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Raising the Dead: War, Memory and American National Identity

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ABSTRACT: The dead, particularly the war dead, play a central role in the development of nationalism, nowhere more so than in America. America's mid-nineteenth-century Civil War produced a recognizable and influential 'cult of the dead,' comparable in its construction with similar developments in Europe following the First World War. Focused on the figure of the fallen soldier, especially the volunteer soldier, this cult found physical expression in the development of national cemeteries devoted not just to the burial of those who fell in the war but to the idea of America as a nation, in the development of monuments to the dead that, again, reinforced the new national symbolism of the war era, and in the beginnings of Memorial Day, an American sacred ceremony with clear parallels with the later Armistice Day ceremonies in Europe. In all these developments, America preceded the European nations by several decades, making America a valuable case study for the role that the cult of the fallen soldier plays in national development more generally.

Raising the Dead: War, Memory and American National Identity

‘These men having set a crown of imperishable glory on their own land were folded in the dark cloud of death; yet being dead they have not died, since from on high their excellence raises them gloriously out of the house of Hades.’

(Simonides of Ceos on the Lacedaemonian Dead at Plataea)

‘The dead in this war—there they lie, strewing the fields and woods and valleys and battlefields of the south...the dead, the dead, the dead—*our* dead—or South or North, ours all.’

(Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days*)

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Introduction

That the dead, especially the war dead, are central both to a nation’s territorial claims and the sense of a unique identity that unifies its people is something that scholars have long recognized. ‘Only the dead,’ Robert Pogue Harrison argues, ‘can grant us legitimacy...humans bury not simply to achieve closure and effect a separation from the dead but also and above all to humanize the ground on which they build their worlds and found their histories.’ Ownership of the land is conferred by the burial of the dead in it, and through them the physical landscape is transmuted into a national one. ‘The graves of the forebears,’ Anthony Smith stresses, not only ‘testify to the uniqueness and antiquity of particular landscapes,’ but also validate the nationalist claims of their descendants to the land itself. One of the dominant symbols of the

modern nation, according to Benedict Anderson, is the empty tomb, the cenotaph, simultaneously symbolic of loss and acquisition: the loss of human life, the attainment of national life. Through his—the symbolism has to date been almost exclusively male—sacrifice the Unknown Soldier validates the nation by dying in its name. Emerging from the aftermath of the First World War, the symbolism of the unknown warrior's sacrifice represents an essential component of what Smith describes as the 'new religion of authenticity that is nationalism' (Harrison 2003: x-xi; Smith 1997: 151, 156; Anderson 1992: 9; Nairn 1997: 4; Smith 1999: 43).

The cenotaph, however, is only the most obvious central symbol in the new 'architectural landscapes' of the national military cemeteries constructed in Europe after the First World War, a conflict that, Philippe Ariès argued, accorded the 'civic cult of the dead...a popularity and prestige that it had never known before' (Ariès 1983: 550; Mosse 1990: 9, 32-3; Smith 2003: 243; Cannadine 1981: 196, 212). Yet the American Civil War witnessed this development in attitudes toward the dead half a century before the First World War prompted a similar shift in Europe. By the time that Germany, for example, established its first military cemetery as a result of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, the United States already had seventy-three such cemeteries. 'Looking at photographs of early American military cemeteries,' George Mosse pointed out, 'means anticipating the military cemeteries of the First World War' (Mosse 1990: 45-6). America's foremost national cemetery, Arlington, created during the Civil War of 1861-65, not only 'forms the backdrop to the urban landscape' of Washington DC, but represents the central symbolic site for the nation, visited by Americans each year, as Ariès noted, in much the same way as 'Catholics make pilgrimages to Saint Peter's, in Rome.' Indeed, America's very capital, Washington, is itself, in Ariès' phrase, a 'city of empty tombs...veritable mausoleums' raised not to accommodate the presidents of the Union, but instead to encapsulate the ideals of the republic; not to honour individual lives, but to invoke the national one. 'Although astonishing to a European of today,' Ariès observed, 'the civic and funerary landscape at Arlington and along the Mall sprang from the same sentiment that caused

a multiplicity of monuments to the war dead in the France of the 1920s' (Ariès 1983: 550-1; 1994: 79).

Were it not for America's position on the sidelines of modern nationalism studies, Ariès' remark about European astonishment might be harder to comprehend. The perception of America as an exceptional nation—'the embodiment of an idea'—its national identity distinct from others in both form and expression, and its nationalism equally *sui generis* is not merely flawed but creates a very real barrier to our understanding of America generally and, in this specific instance, of the development of the cult of the fallen soldier as this developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kohn 1945: 289). As a nation of immigrants whose ancestors are buried far from America's shores, it may not seem immediately obvious that the kind of 'ethnoscapes' that Smith identifies could be constructed in America. Yet America has its own 'sites of memory'—a great many more of them, indeed, than some nations—testifying both to a national expression that may be grounded in the more recent past than that of many other nations, but is no less grounded for that. America may lack the 'temples of priests' and the graves of saints, but its many battlefields and monuments reveal that the process described by Smith as the 'territorialization of memory' was vigorously, indeed extensively, boosted by the Civil War of 1861-65. Remembrance of that conflict is as much 'part of the landscape' of America as the First World War sites are of Europe (Smith 1997: 151-2; Winter 1995: 1).

