

Uncivil War

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Whether you call in it the War of ‘Northern Aggression,’ The War Between The States, or The Civil War, one thing is for sure; this country is still fighting it to this very day. A lot of people say that we are as divided as we were right before the Civil War. I don’t know if this is true or not. But I do know that a house divided cannot stand. Besides, wars are not usually civil. There was a Frontline PBS special on a few weeks ago called the *Divided States of America*. Perhaps that is what we are. But having said that, one never knows where life will take you and I never dreamed I would move to the south. As a man of color and a diversity and anti-racism consultant, it appears that life indeed has a sense of humor for I never dreamed that not only would I leave New York City, I would father a child and marry a southern woman and move to the southland. I also never thought I would marry and divorce, (but not because of pedigree) a woman who is a descendent of Alexander Stephens, who was the Vice President of the Confederacy. This can only happen when we/you practice saying “yes” to the events and situations of life, as opposed to “why?” But somehow, I’m not sure Vice President Stephens imagined this from an ancestor either. It’s not that this is a bad thing, after all, life happens and life is a journey. It’s just that I had a very limited view of possibilities for myself when I was younger. Our daughter Kevyn, with her mother’s heritage and mine have been provided a rich legacy; for our daughter a legacy of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation for our ancestors. At least that’s the way I see it.

Another Son of the South, William Faulker once said that the past is never dead. In fact it’s not even past. How right he was. When I moved to Asheville from NYC, and my family in Baltimore has southern roots with some family members in Tarboro or Rocky Mount, North Carolina, I was, like most people, enamored by the natural beauty of the area. The politeness of the people whom I spoke to on a day to day basis, the yes, sir and no sir, the yes ma’am and no ma’am, reminded me of the way I was brought up by my parents. And yet underneath this genteel politeness, underneath this natural beauty, I could feel the lingering, at times seething, unfinished business of race. Yes, I could not help but notice the confederate flags, but I did overlook them as much as was humanly possible. I wanted to begin a new life with my wife at the time and to start a family. I knew that with my personality and gifts I could get along with most people. I also had to confront my own fear and stereotypes about many southerners and to take life and southerners one day at a time. When I first moved here I saw quite a number of interracial families, usually white women with men of color and that gave me a sense of security. Perhaps all was not lost. I noticed many of the gorgeous offspring of these marriages and relationships and that quieted my spirit a bit. I thought that perhaps there is a “New South” on the rise. I still do believe that. But at the time, all was fairly tranquil and serene it seemed, all was genteel and polite, until the subject of race came up. It was the elephant in the room. T.S. Elliott was once quoted as saying that humankind cannot bear very much reality. At times I felt, and still do feel that the majority of white America cannot bear too much reality about the history of this country and what it has

done to themselves and others. The brutality of some police officers, the economic injustices, sub- par education in communities of color all seems like this is something that is just being discovered when the history, the reality of this nation screams and shrieks otherwise.

David Goldberg, is the Robert Lee Bailey professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the author and editor of 13 books on the American South. In his book, *Still Fighting The Civil War; The American South and Southern History*. He writes in the introduction:

"I live in a tolerable yet sometimes intolerable place. Its sensual climate lures the unsuspecting, and the grace, manners, and civility of its citizens impart a preternatural quietude that belies the storm beneath. Its culture is rich in music, food, conversation, and literature; yet it can be a barren place, a tundra of conformity, a murderer of imagination, inquiry, and innovation....though I grew up elsewhere, I have spent more than half my life in the South and I do not pretend to understand it yet. Perhaps I never will"

Mr. Goldberg, like I and many others, do know that there is a war going on here in the South. It is an ancient conflict. This Uncivil War is like a ghost that has not yet made its peace and roams the land seeking solace, retribution, or vindication.

To justify this war and its sacrifices, not to mention its tragic conclusion for the South, white southerners had to exalt the cause for which they fought--white supremacy and patriarchy. Freedom was dangerous for the slave and it removed white women from the protection of white men. Many did not own slaves, but many did, and so when the war was lost, they lost their sense of dignity when they lost their slaves. James Baldwin puts it this way, *"If I am not who you say that I am then you are not who you think you are."*

Being a biblical people, many believed that "if the people obey the commandments, they yet have a future. These commandments and beliefs speak to the present as it served the needs of a defeated and disposed people. We see this type of perspective in the stories of the Old Testament when the Jews are slaves in Egypt and when the Babylonians have conquered the land. History and memory are intertwined. Tragedy is a central theme to establishing tradition. This is why the past seems so immanent; it is a wound that must be healed, a loss that must be redeemed. Southern history, like African American history is American history. Southern history is also world history.

African American southerners and European American southerners journeyed through the Uncivil War and Reconstruction together but created different traditions from the same event. Rather than sharing a common history, white southerners built a wall between themselves and their neighbors, and in the process, from each other.

White southerners are not the only people in history to have not learned from their past, have not learned from their mistakes, but the question is can they learn now. The country is so divided now. In learning from the past, two peoples separated by a common history can reconcile and build a new region, a new country.

The challenge is that the past is more than a clump of memories, it is an identity. It is the very core of a people's identity. Historian George B. Tindall tells us that, "to change is not necessarily to lose one's identity, to change sometimes is to find it."

