

The Future of Civil War Era Studies:

Nationalism

Michael T. Bernath

It takes no great powers of prediction to venture that scholarly interest in Civil War nationalism will persist, for two basic reasons. First, there is consensus, or near consensus, on the Civil War's vital role in the formation, reconfiguration or, at least, reinvigoration of American nationalism and national identity. The war itself is seen rightly as a crisis of nationalism, indeed of two nationalisms, and out of the fires and transformations of this war would emerge the modern conception and institutional framework of the American nation. Second, at the same time, no one seems to be able to agree on what nationalism is or, rather, how we should go about identifying, measuring, or mapping it. In short, everyone agrees that nationalism is important and no one can agree on what we are really talking about. For these reasons alone, Civil War historians will continue to debate.¹

I do not want to suggest, however, that nationalism studies have moved, or are doomed to move, in a circle. There has been a definite trajectory to the recent historical literature, and a spate of excellent studies on Civil War and mid-nineteenth-century American nationalism have provided fresh insights and opened exciting new areas for exploration.² Speaking generally, this recent work has had to grapple with a number of longstanding problems.

For instance, there is the problem of definition, which in the past has often been too narrowly conceived. To some extent, this is understandable, given the nature of the conflict. The war was a crisis of nationalism, and this has encouraged historians to view nationalism in overly

stark terms. Civil War Americans have been sorted into two categories—either they were nationalists or they were not. In other words, we often have applied an “if you are not with us, you are against us” test. This type of rigid categorization sometimes has led to the conflation of nationalism with political affiliation and support—support for the government, support for a party, support for particular political leaders (presidents), and so forth. In our own lives, of course, we understand that one need not support the current administration or the political party in power to have a nationalist outlook. We understand that disagreements are permissible, that there is no one single vision or platform of nationalism, and that it is not required that everyone march in lockstep for nationalism to exist. Yet, we often seem to apply these standards to Civil War Americans, and this has allowed us to draw lines too readily. It can cause us to overlook the nationalism of Democrats in the North, for instance. It can lead us to group all those opposed to Jefferson Davis in the Confederacy as antinationalists and to see their opposition as a sign of a lack of nationalism. In fact, some of Davis’s most vociferous critics were also the most ardent of Confederate nationalists, and their opposition to him did not mean that they did not desire a separate and independent southern nation—they just didn’t think that Davis was doing a good job of bringing it about.

Recent work, to its credit, has taken a broader, more inclusive, more nuanced view of Civil War nationalism. It has recognized that there are different conceptions and means of expression of nationalist sentiment. Rather than treating nationalism as an either/or position, these scholars see a spectrum, involving clusters of beliefs, symbols, ideas, and attachments (often conflicting) whose salencies shifted and changed over time. When viewed in this light, that there were disagreements and competing visions of the nation does not mean that nationalism did not exist or that it was necessarily weak. Indeed, such debates, such conflicts, are

intrinsic to all nationalist projects, and flexibility within nationalist thought and ideology is as important as its constraints. As a result, our understanding of Civil War nationalism has become much fuzzier and harder to quantify, but at the same time more dynamic, more true to life, and more human.

Recent work has also tried to extricate itself from some of the questions that so dominated the past scholarship on the subject. For Confederate studies, it is no longer necessary to prove that Confederate nationalism existed or to argue about its legitimacy (an ahistorical question in any case). Instead, for the past thirty years, the strong versus weak debate has shaped the field—a central component of the even larger internal versus external causes of Confederate defeat debate—and nearly every monograph on Confederate politics, leaders, soldiers, guerrillas, the home front, slavery and race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, economics, individual communities, unionism, loyalty, dissension, and resistance has weighed in, at least in part. The fruits of this ongoing debate have been many, and despite the inherent difficulties of measuring something as abstract and slippery as nationalism, scholars have employed great care and much analytical sophistication in delineating both what held the Confederacy together and what pulled it apart.³ However, while the subject is by no means exhausted and each new study deepens our understanding of the complexities and varieties of life in the Confederate States, the debate, as a debate, seems to have reached a point of diminishing returns. That Confederate nationalism was both strong and weak, depending on where, when, and among whom you look, and that its strength fluctuated greatly depending on the fortunes of war, proximity of the enemy, conditions and hardships at home, and the ability of the Confederate and state governments to respond to them has been well-established, and unless the issue is to be decided by the size of the stack of books in each camp, it is not clear how this overall picture is likely to change significantly.⁴

