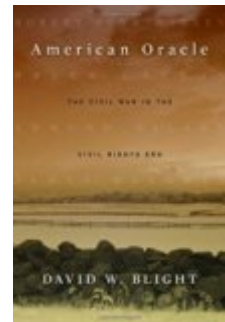


David W. Blight. *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 328 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-04855-3.



Reviewed by Geoffrey Jensen

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

With the onset of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War looming in 2011, David W. Blight decided to explore the literature of a past celebration of the War between the States. During the heart of the Cold War and the civil rights movement, two events that recent historians of various ilk have linked, the United States celebrated the centennial of the Civil War. Throughout the early 1960s, Americans across the nation, whether it was through the draping of bunting and the hanging of ribbons for parades and celebrations, the donning of the blue uniforms of the Union or the grey of the Confederacy in various reenactments, the nation honored those who fought and died during the Republic's most costly war.

In the era of the Cold War, the rise of American patriotism during the centennial celebration of the Civil War was consistent with the nation's self-conceived belief in its place in the world, an image often justified in the minds of Americans by the idea of providence. This belief best describes what Blight's unlikely quartet of oracles tackled head on: the notion that no matter how

awful the nation's past really was, Americans viewed it as part of a progressive story of a people destined to get it right. To achieve this, they uncovered the tragedy of the Civil War. The idea of tragedy in American literature is not new nor is it revolutionary. American historians, journalists, and writers have and will continue to explore the tragic elements of the Republic out of an effort to enlighten the populous to the grittier aspects of the nation's past. For Blight, though, employing the tragic in history is about balancing out myth with reality or the overly positive with the outright negative in our never-ending quest to understand the past as it was. During the centennial celebration, and in their own unique ways, Blight's oracles, Robert Penn Warren, Bruce Catton, Edmund Wilson, and James Baldwin used the tragic to disperse the mythos surrounding the Civil War.

Warren's career, one that would end with him teaching and writing at Yale, revolved around a desire to cut through the ideological sanctuaries of the North and the South, "The Great Alibi" and "The Treasury of Virtue," which sheltered both re-

gions from the tragedy and the truth facing them. "The Great Alibi" or the Lost Cause tradition erected an ideological breastworks based on the concept of southern nobility. To put it simply, "The Great Alibi" contends that the agrarian and numerically sparse Confederacy fought a heroic war, a war it knew it could not win, against a densely populated and industrial North. The South fought this unwinnable war, the Lost Cause tradition contends, to preserve its way of life. That way of life, however, Warren pointed out, was the preservation of chattel slavery: a cause that was most certainly not honorable and that did not make southerners the victims that they believed they were. If anything, it made them the aggressors.

While the North reveled in playing the role of the hero of the Republic, it did not grant them "a plenary indulgence, for all sins past, present, and future, freely given by the hand of history" (p. 68). The North, just as the South, had its skeletons in the closet that it conveniently sought to ignore. In Warren's estimation, the Union victory during the Civil War was not the heralding in of a new era of racial justice, but a contradictory period, led by Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans, who were not flawless or saintly, that failed to live up to the promise of the Reconstruction amendments to preserve the rights and privileges of the freedmen. "The Treasury of Virtue" was a fraud, a tall tale perpetuated by those in the victorious North that only strengthened the mythology of the region with every successive generation.

While Warren gashed the North and the South out of a desire to grapple with the flawed and tragic nature of the American identity, Catton sought to bring balance to the study of the Civil War. For Catton, a journalist by trade, the imagery of the nobly vanquished southerner failed to discuss his often overlooked normal conqueror, the Union soldier who fought for the preservation of the country. Where Catton differed from Warren was in the idea of tragedy. While Warren took the North and the South to task for their past sins,

Catton sought to tell the story of the War between the States as the rebirth of the nation.

While admired for his skills as a writer and a historian, Catton faced harsh criticism for his interpretation of the Civil War as a tragic episode in the American epic of progress. Professional historians especially found Catton's work to be formulaic and predictable. To be sure, his work revolved around a set of dramatic events that led to despair and national tragedy, but that ultimately turned out alright in the end. His work lacked the answers to the deep-probing questions that the professional historian demanded answered. One troubling omission, and during the heart of the civil rights movement no less, was the lack of discussion of African American soldiers during the war. If Catton's Civil War was about progress, however, why not discuss a perfect example of dramatic racial progress?

The Civil War, Wilson believed, was about the never ending human thirst for conquest. The actions of the North, and in Wilson's Civil War the North was the aggressor, against that of the South represented the actions of a nation less interested about ending slavery and more interested in maintaining its stranglehold over Dixie. In many ways for Wilson, the Union's domination over the Confederacy was the beginning of American global domination. A willing accomplice in the birth of American hegemony was the Great Emancipator, Lincoln. In *Patriotic Gore* (1962), Wilson challenged the image of Lincoln as a gentle leader trying desperately to hold the North and the South together. Instead, Lincoln was a cagey and calculated political mastermind who knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. This interpretation of Lincoln demonstrated Wilson's tendency to both eradicate myth and legend, while probing the central flaw in humanity, its unending quest for power.

Of all of Blight's oracles, perhaps the most gifted was Baldwin. Blight makes it clear that the passion and power of Baldwin's pen came from

his desperate search for acceptance from his country and for his country. Baldwin's struggle was twofold: he was an African American homosexual man in a nation that showed little love or sympathy for his skin color or sexuality. Therefore, out of his search for acceptance, Baldwin used his own life as a way to measure the progress of the nation since the end of the Civil War. By doing so, he launched a frontal assault on the mythmaking process of the nation: "Americans, unhappily, have the most remarkable ability to alchemize all bitter truths into an innocuous but piquant confection and to transform their moral contradictions, or public discussion of such contradictions, into a proud decoration, such as are given for heroism on the field of battle" (p. 209-210). The truth was that after a hundred years, Baldwin unabashedly recalled, the United States had still not completed the promise of Reconstruction, and as a consequence, failed to achieve its full potential.

There is more to Blight's *American Oracle* than the recanting of past authors' views, and their subsequent use of tragedy, on the Civil War during the centennial celebration. Nor is this work about deciding how historians, writers, and the American public, in our current era of turmoil, should treat the sesquicentennial of the War between the States. This is a book about the pursuit and the art of writing history. It is also a challenge against the redemptive story line that remains in Civil War and Reconstruction history to this day. "We all want to live in a narrative of progress," Blight observes, "even as art and history remind us of how much suffering and self-delusion is required to even imagine it" (p. 23). Blight's battle cry fits well within the scope of American history in general. While there is no doubt that it is comforting and relaxing to know that our nation is on a perpetual march forward, does that style of analytical thinking truly grapple with the problems of our societies past, which have directly contributed to the problems of today? To be fair, we should not, nor do I believe Blight sug-

gests this, relish a negative and disheartening narrative. Instead, as with many of his oracles, we must use the tragic to find balance in our history. Only then will we be close to achieving a semblance of the past.

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[1]. David W. Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 68.

[2]. Ibid., 209-210.

[3]. Ibid., 23.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

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