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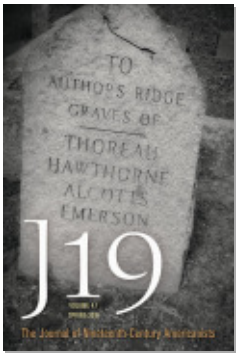

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17. Ibid., April 10, 18, 21, 25, 29, 30, 1862.

18. Charles Minor Blackford, *Letters from Lee's Army; or, Memoirs of Life in and out of the Army in Virginia during the War Between the States*, ed. Susan Leigh Blackford and Charles Minor Blackford III (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), 96; Pvt. Jacob Blackington to Sister, 19th Massachusetts Infantry, June 24, 1862, Lyman and Jacob Blackington Collection, US Army Military Institute at Carlisle, PA; William H. Morgan, *Personal Reminiscences of the War 1861–5: In Camp—on Bivouac—on the March—on Picket—on the Skirmish Line—on the Battlefield—and in Prison* (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell, 1911), 100.

19. See, for instance, Michael C. C. Adams, *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); and Brian M. Jordan, *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War* (New York: Liveright, 2015).

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In 2008, I was struck by two interesting and high-profile publications. Both Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the Civil War* and Mark S. Schantz's *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* spoke directly to the issue of death and dying in the Civil War.[1] Though similar in some of their descriptions of antebellum culture and wartime carnage, the books seemed to me to offer enough contrasting perspectives that I imagined a major historical and historiographical argument would ensue. I was wrong, and my own modest entry into the discussion of the meaning of Civil War deaths more recently helped me understand why.

Winner of the Bancroft Prize and finalist for the Pulitzer, Faust's *This Republic of Suffering* has become a standard in the field. It places death at the very center of the Civil War experience, in the process developing keen insights into how the government, the larger society, communities, and individuals coped with the dying. While acknowledging that nineteenth-century Americans were more familiar with death than we are today, Faust bases her argument on the claim that the "Civil War represented a dramatic shift in both incidence and experience," producing "carnage that has often been thought reserved for the combination of technological proficiency and inhumanity characteristic of a later time" (*Republic of Suffering*, xii). Schantz's *Awaiting the Heavenly Country* received more qualified and less extensive praise but nevertheless found an appreciative audience. His goal is to show how circumstances before the war in some sense trained Americans to understand

and cope with the exceptional level of loss that they were to experience in the 1860s. Schantz argues that the "fundamental confrontation with death" was "one of the most pervasive concerns of the antebellum era"; that "nineteenth-century America was a death-embracing culture"; and that death was "the major story" for nineteenth-century Americans. By 1860 Americans had a clear cultural matrix that allowed them to process and, as Schantz further claims, even "facilitate" the violence of the Civil War (*Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, 2–4). Thus, while viewing the volume of death in the war as unprecedented, he sees the culture of death as continuous and supportive.

Having spent years working on the private papers of antebellum Americans (and finding within them a world very much like that described by Schantz), I immediately identified with his larger purpose. And I especially appreciated his desire to understand the Civil War in the context of a hoary, yet still useful, historiographic argumentative mode—that is, "change versus continuity." As I saw it, both Schantz's and my evidence suggested an unbroken line of both experience with death and means of coping with it, whereas Faust argued for fundamental disruptions in scale and meaning. Yet reviews that treated *Awaiting the Heavenly Country* and *This Republic of Suffering* together made much more of their harmonizing elements than any implicit or explicit contradictions. One noted that "these books are not in competition with each other: Each complements the other, and together they powerfully employ deathways to describe the conclusion of the early American republic and the opening of modern America."[2] Note here the direct support of the "change" perspective rather than "continuity." James McPherson in the *New York Review of Books*, in his usual perspicacious way, praised both works, while discussing some of the distinctions, including the question of whether a "culture of death" continued into the war years. But he also maintained that Schantz's book offers "insights that complement those of Faust." According to McPherson, one of the most important points of intersection was the two authors' understanding of the dramatic new scope of death during the Civil War: the generation of the Civil War, he averred, was "totally unprepared for mortality on this scale."[3] Clearly, the tendency was to fold Schantz's points into Faust's interpretation and always keep the focus on the number of dead.

