

REVIEW ESSAY

DEAD MEN WALKING: WRESTLING WITH DEATH IN CIVIL WAR AMERICA

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*D*rew Gilpin Faust. *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Pp. xviii, 346, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$27.95.)

Mark S. Schantz. *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. xv, 245, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$24.95.)

The Civil War resulted in the greatest loss of life in American military history. The war produced slightly more than one million casualties, including 620,000 deaths, roughly two percent of the population. That catastrophic death toll is nearly equivalent to all other American wars combined, and those figures only represent the dead or wounded that were somehow accounted for, as the real numbers were likely even higher. Indeed, the magnitude of the death toll remains a subject of considerable scholarly debate.¹ In today's America, such losses are difficult to fathom. It is inconceivable in our modern society that we could withstand

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such tremendous loss: today approximately six million Americans would have to die for our nation to equal the horror of the Civil War. If such losses seem impossible to bear for modern Americans, with all of our advanced technology and social infrastructure, how is it that Americans of the nineteenth century overcame the tragedy? Perhaps more to the point, did they overcome it? Death stalked these people, civilian and military, northern and southern alike. None were immune to its effects, and no-one could hide from its grim reality. The Civil War has received more attention and investigation than any other period in American history, and voluminous research has analyzed the causes—technological, tactical, and otherwise—that lie at the root of so much death, but comparatively little research has focused on how Americans of that era came to terms with such unprecedented killing. While existing Civil War scholarship offers us important and inspiring accounts of how men overcame the brutality of the battlefield and soldiered on, we know considerably less about how this generation of Americans reacted to death's omnipresence in their lives.² How did they make sense of the slaughter? How was it that they wrestled with death and somehow managed to move on with their lives and the life of the nation?

Two important new books aspire to answer these and other questions about how Civil War era Americans endured so much death and how that experience transformed their lives. Mark Schantz's *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* and Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* are complimentary in many ways, yet meaningfully contradictory in others. Both Schantz and Faust examine the Civil War through the medium of death as a social and cultural construct, structuring their analyses around the fundamental premise that death was the defining characteristic of life in Civil War America. But their preoccupation with death does not induce these historians to revise or recast current interpretations regarding the technological or strategic causes behind the massive death tolls of the war, rather it drives them to analyze how Americans of this era conceptualized death, prepared for death, faced death, and how the survivors made sense of their loss and honored the memories of the fallen. In this regard, both Schantz and Faust study death as an important part of mid-nineteenth American society and culture, a phenomenon that Americans engaged on an almost daily basis and at times even embraced as a welcome and fitting conclusion to life. Both authors powerfully and meaningfully remind us that the Civil War was a critical crossroads in American history, and just as with so many other aspects of the

American experience, our understanding and conceptualization of death were challenged and transformed by the war.

It seems fitting that any discussion of death and the Civil War must invariably begin with the horrors of the battlefield, on those blood soaked fields and hills where the dead and the dying met their fate. The human cost of the war far exceeded anything that either side could have imagined at the inception of the conflict. Faust, an accomplished Civil War historian who is currently president of Harvard University, reminds us of this grim reality in the opening chapter of *This Republic of Suffering*, one that she simply titles "Dying." "No one expected what the Civil War was to become," Faust writes. "The North entered the First Battle of Bull Run in the summer of 1861 anticipating a decisive victory that would quash the rebellion; Confederates thought the Union would quickly give up after initial reverses. Neither side could have imagined the magnitude and length of the conflict that unfolded, nor the death tolls that proved its terrible costs."³ The slaughter was unprecedented, both in scope and in style. In a sobering reminder that war is hell, Faust recounts the grisly world that engulfed both soldiers and survivors alike: battlefields drenched with blood and littered with the bloated, rotting corpses of the slain, unburied bodies purpled and blackened from the prolonged effects of livor mortis, during which uncirculated blood pools in the interstitial tissue of the body and causes a purplish-black discoloration of the skin. The longer the process is allowed to progress, the deeper and darker the discoloration, and by Faust's account, the bodies of the dead lying on Civil War battlefields lay for days and even weeks until they were discolored beyond all recognition. This apocalyptic landscape also included the mangled corpses of countless horses, mules, and other beasts of burden, the ravaged fields, orchards and pastures of what had once been a peaceful pastoral countryside, and the multitudes of displaced civilians and former slaves crowding roads and towns in an effort to find safety and security in a world seemingly gone mad with battle. It paints a grim picture, one that serves as a chilling reminder that there was nothing romantic or nostalgic about America's greatest catastrophe.

