

American Liberal Pacifists and the Memory of Abolitionism, 1914-1933
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Americans' memory of their Civil War has always been more than idle reminiscence. David Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* is the best new work to examine the way that the nation actively reimagined the past in order to explain and justify the present. Interdisciplinary in its methods, ecumenical in its sources, and nuanced in its interpretations, *Race and Reunion* explains how the recollection of the Civil War became a case of race *versus* reunion in the half-century after Gettysburg. On one hand, Frederick Douglass and his allies promoted an "emancipationist" vision that drew attention to the role of slavery in the conflict and that highlighted the continuing problem of racial inequality. Opposed to this stance was the "reconciliationist" ideal, which located the meaning of the war in notions of abstract heroism and devotion by North and South alike, divorced from any particular allegiance. On this ground the former combatants could meet undisturbed by the problems of politics and ideological difference. This latter view became the dominant memory, and, involving as it did a kind of forgetting, laid the groundwork for decades of racial violence and segregation, Blight argues. Thus did memory frame the possibilities of politics and moral action.

The first photograph in *Race and Reunion* illustrates this victory of reunion, showing Woodrow Wilson at Gettysburg in 1913. Wilson, surrounded by white veterans from North and South, with Union and Confederate flags flying, is making a speech in which he praises the heroism of the combatants in the Civil War while declaring their "quarrel forgotten." The last photograph in Blight's book, though, invokes a different story about Civil War memory. It shows Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking at the March on Washington in 1963. Though Blight does not discuss this photo in the text, he mentions that "emancipationist memory lived on to

fight another day.” Is this merely a concluding flourish? Or did the memory of the Civil War actually help to move the American moral and political imagination from 1913 to 1963?¹

Beginning in the First World War, liberal pacifists revived the abolitionist legacy and reinterpreted it in light of their own experiences and political projects. That legacy proved particularly important in the culture of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a Christian pacifist group formed during World War I. The FOR helps us bridge the gap between the dismal eclipse of racial justice in 1913 and the success of Martin Luther King in 1963. The pacifists in the Fellowship, mostly white northerners, used Civil War memory in two important ways. First, they maintained that pacifism was a new kind of abolitionism, and claimed that war, like slavery, was a doomed relic of a barbaric age. Second, and more daringly, these pacifists argued that the Civil War in particular had been a mistake that had started the country into a spiral of militarism and racial violence. Their marriage of abolitionist memory to radical pacifism would shape much of the moral and intellectual justification of the civil rights movement.

¹David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001). See also Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) and, for a brilliant account of the role of Civil War memory in American intellectual life during the same period, Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

The Fellowship of Reconciliation was the leading Christian pacifist organization of the interwar years, and one of the most important of all peace groups. During the period under consideration here, FOR leaders included the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the labor organizer A. J. Muste, and the Socialist Party leaders Norman Thomas and Devere Allen. Formed in 1915, the group grew to prominence after the events of the war years fractured the coalition of Progressives who had dominated American reform for two decades. Though they shared the predominantly white, northeastern, elite backgrounds of their Progressive peers, opponents of war in 1917 found themselves suddenly isolated, as John Dewey and other liberals decided to support Woodrow Wilson's call for U.S. intervention on the grounds that the war could usher in a more just and rational social order. Pacifists faced harassment and censorship, loss of their jobs and pulpits, and even prison terms when they publicized their beliefs too aggressively. In response to this new political order, the FOR developed a new, more militant and radical form of pacifism that eventually superseded the older, more moderate peace societies that had operated before the war. The group ranged beyond antiwar activity to questions of prison reform, labor organization, civil liberties, anticolonialism, and racial equality. Eventually, the Fellowship would play a major role not only in developing the theory and practice of nonviolent action, but in formulating a powerful critique of the dominant American liberalism as well.²

²On the Fellowship of Reconciliation, see *Charles Chatfield, For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1919-1941* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1971); Donald Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973 [1960]). David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) surveys the effects of World War I on the United States. For a detailed account

of the fragmentation of liberal reform groups during the war years, see Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