As I processed the two books and thought about my own work I increasingly became bothered by the statistics used in all accounts of the war, including my own introduction to the topic in my classes. Statistics were one of the two ways that I (and seemingly everyone else)

encapsulated the horrors of the war; the other was to use an eyewitness account of a battlefield, such as Ulysses S. Grant's harrowing description of Shiloh: "I saw an open field, in our possession on the second day, over which the Confederates had made repeated charges the day before, so covered with dead that it would have been possible to walk across the clearing, in any direction, stepping on dead bodies, without a foot touching the ground."[4] Coupled with such a battlefield description came the mind-numbing numbers: approximately 620,000 soldiers died in the war, roughly equal to all the deaths in all other American wars combined. As a percentage of the population, this figure approached 2 percent, which if applied to today's population would equal approximately six to seven million dead. Such a vast sum was hard to comprehend and served the purpose of making the point that the sacrifice of the Civil War generation was enormous.

However, as I continued to read the diaries and letters of antebellum Americans that were saturated with sickness, suffering, and death, I began to wonder about how the death rates they faced would compare with those experienced in the Civil War. The more I looked into this topic, the more I came to believe that the story of the Civil War as usually told did not represent the experience of those who lived through it. Mortality statistics from the first half of the nineteenth century are not complete, but those that we do have confirm the picture I found in my sources: Americans died at rates and in patterns that were profoundly different from those experienced in twenty-first-century America. Compared to today, they frequently died at birth (mothers and children), in youth, and in the prime of life. Given these circumstances, it seemed logical that, rather than trying to draw analogies by calculating what a similar death rate would look like in our own time, the deaths in the Civil War should be put into their contemporary context. In essence, I began to ask, for those living at the time, was 620,000 (or the newer estimate of 750,000) a big number?

What resulted from asking this question was an essay draft that essentially answered "no." The death rates before the war and the truly overwhelming anecdotal evidence from diaries and letters made it clear that the additional deaths in the Civil War could be seen as part of a regular pattern of high and highly variable loss. However, early commenters on my essay had two issues with my account. First, claims about universal high death rates seemed to suggest that life was cheap at the time, a point that was directly contradicted by Faust's and Schantz's books (and any number of other sources). And, second, the essay failed to rec-

ognize that, often in history, as in our own times, the size of the numbers regarding death are not the key issue; rather, the big question is not how many died but what meaning we associate with the deaths. After all, one could cite any number of instances when relatively few deaths had enormous consequences and significance. In response to these concerns, I worked to make sense of the larger picture, using both quantitative and qualitative sources. The point about a presumed unfeeling populace hardened to death was easily put aside by showing how antebellum and Civil War–era Americans expressed deep and heartfelt loss when their loved ones died. The point about the insignificance of numbers in and of themselves was a bit trickier, for it was not an entirely fair critique. Because so many historians reflexively cited death statistics alone to make a case for the significance of the war, I had to do the same thing in order to combat the argument. So, yes, on one level, I had to speak about relative numbers by themselves, but at the same time, I was careful to discuss the perceptions of those who lived during the period and the meanings they ascribed to the deaths. At no time did I claim or believe that deaths were insignificant on either the personal or national level. I simply argued that there was much continuity throughout the period, and that the antebellum experience of death in terms of both scale and meaning looked very similar to the wartime experience. In the end, I think the evidence supports my original point and serves to undercut rote citation of misleading numbers that have been used to support claims for a dramatic shift in the demographic facts of life or the culture of death. Yet the response to what I thought was a reasonable and relatively uncontroversial attempt at perspective was overwhelmingly negative, including two outright rejections from journal editors.

Not yet suspecting any larger issue, I reworked my piece to include David Hacker's recent article on death totals and the just-published book by Frances Clarke (*War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North*) that skillfully analyzed the way ordinary Americans processed the war.[5] In the meantime, I saw that Drew Faust's book had been made into a film that was shown on PBS's *American Experience*.[6] The introduction to the film included this statement: "With the coming of the Civil War—the first modern war, the first mass war of the modern age—death would enter the experience of the American people, and the body politic of the American nation, as it never had before, on a scale and in a manner no one had ever imagined possible, and under circumstances for which the nation would prove completely unprepared." Now suspecting that I was up against something much bigger than I had

originally thought, I nevertheless soldiered on, sending the essay to a third journal (*Journal of the Civil War Era*), and received an enthusiastic response. The essay was eventually published after receiving positive reviews from all three referees,[7] yet I continued to wonder about the diametrically opposed reactions of the editors of the three journals. This issue came up again soon thereafter when I presented the essay as a paper at a conference. In the comment period, I was immediately confronted with questions like "Are you saying that those were meaningless deaths?" Only a small minority appreciated the paper for providing a new perspective.

