

The Thin Light Of Freedom: Civil War And Emancipation In The Heart Of America

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Feature Essay

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Before and After Appomattox

For the past decade and a half, Edward Ayers devoted himself to administrative duties, first as Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia and then from 2007 to 2015 as the University of Richmond's president. While fine for UVA and Richmond, these arrangements left Ayers with little time to write. *The Thin Light of Freedom* marks his long-awaited return to historical scholarship.

Here Ayers picks up the thread of his new volume's compelling predecessor, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*.¹ Both books focus on two localities— Augusta County, Virginia, just across the Blue Ridge from Charlottesville, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, immediately above the Maryland line, one hundred fifty miles northeast from Augusta. Both were located in the Great Valley, most often called the Shenandoah Valley south of the Potomac and the Cumberland Valley north from there.

In his first volume, Ayers looked at those in the South who were not original secessionists and those in the North who failed to see slavery as a moral problem. He asked why these people, who had no previous quarrel with each other, suddenly were transformed into implacable enemies. He found that Southern Unionists might tolerate Abraham Lincoln's election, much as they regretted it, but they would not fight to coerce sister slave states. When told to do so, they resolved with fierce unanimity to fight Lincoln himself. A new nation, created amid the shock of war, sprang to life. Northerners viewed the Union as sacred. They considered secession a minority coup and hoped initially that military force would scatter the conspirators and allow the South's loyal majority to reassert itself. Only gradually did the North come to understand what it was up against. Few either North or South saw in advance the catastrophe that

impended.

Ayers' preceding volume broke off in late June 1863 when invading Confederates headed east across South Mountain from Chambersburg, Franklin's county seat, to unite their forces at a town called Gettysburg. The Cumberland Valley had just become the only part of the North to face an enemy occupation. It would be hit again, and harder. Augusta County had so far been spared any direct enemy presence. But its turn would come and it already was greatly affected by the war. Compared to Franklin and other parts of the North, the Confederate South (including Augusta) sent more of its sons and husbands to fight and they suffered proportionately higher casualties. Although the slave system tended to unravel in parts of the South controlled by the Union army—along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and in the Mississippi Valley—three million slaves “still labored beyond the reach of Union power” and Confederate marauders had just enslaved some free blacks in Pennsylvania (1).

By mid-1863 a war that never could have been imagined two years earlier had engulfed the land. The revolutionary war aim of ending slavery had superseded the limited war aim of restoring the old Union, as Lincoln sought both to weaken a key foundation of the Confederate war effort and to enlist African-Americans in the army. Indignant white Southerners promised to fight to the death. And many did.

Two years of bitter fighting already had killed and wounded hundreds of thousands and posed questions that could not be answered. Would Northerners remain willing to pay a high price to compel the South to return to the Union? Or would the ferocious intensity of Southern national feeling force the North to acquiesce? As of late June 1863, the outcome stood in doubt. But nobody could doubt the war's “enormous scale” or the way it affected all Americans, white and black (23). Armies flooded across landscapes, “leveling forests and devastating fields, stripping food and livestock, washing away in an hour the work of generations” (2).

Ayers tells multiple stories in *The Thin Light of Freedom*. Painting with a broad brush, he sketches a vast canvas—the bloodiest conflict in the Western world between 1815 and 1914. But the two localities in the Great Valley remain his principal focus. He balances expertly between oft-separated realms of Civil War-era studies: military histories that give priority to major battles, and recent work that explores the war's impact on the home front and shows how civilian

and military affairs interconnected. Throughout, Ayers incorporates the experiences of slaves and free blacks. He traces the unexpected dynamic that led to emancipation and, before long, to a constitutional mandate for equal rights. The entire second half of the book is devoted to Reconstruction, in contrast to the plethora of Civil War writing that ends abruptly in April 1865.

Featured individuals carry Ayers' narrative. Their stories are juxtaposed and interwoven with stories about those who lived in the rival nation. By examining both at once, Ayers reveals far more than if he had focused either on one locale or the other. Soldiers and civilians, men and women, free and slave, white and black, the prominent and the obscure—all found themselves caught in an extraordinary, dangerous, and unpredictable maelstrom.