Whilst not precisely a *Levée en Masse*, the Civil War did involve the entire American population to a degree associated with the development of nationalism in other conflicts, notably the German wars of liberation (1813-14), with its *Freikorps*, its *Burschenschaften* and Freidrich Jahn's development of the idea of *Volkstum*, 'the common character of a people,' and the First World War. As with both these European examples, the Civil War was, as Abraham Lincoln put it, 'a people's contest,' fought largely by volunteer troops on both sides, and productive of an equally emotive sense of nationalism. The war's aftermath also witnessed the development of what Mosse termed—in a specifically European context—the 'Myth of the War Experience,' a myth whose origins he traced back to the Napoleonic campaigns and whose

apogee was reached in the wake of the First World War (Mosse 1990: *passim*). Here, too, America was in parallel with, and at times in advance of, European trends. In some ways, indeed, America can be seen as the missing link in a process spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a process that placed warfare and the dead that resulted at the heart of the modern nation. In attempting to assess how and in what ways the war dead became so central a component of modern nationalism, the American example is clearly apposite, and deserves greater consideration than it has hitherto received. Taking account of the American case may help us better understand this process in Europe and, by extrapolation, begin to explode one of the Myths of the National Experience; that, although sharing its nationalist origins with revolutionary France, American nationalism is either wholly different from the European variants or, as some have argued, entirely non-existent (Connor 2004: 37).

The Union Dead and National Cemeteries

By the mid-nineteenth century, the American approach to death—middle-class death at least—found expression in the Rural or Park Cemetery Movement. The earliest example was Grove Street cemetery in New Haven, inaugurated in 1796, but Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts, dating from 1831, was the most famous, along with Philadelphia's Laurel Hill and Brooklyn's Greenwood, both also inaugurated in the 1830s. Devised as both burial site and 'cultural institution,' the rural cemetery deliberately invoked Athens' famous Kerameikos in form and intent. Designed to 'give people more of a sense of historical continuity, a feeling of social roots,' the rural cemetery combined 'an appeal to the moral power of nature with patriotic feeling' in a manner that, Mosse argued, foreshadowed the development of military cemeteries (French 1974: 49; Stannard 1977: 168-171; Mosse 1990: 41-2; Wills 1992: 63-9). The Civil War that broke out in 1861, however, resulted in a scale of slaughter for which Americans were wholly unprepared. Civil War battlefields and rudimentary mass graves were a world away from the bucolic landscapes of the rural cemetery, and the immediate task that faced Civil War

America involved coming to terms with, and making sense of a conflict in which over 600,000 Americans, some 2 percent of the population, lost their lives, that tore the nation apart and, indeed, threatened its very existence as a nation. From the outset, all groups involved in the conflict—the federal government, the War Department, private citizens, and the soldiers themselves—placed a high priority on the respectful treatment of the dead, removing them, wherever possible, from the battlefield and interring them in suitable ground. In this America was very much in advance of Europe where, Mosse noted, the dead were frequently buried where they fell, if buried at all, as late as the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. In Europe, he observed, military ‘cemeteries for the concentration of individual graves and as places of worship were...the results of the unprecedented slaughter of the first world war’ (Mosse 1979: 8).

The federal government’s response to the Civil War dead was not, for obvious reasons, fully articulated from the war’s outset, but developed piecemeal as it became clear that the war, which many had believed would be of short duration, would be both longer and more brutal than had been anticipated. The framework for the development of the national cemeterial system, however, was put in place very early in the conflict, in 1862, when the War Department instructed the Quartermaster General to supply post hospitals with forms, so that the dead might be adequately recorded, and with suitable materials for the marking of graves. At this stage, no provision had been made for the actual interment of the dead, but a subsequent order stipulated that ‘lots of ground in some suitable spot near every battlefield’ be laid aside for this purpose. Civilian groups also stepped in, and cemetery associations throughout the North arranged for land to be made available to the War Department for this purpose. In that same year, Congress formalized these arrangements by authorizing the president ‘to purchase cemetery grounds...to be used as a national cemetery for the soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country.’ By the end of that year, 14 national cemeteries had been established, with many more to follow over the remaining three years of the conflict. Many of these cemeteries, although referred to as national both at the time and since, were not, however, arranged and financed by

the federal government, but by individual states, the most notable examples being Antietam, established in 1862, and Gettysburg, inaugurated the following year. Indeed, it was not until 1870 that the Secretary of War officially assumed control of them, and it was the 1890s when they, along with Chickamauga, Shiloh and Vicksburg were designated national military parks (Kammen 1993: 263-4; Steere 1953). Arlington, too, did not finally pass into government control until well after the war, in 1872.¹

Despite the somewhat haphazard manner in which the national cemeteries of the Civil War came into official existence, there are grounds for challenging Mosse's description of them as 'simple burial places' about which 'no thought was given to creating a place of national worship' (Mosse 1979: 8). There was little that was simple about the inauguration of Gettysburg—the specific example Mosse cited—which was clearly intended as a national shrine from its inception in 1863, and several other cemetery sites, including Antietam, were conceived of by the states that funded them as national in both scope and sentiment. To dismiss Gettysburg as an exceptional case—'rather more a memorial field to military units than to individual men,' as Laqueur describes it—is to miss the point, which is that Gettysburg was in form and conception designed to commemorate not the individual, but the nation. This is a pattern that we are now familiar with—war cemeteries, as Julie Rugg notes, frequently 'serve more as a means of recalling the horror of a particular catastrophe than as a context for commemorating the individual'—but it is a pattern that Gettysburg itself, to some extent, established (Rugg 2000: 270-1). By acknowledging the sacrifice of the various loyal states that comprised the wartime Union, Gettysburg as shrine and symbol invoked the federal nature of the nation and reinforced the importance of strength through unity, a belief that had, after all, been one of the main reasons that the North sought to prevent the secession of the southern states in the first place (Laqueur 1996: 128-9). 'For the purposes of a "National Cemetery,"' the *New York Times* advised its readers, 'the side of the hill facing Gettysburgh is laid out in half circles around a common center...These semicircles are divided by broad avenues radiating from this center, and the divisions thus made are appropriate to different States according to the number of their

dead.’ The land itself, the paper observed, ‘is invested with a new interest. It holds the bodies and tells of the deeds of soldiers from every State in the Union.’ The purpose of Gettysburg, it was stressed, ‘is to provide a last resting-place for the heroes of the Union,’ and the ‘national interest’ attending its inauguration, it was noted, ‘promises the establishment of similar cemeteries.’²

