

A Just War?

“War is hell,” said General William T. Sherman fifteen years after the end of a war in which he perhaps did more than anyone else to confirm that description. “War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it,” Sherman wrote on another occasion.

Harry Stout certainly agrees. The Jonathan Edwards Professor of American Religious History at Yale University and a leading scholar of early American religion, Stout regards the Civil War as the “fulcrum” of American history. The members of the generation that fought the war came of age during the era of the Second Great Awakening in American Protestantism. An understanding of their religious values and ideology, therefore, is necessary to appreciate the way in which that fulcrum worked. Stout decided not to write a “religious history” of the war that would focus “exclusively on chaplains and ministers,” however, but rather a “moral history” that “raises moral issues of right and wrong as seen from the vantage points of both the participants and the historian, who, after painstaking study, applies normative judgments.”¹

The starting points for such a judgment of “the rightness or wrongness of war” are theological definitions of “just war” going back to Saint Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century and Saint Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth. Just-war theory is divided into two principal categories: rationales for going to war (*jus ad bellum*) and principles

governing the conduct of war once it has begun (*jus in bello*). The only just reason for going to war is self-defense; therefore “just wars are always *defensive* wars,” and unprovoked aggression “is always wrong.”²

On the question of *jus ad bellum*, Northerners in 1861 had no trouble making such a moral judgment: Confederates started the war by firing on Fort Sumter, an unprovoked act of aggression that forced the United States to fight a defensive war to preserve its existence as one nation. Abraham Lincoln put it this way in his second inaugural address: “Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish.”³

Southerners, on the other hand, had no doubt that Lincoln’s government was the aggressor because it refused to bow to Confederate demands for the peaceful surrender of Fort Sumter to the secessionist government, thereby provoking the Confederacy to open fire. As Jefferson Davis expressed it: “He who makes the assault is not necessarily he that strikes the first blow or fires the first gun.” Lincoln’s attempt to resupply the fort’s garrison with food, said Davis, made “the reduction of Fort Sumter” a “measure of defense rendered absolutely and immediately necessary.”⁴

Stout’s expressed intention to offer “moral judgments” and a “determination of right or wrong” might cause the reader of *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (2006) to expect such a judgment on this crucial question of *jus ad bellum*. But the reader will be disappointed. “In civil wars,” Stout writes, “it often becomes difficult to discern with finality who is the unjust aggressor and who the just defender.” Really? He had convinced us that it is the duty of the moral historian to make such a “determination of right or wrong,” difficult or not. But because in the American Civil War “each side joined the battle convinced that its cause was just,” the moral historian is somehow absolved from the responsibility of determining right and wrong.⁵ In what war, we might ask, did one side or the other *not* consider its cause just?

In any event, Stout's book concentrates on the second part of just-war theory, the conduct of war (*jus in bello*), and on the justification of each side's conduct by the principal moral arbiters of the time, the Protestant clergy. Most nations recognize limitations on the savagery of warfare defined by "rules of engagement" and "laws of war." The Geneva Conventions, international treaties, and domestic legislation spell out these limitations. They rest on two basic precepts of just-war theory: proportionality and discrimination. Proportionality requires that the means be appropriate to the end—a nuclear bomb must not be dropped on a city to destroy a single weapons factory. Discrimination separates combatants from noncombatants—the former are a legitimate target but the latter are not, except in the case of "collateral damage," in which noncombatants are unintentionally killed or wounded or their property destroyed.

Measured by these criteria, the conduct of the Civil War was just in its initial stages because it was a limited conflict between uniformed soldiers whose goals were either Confederate independence or restoration of the Union. But the war grew increasingly unjust, according to Stout, as it escalated to what he calls a "total war" by the North to destroy the social and economic infrastructure of the Old South (including slavery) and to build a New South on its ruins. Commander in Chief Lincoln and his generals, therefore, bore the main responsibility for what became an unjust war.

