
NEW TITLES

History

THE BATTLE CRY OF FREEDOM:

The Civil War Era

by James M. McPherson
Oxford, 1988
904 pp. \$35

RECONSTRUCTION: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877

by Eric Foner
Harper, 1988
690 pp. \$29.95



In his 1861 inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln promised to “hold, occupy, and possess” all federal property. His resolve was soon put to the test. Fort Sumter, South Carolina, a federal garrison, was awaiting resupply when the newly seceded Republic of South Carolina demanded its surrender. Five of Lincoln’s seven cabinet members urged him to abandon the fort, but Northern opinion mocked such timidity. “The bird of our country is a debilitated chicken, disguised in eagle feathers,” complained one New York lawyer. Compelled to act, Lincoln sent provisions, but it was too late. On April 14, the Confederacy seized the fort.

Following Sumter’s fall, the erstwhile United States embarked upon four years of civil warfare that would claim 620,000 American combatants’ lives—more than the combined totals of all the nation’s wars before and since.

In his masterful one-volume account, McPherson, a Princeton historian, undertakes to paint the broad social, political, and military panorama of what he calls “a war of peoples rather than of professional armies.” He gives particular emphasis—roughly one-third of the book—to events leading up to the war: the debates, the fears, the expectations. Amateurs engaged in a “glorious cause” soon came to see that they were involved in a “ghastly harvest of death,” but McPherson has no patience with the soft revisionist line that the main issue was not slavery. The “Union victory,” he notes, “destroyed the Southern vision of America and ensured that the Northern vision would become the American vision.”

But how—and how conclusively—would that vision be imposed on the defeated side? That is the question that Foner, a Columbia historian, asks in *Reconstruction*. At stake was the future of the four million ex-slaves and their descendants. To secure their civil rights and to destroy what Senator Charles Sumner called “the demon of Caste,” the Republican-controlled Congress embarked on a legislative crusade that eventually added the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution. The effort successfully created “the idea of a national citizenry whose common rights no state could abridge.”

Yet, despite the rhetorical and legislative

achievements of Reconstruction, Foner endorses W. E. B. Du Bois's gloomy assessment of its practical results: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery." Even before Reconstruction ended in 1877, blacks were on their way to becoming a "disenfranchised class of dependent laborers." Economic depression in the early 1870s, the rejection of federally sponsored land reform, as well as factionalism and corruption among Southern Republicans were factors. But none of these, Foner concludes, would have "proved decisive without the campaign of violence that turned the electoral tide in many parts of the South, and the weakening of Northern resolve . . ." Almost 100 more years would pass before the lofty promises of Reconstruction would be fulfilled.

**HIDDEN HISTORY:
Exploring Our Secret Past**
by Daniel J. Boorstin
Harper, 1988
332 pp. \$19.95

In this collection of essays written over the past 40 years, Boorstin, former Librarian of Congress, opens, aptly, with a meditation on the elusiveness of the past. How, he asks, can one construct early American Puritans' "real" thoughts about religion when the chief text of compulsory education in 18th-century Massachusetts, *The New England Primer*, cannot be found? Honest historians must confront what Boorstin calls the "biases of survival" if they are to overcome "the bizarre miscellany which is our inheritance."

Elsewhere, in "The Therapy of Distance," he remarks upon the far-reaching effects of the simple fact that the American colonies were 3,000 miles from the mother country. Ireland struggled for independence too, but the "Atlantic Ocean proved a more effective advocate than all the constitutional lawyers of Ireland." America's revolution was unique in other respects: It was successful at first go, compared with France's serial revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848, and 1870. The Republic's quick inception, and the Founding Fathers' basic agreement on principles, has resulted in a relative paucity of U.S. political theorizing.

If the Republic emerged almost pristinely, technology, as Boorstin shows, threatens to sully it. The "Graphic Revolution," by multiplying means of disseminating the printed word and images, has made advertising the real language of democracy. Promising everything to everybody, it has made