Several of Ayers' principals were well-known in their own time, albeit forgotten today. Alexander H. H. Stuart, once a member of Millard Fillmore's cabinet, and his politically astute brother-in-law, John B. Baldwin, lived in Staunton, the Augusta County seat. Among the most prominent of Virginia Whig anti-secessionists, Stuart and Baldwin became loyal Confederates. After the war they took the lead in devising a formula that allowed Virginia to return to the Union without ever electing a Reconstruction government. Staunton also was home to Northern-born cartographer Jedediah Hotchkiss, who made maps for Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee. The fiery secessionist, John Imboden, raised a regiment of partisan rangers that preyed on larger, more ponderous Union forces; he was entrusted by Lee to protect the Confederate lifeline through the Valley during the Gettysburg campaign's desperate weeks. Joseph Waddell maintained a brave front in his newspaper, the *Staunton Spectator*, but his private diary revealed his inner doubts about both slavery and the Confederate cause.

Waddell's counterpart, Chambersburg newspaper publisher Alexander K. McClure, edited the *Repository*. McClure was a rising power in the Pennsylvania Republican Party and a confidant of Lincoln's. Particularly rich surviving diaries detail the lives and thoughts of two young Chambersburg residents separated by war: Rachel Cormany—sensitive, principled, and appealingly modern—waited anxiously at home while her husband, Samuel Cormany, fought in a Pennsylvania cavalry regiment. Careful sleuthing enables Ayers to recapture the voices of several African-Americans. Jacob Christy from Franklin County fought with the famed 54th Massachusetts Infantry, as did his brother William Christy, who died in battle. Also in the 54th was David Demus, who corresponded with

his wife Mary Jane, a sister of the Christy brothers. Nelson Irwin and Willis M. Carter provide glimpses of African-American striving—and frustration—in postwar Staunton.

Three riveting chapters address the terrible summer and fall of 1864 when “opposing armies in the Valley contended for immense stakes” and both side practiced “hard war” against each other.² Jubal Early, retaliating for depredations inflicted by Union forces under David Hunter, ordered 2,800 Confederate raiders to burn Chambersburg on July 30. That shocking deed prompted Ulysses S. Grant to install thirty-three year old Philip Sheridan as commander of a new Army of the Shenandoah, with orders to defeat Early and “lay waste” to the Valley (227). “Towering columns of smoke” in September and October marked the progress of Sheridan’s campaign, which incinerated countless barns and mills and a year’s worth of just-harvested crops (250). Many farms in rural Augusta were torched (Staunton itself was only briefly occupied and relatively unscathed). Ayers addresses the moral quandaries wholesale destruction posed for both sides. The burnings “did not break the will of the people” but they did intensify mutual hatreds and foster resentments that festered for generations (251). Readers are left to weigh between Grant’s hope that Lee’s stubborn resistance behind the Petersburg entrenchments might end if he lost the Valley’s agricultural bounty and the sad spectacle of a Virginia “farm woman” weeping over the body of a lifeless colt, shot by Union soldiers (239).

Because Lee hung on through the coming winter, Sheridan’s destructive blitz failed to accomplish all that Grant hoped for. But its political effects were unmistakable. By destroying Early’s army and insuring that Washington, D.C., and the Cumberland Valley finally would be secure from Confederate attack, Sheridan’s “swift hoofs, thundering South” delivered a perfectly-timed boost for Lincoln’s re-election campaign (249).

Ayers insists that politics mattered. He notes that political parties, constructed from the ground up both North and South during the prewar era, had connected “America’s patchwork of localities, denominations, and ethnic groups into alliances that could win national elections” (111). When these parties fractured along sectional lines, war resulted. But wartime politics played out differently North and South. Confederates “suppressed earlier partisan identities in favor of a unifying new national identity” and “mobilized the white people of the South as only a warring government could” (109, 278). By contrast, the North was “saturated by partisan political fighting and rhetoric” throughout the

war (129). Democrats saw Lincoln as a dictator who trampled the Constitution and offered top military commands to inept blunderers. When the president enlarged Union war aims to include emancipation, Democrats howled in protest. Abolition, they warned, would lead to permanent disunion. They deplored Sheridan's "hard war" in the Shenandoah; "such acts of cold blooded barbarity" blasted all hope for reunion and promised only endless war (246). Complaints in Northern Democratic newspapers were "hungrily reprinted throughout the Confederacy" and gave substance to Southern hopes that the North might ultimately tire of fighting and accept Confederate independence (127). By 1864, however, Lincoln had "abandoned the idea of widespread southern loyalism" and resolved to fight with more than "elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water."³ Spurning Democrats as "disloyal at best and treasonous at worst," Republicans depicted themselves as the only hope for the Union (273).

