

Living Memory

Long after the last witnesses to momentous events in the history of a nation have died, the memory of those events may continue to alter the course of the nation. What matters most is not whether historical recollection is accurate, but whether it liberates or imprisons.

by Christopher Clausen

On Memorial Day 2004, two days after the dedication of the World War II Memorial on the Mall in Washington, a woman named Alberta Martin died in Alabama at the age of 97. So far as anyone knows, Mrs. Martin was the last surviving widow of a Civil War soldier. Newspaper stories recounted her colorful history in some detail and emphasized the appropriateness of her dying on a holiday that evolved spontaneously out of the decoration of Civil War graves. The last Civil War veteran, Walter Williams of Texas, died in 1959, thereby severing the link to actual participants in the war on the eve of its centennial. With the death of the last widow, who was born more than 40 years after her husband's service in the Fourth Alabama Infantry, another important link had gone. Although stories soon appeared of an even younger woman who had nominally married a still more ancient veteran, Alberta Martin's passing represented the disappearance of the prolonged social memory of the war embodied by those who in early life had had intimate contact with the combatants.

The urge to keep recollection alive beyond its natural span seems to be one of the most ancient and pervasive human impulses. Whether powerful memories of a historical event do more good than harm to a society's future depends on the specific circumstances. But scholarly historians will never control the past until a serum is invented that obliterates both living memory and the equally vivid myths to which its unreliability gives rise. Like other major historical events, the Civil War passed through several definable stages of

remembrance that merged indefinitely into one another before the war finally became something that could only be read about in books and the inscriptions on monuments. In the late 19th century, that conflict was the common property of every American, a familiar temporal landmark to all but the very young, a historic cataclysm but not yet history. As decades passed and the number of people who had not lived through the war increased, myths and monuments proliferated.

Between 1880 and 1910 practically every county seat in the country erected in front of its courthouse a statue of a soldier, Union or Confederate depending on the location, complete with a plaque commemorating those county residents who had served in the war. During roughly the same period, battlefield reunions of those who had fought at Gettysburg or Chickamauga established themselves as a way to dramatize national unity and reconciliation—the most obvious necessities after a bitter civil war—for a population that increasingly was too young to remember the 1860s. By the 1920s, personal recollection of the war was a prerogative of the old. The final major gathering of Civil War veterans occurred at Gettysburg in 1938, an emotional occasion on which blue- and gray-clad men in their nineties shook hands for the last time over the wall where Pickett's charge had ended in carnage 75 years earlier. The last veterans on both sides died in the 1950s. A few people who had been children during the war lingered a little longer, but by the time the centennial ceremonies ended in



It was an event of national importance when some of the last living veterans of Pickett's charge exchanged a symbolic handshake at the Gettysburg battlefield in 1938.

the 1960s, the event itself was outside the personal memory of anyone then living.

In the extended sense of living memory, however, the Civil War was enjoying its second wind. The not-uncommon veteran who was born in the 1840s and lived into his eighties frequently left young grandchildren who had hung on every word the old man spoke about what he had done in those four years of war. This pattern of transmission was especially common in the white South, which for a century clung to the war as a major constituent of its identity. (Obviously, black Southerners had a strikingly different set of memories.) Given good genes and reasonable luck, those grandchildren could easily live into the 1990s. When Walter Williams died in December 1959, *The Washington Post* ran an obituary that paid tribute not so much to the last veteran himself, whose wartime service was hard to document, but to all who had fought in America's bloodiest conflict. The author of the eulogy made a shrewd point about the afterlife of memory:

There is nobody living now who remembers the Confederate soldier as he was in his war years. But there are a great many middle-aged men who sat at his knee as little boys and heard from his bearded lips how it was in the great old days. There are many who saw him at his annual reunions in the hot and somnolent Southern towns, ancient and feeble, but wearing his gray uniform and brandishing his stick with an air that brought Chancellorsville back again and relegated Appomattox to the limbo where it belonged.

So in an indirect but still-vivid sense, memory of the war was prolonged to a limit of about 130 years. As one of Mrs. Martin's friends noted when she died, "She was what we call the last link to Dixie. The war hasn't been that far removed, particularly for Southerners, and she reminded us of that." In an even more attenuated form, of course, historical memory goes on for as long as its inheri-

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tors consider it important. My wife, who was not born until 1951 but who is a descendant on both sides of Civil War veterans, grew up knowing the names of the battles in which those long-dead forebears took part and the prison camp in which one of them was held near the end of the war.

For Americans whose ancestors came to these shores after 1865, the Civil War has always been someone else's history, never an intergenerational memory. Yet even—or perhaps especially—those who have no veterans in their family tree often try to establish links, connections that are no less revealing for being forced. During the past 40 years, meticulously costumed reenactors have become a conspicuous summer feature of every significant battlefield. In fact, they began to appear even before the actual veterans faded from the scene. Fantasies of reenactment, affectionately derided in Tony Horwitz's *Confederates in the Attic* (1998), are one way a nation often accused of having little sense of history makes contact with the most dramatic episodes in its past.

