

A Nation Transformed: How the Civil War Changed America Forever

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Review

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The Civil War as an Agent of Change

Originally published in 2001, under the title *Civil War Firsts: The Legacies of America's Bloodiest Conflict*, Gerald S. Henig and Eric Niderost's reprint edition, *A Nation Transformed: How the Civil War Changed America Forever*, is a compilation of events that took place first during the American Civil War. The authors consult numerous published primary sources, and an array of monographs and articles from notable historians, to discuss virtually every facet of the Civil War. By providing a brief synopsis of first ever events, albeit with a northern bias, the strength of the book is that virtually no topic is ignored. It discusses issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, politics, economics, health care, spying, and more.

The authors organized the book into fourteen topical chapters for the reader to open it at any part and discover how the Civil War changed America. For example, on page 110, the reader will find the claim that the Civil War was the first time that the U.S. military proposed the use of gas warfare by loading liquid chlorine into artillery shells and exploding them over the Confederate army. One will also discover in the chapter on raising and administering an army that the Civil War was the first war in which Catholics, Jews, and African Americans served as U.S. military chaplains.

Most of the author's assertions about how the Civil War firsts changed America prove true. For example, the innovation of repeating firearms, especially the popular Spencer rifle, profoundly changed armed conflict. The muzzle-loading rifle musket that both sides used was extremely dangerous and tedious to load, allowing for only one shot at a time. The Spencer rifles, though, patented in 1860 by Christopher Minor Spencer, allowed for seven shots before

reloading, giving soldiers an opportunity to fire fifteen rounds per minute. In one of the more interesting chapters of the book, *Fighting the War from the Air*, the authors provide a fascinating discussion on the role of hot air balloons during the Civil War. Although not a significant factor in determining the course of war, hot air balloons were used to send telegraphic messages, sketch maps of the terrain, drop leaflets behind enemy lines, and for aerial reconnaissance of the enemy. In addition, although no new information is uncovered and the authors support the refuted claim that the Civil War was a rich man's war and a poor man's fight, the book offers a good account of conscription in the North and South, and the problems of race and class associated with that process.

Furthermore, the authors provide a timely discussion of how President Abraham Lincoln was the first president to expand his powers as commander in chief by usurping congressional authority. With Congress out of session, Lincoln acted quickly and beyond the scope of his authority by calling for a blockade of southern ports, enlarging the army and navy, advancing \$2 million of public money to citizens of New York for support of the government and war effort, and suspending the writ of habeas corpus. As the authors note, this might not appear alarming today, but in the nineteenth century, Lincoln's actions appeared unquestionably unconstitutional.

In their claim that the Civil War changed America forever, the authors are at their best in the examination of wartime congresses. Here their work provides a discussion of several significant topics such as the first federal income and inheritance taxes, the first war bond drive, the first attempt at organizing a banking system, increasing the bureaucracy of the federal government through the creation of the Bureau of Agriculture and Statistics, and the Homestead Bill. In conjunction with the material on raising and administering an army, especially the discussion on northern and southern conscription, the reader truly gains a clear picture on the significance of the Civil War and how that event forever changed American society, affecting political, social, and economic relations at all levels.

A Nation Transformed however is not so much an explanation of how the Civil War changed America forever, as it is a compilation of interesting facts. The authors do not provide an analysis to substantiate whether these events reoccur or exactly how they changed the nation—a flaw in the book's premise. In addition, this reviewer finds many firsts that are insignificant to premise of the book, such as the Civil War being the first war in which Taps was played. Also,

the fact that the Lincolns were the first presidential couple regularly to attend the theatre is hardly noteworthy; the authors do not show that this impacted all future presidential couples, or that there exists a larger connection to theatre attendance and a maturing high brow society. More significant, some of the author's declarations simply are not true. Their assertion that the Civil War was the first war in which hundreds of women served as soldiers ignores the scores of women who fought in the American Revolution. More troublesome is the claim that the Confederate government was the first government in modern history to commit itself firmly to a policy of racism (46). One only need examine every prior administration to see the inaccuracy of that argument, especially that of Andrew Jackson and his official policy regarding Native Americans. The Removal Act of 1830 and the subsequent forced relocation of Native American tribes to the West, such as the Cherokee, smacks of blatant and aggressive racism.

While there are certain problems associated with this book, it should not take away from its merits. One will find many of the topics quite interesting and truly informative, such as that on the first laws prohibiting obscene materials in the mail. The war brought a new market for licentious material that exploded overnight, and offended the sensibilities of many, forcing Congress to pass the first ever legislation prohibiting the mailing of obscene material. Despite any shortcomings, every Civil War historian should have this book on their shelf for the mere fact that it covers virtually every topic imaginable, and anyone teaching the American Civil War will find it useful in terms of discovering fresh material to teach. Teachers, Civil War buffs, and the general reader will be well pleased with this book.

Clayton E. Jewett is a visiting assistant professor at Texas Lutheran University and is the author of Texas in the Confederacy: An Experiment in Nation Building, and Rise and Fall of the Confederacy: The Memoir of Senator Williamson S. Oldham, CSA. He is currently working on an analysis of the Provisional Congress of the Confederacy.