# THE AGE *of* LINCOLN

Orville Vernon Burton

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The Kentuckian, LINCOLN, defended the Declaration of Independence against the attacks of the degenerate Vermonter, DOUGLAS, and against BRECKENRIDGE and the whole ruling class of the South. Here was a Southerner, with eloquence that would bear a comparison with HENRY CLAY'S, defending Liberty and the North against the leaders of the Border Ruffians and Doughfaces of Illinois.

—*Belleville Weekly Advocate* (Illinois), October 22, 1856

If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.

—Abraham Lincoln to Albert Hodges, April 4, 1864

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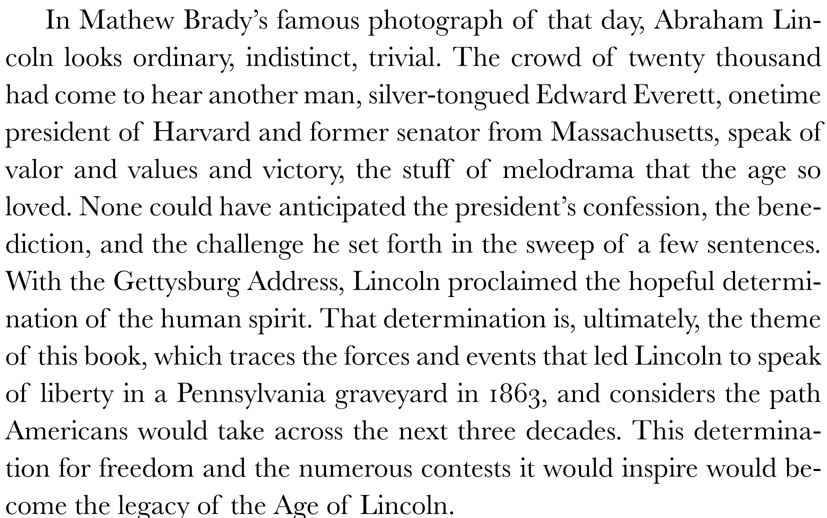
# THE AGE *of* LINCOLN

# Prologue

Rivers of blood flowed as Americans turned against each other in battle. The land was torn asunder. Four and a half months after the Battle of Gettysburg, standing in the November chill of a military cemetery still hardly half-finished, President Abraham Lincoln articulated the meaning of the battle, of the war, of the American dream. He called for a "new birth of freedom."

In Mathew Brady's famous photograph of that day, Abraham Lincoln looks ordinary, indistinct, trivial. The crowd of twenty thousand had come to hear another man, silver-tongued Edward Everett, onetime president of Harvard and former senator from Massachusetts, speak of valor and values and victory, the stuff of melodrama that the age so loved. None could have anticipated the president's confession, the benediction, and the challenge he set forth in the sweep of a few sentences. With the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln proclaimed the hopeful determination of the human spirit. That determination is, ultimately, the theme of this book, which traces the forces and events that led Lincoln to speak of liberty in a Pennsylvania graveyard in 1863, and considers the path Americans would take across the next three decades. This determination for freedom and the numerous contests it would inspire would become the legacy of the Age of Lincoln.



*One*

# Kindred Spirits and Double-Minded Men

From the rocky shores of Maine to the Ohio Valley and beyond, men and women by the thousands rose up early on the morning of October 22, 1844. Quickly and carefully they bathed, put on spotless new clothes, and expectantly went outside. They looked up toward heaven. Before the day was through the skies were to open, the angels of the Lord were to descend, and the world they knew was to come to an end. Today was the day appointed for Christ's return to judge mankind and establish God's rule on earth.

It was not to be. Although their leader, a Baptist minister named William Miller, had promised through thirteen years of vibrant preaching that the advent of the millennium had been calculated down to that very day, their faith was disappointed. Many had abandoned farms and workshops; others had given away worldly possessions in expectation of the Second Coming. They knelt on rooftops, bowed their heads in prayer, and waited, shivering in an early winter's wind and rain, for the Savior's return. Finally they stood up in confusion, went home, and continued on with their lives. That was an act of faith of a rather different sort.

In the 1800s many Americans came to embrace a new and radical idea, that they could advance the millennium by right living. Faithfully, eagerly, defiantly, they took up cudgels against the evils they saw around

*Five*

# "Southern by Birth"

On January 27, 1838, men and women in Springfield, Illinois, braved the winter weather and gathered at the Baptist Church to attend the Young Men's Lyceum, a public meeting where they were audience to talented speakers perfecting their eloquence on a wide assortment of topics. The speaker that evening was a member of the Illinois House of Representatives and a resident of Springfield, having recently moved from the frontier town of New Salem, Illinois. Disturbed by recent mob violence in Mississippi and the city of St. Louis as well as the killing of abolitionist editor Reverend Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln was to deliver a speech on "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions."

Displaying a loquaciousness he would prune in subsequent years, the young representative staked the nation's future on *"a reverence for the Constitution and law"* (Lincoln's emphasis), for which he recommended that "every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor." He worried that nationwide "wild and furious passions" refused to concede to the "sober judgment of the courts," and the "mobocratic spirit" of the times rendered extrajudicial judgment against gamblers, abolitionists, suspected slave insurrectionists. Evoking the specter of dead men "literally hanging from the bough of trees upon any roadside," Lincoln called on Americans to renew their patriotic attachment to sober reason, to law and order, and to the political edifice of liberty and equal

rights bequeathed them by their forebears. All too aware of human frailties, Lincoln readily granted the existence of bad laws, of grievances for which "no legal provision have been made." The "political religion" he espoused was necessarily a never-ending exercise, a halting process toward greater justice, not perfection. Bad laws were to be repealed, and new legal provisions applied to new grievances. "Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason" was the bedrock for America's future support and defense. Here was boundless commitment to, if not necessarily blind faith in, general intelligence, sound morality, and reverence for the rule of law. If the government rested on those pillars of strength, the twenty-eight-year-old Lincoln was prepared to assert, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

HAD LINCOLN LOST the presidential election of 1860, there is reason to believe that the Republicans might have faded from prominence. Had southerners moderated their demands to a slight degree, northern "Wide-Awakes" who championed Lincoln's cause might have been less zealous, and perhaps the center might have held one more time. Instead, Republicans also made important gains in the Senate, where 29 Republicans balanced 37 non-Republicans, and in the House of Representatives, where 120 Republicans and 108 non-Republicans squared off. The Supreme Court, with Taney as chief justice, was still dominated by southern interests. Nevertheless, many slaveholders in the South considered the election of Abraham Lincoln to be the equivalent of a declaration of war. They regarded the election of any Republican as a reproach to their pride, but especially this one, whom they felt sure would centralize the government, would not enforce the Dred Scott decision, and would prevent the expansion of slavery.

