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THE RIGHTEOUS CAUSE MYTH IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR IDEOLOGICAL SOURCES, POLITICAL CONCEPTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Abstract. The aim of this article is to present a broad interpretation of the American Civil War, as promulgated by one of the most modern dominant historical and research schools. The article attempts to consolidate the assumptions and conclusions of neo-abolitionist and nationalist (unionist) historical interpretations. The article unifies entire trend, defining it as the Righteous Cause Myth, and indicates its ideological and socio-political sources that are the basis of its analyses of the American history.

Keywords: Civil War, righteous cause, neo-abolitionism, just cause, unionism

MIT „SPRAWIEDLIWEJ SPRAWY” W WOJNIE SECESYJNEJ IDEOLOGICZNE ŹRÓDŁA, KONCEPCJE POLITYCZNE I ICH IMPLIKACJE

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie szerokiej interpretacji wojny secesyjnej w Stanach Zjednoczonych, jaką głosi jedna z najbardziej dominujących współcześnie szkół historyczno-badawczych zajmujących się tematyką tego okresu. Artykuł podejmuje próbę skonsolidowania założeń i wniosków neo-abolicjonistycznej oraz nacjonalistycznej (unionistycznej) interpretacji historycznej. W artykule dokonano ujednolicenia całego nurtu określając go mianem mitu Sprawiedliwej Sprawy i wskazano źródła ideologiczne oraz nurty polityczne, które stanowią podstawę jego analiz dotyczących historii Stanów Zjednoczonych.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna secesyjna, *righteous cause*, neo-abolicjonizm, *just cause*, unionizm

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*The lack of a sense of history
is the damnation of the modern world*

– Robert Penn Warren

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

The Civil War, fought between 1861 and 1865, is one of the most tragic and painful events in the history of the United States. The number of participants killed is estimated at over 600,000 (cf. Catton 2004, 1; Randall, Donald 1969, 531). It is also one of the most frequently and eagerly commented upon sections of US history by American scholars. Over the course of nearly two centuries, differing views have developed regarding its causes, effects, and long-term outcomes. Analyses of the Civil War have typically focused on two fundamental questions: why did the Southern states secede from the Union, and why did the North not allow the Southern states to secede? Although the tragedy of this war seems to have been abundantly presented in the scholarly literature leading to a clear and constructive consensus, scholars and public debates continue to debate the principles and passions that drove the young, divided nation into the vortex of bloody war. Typically, two factors are identified: incompatible economic systems and different social systems (Jones 1983, 196). As early as the 1930s, historians pointed out that “no other event in American history has produced such a flood of controversial historical literature as the Civil War” (Ramsdell 1964, 23). Decades ago, Leon Korusiewicz (1967, 489) wrote that “the example of the Civil War best illustrates how difficult and risky the interpretation of historical events is, especially breakthrough events resulting from a complex interplay of slowly developing causes.”

In this article, I will attempt to present a gradually sharpening view of this conflict. I will try to focus on one side of the ongoing dispute, taking into account the perspectives of the adversaries for balance. While the motivations and incentives that pushed the South to secede and fight for its independence seem comprehensively presented in the relevant literature, the issues surrounding the victorious North are still undergoing a process of evolution in academic research discourse. In the case of the South, the postwar narrative seemed to point to constitutional problems and a jurisdictional dispute, minimizing the role of slavery in the clash between the two factions at the time.

Slavery was, of course, a crucial institution of the American South and undoubtedly played a significant role in many political decisions made by the Southern side during the Antebellum period. After the war's defeat, a veritable cult of the fallen and a nostalgic longing for the cause for which the Confederate States of America had fought emerged in the South. This term, coined by the then-Southern spokesman Edward A. Pollard (1867), was dubbed *The Lost Cause*. It should be

noted, however, that the term itself has become embedded in the political tradition of the American South primarily due to historians' hostility to the Southern side (cf. Wilson 1980; Cox 2003, 10–12; Poole 2004; Schweiger, Matthews 2004, 115; Gaines 2024, 1–18). Today, it has a rather pejorative connotation in the literature on the subject. However, it seemed that the reconciliation process restored the country's unity and respected the passions of each side. Despite enormous, often justified criticism from pro-union scholars, the Southern interpretation managed to survive the intellectual storm and, despite the passage of time, continue to present its version of events, although outside the discourse which was already dominant in academic centres.

