

Civil War Film Project

Interview with Robert Penn Warren

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The Civil War was a secret school for 1917-1918 and 1941-1945.

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The Civil War offers a gallery of great human images for our contemplation. It affords a dazzling array of figures, noble in proportion yet human, caught in time as in a frieze, in stances so profoundly touching or powerfully mythic that they move us in a way no mere consideration of "historical importance" ever could. We can think of Lincoln alone at night in the drafty corridors of the White House, the shawl on his shoulders; of Jackson's dying words; of Lee coming out of the McLean farmhouse at Appomattox to stare over the heads of his waiting men who crowded around, and strike his gauntleted hands deliberately together; of Sam Davis, with the rope around his neck, giving the federal soldiers the order for his own execution, the order which General Dodge was too overcome by emotion to give; of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, Harvard '60, who led his black Fifty-fourth Massachusetts in its ultimate test of manhood, died with the cry, 'Forward, my boys!' and was buried under the heaps of his own men in the ditch before Fort Wagner; of Grant, old, discredited, dying of cancer, driving pen over paper, day after day, to tell his truth and satisfy his creditors.

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The War meant that Americans now saw America. The farm boy of Ohio, the trapper of Minnesota, and the pimp from the Mackerelville section of New York City saw Richmond and Mobile. They not only saw America, they saw each other, and together shot it out with some Scot of the Valley of Virginia or ducked hardware hurled by a Louisiana Jew who might be a lieutenant of artillery, CSA.

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With the war the old America, with all its virtues and defects, was dead. With the war the new America, with its promise of realizing the vision inherited from the old America, was born. But it was born, too, with those problems and paradoxes which Herman Melville, during the war, could already envisage when he wrote that the wind of history "spins against the way it drives," and with that success, "power unanointed" may come to corrupt us," And the iron dome, stronger for stress and strain/ Fling her huge shadow athwart the main; but the founders' dream shall flee." Melville was, of course, referring to the fact that in the middle of the Civil War, the old wooden dome of the Capitol was replaced by one of iron.

Blood is the first cost. History is not melodrama, even if it usually reads like that. It was real blood, not tomato catsup or the pale ectoplasm of statistics, that wet the ground at Bloody Angle and darkened the waters of Bloody Pond. It modifies our complacency to look at the blurred and harrowing old photographs--the body of the dead sharpshooter in the Devil's Den at Gettysburg or the tangled mass in the bloody lane at Antietam.

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Northerners, from different motives at different periods, tend to favor the view that the Civil War was inevitable. In one perspective, for some members of earlier generations, living under the bruising and bloody shock of the event, one appeal of the inevitability theory may have been that it relieved the Northerner of certain unpleasant speculations about his own hand in the proceedings.

The word tragedy is often used loosely. Here we use it at its deepest significance: the image in action of the deepest questions of man's fate and man's attitude toward his fate. For the Civil War is, massively, that. It is the story of a crime of monstrous inhumanity, into which almost innocently men stumbled; of consequences which could not be trammelled up, and of men who entangled themselves more and more vindictively and desperately until the powers of reason were twisted and their very virtues perverted; of a climax drenched with blood but with nobility gleaming ironically, and redeemingly, through the murk; of a conclusion in which, for the participants at least, there is a reconciliation by human recognition.

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Beyond the satisfaction it may give to rancor, self-righteousness, spite, pride, spiritual pride, vindictiveness, armchair blood lust, and complacency, we can yet see in the Civil War an image of the powerful, painful grinding process by which an ideal emerges out of history. That should teach us humility beyond the great alibi and the treasury of virtue, but at the same time it draws us to the glory of the human effort to win meaning from the complex and confused motives of men and the blind ruck of event.

Looking back on the years 1861-65 we see how the individual men, despite failings, blindness, and vice, may affirm for us the possibility of the dignity of life. It is a tragic dignity that their story affirms, but it may evoke strength. And in the contemplation of the story, some of that grandeur, even in the midst of the confused issues, shadowy chances, and brutal ambivalences of our life and historical moment, may rub off on us. And that may be what we yearn for after all.

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To give things labels, we may say that the War gave the South the Great Alibi and gave the North the Treasury of Virtue. By the Great Alibi the South explains, condones, and transmutes everything. By a single reference to the "War," any Southern female could, not long ago, put on the glass slipper and be whisked away to the ball. Any goose could dream herself (or himself) a swan - surrounded, of course, by a good many geese for contrast and devoted hand-service.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. said, long before his great fame: "You could not stand up day after day in those indecisive contests where overwhelming victory was impossible because neither side would run as they ought to when beaten without getting at least something of the same brotherhood for the enemy that the north pole of a magnet has for the south..."