Along with most Americans of the 21st century, I have no ancestral memories of the Civil War. What I have instead is the memory of an epistolary contact established half a century ago between a 13-year-old Civil War romantic and one of the last participants. In 1955, I read that, of the three or four million men who wore uniforms in the Civil War, there were precisely four almost supernaturally aged survivors—three once very young Confederate soldiers and one Union drummer boy. A newspaper article thoughtfully provided their addresses. Like hundreds of other people, no doubt, I wrote in search of autographs, and possibly more. Some precocious impulse led me to enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope with each letter.

Two of the three veterans sent autographs. In addition, the following letter arrived from a town in Florida:

On the envelope W.A. Lundy wrote his name with out glasses no he didnt see the people you menchen in your letter but here is a couple of things he remembers.

I lived near Elba, Ala., was only 16 when the war closed. One day the Yankees was on us before we realized it. But we hit the ground and their fire went above us then we let them have it with our guns. The grones an taken on was tearble.

Then another time we was skining a beef near a house. The Yankees came in the house we left the beef went in the house & captured them. These are the thangs he rembers most he said it was tearble times then. Sure hope this is alright. You see he's not to able to read or write but signs his name lot of times for people. He can walk some but can't remember too well. I'm his son's wife he lives with us now since his baby girl died. Thank you for writing him.

The eerie sensation this letter gave me of having been present at tragic skirmishes 90 years earlier, in the person of a teenaged soldier barely older than I was, has never quite departed.

Like the memory of the Civil War decades after the event, remembrance of World War II has now advanced to the stage of grandparents telling grandchildren (or anybody willing to listen) what it was really like. Oral history is notoriously unreliable as "history," particularly when it involves great events. Even so, the narrative of any witness or widow of D-Day or the Holocaust is coming to seem infinitely precious. The whole point of these recollections is that they are personal and filled with the contingencies of life—a shrinking number of individual voices speaking out of a vast, impersonal chaos that would otherwise be recorded only in dates and official documents. It is as though once living memory has been lost, the event itself—its mixture of valor and horror, its power to warn or inspire, its sheer reality—becomes irrevocably diminished.

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At Utah Beach earlier this year, a group of World War II re-enactors listen to U.S. infantry veteran John Fowler during ceremonies celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Allied landing at Normandy.

An almost feverish eagerness has been building over the past decade to get the stories down and erect the memorials while large numbers of firsthand witnesses are still capable of participating. The familiar pattern of Civil War retrospection has predictably repeated itself, including reunions and re-enactments at Normandy, as the events of World War II become part of the distant past. For a generation that prefers to get its views of history from films rather than books, *The Longest Day* and *Schindler's List* may have achieved the status of classic representations, much as *Gone with the Wind* did in its time; but unmediated individual recollection, once silenced forever, is irreplaceable even by greater arts than the movies.

As William Faulkner attested in “The

Jail” (1951) while summoning up the ghostly widow of yet another Civil War soldier from Alabama, historical memory can possess an almost magical vividness and tenacity—

so vast, so limitless in capacity is man’s imagination to disperse and burn away the rubble-dross of fact and probability, leaving only truth and dream . . . there is the clear undistanced voice as though out of the delicate antenna-skeins of radio, further than empress’s throne, than splendid insatiation, even than matriarch’s peaceful rocking chair, across the vast instantaneous intervention, from the long long time ago: ‘Listen, stranger; this was myself: this was I.’

The deaths of old soldiers and their widows are material for a poignant

tale, but a skeptical reader might ask what difference any of this really makes. Although memory and commemoration have become hot topics among historians, the inexorable passage of time beyond recall is hardly a new discovery. To be sure, the world has seen dire examples of historical memory at work over the past two decades in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East, to name only the most obvious instances. But the obsessive conflicts between Serb and Croat, Greek and Turk, Kurd and Arab and Jew (again, to name no more) go back many centuries. Memory can either liberate people from their own time or imprison them in the anachronistic demands of another. In lands where the historical imagination is a curse and identity a dungeon, 20th-century events within or just beyond living memory merely reenacted, for the most part, ethnic and religious prejudices dating back to time out of mind. In contemporary America, where all history is comparatively recent and the manifestations of memory likelier to be sentimental than murderous, we prefer to think that our conflicts are more practical and less driven by myths, particularly by old wars that live on in the minds of aging participants, their grandchildren, or, as in the former Yugoslavia, their remote descendants.