The memory of abolitionism suffused the culture of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Most leaders of the organization in this period were born between 1870 and 1900, so they had no living memory of the Civil War. However, they moved in a milieu structured by the abolitionist legacy, and many had strong genealogical, emotional, and intellectual connections to the antislavery cause. They read the *Nation*, edited by Oswald Garrison Villard, an FOR member and the grandson of antislavery firebrand William Lloyd Garrison. They went to school at places like Oberlin College, defined by its role as a center of abolitionist ferment. In this peculiar world of northeastern reform, abolitionists seem to have received the kind of veneration reserved for Civil War veterans in most other environments. John Haynes Holmes, a prominent pacifist minister in New York City, claimed that “the memory of Theodore Parker” had helped lead him to the ministry. Parker had performed the wedding of Holmes’s grandparents, and the antebellum minister and reformer was a “proud possession” in the Holmes family.³

Pacifism became the new abolitionism to FOR members who sought to justify their radical stand against war. Though they had seen the abolitionists as models even before the events of World War I, these ancestors seemed to be especially relevant in the new political climate, and they continued to be relevant after the war. Fanny Bixby Spencer, a California pacifist, defended her supposed “‘disloyal record’ during the war” by appealing to the memory of her grandfather, who had “harbored fugitive slaves in his home and carried them at night to the next station on the underground railway to Canada.” Her grandfather’s “lawlessness,” argued Spencer, was an “honorable heritage.”⁴ Using memories like this, pacifists were able to justify their new adversarial relationship to the state. Pacifism also provided an ethical and

³John Haynes Holmes, *I Speak for Myself: The Autobiography of John Haynes Holmes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 45.

⁴Fanny Bixby Spencer, *The Repudiation of War* (Costa Mesa, CA: H. F. Schick, [1922 or 1923]),

personal challenge for this younger generation that seemed equal in scope and difficulty to the antislavery crusade. “Concerning war,” wrote the minister and missionary Sherwood Eddy in 1924, “like William Lloyd Garrison on the great moral issue of slavery, I count myself an abolitionist. . . . I believe that in this great modern crusade, I have found for myself what Professor James called ‘the moral equivalent of war.’”⁵ Pacifism, like the antislavery crusade, offered a strenuous alternative to the tests of the battlefield.

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⁵Sherwood Eddy and Kirby Page, *The Abolition of War* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924), 25.

To equate pacifism with abolitionism was, by extension, to equate slavery with war. By using this metaphor, the pacifists tried to counter the charge that their crusade was merely utopian. Against those who argued that war was necessary (if regrettable) in imperfect human societies, pacifists stressed the historical precedent for sweeping humanitarian reforms. Slavery was one of many institutions that had once been regarded as inevitable, but that had been eliminated without millennial transformation. For the Fellowship of Reconciliation, war became one more in a series of obsolete relics of barbarism that included, along with slavery, cannibalism, human sacrifice, and dueling. The dialectic of civilization and savagery was central to the social thought of Americans during the first decades of the twentieth century,⁶ and supporters of the war, even liberals, cast the First World War in terms of a battle between the forces of progress and the barbarous Huns. Pacifists also drew on concepts of civilization and savagery, but they resisted this partitioning; instead, they suggested that war drew all participants back into the depths of primitive ferocity. “Confident that we were civilized,” stated Holmes in 1915, “we were all at once awakened to the fact that we were still barbarians.”⁷ The elimination of war became one more step in the journey from savagery to civilization, not a fuzzy utopian dream that existed outside of history.

⁶See, for instance, Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁷John Haynes Holmes, “The Duty and Opportunity of America in the Present Crisis,” *The Messiah Pulpit* (March 1915): 4.