Over the years, although the political influence and thus the research influence of the South's narrative have waned, historians have ultimately failed to fully unite to assess these events unequivocally, without expecting any constructive criticism. Developing a single history textbook of the Civil War therefore seems impossible. It also seems that the further we move away from the events of the conflict that irrevocably changed America, the issues that ignited it seem to persist despite the aforementioned process of reconciliation, and in some respects, they seem to resurface like unhealed wounds and wrongs. In most cases, the constant reminders of these wounds seem to be motivated by the nature of the social and political tensions and changes currently taking place within the United States. For decades, historians have also lamented the fact that any attempts at a balanced assessment of the origins of the conflict almost always result in accusations of being "a defender of slavery" (cf. Craven 1984, 7–8).

Some historians, once often convincingly focused on justifying the thesis that slavery had no direct connection to the war, have gradually lost influence in leading academic centres. This has resulted in a radical, reverse tendency emerging in the opposing camp, on the other side of the interpretation of this history, narrowing the issue of causes to issues not only of race but also of emancipation, expiation, and equality. This has been termed, after some historians, as The Righteous Cause Myth (Leigh 2014; Scales 2024). It therefore seems worthwhile to examine the factors that give rise to this interpretation of this fragment of American history, the premises on which these arguments are based, and how they vivisection existing American historiography. For the purposes of this discussion, however, due to the abundance of available literature, we will limit our references. Considering all available material is beyond the scope of this article. The methodological basis of these considerations will be the use of literature by supporters of the Righteous Cause Myth and works that fit into the discussed narrative.

We will also adopt definitions within political theory that go far beyond the traditional divisions in American political thought between the so-called right and left, and liberalism versus conservatism. We will define unionism as the political tradition that held, and still holds, that the North, by "not allowing" the South to leave, was right in this conflict in every aspect – political, constitutional,

economic, and ultimately social. Following Jeffrey R. Hummel,¹ we will call the neo-abolitionist movement the camp of American historiography that examines the conflict and its causes through the prism of slavery and reduces it primarily to that issue and the results achieved through the war in its abolition. Neo-abolitionists also include those who continued to advocate for equality after the Reconstruction and Civil Rights Era (cf. McPherson 1979, 314). Our main goal is to demonstrate that there are at least three groups that use the Righteous Cause Myth in their political and historical considerations. These are primarily:

- groups and authors with a progressive Left background (historians and activists);
- American nationalists and some conservatives seeking a concept of the American nation;
- neoconservative groups invoking in their rhetoric arguments for the moral superiority of the model and vision of American democracy secured by force by the American empire.

We will demonstrate that these ideologically motivated and politically engaged groups shape contemporary American historiography. Our purpose is also to determine whether reducing the causes to this single issue narrows the lens of the historical researcher and is politically motivated. We will finally comprehensively look at the impact of the Civil War on the general perception of US history.

2. ABOLITIONISM, THE ANTI-SLAVERY CRUSADE, AND NEO-ABOLITIONISM

Distinguished historian and Southern advocate Clyde N. Wilson observed that “historians of the first half of the twentieth century, whether liberals or conservatives, read the sources and understood this. They regarded what had occurred as a great national tragedy. But now it is all rendered in Marxist terms as a great revolution that unfortunately failed to go far enough. Historians now see nothing in the experience but the race question” (Wilson 2016, 35).

