

CIVIL WAR

Interview with Stephen Oates

Is there one event that made the war inevitable?

[I think it was John Brown's invasion of Harper's Ferry that made the Civil War inevitable. He became the great, I think, catalyst of what that war became.] With all the religious zeal he brought to that in saying-God is bringing me to Harper's ferry to create, to attempt to incite a servile insurrection here, or better yet, to set off a powder keg that would explode into civil war in which slavery would die. [He gets the God thing in there...God is bringing me there...it's a very religious age...and I am going to be the catalyst of an enormous conflict, he said, in which slavery is going to die. I think it's at Harper's Ferry that you look for where it becomes impossible to compromise between the sections, and civil war, after that, is probably inevitable.]

Isn't John Brown a madman?

John Brown is often called a madman, in fact, most of the people of the Civil War period...who study the Civil War...have dismissed him as a maniac. The Southerners have. Northern historians have. There have been abolitionists who have in fact created this enormous myth of John Brown as an abolitionist angel. He wasn't either one of them. He was a revolutionary, to be sure, who felt himself, as I said before, called by God to come to Harper's Ferry, but a maniac he wasn't. In fact, if I could just point this out, [John Brown was probably the most perceptive man of his generation in terms of understanding what kind of an impact he was going to have on the South when he got to Harper's Ferry. He realized that all he had to do was simply set foot in Southern territory with a gun, say... I'm an abolitionist here to free your slaves... and the impact on Southern whites would be cataclysmic...and in fact it was.]

Why did the South leave the Union?

[The South left the Union primarily to protect the institution of slavery which underlay their entire culture. Almost any way you put the bucket down into the great morass of political and social events of that time, it comes back up...the roots go back to the slavery issue. Southerners themselves explain that in their secession ordinances, that it was to protect their great domestic institution from Republican grasp, for the reason they seceded.]

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What would an ordinary Southern soldier say when asked what he was fighting for?

An ordinary Southern soldier when asked the question, "What are you fighting for?", would say, more than likely...I'm fighting for my rights, and I'm fighting because you're here...meaning the Yankees. But his rights were some kind of vague thing to him. But more than likely what he'd be thinking about is "my rights" to become a planter, to work myself up in the social scale, and to buy a slave, because slave owning was the most potent, prestigious status symbol of the entire Southern culture before and during the Civil War.

What would a Northern soldier say?

[A Northern soldier, when asked, "What are you fighting for?", probably up until the year 1863 would say... some vague concept of union. I'm fighting to hold the country together. I'm fighting for what Lincoln says. He says I'm going to fight for the Union... That's kind of an abstract thing. And he's fighting mostly in the South, not his own territory. And so a Northern soldier had more difficulty in trying to pin himself to what the reason was for being in the South and for participating in these enormous blood baths. These abstract Constitutional issues, and abstract concept of nation was not nearly as motivating a factor as was the Southerner's when they said I'm here to defend...we're here to defend our territory from invasion.]

What draws Stephen Oates to the Civil War?

[The Civil War was the great central experience in all American history. It's almost as though somebody up there had written this incredible drama for this country and led us, halfway through our experience...as of right now...led us all the way down to this epochal experience in our history, to find out whether we were going to survive as a nation.] Which we, of course, did. Everything that's happened since the Civil War flowed out of that to lead us even right down to now...we're still trying to find out, trying to establish a racial democracy. But the Civil War is a great central experience. And it has so much to do with whether we're going to survive, and whether popular government is going to survive. That is the central issue; whether popular government can actually be a viable form of government, is the central issue. The central issue.

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Tell me about emancipation?

[Emancipation was the single most complex issue that Lincoln had to deal with in 1861 and 1862.] And it's a badly misunderstood chapter of the Civil War and of Lincoln's own biography. By 1862 he had all kinds of pressures on him to do something about getting rid of slavery. [The slaves themselves are putting enormous pressure on him because they were running away from their plantations...not by the hundreds, but by the thousands.] storming into Union lines, and thus forcing the government to try to make...arrive at some policy as to what they were. Vaguely, in '61 and '62, the Union government called them contraband of war, since they were legally property. But the slaves were putting pressure on Lincoln. Also putting pressure on Lincoln were a bunch of Congressmen, so called radical republicans, who were saying...Look, the cause of the Civil War is slavery. It's idiotic for you, Mr. Lincoln, to continue to wage a civil war to save the Union when you're not doing anything at all to remove the very thing that brought the Civil War about. That is idiotic. That's preposterous... . That was an argument that told on Lincoln a great deal. Also, Great Britain, an anti-slavery power, was threatening to come in on the side, recognize the Confederacy, and perhaps establish a military alliance with the Confederacy, because Lincoln kept saying that slavery has nothing to do with the war. So, diplomacy put pressures on him. Also he was suffering, his armies on every front were suffering from military shortages...shortages of troops. [And as Charles Sumner kept telling Lincoln...Mr. President, you need men. And the slaves are the untapped reservoir of manpower for you to use. You need black troops to help save the government, to help save the Union, to help save our experiment in popular government.]... . All of these, plus one more, and that was the moral issue. [Lincoln was a deeply moral man. He hated slavery. He said... Slavery has the power of making me miserable... . And the abolitionists who put so much pressure on him. You've got to deal with the moral issue. It's not just economics. It isn't just a military necessity. It isn't just a diplomatic necessity. It's the moral necessity. We've got to make this country accord with it's own ideals.] That told on Lincoln, who often went over to the Smithsonian Institution to hear abolitionist's lectures. And [he listened to that argument being drilled home to him. Mr. President, it's the moral issue here, too. Four million human beings enslaved. You have a chance now to break their chains.]

Can you review the many names for the Civil War?

I've heard, of course, the Civil War as a name for the war.

[There's the War Between the States, the War for Southern Independence, the War for Northern Independence, the War Against Slavery, the War For Slavery, the War of the Southern Rebellion, the War for National Unification, the War For the North Against the South, and The Late Unpleasantness, which is what the veterans all referred to it...that's about all I can think of now.]

Where did the comradery between the men come from?

