

Slavery, emancipation, and veterans of the union cause: commemorating freedom in the era of reconciliation, 1885-1915.

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In July 1913, veterans of the United States and Confederate armies gathered in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of the Civil War's bloodiest and most famous battle. The four-day "Blue-Gray Reunion" featured parades, reenactments, and speeches from a host of dignitaries, including President Woodrow Wilson. Striking among the event's activities was the lack of a comprehensive remembrance of the war's causes and consequences. Veterans and other public figures highlighted only the virtuous aspects of soldiery such as courage, valor, and selfless devotion. Thousands of spectators enthusiastically approved of President Wilson's remarks to former Yankee and Rebel alike: "Valor? Yes! Greater no man shall see in war; and self-sacrifice, and loss to the uttermost; the high recklessness of exalted devotion which does not count the cost." Any mention of slavery or emancipation was conspicuously absent.¹

For many scholars, this event typifies the robust commemorative impulse undertaken by both Union and Confederate veterans celebrating newfound **[End Page 264]** nationalism in the wake of civil strife—an impulse that necessarily minimized antebellum sectionalism and war causation. Scholars focusing on collective memory and emphasizing sectional reunification contend that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, regimental and state monument dedications, patriotic speeches, personal narratives, "Blue-Gray" reunions, and even combined support for the American war effort against Spain in 1898 yielded a triumphal, national, and, most important, a reconciled version of Civil War memory. Veterans selectively drew from the past to validate the present. In so doing, they left sectionalism behind.²

A conventional interpretation illustrating the shortcomings of national reconciliation has emerged from the growing body of memory scholarship. Many have concluded that the dominant themes of war commemoration marginalized issues concerning slavery and emancipation; white Northern and Southern proponents of war commemoration welcomed reconciliation at the expense of racial change. Edward Tabor Linenthal's analysis of American battlefields, for example, examines Civil War commemorations through the lens of "tacit forgetfulness" and characterizes the "elaborate rituals of reconciliation" as a "moral myopia that ignored the real legacy of the [Civil War]." Similarly, Gaines M. Foster, in his study of Confederate memory, laments that the "sense of triumph derived from [the 1913 reunion at Gettysburg] involved little that had been at issue in the war," and Stuart McConnell's work on Union veterans reminds readers that "the question of blacks and slavery received scant mention in celebrations of the war's outcome."³ **[End Page 265]**

The most eloquently expressed account of the implications surrounding the supposed enthusiastic and widespread support for national reconciliation appears in David W. Blight's capstone work, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Blight examines how participants at events geared toward reconciliation, such as the 1913 Gettysburg Reunion, did in fact ignore the principal issues leading to war and the Union war aim of emancipation. White supremacists and reconciliationists, Blight argues, "locked arms" and by the "turn of the century delivered a segregated memory of the Civil War on Southern terms." He concludes, "Forces of reconciliation overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national culture [and] the inexorable drive for reunion both used and trumped race."⁴

While painting a distinctly darker portrait of reconciliation than many of their predecessors, these recent analyses resemble works such as Paul H. Buck's 1937 publication, *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900*. Although a celebratory study venerating the "positive influences" paving the way for the "promise of ultimate peace" and applauding the breakdown of

sectional animosity during the postwar years, Buck's work otherwise anticipates future scholarship. He admits that reconciliation ushered in a "period where [black people] would no longer figure as the ward of the nation to be singled out for special guardianship or peculiar treatment." Buck pays tribute to reconciliation but questions...

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1. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg: Report of the Pennsylvania Commission* (Harrisburg, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, ca. 1913), 175. For a detailed account of the Blue-Gray Reunion, July 1–4, 1913, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), 383–91; Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Last Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 193–94; Carol Reardon, *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997), 188–98.



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