Unit 1: Lecture D - Warren, Robert Penn. The Legacy of the Civil War. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1961, excerpt

Robert Penn Warren proclaimed that “the Civil War s our only ‘felt’ history – history lived in the national imagination” (4). In addition, “Union, the abolition of slavery, the explosion of the westward expansion, Big Business and Big Technology, style in war, philosophy, and politics…all add up to the creation of the world power that American is today” (46). “Furthermore, the War meant that Americans saw America. The farm boy of Ohio, the trapper in Minnesota, and the pimp of the Mackerelville section of New York City saw Richmond and Mobile. They not only saw America, they saw each other” (13). And…”a people’s way of fighting reflects a people’s way of thinking. …It was a war fought, on both sides, that shaped the very speculations about the nature of war. Out of the Civil War came the concept of total war, the key to Northern Victory” (16). “*The Legacy of the Civil War* offers a rich blend of Warren’s research in historical documents and his own imagination, philosophy, literary talent, and moral values. The result is, arguably, the most memorable short piece ever written on the symbolic meaning of the Civil War. Warren first examines the ideals of the Founding Fathers before focusing on the ‘powerful…grinding process’ of civil war that destroyed America’s innocence (108).

His central theme is the imperfect human being, caught in a predicament that the individual continually tries to transcend but ultimately accepts responsibility for, emerging a better person” (William B. Clark, *Critical Essays on Robert Penn Warren*, Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981, 1). “So was this the case with the Civil War. A nation rose from this conflict between the ‘higher law’ of morality advocated by the abolitionists and the ‘legalism’ expounded by the slaveholders (20). Such a costly series of events demonstrates, Warren declares, ‘the glory of the human effort to win meaning from the complex and confused motives of men and the blind ruck of event’ “(108).

“According to Warren, the Civil War was, ‘for the American imagination, the great single event of our history’ because it defined Americans as a ‘nation’ while revealing ‘so many of the issues and tragic ironies – somehow essential yet incommensurable – which we yet live’ (3, 4, 108). Americans grappled with the most fundamental problem inherent in a democracy: how to control the tyranny of the majority without conceding all power to a minority. The war, Warren insisted, was ‘a crime of monstrous inhumanity, into which almost innocently men stumbled’ (103).

They nonetheless emerged with a more perfect Union built on a new birth of freedom. For such a profound change to occur, Americans had to experience the most wrenching of disasters – a civil war that cost horrendous amounts of blood and treasure but left a people more deeply committed to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The war served as a crucible for securing the fundamental liberties advocated in the Declaration of Independence.”

“Warren declares that the Civil War first had to divide the republic into sections before it could begin the long process of knitting North and South back together into a nation sharing a ‘common humanity’ (100). A study of the war also promotes an understanding of the individual, for just as the United States engaged in an internecine conflict that more clearly defined its national objectives, so did individuals struggle between their own brutality and humanity to ultimately arrive at a better understanding of self. ‘The individual is an embodiment of external circumstances,’ Warren insisted, ‘so that a personal story is a social story.’

Unfortunately, however, the story remained unfinished in the area of race relations. ‘The Civil War,’ Warren declared in the mid-1970s, ‘was the biggest lie any nation ever told itself. It freed the slaves. Then what did it do with them? And the big lie was told, and also, we’re full of virtue, we did it, we freed the slaves and it came to roost a hundred years later’ (quoted in Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers, eds., *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews, 1950-1978*, New York: Random House, 1980, 72, 207).

“President Abraham Lincoln was like many Americans in only gradually realizing that to fulfill the promises of the Declaration of Independence the nation must first destroy slavery. In accomplishing this objective, Lincoln took a major step toward resolving the differences between the Constitution as a former protector of slavery and the Declaration as chief guarantor of freedom. No longer could slaveholders claim the liberty to own human beings; self-government applied to all persons, regardless of race or color.

Warren insists that slavery permeated almost every sectional issue and thereby stimulated a mean and vengeful atmosphere that was conducive to disunion. The existence of slavery had created the great ‘paradox’ of America’s standing as both ‘the land of freedom’ and ‘the land of chattel slavery’ (Watkins and Hiers, 280). Each side in the growing conflict regarded itself as the legitimate heir of the American Revolution who was no engaged in a gargantuan struggle against an enemy seeking to subvert the republic. Slavery lay at the heart of this dispute.

“In the meantime, Warren writes, the Civil War modernized America by encouraging the development of ‘Big Technology and Big Business’ (8). To win the war, both North and South had to organize their economic programs in a manner that promoted efficiency in industrial production. Factories became mass assembly plants based on interchangeable parts, which not only affected the outcome of the war but also laid the basis for postwar expansion westward and the building of a transcontinental nation. A national banking network replaced state banks and brought order to the currency system. The development of a national debt necessitated a new tax structure that tied the people to the central government and further hastened the interdependence so integral to nationhood. The war sent American soldiers into other parts of the nation, exposing them to different situations and different peoples and further incorporating the sections into the union. From these vast changes arose a renewed feeling of national destiny.