[The thing that distinguishes the Civil War, I think, the most is how these guys on both sides could kill each other in the worst blood bath this country ever experienced during the day, and then in the evening time the pickets would go out and talk to each other and exchange coffee and tobacco, and in fact renew old friendships and acquaintances.] Many of the men, the officers, had gone to West Point together. Many of the soldiers, the officers and soldiers alike, had fought together in the Mexican War. That's part of it. And there were also lots of relations going on. A lot of the Southern brothers, the Southern soldiers, had brothers who had gone North to fight. And it's not uncommon to find brother of the Union and brother of the South getting together in the midst of a battle. Or a father shooting a son, or a son shooting a father.

It's almost the war that wanted to be fought, and didn't want to be fought...

[In a sense the Civil War was inevitable because... I don't think you can establish a country on the noble ideals of the Declaration of Independence. And let it not be said that those aren't noble ideals of life, liberty and equality for all Americans. To have a country founded on that noble ideal, and yet a country which in practicality had the institution of human bondage. Those two warring ideals, as long as they were...as long as they're not resolved, as long as we either get rid of slavery, get rid of the Declaration Independence and the ideals upon which the country was founded, if these things are not resolved then inevitably their going to lead, I think, to some kind of conflict.]

Tell me about the first battle at Bull Run.

[Bull Run was a great opera, and, in fact, Congressmen from Washington D.C. came out there in their carriages, with lunch baskets and their bonnetted wives, and opera glasses to watch all the fun. When the two armies came together in the brush and swamps around Bull Run, they could hear the delayed concussions of the guns to their sheer delight. Except that all of the sudden, the picture book war part of the Civil War, the preceeding ninety days or so when both sides had been mobilizing to the great pomp of drum and call of bugle, had been mobilizing for what they thought was going to be a bit of a lark, a ninety day conflict...all of a sudden that dies right there in the swamplands of Bull Run, because it became a very real war there. Real people got killed. Real armies got butchered.] And a real army, like the army at the Potomac actually fled and retreated all the way back to Washington with the civilians going back with them.

Tell me about Mary Walker.

[Mary Walker was one strange, wonderful woman of the Civil War period.] I'm always tempted to call her, you know, the first liberated woman of the Union Army. Maybe I will call her that. But she had this incredible...she had managed to become a trained physician at time, of course, when women were segregated out of the medical schools. [The Civil War breaks out and she wants to do her part for Lincoln's cause. So she goes down and wants to enlist, not as a nurse, but as a doctor. She wants to become... get a commission in the Union army. And she's turned down so she goes out to prove some of her, shall I say, manliness? - and goes to the firing range and pops off whatever it was, six shots at 50 yards in a little space of about 5 inches. And that did impress most of the men but one guy made some cutting commentary about her and the fact that she wore pants so she shot him.] Didn't kill him but shot him good. Then later on, to cut down the story a little, then later on, she gets her commission in the Union army, is sent to the Western theatre. She's wearing pants. She dressed as a man completely. Well, she had a commission as a man. She might as well act the part. [The Confederates captured her in one of the battles in the Western theatre and the captain, the Confederate officer who captured her was a man of great Southern charm and chivalry. And he looks upon this woman in man's dress and wrote his wife, "Nothing but the vile Yankee nation could put up something like this."]

Robert E. Lee: what a contradiction, a paradox, extraordinary man. Talk to me about him.

[Lee was an extraordinary man and unfortunately he lives with such a web of mythology for us in the twentieth century that it's extraordinarily difficult to try to perceive the real man back there in the mists.] And the real man is extraordinary enough and Southerners and his Northern admirers have no reason, you know, not to still like him and still admire him when we bring him down out of the mists and out of the clouds and paint him as a real person. Robert E. Lee was very ^{Am101} vicious. He suffered from a bad temper. He probably neglected his poor wife Mary who gave him all his children, a great deal of loyalty to him, a loyalty to his career and suffered these long absences on his part. [And he also was a man of great contradictions. Lee said that he didn't believe in slavery. He thought it a terrible wrong and yet, he derived a great deal of pleasure from being the master of, and the planter of Arlington,] the Arlington estate and managing some 200 slaves. And he waited until the very end of the five year period...you know, his father-in-law's will said that the slaves must be manumitted within five years and Lee waited until the very end of the five years to do so. [And he said, "I don't believe in secession. I don't believe in Civil War." And yet at the same time he fought for that very cause that he didn't believe in with a great deal of tenacity and a great deal of talent.]

What did Lincoln call these men from the South?

[Lincoln called these fellows who went south traitors. He referred to Lee, John Bankhead McGruder, Jefferson Davis, the whole lot of them as traitors to their country.]

What do you think about that?

But, in fact, you're putting me on the spot. What do I think about that? I think that's true. Particularly the officers, they had taken an oath of allegiance when they graduated from West Point to give their lives to their country. They owed their lives and everything they were to their country. The government had given them an education and paid for it and I think that, yes, they were traitors to their country.

Tell me about Grant.

Grant also is a man enshrouded in mythology. [One of the most persistent myths is that he was a drunkard. He did have trouble with the bottle before the Civil War and did enjoy his glass before the Civil War at a very high drinking time.] But we don't have any real evidence that he drank any more than anybody else particularly in that hard drinking time. He may have enjoyed one glass too many on occasion as apparently he did after Shiloh. But [nobody would have fought those campaigns that he fought. Nobody could have written the lucid battle reports that he wrote had he been a chronic drunk.] Grant was also a very innovative general in what he did at Vicksburg in understanding that he could take a modern army and break it loose from its base of supplies and live off of the country and thus maximize his offensive movement capability. [Most of the war armies, nearly all of them up to that time were then simply chained to their supply bases and it limited their flexibility of response. When Grant threw off his supply base at Vicksburg, went all the way down the river and crossed the river below Vicksburg and fought his way back up with his army living off of the countryside, it was something new in military history.] He was throwing out everything he had learned at West Point or, as I often like to say, he never learned anything anyway since he lagged very badly in his class and perhaps didn't pay all that much attention to the text anyhow.

Can you just briefly tell me about William Tecumseh Sherman?

