Interview with William Safire

Civil War

What event would you most like to have witnessed?

If I could project myself back in time, the moment that I’d loved to enter the Civil War era would be the morning of July 22, 1862 in the Cabinet room, when Lincoln said to his Cabinet that it was time to consider the emancipation of the slaves. I put that wrong. It should be when he told them he was going to emancipate the slaves. It was a stunning moment. Seward almost dropped his teeth. He thought he had discouraged it when it first came up. It was against everything Lincoln had promised all the Republicans and the country. He would not become an abolitionist. He would not strike at slavery where it existed. And here, suddenly, he was changing the character of the War. And, in that meeting, Montgomery Blair, the Postmaster General, came in at a dramatic moment and saw the Cabinet was split. There was Stanton, pro-abolition, and Chase, the Secretary of the Treasury, seemingly pro-abolition, but not really happy with the fact that here was Lincoln stealing the radical’s clothes and running off with something. And Blair comes into the meeting, realizes what’s going on, and presents the political argument against emancipation. In other words...we’ll lose the fall elections. If we lose the fall elections up in the North, then the Democrats will say...we’ve determined the nature of the War, and the goals of the War, and let’s settle the War. And, if the Democrats gain control of the Congress, and win control of the State Houses in states like New York, where the draft came from and the money came from, then there will be an impossible pressure to end the War. And you would have no emancipation of the slaves. The South would go its’ own way. So, he felt, logically, it was self defeating. And here you had men, not black and white, not saying I’m for freedom...I’m for slavery, but talking the way we do today about the practical politics of emancipation. And, at that point, Lincoln took it under advisement. He didn’t make a decision, he backed away from a decision, and later on came around to thinking that because he was losing the war militarily, he had to do something dramatic that would trigger an emotional reaction in the North and give a new and ennobling sense of why we are fighting this war.
What was the event that allowed him to issue it?

Some people feel that Antitum was the thing thing, or the battle, or the news event that enabled him to emancipate the slaves. I wonder about that because Antitum was a draw, it wasn't a Union victory. Now, same as today, the President said... well, it was a great Union victory... and an argument can be made that it was. It did indeed stop the invasion of the North by General Lee. And, from the North's point of view, from Lincoln's point of view, it wasn't a defeat, the way so many other battles had been. And, having not been defeated, having stopped the invasion of the North, at that point he issued his Emancipation Proclamation saying that unless the South decides to go back into the Union and make some kind of deal, that in three months time, or in a hundred days, the slaves... only in the disloyal states... would be free. Now a lot of people felt that was hypocrisy. Here was Lincoln, not in the border states that were loyal, where he could free them, but only freeing slaves in the rebellious states, where he could not free them. And I think that makes a pretty clear point that what he was doing was a military act based on military necessity.

Did he not want to free the slaves?

All his life he's been against slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. But, he realized that he was not elected President to free the slaves. He was elected President in his mind to hold the Union together. And, those two great thoughts, union and abolition, or emancipation, had become confused. Lincoln's purpose was to preserve the Union. That's a bunch of words. Lincoln's purpose was to prove that the experiment in Democracy was not an absurdity. And the idea of majority not ruling would torpedo democracy before it could get started. And so he said.... Look, we had this election. OK, I'm a minority President, I only won forty percent of the vote. But I won legally according to our Constitution and you can't pickup, go out, set up shop otherwise. He said you have to accept the rule of the majority.

At a certain point Abolition and Union converged.

I think at some point Lincoln realized that his abstraction of fighting for the experiment called Democracy wasn't getting off the ground. He was losing the War in '62. He was melancholy to the point of depression.
Why should we care about the War?

The Civil War was the second central event in American history. The first was the Revolution. That started it. The crisis came in 1860 and '61. The crisis was will the experiment, started in 1776 and 1789, will it work? It's on the challenge now. Can you split up a Union? Does the South have the right to secede? Now, we look back today, and say well of course there has to be a Union, nobody can secede. That isn't the way it was back then. A good argument can be made that the Southerners were looking at the North the way the North looked at Great Britain under King George the Third. And they said...Look. We're a different kind of country. We're being oppressed by the North. And, we're entitled to independence.