One way historians of Confederate nationalism have attempted to move beyond this binary discussion has been to focus on analyzing the content rather than trying to measure the strength of nationalist sentiment in the southern states. Following Drew Gilpin Faust's urging that we take Confederate nationalist ideology seriously, they have explored the substance, ideas, symbols, dissemination, duration, emotional touchstones, and concurrent resonances of Confederate nationalism without necessarily framing their studies within a strong versus weak dichotomy. Recent studies have explored Confederate nationalism's deep intellectual roots within antebellum American nationalism and challenged us to rethink the relationship between sectionalism and southern nationalism. Others have pushed the chronology in a different direction to show how Confederate identity persisted beyond the war. Still others have examined the different manifestations and outlets of Confederate nationalism, be they economic, cultural, generational, familial, religious, literary, or military.⁵

Recent studies of nationalism in the Civil War North (ironically, a field less developed than its Confederate counterpart) have also endeavored to show the different ways nationalism was constructed, explain the complicated relationship between northern and national identity, and reveal the different engines that drove its dissemination. They recognize that the fostering of nationalism is not always political and that it can have little to do with the activities of the official state. There has been particularly revealing work on the sometimes complementary but often conflicting relationship between ethnic and national identity, especially among Irish and German Americans.⁶ While historians of nationalism in the North have not been wedded to the same strong versus weak dichotomy of Confederate nationalism, they have been confronted with a different challenge: what to call it? American nationalism? Northern nationalism? Union nationalism? Strong cases have been made for each, but these terms are not interchangeable, and

they carry quite different historical, historiographical, and teleological arguments and assumptions.⁷ The sectional nature of the antebellum northern vision of American nationalism has yet to be fully rectified with the narrower, but more specifically and politically defined, Union nationalism that was plainly evident during the war and at other moments of political crisis.

Unlike historians of the Confederacy, historians of nationalism in the North are simultaneously blessed and challenged by the looming presence of the greatest and most articulate visionary of American nationalism that the country has produced, Abraham Lincoln; they are compelled to grapple with the role Lincoln and his ideas played in shaping wartime nationalism and our conception of American nationhood ever since. That Lincoln's vision of the nation and Union as presented in the Gettysburg Address, Second Inaugural, and elsewhere has wielded tremendous influence on subsequent generations is undeniable, but we must be careful not to assume a too direct and easy transference between Lincoln's pen and the minds of Civil War Americans.⁸ To track how these ideas were disseminated and interpreted and the extent to which they were accepted, absorbed and/or reflected by ordinary Americans, historians must resist, at least in part, the seductive siren's song of Lincoln's language.

More generally, a danger of Civil War nationalism scholarship has always been (and will always be) determinism. Since we know what is going to happen, since we know how the war will end, who will win, and what the United States will become afterward, we are predisposed to view nineteenth-century nationalist projects within certain contexts and as part of certain narratives. Indeed, the main reason historians have been interested in Confederate nationalism is to explain Confederate defeat, or, the more positive view, to explain how the Confederacy lasted as long as it did. Either way, they have been concerned primarily with the outcome of the

conflict. Similar assumptions (albeit not so explicit) inform our thinking about nationalism in the North, but here we are also always looking for what American nationalism will become. We are looking for roots and origins, as well as continuities. Thus, we have taken a primarily instrumentalist approach to nationalism. We are interested in it mainly because it helps us better understand and explain the coming, course, conduct, and legacy of the Civil War. There is nothing wrong with this, and these questions will certainly continue to drive our interest in Civil War nationalism. But these are not the only questions we can ask, nor is this the only context within which to view the activities of American nationalists—be they northern or southern—and new questions and new contexts are some of the areas that recent studies have pursued or at least suggested.

As our understandings of the creation, construction, substance, and dissemination of American nationalist sentiment and ideology have become more sophisticated, historians of the United States have become, or should become, more comfortable entering into the wider and by now long-established debates surrounding the rise of nationalism in the modern world. Nineteenth-century American nationalism has always held an awkward place for the scholars and theorists of nationalism.⁹ It has never quite seemed to fit the dominant models, remaining “an exception to most of the rules.”¹⁰ But as recent studies of Civil War Era nationalism have become more nuanced, it enables us to more fully engage in broader historical discussions about nineteenth-century conceptions of nationhood, to see the connections, similarities, and differences between what was happening in the United States and what was going on in the rest of the world. We all know that we are supposed to cite Benedict Anderson when talking about nationalism (and we almost always do in our introductions), and our working definitions of nationalism are certainly informed by, and even directly derived from, the work of the