[Sherman's an interesting character. Number one: he's a guy who sympathizes very much with Southern slavery, sympathizes with the Southerners themselves, he was in Louisiana for awhile, he had a lot of friends there, but he really was loyal to his country and he was an innovative genius when it came to warfare. He took Grant's concept of breaking away from your base of supplies and living off the country, he took that concept and went a step further. He said, "We could not only do that, maximize our freedom of movement with our armies by living off the country, but we could go further than that. We could go directly to the economic resources of the Confederacy and thereby destroy their very ability to make war."] Which is what he did in that entire Atlanta campaign and then cutting the swathe through Georgia and up through the Carolinas. [He took the Civil War straight home to the Southern people. He made it total war with the full approval of Abraham Lincoln, by the way, because Lincoln saw that this was going to be a way to facilitate the end of the war.] And within a few months after he left Atlanta, the war was over.]

Very complex person, this Mary Lincoln. A tragedy in some ways but also a very strong woman.

[Mary Lincoln has gotten a very bad press. She's got about the worst press, I guess, of any First Lady in all of American history. She is most often portrayed as a hellion, a hellcat who suffered from migraine headaches and yelled and screamed at everybody so much so that she made the White House tremble. Mary is just simply badly misunderstood. She was very loyal to Lincoln and very loyal to her government.] [She was accused by the opposition press, the Democratic papers in Washington of being a Confederate sympathizer who actually handed over state secrets to the Confederacy. Those kind of accusations broke her heart. She was not only loyal to the country but she was loyal to the armies and loyal to cause and became an abolitionist before her husband did, thanks to her black seamstress, Elizabeth Keckly.] But [she suffered terribly over the loss of her son Willie Lincoln in 1862. She suffered a nervous breakdown after that and never fully recovered.] She has to be forgiven for some of her migraines and some of her neurotic problems and the shopping binges she went on. She found them therapeutic but also terribly expensive. She needs to be forgiven and to be understood a great deal by all people who try to study the Civil War and care about the problems of the First Lady during the Civil War.

Have you thought about Jefferson Davis?

Jefferson Davis has, I think, also been badly misunderstood. He also has gotten a bad press. Davis has about the worse press, I guess, of anybody during the Civil War period. He'd been vilified, of course, by almost everybody in the Union and in the South alike. It's only after the Civil War that Southerners turned to him to make him a great Southern patriot and Southern hero. But because he was the president of the Confederacy, as all presidents seem to have to do with any kind of government in the United States, you know, they become the focal point of all criticism. [Davis may well have been the only Southerner who understood Southern nationality, who understood what sacrifices had to be made if the Confederacy was ever going to gel as a nation. He kept saying, "I need the kind of powers that Lincoln got. I need the kind of resources that he got in the draft laws. I need to be able to suspend the writ of habeus corpus like he did. I need to be able to do new things and creative things when have to..." He would have said, "We can't live by the dogmas of the quiet past any longer." He didn't say that but he acted that out. He said, "I have to be given the kinds of... the Confederate government needs the kind of national authority, national power that the Union had in order to win." And they didn't get it because states' rights helped kill the Confederacy.]

I guess I'd like to ask you about the intrigue in Washington. Paint the cast of characters, the court around Lincoln that are sort of constantly plotting.

[Lincoln's cabinet was filled with very strong-willed men, each of whom thought he was capable of being President. Most of them at one time or another felt that they were better a political leader than their own chief, Lincoln himself. And few of them got along with each other. So they were constantly overstepping their boundaries. You would find that of Wells, secretary of the navy meddling around in army affairs. You would have Stanton, secretary of the army meddling around, not just in naval affairs but in state department affairs. You would have Seward meddling in everybody's business and also enjoying a direct line to the Presidency that nobody else has because Lincoln and Seward loved the same kinds of humor and told these preposterous jokes with each other and indulged in this enormously risqué repartee.] And that to the chagrin of many of the other Cabinet members. [But Lincoln loved all of them and he thought that because of their enormous capacities, political capacities, that he needed each and every one of them regardless of how strong-willed they were and regardless of how much they plotted against each other, in order for him to win the war.]

You said that Bull Run really woke people up. What did Shiloh do?

Shiloh was the first real bloodbath of the war. You know this is the first genuinely large battle that involved the kinds of ghastly casualties that Civil War battles thence forward would be noted for. And it was a tremendous shock too, I think, particularly to people in the northeast that fought way out there in the west. I think most people in northeast still looked on the real action of the Civil War as taking place in the eastern showcase theater but here's this massive battle going on out there fairly early in the war, 1862, going on out there with these enormous casualties that [it only reinforced what Bull Run had first awakened both sides to: that this was going to be a long, that this was going to be a protracted... and it was going to be a melancholy bloodbath. And nobody knew when the end was going to be.]

What interests you about Abraham Lincoln?

Lincoln was the man at the center of the storm. At that center, he was a man of such contradictions as all those wonderful contradictions that would make up a true and genuine personality. And they were all pretty much at war with him during the Civil War and he lived through a depression. [He took the war personally.] That's what really attracts me to that guy. [He took it personally. This was something that had happened because of his election to the presidency. He had worked hard all of his life to rise up through the ranks of American society. The central core, the central idea of his philosophy was the right to rise. He had lived the American success story in going from a mundane wheatfarming family in Indiana and Illinois and going all the way to the presidency. And through his own talent and luck had been able to do that and yet what does this do? It's the cruelest of ironies. Having lived through the American dream, then it explodes into a bloody civil war all around him] a tornado of violence with him whirling at its center. That is high drama and high tragedy. That's what attracts me to Lincoln.

Where did he come from?

Lincoln came out of--I'm not going to say a cesspool of a family as his law partner, William Hurnan said--but he came from largely uneducated, a frontier family in Indiana. [He grew throughout his young manhood in Little Pigeon Creek in Southern Indiana, an area given to superstitions where people believed that if you walked into a cabin with a shovel, you would go right out with a coffin, who believed that a dog baying in the distance means that some kind of death or calamity will visit your family.] And yet he was able...he was a superstitious man as a result of that, but yet he was a gifted child in this area. He became literate after only picking up a year of formal education so that he began writing letters for his neighbors and that began his real training for the Lincoln he became. He started seeing the world through other people's eyes. Always he would be able to set himself aside and look at some problem from somebody else's point of view. It started right there in Little Pigeon Creek.