Was the South justified in seceding?

If you believe in Democracy being the rule of the majority, they're wrong. If you believe that a country or a group of people has the right to water the tree of liberty with their blood, as Jefferson said, and they can do it and they can get away with it the way we got away with it in the Revolution, then they're right. Results do count in history and looking back. But, why was the Civil War so important? Besides going to the basic idea of whether majority rules or not, it had to do with power. Power and its' distribution in America. And what the Civil War did, what Abraham Lincoln did, was pull together this nation into, not a collection of states, or a association of regions, but into a national government.

What was the event that made the War irreversible?

When was the War made irreversible. I suppose at Bull Run. The first Bull Run. Up to then it was a phoney war. It was a bunch of parades, and people making speeches at each other. And, having fun. It wasn't a serious war. At Bull Run the North expected to crush the South, and was routed, thanks to the excellent intelligence work of Rose Greenhow who stole some of the Union plans. Suddenly, the North realized that blood was being spent, their own blood, and that this war would take a long time. And, the North then reacted, I think properly, to the real challenge of the South. It wasn't a challenge at Fort Sumter. It was a challenge at Bull Run.
What was Washington like?

Well take a look out the door here and be careful crossing the street because it's probably a sea of mud. There's no paving. Look up toward Captiol Hill and you see that a Capitol Dome which doesn't exist. It's just like an open molar. It's under construction. The carcasses of dead horses are in the streets, they're having a big sanitation problem. There's a miasma coming from the swamp where we now have the State Department, coming in with a different kind of miasma. And, the city is a small town, and it's a very worried town. It's worried about being invaded and taken over. It's a southern town with some connection with the North, but if you're the President of the United States, early in 1861, you won't know if there is a North.

Tell me about that man, especially in '61. There's some question that he might have been a tyrant.

Was Lincoln tyrannical. In some senses, yes. He did put the ends before the means, which we all know ethically is terrible to do. On the question of habeus corpus, did he have the right to suspend it? Well there it is in the Constitution, the right of habeus corpus may not be suspended except in cases of rebellion or invasion. But, it is located in that part of the Constitution that has the powers of the Congress. So, when Lincoln suspended habeus corpus, he essentially said that a military officer can make an arbitrary arrest and the civilian courts meant nothing in that case. The Chief Justice in the United States, Roger Taney, said no. And he went to Baltimore and sat in the case as a circuit judge, and defied the President, and said no you cannot do this.

What did Lincoln do?

Lincoln, in that situation, did the smart thing. He ignored Taney. He didn't exist. He didn't confront him. He didn't argue with him. He just ignored him.

And what did Taney think?

At that stage Taney told his family he was quite prepared to go to jail. And there was a moment when there was a possibility of the President putting the Chief Justice in jail for treason because after all he was challenging the authority of the President to defend the Union.
Who was Lincoln?

Lincoln was, I guess, God's gift to the nation in it's moment of agony. He was a shrewd, cunning, opportunistic, passionate lawyer. An ambitious man. Not a modest man, as John Hay's secretary carefully made note of, he was not a modest man. He was a man who had little concern for the trappings of power, but every bit of concern for the reality of power. When ever he was challenged by his military, he struck down his military...court martials and firing squads and everything. He took control of his military and George McClellan. When he was challenged by Congress he, the joint committee on the conduct of war wanted to seize control of the operations of the war, and he very skillfully finessed them and confused them and tripped them up and kept them off balance. And of course some basic challenge to the legitimacy of the Presidency of the whole Union. He was out to win, he wasn't out to settle. We all look today at presidents and say now look victory shouldn't be it, you gotta work out a thing that's a consensus and agreements and all that. He wasn't looking for consensus. He was looking for victory, and was willing to put up with great expenditures of blood in order to win, and to win for his principle of majority rules.

Did it matter who won the war?

