* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995) xiin. Thomas L. Connelly, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (New York; Alfred Knopf, 1977). I am grateful to comments from many friends and colleagues who helped me think about why we love the Civil War: Lynn Hunt, Charles Rosenberg, Tony Horwitz, Edward Ayers, James McPherson, Yonatan Eyal, Michael Bernath, Peter Kolchin, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Gabor Boritt, Homi Bhabha, Jeremy Knowles, and all the participants in the Huntington Library’s Civil War conference in October 2003 and in the AHA Presidential Session in January 2004, where I delivered versions of this paper.

assured its readers that “many virtues will glow and brighten in . . . [war’s] path, like fragrant flowers in the wilderness.” But it would not be fragrant flowers that Virginians would soon be finding in the Wilderness.³

Often war’s expected transformations were framed in religious terms—as processes of divine purification resulting from the sacrifices required by war. Sermons in the North and the South hailed war’s chastening rod. More secular observers welcomed war’s imposition of discipline and even subordination into a society disrupted by undue egalitarianism, selfishness, and disorder.⁴

The realities of battlefield slaughter and enormous death tolls did not destroy this enthusiasm for war’s purposes. Paeans to war did not cease as the

³. Fredrickson, Inner Civil War, 75; Richmond Enquirer, June 29, 1861
⁴. See, for example, Stephen Elliott, God’s Presence with Our Army at Manassas (Savannah, Ga.: W. Thorne Williams, 1861); Elliott, How to Renew Our National Strength (Richmond, Va.: MacFarlane and Fergusson, 1862); Alexander Gregg, The Duties Growing Out of It and The Benefits to be Expected From the Present War (Austin, Tex.: The State Gazette, 1861); T. L. De Veaux, Fast-Day Sermon (Wytheville, Va.: D. A. St. Clair, 1864); John William Draper, Thoughts on the Future Civil Policy of America (New York: Harper, 1865), 251. One can find very similar
conflict grew more intense and more terrible. Fought in April 1862, Shiloh marked a new departure in warfare, a level of death and destruction previously unknown and unimagined. Yet Charles Eliot Norton responded to the carnage by writing, “I can hardly help wishing that the war might go on and on till it has brought suffering and sorrow enough to quicken our consciences and cleanse our hearts.” Great battles were believed to be occasions and sites for profound reflection and insight, and Northerners and Southerners alike were eager to learn, to borrow the title of a Richmond Enquirer editorial, “What War Should Teach Us.”

Civilians rushed to Antietam or Gettysburg not only to care for the wounded or to collect relics but also to experience the lessons that only a battlefield could convey. A Union quartermaster estimated that as many as 5,000 people a day swarmed into Gettysburg in the battle’s immediate aftermath. Many soldiers regarded these civilians with contempt, seeing their presence as a hindrance to providing care for the injured and graves for the dead. War correspondent Sylvanus Cadwallader described “greedy sight seers . . . there to gratify their morbid curiosity,” and Leslie’s Illustrated News published an almost cartoonlike engraving of “Maryland and Pennsylvania Farmers Visiting the Battle-field of Antietam While the National Troops were Burying the Dead and Carrying off the Wounded.” A gruesome pile of tangled bodies fills the left foreground of the engraving; buzzards fly overhead; the Army burial detail labors in the background while four well-dressed civilians, including a woman and a child, gape at the repulsive sight. Presumably these sightseers are being relieved of their Romantic fascination with war.

But many civilians continued to be attracted by war’s power and to search avidly for its lessons and meaning. After kissing a dying soldier at Malvern Hill, Reverend E. L. Locke explained his hope “that we who are spectators might be the truer and braver for what we had seen.” On the Northern homefront statements on both sides at the outset of World War I. See Eric Leed, No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I (Cambridge; Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979).

