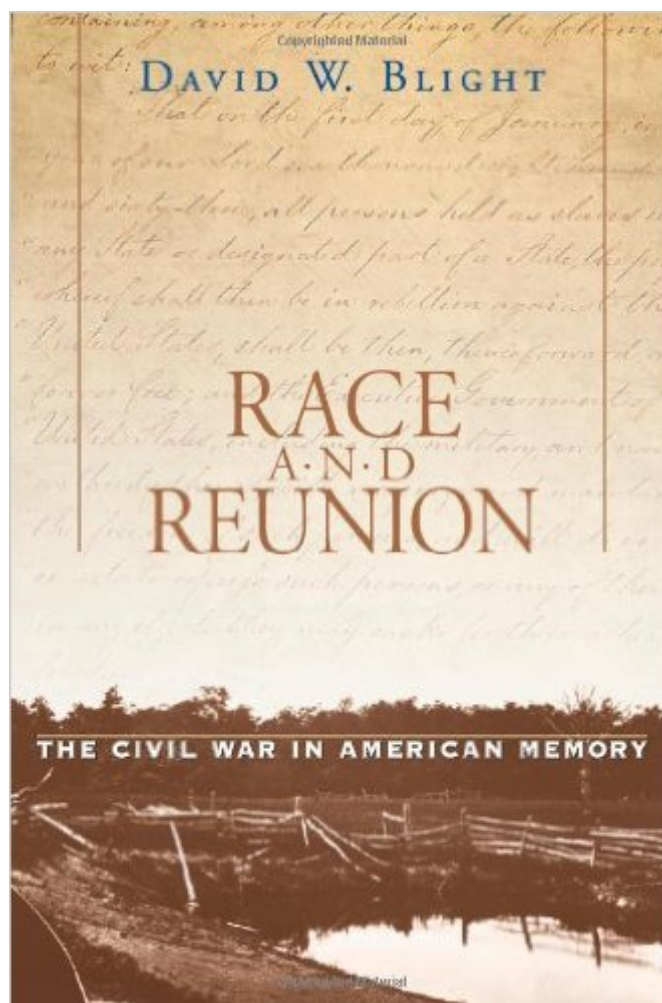


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Race And Reunion: The Civil War In American Memory



Synopsis

No historical event has left as deep an imprint on America's collective memory as the Civil War. In the war's aftermath, Americans had to embrace and cast off a traumatic past. David Blight explores the perilous path of remembering and forgetting, and reveals its tragic costs to race relations and America's national reunion. In 1865, confronted with a ravaged landscape and a torn America, the North and South began a slow and painful process of reconciliation. The ensuing decades witnessed the triumph of a culture of reunion, which downplayed sectional division and emphasized the heroics of a battle between noble men of the Blue and the Gray. Nearly lost in national culture were the moral crusades over slavery that ignited the war, the presence and participation of African Americans throughout the war, and the promise of emancipation that emerged from the war. *Race and Reunion* is a history of how the unity of white America was purchased through the increasing segregation of black and white memory of the Civil War. Blight delves deeply into the shifting meanings of death and sacrifice, Reconstruction, the romanticized South of literature, soldiers' reminiscences of battle, the idea of the Lost Cause, and the ritual of Memorial Day. He resurrects the variety of African-American voices and memories of the war and the efforts to preserve the emancipationist legacy in the midst of a culture built on its denial. Blight's sweeping narrative of triumph and tragedy, romance and realism, is a compelling tale of the politics of memory, of how a nation healed from civil war without justice. By the early twentieth century, the problems of race and reunion were locked in mutual dependence, a painful legacy that continues to haunt us today.

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Customer Reviews

David W. Blight's thorough research, assembled into the seminal book "Race and Reunion" demonstrates how our nation lost the great opportunity created by the Civil War to lay a solid foundation for racial equality and justice. Professor Blight explains how the desire to reunite the (white components) of the nation in reconciliation and brotherhood pushed the issue of African Americans and their rights to the sidelines. The causes of the Civil War--slavery and the status of African Americans in our society--were de-emphasized, and the virtues and nobility of the fighting man, both North and South was lauded. Neither was right, neither was wrong; both were brave, and their causes just. The idea that we should not judge veterans by the cause they fought lives with us today: this reviewer once participated in a dinner honoring a Russian pilot that fought for North Korea during the Korean War. Why did the Air Force honor a man who killed Americans for what many would consider one of the most evil regimes imaginable? Because he was a great "warrior." Our desire to avoid judging warriors began with the Civil War. It has damaged our moral sensibilities since. By reducing the Civil War to chivalrous recollections, the essential meaning of the war became lost, and the South was able to build myths of the Lost Cause, the happy slave, and an Antebellum Utopia. Reconstruction went down in US history books as a chapter of regional oppression. Professor Blight demonstrates that this was not by chance: the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and other organizations worked to ensure their views were in textbooks across the nation. They promoted the "faithful slave" image, awarded laudatory reminiscences of the Klan, and erected "Mammy" memorials.

In Race and Reunion, David Blight argues that white Americans from both the north and south redefined their understanding of the causes and meaning of the Civil War as they attempted to reconstruct the nation. For Blight, the causes of the war were alternately the preservation of the Union or of slavery, and its most important legacy was emancipation. This interpretation was rejected during the post-war era, however, because it stood in the way of reconciliation and renewal. After an initial period of deep hostility between the sections while wartime atrocities were still fresh in their minds, Americans began to remember the war by focusing upon the shared experiences of both sides, thereby reducing their focus on their initial differences. For many, it no longer mattered which side had been right, only that all had fought for deeply held beliefs with honor and glory. As demonstrated in the massive amount of evidence Blight has gathered from popularized histories, magazines, and fiction, the war and its participants were romanticized in a way that served to erase both its tragedy and its causes. The centrality of race and slavery in the conflict were thereby

forgotten by most, eventually to the point that southern apologists could even maintain that they had been right in preserving slavery, and few but black Americans would argue. Indeed, in the memories of former slaves and their descendents, the importance of emancipation was central to their understanding of the war, and the rejection of that interpretation by whites was a huge betrayal. Most whites however were exhausted by acrimony; they wanted to rebuild the nation and move forward, and could only do so by ceasing to argue a cause they felt the war had settled.

David W. Blight has written a monumental study about the central place of memory in American life. While *Race and Reunion* specifically deals with the end of the Civil War to 1913 (the fiftieth reunion of Gettysburg), it is a powerful reminder that how we think about our past defines our present and shapes our future. Blight's book is a necessary antidote for the easy nostalgia that too many Americans feel for ugly periods of our history. Indeed, the recent comments by Senator Trent Lott show that we have not fully learned the lessons that are so evident in this book. As Bernard Malamud wrote in *The Fixer*: "There's something cursed, it seems to me, about a country where men have owned men as property. The stink of that corruption never escapes the soul, and it is the stink of future evil." *Race and Reunion* tells how slavery went from being seen as corrupt to being remembered as an integral part of a respectable lifestyle. It also explains how the myths of the Lost Cause were told and retold throughout the nation until most of them became part of our accepted history. Blight uses extensive citations in his reconstruction of the campaign to legitimize the Confederate cause, the honor of rebel soldiers, and the belief that slavery was a mostly benign practice. The success of those wishing to rehabilitate the Old South was astonishing. Blight details a fact that I had never known, and one that is among the most outrageous in our history. In 1923, the United States Senate appropriated \$200,000 for a memorial to beloved and faithful mammies. This monument would have been located on Massachusetts Avenue and would have been the only national monument depicting African American "heroes." Thankfully, the bill died in the House.

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