What makes his writing great?

What - I think the distinguishing element in Lincoln as a great writer is his poetic impulses. He loved the sheer beauty and sound of the language. He loved alliterations. He loved the kinds of music that could come of alliterative responses and come from wonderful similes. He always studied as young man and later on when he got into law and politics, he liked to study great truths greatly told.

What are his faults? What are his weaknesses?

[If I have to single out one of Lincoln's weaknesses--he had several of them, by the way. Lincoln's not perfect--was his tendency toward melancholia. Sometimes that got the best of him and it really threatened his stability of mind] surrounding the marriage of Mary Todd. Mary Todd didn't do it; it was his own lack of self-confidence that caused him to break off his promise of marriage to Mary Todd and lie for a week in the most awful kind of depression. He was immobilized by it. [And the first two years of the Civil War, you see that working again where he fell into this terrible depression because he took the world so personally and it had come about because of his own election. And the depression plus his own lack of experience made him a very ineffectual tentative and somewhat unresponsive president during his first two years.]

Why did he waffle on Emancipation?

[Well, Emancipation was the single most difficult question he faced in his presidency, aside from defeating the Confederates and ending the war. And there were no guidelines. He was way off into uncharted waters. He had nothing to guide him. And nothing but peril and awful consequence that lay ahead whatever he did and whatever he didn't do. But the war itself put such demands on him that he finally had to respond to the pressures of the war and do something about the very thing that had brought the war about.]

Did he dream?

[Lincoln came from Little Pigeon Creek, Indiana where people looked at their dreams for signs of something that was going to happen in their lives, as portents and auguries of approaching sorrow or gladness. He had dreams all of his life in which he did that as well. In 1860, during the campaign for the presidency, he went home in Springfield, lay down for a nap, rose up from his bed and saw two images in a looking glass, one slightly apart from the other. One was gray and it bothered him alot. He told it to Mary and Mary was horrified. She thought that it signalled that he would make it alright through his first administration but would die in his second.] And he kept having dreams in the Civil War of distant battlefields and himself on a ship heading toward some dark and distant shore. He had that before every major battle. He had that the last night he lived.

What happened in the boarding house across the street from the Ford Theater?

They carried Lincoln out of the theater across the street to the boarding house and carried him down this dimly lit hall into this very small little room which a tailor had now rented. Took him back there to this little room and laid him down on this rather small bed. The bed was too small for him so they had to lay him down diagonally. The coverlet of the bed had eagles as their insignia and they lay his head on the pillow which became bloodstained almost right away. [And the lanterns inside the room, when lit, gave off this kind of greenish glow so there was almost a miasmic atmosphere inside that room, crowded with doctors who were trying to tend him.] He was unconscious, of course, and would never regain consciousness. An unlimited procession of politicians came running through the night to be there with him during his final hours.

After he passed away, can you tell us what Stanton said?

[And when Lincoln finally died and they pulled the sheet up over his face, Stanton said, "Now he belongs to the ages."]]

How does he still speak to us today? What is his gift?

One way Lincoln still speaks to me is that here is a man who worked his way from almost nothing, almost nobody into becoming a professional man and a very talented man and a very successful man all the way to the presidency. The one thing that the myth of Lincoln doesn't do is [the myth of Lincoln makes him out to be this homespun Socrates of the Illinois prairie brimming with prairie wit and wisdom who cared nothing about social station, nothing about money, nothing about material success whatever.] That's maybe fine for the mythology but not for the real man. [The real man was enormously successful, made a good deal of money, was well-to-do in his time, was enormously intelligent and very gifted as a writer and as a politician and as a lawyer.]

He was ugly and knew it too.

Lincoln was ugly and knew it to the extent that he liked to tell a story of himself as a young man splitting rails. There he was, down to his waist and swinging his axe and this man walks up to him and then suddenly has a gun. The man raises a gun and aims it at Lincoln and Lincoln says "Whoa, what?" The man said, "I made a promise that if I met anybody uglier than you, uglier than me, I was going to shoot him." And Lincoln said, "My God, if I'm uglier than you are, then shoot away."

He was really funny time and again. His humor saves him.

Lincoln's humor was the one thing that was the antidote to his depressions. When the depressions got too bad, he could always pull himself back from the brink of maybe total mental collapse and achieve some kind of balance again through the sheer effort of humor. [He would tell stories anywhere, at anytime. He once said that "the effect of a good story on me is what the effect of a good slug of alcohol has on an old tippler. It gives me renewed strength."]

What finally pushed Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation?

The Emancipation Proclamation was the....I can quote Lincoln on the Emancipation Proclamation. [He said upon signing that document, the night of January 1, 1863, "If my name ever goes into history, it will be for this act."] That means he had some historical sense of what was going on here and that he wasn't doing something that just related to the Civil War. He was doing something that was going to be immortal for all time. [By the stroke of that pen, he was enlarging that whole concept of the right to rise. He was extending American liberty now to four million, the promise of American liberty to four million black Americans out there who, heretofore had been excluded from the American political process. By bashing away at slavery, he was taking away that heinous contradiction of slavery in a country based on the Declaration of Independence which would then resolve one of the great dividing issues of American history up to the Civil War time.] So no wonder he viewed this as the way he was going to be remembered. And indeed, that is the way he's remembered.

Tell me about him militarily. He was very active. Very involved.

Lincoln lived at a martial time. It was a time when everybody loved military glory. It was a military oriented culture, the North, and particularly in the South. And besides that, he was a tinker an inventor of sorts himself. And he liked the tools of war. He liked to have inventors come to the White House or he'd go down to the firing lane and see what kind of new tool of war was now being developed. And he also understood that the president had to command the commanders. At a time of a civil war, a war this fast, by far and away the largest war the United States had ever fought, that the Commander-in-Chief himself had to know something about the military. Therefore the earlier part of the war, he went over to the Library of Congress, checked out all the books on military theory, the history of warfare and set about putting himself through a seminar on becoming a military commander which he did.