The American unionist political tradition and postwar historiography have made many descriptions of the enormous influence of the abolitionist movement on the causes and course of the conflict between the North and the South. It is indeed astonishing how a socio-political movement, marginal at the time, such as the abolitionists ultimately managed to move from purely theoretical assumptions

¹ Jeffrey R. Hummel (2014, 6) divides American Civil War historiography into six classic camps: nationalist, economic, revisionist, cultural, neo-confederate, and neo-abolitionist. The most comprehensive monograph on the Civil War, collecting descriptions of individual interpretations, seems to be the now classic work by Thomas J. Pressly (1965).

to practical action, forcing legislative solutions.² It is rightly pointed out that “the cause for which the Abolitionists labored was just” (Warren 1998, 22).

In the mid-19th century they could be identified as a faction centred around William Lloyd Garrison, called the Garrisonians (McPherson 1975, 4). The abolitionist movement itself, it should be emphasized at the outset, was “based on a moral frenzy, not an economic discontent” (Hofstadter 1973, 185). Some historians and researchers assume that while the issue of slavery was not the direct cause of the actions taken by Lincoln and his administration, it eventually came to the forefront (Levine 2013, 284–286), culminating not only in the Emancipation Proclamation but also in the famous Gettysburg Address, in which Lincoln, having recalled the foundations of the Declaration of Independence, was to “refound,” as it were, a renewal of the Republic, decayed and tainted by shameful practices. The Gettysburg Address “firmly planted the roots of America in the Declaration of Independence rather than the Constitution...” (Cox Richardson 2021, 69).

African Americans themselves undoubtedly saw the war as an opportunity to change their situation. One of the leading leaders of the time wrote as follows:

When the war began between North and South, every slave on our plantation felt and knew that, though other issues were discussed, the primary one was that of slavery. Even the most ignorant members of my race on the remote plantations felt in their hearts, with a certainty that admitted of no doubt, that the freedom of the slaves would be the one great result of the war if the Northern armies conquered. (Washington 1995, 4)

The so-called Reconstruction period following the war did not yet mark the acceptance of slavery as the primary cause of the Civil War, although this issue was undoubtedly already being considered. More specifically, in historical analyses, constitutional issues and the political rivalries between individual sections dominated the issue. Over time, however, research concepts developed that focused primarily on the social structure of the South. The result of this sociological school was the thesis that the entire trajectory of political movements in the South depended on the dominant social group, the slaveholders.

This entire structure, constituting a form of aristocracy, was defined by the neo-abolitionist camp as slavocracy and was summarized in the statement that: “slavery is not a moral wrong, that it is a right possessed by the slaveholder, that he holds the right of property in man, that slavery is legal and that it is constitutional” (Nye 1991, 21). It was further recognized that all the South’s actions were a deliberate strategy implemented within the framework of the so-called Slave Power concept, the intention of which, according to abolitionists, was to:

² It is worth mentioning here the passage of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments during Reconstruction, the justification for which the neo-abolitionist narrative indicates as follows: “For if it was worth four years of civil war to save the Union, it was worth a few years of radical reconstruction to give the American Negro the ultimate promise of equal civil and political rights” (Stampp 1965, 215).

[R]e-open the slave trade; to extend the institution of slavery throughout the entire nation and beyond; and to remove from the free white man those constitutional and traditional guarantees of liberty which stood in the way of the exercise of control over the middle and lower classes by a privileged aristocracy of slave holder and capitalist. (Nye 1991, 22)

However, considering the diversity of political decisions and motivations across the Southern states, it is difficult to consider the South a sufficiently consolidated and unified political entity capable of implementing such a profound and Machiavellian strategy.

In the writings of the 19th-century abolitionists, considering the mood of the time, the movement's postulates indeed carried a subversive, radical, and somewhat extremist message. This attitude, motivated by the desire to alleviate the suffering and defend the rights of all people (Kazin 2011, 16), meant that the movement's advocates refused to compromise on this issue. Frederick Douglass, a great champion of the African American cause and a black abolitionist, had already pointed out that: "The Negro is the key to the situation – the pivot upon which the whole rebellion turns" (Foner 2014, 5).