There are obvious parallels between Gettysburg and the form and development of cemeteries during the French revolution and the wars of liberation and, later, the First World War. ‘The serried rows of graves’ that defined the First World War cemeteries, Mosse noted, ‘date from the eighteenth century,’ and were partly inspired ‘by the quest for equality during the French revolution’ (Mosse 1979: 9). The similar arrangement of the graves, and specifically the style of grave marker selected at Gettysburg became, over time, the norm for Civil War national cemeteries. Designed by its architect William Saunders with the deliberate intent of drawing no distinctions of rank or status between the dead, Gettysburg very clearly followed the rural cemetery precedent, both in its ‘quest for the sublime in scenery’ and in the consecration of the land itself, as well as in the rather morbid aspects of popular enthusiasm for the site (Weeks 2003: 16-17, 49, 65; Faust 1995: 16). Purely in visual terms, the national, overtly republican symbolism of Gettysburg, and the similarities between it and the European cemeteries constructed after the First World War are obvious (Figure 1). Again, although the decision to adopt the Gettysburg model was only taken in 1873, a full decade after the cemetery had been inaugurated, the debate over the issue began during the war itself, and continued for some years afterwards. That this was a subject of national concern was obvious to Bvt. Brig. Gen. J.J. Dana, who contributed the annex to the Quartermaster General’s 1866 annual report, an annex almost entirely devoted to the subject of the Civil War cemeteries. ‘Public opinion,’ Dana observed, ‘seems to be turning to a more permanent mode of marking the graves than by wooden head-boards...the sentiment of the nation will not only sustain the expense of marble or other permanent memorial,’ he concluded, ‘but...will be likely to demand it in a few years, if not now established.’³ Although it took some seven years to act on Dana’s advice, when congress did so

it was to approve \$1,000,000 ‘for the erection of a uniform marble or granite headstone at each grave in the national military cemeteries,’ a considerable sum, and a decisive statement about the national importance of the Civil War dead (Steere 1953: 1).



Figure 1: Gettysburg National Military Park, Pennsylvania (photo: author).

The national significance of Gettysburg itself was established long before the issue of grave markers had been mooted, however. With the inauguration of the cemetery, the *New York Times* enthused, ‘new associations will weave themselves into the warp and woof of the hour; a more dazzling rainbow halo will encircle the gloried brow of the Republic...Through the arteries of the Union the blood of pride will leap yet more exultant.’⁴ Edward Everett, the most renowned orator of his age was an obvious choice for the main speaker at the cemetery’s

inauguration for that reason and because he was, as Garry Wills notes, something of ‘a connoisseur of American cemeteries,’ having been involved in the creation of Mount Auburn. Everett was, too, a moving force in America’s Greek Revival. He had walked the Greek battlefields, fascinated by the lessons America might derive from ancient example, and believed that a new Athens was emerging in the New World (Wills 1992: 44, 63). It was hardly surprising, therefore, that Everett’s oration at Gettysburg in 1863 began by reminding his audience that Athenian law stipulated ‘that the obsequies of the citizens who fell in battle should be performed at the public expense, and in the most honorable manner.’ He moved quickly on to the Battle of Marathon, an obvious parallel with Gettysburg since it, too, was a battlefield site on which burial rites were performed and one, he noted, ‘distinguished from all others in Grecian history...as it depended upon the event of that day whether Greece should live, a glory and a light to all coming time, or should expire like the meteor of the moment.’ The dead of Marathon, Everett pointed out, were awarded honors ‘such as were bestowed by Athens on no other occasion. They alone of all her sons were entombed upon the spot which they had forever rendered famous.’ Presenting himself as a modern-day Pericles—and indeed described as such by his contemporaries—Everett was not about to let his audience miss the parallels between the Athenian and the Union dead, as the former were buried ‘tribe by tribe, with a special place for those whose tribes could not be identified,’ so the latter, gathered for reburial at Gettysburg, were interred state by state, with unknown soldiers allocated a separate section (Wills 1992: 40-42).⁵

The obvious parallels between the Peloponnesian War and America’s nineteenth-century conflict would have resonated with large sections of Everett’s audience even if he had not drawn attention to it. Both were internecine conflicts and both, as Everett highlighted, had at stake the existence of a nation. In evoking Pericles’ famous oration for the Athenian dead, Everett was also following a, by then, well-established pattern. ‘The sentiments and imagery expressed by Pericles,’ as Smith notes, ‘became models of political solidarity and civic nationalism for the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, as for their successors, the French

revolutionaries.’ The ideas that Smith describes, ‘of inscribed and unwritten monuments, of undying fame and eternal glory, the overcoming of death through posterity, the land and its inhabitants as an immaterial sepulcher, and of emulation of the courage of the self-sacrificing fallen’ were especially valuable in a mid-nineteenth-century America struggling to make sense of its own, modern civil conflict and searching for some national meaning to counteract the very potent sectional forces that were tearing the nation apart (Smith 2003: 220). In his conclusion, Everett reminded his listeners of what nationalism involved, and did so in terms familiar to scholars of our own day: the ‘bonds that unite us as one people,’ Everett argued, ‘a substantial community of origin, language, belief, and law...common national and political interests; a common history; a common pride in a glorious ancestry; a common interest in this great heritage of blessings; the very geographical features of the country...are of perennial force and energy, while the causes of alienation are imaginary, facetious and transient.’⁶ Over the graves of the mass dead of the Civil War—a war that was still in the process of being waged—Everett conjured the image of Athenian sacrifice to console a population, and to invoke a nation riven by conflict.