5. Fredrickson, 80; Richmond Enquirer, June 29, 1861.

Mary Percy was eager to “talk with one who has been in a real bona fide fight. I want him to tell me what the sensations are.” Walt Whitman shared her desire to understand combat and longed “to be present at a first class battle.” His hospital work thrilled him—not so much because of the service he was able to render, but, as he explained it, because the wounded opened “a new world somehow to me, giving closer insights . . . exploring deeper mines—than any yet, showing our humanity . . . tried by terrible, fearfulest tests, probed deepest, the living soul’s, the body’s tragedies, bursting the petty bonds of art.” The war years, he later observed, brought the “greatest privilege and satisfaction” because they “brought out . . . undream’d of depths of emotion.” War enabled Whitman, and many others, to achieve that most desired of goals in this Romantic age: an enhanced ability to feel.⁷

Civilians, as Charles Royster has noted, sought a “vicarious war,” but many soldiers rejoiced in war as well, even after the destructiveness and horror of Civil War battle became evident. For all the slaughter at Shiloh, one Iowa soldier remarked, “I would not have missed this for any consideration.” And Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain confessed just a few weeks after the disastrous and bloody Northern defeat at Fredericksburg that he had never felt so well or so truly alive. Henry James admitted to profound envy of his younger soldier brother Wilky, even after he was severely wounded at Fort Wagner. Apparently medically unfit for service himself, Henry resented that “this soft companion of my childhood should have such romantic chances and should have mastered . . . such mysteries.” In the military both Wilky and a second brother, Robertson, had gained “wondrous opportunity of vision.” James feared “they would prove to have had the time of their lives.” Even Ambrose Bierce, whose postbellum short stories so vividly portray the Civil War’s horrors, understood war’s attractions all too well. The lure of war, he wrote, its bugle call, “goes to the heart as wine . . . . Who that has heard its call to him above the grumble of the great guns can forget the wild intoxication of its music?”⁸

Historians have shared this intoxication with war. War has been perhaps history’s most popular subject, and recent years have only seen that interest intensify. Within the American field this fondness for war has manifested

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⁷ E. W. Locke quoted in Royster, Destructive War, 252; Mary Percy quoted in Hess, “Tell Me . . . .”, 123; Whitman quoted in Hess, “‘Tell Me . . . .’”, 132–33.
itself most dramatically in the dedication of so many historians to Civil War subjects. Many of us have chosen to devote our professional lives to exploring the Civil War, identifying it as a topic that interests us above all others. Certainly a desire to study war is different from a passion to fight it, but both acknowledge its attraction, its fascination, its power, and its importance.

Why do historians love the Civil War? Why has the Civil War come to be one of the liveliest fields in American history? We are part of a long tradition of writing about the war. More than 60,000 volumes of Civil War history had appeared by the end of the twentieth century, more than a book a day since Appomattox. But we represent a more recent phenomenon as well—one that has been characterized as an explosion of Civil War scholarship—what has been called a Civil War “industry,” and a “new Civil War history.”

How can we more precisely describe this explosion, this new and sizeable “wave” of Civil War studies? What are the factors that have produced this recent volume of writing? And what are the new directions and perspectives that have made the Civil War so attractive a subject to the current generation of scholars? How should we understand this growing fondness for the Civil War?

Many commentators have dated the beginning of the recent dramatic expansion of interest in Civil War history to the 1988 publication and astonishing popular success of James M. McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Oxford University Press planned a very respectable initial print run for *Battle Cry* of 20,000 books. In what was, McPherson says, a “BIG (though of course pleasant) surprise” to both author and publisher, it became a *New York Times* hardcover best-seller for sixteen weeks, won the Pulitzer Prize, and has ultimately sold more than 600,000 copies. Successfully appealing both to professional historians and to a wider popular audience of Civil War enthusiasts, *Battle Cry*