In his proclamation of April 15, 1861, calling state militias into federal service to suppress the insurrection started by the firing on Fort Sumter, Lincoln enjoined these troops to avoid "any devastation, any destruction of, or interference with, property, or any disturbance of peaceful citizens." Eight months later, in a message to Congress, Lincoln reiterated his concern that "in considering the policy to be adopted for suppressing the insurrection, I have been anxious and careful that the inevitable conflict for this purpose shall not degenerate into a remorseless revolutionary struggle."⁶ Even General Sherman, at this stage of the war, did his best to instill in soldiers "a common sense

of decency...to respect [civilian] life and property,” or “we ought never to hope for any friends in Virginia.” As late as July 1862 the North’s senior general at the time, George B. McClellan, insisted that the war “should not be, at all, a war upon population; but against armed forces....Neither confiscation of property...[n]or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment.”⁷

So far so good; official Union policy was consistent with just-war principles of proportionality and discrimination. This policy of a sword for enemy armies and an olive branch for Southern civilians proceeded from an assumption that a residual Unionism would bring the South back into the United States when Confederate armies were defeated. By the summer of 1862, however, that faith in Southern Unionism was wearing thin. So was the distinction between combatants and noncombatants in the parts of the Confederacy and border states occupied by Union forces. The crops and livestock of Southern civilians were feeding and clothing Confederate armies. Their slaves were the principal labor force in the Confederate war economy. Thousands of Southern civilians became guerrillas who roamed behind Union lines destroying supplies and ambushing unarmed as well as armed Unionists. Little more than a year after his reference to respecting Southern property in order to win friends, Sherman had become convinced, as he wrote in a letter to Henry Halleck in 1864, that “all in the South *are* enemies of all in the North.... The whole country is full of guerrilla bands.... The entire South, man, woman, and child, is against us, armed and determined.... We are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make [them] feel the hard hand of war.”⁸

Lincoln did not put it as starkly as Sherman, but by midsummer 1862 he was moving toward similar conclusions. “Lincoln came to understand,” writes Stout, “that if his aim of preserving the Union was to be achieved, the war would have to be escalated to a total war on both citizens and soldiers.”⁹ The newly appointed commander of Union forces in northern Virginia, General John Pope, issued a series of orders authorizing his troops to “subsist upon the country,” to hold civilians

responsible for shooting at Union soldiers from their houses, to execute captured guerrillas who fired on Union troops, to expel from occupied territory any civilians who refused to take an oath of allegiance to the United States, and to treat them as spies if they returned. Lincoln approved these orders as well as an order by the War Department authorizing commanders “to seize and use any property, real or personal,” that would help the war effort.¹⁰ To professed Southern Unionists who protested such actions, Lincoln responded bluntly: “What would you do in my position? Would you . . . prosecute [the war] in future with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose-water? . . . Would you give up the contest, leaving any available means unapplied?”¹¹

For Stout, these actions and words should be seen as the beginning of a slide down a slippery slope to the barbarism of an unjust war. Lincoln’s “taste for blood,” he writes, bore “a large portion of the responsibility for unimaginable suffering and death” and for “campaigns of such unmitigated violence, slaughter, and civilian suffering.” In the end this policy may have won the war—but at an immoral cost. “Lincoln’s war strategy was and remains genius. That does not make it right.”¹²

In Stout’s view, the only redeeming feature of this obscenity of total war was the abolition of slavery. “The justness of abolition and the freedom of four million,” he writes, “dictates that any moral history of slavery unconditionally conclude that the right side won, no matter what the casualties and sacrifices.”¹³ Stout is uncomfortably aware that emancipation was an integral and essential part of the escalation to total war. Slaves were property owned by enemy civilians; their confiscation and emancipation and the ultimate abolition of slavery by the Thirteenth Amendment represented the destruction of the largest single category of Southern property. In practical terms, Stout acknowledges, “emancipation was necessary as a means to total war.” But it also gave the war “an unprecedented moral stature, allowing the Northern public to fasten on the ‘good’ of emancipation without ever inquiring into the ‘bad’ of unjust conduct in a total war.”¹⁴