Absolute pacifists employed the metaphor of slavery to counter the mainstream liberal position of Woodrow Wilson, who argued that World War I was a just war because it was fought for moral and democratic ends.⁸ “War, like slavery, cannot be wrong in one place and right in another place,” declared Holmes.⁹ All wars, the FOR pacifists found, bore remarkable similarities to slavery in their dehumanizing elements. For example, armies, like slaveholders, depended on the coercion of individuals against their wills. Norman Thomas even suggested that: “Conscription of the conscientious objector on whatever ground is worse than chattel slavery, for the slave may still be in heart and conscience free.”¹⁰ War and slavery also had parallel corrosive effects on the sexual purity of a society. Sherwood Eddy, who worked in soldiers’ camps for the YMCA during World War I, maintained that just as the “story of the sexual immorality of some of our greatest national heroes can never be written” because of their intimacy with slaves, neither “can the story of the sexual immorality of our armies overseas ever be told.”¹¹ In this view, liberal defenders of the “war to end all wars” had mastered the equivocation and hypocrisy of the antebellum plantation owner.

⁸On the just war tradition, see Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000 [1977]) For a discussion of Wilson’s war aims, see Knock, *To End All Wars*.

⁹John Haynes Holmes, “Is War Ever Justifiable?” *The Messiah Pulpit* (February 1915): 5.

¹⁰Norman Thomas, *The Christian Patriot* (Philadelphia: Walter H. Jenkins, 1917), 65.

¹¹Eddy and Page, *Abolition of War*, 57.

Prowar liberals challenged the pacifists' appropriation of the abolitionist legacy. They seized on some logical problems implicit in the metaphorical project of the FOR circle. If war was a barbaric institution like slavery, how could war have eliminated slavery? How, in other words, could a pacifist reconcile the irreconcilable conflict? The original trauma of modern American society became the ultimate weapon for non-pacifists of all stripes. Devere Allen, the future Socialist Party leader, discovered this while attending college at Oberlin during World War I. Beginning in March 1917, Allen edited an antiwar newspaper entitled *The Rational Patriot*. His activities laid claim to the Oberlin abolitionist legacy, but he soon found that this legacy could be separated from war only with difficulty. *The Oberlin Tribune*, the official student newspaper, condemned *The Rational Patriot* for attempting to appropriate "the true Oberlin spirit." That spirit, noted the editors, "had an important part in bringing on the struggle between the north and the south." To argue that *The Rational Patriot* was carrying on an Oberlin tradition "would be to say that Abraham Lincoln was a misguided individual who lacked moral courage and whose sole object in projecting the nation into war was to please the jingoes and the manufacturers of munitions." Allen, trying to conjure the abolitionist spirit, found that spirit invoked by both sides in the debate over U. S. intervention.¹²

The apparently righteous aims of the Civil War, along with the towering moral figure of Lincoln, presented daunting obstacles to pacifists attempting to identify themselves as the heirs of abolitionism. Fanny Bixby Spencer charged that Lincoln, though "a true humanitarian at heart," had "made the mistake of his career" by waging a war to preserve the Union,¹³ but most pacifists were more circumspect about the Great Rebellion. "If any war in the history of the

¹²"The Oberlin Spirit," *The Oberlin Tribune*, 15 June 1917. See also Devere Allen, "A Brief Report on 'The Rational Patriot,'" 6 February 1947, Devere Allen Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

world was ever fought unselfishly,” John Haynes Holmes conceded, the Civil War deserved the honor.¹⁴ To question this seemed the height of a morally indiscriminate absolutism. During World War I, a Fellowship of Reconciliation member wrote to Norman Thomas announcing his resignation from the organization. The man had been profoundly disturbed after talking to a pacifist friend who claimed “that it would have been better to have had slavery continued, if that was the only way out, than to have had a war which freed the slaves.”¹⁵ Here the new abolitionists, rather than the non-pacifist liberals, seemed to be the retrospective defenders of the “peculiar institution.”

¹³Spencer, *Repudiation of War*, 5.

¹⁴John Haynes Holmes, *New Wars for Old* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1916), 287.

¹⁵Ralph Harlow to Norman Thomas, 6 September 1917. Norman Thomas Papers, New York Public Library, Series I (microfilm).