Southern newspapers jeered at Lincoln as "vulgar," a "horrid-looking wretch," and an "Illinois ape." Some called him harder names still, usually linked with an affection for African Americans that Lincoln tried to soft-pedal in the campaign. Such unthinking hostility perplexed president-elect Lincoln. As he wrote in December 1860 to North Carolina congressman John Gilmer, "You think slavery is right and ought to be extended; we think it wrong and ought to be restricted. For this, neither has any just occasion to be angry with the other." But angry they were.

Lincoln seemed to polarize people; some felt intense animosity, others a fierce loyalty. Those who came to know him, however, even former enemies, came to like him.

One admirer, the poet Walt Whitman, considered him a man of "the real West, the log hut, the clearing, the woods, the prairie." Although Whitman called him a man of the West, Republican senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio referred to him as "born of 'poor white trash' and educated in a slave State." Antislavery journalist Charles H. Ray (future owner of the *Chicago Tribune*) wrote to Illinois congressman Elihu Washburne in 1854 of his concerns over Lincoln: "I must confess I am afraid of 'Abe' . . . He is Southern by birth, Southern in his associations and Southern, if I mistake not, in his sympathies . . . His wife, you know, is a Todd, of a pro-slavery family, and so are all his kin." When Lincoln campaigned for Frémont in central and southern Illinois in 1856, Republican newspapers stressed that Lincoln was a "southerner" and compared his eloquence to that of his fellow Kentuckian, Henry Clay. South Carolina fire-eater Robert Barnwell Rhett declared in 1860 that Lincoln was "a Southern renegade—spewed out of the bosom of Kentucky into Illinois." In later years black sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois declared, "Abraham Lincoln was a Southern poor white." Historian of the South, Bertram Wyatt-Brown names Lincoln as the greatest poet of the South. His hometown newspaper in Springfield, Illinois, clearly identified Lincoln as a southerner: "Our friend carries the true Kentucky rifle and when he fires he seldom fails of sending the shot home."

Abraham Lincoln did indeed have southern roots, roots that helped define him as a person and as a president. Lincoln once confided to his law partner William H. Herndon that his maternal grandfather was "a well-bred Virginia farmer or planter," and Lincoln attributed some of his ambition and intellect to this nobleman from Virginia. His father, Thomas, and his paternal grandfather, Abraham, were also from Virginia, and Abraham was born in Kentucky, not far from Jefferson Davis's birthplace. Beyond Lincoln's habit of greeting folks with a southern "Howdy!" his famous sense of humor emanated from his rural southern heritage. His father was a legendary storyteller, and young Abraham not only reveled in the stories but learned his father's talent and used it to good purpose most of his life.

But Lincoln's southern habits went beyond turns of speech, story-

telling, and literary references. Driving his life's decisions and his handling of the crisis to come was his understanding of and respect for southern honor. Honor depended on one's standing in the community; it was an external quality that reflected others' view of the individual's place within the group. For the yeoman of the American South, this included exaggerated masculine traits of derring-do, courage, strength, and braggadocio. Traits of the yeoman sense of honor in young Abraham Lincoln are evident in the story, now part of legend, of his wrestling match with Jack Armstrong in 1831. The Armstrong family of the Clary's Grove settlement had migrated from Tennessee. Lincoln's own neighborhood of New Salem was similarly settled by southerners and was in fact a southern enclave in Illinois. Jack Armstrong was the leader of the Clary's Grove Boys, a group of tough young rowdies, and Armstrong was considered the toughest. Lincoln's employer, shop owner Denton Offutt, was more impressed with the strong, wiry Lincoln. He bet that his store clerk could whip Armstrong. Accounts vary, but apparently the two contestants struggled evenly for a long time until Armstrong threw Lincoln by cheating. Lincoln sprang angrily to his feet and challenged the entire gang, claiming that he would take them all on one at a time, but only in a fair fight. His strength and courage won over the Clary's Grove Boys.

Just a few months later when the community's militia unit was mobilizing for the Black Hawk War, Jack Armstrong and the Boys elected Abe Lincoln captain. According to Lincoln's short 1859 autobiography, the public esteem evidenced by this election by the men who knew him so well provided him "a success which gave me more pleasure than any I have had since." Abraham Lincoln craved communal approval, that essential part of southern honor. In 1832, in his first race for the Illinois General Assembly, he explained his ambition "of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by tending myself worthy of their esteem." Although Lincoln lost the election, his own home district of New Salem gave him 277 of its 300 votes cast.

On one occasion, Lincoln's respect for southern honor almost brought him to a duel, an unusual event in the rural North. Lincoln told a friend that he was opposed to dueling, but if degradation was the only alternative, he would fight. Democrat James Shields challenged Lincoln in September 1842 because of witty, anonymous articles in the Whig paper *Sangamo Journal.* The wit may have been a little too vicious due to the

*Seven*

# "A Giant Holocaust of Death"

Tall, sad, and shrouded with a tawny mane of beard and hair, Kentucky-born Texan John Bell "Sam" Hood was too much the lion, Robert E. Lee thought, and too little the fox to make an effective commander. No one doubted Hood's courage, but by war's end, bravery had turned to irrational bloodlust. He already bore one wound from a Comanche arrow in his left hand, when he had led the Texas Brigade into battle at Gaines' Mill in 1862. His soldiers shattered the Union line that day and broke George McClellan's spirit, but by nightfall every officer under his command had been killed or wounded. Gettysburg ruined his left arm, and Chickamauga took off his right leg, but on both occasions he grasped his sword, urged his men forward, and rose ever higher in rank. On the afternoon of November 30, 1864, he was raging over the remnants of the Army of Tennessee he now led, stalled on the road outside Franklin, fifteen miles below Nashville. The fight had gone out of his men, he believed, so he set them a simple, impossible task: charge straight down the road toward the Yankee guns that blocked their way, break through their entrenchments, and carry on toward Nashville itself. It would be a fair fight, Hood figured, about twenty-two thousand men on each side. One gallant rush, and the Confederacy would drive the invader out of the heart of Tennessee.