For all of his forcefulness in praising abolition and his indignation in damning an unjust war against Southern civilians, and his awkward admission that the latter was necessary to achieve the former, Stout never makes clear which he regards as the greater evil: slavery or total war. Instead, he resorts to what can only be labeled an evasion: “But this book is not a moral history of slavery. It is a moral history of a war, where questions of proportionality and discrimination continue to remain in play.”¹⁵

By a twist of logic difficult to follow, Stout considers black soldiers fighting for freedom to have been engaged in a just war even as white soldiers fighting for the same cause were not. “If anyone had a ‘cause’ that could meet all the moral scruples of a just war, it was the slaves and freedmen,” he believes. “The willingness of black soldiers to fight and die helped to transform the moral meaning of the Civil War from a war for Union to a ‘crusade’ for freedom.”¹⁶

The Union army’s organization of black regiments in the second half of the war produced retaliatory actions that undermined any claim the South made to be fighting a just defensive war. The Confederacy refused to exchange captured black prisoners of war under the agreement negotiated in 1862, thus bringing a halt to exchanges; this led to the deaths of thousands of POWs, both Union and Confederate, in fetid and overcrowded prison camps. Even more heinous was the cold-blooded murder by Confederate soldiers of captured black troops on a half-dozen battlefields after they had surrendered. The most notorious such case occurred at Fort Pillow on the Mississippi River on April 12, 1864, when Confederate troopers commanded by General Nathan Bedford Forrest shot at least a hundred black captives.

More lethal, perhaps, but less publicized was the Battle of the Crater at Petersburg, Virginia, on July 30, 1864, when a Confederate counterattack captured several hundred black prisoners, many of whom were shot as they were led, disarmed, to the rear. General Robert E. Lee, writes Stout, “observed the carnage from only five hundred yards away and obviously knew of the murders taking place. In yet

another searing enactment of the inhumane racial civil war within the Civil War, he made no comment, then or later.”¹⁷

Curiously, in Stout’s account Forrest receives no stronger censure than Lee because Forrest “neither ordered nor condoned the massacre” but, like Lee, merely did nothing to stop it. Recent scholarship on Fort Pillow, however, challenges the notion that Forrest did not condone it.¹⁸ But even if he—like Lee—only failed to restrain his men, “it was a lesson in moral avoidance that Northern generals would also learn perfectly.”¹⁹

What does Stout mean by this last sentence? He is drawing a parallel between Confederate commanders who did not prevent the murder of black prisoners and Union commanders who did not prevent their soldiers from burning and pillaging civilian property. Whether there was in fact a moral equivalency between these actions is a question largely unexamined in Stout’s book. He implies, however, that one was as bad as the other. On the last page of the book, he suggests that the top officials and commanders on both sides were equally culpable for terrible deeds in this unjust war. “Americans don’t want to concede the unforgivable wrongs committed by the likes of Lincoln, Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Lee, Forrest, Early, and Davis.”²⁰

What, then, is one to make of Stout’s dedication of his book to the memory of his father, “a warrior sailor in a just war”—World War II? The chief ground on which Stout condemns the Civil War as unjust is its increasing failure to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants (including disarmed prisoners). But all nations in World War II did this on a scale a hundredfold greater than either side in the Civil War. Sherman’s “bummers” wantonly destroyed much civilian property on their marches through Georgia and especially South Carolina, but Allied bombers in World War II destroyed not only property but hundreds of thousands of civilian lives as well.