The pacifists in the FOR countered these difficulties by undermining the legitimacy of the Civil War in two ways. First, they emphasized the origins of a broad antislavery impulse that had preceded the conflict itself. The most extensive work along this line came in Devere Allen's 1930 book *The Fight for Peace*. Allen, by this time an editor of the Christian pacifist journal *The World Tomorrow*, presented an exhaustive history of pacifism in the United States that made the case for a tougher, more realistic and at the same time more radical antiwar stance. His book was not a history of the abolitionist crusade, but his extensive discussions of William Lloyd Garrison and other antebellum reformers clearly demonstrated the original affinities between opposition to slavery and opposition to war. Allen saw the Civil War as a preventable, almost accidental event that was unnecessary for the achievement of racial justice, and he located the heart of the antislavery campaign in the earlier Garrisonian nonresistant movement.¹⁶

As they reached back before the Civil War to revive a tradition of nonresistance, pacifists also examined the consequences of the conflict. Here they attacked the reunion culture of memorials and holidays as a blasphemous religion of militarism, but also modified the emancipationist idea that the war had been a victory for justice and equality. "The ultimate benefits of the Civil War are not what the winners have proclaimed," Fanny Bixby Spencer declared ominously. She inveighed against the "worship of war heroics," maintained "under the persuasion that the Civil War was holy." As an example, Spencer denounced the Civil War anthem "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which, she said, reduced Christianity to "a religion of blood." Spencer also extended her case to twentieth-century institutions such as ROTC and the Boy Scouts.¹⁷

¹⁶Devere Allen, *The Fight for Peace* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930).

¹⁷Spencer, *Repudiation of War*.

Expanding on the idea of a militaristic culture, the FOR pacifists argued that the Civil War had begun an long cycle of terror. “The harm done by that war,” explained Devere Allen, “was to go on poisoning the life of the American people, black and white alike, for generations.”¹⁸ The idea that violence, once employed, would escape the control of even a righteous cause was a staple of Christian pacifist belief, used to refute those (like Woodrow Wilson in 1917 and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1930s) who argued for the judicious use of force to achieve social justice. Pacifists remained haunted by the reversion to savagery. “Let the passion of war sweep widely through a nation,” declared Holmes, “and instantly the beast, that is lurking in every human heart, is freed from its social bonds and the spiritual being which is his best self is instantly imprisoned or destroyed.” The reconciliationist standard of selfless devotion to a cause was merely an illusion. “Courage remains, but it is the courage of the frenzied beast and not of the patient martyr. Sacrifice appears, but it is the sacrifice of madness and not of calm deliberation.”¹⁹ Passion, frenzy, madness — these were the offspring of even the most righteous of wars.

¹⁸Allen, *Fight for Peace*, 462.

¹⁹John Haynes Holmes, “Is Permanent and Universal Peace to be Desired?” *The Messiah Pulpit* (January 1915), 17.

These pacifists turned to the racial violence taking place in the American South for concrete evidence of the continuing spiral of warfare. Here the Fellowship of Reconciliation tried to separate the Civil War from a narrative of African-American progress. “Did the Civil War settle the race question,” the pacifist leader Kirby Page asked rhetorically, “or did it set back its solution by a hundred years?”²⁰ FOR pacifists constructed a kind of mirror image of white supremacist views, which had been exemplified by D. W. Griffith’s 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. In this movie (itself a perverse kind of antiwar statement) the Civil War and Reconstruction unleash a supposed reign of black terror and violence in the South, a siege ended only by the actions of the Ku Klux Klan. The pacifists in the Fellowship agreed that the war had only incited more violence, but they turned Griffith’s formulation around. The Civil War was, Fanny Bixby Spencer explained, “breeding a continual aftermath of peonage, persecution and lynching of the Negroes, the bitterness of revenge in the south having centered on the innocent cause of the outbreak, and northern solicitude for justice for the Negroes having been swallowed up in victory.”²¹ Such interpretations structured the FOR’s particular variety of pacifism. As war had produced racial violence, so the opposition to war entailed a commitment to racial equality. Even as early as the 1920s, therefore, FOR chapters became involved in integration efforts and other interracial political action.