What else do you want to say about Lincoln? What's important to remember?

The other important thing about Lincoln is that even those that rise to supreme heights, who go all the way to the Presidency...

[Lincoln changed enormously during the Civil War. The one thing that appeals to me about him is how he began the war an indecisive vacillating insecure president who kept saying, "This war is...we're going to wage a conservative war. We're not going to let it degenerate into some kind of remorseless revolutionary struggle." But the war went that way anyway. And Lincoln went with it. As it grew and changed, he grew and changed so that by the time he issues the Emancipation Proclamation which frees him as much as it does the slaves themselves, you find after that a much more decisive tough aggressive chief executive than you saw before. And I think that's an enormous legacy to leave to us is his capacity for change, to respond to the problems of the moment.]

[When you look at a picture of Lincoln in 1860 when he ran for the presidency, he looks like a virile young man. He was a virile man but he was in his early 50's. And you look at the picture of him taken in 1865 and it's heartbreaking what those juxtaposed photographs tell us about the suffering of the entire nation. It's right there in Lincoln's face in that 1865 photograph.]

There was a wonderful moment in 1863 when Frederick Douglas came to the White House. Tell us about it.

In August of 1863, Frederick Douglas came to talk to Lincoln. This was after the Emancipation Proclamation, after Lincoln had decided to use black troops to squash the Confederacy. And Douglas was helping to raise black troops and he wanted to go to Lincoln to complain because the black troops were getting a lower pay than were white volunteers and draftees. And Douglas describes walking into the White House office and he said, "Lincoln stood up and kept standing and kept standing and kept standing until Douglas was gazing way up at him." But you know Lincoln and Douglas had a great deal in common and Lincoln himself later on said, "You know I like that Douglas. He came up like me. He and I both indicate what's great about this country and that's the right to rise."

There's a great scene after Richmond falls when Lincoln goes into somebody's house and sits down at somebody's desk. Can you tell us about it?

He went into what can only be called the Confederate White House in Richmond. And he went in and sat down just to see what it would feel like to sit at Jefferson Davis' desk. There sat Abraham Lincoln. And right there in that symbolic moment captures the Union triumph in the Civil War.

At his funeral a normally very sturdy general cries. Can you just set the scene of the funeral?

[The funeral in Springfield had alot of military brass and alot of Lincoln's political associates, particularly those in Springfield, his friends, his relatives, people he'd grown up with, but there also was Fighting Joe Hooker who had taken the Army of the Potomac to that disastrous loss at Chancellorsville and whom Lincoln had had to cashier because he wouldn't fight. He had the slows like McClellan. But Joe Hooker was tearful. He loved Lincoln and was terribly moved when one of the persons officiating at the funeral read Lincoln's ringing second inaugural. And Fighting Joe Hooker thought that was the saddest moment of his life.]

Earlier at the funeral at the White House, another general also wept. Can you tell us about that?

Grant was sitting at the White House at one end of the coffin just before the funeral ceremonies were to take place in the White House and he had a mourning band on his arm and he kept gazing at the casket. And he said later, "It's the saddest moment of my life."

If you could be the proverbial fly on the wall, could you describe the scene that you would most like to witness?

I would like to be in the crowd in Washington March the 4th, 1865 and heard and saw Lincoln read his ringing second inaugural. It was a cloudy day and when Lincoln was on the rostrum when he stood up to go to the speaker's stand, the clouds rolled ahead...it was a gloomy day. [When he went to the speaker's stand, suddenly the clouds parted and there was a brilliant burst of sunlight and then the clouds closed back again and he began reading in his shrill ringing voice that incredible document, the most memorable inaugural address in all of American history when he said that maybe God had willed this terrible war on both North and South because of the crime of slavery. I would love to have been there and seen and heard that. After the ceremony was over with, Lincoln ran into one of his young friends and said, "Did you see that cloud, that sunburst? It made my heart jump."]

Speaking of religion, can you talk about this thing? Everybody had it, right? We just don't appreciate that...it sort of promotes both sides.

[It was an extremely religious age. Hard for us to understand in our more secular time just how much both sides appealed to God, both sides wanted to get right with God. John Brown said he was an instrument in the hands of God to bring him to Harpers Ferry to free the slaves and perhaps began the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln thought and he felt that he too was an instrument in the hands of God and that God was punishing the country for the crime of slavery. Robert E. Lee said that he was an instrument in the hands of God and said at Gettysburg that it's all in God's hands and then sent the cream of his army to its doom. It's hard for us to understand because they really felt that Providence was at work in this war.] Nobody knew in the inscrutable Providence which way Providence would go, on whose side His judgment finally would come down. [As Lincoln said, "We both pray to the same God. We both invoked Him. We both said we were on His side. But it wasn't until 1863 at the end of the war that it became clear where God's judgment was coming down. That was on the whole country. It must now atone with blood for its complicity in wickedness, the wickedness of slavery."]

Did it matter who won that war?

[It mattered so much it's almost difficult for me to talk about because what was truly at stake in this Civil War was what Lincoln called "the central idea." This wasn't just a provincial war between a couple of sections in an out-of-the-way, across-the-ocean republic fighting to keep the nation together. The central idea, the notion of popular government was at stake here. Lincoln understood that. He said, "What the Civil War really is is it's something taking place on a global stage. The central idea, the idea that people can govern themselves, that they can elect their own officials. That's what's at stake here."] We Americans don't often understand that in the nineteenth century when the Civil War broke out, Democracy, popular government was by no means the most popular form. A lot of Europeans said that monarchy was the more stable form, that if popular government led to anarchy, internal secession movements...and whole Civil War seemed to prove that. [Lincoln said the country must survive to insure that popular government itself will survive.]

Who's William C. Oates and what happened to him on July 2, 1863?

[William C. Oates was the Confederate officer in command of the Alabama infantry whose task it was to carry Little Round Top in the great attack that Longstreet launched the second day of Gettysburg. He didn't make it. He was my ancestor and he didn't make it.] I'm a Lincoln biographer and I'm glad he didn't.

What was the response of the South when Lincoln ~~was~~^{elected}?

