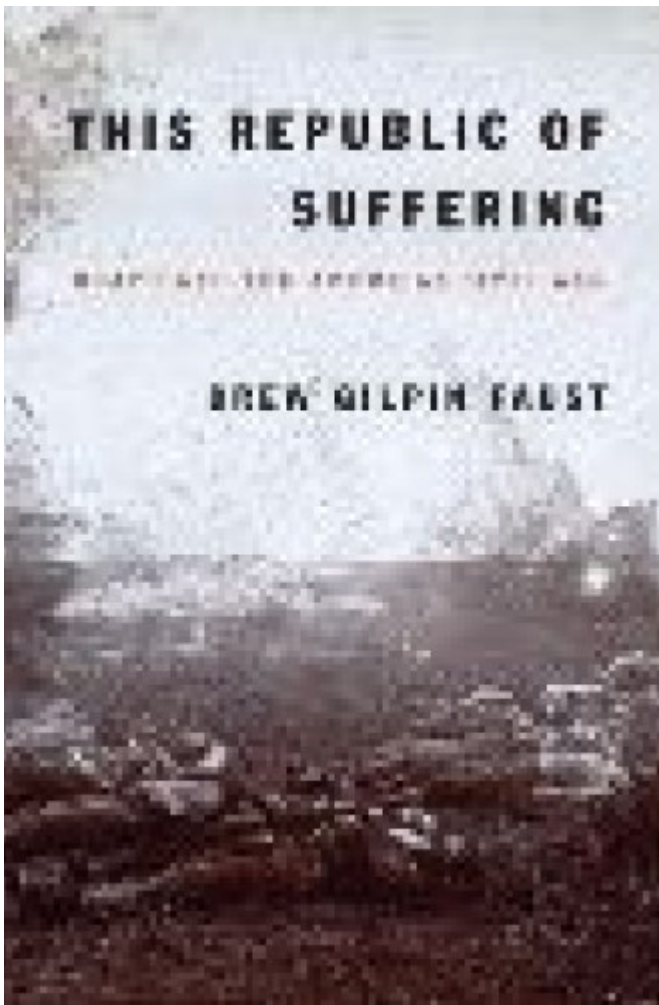


This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War

reviewed by [Edward J. Blum](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

In Review



This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War

Drew Gilpin Faust
Knopf

In a beautifully written, deeply researched and profoundly thoughtful book that may earn her the title of the finest Civil War scholar in the United States, Harvard's new president, Drew Faust, takes the reader on an emotive and analytical tour of death in Civil War America. She places us right on the battlefield, where we watch as soldiers die, nurses soothe the wounded and comrades write letters to their families. We see the chaos through the eyes of combat survivors as they bury the dead and wonder why they still live. Faust brings us into the homes of those who lost brothers, fathers, husbands and sons. We see Americans North and South combing newspaper reports of the dead and missing; we see them struggling to find mourning dresses, which were ever more scarce, especially in the South.

When Faust moves on to the executive mansions and the halls of Congress, we behold the first wives, Varina Davis and Mary Todd Lincoln, weeping over the deaths of their respective sons, and we learn of the Union Congress passing new laws to deal with burial grounds, memorials and pensions.

Faust even takes us close to the heart and soul of faith. She shows how massive death led some to wonder about God's presence in a world of bayonets, mortars and hundreds of thousands of sawed-off limbs; she shows how the war altered conceptions of heaven, which was reconsidered as a domestic sphere of family reunion and not just a place to sing hymns and pray for eternity. Novelist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* (1868) epitomized and furthered this shift; Phelps imagined heaven as a location where families reunited, where husbands and wives knew each other and where President Lincoln blessed the fallen Union soldiers.

Although it is a sad book in many ways, *This Republic of Suffering* is a joy to read. General readers will be riveted by the personal and passionate stories of soldiers clutching photographs of their children while dying on the battlefield, of Emily Dickinson reading newspapers and creating new verse and of Walt Whitman trying to make death comprehensible for those who remained alive.