This particular memory of abolitionism, however, also limited pacifists’ imaginations in ways that hindered complete racial equality. As the Fellowship of Reconciliation moved race and slavery to the foreground of Civil War memory, it tended to occlude actual slaves. The FOR members, mostly white, mostly northeastern, imagined themselves as William Lloyd Garrison or

²⁰Eddy and Page, *Abolition of War*, 114.

Theodore Parker, never as Frederick Douglass. White abolitionists, in this construction, were heroic figures struggling mightily with the complex requirements of peace and justice, enduring the scorn of their peers, and witnessing dramatic reversals of fortune. African-Americans, by contrast, became a collective “race question” or an “innocent cause of the outbreak.”

²¹Spencer, *Repudiation of War*, 5-6.

The integration efforts of John Haynes Holmes reveal the limits of the Christian pacifists' work to achieve racial justice in this early period. Holmes was one of the co-founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, and one of the pioneers of early civil rights reform. His career clearly demonstrates the energy that the abolitionist tradition could provide for the promotion of twentieth-century liberal causes. Yet Holmes's work also reveals the limits of that tradition. In his 1959 autobiography, entitled *I Speak for Myself*, he describes an act of civil disobedience that early reformers used to commit at theaters, probably in the 1910s or 1920s. Holmes and his colleagues would purchase tickets in advance, then show up on the date of the performance "with one or two Negroes in our company. The Negroes were under strict instructions to say nothing, but to hold their places at any cost." The white contingent, meanwhile, protested the inevitable refusal of admittance to the segregated show. As the argument persisted, the other patrons would become agitated at the delay. Eventually the theater manager would call the police, allowing the reformers to end their protest and challenge the segregation system through legal channels.²²

²²Holmes, *I Speak for Myself*, 198.

These maneuvers, as Holmes was no doubt aware in 1959, anticipated the tactics of the civil rights movement in their moralistic tone, in their nonviolent method, and in their symbolic and performative character. Yet they also framed the debate over racial justice as a moral struggle among whites; blacks were largely silent. The focus on speech in the theater incident is crucial. The white reformers “were politely but firmly protesting,” while the theater employee would occasionally “blurt out the truth — that they did not admit Negroes to their performances.” As the other theatergoers grew more agitated: “Shouts were raised, protests heard.” Yet one party remains outside the general cacophony. “The Negroes were under strict instructions to say nothing.” Three pages later, Holmes describes a similar incident involving a segregated elevator in Washington D.C. Here again, Holmes and the hotel staff argue the case, while the black man in question remains silent. Holmes’s stories suggest, then, that this memory of abolitionism was not yet ready to encompass Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963, even as it challenged the complacency of Woodrow Wilson at Gettysburg in 1913.²³

Still, the Fellowship of Reconciliation in its first two decades had begun to fashion an abolitionist memory that linked pacifism and nonviolence with racial justice and equality. In this sense, the FOR helped set the trajectory of the civil rights movement. Another generation would adopt its radical commitment to moral principles, continue to develop its idea that violence of all kinds was destructive, and work to overcome its lingering white paternalism. In 1942, James Farmer and George Houser, Fellowship of Reconciliation secretaries who opposed World War II, formed the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) as an offshoot of the FOR. This organization pioneered the use of nonviolent civil rights protest, particularly in its 1947 “Freedom Ride” testing integration laws on interstate bus lines. In the early 1960s, CORE helped support a movement of protesters, led by Southern black students, who conducted sit-ins at segregated lunch counters and soon formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which would become the most important civil rights organization of its day. In 1964 the historian Howard Zinn wrote an analysis of this group.²⁴ SNCC’s nonviolent crusaders were, he declared, “the new abolitionists.”

²³Holmes, *I Speak for Myself*, 198, 201.

²⁴Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).