The south has not yet reached a point of mutual acquiescence in the separate yet common histories of black and white, man and woman. Yet the possibilities are greater now than perhaps any time in our nation's history. It is vital to understand the traditional perspective of the Uncivil War when Americans killed each other wholesale, brother against brother, father against son. The Uncivil War appears in southern history as a heroic battle in defense of the Old South and American Constitutional principles. Reconstruction was a courageous battle against the enemies of these values, Yankees and African Americans. Southern white men had to restore control of African Americans and preserve their role as protectors of white women. I don't buy the economic arguments for the justification of the war. White women required protection so black men needed controlling.

A people who derive their identity from one particular version of history will most likely defend that version as they would their home and their families. They can no more deny this "past" than they would themselves.

Southern evangelical Protestantism became the accomplice to this historical version of racial and gender superiority. This version became as unerring as the Bible itself. In the days after the Uncivil War, the white man saw in his African American neighbor both the reason and the fact of his defeat. AA saw the Yankees soldiers, some of whom were black, as liberators and not oppressors. How southern consciousness has viewed and interpreted this history, has set the south apart from the rest of the country but not from the rest of the world.

When an urban industrialized nation grew to a world power by the early 20th century, the South looked backward (as many whites are doing today in this nation), embracing a culture different from the diverse, democratic society that emerged in the North. White southerners welcomed the latest technology which contributed to some economic progress, but their society rested on principles at odds with American ideals. Yes, the existence of white Americans generally speaking was one of white privilege so there was a great deal of selectivity about who benefited from those ideals (racism was alive and doing quite well in the north), but however imperfect, the North did become more inclusive while the South reveled in exclusivity, hierarchy, and homogeneity. However, imperfect, the North became for AA a place to pursue the American Dream and the South became the American nightmare because it was a place where a significant number of America's population could never fulfill their aspirations.

Most Americans know this although many still sing "Dixie." Throughout this nation's history, the American South has functioned, for good or ill, as a natural mirror, as a place of slavery, segregation, disfranchisement, predominately rural poverty and ignorance, in a land of prosperity. Not to mention the hint of self-righteousness in the North.

I have lived in the North for most of my life. Stereotypes abound. Many see the South as a place of ignorant country preachers, gun-totting people, rampaging against the government, education, and the arts, with politicians who raise hogs and lower taxes. Yes, many of these stereotypes are overblown, there is a bit of reality behind these perceptions. I don't know what the numbers are now, but in 1999, The Southern Focus Poll recorded that southerners still held more conservative racial views than the rest of the country concerning interracial marriage, affirmative action, interracial dating, and general attitudes toward diversity.

Nearly one half of the southern respondents read the Bible at home during the week, compared with less than one-third of non-southerners. Nearly one-third of southerners admitted that their minister offered advice and guidance on political matters, compared with only 18% of non-southerners. Almost two-thirds of the southern respondents agreed that some people are possessed by the devil, and 44% of non-southerners expressed that belief. Almost half of southerners agreed with the statement, (48%) "The U.S. is a Christian country and the government should make laws to keep it that way." 32% of non-southerners agreed with that statement. Take a walk around New York City, Bloomington, Minnesota, Chicago, Illinois, Greenwich, Connecticut, and you will find few people who self-identify as "northerners." You are only a northerner if you move down south. Suddenly, you have developed a new identity, no longer bound necessarily by ethnicity, religion, or race (but I feel these categories only add to the uncomfortability with this new identity). You are not just an outsider; you are a Yankee.

Of course this does not make any of us, northern or southern, less American. As with any group, one can have multiple allegiances.

The South has had its greatest political influence since the 1850s with its leadership in Congress. It has much influence over key domestic issues such as race relations, the role of religion and politics in society, the balance of federal power, and the federal budget and fiscal policy. What we will become as a nation in this century will very much depend on what happens in the South.

No doubt for some, this is both encouraging and frightening.

Encouraging because the people of the south have demonstrated a great capacity to initiate and experience great change. Frightening because the combustible mixture of a particular view of history and a religion that accompanies and gives strength to the old way of being is a detriment to the national interests.

That the south is still fighting the Uncivil War is a national concern demanding a serious look. And so the past is still very much with us (just look at the Crusades of the Middle East that is still going on). And so what we are witnessing, between the South and the North in our country as well as what we are witnessing in the Middle East is not just a conflict between Islam on the one hand and Christianity and Judaism on the other. It is rather a battle between religious fundamentalism and modernity, between a closed, exclusive, and hierarchical society against an open, diverse, and fluid civilization. People

in the South understand this very well. Can we finally learn the lessons of the past and create a better nation, to live together as brothers and sisters? Or will we perish together as fools. Only time will tell. I believe we can and will but it will take time. Yet if we don't, the consequences are truly tragic and unimaginable to consider. It would be a nightmare. At this time in our nation's history, we need all the help we can get. So if there is a god, we certainly need her now. Yet whether there is a god or not really isn't the issue. I choose to believe that you and I; that we are the ones we have been waiting for. You see the moral arc of the Universe does bend toward justice. Life is always moving toward wholeness and creativity. Dr. Howard Thurman reminds us that the contradictions of life are not final. Dr. King reminds us that Good Friday must come before Easter. Good defeated is still more powerful than so-called evil triumphant. Any movement toward Universal oneness can never be permanently defeated. And this is why I am totally confident that we shall overcome.