“We have learned that you cannot live from history,” a Kosovo Serb told a *New York Times* reporter in 1999. “Americans have no history and they live wonderfully well.” Without question, a combination of luck and wise contrivance has spared the United States the worst kinds of internecine conflict, with the major exception of the Civil War. Inherited identities rarely command us to kill our tribe’s hereditary enemies. But anyone who thinks historical memory has no serious impact on our lives, that either ordinary Americans or policy-makers come to decisions about great issues solely on the basis of current interests and circumstances, is ignoring powerful evidence to the contrary. When the civil rights movement was in full flower, a period coinciding almost exactly with the centennial of the Civil War, the ideology and imagery of its segregationist opponents were heavily influenced by the memory of the Confed-

eracy. It was in the 1950s and early ’60s that Georgia incorporated the Confederate battle flag into its state flag and South Carolina began flying the conquered banner above the state capitol, thereby making its display or removal a political issue that resonates to this day.

The steam went out of Southern resistance to integration—went out, in fact, of the South’s whole self-image as a conquered but defiant province—about the same time the last generation who had grown up with Confederate veterans in the family left the political scene (with a few spectacularly antique exceptions such as Strom Thurmond). This beneficent regional transformation had a variety of causes, some of them economic, but the fact that certain memories had run their chronological course should not be underestimated. While teaching at a state university in Virginia during the late 1970s, I once pointed out to an undergraduate class that when their parents were their age, the university had been racially segregated by law. Not only did many of the students not know this fact, they refused to believe it and thought I was making it up. (All of them were white.) Sometimes progress takes the form of historical amnesia.

A few years earlier, during the Vietnam War, it was frequently pointed out that the most influential makers of American foreign policy were of the right age to have been decisively influenced in their attitudes by the appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s and its eventual costs. Threats from dictators, they felt certain, should be forcibly resisted sooner rather than later. (The democracies’ reluctance to resist Nazi Germany had owed something, in turn, to memories of what seemed in retrospect like pointless carnage in World War I.) A great many Americans identify World War II with the treacherous attack on a negligently defended Pearl Harbor, followed by the heroism of Midway, D-Day, and Iwo Jima. But while applying the supposed lessons of history to the present may be inevitable, doing so is always perilous, for it involves the use of analogies that may, in hindsight, look

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wildly inappropriate. Generals are not the only people with a tendency to fight the previous war.

Voices from the past are hard to interpret and can be dangerously seductive. The self-image of Americans at war as liberators, which reached an early high point with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, was spectacularly reinforced by the liberation of Western Europe in World War II (and, later, by the outcome of the Cold War). Although historians remind us that it was not in all respects a “good war”—no war is—we understandably devote more of our attention to Pearl Harbor and D-Day than to Dresden and Nagasaki.

As nations haunted by vastly greater numbers of war graves and widows than America pass through the same trajectory of time, their own recollections of World War II can lead them to see the world very differently. Lately, disagreement about where those memories should point has been a source of conflict between the United States and several of its longtime allies, who sometimes seem to have learned precisely the opposite lessons from those that Americans carried away. For many Europeans in the past 20 years, now-distant memories of both world wars have hardened into a self-righteous conviction that peace outweighs any value that might conflict with it, almost regardless of the threat or provocation. The results can be disastrous. After four decades of vowing never again to tolerate genocide, Europeans were simply paralyzed in the early 1990s when the Yugoslav government of Slobodan Milošević began practicing it with a ferocity not seen on their continent since Hitler’s time. Intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo, unconscionably delayed, would not have occurred at all without American leadership, and it remains controversial today.

Germans are probably more tied in knots by historical memory than any other people in Europe or, indeed, the world. They bear the double burden of crushing guilt and total defeat—of the Holocaust and the annihilation of German cities from the air. A number of recent books,

including W. G. Sebald’s widely popular *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999; English-language edition 2003), have insistently reminded Germans that millions of their own civilians suffered a horrible retribution in the last years of World War II or were forcibly expelled from their homes soon after the war. For the survivors and their descendants, the war represents only a grim warning to the future; there are no monuments to the valor of Hitler’s soldiers. Not surprisingly, a country that has become a model democracy suffers acutely at times from an unresolved conflict between shame at the crimes it committed within living memory and resentment of what it refers to in some moods as its conquest by the Allies, in others as its liberation.

The passage of time—the fact that most German adults nowadays were born after the war and feel less guilt than their parents—has allowed this ambivalence to be more openly expressed. Incongruously combining disapproval of Nazi aggression in 1939 with a reawakened sense of grievance at having been victims in 1945, many Germans of all ages now reflexively identify with any country against which America and its allies consider using force. When Chancellor Gerhard Schröder announced in the fall of 2002 that Germany would take no part in a war against Saddam Hussein, even if it had United Nations approval, his popular decision was in full accord with his nation’s emotionally complicated memories of events 60 years earlier.

It goes without saying that Germans or other Europeans are no more of one mind about contemporary issues than Americans are. Nonetheless, whatever other factors come into play during the great crises of war and peace, intensely different perceptions of a traumatic past tend to dominate debate even in free and prosperous countries. Living memories, unlike more abstract assertions about interests or ethics, are by definition invulnerable to argument. As T. S. Eliot wrote in the darkest days of the London blitz, “History may be servitude, / History may be freedom.” It can take a long time to distinguish accurately between the two. □