I should have expected something similar when a short form of the essay appeared in the *New York Times* Disunion Blog.[8] The reaction from the readers was generally outraged. One respondent simply said, "So the Civil War wasn't that bad. What a relief! Kudos to young historians seeking distinction by rehashing statistics." Another chimed in with "Me thinks Professor Marshall protests too much—engaging in sophistry that demeans the real, terrible costs of the Civil War." I took solace in the few readers who told some of these folks that they had not understood my point about context, but the responses reveal a powerful inability to separate an attempt to comprehend death in a larger sense from a perceived attack on the importance of the war or the sacrifice of the soldiers involved.

I began to think that it might be difficult for some to comprehend that Civil War–era Americans could have suffered emotionally at the deaths of loved ones and at the same time recognized the dying as, in some sense, an ordinary part of life. That the massive loss of life in the antebellum period (and the cultural responses) represented an uncivil demographic war that accustomed (note that I do not use "inured" here—there is an important distinction) nineteenth-century Americans to loss. As I wrote in my essay: "The antebellum evidence shows that within a sentimentalized culture death was indeed an important and profoundly disturbing event. Deaths in the war were also viewed in this way, and the trauma associated with them was real, heartfelt, and an added burden. The demographic picture that spans the war years, however, makes clear that it is unconvincing to claim significance or meaning based on the perception that the magnitude of death in the war necessarily forced Americans to re-assess the implications of the carnage" ("Great Exaggeration," 12).

In the end, I think something is going on in the field and in popular culture that bears notice. The suffering in the war and the larger signifi-

cance of the era have become intertwined to the point that the Civil War has achieved some kind of exalted status, and many believe that it should not be challenged. We had hints of the problem when Mark Neely published his book on the relative destructiveness of the war in 2007 (*The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction*) and was taken to task by a number of reviewers, including James McPherson in the *New York Review of Books*.[9] By comparing the violence of the Civil War to the Mexican War, the Indian Wars, and other mid-nineteenth-century conflicts, Neely made a strong argument for the relative restraint practiced during the fighting between Union and Confederacy. Criticisms of the book too often took the form of pointing out specific instances of brutality in the Civil War rather than recognizing that Neely was arguing about the big picture. Since Neely's book appeared, I would argue that the trend he criticized, of sensationalizing the war and putting it in "some unfathomably violent category by itself" (*Limits of Destruction*, 213) has continued unabated and has been amplified by Faust's book and the subsequent documentary based on her work. As Andrew Delbanco noted in a recent review, there has been a "surge of books that belong to what might be called the school of gore—exemplified most recently by Mark M. Smith's *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War*—books that almost seem to savor the range of ways in which living bodies were converted into corpses by fire or disease, in mud or in bed, quickly enough to block awareness of death's arrival, or slowly enough to taunt the dying with false promises of reprieve."[10] The celebration surrounding the publication of David Hacker's carefully wrought demographic article suggests that the fascination with numbers (and their use by themselves to clinch an argument) also shows no sign of dying out. In fact, James McPherson used the occasion to continue his attack on Neely, noting in *Civil War History* that "such a figure calls into question Mark Neely's assertion that the Civil War was 'remarkable for its traditional restraint.' The Civil War did indeed result in more American soldier deaths than all the other wars this country has fought combined."[11] At the same time, the editors of *Civil War History* said that Hacker's recalculation of the number who died in the war "stands among the most consequential pieces ever to appear in this journal's pages"; shortly thereafter, Eric Foner, writing in the *New York Times*, stated that the article "further elevates the significance of the Civil War and makes a dramatic statement about how the war is a central moment in American history."[12]

More evidence that the trends are continuing may be found in a recent issue of *Civil War History*. In it, David Hacker offers a review of

my essay, in part taking issue with my efforts to avoid comparisons to the present, and concludes by calling the Civil War "the greatest demographic shock in our nation's history."[13] It might make for an interesting conversation to debate whether the Civil War was truly the greatest demographic shock: perhaps the blow to Native Americans was greater; perhaps the 600,000 who died in a few months from flu in 1918–1919 was greater, but this misses the main point: how did Americans at the time understand their circumstances?

