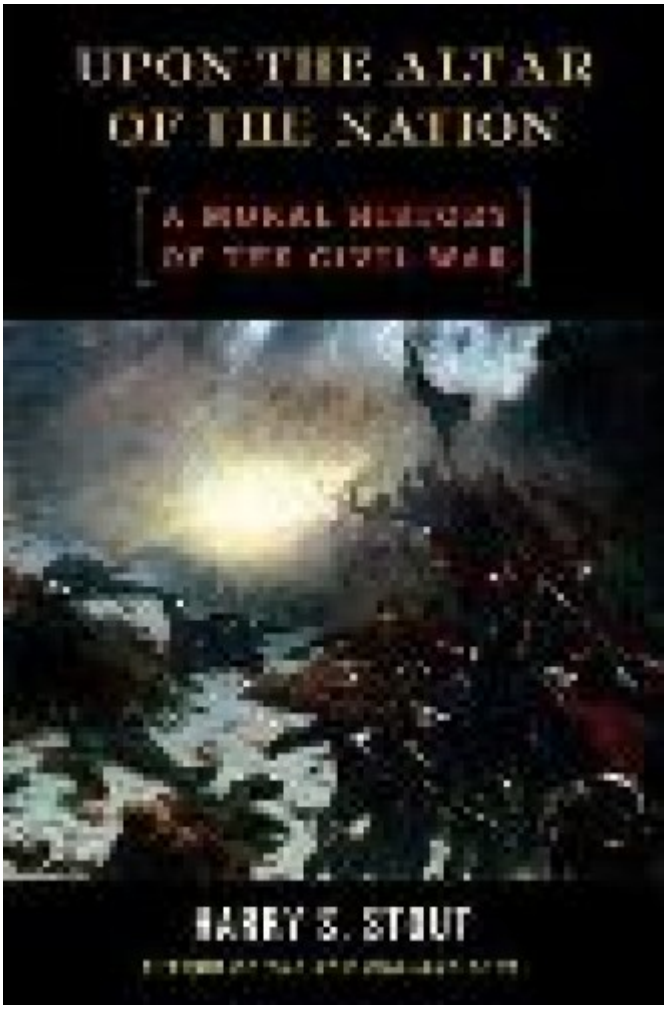
Upon the Altar of the Nation

reviewed by Grant Wacker in the May 30, 2006 issue

In Review



Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War

Harry Stout
Viking

The Civil War stands at the center of Americans' collective memory. More than any other event, it defines the desired identity of the U.S. as an indissoluble union committed to equality and freedom for all. With good reason, U.S. history courses and textbooks are organized in semester sequences that end or begin with the war. It is the pole star that orients the rest of the nation's story.

The Civil War's enduring significance stems from several factors. The most obvious are the raw statistics of death and destruction, which remain unparalleled in the history of American conflicts and continue to numb even the casual reader. More than 620,000 died and 470,000 suffered wounds, for an overall casualty count of nearly 1.1 million. The violence likely left 100,000 women widowed. War-related civilian deaths may have reached 50,000. The casualty count nearly equaled that of all other U.S. wars combined. If translated into the current U.S. population, it would total 10 million.

In *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, Harry Stout, the Jonathan Edwards Professor of American Religious History at Yale University and author of prizewinning books on New England preaching, moves into the fiercely contested terrain of Civil War history. This shift requires considerable courage because, as Stout notes elsewhere, professional Civil War scholars have turned out more than 100,000 books, articles, theses and dissertations on the subject, while popular fiction and nonfiction authors have produced at least that number. One Abraham Lincoln history Web site registers more than 1,500 hits each day, and *Gone with the Wind* remains America's all-time best-selling novel and highest-grossing movie.

In this volume Stout tells two stories at once. The first is a narrative of the political and especially the military events of the war, in which Stout pays close attention to the maneuvering of armies and the strategizing of generals. The second is a narrative of Christians' role in fomenting, sacralizing and then memorializing the hostilities. Though the first story occupies a substantial part of the book, Stout's main interest lies in the second story—in Christians' complicity in the bloodshed.

For Stout the legitimacy of going to war (*jus ad bellum*) is one thing; the legitimacy of how the war is conducted (*jus in bello*) is another. The moral problem of the Civil War does not lie in the decision to go to battle. Preserving the Union and eradicating slavery offered reason enough. Stout makes clear that he is not a pacifist and that fighting is sometimes a lesser evil. (Indeed, he dedicates the book to the memory of

his father, a veteran of World War II, “a warrior sailor in a just war.”) Rather, the moral problem lies in how the war was conducted.

Stout contends that combatants and Christian advocates grew to ignore two venerable principles of just war thinking: proportionality and discrimination. According to the first principle, the degree of destruction should be proportional to the threat at hand. According to the second, combatants should target only enemy soldiers, not innocent civilians.