Through carelessness or misrepresentation, Stout grossly inflates the number of civilian casualties directly caused by military action in the Civil War. Lincoln and his generals, he claims, “deliberately targeted

civilian farms, cities, and—in at least fifty thousand instances—civilian lives.”²¹ His cited source for this information is my own estimate in *Battle Cry of Freedom*. But I made clear that this estimate referred to *indirect* consequences of the war in the South: the inevitable results of transportation disruptions, the loss of crops and livestock from army operations by both sides, the overcrowding of refugees fleeing from war zones, and the like, which caused shortages and fatigue and malnutrition that in turn lowered resistance to disease. The highest civilian mortality rate actually occurred among slaves who fled their owners for freedom and crowded into “contraband camps” behind Union lines, where they became prey to diseases and sometimes to murderous raids by Confederate guerrillas.

Except for guerrilla raids, none of the civilian casualties was “deliberately targeted.” And in fact, civilian casualties in the American Civil War were far fewer than in large-scale European wars from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. These included the Thirty Years’ War, the Napoleonic Wars, and of course World Wars I and II (including the influenza pandemic of 1918–19), in which civilian deaths, direct and indirect, were twice to several times greater than soldier deaths. In the Civil War, even if my estimate of fifty thousand civilian deaths is accurate, that was one-fifteenth of the 750,000 soldiers who are estimated to have died.²²

Another example of misrepresentation occurs in Stout’s discussion of Sherman’s siege of Atlanta in August 1864. Atlanta was a heavily fortified city defended by an army of forty thousand men and containing important war industries and railroad facilities. Sherman’s shelling of the city was quite legitimate according to the laws of war, though Stout implies otherwise. Many houses as well as warehouses and factories were damaged or destroyed by the shelling. But civilian casualties in Atlanta were remarkably low. Stout, however, cites an alleged letter from Sherman to Confederate General John Bell Hood in which Sherman, according to Stout, “estimated that five hundred ‘rebel’ civilians were killed and twenty-five hundred wounded. Given the source, one can

assume these figures are significantly understated.” Stout’s cited source, however, mentions neither a letter from Sherman nor five hundred civilian dead and twenty-five hundred wounded. But another page of the same source notes a total of twenty documented civilian deaths from the shelling.²³ So far as I am aware, no historian of the Atlanta campaign and no Sherman biographer has ever heard of this supposed letter. One of them wrote to me: “Stout has a good imagination.”

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AS A HISTORIAN of American religion, Stout is particularly concerned with the function of churches and their pastors as moral arbiters in what he portrays as an increasingly immoral war. They mostly flunked their assignments. In both North and South they preached that God was on their own side and that the Godless enemy’s cause was evil. The clergy became “virtually cheerleaders all,” which prevented them from expressing “moral criticism directed at one’s own cause” or addressing “the question of what constitutes a just war, and what limitations ought to be observed in the unpleasant event of war.” They “fell victim to the sheer power of patriotism” and “privilege[d] patriotism over spirituality.” Believing in “the absolute moral right on each side . . . America’s clerical arbiters supported the war without any real qualifications.” Along with secular molders of public opinion, the clergy, especially in the North, provided “moral justification and endorsement” of the descent into total war, which “goes a long way to explain how military destruction and civilian suffering reached the levels they did.”²⁴

Most secular as well as religious leaders subscribed to the “God is on our side” moral absolutism, according to Stout. One who did not, for which he earns the author’s praise, was Abraham Lincoln. He was “one of the few principals in the war capable of transcending the prevailing rhetoric of absolute right and wrong” and who could “perceive right and wrong on both sides.”²⁵ In his remarkable second inaugural address, Lincoln noted that each side in the war “invokes [God’s] aid against the other.” Both could not be right; in fact neither was right, for

“the Almighty has His own purposes,” which Lincoln suggested might include the punishment of both for the sin of slavery, of which North and South were equally guilty.²⁶ On this issue Stout considers Lincoln sound both in theology and morality. But what about the author’s repeated censures of Lincoln’s “taste for blood,” his “responsibility for unimaginable suffering and death”? These were the result of pragmatic military strategy, Stout claims, not of moral absolutism.