Neo-abolitionism, therefore, seeks to demonstrate that "the Civil War matters to us today because it ended slavery and helped define the meanings of freedom, citizenship, and equality" (Faust 2008, 13). Furthermore, as David Blight (2017) argues, "as long as America has a politics of race, it will have a politics of civil war memory." However, we must supplement this issue with another important consideration. The neo-abolitionist narrative is not limited to dominating wartime casuistry with the issue of slavery. For this type of research camp, this issue also extends to the entire history of the United States. The issue of slavery, according to some representatives of this historical camp, was already considered a key issue during the ratification of the Constitution. These historians suggest that a thorough and careful exegesis of constitutional provisions provides such evidence. They identify this problem as follows:

The Constitution never mentions slavery. The word does not appear. And yet slavery is all over the document. Of its eighty-four clauses, six are directly concerned with slaves and their owners. Five others had implications for slavery that were considered and debated by the delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention and the citizens of the states during ratification. (Waldstreicher 2009, 3)

This interpretation, according to neo-abolitionists, means that the Constitution includes provisions and postulates that take into account the arguments of the slave states. Carl T. Bogus (2023, 200) calls the entire process the creation of a "slave compact in the Constitution," evidenced by the adoption of a unique definition of property and the establishment of the so-called three-fifths clause. Otherwise, they seem to believe, the slave states would not have joined the Union, nor would they have ever entered into any mutual alliance under the compact theory. Regardless of the slave states' motives in ratifying the Constitution, we must take into account their otherwise legitimate concerns about the potential

expansion of the federal government.³ Resistance to such a process, later known as nullification, was, as Thomas Jefferson seemed to argue in the Kentucky Resolutions of 1798,⁴ a so-called “rightful remedy” (cf. Banning 2004, 233). After the Civil War, significant constitutional changes took place that were revolutionary in nature. In just a few months, “the Thirteenth Amendment began the process that transformed the Founder’s Constitution into (our) modern Constitution” (Conlin 2019, 235). For the neo-abolitionist camp, the Civil War thus took on the character of a just war, in which, as Harry S. Stout puts it: “The justness of abolition and the freedom of four million dictates that any moral history of slavery unconditionally concludes that the right side won, no matter what the casualties and sacrifices” (Stout 2007, 16).

In conclusion, after John Devanny (2022) we can identify three pillars that comprehensively define neo-abolitionist historiography:

First, slavery and its racist underpinnings were the chief source of conflict in Antebellum America and the primary cause of the Civil War. Second, the South’s defense of slavery was racist in nature, secondarily classist in the preservation of planter hegemony. Third, secession and civil war were both a product of the South’s commitment to expand and defend slavery. Fourth (and finally), the failure of Reconstruction in its radical form was brought about by a lack of Northern resolve and by Southern violence. The South, unfortunately, was ultimately the victor at the end of Reconstruction, at least in a social sense. Thus, this would bring about the necessity of another, new abolitionist movement: The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s.

It should be clarified, however, that the neo-abolitionist narrative is not a monolith in historical reflection. Within it, we can group and specify several trends that advance more or less radical historical theses.

3. ROOTS OF THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM, ELITE OVERPRODUCTION, AND THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The mid-20th century brought a new research spectrum of sectional conflict, focusing on social and economic issues. Although, it should be emphasized again, this issue had been addressed much earlier, it did not gain sufficient traction in American historiography until a certain point.⁵ Themes of social inequality were already being addressed in works with a neo-Marxist perspective on the

³ The later period was marked by Southerners’ fears of radical abolitionist actions, which resulted in the following: “After Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831, Southerners tended to view all abolitionist propaganda as incendiary in purpose” (Fehrenbacher 1981, 57).

⁴ This concept stems from the so-called compact constitutional theory, in which states are sovereign entities. In political action, this type of pattern has been referred to in the literature as the Principles of ‘98, which, as some argue, “had nothing to do with slavery” (Woods 2010, 59).

⁵ Any earlier interpretations with a clearly leftist tinge might have been considered politically suspect, given the ongoing rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.

historical process,⁶ but they did not penetrate the mainstream literature on the subject. However, the issue continued to inflame scholars, who recognized that slavery had crept into the heart of the liberal experiment, creating the so-called “paradox of freedom.” Such works will undoubtedly provide the first serious analyses of sectional conflict through the lens of economic change. According to this perspective, the Civil War was “a clash between two expansive social systems – a Northern capitalism and a Southern semi-feudal slavery” (Genovese 1968, 337).