That said, would the horrors of the Civil War somehow seem more palatable if we were aware that Americans of the mid-nineteenth century were well prepared for this onslaught of death? In his book *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, Mark S. Schantz, a professor of history at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas, argues that antebellum Americans' beliefs about death prepared them for what was to come during the war. Through a series

of interrelated essays, Schantz offers a tour de force through antebellum America's understanding of death, a belief system that was structured around the concept of what became known as a "good death." To achieve such an end, Antebellum Americans believed one had to accept death calmly, a state they could readily achieve because they expected that their end would come at home, surrounded by familiar comforts and in the presence of their loved ones. Acceptance of death was made easier by antebellum Americans' strong belief that there was life after death. Most Americans subscribed to the tenants of Protestant Christianity, which taught that the deceased would be welcomed into heaven after dying, where they would be reunited with departed family and friends and live out eternity in peace. Making amends with God was necessary to gain entrance to the heavenly country, but this too was an accepted and expected part of dying a good death. Thus, Schantz contends that antebellum Americans were not overwhelmed by death when the war intruded into their lives, but instead that they were culturally and socially prepared to face death because they understood that a better world awaited them after dying. This interpretation lends credence to well articulated premise that Civil War soldiers were better prepared to die than to fight, a notion both Schantz and Faust embrace. But Schantz pushes this concept in a new direction, urging us to consider the notion that antebellum beliefs about death may have directly contributed to the massive casualty rates that ensued. "Americans came to fight the Civil War in the midst of a wider cultural world that sent them messages about death that made it easier to kill and be killed," writes Schantz. "They understood that death awaited all who were born and prized the ability to face death with a spirit of calm resignation. They believed that a heavenly eternity of transcendent beauty awaited them beyond the grave. They knew that their heroic achievements would be cherished forever by posterity. They grasped that death itself might be seen as artistically fascinating and even beautiful Americans thus approached the Civil War carrying a cluster of assumptions about death that . . . facilitated its unprecedented destructiveness."⁴

It is a fascinating and thought-provoking assertion. Indeed, Schantz's interpretations echo the remarks of a private in the thirty-third Mississippi Regiment, who wrote that "Christians make the best soldiers, as they would not fear the consequences of death as others would."⁵ Yet while it has been established that religion played a powerful role in sustaining soldiers during the war, Schantz's contentions about belief in the Heavenly Country would appear to unravel under the considerable weight of the Civil War. Perhaps

consequently, Schantz focuses only a small portion of his book on the actual war, eschewing any meaningful litmus test for his theories.⁶ But even if we accept Schantz's arguments for their intrinsic value, and he makes a compelling case that we should, Faust offers a persuasive counterpoint to the idea that Civil War Americans were well prepared to weather the ravages of death unleashed during the war. Indeed, the dying occurred on such an unprecedented level, Faust argues, that the survivors had to create a new set of rituals, funerary rites, and ways to memorialize the dead in order to make sense of so much killing. Faust is perhaps most persuasive in proving her point when discussing the almost total systemic failure of American society to face the challenges presented by the war. For example, in 1861 Union soldiers marched off to war with no standardized forms of identification (American soldiers did not wear dog tags until World War I). As casualties mounted, serious problems attended the identification of the fallen. Ironically, the acuteness of this problem was blunted, at least early in the war, by the failure of the Union Army to provide for the burial of its dead. No-one was overly concerned about identifying the dead because no-one was burying them. As time passed, individual units and companies often carried out that task, if the conditions of war allowed for it, but there was no standardization of commemoration or grave registration. Officers were generally afforded better treatment than enlisted men, who all too often were tossed into unspecified mass graves, if they were interred at all. Most troubling, with no regular burial details on either side, countless numbers of the deceased were left unburied on the battlefield. In turn the inability of the government to identify and bury the dead complicated efforts to notify next of kin, who more often than not were forced to take matters into their own hands. Fathers, mothers, and other relatives of missing Civil War soldiers traveled to battlefields, hospitals, and encampments to discover the fate of their loved ones, while other worried families hired private detectives to search for missing men or placed advertisements in newspapers and weekly magazines seeking news of a relative. Those in need of succor just as often turned to self-proclaimed mediums and other hack spiritualists, who made a brisk income by reaching out to the spirits of the dead for grieving families desperately searching for certainty and closure. "In the twenty-first century Americans considering the impact of death regularly invoke the notion of closure, the hope and anticipation of an end to the disruption of loss," relates Faust. But for Civil War Americans there was "no such relief. For hundreds of thousands, the unknown fate of missing kin left 'a dread void of uncertainty' that knowledge would never fill Wives,

parents, children, and siblings struggled with the new identities—widows, orphans, the childless—that now defined their lives.”⁷