Everett, of course, was not the only speaker at Gettysburg that November day, and a far more famous address came to be associated with the inauguration of that particular Civil War cemetery. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address itself, as Wills has shown, followed ancient precedent in form and structure, and in purpose. It also reinforced the message conveyed by the republican arrangement of the graves themselves in its emphasis on ‘the proposition that all men are created equal.’ Lincoln’s speech and Saunders’s cemetery plan were ‘in aesthetic harmony. Each expressed the values of the other.’ Yet Lincoln did more than this. In ‘praising the Greeks,’ Wills, argues, Everett failed ‘to imitate them.’ Lincoln, by contrast, although ‘not aiming for Periclean effect,’ in fact achieved it. His address, as Wills has shown in some detail, followed the structure of the Epitaphios in praising the dead (*epainesis*) and instructing the living (*parainesis*). Lincoln looked back ‘Four score and seven years ago’ to the founding of the nation, focused on the ‘brave men, living and dead’ who fought at Gettysburg, and encouraged

the ‘living...to be dedicated to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus so nobly advanced.’ As Lincoln explained it, the ‘dead not only saved a nation but advanced it on the course it must complete...Life-*in*-death is made life-*through*-death’ (Wills 1992: 30, 59-62) Lincoln’s speech, according to Harrison, is itself the *sema*, marking not just the graves of the fallen, but the physical manifestation of the living nation. ‘A discrete grammatical breakthrough—from “that nation” at the beginning of the address to “this nation” at the end,’ Harrison concludes, ‘indicates that the securing of the nation’s *hic* has taken place, precisely through the sepulchering act of the address itself’ (Harrison 2003: 28). So far from a simple burial place, Gettysburg represented the core national shrine of the nation, the site of its burial and rebirth. The fact that the battle itself concluded on July 3, the day before Independence Day, only reinforced the site’s importance as a focus for national worship, even at a time when the existence of the nation itself hung in the balance.⁷

If Lincoln’s and Everett’s words were delivered to an appreciative northern audience hungry for what comfort they could provide and inspired—perhaps even flattered—by the national message they conveyed, southerners were equally aware of the importance of the occasion and conscious, too, of the threat that it posed to their cause. ‘The dramatic exhibition at Gettysburgh,’ the Richmond *Examiner* snidely observed, ‘is in thorough keeping with the Yankee character...It is easy to see that the whole affair was formed upon a classical model.’ ‘The Yankees,’ it continued, ‘have an invincible conviction that they are the successors of the Romans in empire, and of the Athenians in genius...Accordingly, the stern virtue and lofty patriotism of the Roman is brought to the scene.’ Everett, the paper sneered, ‘fancied himself a Pericles, commemorating the illustrious dead... whether they came from the vine-clad banks of the Rhine, the verdant fields of Erin, or the granite rocks of New-England,’ which was an attempt on the South’s part to question the national composition of the Union army; in effect, to challenge its Americanness. Nothing, it concluded, ‘more strongly distinguishes the genuine spirit of modern constitutional liberty from the pinchbeck counterfeit...than the puerile attempt at classical imitation which infects the latter.’ Accusing the North of clothing ‘themselves in the

draperies of Greece and Rome,' the *Examiner* revealed a very real awareness of the ideological impact that such draperies had, of the moral and political message that they conveyed.⁸

Gettysburg, as southerners well realised, was much more than a burial place; it was a national statement, and one they would find difficult to counter except through military victory and that, as it turned out, eluded them.

Although sectional controversy surrounded the national cemeteries for many years after the Civil War, Americans were obviously proud of the way in which the war dead had been honored. America, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* announced, had proved itself 'far in advance...of any other nation, in any previous war, ancient or modern' in the manner in which the Civil War dead were treated. Citing Athenian precedent, cemeteries, it argued, were 'indicative of the spirit and growth of the race...the republic's legacy and the nation's inheritance,' a visible expression of patriotism and reverence for the fallen soldier. Although critical of the fact that Gettysburg had been a state rather than an official, national endeavor, *Harper's* nevertheless quoted Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in support of its 'call for these scattered dead of the Union army, whether white or black, to be disinterred from the places where they lie, and brought speedily together into great national cemeteries, where they may repose in peace and dignity beneath the aegis of the Republic while time endures.' Such cemeteries, it argued, should be established in 'every State affected by the war, on the field of our greatest victory or at a place of most importance, to stand as a monument forever to the South, and to us all, of the crime and folly of Secession...Let us emulate the lofty example of that other republic, Athens, in the best days of her supremacy, and thus rebuke forever the current calumny and slander about 'the ingratitude of republics.'⁹ *Harper's* proposal did not fall on deaf ears, and a massive re-interment programme began as soon as the war was over. By the middle of 1866, forty-one national cemeteries had been inaugurated, rising to seventy-three by 1870, and in 1867 the establishment of a permanent national cemeterial system was formalized by Congress. Looking back at the war after two decades, veteran Charles Cowley reflected that for those of 'us who have survived the perils of battle...and for all who cherish the memory of

these dead, it will always be a consoling thought that the Federal government has done so much to provide honorable sepulture for those who fell in defence of the Union.’ For him, as for many others, it was significant that his comrades were not buried ‘upon an unfriendly shore, but in the bosom of the soil which their blood redeemed.’¹⁰