Historians and scholars such as Howard Zinn, Heather Cox Richardson, and Peter Turchin are currently considered the leading proponents of viewing the Civil War and its consequences through the prism of the rivalry between the propertied class and the poorest class. In this perspective, the conflict between the North and the South was, on the one hand, a superficial example of a classic clash of elites. On the other, in deeper analyses of social structures, it was based on a stark dichotomy between democracy and equality versus oligarchy and plutocracy. The later radical abolitionist Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed this in the words: “the country is full of rebellion; the country is full of kings” (Atkinson 2000, 403–404). During the Antebellum period in the South, neo-abolitionists believed that status and social standing were determined by membership in the large class of planters and slaveholders. Historian James Oakes puts it this way: “Slaveholding was the symbol of success in the market culture of the Old South. It was an ambition, an achievement, a reward for diligence, hard work, and tenacity” (Oakes 1998, 123).

This perspective suggests not only that a “peculiar institution” was at the heart of the conflict, but also that the interests of a particular oligarchy, or elite, may have fuelled the entire conflict. To lend credence to this argument, representatives of this historiography also reach back to the early formation of the United States, pointing to an assumed flaw at the very origins of the United States. Heather Cox Richardson formulates this thesis as follows:

From its founding, America has stood at the nexus of democracy and oligarchy. And as soon as the nation was established, its history of conflating class and race gave an elite the language to take over the government and undermine democracy. (Cox Richardson 2020, 22)

Democracy, as it is understood today, was indeed not the domain of the young republic.

⁶ The classic and pioneering work on this issue at the time seems to be the monumental work by Charles and Mary Beard (1956). The Beards call this conflict the Second American Revolution and attribute it primarily to the rise of Northern capitalists and industrialists, who initiated the conflict by pursuing their naturally prioritized economic interests (1956).

Peter Turchin suggests that:

[T]he antebellum ruling class in the US was a direct offshoot of the English squirearchy. Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia were settled by the Cavaliers, the faction of supporters of Charles I who lost the English Civil War. They brought with them their aristocratic ways and indentured servants. The latter were soon replaced by imported Africans, enslaved for life.” (Turchin 2024, 139–140)

For advocates of social justice, America’s European roots must therefore have entailed problems that were also familiar on the old continent. America, as a child of Europe, could not be free from its cultural patterns. The only difference was that, over time, issues of post-feudal inequality were added to those of race.

Because the North believed that slavery in the South was a lucrative industry that brought wealth and economic power to the entire region, its destruction was a political, not a moral, goal (Turchin 2016, 189). While contemporary historiography can identify and define sectional differences, as Turchin notes, the acceleration of sectionalization in American politics after 1845 cannot be fully explained satisfactorily. For Turchin (2016, 190), there is only one explanation: structural-demographic theory and elite overproduction. However, the explosion of elites was supposed to be the dominant image in the North, not in the South, where plantation elites already existed.

Historian Howard Zinn, using the example of Virginia, argued that the prejudice emerging in the colony was originally supposed to be based on class. This fact seems to be supported by the similar attitude that the privileged classes showed towards both African Americans and the poor whites. According to Zinn (1994, 55), plantation elites feared a potential alliance among the lower classes. This kind of classism, therefore, resulted in, and was intended to be, tangible proof that, if not evil, then error had crept into America’s intellectual foundations. It is worth noting, however, that some draw entirely different conclusions from this fact. Even if we agree that a quasi-aristocracy did indeed build America, especially the one formed in Virginia, it may have been a factor in the development of the young republic, and the political system it created was so perspicacious that it “warns against too much preoccupation with the mechanics of democracy” (Sydnor 1952, 117).