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10. Prior to the recent wave of scholarship, the Civil War was all but ignored by academic historians. As Edward Ayers has observed, “The war itself became something of a scholarly backwater, neglected by the leading historians of nineteenth century America. The distaste for the war in Vietnam manifested itself in an aversion to any kind of military history, while the fascination with social history made generals and their maneuvers seem irrelevant and boring at best.” Edward Ayers, “Worrying About the Civil War,” in *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, eds. Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998), 155.
demonstrated that scholarship produced in the academy could indeed reach beyond its walls. The inspiring—as well as venal—hope for such a wide readership riveted historians’ attention on *Battle Cry* as a publishing event and on the Civil War as a subject that might bring attention, acclaim, and even riches. But in fact, McPherson’s book was the beneficiary rather than the cause of an already increasing interest in the Civil War.¹¹

In an effort better to understand the dimensions of the much noted recent growth in Civil War history, I undertook a survey of Civil War books reviewed since 1976 in the *Journal of Southern History*, which, despite its title, considers studies on both Northern and Southern aspects of the conflict. The *JSH* includes a broader representation of general-interest Civil War books than are reviewed by either the *Journal of American History* or the *American Historical Review*, yet it draws the line at works of such specialized focus as to address no significant interpretive or intellectual questions.

In 1976 the *JSH* reviewed 13 Civil War books. In 2002 it reviewed 66. That is a fivefold increase. How did we get from there to here? From 1976 through 1987 the numbers average 13 a year, varying between a low of 7 in 1980 to a high of 21 in 1982. We should remember the idiosyncrasies of academic reviewing, especially the lag of about a year between publication date and published review. But through these twelve years, the numbers are quite consistent. Then in 1989 there is a dramatic rise—to 27 books. This is, in fact, the year that *Battle Cry* was reviewed, suggesting, intriguingly, that McPherson’s book was part of an already emerging phenomenon. For four years the number of books hovers at this level, and then we see a second significant increase, in 1993, to 45 books. Over the next decade the average number per year is 48, though the two most recent years, with totals of 64 and 66, may represent the beginning of a third, still higher, phase.

The jump in 1993 from an average in the preceding four years of 28 books to an average of 45 books over the next ten years (an increase of more than 60 percent) may well be attributable to the extraordinary reception and impact of Ken Burns’s *The Civil War*. This eleven-hour series broke television records in the fall of 1990 when it attracted an audience of 14 million. By the end of the decade more than 40 million Americans had watched one or more episodes. Burns has himself offered an explanation of why Americans loved his *Civil War*. The conflict, he explained, “continues to speak to central questions of our present time.” He noted “an imperial presidency, a growing femi-

nist movement . . . an ever present civil rights question . . . greedy Wall Street speculators who stole millions trading on inside information . . . unscrupulous military contractors . . . new weapons capable of mass destruction” as Civil War–era issues with particular resonance for contemporary Americans.¹²

Writers before Burns had found evidence in the Civil War era of what historians Peter Parish and Adam I. P. Smith have called the “increasingly recognizable shape of modern America.” We see ourselves and our concerns reflected in this history. Yet the war intrigues us not simply because we identify with its central issues, not just because it seems curiously modern. We have found in it, as David Montgomery has explained, “so critical a moment in the formation of the world in which we live that it compels us to contemplate the most basic features and values of modern society.” The war, he suggests, has in fact made us, has set the agenda for the world we now inhabit. We look to the war for our origins.¹³

But this sense of the war, embraced and represented by Burns, was also far from new with him, even if he was the first to offer it so compellingly in the magical medium of television. Historians and writers had long been captivated by the war as the site and reason for the emergence of modern America, even though they might have disagreed about which attributes of this modernity to stress: the establishment of a centralized nation-state, the creation of a vigorous industrial economy, the forging of new meanings for freedom and citizenship of and by and for the people.