It mattered very much who won the war. Had the South won, the South would have built a nation, probably gone, taken South America and Mexico and built a nation there. The North probably would have turned northward and taken Canada and built its nation there. But, the principle would have been established here on this continent, that if you disagree with the government, you can set up shop for yourself. And, the likelihood of subdividing would have been there. The ghost of the successful secession. And I think what you would have seen is one secession after another. And, a kind of anarchy or balkanization of the North American continent. What happened in the Civil War was terribly important to the creation of a super power.
What were the newspaper men like then?

William Tecumseh Sherman was a nut about the press. He was convinced if he killed them all there would be news from hell before breakfast. And he was a nut about the press because the press said he was nuts. There were some stories saying that he was perhaps a lunatic, or at least unbalanced, and that kind of gets to a general. And he freely arrested them. And when it came to Lincoln, if he could avoid anything that upset his generals, he avoided them. He would question them if it came from a complaining source like Horace Greeley, who was a powerful voice within the Republican party, not to arrest the wrong generals.

Was it a tragedy that 600,000 men died?

Well, one of things that you have to balance is the degree of blood and tragedy in the War against the degree of misery and evil of slavery. When we got into the war, we didn't think in terms of that balance. The abolitionist thought we had this great evil of evil in this land, human slavery. Even the Russians were getting rid of serfdom at that era. And here was the last great bastion of bondage of human beings. That was terrible. Yet, they didn't think of the other side which was the 600,000 people who would get killed and maimed, and their children who would not be born, and their lives that would not be lived. So there was a balance of blood drawn by the lash, and drawn by the sword, as Lincoln skillfully put it. Looking back now, making the terrible judgement, you have to say that it was worth it. That certainly there were better ways of doing it. Lincoln's gradualist suggestion of phasing it out and buying back the slaves over the years and manumitting them would have been a lot more intelligent because it would have saved hundreds of thousands of lives. But that was not the way it was to be. Sometimes you have this terrible conflagration, and it kind of sealed the American juices and brought the country, through its' tragedy, to where it is today.
What one man are you drawn to in the Civil War.

Well, going away from the obvious, the Lees and the Jacksons and the Lincolns and Greeleys and all, I was interested in learning to some detail in my novel Freedom, about the Civil War, in John Breckinridge, former Vice President of the United States, the youngest one, Kentuckian, a man in the middle. He didn't much like slavery. He was for the Union, but he was caught as a border-stater, in a kind of real problem like we have today when your torn, when it's not clear black or white, or one way or the other. And, he was pushed South and became denounced as the Senator from Kentucky who was a traitor and became ultimately the Secretary of War of the Confederacy. But the kind of passions, and complexities that went on within him were the real story about Civil War. It isn't black and white. It isn't good and bad.

What was the essential question of 1862?

If you were the President of the United States in 1862, in the summer, your basic problem is you're losing the war. You did ok at Shiloh. You almost lost it but just came back and saved the day. The War is going no place. Unrest in the North is spreading. The basic purpose of majority rule, or preserving the Union is losing it's appeal. And what do you do to reform the troops, to give a new birth of freedom? And what you do is something dramatic. You scramble everything up. You do the most controversial thing you can conceiveable do, which is to move toward the dreaded abolition.

What was slavery?

Slavery was a monstrous moral crime. The farther we get away from it, the worse it looks. However, to the people in the United States in 1862, it was an issue. It wasn't a decided issue. Some people felt very strongly on the issue of civil rights, human rights. Others said... Look. This is property. This is the way it's always been since the ancient Greeks, and we didn't elect Mr. Lincoln to change slavery. And, he promised that he wouldn't strike at it where it existed, even though he personally felt that way. So slavery, which seems like such a simple question today, was not a simple question then. It was not just right or wrong, it was all mixed up with the culture of the time.
What do we miss when we smother the Civil War with myths?

The problem with the Lincoln myth is that it hides from us the man with his moles and all. He was tyrannical. He was opportunistic. He was criticizable. The things he did set terrible precedents. But, he was our greatest President. He was a man of flesh and blood, and mistakes and passion. And one thing he had, which I wish candidates today had and Presidents today had, and overriding sense of purpose. He had one basic purpose; to preserve the Union... to make certain that democracy was not an absurdity.