A generation later, Sam Watkins, a private in the First Tennessee Regiment, recorded his memory of that charge:

> A sheet of fire was poured into our very faces, and for a moment we halted as if in despair, as the terrible avalanche of shot and shell laid low those brave and gallant heroes, whose bleeding wounds attested that the struggle would be desperate. Forward, men! The air loaded with death-dealing missiles . . . Forward, men! And the blood spurts in a perfect jet from the dead and wounded. The earth is red with blood. It flows in streams, making little rivulets as it flows . . . The death-angel shrieks and laughs and old Father Time is busy with his sickle, as he gathers in the last harvest of death, crying, More, more, more! while his rapacious maw is glutted with the slain.

For five hours, into the darkness, Yank and Reb fought hand to hand in a slaughter of no strategic importance whatsoever. The Union forces at Franklin, Tennessee, were a minor rear guard, expertly dug in. Amassing sixty thousand bluecoats behind them for the coup de grâce was the Virginia-born and -bred General George Thomas—the "Rock of Chickamauga" and Hood's old teacher from West Point. More disastrous still, Hood's advance had been achieved only by abandoning Georgia and the Carolinas, actually easing Sherman's plan to "make Georgia howl" by marching his own sixty thousand Union troops through the countryside, "smashing things" all the way from Atlanta to the sea. Even the grandest victory at Franklin would be a crushing defeat for the Confederacy.

How much worse then was the spectacle Sam Watkins saw when the sun rose that next morning. "O, my God! what did we see!" he remembered. "It was a giant holocaust of death." The Union lines had held firm, and now that their work was done, the Federals were pulling back down the pike, yielding up quietly the ground for which so many had perished, aiming to draw southerners farther into Thomas's trap. More than one-third of the Confederates who had gone forward at Franklin the previous evening now lay dead or wounded on that battlefield, a carnage equal to any in this grim, increasingly pointless conflict. All told, six Confederate generals had been killed in this battle. Whole regiments and brigades were slaughtered. "Death had held high carnival there that night," Watkins summed up. "The dead were piled the one on the other all over the ground. I never was so horrified and appalled in my life." Two weeks later Hood's forces were crushed outside Nashville,

reeling back aimlessly toward Mississippi, now less an army than a mob of hungry, filthy refugees.

By the end of 1862 the Civil War was by no means over, but it was fundamentally transformed. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation offered only the clearest sign of that change. In the East the failures of McClellan and his lieutenants had exaggerated Confederate battlefield achievements. In the West, apart from the scare at Shiloh, northern forces had advanced from victory unto victory. Lincoln had paid dearly in blood and treasure for such successes as had been achieved, but he never doubted that he could pay. His only consistent complaint throughout the war was that his generals did not fight often enough, boldly enough, directly enough. When McClellan had proposed to swing around behind Lee's forces in the Peninsular campaign, the president was at first displeased. Nevertheless, Lincoln remained supportive of McClellan's various demands. The failures of 1862 confirmed his belief in a simple method of slaughter: if the South could not be outwitted on the battlefield, it could be outbludgeoned. After McClellan's dismissal that fall, Lincoln chose a series of generals whom he called "fighters," but those closer to the front labeled them "butchers."

In the end, more than thirty months passed after Antietam before the last rebel surrendered, Yankeedom growing steadily stronger. In his annual message to Congress in 1864 Lincoln stated that, for all the carnage, his generals had more men, more guns, and more money to fight the war than ever before. After all the "science" of warfare that leaders like Halleck preached, all the discipline and cohesion that had been drilled into recruits, and all the technical advances of weaponry that recent decades had yielded, was modern warfare to resolve itself simply into slaughter on a vaster, more efficient scale? "What is all this struggling and fighting for?" one Union general's wife asked. "This ruin and death to thousands of families? . . . What advancement of mankind [was] to compensate for the present horrible calamities?" Any assessment of Lincoln and Davis, of the Confederacy and America itself after Antietam, must include the question, Could even a goal as noble as liberty, Union, or independence possibly justify such slaughter?

From the fall of 1862 onward the pace of killing accelerated, and the conflict itself was transmuted from a war of armies into a war of peoples. Commanders and soldiers on both sides increasingly came to regard the enemy, soldier and civilian alike, as alien other. Lee himself consistently called northern soldiers "those people." Soldiers of the New Orleans Guard waiting in reserve at Shiloh in April 1862 described the Union men as covered with blood and scarcely recognizable, with "faces disfigured with hideous wounds." But when ordered to charge, they fixed their bayonets and let out "a collective 'hurrah.'" More disturbing still, military leaders on both sides hardened themselves to the human sufferings of their own troops as they lashed out against the foe. Warned that Mobile Bay was infested with mines that might decimate his fleet, Admiral David Farragut answered with a callousness that succeeding generations have chosen to interpret as a hero's shout: "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" That cruel logic writ large unleashed a bloodbath in the last years of the war.

*Ten*

# The Promised Land

On February 18, 1865, blue-coated soldiers of the Twenty-first U.S. Colored Troops Regiment marched into Charleston, South Carolina, capturing the rebel citadel with surprising ease after four long years of war. White southerners had long dreaded the coming of the Yankees, but how much more dreadful to discover, when they finally did arrive, that the invaders were black. U.S. Colored Troops, free African Americans and former slaves, commanded by white abolitionist Augustus Bennett of New York, who had earlier overseen the execution of his black sergeant for insubordination, marched through the fallen city's streets, securing government offices and establishing strongpoints—and wreaking a revenge of looting and burning as well. Grim and gleeful soldiers sang words that had come to haunt the slaveocracy from battle to bloody battle: "John Brown's body lies a-mould'ring in the grave, but his soul goes marching on!"

The strains of "John Brown's Body" had offered fair warning of the social cataclysm that engulfed the master class between 1861 and 1865. But it suggested something more fearsome still: the prospect of sweeping social change, which overturning slavery only began. Thereafter it threatened to erupt into egalitarian demands for property, freedom, and justice, promising as it did so to cut down traditional barriers of gender, race, and class altogether. America in 1865 looked remarkably different

than it had in 1861. Virtually no one could have imagined the bewildering new nation that emerged from the fires of fratricidal war.

