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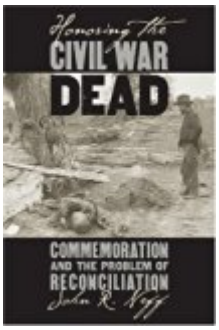

John R. Neff. *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. xiv + 328 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1366-3.

Reviewed by Lisa M. Budreau

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In September 1918, on the eve of America's celebrated World War I offensive on the St. Mihiel salient in northern France, the U.S. secretary of war pledged that the government would provide a home burial to all who died in foreign service to the nation. This promise resulted in a massive operation that cost the government more than thirty million dollars and firmly established a national precedent that still endures. Today, images of soldiers' caskets being returned home, from contemporary war zones, for burial at Arlington National cemetery are, sadly, an all too familiar image. Moreover, each year American taxpayers contribute millions of dollars to the U.S. government's mission of searching for, recovering and identifying America's soldier dead. This unique approach to commemoration adopted by the United States after the First World War and the accompanying expansion of the federal government's power are a direct result of the nation's response to the massive death tolls of the Civil War.

The Civil War remains one of America's most "remembered" conflicts and the list of published material on the subject is extensive. Vibrant popular memories of the bloody four-year struggle continue to draw avid enthusiasts and scholars alike; but until now, none have so thoroughly considered the war's soldier dead and the nation's attempts to honor them, as does John Neff in *Honoring the Civil War Dead*. This is an extremely well-researched, thoughtful and engaging exploration of public commemoration for this war's unprecedented losses.

Historically, America's commemorative path has differed considerably from that practiced in Europe. As Neff rightly contends, characteristics of late-nineteenth-century American practice have no parallel in the European experience. "The fundamental nature of Civil War commemoration contained tensions between divergent Northern and Southern interpretations of the war not apparent in the early-twentieth-century European commemorations" he explains. Even in the aftermath of the First World War slaughter, "no European nation confronted large portions of its own populace intent on commemorating the activities of the enemy" (p. 4).

As this study aptly demonstrates, national commemoration of the war dead does not always serve to unite a fractured society. In the years following the American Civil War, "Northerners and Southerners struggled to understand their separate commemorations within a larger, reunified national context" (p. 4). Neff's key premise rests on this foundation whereupon he asserts that Civil War commemoration, far from being a process of reunification across sectional, political and racial divides, was instead wrought by decades of antagonism and turmoil. Alternatively, it became a means for expressing lingering animosities and discouraging reconciliation.

Neff claims that whereas both sides commemorated only their own dead, "Northerners did so within a memorial rhetoric that invoked a broad, inclusive nationalism, while Southerners followed the dictates of a separate mythos predicated on difference and distinctiveness" (p. 143). Commemoration of the dead shaped memory in the North where Northerners were equally active as Southerners in myth-making after the war, crafting a "Cause Victorious" myth that reverberated as powerfully as the much better-known "Lost Cause" myth cherished by Southerners. Through their commemorations, the North asserted the existence of a loyal and reunified nation long before it was actually a fact. But, as Neff demonstrates, it is difficult to gauge national unity and to assess the point when reunion has finally been achieved.

The U.S. government's role in caring for the war dead developed after 1865, and continued to expand in response to the demands of further twentieth-century conflicts. According to Neff, National Federal Cemeteries were initially constructed for two primary reasons: to serve as repositories for the honored, heroic dead as a sanctuary from a hostile, foreign people; and, to instruct the living. In time, the American government would become increasingly accountable to a public that held unique expectations regarding the commemoration of their war dead. After the Civil War, Americans considered both the government and its military leaders responsible for the care of the nation's deceased soldiers to the extent that they presumed the use of modern funeral procedures and advanced identification methods. Moreover, Americans had come to expect national cemeteries for those who chose not to bring their dead home, and an unrestrained right to erect monuments upon the former battlefield. These assumptions significantly influenced the nation's approach to remembrance as did America's institutions, political mores, and a distinctively democratic mass culture.

Neff generally shies away from strident political discourse regarding the impetus for broad social change, emphasizing instead specific responses to events within a regional and nationalist context. For example, in his exceedingly well-crafted treatment of the Lincoln assassination, he notes that when Northerners grieved for Lincoln, "they grieved the attacks on their nation as well, at the moment when the nature of that nationality was most in flux" (p. 69).

The Gettysburg battlefield and the national cemetery established there, were of key importance in the activities of civilians toward the establishment of a foundation for the Northern postwar commemoration of the war dead. Neff's interpretation explores sectional divisions at this burial site without Southerners, rather than the more familiar focus on the cemetery as a unifying symbol. Interestingly, Neff has not considered the recent work of Gettysburg memory historian, Jim Weeks, in his analysis of this national icon (*Gettysburg: Memory, Market and An American Shrine*, 2003).

Another key highlight of this study's fresh approach is its analysis of the national cemetery at Antietam, where the 1862 battle left over 27,000 men killed, wounded, or missing. As Neff explains, burial parties performed their grisly task with speed, but not great care, as graves ranged from single burials to long shallow trenches, often

accommodating hundreds of bodies. When present, grave markers were rough and haphazard, resulting in the identity of more than half of the corpses being left unknown. Although perfunctory measures were taken to bury the dead, a national cemetery was not established on the site until September 1867, on the fifth anniversary of the battle. This absence of a suitable cemetery at Antietam reflects the lack of resolution amongst the living toward the dead and the ambiguity surrounding their sacrifice. Residents were neither indifferent nor neglectful. Rather they were victims of a tragically divided community. According to Neff, this battle "remains to the present day the single bloodiest day in American military history, yet the establishment of the cemetery was delayed for several years, due in part to a clouded title to a portion of the proposed site" (p. 116). Such political and propriety land issues regarding the establishment of cemeteries in the United States and overseas, were repeated well into the next century.

This persuasive study is presented in six lucid chapters that prompt only few and minor criticisms. For instance, the absence of any mention of Clara Barton's work in establishing a missing soldier's bureau for families of the dead might have warranted a place in the discussion. This omission is surprising given the level of detail presented here on the burial and identification process. Neff also refers to a Captain Jason M. Moore, who performed much of the macabre work on the Civil War battlefields (p.127); he was actually Major (promoted in1866) James M. Moore and his military service was reinstated during the return of the Spanish-American war dead. And, while the efforts of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (the women's auxiliary to the Southern veterans organization) are well represented in chapter 6, the author does not mention the Women's Relief Corps and their influence on the construction of northern collective war remembrance.

John Neff's refreshing perspective challenges numerous myths that have become entrenched in American war memory, but he does so without getting mired in messy theoretical abstractions. This is an exciting narrative and a welcomed contribution to American Civil War historiography and to the literature on memory and memorialization, one that should be considered essential reading by all earnest scholars of the period.

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