[The Southerners called Abraham Lincoln every name under the sun, every piece of vituperation they could think of. They called him a baboon; they called him a black abolitionish fanatic; they called him another John Brown whose inaugural address would be probably a declaration of war, who would send his Republican troops down to the South to free the slaves and destroy the Southern way of life by bayonet.]

Jumping ahead to Gettysburg. Talk about this invincibility thing. What did Robert E. Lee believe?

[Lee, by the summer of 1863, had come to believe that he was invincible and so was the Army of Northern Virginia. The record would almost invite that when you see how they had pummelled one Union general after another and had defeated or at least fought to a draw the Army of the Potomac almost at every battle up to that point. And Lee really did think that if he asked his boys to do something, they would do it, that they would do anything.] At Gettysburg, he found his army situated on the worst ground with the fewer troops facing a much larger army entrenched on the better ground, higher ground south of Gettysburg. He asked his boys then to go on the offensive given those enormous disadvantages because he thought that they would do exactly what he asked and that it would bring victory or that God would determine it one way or the other. [He had come by Gettysburg then to believe in his invincibility and that of his men. And it was his doom.]

Tell me about Shiloh.

[Shiloh proved again for the North that the Southerners were for real and so was the Civil War, that it was going to be longer and more bloody than they had ever ever dreamed.]

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Draft riots.

The draft of the spring of 1863 indicated that the Union was going to start hauling men in to start saving the Union, to fight in Lincoln's armies. It has to be coordinated along with the Emancipation Proclamation. This was a new war now. It was not just a war to save the Union. It was partly that. But it was also a war to destroy slavery. [A lot of immigrant Americans, particularly in New York and Boston blanched at the idea of being dragooned into Lincoln's armies to fight a war for slave liberation for fear that the emancipated blacks would come stampeding into Northern cities such as New York and Boston and take away the immigrants' jobs.] And therefore they often rioted against the draft officers when they came to enroll men.

Life was pretty tough in the South once the war really set in. Can you sort of paint a sense of economic deprivation there?

They suffered from, first of all, from a currency system that was inflationary beyond measure to the point whereby halfway through the war.....RUN OUT

[The Confederate government resorted to the cheapest of all possible ways to finance its own war effort. It resorted to loans and the issuing of worthless paper money. By 1862, 1863, the South suffered from enormous, terrible inflationary currency. So bad that Confederate housewives going down to do the day's shopping at market had to carry almost a barrel full of money down in order to pay for whatever she was going to buy.] It was so bad in some areas of the South that people resorted to barter. [What was really at a premium was a Union gold dollar so that the Confederate people could never get away from the Union, not even economically.]

Black men triumph of 1863....?

When the blacks got the opportunity to serve in Lincoln's armies and navy, they responded by the thousands and tens of thousands and, by the way, the emancipated slaves ~~were~~ ^{more} then the free blacks in the North joined up in Lincoln's armed forces in order to help liberate their brothers and sisters in bondage and to save the Union. It was an incredible significant step the Lincoln administration took in doing that because it gave black men the image that they weren't obsequious Sambos any more but they were armed men ready and willing and able to fight for their own freedom.

When 1864 comes around, they ~~roll~~ ^{A!!} out the meat grinding machinery of war and things are black.

1864 was the blackest year certainly for the Union. It was Lincoln's lowest ebb. The fighting in the Eastern showcase theater had bogged down. The fighting in the Western theater had bogged down into the sieges of Atlanta, sieges of Petersburg.... Then 1864 was an election year, too. Lincoln was up for re-election in the midst of war. [It was something absolutely unprecedented in all of American history that a president would come up for a re-election in the midst of a civil war, that there would even be a national election of this sort, of this scope in the midst of a civil war. In fact, some of Lincoln's advisors, because things were going so badly for the Union, told Lincoln, advised him - skip the election. Become temporary dictator. One of the things we need to remember him for is that he said no to that advice. He said "If we give in to that, if I become a temporary dictator, if we forego an election because the Civil War, then the rebels have really won. The popular government then has failed. To prove the popular government can work, we must have an election." And he went through with it.]

And his opponent?

And his opponent in the election of 1864 turned out to be none other than George McClellan whom he had fired after the battle of Antietam because, as Lincoln said, "He had the slows and was afraid to fight." When...by the summer of 1864 when McClellan was nominated by the Democratic party, Lincoln was nominated as well. Lincoln thought he was going to lose. [All the word from all Republicans, even on the most local level, indicated that Lincoln couldn't possibly win, that the fortunes of war had turned too badly, too sour for the Union. At one really poignant moment in the deep dark summer of 1864, Lincoln sat in the privacy of his office contemplating the fact that he probably wasn't going to be re-elected and that McClellan of all people would replace him as president.] And he took out a sheet of White House stationery and he wrote a note. He said, "Dear Mr. McClellan, You will now be assuming, taking over the reigns of government. I will be giving them up to you. We need to work together in order that this Union can truly be saved. I will do everything I can to help you get inaugurated and get installed to save the Union and bring about a victory." And then he put this in an envelope and had all his cabinet members sign their names as a witness to this document. And then filed it away in case he should ever have to use it.

When I look at Andersonville, when I look at the incredible casualties of that year, when I look at all these different things, photographs of dead bodies at Gettysburg, I wonder why on earth Americans killed each other.

It's one of the most inexplicable things I guess in the human condition as to why family warfare, family feuds tend to be the most violent and most inexplicable. The Civil War became that too. The guys were out there massively killing each other. And the kinds of horrendous suffering that went on in the prisoner of war camps and yet they could still have this kind of fraternity they enjoyed in between battles. It's a mystery, an enigma, as Lincoln liked to say, that may never be resolved.

1865. The end of the war. Lee and Grant at Wilmer McLean's house at Appomattox. What do you see?

One person who witnessed that scene was Robert Lincoln. He was a member of Grant's staff at that time. He was out there on the porch. And he, in fact, went back and reported that to Lincoln so that Lincoln himself got some idea of what had gone on in there and that Grant had been very.... Grant became the gentleman. He's always regarded, you know, as a kind of ruffian who comes out of California and out of Illinois from the hardscrabble existence he had there to rise up as a Union general who butchered people. And Lee is always referred to as a chivalrous, charming gentleman soldier. But it was Grant who was a gentleman there and the magnanimity he displayed in the surrender terms and refusing Lee's sword.