Four million African Americans were free from bondage. Yet in this revolutionary by-product of the struggle for the Union, white and black Americans lacked anything like consensus about the possible place of freedpeople in a reconstructed United States. Commentators as diverse as Martin Delaney, Hinton Helper, William T. Sherman, and Lincoln himself had wondered doubtfully whether different races could ever be brought to peaceful coexistence, much less to the common purpose of joint citizenship. Equally uncertain was the question of what to do with the defeated southerners, all the men and women who had aided and encouraged the slaveholders' rebellion. Were these traitors, at the hour of their defeat, to be handed back the privileges they had scorned and with them the reins of local power? Should ex-rebels be permanently disfranchised? Should they be penalized for their treason, after the example of other republican governments, by execution, confiscation of their property, or loss of their political rights? How the victorious nation dealt with southern masters and former slaves at war's end would foretell the providential meaning that Americans would impose on the blood and sacrifice of the past four years.

The Civil War cost more than $6.5 billion, not including the pensions to wounded and elderly soldiers and widows and orphans of the conflict (by 1890, over 40 percent of the federal budget). That money was more than enough to cover the cost of purchasing from all the slaveholders all the four million slaves, which, after all, is what Lincoln had advocated all along. In addition, there would have been enough money left over to give each African American family forty acres, a mule, and some cash.

Worse than the financial cost, the war had seen more dying than any could have imagined—fully six hundred thousand soldiers as well as many civilians. Tens of thousands of dinner tables included a vacant chair, once filled by a father or a son, now forever empty. More than half a million more were filled by men suffering wounds, many mangled or crippled, with one sleeve empty, an eye gone, their minds distracted or their nerves shattered. The war's cost, too, was borne by women and children who had endured dark fears and long nights, and too often

found those fears of loss dreadfully realized. Even men who did not go into battle, due to advanced age or infirmity, special position, self-interest, or simple cowardice were compelled ever after to concede in private that at the hour of crisis they had failed to act the part of a man. The diminution of spirit such admissions entailed, however tiny and personal, were magnified by their social pervasiveness. True heroes there were, all knew, but they were fewer than anyone had thought, and now they were mostly dead or gruesomely maimed. Even the best of men, though they had given full measure in the struggle, now knew that their bodies, their families and communities could never be restored to what they had been before. Many wondered why God had put them—and their country—through the horrifying ordeal.

Historians have noted that the Civil War created a "theological crisis." Antebellum Protestants, both North and South, had been certain they were wedded to notions of national destiny, but they were less certain now. Religion had not solved the nation's political problems. Religion had not prevented war. More than that, political extremists had used religion to justify war. Many decided that they should no longer base public policy on interpretations of the Scriptures. The Civil War took the moral energy out of Protestantism.

Southern white theologians had a dilemma in how to explain defeat. They did so by preaching that God was testing their reliance on His providence. As had happened in Biblical times when God allowed the enemy to smite His chosen people, southerners needed to keep the faith. Theological underpinnings for slavery would become underpinnings for racism, discrimination, and segregation. As southern Presbyterian minister John Bailey Adger wrote in 1868, "God has so constituted the two races as to make their equality *forever* impossible."

Northern white theologians also had a dilemma. Although the Civil War determined that the northern interpretation of Biblical scripture on slavery was the political winner, many northern clergy did not want to preach racial equality. Moreover, many thought the larger problem was young white men. The young men they had sent to fight for noble ideals were supposed to return home more purified and less self-centered. Some of the soldiers sent "to die to make men free" had instead become killers, or at least drunkards and blasphemers. Northern newspapers editorialized that the war did not redeem the Union. The

war had not brought sanctification or godliness as hoped. Northern American Protestantism would never be the same. The failure of white American Protestantism to come to terms with the Civil War meant that it would have only a marginal voice when it came to issues of accelerated industrialization and the Civil War's unleashing of unfettered capitalism.

African Americans faced no such dilemmas. Unlike white evangelicals, their theology held no ambitions for cultural power and prestige and thus was not overturned. Rather than a theological crisis, the Civil War was proof of God's plan for His children. In April 1867, African American minister Simeon Beard interpreted the meaning of the war for fellow former slaves: "God intended, through this war, that, like the Red Sea, while the nation rendered itself asunder, you should pass through free. This war was God's work." AME minister Andrew Brown drew upon a millennial imagery of Revelations: "God's horse was tied to the iron stake. The day the first fire was made at Sumter, I saw the Gospel Horse begin to paw. He continued to paw until he finally broke loose and came tearing through Georgia. The colored man mounted him and intends to ride him."

Lincoln's war had been fought to prevent the disorder of secession from ending the American experiment of democratic freedom. When the war uprooted the twisted tree of chattel slavery once and for all, it also unleashed a broad new debate across the land about just what freedom actually signified, what it meant to be American, and what sort of a new nation had been ushered in at such horrific cost.

For North and South alike, April was the cruelest month. Amid ruined cities, ruined fields, and ruined lives arose a profound uncertainty. Once-valiant Confederates were now vanquished traitors awaiting the justice of victorious Yankees. No one knew how far that justice would be meted out. On April 4, as Jefferson Davis abandoned Richmond and fled south hoping to reach Texas, he defiantly urged Confederate troops to fight on, suggesting even guerrilla warfare, "with our army free to move from point to point," and with "the foe . . . far removed from his own base . . . nothing is now needed to render our triumph certain but . . . our own unquenchable resolve." Lee contravened that last order of his president, refusing to turn his remaining 27,805 seasoned soldiers into guerrillas.

On April 9, with marked graciousness and leniency, General Grant accepted General Lee's surrender. Reactions to the surrender were

varied. Some Union officers hooted and jeered Lee as he rode away in defeat, and federal soldiers stared curiously at the rebel soldiers who stacked arms three days later. The famed "mutual salutation and farewell" at the formal surrender ceremony disbanding Lee's army was only one gesture among thousands. Another was made by General Martin Witherspoon Gary of South Carolina, whose brigade earlier in the war had massacred a brigade of African American soldiers so that "only a corporal's guard survived the slaughter." Ignoring Lee, Gary rode away from Appomattox with his men in an attempt to join the fleeing Davis and fight on.