Given what Faust reveals, it is hard to accept Schantz’s assertion that Americans were prepared—emotionally, spiritually economically, politically, or any other way—to cope with the Civil War’s harvest of death. Simply put, the war changed the rules. The core of Schantz’s interpretation is found in the assumption that Americans were prepared for death, yet this holds true only as long as death occurred with the framework of their cultural understandings. Death was expected to visit a person in their home, where the dying would be surrounded by family, content to pass from this world having come to terms with God and at peace with their fate. The war did not allow for the perpetuation of such traditional practices, but instead unchained a new form of death that obliterated accepted conventions and protocols for dying and forever changed what it meant to live and die in America. During the war men died far from home, surrounded by enemies, and often unable to reconcile themselves to their fate. In that awful universe of battle, it was no longer possible to cling to antebellum America’s notion of a good death. Faust sums it up well: “Individuals found themselves in a new and different moral universe, one in which unimaginable destruction had become daily experience. Where did God belong in such a world? How could a benevolent deity countenance such cruelty and such suffering? Doubt threatened to overpower faith—faith in the Christian narrative of a compassionate divinity and a hope of life beyond the grave, faith in the intelligibility and purpose of life on Earth Death without dignity, without decency, without identity imperiled the meaning of the life that preceded it. Americans had not just lost the dead; they had lost their own lives as they understood them before the war. As Lucy Buck of Virginia observed, ‘we shall never any of us be the same as we have been.’”⁸

That transformation eventually forced the federal government to become actively involved in the business of death. As Faust explains, “The Nation was a survivor, too, transformed by its encounter with death, obligated by the sacrifices of its dead. The war’s staggering human cost demanded a new sense of national destiny, one designed to ensure that lives had been sacrificed for appropriately lofty ends.”⁹ The task of finding that meaning invariably fell squarely upon the shoulders of government. Following the harrowing three-day Battle of Gettysburg, Congress took steps to create a national military cemetery to inter and commemorate the Union soldiers who had fallen there. But it was not until war’s end, when the horrible realities

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of the cruelty of war at last abated, that the federal government finally made adequate provisions for burying and remembering all of its Civil War dead. The process took nearly six years and cost millions of dollars, but by the end of 1871 the government had created seventy-four national cemeteries where 303,536 Union soldiers were afforded a final place of honor. Still, the inability to accurately identify the dead proved to be a major problem. Over forty percent of Union soldiers who eventually found their way into government cemeteries were interred as "UNKNOWN," a moniker that immediately conjures up sad and haunting memories for anyone who has walked among the markers of the dead at the nation's Civil War cemeteries. Confederate dead perhaps had an even sadder fate. Initially barred from the national cemeteries, Confederate corpses found their way into cemeteries, but only due to the efforts of southern widows and charitable organizations who raised money and carried out the grim work of putting their dead to rest.

Both of these works are provocative, if grim, additions to the library of Civil War scholarship. So much had been written about the war that is strikingly unique to encounter such novel approaches to the conflict. Both of these books compel us to alter our preconceptions about the Civil War and compel us to think differently about war and death in general, and more specifically about how both impact us as a people and a nation. Taken separately, Faust's arguments are more convincing and more sustainable, but taken together they offer compelling insight into the cultural, social, and mental realm of Civil War America. There can little doubt that both books will appear on the reading lists for graduate and advanced undergraduate courses for years to come, and it is likely that they will be paired together as often as not. In short, no serious student or scholar of the Civil War can afford to ignore either of these important books, or what their authors have to say about how "the sheer destructiveness of the Civil War worked profound transformations on American society."¹⁰

NOTES

1. Coming to grips with the total death toll of the Civil War is challenging and problematic. Confederate records are incomplete, leading to widespread disagreement among scholars as to the aggregate number and representative percentage of southern males who died during the conflict. Adding to difficulty is the almost untraceable number of civilians who died directly or indirectly as a result of the war. Faust herself concedes that she has chosen to accept some of the more conservative

figures often cited for the war's death toll. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xi–xii. See also note 2 on pages 273–74 for the disagreements of historians concerning Confederate casualty rates.

2. Among the best of such accounts are Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Edward J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Overcoming the Ordeal of Combat* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Wiley Sword, *Courage Under Fire: Profiles in Bravery from the Battlefields of the Civil War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007).
3. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 3.
4. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, 2–3.
5. Quoted in McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 68.
6. For a more direct account of how Civil War soldiers turned to religious faith in an effort to cope with the cruelties of combat, see McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 62–76. McPherson also delves into the moral contradiction that Christian soldiers faced during the war when they violated the commandment against killing.
7. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 170.
8. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 268–69.
9. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 269.
10. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, 1.