You describe in your book very well the change in the Union war aims. First it was to destroy Richmond, then destroy the rebel armies, finally to destroy the forces that sustained the South. Could you just trip down those three points again?

When the war began, the Lincoln administration and his generals really thought they could win the war by capturing Richmond. As soon as Richmond fell, then the rest of the Confederacy would collapse, like a collapsing tent. But that proved to be erroneous anyway, that the fall of cities, even capitals was not going to bring about the end. So out of that revelation, Lincoln got the idea that objection had to be the destruction of the Confederate armies. He kept trying to pound that idea into his eastern generals, that their goal was to destroy Lee's army to eliminate it as a fighting force. And he tried to find...one general after another tried to look in his grab bag of generals for one who could get that notion into his head. And then out of that notion, that the idea was to destroy the enemy armies came Sherman's insight that we go a step further to win the war and that's to bring the war home to the Southern people and to destroy the economic resources of the Confederacy, their very ability to wage war.

There's a wonderful story of a young boy who happened to see the President of the Confederacy held by chains. Jefferson Davis was caught after the war.

When Davis was captured, he was taken through Augusta, Georgia and a small boy stood at the window of his parents' house and watched Jefferson Davis go by in the Southern dust. That boy would never forget that scene. It was Woodrow Wilson.

What is important to remember about this era?

We want to remember the passion involved in this era. It was a passionate time. And the Civil War itself was an act of enormous, almost prodigious passion. It wasn't just a thing of the mind. And we don't want to leave it as just an intellectual or academic enterprise. These people were swept up in passions as great as a horrendous storm.

This is the American Illiad. It's almost Homeric.

It is Homeric, an American Illiad. It has the sweep of that kind of tragedy. [By beginning with the fact that it's a brother's war with all the passions that that unleashes and because it ended with this terrible tragedy, the assassination of the president. As though civil war were not atonement enough for the crime of slavery. In the end, we have the first president in American history who was assassinated and the country reeled in its own passions and guilts and remorse over that.]

What happened to the country after that? Where did it go?

Well, in some ways. [I think it was about a ten year hiatus in there with the veterans unions and the Fourth of July parades and all the grand eloquent oratory that attended those enterprises, the passion of the war remained. But by the 1880's there's such an incredible economic forces loose in the country and the country's industrializing at such an enormous rate and such an enormous amount of money to be made that the great passionate idealism that attended the Civil War period tended to die away.]

Can you talk about opposition in the North and specifically the reaction to Emancipation North and South?

[The single most unpopular act of Lincoln's administration was the Emancipation Proclamation. It not only was horribly unpopular in the Confederacy where Jefferson Davis called it the most wicked thing that the dark side of human kind had ever come up with, but millions of Northerners responded to it as well. They did not really want the....a great many Northerners did not want the war to be changed over slave liberation.] The Northern Democrats who had had a very loose, you know, a very difficult alliance with Lincoln in prosecuting the war up to that time virtually abandoned the administration because of that. [And there was a big peace movement that began that swept across the midwest, most of which had to do with the reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation and to the fact that the Lincoln administration was resorting to the arrest of civilians who opposed the war.]

Did the men who died in that war die in vain?

[They did not die in vain. If you believe in popular government that the right of the people to choose their own leaders and to have a system that allows everyone the right to rise, then that civil war meant everything in the world for those notions. In that sense, it was not in vain.]

Tell me about the Confederate plan to put slaves into Confederate uniforms.

One of the great anomalies of the war is what happened in the Confederate attitude toward slavery. I don't want to say Confederate attitudes, certain Confederate leaders...RUN OUT

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Something extraordinarily ironic occurred in 1864 when Jeff Davis ? about the war?

[One of the great ironies about the Confederate war effort is that right at the end of the war, the thing was going so terribly for the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis was willing to arm the slaves and put them into the depleted Confederate ranks. And not only that but making some overture in diplomacy to Britain and France that he might be willing to issue a Confederate Emancipation Proclamation. In other words, Davis, by 1865, in order for the South to survive, realized it would now have to give up the very cause of the war--the very reason why we seceded and started fighting was to insure our slave based culture--be willing to even give up that for Confederate independence] but few perhaps people of his country would have been willing to follow him that far. The Confederate Congress, of course, did vote to arm a few blacks and see how that would go but the war ended before they actually saw any service.

There is that one event that really started the war for you.
What is it?

[John Brown's role in Harper's Ferry for me is the opening shot of the Civil War, even moreso than the civil war in Kansas in 1856. Brown can be viewed as the catalyst of the war. After this there's no chance of compromise between North and South. And Brown himself was very visionary on that score because he had two objectives at Harpers Ferry. Either he was going to insite a slave insurrection all across the South to rid the country of this wrong or, failing that, he was going to so provoke the South that it would lead to a sectional blow-up in which slavery somehow would die. In many ways, he's often maligned as a madman but John was perhaps the most perceptive man of his generation. He realized that all he had to do, being a Northern white and an abolitionist was to step foot into Southern territory with a gun and say, "I'm here to free your slaves." And the effect of that on the South would be cataclysmic. He was prophetic. That's exactly what happened.]

Was he a madman?

He's often been called mad. He was certainly zealous in his religious ideas. But if you call him a madman, then that's a convenient way of putting him into the closet and not having to deal with him and understand what motivated him. If you call him a madman because he felt himself an instrument in the hands of God, then there were thousands of madmen running around at that time because almost everybody thought they were instruments in the hands of God.

What did Antietam do?

Antietam - first of all, militarily Antietam marked the first time Lee had a taste of some degree of defeat. Everything he had done up to that point as the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia had led to a victory on the battlefield. This time he got driven out of Maryland and his invasion of the North had come to an end. More than that, Lincoln was able to pronounce this a Union victory. It wasn't really. It was not exactly that. It just meant that the Confederates left the field. But it was good enough for Lincoln and he pronounced it a Union victory and issued a preliminary emancipation proclamation announcing to the world that in ninety days he was going to free the slaves in the Confederacy.