Just like war, war's aftermath involved matters of moral integrity and sheer power. Lincoln began considering the issue of Reconstruction almost as soon as war broke out, and in 1864 he had written to a Quaker constituent: "Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion." Lincoln also considered the place of African Americans in a nation undergoing a new birth of freedom. His views had evolved and expanded throughout his presidency. As he pondered racial issues, he became acquainted with people such as Frederick Douglass, whom he called "my friend," and Martin Delaney, about whom he wrote to Edwin M. Stanton in February 1865, "Do not fail to have an interview with this most extraordinary and intelligent black man." Asking about Douglass's reaction to the Second Inaugural, Lincoln said, "there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours."

The *New York World* criticized Lincoln for not having a plan for Reconstruction, comparing him to "a traveler in an unknown country without a map." Not true. Lincoln knew where he was headed and had already taken several important steps in the right direction. Of critical importance was the appointment of a new Chief Justice to replace Roger Taney on the Supreme Court. Taney, whom Andrew Jackson had appointed in 1836, had written the majority opinion in the *Dred Scott* case. For twenty-eight years, until his death in October 1864, he had presided over a conservative court. Many of Lincoln's supporters, good and qualified people, wanted the position, but Lincoln knew that Reconstruction would need an unfaltering advocate of black rights: Salmon P. Chase. When questioned why he appointed a rival, a critic, a thorn in his side, Lincoln admitted that he "would rather have swallowed his buckhorn chair than to have nominated Chase." But more important to

Lincoln: "To have done otherwise I should have been recreant to my convictions of my duty to the Republican Party and to the country." Just a little over a month after Chase was confirmed, Charles Sumner introduced the first black attorney, John Rock, to practice before the highest court, and *Harper's Weekly* commented that future historians would interpret this "as a remarkable indication of the revolution which is going on in the sentiment of a great people."

An early step in his Reconstruction plan was his decision on amnesty for the rebels. He determined that a general amnesty should be granted to all who would take an oath of loyalty to the United States and pledge to obey federal laws pertaining to slavery. Unworthy of amnesty were officials and military leaders of the so-called confederate government, who were to be at least temporarily excluded. Again, Lincoln was putting his trust in southern yeomen and not their leaders.

On April 11 from the White House balcony, after Lee's surrender but before Johnston's, Lincoln made some remarks to the gathering crowd, reminding them to remember Him "from whom all blessings flow." He then addressed "the re-inauguration of the national authority—reconstruction." Lincoln the southerner knew that he did not confront a single, unified South. "We must simply begin with, and mould from, disorganized and discordant elements." Nevertheless, he hoped and expected that a majority of white southerners would support efforts to reunify the country. Lincoln's plans for Reconstruction required cooperation between the executive and legislative branches of the government. The executive branch had the right to determine when the rebellious states were back in "proper practical relation" with the government, and the legislative branch had the right to determine who were admissible as members of Congress.

Lincoln pointed to Louisiana as an example of what Reconstruction might look like. That state had already passed the Thirteenth Amendment granting total emancipation with no middle step of apprenticeship for freed slaves. Louisiana's "free-state constitution" gave "the benefit of public schools equally to black and white." Lincoln noted that some criticized Louisiana's constitution for not granting African American suffrage, but it did empower the state legislature "to confer the elective franchise upon the colored man." In part Lincoln agreed with the critics: "I would myself prefer that it were now conferred on the very intelligent, and on those who serve our cause as soldiers."

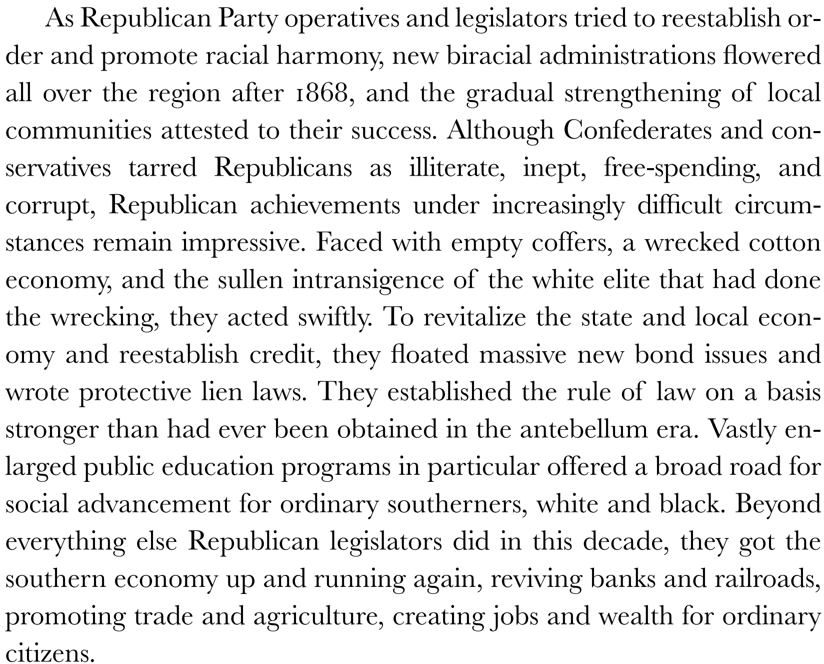
In Louisiana the new state legislature in 1868 was approximately half white and half African American. Black legislators never constituted a single like-minded bloc. Well-heeled Creole politicians often advocated programs far more attuned to moderate white Democrats than to landless black farmers. African Americans in Louisiana held the offices of lieutenant governor, state superintendent of education, and state treasurer. In South Carolina, African Americans controlled a majority of seats in the lower house (and from 1874 to 1876 both the senate and the house), and African Americans won elections as lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and state treasurer, as well as a significant number of local offices. Reconstruction in South Carolina lasted longer than in any other state, and South Carolina's black Republicans achieved as great a degree of political power as did African Americans anywhere. Their achievements were the consequence of clear-eyed pragmatism and considerable political horse-trading.

Newly freed African Americans understood the give-and-take of politics. When a white newspaper reporter asked an African American leader in Vicksburg, Mississippi, whether it was appropriate for black candidates to disagree on issues, the official chided the reporter's paternalistic attitude. He had no wish to prevent other candidates from expressing differing views, he explained. Had he so wished, he "could have followed the course whites had so often pursued: using cow hide, a bucket of tar, and a bag of feathers." Vigorous and honest debate promised a better way forward.