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Oh yes. It reminds me, by the way, of a Oliver Wendell Holmes remark that the Northern soldier as he was, wounded six times, got the feeling of brotherhood for the Southern soldier because they wouldn't run away. Neither side would run away as they ought to go. They just stayed on. And they had the affinity for each other the north pole of a magnet has for the south pole. But anyway, a good example of that seems to me to be this tale about....Stonewall Jackson's baby was born during the war. And one night Southern pickets very close to the Northern picket line heard the news of Jackson's baby's birth and so they burst into cheers and cheered General Jackson. And the Federal pickets so close said, "What are you cheering about?" The said, "Jackson's got a baby." Well the whole line of Northern pickets went and cheered the baby too. A strange kind of comradeship.

They were all trapped. They sensed they were all in it together, I guess. They all were the victims. They all were caught in the same machine of some kind. And also, you had on both sides certain admiration for the worthy enemy. Lee could command applause. And Grant was recognized, or Sherman for their abilities. They were soldiers too. They recognized a common craftsmanship. Put it that way.

He did. James built Gould Shaw's Memorial, that Saint Gaudens put on the Common in Boston long after the event, yes.

James said--I can't quote it exactly--but he was talking about victory and defeat in war and he says, "Where something should lie. Something should always lie with each side that can recognize the virtues of their opponent."

...of the opponent. Now that's not the exact phrase but that's the exact idea, that can understand the quality of the opponent. Quality demands respect.

Well, I know what you mean. Sure, I know what you mean.

It's been said elsewhere in many forms, the same idea, that not only they are all in the same trap, North and South, an individual could see himself as trapped, too. He was there against his will easily but...I've lost track of what we were talking about, tell you the truth.

I don't know. It's an insoluble tangle, it seems to me. Strange things like this happen. I have to check this carefully. But the basic fact is anyway that in the legislature of '31, '30-'31, Virginia missed Emancipation by one vote. Tangles of that, but that's miraculous. And four years later, you see, they had Turner's Rebellion. Now this, its tangled. And then some Caribbean stuff, but the panic then set in as apparently that could never happen again. Before that event...It's a historical accident. I mean, no price tag on it, you see.

Well, that's the case, obviously, and isn't it? But that's just saying it was damn foolishness.

How do I.... it looks idiocy from our perspective. But localisms....we've lost them now. Your country was where you lived, the place you had some identity, I don't know. But it's true. I mean it seems incredible now to us. But also the State's Rights system of belonging to a section, or to a state....Hawthorne would say that New England was as big a country as he could imagine about him. Beyond that he couldn't grasp it.

....you see. Cotton growers and a few others are by the fact that they wanted secession because their debts got cancelled, their personal debts got cancelled. That's one theory, I have no details of this. But there are all sorts of facts as it may have never been. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. I have no facts on that. That's just one of the theories.

Well, at Gettysburg the problem of getting rid of the wounded in a protracted battle is enormous. And another thing is getting artillery supplies up with a heavy and a hard to handle mule wagon and so forth, well General Halp at Gettysburg built a railroad to the battlefield. He flung it down and overnight, overnight, really, got a railroad going. So they had a train to carry back the wounded them out so they wouldn't interfere with the battle and also keep the ammunition for the artillery. But they could ...Lee had to bring all this stuff by wagon from Virginia. So there's ammunition right there. That's a crucial factor and the battle...of a wounded in a battle...You got to get them out of the way. It's a several day battle, you see.

That's a historian named Frank Ausey (?) did a book on States' Rights. And it concludes by saying on the tombstone of the Confederacy'd be the inscription: 'Died of States' Rights. Well States' Rights was a suicidal principle.

Well, I think this is right now. I know it might not be exactly the number but it's a terrific number... in the early days of the war, the state of Georgia had I think it was 200,000 firearms, muskets and rifles. At the same time, they couldn't get enough armament for volunteers elsewhere. He would let it go. That's Georgia. States' Rights always has a way. Of course it was crazy. There was no overall military planning, really in a sense, so I read somewhere.

It did, in certain ways anyway. That's a complicated notion, though, lack of will. There was no overall war plan apparently and because of States' Rights. Now I've heard this said by veterans--take it for what it's worth--people who fought the war and are saying that the South could have won the war, even late, if it had the will to--that's an old soldier--if they had the will to. It really wasn't a will of not willing to fight. It was another question of will, his notion. In fact, this was my grandfather. He said that Sherman's march could have been prevented. But it would take a strong central government to do it. He said the Russian campaigns against Napoleon, they [cleared the world?] in front of Napoleon. They should have Shermanized the country before Sherman, you see. So he would have had to get supplies, and then say, and then use the Southern calvary to break our supplies. They had an expert calvary, great calvaliers and at least, the only hope against Sherman would have been to destroy ... [so] he couldn't live off the country, clear it before him. And make him move into a desert. And then cut his supply lines. They were fragile....Supply lines were really fragile. If you turn loose a massive calvary assault on them, kept them cut. I'd say 60,000 men Sherman had down there, they just.... Things besides letters would be not getting to them at that time. But that's one of the cases of argument about will. Is it will or is it something else? Will gets infected by other things. I don't know, I mean I guess you can't say will explains it....but surely, it was not a nation. That's the answer, it was not a nation.