Was there a reason in the late 1980s and early 1990s that what we might call a chronic interest in the Civil War became acute? The Gulf War of 1991 was, of course, a significant factor, for Burns’s series aired during a fall of anticipations and anxieties about the outbreak of war. The contemporary relevance of Civil War questions was forcefully underscored by the coincidence of the release of Burns’s documentary with a real-life military drama. President George H. W. Bush, Colin Powell, and even General Norman Schwarzkopf at his post in Saudi Arabia watched the series as they contemplated their own decisions about the conflict they inaugurated in January 1991. Burns’s depic-

¹². Toplin, “Introduction,” in Ken Burns’s The Civil War, xv; Burns, ‘Four O’Clock in the Morning Courage,” ibid., 164.

tion of the Civil War’s terrible casualties reportedly reinforced their commitment to minimize American deaths as they developed their strategic plans.14

Operation Desert Storm, with its quick, seemingly easy, and, in U.S. terms, almost bloodless victory, brought war back into fashion in America. The bitterness that had followed Vietnam and the rejection of war as an effective instrument of national policy had been challenged throughout the Reagan years. But the slow rehabilitation of war in the course of the 1980s culminated in 1991’s dramatic victory. Growing interest in the Civil War in the late 1980s reflected gradually changing American attitudes about military action, attitudes further and decisively affected by the conjunction in the fall of 1990 and the winter of 1991 of Ken Burns’s compelling visual rendition of the conflict and with George H. W. Bush’s splendid little war.

Historians who recognized war as back in fashion in Reagan-Bush America did not necessarily celebrate its return, just as many scholars vehemently criticized the overwhelming military focus of the Burns’s documentary. A considerable proportion of the scholars who began to direct their attention to the Civil War were children of the Vietnam era, individuals struck by the changed political atmosphere in the 1980s, individuals who had lived through a period when war was at the heart of American public life and discourse in the late 1960s and 1970s, individuals who wanted to understand the historic roots of America’s relationship with war as they now witnessed its late-century return to respectability. And although their critical perspective sharply differentiated them from a wider public that gloried in the success of Desert Storm and relished the elegiac seriousness of Ken Burns’s soldier-patriots, these scholars saw in Civil War history the possibility of reaching across this divide not only to sell books but also to add important considerations to wider American public discourse. Loving the Civil War, we must not forget, has created some strange bedfellows.

The Civil War created strange bedfellows within the historical profession as well. Many academics who discovered an awakening interest in the Civil War in the late 1980s and early 1990s came to the subject with historical training and experience quite different from that of the military and political historians who had overwhelmingly dominated the literature. “Never before,” wrote James McPherson and William Cooper looking back in 1998, “have so many scholars of the war ranged so widely over so many fields.” If Maris Vinovskis

14. Gabor Boritt, “Lincoln and Gettysburg,” in Toplin. ed., Ken Burns’s The Civil War, 84. Boritt cites his own phone discussions with Powell in 1992 as well as newspaper reports. Boritt has also pointed out to me that the creation of the Lincoln Prize in 1991, with its $50,000 award for a work of Civil War scholarship, may have helped attract historians’ attention to the war.
worried in 1989 that social historians had lost the Civil War, they had by the end of the next decade certainly found it, connecting home and battle fronts and situating the Civil War battlefield decisively in the larger context of nineteenth-century American life. Three developments seem to me of particular note: the introduction of social history, with particular emphasis on the life and importance of the common soldier, into study of the Civil War military; the use of the community study as a window into the interplay of war’s myriad effects and actors; and the growing interest in the experience of women and of African Americans.¹⁵

Significantly, this new social history—this invasion into Civil War territory by social historians, women’s historians, African American historians—has done little to diminish the proportional strength of military history. As the number of social histories of the war has increased, so too has the number of military studies. Military history made up 57 percent of titles in 1988 and 69 percent of titles in 2002. On average over that fifteen-year period, 65 percent of titles were in military history. To some degree the military history of 2002 represented a changed and broadened approach, as it considered civilians in collections of essays on particular battles or explored the life of the common soldier as well as that of the general or, in the words of the editors of one series on Great Campaigns, looked “beyond the battlefield and headquarters tent.” But the rapprochement of Civil War military history with social and cultural concerns is far from complete; audiences remain largely separate and segmented. The “crossover” success of Battle Cry remains the exception rather than the rule.¹⁶