Make Frederick Douglas human for me.

[Frederick Douglas was a passionate man of words. This is all the more extraordinary because he was born into slavery in Maryland and escaped slavery and later on with the help of , bought his own freedom. He was eloquent. He was eloquent as a speaker. He was so eloquent that once he'd bought his freedom and he was going around as an abolitionist speaking from white rostrums to white crowds, Garrison said, "You can't talk like that. People won't believe that you've been a slave if you're that smart and that eloquent." Can't you put in a little more of the black dialect or something?" And he went from that to become an abolitionist editor and a friend of John Brown's and one of the great one-man lobby groups for emancipation during the Civil War. [The pressure he put on Lincoln must be reckoned as one of the major pressures that finally brought Lincoln to the point of emancipating the slaves.]

Lee is sick alot during the war, during the last years of the war.

He's got heart trouble. His heart's bothering him a good deal. And his heart - he had pains in the heart and that aggravated by the fact that he was insomnic. He could scarcely sleep, mainly because he tried to do everything. His staff was not the kind of staff that Grant had. It was a kind of yes-men staff and left Lee with the problems of logistics and supply. So he was trying to do everything himself and, as supreme commander, trying to deal with western theater as well and yet fight in the eastern theater itself as the leader of the biggest army there. But it was too much for his heart. By Gettysburg, he 's having heart trouble and really bad heart trouble which eventually would kill him.

Is Lincoln two-sided? Does he lie to get his schemes across?

[The one place where the Lincoln of reality and the Lincoln of mythology merge is the fact that Lincoln was an honest man. My litmus test for that is that even his opponents said that he was honest. Well, you can believe it.] But he had a habit of arguing with himself. When he was about to do something, he would argue, "I'm not going to do that. That's the silliest thing in the world. Why in the world would I want to do that?" For example, in late '62, he was going to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. He was waiting for the ninety day period to be up with and the Christians came to beg him, to implore him to stand by his decision to free the slaves. And he argued with them: "Why should I do that? What good would that be for the Union cause and for the cause of the nation itself?" He had a habit of arguing with himself and if you didn't understand what he was doing, you might think him a bit two-faced.

Chicamauga.

I always think of Chicamauga as...the rock of Chicamauga was George Thomas. [We know him as the Rock of Chicamauga because of his sturdy generalship, but what's often overlooked in the Civil War is that he was a native Virginian, one of the few Virginians that elected to stay with his country and turn his hand against the state and his locality.] He also came from Southampton County where Nat Turner came from back in 1831 which, in some ways, foreshadows the Civil War itself. So this native Virginian who stayed with his country, honored his oath of allegiance to the flag, became the Rock of Chicamauga which won the battle for the Union.

George
Thom

McClellan.

[George McClellan was an expert organizer. Give him credit for the fact that he whipped the army of Northern Virginia into one of the finest armies on the planet, a superb fighting machine. He was always great at discipline and great at building an army, restoring the discipline and great at building an army, restoring the discipline of a demoralized army. But a fighter he was not. He really did view war as a kind of chess game where you feed your enemy by out finessing him and out maneuvering him and capturing maybe his capital and then the enemy would surrender. This business about the Civil War where these battle became huge bloodbaths - he had no taste for that. He loved his men and he couldn't bear to see them killed. In a sense ,you know, you can recognize the humanity in George McClellan but you can also recognize that he's a very bad general that would have that attitude and be afraid to allow men to be killed. He's not going to win a battle with that attitude, is what I'm trying to say, in the Civil War.

What made a man, North or South, charge? Why do men fight?

In the heat of battle, I think that the Red Badge of Courage captured best of all, probably better than it's ever been captured the throes of the insecurities and anxieties-- What am I going to do-- that went through the typical war soldier, North and South. If I attack, will I stand? If somebody attacks me, will I stand or will I run? If I'm ordered to attack, will I simply grab hold of myself and not go? What happens? In the heat of battle, it's probably self-survival. That's what's going on there. By attacking, it might end the battle. You might actually save yourself. It becomes the essence of survival and those who understood that to do well, not to run away or not to cringe in a hole when it was time to attack, that their heroism was attached to their understanding of the need to survive.

Women. This was the first women's war in a way. It really shored things up. Can you describe that?

Even from the Union side alone, the women's war effort was indispensable. For one thing, they flocked into the government to serve as nurses. There was mother who served in the western theater for the most part as a nurse for the U.S. Sanitary Commission. There was Clara Barton who was her own nurse. She never did belong to any of the official nursing organizations of the Union army. She was a self-appointed nurse and she was on many of the great battlefields in the eastern theater of the Civil War. She held a man who died in her arms at Bull Run, had been shot and wounded and she was holding him and nursing him and shot and killed right there. And she would go back and describe to people as she went around raising money for nursing equipment and for medicines which she would take down to the battlefields and she would describe the horrors she had witnessed. And there was a tremendous reaction on the part of men in the audiences she addressed. This was no place for a woman. War was no place for a woman. And the Civil War became a woman's place. There are literally hundreds of Union women who served as nurses to work in those horrible Civil War hospitals whose scenes are indescribable in their ghastliness.

Andersonville is really a terrible chapter of the war.

When you look at the photographs of Andersonville, those photographs speak eloquently of the kind of human misery that took place there. Thousands of men were dying daily of starvation, of malarial diseases, dysentery in particular. You can even look in the photographs at Andersonville and see that the commandant of Andersonville, Henry Werts, had allowed the latrine at Andersonville to flow into the one river, stream the men had there for drinking. So the stream was polluted and the men died like flies.

Why should I care about the Civil War?

[The Civil War is not only the central event of American history but it's a central event in large ways for the world itself. If we believe today in the twentieth century as surely we must, that popular government is the way to go, that it is the way for the emancipation of the human spirit, then the Civil War established the fact that a popular government could survive, that it could overcome an internal secession movement that could destroy it. So the war becomes, in essence, it becomes a testament for the liberation of the human spirit for all time.]