Competing Commemorations: Memorial Day North and South

The national cemeteries created during and after the Civil War, however, were clearly constructed for the Union dead, and although it was doubtless the case that many of the Confederate dead were inadvertently interred in them—some 42 percent of the Civil War dead remained unidentified after all—that was not, in many people’s view, the desired intention. By ‘unfriendly shore,’ Cowley had clearly meant the South, and southerners were no more willing to let the Confederate fallen lie in northern soil. For the North, the issue came to a head in the case of Antietam. At the war’s end, the Maryland Legislature stipulated that the Confederate dead might be buried at Antietam, but their decision prompted a backlash led by Republican congressman John Covode, who objected to the proposal that ‘national honors’ be accorded the ‘rebel dead.’ Governor Geary of Pennsylvania was equally opposed to any suggestion ‘that the loyal states construct cemeteries for the heroic dead and then desecrate them by the burial therein’ of their enemies. Although the *New York Times* considered such attitudes to be both ‘puerile and absurd,’ it was many years before the Confederate dead were accorded any kind of official recognition in the national cemeteries, and most were removed for reburial in the South.¹¹ This did little for sectional reconciliation: ‘The nation condemns our dead,’ the *Richmond Daily Examiner* noted. ‘They are left in deserted places to rot into oblivion’ (quoted Blair 2004: 53).

Although couched in a different context, the parallels between the Civil War and the First World War are evident in this emotive debate over where the dead should be buried, in what manner commemorated and, in the South especially, to what end (Sherman 1998: 451;

Blair 2004: 90). The unwillingness of both sides to incorporate the Confederate dead in the national military cemeteries produced a parallel process in the South of commemoration and monument-building, a process by which, Gaines Foster shows, the ‘Ghosts of the Confederacy’ ‘became powerful cultural symbols within the New South,’ memorialized in the South’s cemeteries, the ‘cities of the dead.’ They, like Gettysburg, harked back to the antebellum rural cemetery with their ‘beautiful, dignified landscaping and built paths or streets through them to facilitate visits by the living,’ and their funereal statuary, designed to reinforce the difference that, unlike Gettysburg, their message was one of a nation lost, not a nation reborn (Foster 1987: 37-9, 41). This was a message repeated and reinforced at the many ceremonial occasions devoted to the Civil War, notably on Memorial Day, a ceremony that also bears comparison with the later Armistice Day celebrations in both France and Great Britain. Memorial Day has been described as ‘an important outlet for grief in the postwar years,’ which it undoubtedly was; yet it was much more than that (Cook 2003: 327). It was a spontaneous development on the part of Americans north and south to commemorate the Civil War dead and establish some framework for reconciling themselves to the extent of the slaughter and, as time went on, to each other. The first ‘Decoration Day,’ organized by black South Carolinians and white abolitionists, took place in Charleston on May 1, 1865. The North adopted the ritual in 1868 and 1869 under the encouragement of the Grand Army of the Republic, 30 May, known as ‘Decoration’ or Memorial Day, ‘became an instant tradition’ (Kammen 1993: 103; Blight 2003: 64-97; Foster 1987: 43).

The pattern that Memorial Day followed resembled that of early Armistice Day ceremonies in that it was primarily a funereal occasion, and followed the pattern of the mourning ritual. A parade to the cemetery was followed, initially, by the laying of wreaths on the graves and later, as the ceremony became more elaborate and, arguably, more political, formal speeches by politicians became an increasingly important element in the proceedings. In all its manifestations, however, Memorial Day focused on the cemetery and on the graves of the dead, which were decorated with flowers; it involved veterans at the center of the ceremony but

with public officials and non-combatants playing a significant role; and it involved children, whose presence was perhaps salutary—it brought home the cost of war—inspirational—it provided visible evidence that another generation was emerging—and educational—it introduced children to the civic world of the state and to their future role in it. The participation of children was as important to Memorial Day as it was to Armistice Day in France. In both cases, the intention was to impress and inform. Just as the French republic ‘was a regime that obtained social conformity by inducing its citizens to subscribe individually to its fundamental values,’ so, too, the American republic needed not just to educate its own citizens but, as immigration soared in the decades following the Civil War, a whole body of new citizens and would-be citizens for whom Memorial Day provided a fast-track introduction to American values and civic requirements. If France required ‘a civic cult and a method of moral education’ in the aftermath of the First World War, America’s need for the same was even more pressing in the wake of the Civil War. For both, the memorial ceremonies for the war dead answered that need (Prost 1997: 323-5).

Out of Memorial Day, a new interest in the art of the funereal oration developed, an oration that, in the North at least, was ‘mournful, celebratory, and fiercely patriotic all at once,’ a potent mix of ‘religion and nationalism that provided northern Christians with a narrative through which to understand their sacrifice of kin and friends.’ Memorial Day, as Blight argues, fast ‘became a legitimizing ritual of the new American nationalism forged out of war’ (Blight 2001: 72). This new nationalism, however, comprised a combination of elements not all of which emerged from the war itself. The Civil War soldier was placed within the broader context of America’s self-image as a ‘redeemer nation,’ a belief that peaked in the years prior to the war, but Memorial Day effectively merged the theme of America as the ‘New Israel,’ of Americans as God’s new chosen people, with the more immediate requirements of reconciliation after the Civil War; reconciliation of the living to the dead, and of North and South (Tuveson 1968: 187). The new element that the war brought to the concept of America’s missionary role was the element of ‘redemptive sacrifice...the sacrifice of American war dead

and martyrs' (Cherry 1969: 749). Without this element, the story of America's manifest destiny was only partially complete. The cult of the fallen soldier in America did more than legitimize the war experience; it validated America's national existence. The Civil War dead provided the nation with the most important component of their sacred trust narrative; through their sacrifice America's position as the redeemer nation of the modern world was secured.