I really have alot more than one. I mean, you can find stacks of people. I mean, poor Grant, in his terrible stupidity after he became President and before sometimes but heroic end, of course that business, writing his memoirs, redeeming himself, that heroic death. One of the strange moving tales to me about the Civil War is: Floyd surrendered to Grant at that fort in Kentucky, Fort Pillow, not Pillow... it's the first river port captured and Grant did it. Anyway the point is this: Floyd surrendered to him. Now Floyd and Grant were classmates at West Point. And Grant was on his uppers, he'd become a drunkard, had no job, and was broke, so stony broke he couldn't get out of the rooming house he was living in in New York. He met Floyd on the street. This time Floyd was a great man militarily. And Floyd said, "My friend!" and took in Grant, the decrepit broken-down drunkard, and got him started again in life, said ... gave him money, paid his bills, and so forth. They were great friends. And sent him back to his family, you know. And then Floyd surrendered to him. It's an incredible case.

And Floyd came to see Grant on his deathbed and saw him privately. And this news got out to the press and there were mobs of newspaper men, real enough probably ten but by those standards, outside waiting, you see, for Floyd to see Grant on his deathbed. And they all went around to Floyd: "What'd you say? Tell us about this..." And he was weeping, dabbing his eyes. He said, "It's too sacred."

That's a little human touch in that. If I was to remember the book-I read it 40 years ago.

I don't know. It's what, I think, you said. It's an echo of, what? Its ambivalencies are so intense for anybody, I think, who knows any history at all. 'Course we've lost our history. Nobody knows any history now...except surprising few people. But its tensions go to anybody's center. It's a family story in a way. And also it's a pack of myths too.

It's our Homeric period. I think that's just obvious fact. But it's the number of characters and personalities and some foolishness and some genius in it. And all kinds of causes, but memorable personalities. It's incredible. The pressure on that generation was so great, from a subliterate to Lee, on both sides, extraordinary causes of character and intelligence and personality. Incredible. It's an endless story. But the pressure, is what always has struck me for years, are these tremendous emotional pressures. Somehow Lee's talents and other human qualities, in an extraordinary way. And I think that part of that was because the tension.....

The division...almost anybody, it seems to me--course this has got to be guess work--who is subject to those pressures, whatever side he's on, will find some self-division, some sign of self-division. Pressures that were unusual anyway. After all, it was a civil war. It wasn't just a war, just a foreign power thing, that's clear cut and simple. It's bound to have had strange elements of that sort. And the pressure is released. I think the emotional pressures release something--we haven't seen anything like it before or after. The period produces many impressive personalities of one kind or another.

There's no period like it. You can find individuals, like Washington, there's ..., you can find a great man, but still...

I don't know. I mean it's the fact that the emotion of the war is alive, so alive to America. It is in itself a mark of its complexity. Civil War round table, for instance, is strange.

How do I know what it means to me? I mean it's a story that I grew up with, of course. I don't mean merely by word of mouth but it was never offered to me by...the fancified version of it....I mean I heard the other side of it, the grizzly side, too. And I never had, personally with the old people I knew, I never had the romanticized view of the war, the suffering, what they had. In fact, humans were the things that constantly appeared. For instance, well, a grandfather whom I knew was a scout, a cavalry scout and they encountered something like turnips hanging from trees way up a lane. They got there and a scout, a Federal scout, just ahead of him. And these looked

like turnips, well, they had some old women they'd met on the road, said the Federals had put all their skirts above their head and put a knot in their skirts and hung them up so their feet couldn't touch the ground. So they looked like turnips up the road til she stops kicking. Well, that sort of thing.

Also, the same grandfather, one of the scouts, he went back to the headquarters where he interviewed a captive they had, overtaken by some Federal scouts and surprised him, brought him in. And one interview--he interviewed the man, the prisoner, and the prisoner was embarrassed. He had a dark-complexion but he certainly wasn't in any sense a Negro and he spoke very strange English, it was very accurate English, but all the same very strange. And my grandfather said, "What are you?" He said, "I'm a Turk, sir." And "What are you doing here?" would say Grandpa." And he said, "Well, I'm here to study the art of war." My grandfather was a very unwitty man, he never made any jokes. He said, "I said to him that he'd come to the right place." That was in North Mississippi after Shiloh. But that reality of the war from old man who had lived through it killed off these things for me, you see, very early. And the actual physical sufferings you hear about.

Anybody reads anything about it knows about it. But, as I say, it's not the UDC version of the Civil War. And that wasn't absolutely the official view, was that way. They tried to make it so.