Professional historians will learn much too. The war created an entire industry of death dealing, with embalmers, investigators and morticians making a financial killing amid the butchering. All should be fascinated by Faust's ingenious claim that while soldiers were culturally prepared to die (martyrdom was honorable in both the North and the South), killing was much more difficult. Very little, perhaps with the exception of the Indian wars, had morally prepared Americans to kill. Interestingly,

one way they coped with killing was by mimicking Native Americans, with war whoops, scalping and face painting. It may have been a sign that whites subconsciously looked to Native Americans as people who had more successfully come to grips with life, death and war.

There is much to applaud in Faust's study, but there are a few elements that may disturb readers. Faust's work embodies a recent and troubling trend in new studies not only of the Civil War, but also of the civil rights era in the 20th century. Attention has shifted from the historical role and centrality of African Americans during these climactic moments to the feelings and experiences of whites. Although Faust focuses some attention on the meaning of death for enslaved and free blacks in the mid-19th century, that aspect of her work lacks the nuance of her reading of white responses.

Examples of this trend include historian Harry Stout's "moral history" of the Civil War, *Upon the Altar of the Nation* (2006), a work equal to Faust's in innovation, brilliance and scope. Stout not only brackets the morality of slavery, he also downplays the ethical implications of interracial interaction in the fields of education and religion in the Civil War South.

As for the civil rights era, Matthew Lassiter's much-heralded *The Silent Majority* examines the rise of new conservatism in the 1960s Sunbelt. Throughout his narrative, moderate whites take center stage in the struggles against the protectors of racial segregation. The overfocus on whites leads Lassiter to patently misleading claims like: "The grassroots open-school movements led by middle-class white parents from the cities and suburbs defeated the massive resistance program of the region's political leadership." It was, of course, the African-American teachers and lawyers and the students who braved stone-throwing and death threats who did the most to defeat the archsegregationists—or at least their role was just as important as that of middle-class white suburbanites.

Perhaps it seemed to Faust that if she made slavery a central element of the Civil War, death would no longer fit as the dominant theme. Although slavery was a status of "social death," as Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson pointed out many years ago, during the Civil War almost 4 million slaves became civically alive with emancipation. They achieved freedom through mobility (by walking away from plantations, often heading to Union lines) and through military service. According to pioneering African-American historian W. E. B. Du Bois (in *Black Reconstruction*), for

freed slaves the war was defined by new life, not suffering:

This was the coming of the Lord. This was the fulfillment of prophecy and legend. It was the Golden Dawn, after chains of a thousand years. It was everything miraculous and perfect and promising. For the first time in their life, they could travel; they could see; they could change the dead level of their labor; they could talk to friends and sit at sundown and in moonlight, listening and imparting wonder-tales. They could hunt in the swamps, and fish in the rivers. And above all, they could stand up and assert themselves. They need not fear the patrol; they need not even cringe before a white face, and touch their hats.

It is the failure to see life amid death that most detracts from *This Republic of Suffering*. Any quick look at the imagery and rhetoric of the Civil War shows an obsession with life and newness. In 1860, the Republican Party was imagined as a newborn baby of American liberty; in November 1863, in his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln claimed that the war brought a “new birth of freedom.” After the Confederate surrender one African-American minister proclaimed in Washington, D.C., on the Fourth of July, “We come to the National Capital—our Capital—with new hopes, new prospects, new joys, in view of the future and past of the people.” Even white supremacists have crafted the war as one of new life. America’s first major motion picture, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), is the story of how the Ku Klux Klan remade the United States during and after the Civil War.

As we read *This Republic of Suffering*, as we crawl along the battlefields in our minds and hold the hands of ancestors who weep, we should remember the work of life. Slavery’s demise was a time of new birth, of personal and communal liberation, of Jubilee. For so many African Americans, this new birth outweighed the sadness and suffering of death.