That Memorial Day was in every sense 'a modern cult of the dead' is made evident by the way in which it very quickly changed its meaning from a day devoted to the celebration of freedom by African Americans to a day devoted primarily to the decoration of war graves. The 'instant tradition' that was created celebrated the sacrifice of the dead, but avoided—as much as possible—any of the potentially divisive issues involved in what they had fought for (Cherry 1969: 741; Blight 2001: 64-70). The message conveyed by Memorial Day in the South, of course, was rather different. Although also revolving around the fallen soldier and his sacrifice, the difficulty that the South faced was reconciling the redemptive aspects of the ritual—those that reinforced 'Southern-ness—with the fact that the sacrifice, in the case of the Confederate soldier, had been in vain. Southerners, William Blair has argued, frequently saw a political opportunity in Memorial Day that 'promised anything but reconciliation,' that might even be described 'a form of guerrilla warfare through mourning' (Blair 2004: 50-51, 54, 78; Wilson 1980: 29-30). With an even more pressing need for the validation that Civil War commemorative rituals provided, southerners, in effect, constructed a separate, parallel 'civil religion not dedicated to honoring the American nation.' It too, was a civil religion predicated on the dead, but whereas northerners could take comfort from the fact that their dead had died for a purpose, southerners were left to bury their dead apart; a putative nation within a nation, the defeat of the Confederacy left its supporters on the sidelines in the new civic nationalism that the North trumpeted so effectively at Gettysburg and elsewhere. Memorial Day ceremonies in the South, although central to the development of the 'Lost Cause,' could only ever exist in the shadow of their northern counterparts; the unwelcome—but nevertheless persistent—ghosts at the nationalist feast of post-Civil War American civic ritual (Wilson 180: 30).

Myths, Memorials and Monuments

It was in the context of Memorial Day rituals and against the backdrop of the Civil War cemeteries that America constructed its own version of what Mosse termed the ‘Myth of the War Experience,’ a myth ‘designed to mask war and to legitimize the war experience,’ reshaping it into ‘a sacred experience which provided the nation with a new depth of religious feeling, putting at its disposal ever-present saints and martyrs, places of worship, and a heritage to emulate.’ At its heart, Mosse argued, was the ‘cult of the fallen soldier,’ specifically the volunteer soldier, around whom a new civil religion was constructed. Mosse traced the origins of this myth to the wars of the French Revolution and the German Wars of Liberation, on the grounds that such wars ‘were the first to be fought by citizen-armies, composed initially of a large number of volunteers who were committed to their cause and their nation’ and its culmination in the First World War (Mosse 1990: 6-7, 9). The myth, as Mosse described it, comprised several distinct elements and operated on different levels. ‘During the war it helped men to face unparalleled slaughter’; afterwards, ‘it explained why the dead had not fallen in vain and why the veterans had made their sacrifice’ (Mosse 1979: 2). For Americans, the significance of the sacrificial dead was a crucial component in the war effort itself, and served both private and public imperatives. For northerners, ‘a landscape covered with mangled and broken bodies...symbolized the righteousness of the Union cause—the large numbers of young northern soldiers slaughtered on the fields of battle became evidence of Union patriotism and virtue.’ More specifically, as northerners sought to understand the reasons behind the war, and as slavery began to be accepted as the cause, the Civil War dead came to be seen as sacrificial offerings to expiate America’s sins. As Lincoln interpreted the war in his Second Inaugural address, by 1865 it seemed as if the Union was committed to a conflict that would not end until ‘every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.’ In this religious interpretation of America’s civil conflict, Union blood acquired ‘an extraordinary

status as a curative, a source of regeneration' for a nation destroyed by its crimes (Laderman 1996: 98-99).

Lincoln's own death at the hands of John Wilkes Booth, who shot him on Good Friday, 1865—he died the following morning—seemed to Americans the ultimate sacrifice of Union blood for national ends. The religious connotations of the timing of his assassination appeared significant to contemporaries, already 'familiar with at least the terminology of Christianity' and with the concept of sacrifice on the altar of the country. This image, as Woodworth notes, allocated the soldier 'a special place in a new theology in which country, not God, occupied the position of the deity.' In this context, Lincoln's assassination was interpreted from a theological perspective, but one already informed by a new, national imperative (Woodworth: 106). Addressing a public meeting in New York, General James A. Garfield—himself a future president, and, ironically, the next one to die from an assassin's bullet—observed that it 'would really seem that this tragedy almost parallels that of the Son of God,' while the Reverend Henry W. Bellows described Lincoln's death as 'a mighty sacrifice...for the sins of a whole people.' Lincoln's death, Harrison points out, secured for America 'the sacrificial basis of the most ancient nations: the blood of the brother.' It also sealed Lincoln's apotheosis as the saviour of the Union, and forever influenced the ways in which the Civil War was remembered, and commemorated, in the years to come. 'Nationality, Humanity, Democracy, Americanism, and the individual opportunity which is its essence.' These, Merrill Peterson points out, 'are the building blocks of the Lincoln image.' They were also the building blocks of America's national image in the wake of the Civil War, an image formed, to a very great extent, by that war (Harrison 2003: 29; Peterson 1995: 27).