“Paradoxically, however, out of the war also came the Solid South. The states’ rights doctrine had not only split the nation, Warren declares, but divided the Confederate war effort and undercut its cause. Not surprisingly, restoration of the Union led to a South more southern than before the war. Believing itself the sole practitioner of right and the chief speaker for God, the South froze its institutions against all change and closed its society to the outside. The Confederacy rose from defeat to become a ‘City of the Soul’ that took on a ‘mystique’ of its own (14). As Warren so eloquently writes, ‘ in the moment of death the Confederacy entered upon it immortality’ (15).

“The war also encouraged the popularity of a philosophy known as pragmatism, a stance Lincoln readily accepted because it struck a balance between higher law and legalism. In the fighting the Union focused more on superior resources and crushing blows than on tactics and strategy. Its war of attrition pointed to the development of total war in which the emphasis lay on the employment of whatever method worked in any given situation. On the policymaking level, Lincoln always kept the ideal as his guiding principle but remained realistic in seeking only the possible. ‘I concluded,’ he declared, ‘that it was better to make a rule for the practical matter in hand….than to decide a general question’ (32). John Brown was correct in attacking slavery as a great moral wrong, Lincoln asserted. But, he added, ‘That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed and treason’ (24).

Warren also opposed absolute positions on issues. If at least one side in a conflict claims a monopoly on virtue, he warns, it leaves no remedy save the ‘arbitrament of blood’ (20). Indeed, self-righteousness can sanctify unjust methods in pursuit of a just cause, making it ‘difficult to distinguish love of liberty from lust for blood’ (20). What limitations can exist if every person makes decisions based on that individual’s own laws and the shedding of blood in God’s name? The extremism of the times mandated that the Virginia courts sentence John Brown to death. This was not justice. As Warren aptly remarks, ‘a crazy man is a large-scale menace only in a crazy society’ (40).

The war also proved costly in that the South, Warren declares, arose from the fighting with the ‘Great Alibi’ and the North with the ‘Treasury of Virtue’ (54). Southerners continue to attribute social and racial problems to a war forced on them by outsiders. Indeed, a miraculous transformation occurred as defeat became victory and failings became virtues, leaving the South as a victim of forces beyond its control and therefore bearing no guilt in the face of such a monumental conspiracy. Everything in the antebellum South became sacred, causing its supporters to revere an idyllic Confederacy of the imagination. The North, however, felt redeemed by history. Even though the Republican party and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation rejected abolition, and even though racism permeated the North as well as the South, the history recounted by the victors praised the war as a successful crusade against slavery.

“Despite the death of slavery, Warren asserts, racism continued in the United States. By the ‘Big Sell-Out of 1876,’ the Southern states regained control over the blacks (and other matters) in exchange for the peaceful ascension of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio to the presidency (67). The federal government’s decision to abandon black Americans assured them only a shadowy claim to freedom that led to repeated outbreaks of racial violence over the next century. Leaders of the ‘New South’ nonetheless defended this policy as a return to the doctrine of states’ rights and hence an guarantee of the black’s right to self-government (68).

“In trying to explain the enduring appeal of the Civil War, Warren makes clear that both sides shared in its causation. The war has assumed great importance to Americans interested in an age that valued duty and honor. The period has also attracted a fervent following because of the intrinsic interest in the question of whether the war was avoidable.

If it was inevitable, Southerners escape the verdict of history by arguing that both sides share guilt – the South in holding slaves and the North in practicing racism. If it was preventable, however, the South deserves all moral blame for harboring slaves and refusing the offer of reconciliation. Lincoln put it best in his Second Inaugural when he asserted that God gave ‘to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came’ (104). The war, Warren concludes, rests on ‘communal guilt’ (104).

“An examination of the many political and military figures of the Civil War promotes an understanding of the inward nature of their problems and helps to explain what made the conflict itself so complex. Indeed, to study the Civil War is akin to Americans looking at themselves in a mirror and seeing both good and bad.

The war became America’s ‘Homeric period’ (82) in which a ‘gallery of great human images’ engaged in events that were ‘profoundly touching or powerfully mythic’ (81). If such national turmoil breeds a Robert E. Lee of a Lincoln, it warrants careful study. If the onset of war led Lee to take the side of the South in 1861 because he could ‘sacrifice anything but honor’ for the Union, a study of this era promotes a grasp of the inner workings of the mind in time of crisis (84).

If the daily certitude of death sharpens the senses to the point that Lincoln can pen a magnificent piece of compassion in the form of the Gettysburg Address, the war deserves a prominent place in America’s consciousness. At the heart of this war was a deep inner struggle – a genuine civil war, both inside individuals and within America itself. Brother fought brother, as ‘crypto-unionism’ and ‘crypto-emancipationism’ existed in the South, and crypto-Confederates and crypto-racists permeated the North (8). “Fierce internal division characterized Americans on both sides, making their conflict the most traumatic of experiences.

The ambivalence of right and wrong continues to blur judgments of that war and thereby encourages a lasting interest in America’s own Homeric tragedy. In an ironic sense, the inwardness of the struggle has cast an element of dignity onto the most horrible of wars, resulting in a dramatic series of events that show no signs of failing to attract the imagination of future generations” (C. Vann Woodward, “*Reflections on a Centennial: The American Civil War*,” The Yale Review 50, June 1961, 489-90).