Ayers rejects the idea that "the vigorous two-party system helped the North win the war, creating a democratic crucible in which white Northerners found common purpose through conflict" (273). Instead, a "near-perfect alignment of military and political circumstances" enabled Lincoln and his party to carry the all-important elections in late 1864 (270). "What could have been a tragic weakness turned out to be a critical strength" as Republicans insisted upon winning the war unconditionally and ending slavery; the outcome legitimated "the views of the winning coalition" (273, 279).

But there would be no respite from partisan politics. Republican success in the 1864 elections "shifted the debate in the North from slavery to race" (276). Democrats "doubled down on race, making black people the defining difference between the parties" (353). When the war ended, new partisan allegiances began to coalesce across sectional lines, as Northern Democrats and defeated white Southerners supported Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, and opposed any enlargement of black rights. The South appeared poised to regain the political leverage it forfeited during wartime. But Republicans refused to buckle. Moderates such as McClure, the Chambersburg newspaper publisher, became more openly egalitarian than they ever had been before. The entire country had an obligation to the freedmen, he wrote, and we should "amend for the injury we have done them" (294). Within months of Lincoln's assassination, "run-of-the-mill Republicans were making progressive arguments that Lincoln himself could not have stated so boldly" (353).

It was to be an uphill battle. The Republican Party that championed equal civil and political rights “pushed against the weight of all American history.” Before long, its reserves of “electoral fuel” were spent. Wily white Virginians, led by Stuart and Baldwin, thwarted the new order. In retrospect, Ayers finds it more remarkable that Republicans temporarily embraced such a “comprehensive” agenda for change than that their handiwork ultimately was undermined (463). He dismisses the stale idea that wiser leadership could have devised a more unifying Reconstruction policy. And he sadly notes that McClure, like too many other Republicans, eventually reneged on his party’s commitment to equal rights.

Ayers rejects conventional theories that see the war’s outcome as predictable consequences of a more modern Northern economy and the North’s large population advantage. Instead, he insists that “Republicans, United States soldiers, abolitionists, and enslaved people persevered through often-demoralizing circumstances” to overcome an unseemly coalition of Confederates and Northern Democrats. It was a close call, not a sure thing. Ayers’ eye for irony elevates his writing. “Without secession, the mobilization of vast armies, and years of military success by the new Confederacy there would have been no full-scale emancipation in the 1860s,” he observes. “Without defiant former Confederates and Northern enemies of African-American rights there would have been no Radical Reconstruction or Fourteenth Amendment. Americans made each others’ history, often in ways they did not foresee or intend” (xix).

The Augusta segments of Ayers’ story resonate more fully in *The Thin Light of Freedom* than the Franklin ones, just as in this volume’s predecessor. The vagaries of surviving sources—richer for Virginia than for Pennsylvania—may explain this result. Or it may be that a more striking cast of characters lived in Staunton than in Chambersburg. But Virginia almost inevitably commands center stage. This was the white South’s war of choice. Fearing the loss of slavery, secessionists chose to fight and thereby lost slavery. Race-related matters absorbed plenty of printer’s ink in Pennsylvania too, and we are bound to honor the heretofore-obscure black Pennsylvanians who fought in the Massachusetts 54th. But the central Civil War-era drama played out in the former slave states.

Ayers provides a fine-grained assessment of the complex interplay between the slavery issue and the war. He reminds us that while some white Northerners

made common cause with black Southerners, almost as many other white Northerners obstructed the war effort and eagerly reached out to white Southerners as soon as the shooting ended. Northern Democrats—here, the hideous editorials in Chambersburg’s *Valley Spirit*—validated both the white South’s horror of emancipation and its quest to block any extension of citizen rights to African-Americans. *The Thin Light of Freedom* stands far apart from gauzy “all’s well that ends well” salutes to national greatness.

The cover of this handsomely produced book reproduces a troubling painting by the great Albert Bierstadt, entitled *Guerrilla Warfare—Civil War* (1862). Owned by the Century Association in New York City, it foregrounds a clutch of concealed Union sharpshooters on “picket duty in Virginia” as they fell a distant Confederate horseman. A century and a half later, Edward Ayers displays a similarly keen eye for moral complexity. His achievement will endure.

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¹ Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

² Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), xiii.

³ Andre M. Fleche, “Uncivilized War: The Shenandoah Valley Campaign, The Northern Democratic Press, and the Election of 1864,” in Gallagher, ed., *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864*, 201; Abraham Lincoln to Cuthbert Bullitt, 28 July 1862, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), V:346.