Yes, over and over again.

Well, there are two episodes. I remember I read them rather vaguely, I know they're true. But one I think, I'm pretty certain of this one, but I could check it, I haven't read it in a thousand years....But in the bowels, you see, of the Ironclad in its first foray up the river and it was being fired on by a Federal battery from the shore on one side. Meanwhile it struck a Federal warship out there and was about to sink it. But they couldn't....the Federal batteries would not stop firing, you see, and let this ship surrender and their guns on the Merrimack, you see. And I forget the relationship. The officer of the Merrimack had a kinsman on the ship and I think he had to fire on the ship. Now I forget the details of that. That's the situation anyway. But there are others of that same sort. There's another one which is in a poem, I think by Melville, I forget the details of it, but those things happen all the time.

Well, he said this, you see the old Capitol building was wooden, had a wooden dome and not adequate for the national glory and they put up an iron dome. It was done during the Civil War, an iron dome. Now Melville in a poem called "The Conflict of Convictions"--it was a poem about, a whole book of battle pieces about the Civil War, published in '69, in '66--and in this poem, "Conflict of Convictions", he tries to make into a

long poem, the various views of the nation on the war. Written toward the end of the war actually. He says "You can't tell what history means" is what it amounts to. He says "The wind of history spins against the way it drives." It's like a whirlwind moving this way, you see. Spinning is one thing and the drive's another. History you can't read, you can't read. It's always ambiguously meaningful. You can't quite be sure of it. "Spins against the way it drives." Then he says, another passage, same page actually... then he says that"... And the iron dome," you see, of the Capitol, "strong before stress and strain", meaning the Civil War, "strong before stress and strain/ Shall stretch its jaggedy shadow athwart the main", be a great power. "But the founder's dream shall flee," "But the founder's dream shall flee." The democracy which is intended would go with the power of state, would not last in the power of state, "the iron dome", which casts a shadow across the world, across the ocean. "But the founder's dream shall flee." But the democratic dream will not survive the great power of state, the great modern state.

Melville raises this question in the poem. I quote that passage. And that ambiguity of the war, we have to confront. What is the nature of our democracy in terms of the great modern power of state?

He was, I think now, he was accused of being a spy and was picked up and condemned to be hanged. And he was a very touching young fellow, a very touching fellow and dignified and he was being hanged. And the officer in charge--Dodge is his name--broke down, couldn't give the orders to hang him. A noose is on him, going to be hanged. And Dodge just couldn't bring himself to do it, a Federal officer in charge. And then the boy gave the order for his own hanging, see.....Sam Davis.

Well, I remember very distinctly as a boy noticing the equation, of noticing, of being Southern, the necessity of being anti-black in some way. I was noticing such things, you see, particularly because my father was very vocal about this matter. He wouldn't let the words be used in the house. One time the word 'nigger' was used in the house by a child, he said it was not to be used in this house again, never used. That's a different thing, same attitude of my grandfather. But the point I was getting at is this: as a boy I was puzzled by the fact that around me here and there something quite directly, somehow being Southern should be equated somehow with using the word 'nigger', a certain attitude toward blacks, you see. That was very common. It would be equated, you see, being a decent citizen would be equated with this in some people's minds and very commonly. And since I was exposed to other views as well, this was a puzzlement. And it was a real puzzlement. And then later on now, years later, I wrote two little books about segregation. One was called Segregation, it was a very brief book of a series of interviews, of travelling in the South just.... as the first business broke, you see. Then the long

book which was done for LOOK magazine, parts they were going to use, called Who Speaks for the Negro? Two or three years going around interviewing various Negroes, of Southern leadership capacity, hundreds, sometimes fifty or seventy-five it seems I must have interviewed at one time or another. And I was really struck by this fact: that many white interviews I had, this I remember distinctly a woman saying to me, she says, "You know," she said: "I don't feel like using the word 'nigger' and I don't feel like mistreating them the way some people mistreat. I hate it. I just feel that somehow I have to."

Some pressure's there but purely against all her instincts, all her feelings, all her common sense 'cause she's obviously very bright. But it's true. It existed as a kind of off-shoot of the Civil War legend.

Well, I guess, like all the boys who fight in armies...they fight because they're put there or they have some vague notion this is the thing to do, some social pressure or just simply they're put there so a man's there. There are pressures on them of all sorts to be there. But I shouldn't expect those soldiers of the North and South to be more intelligent than the soldiers of Viet Nam. Why should we expect them to be more?

God knows. I don't know.

I wish I could see inside of Lee's head on the morning of the surrender. Inside of Lee's head on the morning of the surrender, what went on inside him.

What he was thinking and the strange kind of complexity of feelings he had about the war himself. The way he struck his gloves together when he came out from the surrender. I'd like his head.