Some readers might find it difficult to reconcile these two views of Lincoln. And Stout’s ambivalence toward the man he describes on one occasion as “a Christ-like messiah for the reconstituted American nation” extends to the matter of civil religion. This typically American phenomenon is a “religion” of patriotism in which icons like the flag and other symbols of nationalism are objects of reverence. “Many Americans,” writes Stout, “equate dying for their country with dying for their faith.” The “sheer blood sacrifice” of soldiers “on the national altar” was a “baptism of blood” that “would incarnate the national faith.”²⁷ In the South this sacrifice was most notably associated with the death of Stonewall Jackson, “by which a Confederate civil religion was incarnated through a violent atonement.” The “Christian heroism” of generals like Jackson and Lee “effectively fus[ed] patriotism with the same Christian legitimation that prevailed in the North. By August 1863 the war had created and consecrated two American civil religions, mortally opposed, but both Christian and both ‘American.’”²⁸

The Southern civil religion persisted even after defeat in the form of “Lost Cause” reverence for the Confederate battle flag and the men who carried it through four years of blood sacrifice in a doomed but noble cause. The dominant American civil religion, however, was bequeathed by the nationalism of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, which expressed a “mystical reverence for the Union as itself something sacred and worthy of sacrificial worship.” The “sacralization of this particular battlefield,” Stout maintains, “would mark it forever after as the preeminent sacred ground of the Civil War—and American wars thereafter.” And at the moment of victory, Lincoln’s martyrdom by

assassination (on Good Friday) transformed him “from the prophet of America’s civil religion to its messiah.”²⁹

For Stout, therefore, “the incarnation of a national American civil religion may have been the final great legacy of the Civil War.” But this legacy, he writes, might be more curse than blessing. It reinforced America’s sense of its “messianic ‘mission’ to be a ‘redeemer nation’ ” that “identifies Providence with the ‘idealistic conception of American destiny.’ ” By “linking emancipation and the ‘crusade’ [a word Lincoln never used] against slavery to total war and a ‘crusade’ against the Confederacy, Lincoln’s administration watered the seeds of an American-led Christian imperialism that was not without costs in later American history.”³⁰

It was this type of messianic crusade that brought on this “cruel and senseless war” in the first place, according to David Goldfield’s sweeping narrative of the Civil War era, *America Aflame*.³¹ Goldfield places his interpretation in the tradition known as “revisionism” after a school of historians in the 1930s and 1940s. The revisionists denied that sectional differences between North and South were genuinely divisive. Disparities that existed did not have to lead to war; they could have, and should have, been accommodated peacefully within the political system. But self-serving politicians—a “blundering generation,” as one revisionist historian described them—whipped up passions in North and South for partisan purposes. By 1861 these passions grew out of control and erupted in a “needless war.”³²

Although not as stark in his presentation of a similar thesis, Goldfield makes clear his conviction that the war should have been avoided. His villains, however, are not self-serving and blundering politicians; rather, the culprit is “the invasion of evangelical Christianity into the political debate as an especially toxic factor in limiting the options of political leaders.” The “elevation of political issues into moral causes,” especially antislavery, “poisoned the democratic process.”³³

Goldfield never defines precisely what he means by “evangelical Christianity.” He mainly refers to social reform movements like temperance and abolitionism generated by the Second Great Awakening among

Protestant denominations that injected moral fervor into politics, “especially in the Republican Party.”³⁴ His use of evangelicalism, however, tends to be loose and expansive. He tries to connect Lincoln with this tradition, but it is an uphill battle. Lincoln’s House Divided speech in 1858 “reflected a growing messianic sentiment” in his views, Goldfield maintains, because the metaphor was taken from a biblical passage in Matthew 12:25. “Lincoln not only identified the Republican Party with the forces of liberty and freedom all over the world,” writes Goldfield, “but also framed the debate as a contest between good and evil.” “As I view the contest,” he has Lincoln say, “it is not less than a contest for the advancement of the kingdom of Heaven or the kingdom of Satan.”³⁵ These words were not Lincoln’s, however; they were written *to* Lincoln by an antislavery farmer.³⁶ Another example of careless attribution of evangelicalism concerns the “Secret Six” abolitionists who supported John Brown’s raid in 1859 and their “close ties to evangelical Protestantism.”³⁷ To the contrary, four of the six were Unitarians.

