

Civil War Time: Temporality and Identity in America, 1861-1865

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Review

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Perception and Relativity

The Experience of Time during the Civil War

During the first half of the 19th century, Americans both North and South participated in multiple, and sometimes overlapping, systems of time. These included the natural time of the seasons, individual days, and weather; religious time, in which Sundays were set apart for church services, prayer, reflection, and a rest from work; personal time, which individuals could order as they wished; and clock time, which used mechanical devices to mark the hours and minutes. In *Civil War Time: Temporality and Identity in America, 1861-1865*, historian Cheryl A. Wells, assistant professor of history at the University of Wyoming, examines how these 19th century ideas of time were disrupted by the Civil War. Wells argues that the war, both on the front lines and away from the battles, threw antebellum systems of time into confusion and created something she calls battle time. Battle time, she argues, superseded and subordinated all other forms of time, and became a ruling time that created a temporal web within which soldiers fought, and whose effects rippled out to alter the clock, natural, personal, and religious times of soldiers, hospital workers, civilian men and women, and prisoners of war. In particular, battle time forced Civil War Americans to temporarily replace the modern, clock-based system of time they had been striving to develop with a more pre-modern, task-based time system.

Wells divides her work into two sections. The first examines two major battles of the Civil War the first battle at Manassas and the Gettysburg campaign to uncover the role that time played in the outcomes of those conflicts. At Manassas, Federal leaders tried to impose a strict clock-based system of time on the army and its movements, and forged a battle plan that depended on exact coordination between different parts of the Federal forces. During the battle,

however, Wells explains that the multiple antebellum systems of time intruded onto the battlefield, disrupting the clock-timed battle plan and producing a chaotic battle time that caused events to spin out of control. Green troops, for example, unused to military time, asserted their pre-war ownership of their personal time by falling out of the ranks at will to get water, hunt for berries, or sit down and rest, causing significant delays as units tried to maneuver into battle position. Natural darkness caused unplanned delays as well. Even clock time failed, as a uniform clock time was not asserted over individual commanders. Although Wells is careful to admit that factors such as an inability to identify the enemy because of similarities in Federal and Confederate uniforms greatly influenced the outcome of the battle, the lack of ability on the part of Federal leaders to impose a single, clock-based time on the battle resulted in a well-planned attack but, in the end, a disastrous failure.

At Gettysburg, Confederate commander Robert E. Lee, Wells argues, created many of his own problems by failing to impose a single time authoritatively over his subordinate commanders. Instead, Lee let them control time and determine when to engage their troops by issuing orders that left plenty of room for individual officers to identify what they felt to be the right moment to begin an attack. Lee also issued orders most often according to natural times, such as dawn, which further left considerable interpretational leeway in the hands of his officers. To confuse matters further, if Lee did issue an order with a clock time attached to it, not all his officers had watches set to the same time. With orders such as these, Wells explains that different geography, topography, and personal opinions resulted in uncoordinated battle operations. As with her analysis of Manassas, Wells does not ignore the other factors that contributed to the battle's outcome, but does assert that all of these conflicting times caused the Confederate forces to lose valuable time and even kept them from securing the high ground that could have helped them win the battle. The battle at Gettysburg, though, disrupted the time systems of civilians in the town as well as the combatants on the battlefield. Battle time, Wells argues, proved disruptive to almost every aspect of civilian life while the battle raged. Storekeepers and workers were forced to abandon normally clock-based working hours as the town became filled with soldiers and shells ripped through buildings, causing people to shut up their homes and shops to either take cover in basements or flee the town altogether. Clock-based mealtimes were disrupted, sleep was grasped during lulls in the battle, and homes were turned into makeshift hospitals that required around-the-clock attention. Battle time was beyond the control of

individuals, both military and civilian, and claimed authority over all other times.

The second half of the book deals with the effects of battle time on soldiers in camp, men and women in hospitals, and on prisoner-of-war camps. In army encampments, the clock reigned as the supreme organizer of time, usually superseded only by God's time on Sundays. Both clock time and God's time, however, were subject to disruption by battle time. When a battle raged, or preparations for battle, such as marching, were necessary, battle time took over as the controlling factor. Battle time disrupted regular drill and leisure times, and took precedence over God's time as well. Battles and marching, despite some people's protests, became commonplace on Sundays during the war, and religious services were always contingent upon battle time.

Similarly, in Civil War hospitals, clock time reigned when possible, with doctors and nurses operating on a clock-based schedule of mealtimes and work. Patients, however, often needed care around the clock, disrupting normal sleep times and regulated care and putting nurses on a task-based time system. When a battle occurred, clock time was disrupted even more severely, as patients arrived in droves and had to be tended to and organized as they arrived, without respect for time or schedule. During battle time, task-oriented activities drove both men and women's time, and, Wells argues, produced a degendering of time that removed men's ability to order women's time in the hospitals as both responded to the individual tasks presented to them. Battle time, then, temporarily took temporal authority away from men. Once the battle was over, though, men reasserted their control of both the clock and women's time.

Battle time also altered the nature of Civil War prisons from that of their antebellum predecessors. Antebellum prisons were predicated on rehabilitating prisoners, and teaching them habits of work and industry that would hopefully reform them into law-abiding citizens. During the war, prisons became, rather than sites of rehabilitation, holding areas for men captured in battle. While clock time, religious time, and personal time still operated in Civil War prisons, battle time was the ultimate ruling force, determining when prisoners arrived, how many new additions had to be accommodated, and when they were released or exchanged. After the Civil War, Wells argues, the hegemony of battle time disappeared, giving way to the antebellum forms of time within which people had operated. Clock times, though, as they had been doing in the years leading up the Civil War, increasingly gained an edge as the country went down a path of modernization. The war interrupted, but ultimately did not change, this path.

Civil War Time: Temporality and Identity in America, 1861-1865, is carefully researched and engaging, and provides a unique picture of how the Civil War disrupted both military and civilian modes of thinking and conduct. Wells' assertion that the war disrupted the modernization process, and in fact forced people, if only temporarily, back into pre-modern, task-based systems of time will have to be considered in the various arguments historians have made and continue to make about the modern nature of the Civil War.

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