In a speech entitled "An Honest Ballot Is the Safeguard of the Republic," delivered in the U.S. House of Representatives (1877), Congressman Robert Smalls told how slavery had taught white masters "to ignore and trample the rights of those they could not control." The right to vote brought protection against that trampling. It meant political power and elected officials responsive to the needs of the new constituency. The new state constitutions, formed by various coalitions of African Americans and moderate whites, brought about important reforms in women's rights and divorce laws. They reformed orphanages and asylums and ended some of the exploitation of children in apprenticeship. A lasting legacy of Reconstruction was the vigorous advocacy

of public education for all children in the South. Republican legislators also initiated important changes in the penal system, ending inhumane punishments such as disfigurement and imprisonment for debt.

The tendency of this legislation seems overwhelmingly radical, given its accent on fair play, aiding the underdog, and holding back the hand of unjust power. But once again the vision of Lincoln shines forth, meshing the drive for equal opportunity with a concern for emerging order. African American and white Republicans saw the suffrage as a means of radically altering their society, to be certain, but altering it along lines that would seem familiar and palatable even to the most socially conservative of Americans: erasing racial preference, guaranteeing the rule of law, upholding the operation of the free market, securing the strength of families and the promotion of churches and schools in the local community, and advocating personal responsibility, voluntarism, honest government, and civic service.



As Republican Party operatives and legislators tried to reestablish order and promote racial harmony, new biracial administrations flowered all over the region after 1868, and the gradual strengthening of local communities attested to their success. Although Confederates and conservatives tarred Republicans as illiterate, inept, free-spending, and corrupt, Republican achievements under increasingly difficult circumstances remain impressive. Faced with empty coffers, a wrecked cotton economy, and the sullen intransigence of the white elite that had done the wrecking, they acted swiftly. To revitalize the state and local economy and reestablish credit, they floated massive new bond issues and wrote protective lien laws. They established the rule of law on a basis stronger than had ever been obtained in the antebellum era. Vastly enlarged public education programs in particular offered a broad road for social advancement for ordinary southerners, white and black. Beyond everything else Republican legislators did in this decade, they got the southern economy up and running again, reviving banks and railroads, promoting trade and agriculture, creating jobs and wealth for ordinary citizens.

White "Restoration" of the mid-1870s and 1880s ushered in a new phase of southern white violence, an era wherein no act, no matter how heinous, went untried in the effort to eliminate African American voting power. Ultimately what brought down the republican vision in state after state was a bloody reign of terror, sponsored and carried out by the very leaders who posed as champions of conservative "order." Waning in power were groups such as the 1873 Unification Movement in New Orleans, which included blacks and whites, Republicans and Democrats, Jews and Gentiles, former Union soldiers and former Confederates such as General P.G.T. Beauregard. This group and others advocating racial equality, and freedom and justice for all, were slowly losing out to the largely unchecked flood of white supremacist rhetoric and violence.

The very success of Reconstruction drove white Democrats and their vigilante lieutenants to acts of terrorism. A Democrat from Louisiana pronounced, "This state of affairs could scarcely be tolerated by the proud former masters of slaves." Refusing to work with the interracial coalitions that had won elections during the first several years of Reconstruction, too many whites deliberately chose lawlessness precisely because they demanded a system that would adjudicate their interests only. Violence was the only way white Democrats across the South could end the record of electoral and appointed success. The Democratic Party created a paramilitary wing that shadowed the opposition and generated unrest. While party leaders promoted the peaceful electoral process, it was a facade. Whether through secretive activity or through open mob fighting, Democrats resorted again and again to political assassination and murder, although physical beatings, arson, and threats of death were more common. A constable, white or black, who tried to serve a warrant on a white man put his own life in jeopardy. While adopting a policy of winning elections peacefully if possible, Democrats did not shrink from fraud and violence in areas with large African American populations.

Corruption of the electoral process became the norm. One northern Louisiana newspaper bespoke the depth of white feeling when it editorialized that it was a "religious duty" to rob votes and "any failure to do so will be a violation of true Louisiana Democratic teaching." With a

might-makes-right mentality, whites used extralegal activity because they were not legally able to break the majority control of the state and local governments. Ultimately, it was not African Americans or Republicans they opposed but the rule of law itself.

In Louisiana in 1867, former Confederate General James Longstreet, then commander of the state militia stationed in New Orleans, was surprised that the newspaper accused him of "joining the enemy" when he expressed his support for equal rights: "If I appreciate the issues of Democracy at this moment, they are the enfranchisement of the negro and the rights of Congress in the premises." Longstreet had only acted as he thought right. He had integrated the militia and appointed black as well as white officers, including Confederates and Union veterans. He ordered that each militiaman swear on oath to "accept the civil and political equality of all men, and agree not to attempt to deprive any person or persons on account of race, color, or previous condition of any political or civil right, privilege or immunity enjoyed by any other class of men." By 1871 Longstreet claimed that "one half of our force is composed of officers and soldiers who were in the military service of the Southern States during the late civil conflict," and in 1872 and 1873 this militia defended the governor and state legislature from two attempts at violent overthrow. Thereafter, the White League, the paramilitary arm of the Democratic Party, grew stronger, enforcing tighter discipline in its ranks. It replaced wanton, indiscriminate terror with carefully orchestrated violence to achieve specific political ends. In the "Colfax Massacre" of April 13, 1873, the more numerous White League defeated the Louisiana state militia as it attempted to protect black voters. White Democrats in Colfax, determined to rid the county of black voters, strode into the black section of town and killed the fleeing people. When some African Americans took refuge in the courthouse, whites set it afire and then shot those exiting the burning building.

After the massacre, the federal government was able to convict only three persons for more then 100 murders. The defendants appealed their case all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in October 1875 in *U.S. v. Cruikshank* that the federal government did not have the right to prosecute individuals under the Enforcement Act of 1870. The Supreme Court had already severely limited the enforcement of Reconstruction law in its rulings in the *Slaughterhouse Cases* of 1873. Justices used those cases,

which were initiated by butchers, to define what could be brought to trial under the auspices of the Fourteenth Amendment. In a split decision 5 to 4 (Chase among the dissenters), the court ruled that very little could be so brought. In effect, the court gutted enforcement of civil rights legislation.