nationalism theorists, but relatively few Civil War-era historians have undertaken the task of engaging and challenging these models and theories.¹¹ This is a missed opportunity not simply to bring parity to the American side of the story but to advance the overall discussion about the workings of nationalism in the nineteenth century generally. Given the focus of the dominant models on the rise of print culture, the spread of literacy, the role of popular politics, and the “voluntaristic” nature by which people chose to “*recognize* each other as belonging to the same nation” in the construction of modern nationalism, Civil War America would seem a good testing ground.¹² Here is a conflict fought explicitly over competing visions of American nationalism, by members of the most literate and politicized society (or societies) in the world, involving the raising of massive volunteer armies and the mass mobilization of civilian agricultural and industrial capacities, requiring the “imagining” of national communities of common causes and common interests across enormous distances and dispersed populations knitted together by modern mass communications and transportation networks.

Comparative nationalism studies are nothing new, but until very recently, most of those that have included the United States have focused on initial American independence. Excellent work has been done comparing independence movements and the rise of nationalism across the Western Hemisphere.¹³ But if the initial imagining of the American community has benefited from this larger perspective (call it comparative, transatlantic, or transnational), so too does the reimagining of the American community or, rather, communities in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴ Indeed, the commonalities and parallels between U.S. nationalism and nationalism elsewhere in the world are even clearer and perhaps more instructive in the nineteenth century than during that earlier period. Our perspective must be transnational because theirs was, and nineteenth-century Americans borrowed models and understandings of nationhood from others, even if they were

not always consciously aware of it. Like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, American nationalists were convinced of the centrality and modality of nationhood and that shared conviction demands our attention.

A broader perspective on Civil War nationalism not only allows us to contribute meaningfully to the unfolding discourse on nationalism in the modern world, but it also helps us better understand what nineteenth-century American nationalists thought they were up to. While we must engage more directly with the contemporary theoretical models of nationalism, we need not be beholden to them. Civil War-era Americans had their own theories about nationalism, and these deserve to be taken seriously. Nationalism was not something that happened to nineteenth-century Americans, not some inexorable force in which they found themselves passively caught. Rather, they consciously created, cultivated, and constructed it. They knew, or they thought they knew, what they were doing. They wrote, talked, sang, and painted about it and did so with their eyes wide open. Nineteenth-century Americans spoke and understood the language of nationalism even if they did not often use the word—preferring “nationhood,” “nationality,” or “national character.” This was something they shared with others around the globe, and these commonalities, these common understandings and methods of nation-making and legitimization, are significant.

By looking at Civil War nationalism as not simply an explanatory tool for defeat, victory, or persistence, and analyzing it within the context of broader nineteenth-century nation creation and theory, there are important lessons to be learned about what Americans thought nations were, why they thought they were important, and how they believed nations were to be constructed. If the problem for historians of early American identity has been grappling with the famous “roof without walls,” we who work in the mid-nineteenth century face a very different

challenge, a very different edifice—one more structurally sound, perhaps, but far more ungainly.¹⁵ We have lots of walls, not all of them load-bearing, and two different roofs to deal with.

Thus, my prediction, my hope, is that in addition to looking at nationalism within the context of the Civil War (as has been the dominant approach), historians will seek to explore and analyze the Civil War within the context of nationalism—not simply to use nationalism as a tool for explaining the onset and outcome of the war but to ask what the Civil War experience can teach us about the workings of nationalism itself.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this essay I discuss nationalism scholarship specifically as it pertains to the Civil War. The literature on postwar American nationalism is simply too large and too important to treat adequately in this short piece.

2. The broader scholarship on Civil War-era nationalism is discussed in the notes that follow, but here I am especially thinking about the work of Robert Bonner, Susan-Mary Grant, Anne Sarah Rubin, Paul Quigley, Melinda Lawson, Don Doyle, and John Majewski, as well as my own book.

3. Major works in this debate include Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Richard E. Beringer et al., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); Wayne K. Durrill, *War of Another Kind: A Southern Community in the Great Rebellion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Armstead L. Robinson, *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The*

Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861–1865 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); William Alan Blair, *Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation, 1861–1865* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Rable, *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution against Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). See also David Williams, *Rich Man's War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Williams, Teresa Crisp Williams, and David Carlson, *Plain Folk in a Rich Man's War: Class and Dissent in Confederate Georgia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Brian Steel Wills, *The War Hits Home: The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); Jacqueline Glass Campbell, *When Sherman Marched North from the Sea: Resistance on the Confederate Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

4. On the conditional nature of Confederate loyalty, see David Brown, "North Carolinian Ambivalence: Rethinking Loyalty and Disaffection in the Civil War Piedmont," in *North Carolinians in the Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. Paul D. Escott (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 7–36.