Goldfield is not consistent in his revisionist position. Summarizing what he considers the trumped-up debates over slavery’s expansion in the 1840s and 1850s, he asserts that all too often “reality fled.” In the controversy over the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which opened Kansas Territory to slavery, “reality, a rare commodity since the introduction of the Wilmot Proviso, became ever more elusive. . . . Most of the issues worked little harm or benefit to either side,” but “the reality, again, no longer mattered. In this atmosphere, demagogues prospered, and moderates faltered.”³⁸

In a change of tune, however, he declares that the secession crisis of 1861 was concerned with “the core of the sectional problem,” slavery. “It had always been thus.” The war that ensued abolished slavery. “There may have been other ways to achieve that noble end,” Goldfield writes in what amounts to wishful thinking, for while noting that all of the slaves could have been purchased and freed for half the cost of the war, he acknowledges that there were almost no willing sellers in the slave states. And “a new and stronger nation emerged from the fire

of war,” he writes, a “nation energized and inspired by the war’s ideals. . . . The war unleashed an economic revolution, unparalleled innovation and a degree of affluence across a broader segment of society than any Western nation had known.”³⁹ Perhaps the Civil War was not so cruel and senseless after all.

Many Americans—perhaps most of them, according to George Rable’s *God’s Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War*—would have seen the bad as well as the good accomplished by the war as God’s will. “Men, women, and children, free and slave, Protestants, a growing number of Catholics, Mormons, and even the small number of Jews . . . shared a providential outlook on life” and “saw God’s hand in the war’s origins, course, and outcome.”⁴⁰

Most clergymen as well as their parishioners in both North and South viewed the war as a holy cause. With little or no debt to St. Augustine, they came up with their own just-war theology. Unionists and Confederates alike believed that they stood at Armageddon and battled for the Lord. Devout Confederate commanders like Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee, and similarly committed Union generals like William S. Rosecrans and Oliver O. Howard gave credit to the Lord for their victories. Defeats were God’s judgment on the sins of His people in order to humble and discipline them to greater devotion and effort. Victories brought forth presidential proclamations for days of thanksgiving; defeats elicited decrees for days of fasting, humiliation, and prayer. People in both North and South became more religious as the war went on and on, the toll of death and destruction mounted, and God’s will for His almost chosen peoples became more inscrutable. Soldiers facing death or maiming experienced religious conversions; many revivals occurred in the armies, especially in the Confederacy. Jefferson Davis was baptized in May 1862 and joined St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond. Two years later, Confederate general Leonidas Polk, who was also an Episcopal bishop, baptized Joseph E. Johnston, John Bell Hood, and several other Confederate generals in the Army of Tennessee.

Abraham Lincoln also became more religious under the stresses of war. He occasionally attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, but he never joined a church. He did meditate more profoundly on the will of God in this war, however, than almost anyone else. “It is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party,” Lincoln mused in an undated memorandum, probably sometime in 1864. He could have “saved or destroyed the Union without war,” but He had not. And “he could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.”⁴¹

In his second inaugural address on March 4, 1865, with the war near its victorious conclusion, Lincoln expanded this idea. “Both [parties] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.... The prayers of both could not be answered,” he said. “The Almighty has His own purposes,” Lincoln continued.

Let us suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came.... Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”⁴²

If Lincoln was right, the abolition of slavery was not the self-congratulatory triumph of the “messianic mission” of a “redeemer nation,” as Harry Stout would have it, but God’s will after He had purged a guilty nation of the sin of enslaving an entire people by the cleansing agency of a terrible war.