Yet social historians have been attracted to the war by some of the same elements that engage military scholars. The Civil War offers an authenticity and intensity of experience that can rivet both researcher and reader; the war serves as a moment of truth, a moment when individuals—be they soldiers or civilians—have to define their deeply held priorities and act on them. War is a crucible that produces unsurpassed revelations about the essence of historical actors and their worlds. James McPherson has described his work with the papers of more than a thousand soldiers: “From such writings I have come to know these men better than I know most of my living acquaintances, for in


¹⁶. This is from the mission statement for the Great Campaigns of the Civil War Series at the University of Nebraska Press, Brooks Simpson and Anne Bailey, series editors.
their personal letters written in a time of crisis that might end their lives at any moment they revealed more of themselves than we do in our normal everyday lives.” War can exact from individuals just what historians hope to find: expressions of their truest selves. We follow as historians in the footsteps of many of our century’s—and our civilization’s—greatest writers. As Ernest Hemingway once explained to F. Scott Fitzgerald, who enlisted too late for any significant World War I experience, “The reason you are so sore you missed the war is because war is the best subject of all. It groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get.” No wonder we love to study war.¹⁷

The new Civil War historians have found in the war years an extraordinarily rich field for exploration of many of the approaches and issues that had become central to professional historical practice since the 1970s. Because the war had been almost exclusively the domain of military historians, it represented an almost untapped resource for social and cultural historians. The war was, in addition, a historical moment that was extraordinarily well documented, for mid-nineteenth-century Americans were highly literate; soldiers letters were uncensored; and expanding government and military bureaucracies North and South accumulated vast records of both public and private lives. Historians confronted a combination of unstudied questions and vast documentation as they recognized the opportunity to pursue previously neglected issues central to the revolution the 1970s and 1980s had brought to the historical enterprise.

Historians’ work in uncovering and documenting the lives of groups once labeled “inarticulate”—workers, slaves, women—had embodied a fundamental commitment to giving these new subjects of historical inquiry both voice and agency. We learned in the 1970s and 1980s how workers’ actions shaped economic growth, how slaves manipulated and resisted their masters, how women used voluntary associations to control men in domains of life from sexuality to party politics. The Civil War, with its decisive events in the realms of both of battle and of national policy, with its clearly defined moments of truth, offered unparalleled opportunity to explore, document, and highlight these examples of human agency. Military and political historians have long loved war because they could demonstrate the critically important actions of generals and politicians. As Mark Grimsley has observed,

“Battles alter history. They decide things.” Now social historians would seize the same opportunity to demonstrate far more dramatically than had been possible in their studies of lengthy social movements and processes that the actions of the so-called inarticulate mattered.¹⁸

Traditional Civil War historians have long been caught up in questions of causation: Why did the Civil War happen? Why did the North win? Why did the South lose? Why was slavery overturned? New Civil War historians directly confronted these conventional problems, accepting their predecessors’ definition of the terms of engagement, lured by their fascination with issues of agency to fight on enemy ground. In the new Civil War history homefront rivaled battlefront as the decisive factor in war’s outcome; common soldiers, rather than generals became the critical military factors in triumph or defeat; women undermined the stability of slavery and the level of civilian morale and contributed to Southern defeat or, conversely, struggled both at home and in military disguise to ensure victory. Perhaps most notably, slaves freed themselves. This is not the time or place to evaluate the legitimacy of these interpretations. At a minimum, I think we would agree that they have sparked vigorous and constructive debate that has enriched and broadened Civil War historiography. But I describe them here with the purpose of demonstrating how social historians melded their agendas with the traditional preoccupations of the Civil War field; they recognized and used the Civil War as a site to explore concerns that had been at the heart of the revolutions in methods and subject matter of the 1970s. And they used the Civil War to engage social history with event as well as process and to show how it became political and even military in its effects. The Civil War offered social historians the chance to capture new territory. But in this imperial gesture, they ironically largely accepted the prevailing framework of Civil War studies, refining traditional questions, especially those of causation, rather than posing new ones. The war as moment of truth, as occasion for decisive action, as laboratory for agency—even for heroism—was a war both old and new Civil War historians could love.¹⁹