The blood of the brother, of course, had specific resonance in a Civil War—one frequently referred to as a 'brother's war. The myth of the war experience as it developed in America both during and after the conflict involved more than remembrance; in large part it was about masking both the horrific realities of the conflict, and the sectional rift that had caused it. Ambrose Bierce was not alone when he lamented the fate of the many 'honest and courageous

foemen' who had 'little in common with the political madmen who persuaded them to their doom and the literary bearers of false witness in the aftertime.'¹² The voice of cynicism was hardly to be heard above the tumult of Civil War memorialization ceremonies, but it nevertheless existed. The myth of the Civil War experience, therefore, also served a defensive purpose by obliterating the full horrors of that conflict by utilizing what Jay Winter has termed the 'traditional' response to the experience of war: 'patriotic certainties...incorporating euphemisms about battle, "glory", and the "hallowed dead", in sum, the sentimentality and lies of wartime propaganda' (Winter 1995: 2). At the laying of the corner-stone for the Soldier's Monument in Gettysburg on July 4th, 1865, General Howard reflected this perspective in his comments on the nature of the American soldier, epitomized, in his view, by the private volunteer. The soldier, representing war, was to take his place on the monument alongside 'History,' who was to record the names of the 'honored dead,' 'Peace,' represented by a mechanic, and 'Plenty,' a female figure carrying wheat and representing nature's abundance. It was expected—wrongly, as it turned out—that 'Plenty' would be replaced by 'Liberty,' represented by Lincoln holding the emancipation proclamation. When the monument was finally dedicated in June, 1869, it was noted by the *New York Times* that the plan of the cemetery itself had each grave numbered, with 'the name of the sleeper it contains...carefully recorded in the books of the Commissioners...the individuality of the dead,' the paper noted, 'is thus rigidly preserved.'¹³ The significance placed on accounting for, and recording the names of, the dead had its origins in the federal government's 1861 order to the Quartermaster General's Department, an order that eventually gave rise to the American Graves Registration Service but also, and more significantly, informed the role played by the war dead in American nationalism. The listing of names—most graphically illustrated by the names inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Mall and, more recently, in the ceremonies commemorating the dead from the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001—provides a revealing insight into the nature of American nationalism, and the similarities between its development and that of other nations in the aftermath of the First World War.

As in France following the First World War, monument building in post-Civil War America ‘proceeded rapidly, as if in response to a contagious necessity, which everyone took for granted.’ As with France, too, ‘the fact that the cult of the dead that spawned the monuments preceded their actual construction is of the utmost importance for comprehending their meaning.’ Exploring the significance of monuments in France in the aftermath of the First World War, Antoine Prost suggested that the ‘republican cult of the war dead, as constituted and practiced between the two world wars,’ was ‘the only example in history of a civil religion in Rousseau’s sense.’ The First World War, he noted, ‘had been a terrible calamity, and the sacrifices it required went beyond what could be expected from mere civic obedience. The need for citizens with a love of duty was widely felt.’ In the republican cult of the dead, Prost argued, such duty was inculcated. ‘The Republic ceased to be a party; it became France itself,’ and the ‘monuments to the dead...became the centerpiece...of a republican cult, a civil religion,’ at the core of which were those citizens who had died for the republic and whose names were read out on Armistice Day as ‘one way of indicating that the Republic was nothing but its citizens’ (Prost 1997: 309, 328-9). The obvious parallels between the process Prost described and the response of Americans to the Civil War dead suggests that the French republican cult of the war dead was not, perhaps, the sole example of its kind in history. In placing such importance on identifying and recording the names of individual Civil War soldiers, America was making a similar point: that the American republic was the sum total of its citizens, and the Civil War itself had transformed the antebellum Union into a nation, into America. This message found resonance long after the Civil War generation had passed away. The First World War proved a catalyst in this regard, as the monument raised to commemorate the Battle of Nashville reveals (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The Battle of Nashville Memorial, Nashville, Tennessee (photo: author)

The Battle of Nashville had taken place in 1864, but the monument was not erected until 1926, under the auspices of the Ladies Battlefield Memorial Association. Symbolizing the ‘Spirit of Youth’ holding in check ‘the contending forces that struggled here in the fierce Battle of Nashville,’ the monument was actually intended to seal ‘forever the bond of Union by the blood of our heroic dead of the World War 1917-1918.’ If northern blood had been the life-force of

Union victory and national renewal during the Civil War, in the wake of the First World War both northern and southern blood served that end. The message of this monument, at least was, as its inscription put it, to ‘let the past be past, let the dead be dead,/Now and forever, American.’ As with the Civil War, however, the sacrifice of the soldier was crucial. National reunification could only be sealed with the blood of the fallen; in both conflicts, the ultimate sacrifice was necessary to validate the nation. Indeed, the cult of the fallen Civil War soldier, remained a constant element in American sacred ceremonies and in the monuments erected over the years, not just in remembrance of the Civil War, but of other wars, too. Washington DC, as Ariès pointed out, has become over time the central sacred site of the nation, a city of empty tombs, competing memorials raised to honour the dead and extol the ideals of the nation. Rather than a single cenotaph, America has an entire city that has become suffused with ghostly ‘national imaginings’ (Anderson 1992: 9). The many memorials erected there—most notably the Vietnam Memorial—are understood as tombs, and treated appropriately, with flowers inserted into the slender gaps between the slabs listing the names as one would leave them on an individual grave (Prost 1997: 319; Doss 2002: 66). Most recently, and not without some controversy, the World War II Memorial has been inaugurated, but perhaps the most graphic representation of the continuing significance of the war dead in American national identity is the Korean War Veterans Memorial, inaugurated in 1995 (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Korean War Veterans Memorial, Washington DC (photo: Peter Wilson)

