

12-1-2015

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The American Historical Review, Vol. 120, No. 5 (2015): 1896-1897. [DOI](#). This article is © Oxford University Press and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Oxford University Press does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Oxford University Press.

Review of *Across the Bloody Chasm: The Culture of Commemoration among Civil War Veterans* by M. Keith Harris

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Veterans have always been a part of Lost Cause and Reconciliation tropes, but over the last decade we have learned about the nuances of how, in fact, veterans actually thought about those and other issues, and how they acted on those thoughts. None of the books on this relatively short shelf of works has provided a full account of the postwar lives of the men who fought the war. Rather, they tend to emphasize white or black, or northern or southern veterans; they focus on memory, or disability, or politics; or they explore the workings of the veterans' organizations that drew hundreds of thousands of members by the 1880s and 1890s. *Across the Bloody Chasm: The Culture of Commemoration among Civil War Veterans* explains a number of the ways in which the commemoration practices by both Union and Confederate veterans were designed to justify and to honor the old soldiers' actions and to press the public to recognize and remember the causes for which they fought.

M. Keith Harris reminds us that words like “reunification” and “reconciliation” are not interchangeable, that political expediency could lead veterans to express one thing in public, for the record, and quite another at the “campfires” and conventions that brought veterans together for decades after the war. Indeed, the language of reconciliation is a bit of a slippery slope in Harris’s book and requires some fine definitions and rhetorical precision. The author writes, “Though they expressed spread-eagle paeans to postwar unity and often styled themselves as ‘reconciled,’ veterans recalled their former enemies as base perpetrators of lies who carried with them the spirit of treason or the spoils of tyranny” (4). Harris bases his argument primarily on published evidence—the thousands of minutes, proceedings, speeches, and other documents produced by Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and United Confederate Veterans (UCV) members and chapters—especially in the 1880s and 1890s. Thus, while veterans could seem to be in favor of national unity, and to participate in the (relatively rare) “Blue and Gray Reunions,” and to suggest that, in fact, the fighting men of both sections had more in common with one another than with the men who had not fought, when push came to shove, their public personae did not always reflect their true feelings. At official gatherings to commemorate their contributions and their dead comrades’ sacrifices, they were compelled to state their claims to having fought for the “right” reasons and to criticize the motivations of their former enemies.

Emphasizing “contention and continuity among former enemies,” (14) Harris briskly addresses the most important issues that prevented true reconciliation: the atrocity narratives—the awful treatment of prisoners of war and the destruction of civilian property by both armies; the Yankee veterans’ pleasure and pride at having saved the Union; the Confederates’ rebuttal to accusations that they had committed treason; northern soldiers’ attitudes about slavery and emancipation; and southerners’ challenges to what they believed to be the racial hypocrisy of their northern counterparts. At one level, the attitudes of Confederate and Union veterans toward commemoration were based on a similar devotion to the past: both sides believed they had fought and sacrificed in the name of a shared “past where sections came together under one constitution guided by the wisdom of the founding fathers” (3). Each side blamed the other for corrupting those shared values.

Chapter 4 may be the strongest, most nuanced chapter in the book. In it, Harris argues that even as Confederates denied slavery was a factor in their cause, they acknowledged slavery as an issue by blaming northern abolitionists for making it one. Although most southerners sidestepped the issue, a number of them tried to undermine northern credibility, to knock them off the high moral ground, by making them complicit in the existence of slavery and its role in the coming of the war.

One of Harris’s chief contributions is his recovery of lost ambiguities, intentions, and memories, which fairly quickly were obscured by national self-interest and the ignorance of Americans who did not fight or who were born after the war. His book reminds us that reunion was a political act, while reconciliation was an emotional one, although eventually, at least to most Americans in the late nineteenth century and beyond, they came to mean the same thing. In fact, while veterans may have “reconciled” themselves to the idea that the national good needed them to de-emphasize, at least outwardly, their sharply differing motivations for fighting and even sharper differences in the meanings they applied to the war’s outcome, they never forgot those contrasts.

Harris adds to the boomlet of books on Civil War veterans by making it clear that the attitudes of veterans about their former foes and the causes for which they fought did not move in a linear fashion from a fervor for killing to a penchant for clasping hands in peace. No single attitude ever really

disappeared; rather, they were layered on over the years, as circumstances, political expediency, and personal emotions ebbed and flowed.