But to describe the movement by social historians into the Civil War as just a calculated strategy to extend domain and audience is to miss a critical component of the phenomenon. The new Civil War historians have been caught up, like their predecessors, in the drama of the conflict, in the powerful human stories that stand apart from the analytic and interpretive goals of the historian as social scientist. Ken Burns has described himself as above all “a historian of emotions.” Emotion, he has said, “is the great glue of history.” Certainly it was the glue and the appeal of his television narrative. The American public loved _The Civil War_ not primarily because it dealt with constitutional or political or racial or social questions that matter today, but because it was about individual human beings whose faces we could see, whose words we could hear, as they confronted war’s challenges. The presence, the threat, even the likelihood of death imposes a narrative structure and thrust on Civil War stories. The exercise of agency is always inflected by this unavoidable question; decisions are quite literally matters of life and death. The presence of such risks places the lives that interest us on a plane of enhanced meaning and value, for life itself has become the issue and cannot be taken for granted. Death offers every chronicler of war a natural narrative shape, an implicit climax for every story, a structured struggle for every tale.²⁰

And the accumulations of these many narratives, these thousands and thousands of deaths into the Civil War’s massive death toll, have given the conflict, as James McPherson has written, a “horrifying but hypnotic fascination,” a fascination I would suggest is almost pornographic in its combination of thrill and terror. We are in some sense not so different from those New Yorkers who in 1862 crowded in to see Mathew Brady’s photographs of the Antietam dead, photographs fresh from the front offering the Northern public—as they still offer us—a vicarious taste of war. We are not, as Lee reminds us, the first Americans to grow fond of the Civil War. We are both moved by the details of war’s suffering and terror and captivated by the unsurpassed insight war offers into the fundamental assumptions and values of historical actors. Despite our dispassionate, professional, analytic stance, we have not remained untouched by war’s elemental attractions and its emotional and sentimental fascinations. We count on these allures to build


a sizeable audience for our books. In both the reality and irony of our fondness for war, we are not so unlike the Civil War generation we study.²¹

As America stood on the brink of our most recent war with Iraq, journalist Chris Hedges published a best-selling book warning of war’s seductive power, its addictiveness. War, he explained, simplifies and focuses life; it offers purpose and thus exhilarates and intoxicates; it is, in the words of Hedges’s title, a “force that gives us meaning.” And humans crave meaning as much as life itself. Caught in war’s allure, we ignore its destructiveness—not just of others but of ourselves.²²

The love affair with war Hedges describes has deep roots in history. He invokes examples from classical Greece, from Shakespeare, as well as from wars of our own time, just as I have been exploring the seductions of America’s Civil War. Hedges offers no real solution to the problem he describes. He simply ends his book with calls for love, for Eros in face of Thanatos. And indeed, as his book climbed the best-seller list, the United States turned its love of war into the invasion of Iraq, endeavoring to transform the uncertainty of fighting a terrorist enemy without a face or location into a conflict with a purposeful, coherent, and understandable structure—with a comprehensible narrative.

In the United States’s need to respond to terrorism with war, we can see a key element of war’s appeal. War is not random, shapeless violence. It is a human, a cultural construction, an “invention,” as Margaret Mead once described it, that imposes an order, a purpose, and indeed a control on violence. Through its implicit and explicit conventions, through its rules, war limits and structures its violence; it imbues violence with a justification, a trajectory, and a purpose. The United States sought a war through which to respond to terrorism—even a war against an enemy who had no relationship to September 11’s terrorist acts would do—because the nation required the sense of meaning, intention, and goal-directedness, the lure of efficacy that war promises; the control that terrorism obliterates. The nation needed the sense of agency that operates within the structure of narrative provided by war.