Initially both sides largely heeded both criteria. That was partly because almost all regular army officers had been trained at West Point, where the ideals of proportionality and discrimination were central to the soldier’s code of honor. It was also because no one expected the war to be long or especially bloody. Who knew? At Fort Sumter, South Carolina, where the fighting began in December 1860, the only direct casualty was a horse.

But things rapidly changed, and proportionality was the first of the two principles to go. As the months wore on, places bearing obscure names like Bull Run, Ball’s Bluff and Shiloh turned into fountains of blood. The Battle of Antietam, fought September 17, 1862, marked a transition in both sides’ thinking. That one day—which still ranks as the deadliest in U.S. history—saw nearly 23,000 casualties, including approximately 8,000 fatalities. It prompted President Lincoln to make the most momentous strategic decision of the war. He concluded that restoring the Union would require abandonment of the West Point code of the fair fight and, instead, pursuit of total war. But total war, involving unrestricted loss of life and property, could not be justified on pragmatic political grounds alone. It would have to be justified in terms of a transcendent ideal, the ideal of freedom. A presidential proclamation emancipating the slaves in the states in rebellion offered the obvious answer.

Lincoln was no cynic. He had always detested slavery, says Stout. But he could see no way to abrogate the Constitution’s protection of that institution in the states where it was legal—no way, that is, until Antietam forced him to face the terrible reality that the war might go on interminably or, worse, that the North might actually lose and the Union break apart.

Conventional wisdom associates complete abandonment of the proportionality principle with the Battle of Gettysburg, where, in the first three scorching days of

July 1863, more than 50,000 men fell in frontal assaults on entrenched artillery positions. Stout's detailed descriptions of the killing at Gettysburg and other battles, like Fredericksburg, Chickamauga and, above all, Spotsylvania, make clear that the slaughter was driven more by adrenalized frenzy than tactical necessity.

Abandonment of the discrimination principle took longer, and it was never complete, for there is no evidence of authorized rapes or murders. Even so, the pillaging of farms, the burning of buildings and the wrecking of homes generated the war's bitterest animosities. Union general William T. Sherman—ironically one of the more humane commanders—won the South's undying hatred for his army's depredations against civilians in Georgia and South Carolina. He acted with Lincoln's approval, and other commanders, both Union and Confederate, behaved similarly.

All of this makes for grim reading. Eyewitness accounts of gore on the killing fields, starvation in the prisons and stench in the hospitals, piled up page after page, are not for the squeamish. But that is the lesser hurdle. The greater one is that Christians, North and South, male and female, seemed to do everything they could to make things worse. With their sermons, editorials, letters and front-porch talk they prodded the forces to lock in battle. They urged the armies to slaughter each other without restraint or remorse. They glorified the civilian and military leaders who orchestrated the engagements. They sanctified the killing after the guns fell silent. Above all, they insisted that their side's cause was not only right but righteous.

This last point merits emphasis. By any reasonable measure, each side's determination to invoke God's blessing must be called idolatrous. In Stout's unflinching presentation of the primary evidence, fallen soldiers became martyrs; battlefields, altars; flags, sacraments; Northerners, holy warriors; and Southerners, God's chosen people. Both the United States of America and the Confederate States of America became redeemer nations, purified by blood sacrifice and prepared to carry their version of the gospel of freedom to the rest of the world.

There were those who did not embrace this view, of course, including the gaunt and melancholic man who occupied the White House. He sensed that the Almighty might have his own purposes. Lincoln was not a professed Christian, and perhaps that reticence prompted a corresponding reticence about the holiness of his region's cause, especially in the war's later years. Still, Lincoln seemed certain that the Almighty's purposes were compatible with total war.

This is a book of sweeping scope. It is too long, the recounting of the battles is too detailed, and thunder words like *carnage*, *murderous* and *horrific* appear too often. But those are quibbles. The volume represents a brilliant and profound effort to move beyond the conventional military, political and cultural histories of the Civil War in order to ask how Americans ordered and disordered their moral lives during the conflict. Both supporters and opposers of America's past and present wars will find cold comfort in these pages. Stout's work offers no easy answers, only the necessity of ruthless self-criticism.

Because Christians did much, and perhaps most, of the fighting, we might say that the volume also represents an inquiry into how Christians in particular ordered and disordered their moral lives during the Civil War. The short answer is that they lost their way. They rarely asked if their own interests were different from God's. If we judge them by their self-professed standards—which is the only fair way to judge—they failed themselves, their nation and their faith.

Stout is too good a historian to think that Christians have ever been free from the blinders of personal interest. But he seems to wish they had. If Reinhold Niebuhr had tried to tell this story, I suspect he would have said that it confirms the moral darkness that lies at the heart of all human endeavors, Christian and otherwise. In the end, to paraphrase Herbert Butterfield, the most appropriate response might be to feel a little sorry for everyone.