5. Faust, *Creation of Confederate Nationalism*; Robert E. Bonner, *Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Bonner, *Colors and Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Anne Sarah Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861–1868* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Paul Quigley, *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South, 1848–1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); John D. Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Peter S. Carmichael, *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Victoria E. Ott, *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age during the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008); Jason Phillips, *Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007); Michael T. Bernath, *Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

6. For instance, see Christian B. Keller, *Chancellorsville and the Germans: Nativism, Ethnicity, and Civil War Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007); Stephen D. Engle, “Yankee Dutchmen: Germans, the Union, and the Construction of Wartime Identity,” in *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America’s Bloodiest Conflict*, ed. Susannah J. Ural (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 11–55; Susannah Ural Bruce, *The Harp and the Eagle: Irish-American Volunteers and the Union Army, 1861–1865* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American under Fire: Irish*

Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009); Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986).

7. For an example of each, see Melinda Lawson, *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Susan-Mary Grant, *North over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000); Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Other important works on nationalism in the North include Peter J. Parish, *The North and the Nation in the Era of the Civil War*, ed. Adam I. P. Smith and Susan-Mary Grant (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003); Mark R. Wilson, *The Business of Civil War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861–1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Susan-Mary Grant, “From Union to Nation? The Civil War and the Development of American Nationalism,” in *Themes of the American Civil War: The War between the States*, ed. Grant and Brian Holden Reid, rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 295–316; Grant, “‘How a Free People Conduct a Long War’: Sustaining Opposition to Secession in the American Civil War,” in *Secession as an International Phenomenon: From America’s Civil War to Contemporary Separatist Movements*, ed. Don H. Doyle (Athens: University of Georgia, 2010), 132–50; Grant, “When Is a Nation not a Nation? The Crisis of American Nationality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Nations and Nationalism* 2, no. 1 (1996): 105–29; Frances Clarke, “‘Let All Nations See’: Civil War Nationalism and the Memorialization of Wartime Voluntarism,” *Civil War History* 52 (March 2006): 66–93. See also Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

8. For the most forceful assertion of the power of Lincoln's words, see Gary Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

9. The literature on nationalism is immense, but the most influential figures remain Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, and Anthony Smith. Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, the most widely read and often cited book on nationalism, does not ignore the New World (though it gives attention mainly to Latin America), but the focus quickly shifts following the initial rise of nationalism among American "Creole Pioneers." The Civil War, while briefly mentioned in the revised edition, does not play an important role in Anderson's analysis. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 201, 203.

10. Peter J. Parish, "An Exception to Most of the Rules: What Made American Nationalism Different in the Mid-Nineteenth Century?" *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives* 27 (Fall 1995): 219–29.

11. There are notable exceptions. See Susan-Mary Grant, "'The Charter of Its Birthright': The Civil War and American Nationalism," in *Legacy of Disunion: The Enduring Significance of the American Civil War*, ed. Grant and Peter J. Parish (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 188–206; Grant, "When Is a Nation not a Nation?"; Parish, "An Exception to Most of the Rules."

12. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 7. On the centrality of "print capitalism" in the construction of national consciousness, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

13. To their credit, scholars of the Revolutionary era have been employing comparative and/or transatlantic approaches since the days of R. R. Palmer. Palmer, *The Age of the*

Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959–64). See also Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (1962; repr., New York: Vintage, 1996); David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Gould and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

14. Thanks to the work of Don Doyle and others, the internationalization of Civil War-era nationalism is well underway. Don H. Doyle, *Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002); Doyle and Marco Antonio Pamplona, eds., *Nationalism in the New World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Doyle, ed., *Secession as an International Phenomenon: From America’s Civil War to Contemporary Separatist Movements* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010). For comparative and

transnational approaches to Civil War-era nationalism (in addition to the excellent essays in the above cited volumes), see James M. McPherson, *Is Blood Thicker than Water? Crises of Nationalism in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Nicholas Onuf and Peter Onuf, *Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); and Quigley, *Shifting Grounds*.

15. John M. Murrin, "A Roof without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 333–48.

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