Hacker's review, however, raises the question of why historians and those interested in history are so sensitive about the war's place in history. Why does any suggestion that some part of it was something other than catastrophic or overwhelming incite such quick and seemingly visceral response? In different contexts, Drew Faust and Mark Neely have put their fingers on part of the issue. Years ago, in explaining the boom in Civil War studies, Faust commented on the attractions of the war for those looking back: "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."[14] I would add that the middle of the nineteenth century offers a perfect blend of a different world and a recognizable one, a bit of mystery and romance folded into characters and actions that we are still able to identify with. Though foreign, they are not so foreign as to be unknowable, and we have excellent documentation of their thoughts and feelings. Mark Neely, on the other hand, spoke to why historians tend to emphasize the war's brutality: "unequaled bloodiness has become a way for those of us who write on the war to impress our readers with the importance of our subject" and "bloodiness has abetted the idea of the importance of courage and dedication to public causes in the individual Civil War soldier. It is important, also, for demonstrating objectivity; it has the further advantage of not making invidious distinctions between the Union and Confederate causes" (*Limits of Destruction*, 210, 211).

My experience supports Neely's analysis but also extends it. By challenging the statistical case for the importance and destructiveness of the war, I now realize, I have been stepping on a hallowed piece of evidence that is connected to a hallowed interpretation. On the one hand, the attempt to rethink how death may have been understood in the past has run into two of twenty-first-century American culture's primary, re-

lated associations with death. The first is that death before old age is deeply, fundamentally tragic. The second is that death while in military service should be viewed as noble sacrifice no matter the context. Given these two powerful interpretive perspectives, it is hard to imagine that Civil War–era Americans could have seen death in the war as closer to ordinary and understandable. On the other hand, these numbers, in shorthand form, seem to represent the monumental importance of the only all-American war. They have a purity, simplicity, and cogency that is very, very difficult to give up: great sacrifice, suffering, and courage all wrapped up in a shining bundle. It may be time, however, to look elsewhere to encapsulate the elemental transformations—the major discontinuities with the past—that reveal the significance of the war. One possibility would be to focus on figures related to the death of slavery rather than the death of soldiers: At the beginning of 1861, there were about four million American slaves. By the end of 1865, there were none.

Notes

1. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008); Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). Subsequent references to both are made parenthetically in the text.

2. *Journal of Social History* 43 (Spring 2010): 742.

3. James M. McPherson, "Dark Victories," *New York Review of Books*, April 17, 2008.

4. Ulysses Simpson Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, ed. Caleb Carr (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 97.

5. J. David Hacker, "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," *Civil War History* 57 (December 2011): 307–48; Frances M. Clarke, *War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

6. "Death and the Civil War," *American Experience*, PBS, September 18, 2012.

7. Nicholas Marshall, "The Great Exaggeration: Death and the Civil War," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4 (March 2014): 3–25. Subsequent references are made parenthetically in the text.

8. Nicholas Marshall, "The Civil War Death Toll, Reconsidered," *New York Times* Disunion Blog, April 15, 2014.

9. Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); subsequent references are made parenthetically in the text. James M. McPherson, "Was It More Restrained than You Think?" *New York Review of Books*, February 14, 2008.

10. Andrew Delbanco, "The Civil War Convulsion," *New York Review of Books*, March 19, 2015.

11. *Civil War History* 57 (December 2011): 310, 307.

12. *New York Times*, April 2, 2012.

13. J. David Hacker, "Has the Demographic Impact of Civil War Deaths Been Exaggerated?," *Civil War History* 60 (December 2014): 458.

14. Drew Gilpin Faust, "'We Should Grow Too Fond of It': Why We Love the Civil War," *Civil War History* 50 (December 2004): 377.