The Korean Veterans Memorial incorporates all those elements of the cult of the war dead that the Civil War initiated, albeit in a very modern way. The listing of the names of the dead, the ‘Honor Role,’ is kept on a computer, accessible by the public. The 19 statues, all larger than life-size at 7’3” tall, represent American Korean War troops in an arrow-head formation as if on patrol; these are designed to represent the ethnic composition of the nation, with 12 Caucasian figures, 3 African American, 2 Hispanic, 1 Oriental and 1 Native American, and the make-up of the American military, with 14 Army personnel, 3 Marines, 1 Navy and 1 Air Force. Every effort has been made to represent these men accurately insofar as the uniforms they wear and the equipment they carry is concerned. A Mural Wall, consisting of 41 panels, incorporates some 15,000 photographs of the Korean conflict from the National Archives. It is, by any standard, a quite daunting and perhaps equally unsettling achievement. It is certainly a long way from the republican simplicity of the grave markers commemorating the Civil War dead. More

effective than any number of Memorial Day orations, the Korean Memorial constitutes the most graphic symbolic representation of the cult of the fallen soldier in America to date; it has raised the dead from the earth, and positioned them squarely among the living, a powerful visual statement encapsulating both the sacrifice of the individual American soldier and the nation itself.

Conclusion

‘The fraternity of the nation,’ Smith asserts, is ‘lived in and through the sacrifice of its citizens in defence of the fatherland of motherland, seen as the unchanging bedrock of the nation, and the sacred soil which nourishes its historic culture’ (Smith 1997: 156). Americans do not invoke their nation in such familial terms, but in their response to the crisis of Civil War that threatened their nation in the mid-nineteenth century they revealed a similar attachment to, and reverence for, the land and a clear awareness of the ancient roots of redemptive sacrifice as a means of consecrating that land for the nation. In the process of constructing a suitable and lasting response to the dead of the Civil War, Americans both looked back to an Athenian past that was not their own, and to a European future that no one, in the mid-nineteenth century, could have anticipated. That the precedent of the American Civil War did not directly inform the construction of the post-First World War ‘myth of the war experience’ in no sense diminishes the fact that in their response to the Civil War, Americans anticipated, in fundamental ways, the shift in the reaction to the soldiers’ sacrifice in war. In the many monuments and memorials constructed in the national cemeteries, in southern cemeteries, on battlefields, and in northern and southern communities, America’s cult of the fallen soldier—significantly reinforced by the parallel cult of the fallen president—took shape. The Civil War was by no means the worst of the nineteenth-century wars, nor do its losses compare with those of the 1914-18 conflict in Europe. Both factors have, perhaps, prevented a fuller recognition of the many ways in which the Civil War anticipated the memorializing process as it developed in the aftermath of the First

World War. However, it was the American Civil War, a war fought by volunteer troops in the name of the nation—be that the Union or the Confederacy—that many of the elements that became so prominent a feature in the wake of the First World War first emerged: the relationship between the soldier and the nation; the importance, indeed the pressing urge, to repatriate the dead, to provide for them honorable sepulture in the nation's name; to acknowledge, as Lincoln did at Gettysburg, that they had died so that the 'nation might live.' The war cemeteries constructed both during and after the Civil War not only preceded the development of these in Europe by some half a century, but also anticipated the social, political and above all national messages that these sites convey.

What did set the American experience apart from that of European nations in the early twentieth century was the need to reconstruct the nation in the war's aftermath, and specifically to incorporate the sacrifice of Confederate soldiers whose blood sacrifice was an equally potent symbol, but not obviously a national one. Here, the new national cemeteries perpetuated sectional divisions. They could not do otherwise; their national significance was made explicit by the exclusion of the Confederate dead from them. Had they been merely burial sites, the issue of who was buried in them would hardly have proved so contentious. It was because they were seen as national shrines that the question even arose at all. In this, the Civil War set a clear precedent, one that resonated in other nations faced with the task of commemorating the war dead. Via the 'national' cemeteries, and the purportedly national message they conveyed, nineteenth-century Americans established the triumphal nature of the public memorial at the cost of incorporating the Confederate memorialization process into the national story thereby denying, as it has been argued Americans still do, that 'dissent and violence' constitute 'key facets' of American national identity (Doss 2002: 79). Ultimately, however, it is as well to bear in mind Winter's caveat against an over-emphasis on the 'political landscapes' of war memorialization, a process that was as much personal as it was political, a 'collective expression, in stone and in ceremony, to help individual people...to accept the brutal facts of death in war' (Winter 1995: 94). In the end, as Walt Whitman realised, when the fighting ceased

and the nation was secured as a single nation, it had been achieved through the sacrifice of ‘*our* dead—or South or North, ours all.’¹⁴

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¹ On the development of the national cemeterial system see Steere 1948; 1953. General Orders No. 75: U.S. Statutes at Large, 37th Congress, Session II (July 17 1862) 596 at <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=012/llsl012.db&recNum=627> (10/06/04).

² New York *Times* 4th November 1863.

³ Extract from Dana's report quoted in Steere 1948: 160.

⁴ New York *Times* 4th and 15th November 1863.

⁵ Everett's address is reproduced in full in Wills 1992: 213-247. Quotations from this are on pages: 213-214.

⁶ Everett in Wills 1992: 245-6.

⁷ I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for highlighting this point.

⁸ Richmond *Examiner* reprinted in the New York *Times* 6th December 1863.

⁹ 'National Cemeteries,' *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 33 (195) (August 1866) 310-22: quotations 310-11, 312.

¹⁰ Charles Cowley, 'Our National Cemeteries,' *Bay State Monthly* 2(1) (October 1884): 60.

¹¹ New York *Times* 30th January 1868; R.E. Fenton in the New York *Times* 18th December 1867; New York *Times* 30th January 1868.

¹² Ambrose Bierce, 'A Bivouac of the Dead,' [1903] in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (London: Penguin Books, 2000) 248.

¹³ New York *Times* 6th July 1865.

¹⁴ Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* [1883] (New York: Dover Publications, 1995) 79.

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