President Grant was outraged that guilty parties went unpunished. "To say that the murder of a negro or a white Republican is not considered a crime in Louisiana would probably be unjust to a great part of the people, but it is true that a great number of such murders have been committed and no one has been punished." He denounced the idea that "the spirit of hatred and violence is stronger than law."

Six months later, on September 17, 1874, the Louisiana state militia again lost to the stronger forces of the White Leaguers in the battle of Canal Street, an attempt to get rid of the Republican governor William Kellogg. Democrats also prevented elected Republicans from organizing the state legislature. After an emergency cabinet meeting President Grant authorized federal troops to preserve the peace. Three months later, on December 24, 1874, Grant sent Lt. Gen. Philip Sheridan to Louisiana to investigate reports of massive disorder. Sheridan verified the reports and recommended the arrest of the leaders. U.S. troops reinstalled the duly elected officials. Republicans in Louisiana were grateful, but White Leaguers did not approve of the military intervention. Reaction in the North was also hostile.

In the midterm election of November 1875 Georgia native white Republican Richard Whiteley was defeated in his bid for reelection to the U.S. House of Representatives. Like other southern white Republicans, Whiteley had built a coalition that depended upon getting African Americans to the polls, winning over or appeasing some whites, and minimizing the certain obstruction of Democrats. By 1875, however, white supremacy had become a major issue in Georgia. By limiting the vote of African American Republicans, Democrats won every single congressional race in Georgia. In both north and south, the Republicans felt the repercussions of the Panic of 1873. For the first time since the Civil War began, Democrats gained control of the House of Representatives. The Forty-third Congress, which served from 1873–75, included 88 Democrats and 199 Republicans (5 other). The Forty-fourth Congress, 1875–77, included 182 Democrats and 103 Republicans (8 other).

With victory in Congress, the white counterrevolution at the state

*Thirteen*

# The New Colossus

On October 28, 1886, more than one million Americans, white and black, many of them immigrants newly arrived, lined New York's Fifth Avenue to share in a celebration of liberty. Marching in a grand parade to the city's teeming harborfront, citizens and dignitaries traveled by ferry to tiny Bedloe's Island to unveil a gigantic, gleaming copper statue, 150 feet tall, on a site selected by General William Tecumseh Sherman. *Liberty Enlightening the World* was a gift to the United States from France, which was recently vanquished by Bismarck's aristocratic Prussians, increasingly unconvinced of democracy's virtues, and riven by all manner of social and economic divisions. The gesture, financed by lotteries and sporting events, was as much a backhanded colonialist slap at Turkey for the marvel it hoped to plant at the mouth of the new Suez Canal, *Egypt Carrying the Light of Asia*, as it was a proud remembrance of an enduring republican ideal.

Imagined in 1865 as a symbol of the love of liberty as shared by France and America, the statue was the idea of Edouard-René Laboulaye, an ardent supporter of the Union at a time when the French monarchy unofficially supported the Confederacy. The *Times* of London cheekily wondered "why liberty should have been sent from France, which has too little, to America, which has too much." For some Frenchmen at least, such as Victor Hugo, the idea of liberty was an ideal to be constantly sought. The great French novelist never glimpsed how the

emerging egalitarianism of the Age of Lincoln was being turned back, but in his awe upon seeing the Statue of Liberty's completion in France, Hugo pronounced, "The idea—it is everything."

In the two decades intervening between Laboulaye's imagined gesture of 1865 and its delivery of 1886, America itself seemed to slip far from the pinnacle of Lincoln's triumph. Then the nation's leaders had been upright religious men, idealistic abolitionists, egalitarian intellectuals, high-minded statesmen, and vigorous captains of industry. Now freedom's fortunes, such as they were, seemed bound up with the success of narrow-minded corporate leaders, chiseling lawyers, sneaking speculators, and political bagmen. The golden age of the millennium was nowhere in sight. Instead, America's greatest writer, Mark Twain, a man at once more sadly sentimental and more misanthropically cynical than any author before or since, sneered at life in "The Gilded Age," when men dreamed only of millions and—like his foolish, wayward schoolboy Tom Sawyer—had no inkling of what to do with such riches once gained. At century's end New York Tammany ward heeler George Washington Plunkitt could trumpet his success as a champion of "honest graft" as a positive good. Even as he helped loot the city's treasury—on a minor scale, certainly—he made sure to share his windfall with local constituents, creating jobs, doling out rewards, and greasing palms. "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em," he pronounced. More than one immigrant who passed through Ellis Island in these years must have imagined that those words were in fact the legend inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty that welcomed them to the New Jerusalem of the Almighty Dollar.