War is defined and framed as a story, with a plot that imbues its actors with purpose and moves toward victory for one or another side. This is why it provides the satisfaction of meaning to its participants; this is why, too, it offers such a natural attraction to writers and historians. Yet just as we need war, because in Hemingway’s words, it is “the best subject of all,” so in some sense war needs us. Writers and historians are critical to defining and elaborating the narratives that differentiate war from purposeless violence, the stories that explain, contextualize, construct, order, and rationalize—eliding from one to the other meaning of that word—what we call war. Are we then simply another part of the dangerous phenomenon Hedges has described? In writing about war, even against war, do we nevertheless reinforce its attraction and affirm its meaning? “When we write about warfare,” Hedges warns, “the prurient fascination usually rises up to defeat the message.” What, indeed, is the message that our historiography conveys? “Is there,” as Susan Sontag has asked, “an antidote to the perennial seductiveness of war?” Are we as historians part of the problem or part of the solution? Attracted by the potential narrative coherence of war, we also create and reinforce it. Out of historians’ war stories—from Thucydides onward—we have fashioned war’s seeming rationality and helped to define its meaning. Have we in so doing contributed to its allure?

Historian George Mosse once warned, “We must never lose our horror, never try to integrate war and its consequences into our longing for the sacred…. If we confront mass death naked, stripped of all myth, we may have slightly more chance to avoid making the devil’s pact” with war. But the effort to retain our horror is immensely aided by our recognition and acknowledgment of war’s attractions. The complexity of irony disrupts myth, undermines unified narrative and unexamined purpose, questions meaning.

When we recognize, like Robert E. Lee, that war is both terrible and alluring, we may move both ourselves and our history to a different place. We separate ourselves from war’s myths through irony and open ourselves to its contradictions. Yet if we cannot understand why we love it, we cannot comprehend and explain why it has seduced so many others. In acknowledging its attraction we diminish its power. Perhaps we can free ourselves to construct a different sort of narrative about its meaning. But I am not sure.


It was Vietnam that gave many of us both the motivation and the ability to look critically at war, to be both fascinated and repelled. Michael Herr’s brilliant book *Dispatches* is unflinching in its portrait of the horror and the purposeless of this war. It is a book, significantly, without a narrative, a book of glimpses, a book as chaotic as war itself. He had left, as the language of the time had it, “the world,” to live in a surreal space beyond the possibility of understanding. Yet he returns at the end—“Back in the World”—with an observation that uncannily echoes Robert E. Lee and even Henry James: Herr finds himself “like everyone else who has been through a war: changed, enlarged and . . . incomplete. . . . coming to miss the life so acutely. . . . A few extreme cases felt that the experience there had been a glorious one, while most of us felt that it had been merely wonderful. I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods.”

Michael Herr was, like us, a writer of war. He was not a soldier; his tour in Vietnam was as a journalist. He wrote *Dispatches*, perhaps the best book to come out of that far-from-unwritten war, and he has hardly been heard of since. War was his only subject. He loved it and he knew it was terrible, and in that lay the power of his prose. Without war he disappeared.

War made Michael Herr possible; it gave him a voice. But the voices of writers and storytellers have also made war possible from ancient times to the present day. I have written elsewhere about the role of war stories in mobilizing both men and women for war. Seductive tales of glory, honor, sacrifice provide one means of making war possible.

But there is another more complex way as well, one that does not depend on an idealization or romanticization of war. War is, by its very definition, a story. War imposes an orderly narrative on what without its definition of purpose and structure would be simply violence. We as writers create that story; we remember that story; we provide the narrative that by its very existence defines war’s purpose and meaning. We love war because of these stories. But we should ask ourselves how in the construction of war’s stories we may be helping to construct war itself. “War is a force that gives us meaning.” But what do we and our writings give to war?

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27. Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice.”