*Fourteen*

# A Cross of Gold

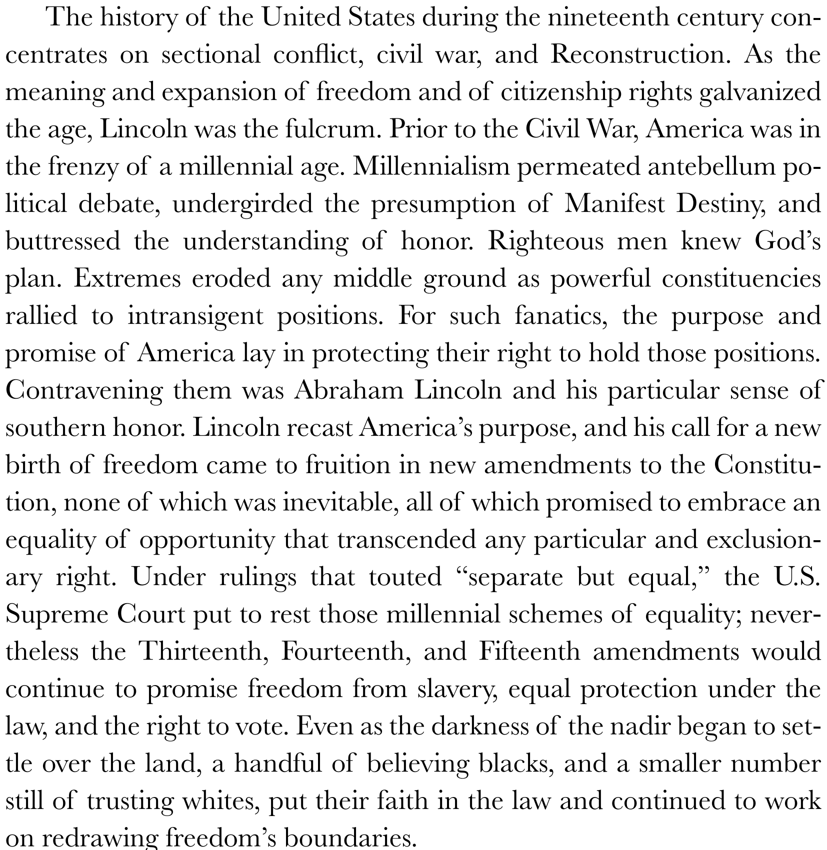
On April 30, 1894, the Commonwealth of Christ came at last to Washington, D.C. Its representatives were politicos and workingmen—not angels, to be sure—and their numbers were as unimpressive as their peculiar vision of millennial harmony. But in many ways their naïve faith and simple, sweeping demands brought the nation full circle to the Millerite believers of a half-century earlier and the millennial spirit that did so much to shape the Age of Lincoln. Led by "General" Jacob Coxey, a small-time Ohio politician, the five hundred–odd marchers who constituted "Coxey's Army"—newspapers derided them as tramps and crackpots—called upon Congress to end unemployment, vanquish social strife, and regenerate rural communities and idle factories. By an action both plain and radical, they set out on foot across the American heartland from Massillon, Ohio, in late March, preaching a gospel of national salvation through public works and full employment. The press focused its ridicule on his monetary theory: the printing and circulating of vast amounts of paper money. Backed by pledges of redemption from the federal government—covenants of the sort that had underwritten military victory in 1865 and shored up egalitarian efforts during Reconstruction—Americans would literally purchase their way into utopia, buying and selling goods, creating jobs, building bonds of property and custom. The acme of statesmanship, the zenith of public service, and the chief duty of citizenship, it turned out, was to promote and facilitate

consumption in the marketplace. Governance and worship both, for Coxey and his followers, had mutated into little more than esoteric forms of shopping. The City Upon a Hill had become Vanity Fair.

In its broad principles, the program of government-sponsored economic recovery and social reform that Coxey promoted foreshadowed the deficit-finance schemes that reshaped American capitalism forty years down the road. But Coxey (who named his first son Legal Tender) managed to tangle up notions of free enterprise, government activism, and conservative moral reform in a theoretical stew that smelled pungently socialist to some. The upshot was political farce. Marching up Capitol Hill to declare his principles to the nation at the end of a five-week trek, Coxey was arrested for walking on the grass. His corporal's guard of supporters scattered, and the spotlight faded.

Frank Baum, a ruined South Dakota storekeeper turned Chicago journalist, witnessed the failure of "Coxey's Army" up close. Baum knew many farm families whose few years of contact with the market economy had run athwart of drought or rain or pests or low prices or sickness or something else. Susan Orcutt from western Kansas wrote to Governor Lorenzo Lewelling in 1894 after hail destroyed her crops and garden, "I take my Pen in hand to tell you that we are Starving to death. It is pretty hard to do without anything to Eat hear in this God for saken country." How were the common farmers to cope, she wondered, when eastern capital and harsh western nature conspired to wreck their fortunes?

Baum's answer came in the form of a parable, an allegory on the election of 1896. The children's book he penned as a follow-up to his 1899 bestseller *Father Goose* transposed elements of personal experience and political philosophy into a manifesto disguised as whimsical fiction. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) traces the trials of everygirl Dorothy (the syllables of whose name, reversed, read *Theodore*, after Republican reformer Theodore Roosevelt) as she attempts to return to the tranquil farm life from which she has been separated by a powerful cyclone. Dorothy is assisted by a scarecrow who has his own problem: "If my head stays stuffed with straw instead of with brains, as yours is, how am I ever to know anything?" Even without the brains he so desires, the scarecrow is as uncommonly sensible as many unschooled farmers. Another companion is a tin woodman. Having had to work harder and faster, he accidentally chopped off pieces of himself that were then re-



The history of the United States during the nineteenth century concentrates on sectional conflict, civil war, and Reconstruction. As the meaning and expansion of freedom and of citizenship rights galvanized the age, Lincoln was the fulcrum. Prior to the Civil War, America was in the frenzy of a millennial age. Millennialism permeated antebellum political debate, undergirded the presumption of Manifest Destiny, and buttressed the understanding of honor. Righteous men knew God's plan. Extremes eroded any middle ground as powerful constituencies rallied to intransigent positions. For such fanatics, the purpose and promise of America lay in protecting their right to hold those positions. Contravening them was Abraham Lincoln and his particular sense of southern honor. Lincoln recast America's purpose, and his call for a new birth of freedom came to fruition in new amendments to the Constitution, none of which was inevitable, all of which promised to embrace an equality of opportunity that transcended any particular and exclusionary right. Under rulings that touted "separate but equal," the U.S. Supreme Court put to rest those millennial schemes of equality; nevertheless the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments would continue to promise freedom from slavery, equal protection under the law, and the right to vote. Even as the darkness of the nadir began to settle over the land, a handful of believing blacks, and a smaller number still of trusting whites, put their faith in the law and continued to work on redrawing freedom's boundaries.

In the passing of the age, Americans gave up old dreams of heavenly perfection and enshrined new hopes of material progress—incremental, tangible, calculable in dollars and dimes, full bellies and fine clothes. In place of noble statesmen and great leaders, they trumpeted clean hands and efficient administration. In place of pure hearts, gentle spirits, and

feminized consciences, they held up manly toil, stoic endurance, and the virtue of struggling self-interest. But in the American mind, the Civil War itself never truly ended. It was transmuted to a romantic memory, the stuff of elaborate weekend rituals of bloodless battles during which no contraband crossed enemy lines at risk of life. It flowered into a national pastime for vacationing families that took in the emotional majesty of Little Round Top and Cemetery Ridge without making sure to wrestle likewise with untold lynchings across America. Whether found in the shock of a geneticist discovering slaves in one's family or in the wastes of New Orleans's devastated Ninth Ward, the war is with us still, as myth and reality both. Just as in the Age of Lincoln, moral choice, democratic citizenship, and equality still mingle. "Determine that the thing can and shall be done," wrote Lincoln, "and then we shall find the way."