Advocates of equalitarian solutions, however, believe that America should cut itself off from these roots. In their view, the existence of these inequalities and hierarchical, systemic discrimination constitute a paradox of freedom. A system based on this will, from time to time, prompt elites to attempt to restore it (Cox Richardson 2020, 24).

The problem will recur until the principle of liberal equality is definitively restored. Analysing the history of the American South, some scholars describe this process as “a vicious circle,” in which exploitative political institutions form the foundation, which in turn foster exploitative economic institutions, which in turn support political institutions (Acemoglu, Robinson 2012, 335–367).

Despite these criticisms, a process of evolution in American history is discernible, in the direction appropriate to the neo-abolitionist narrative. One significant stage in this process was the transfer of the “leadership role” of the aristocracy to political parties, which recognized the need to consider the interests of individual social groups and, over time, become the expression of the social structure (cf. McKay 2005, 81; Fraser 2015, 289). Although political parties, as Zinn, for example, argued, quickly abandoned social demands in favour of defending the interests of elites, they nevertheless experienced breakthrough moments.

Zinn points out that:

Lincoln could skilfully blend the interests of the very wealthy and the interests of blacks at a moment in history when these interests met. And he could link these two with a growing section of Americans, the white, up-and-coming, economically ambivalent, politically active middle class. (Zinn 1994, 182)

The author of the *People's History of the United States* was much more forward-thinking in his criticism of Lincoln's policies than historians with a similar perspective. Although we can undoubtedly classify Zinn as a neo-abolitionist within the leftist faction, he clearly breaks away from the nationalist narrative, and in his criticism, he essentially agrees with some of the accusations levelled at Lincoln by historians of the South.⁷

Heather Cox Richardson concludes her thesis by stating that persistent inequality and discrimination in America are proof that the South won the war. Attacking the contemporary conservative movement, she even suggests that “the world of 2018 looked a lot like that of 1860” (Cox Richardson 2020, 203). She also argues that “almost as soon as the Civil War ended, the Republicans’ egalitarian vision came under attack” (Cox Richardson 2021, 9), ultimately causing Lincoln's former party to depart from its original principles. Regardless, we must acknowledge that the evolution of social processes in America clearly demonstrates a unique and appropriate course for equality demands. Reaching back to the American Revolution, we can successfully demonstrate that this evolution brought about the rupture and elimination, first of the feudal system, and later opened the door to the final abolition of slavery (cf. Rothbard 1999, 1548–1552). In conclusion, historians like Heather Cox Richardson, by taking into account the concept of social justice and focusing mainly on it, definitely fits into the narrative characteristic of the Left view of the history of the Civil War and American history.

⁷ One of Zinn's consistent theses with Southern historians is that Lincoln's goal was to salvage his administration and his fragile political coalition in Congress. Compare the critical works of Abraham Lincoln's presidency by Thomas J. DiLorenzo (2020) or M.E. Bradford (1990, 219–225).

4. "TO PRESERVE THE UNION": FROM NATIONALISM TO IMPERIALISM

Analysing the theory of American nationalism, historian Jill Lepore notes that:

[T]he American Civil War was a struggle between two nationalisms. In the antebellum United States, Northerners and especially Northern abolitionists drew a contrast between (Northern) nationalism and (Southern) sectionalism. (Lepore 2020, 57)

The conflict between the North and the South, if we assume that it resulted from a clash of two social systems, undoubtedly stemmed from a struggle for control of the federal government to protect the interests of one or the other section (cf. Genovese 1968, 338). Those reporting and interpreting the events of the Civil War pointed out that "the great majority of the Union soldiers enlisted for the preservation of the Union and not for the abolition of slavery" (Herbert 2021, 100). We must therefore finally consider the effect the Civil War had on the militarization of the country and the development of a unified foreign policy for the United States. As can be inferred, the Civil War was another stage in the construction and development of the galloping American empire. Southern ideas of "small government" began to give way to centralist and expansionist concepts. In the matter of saving the Union as a project, neo-abolitionist historians begin with a fundamental nationalist thesis, the Unionist contract. They state that:

No concept of union can survive any secession, any more than a body can survive the secession of its heart or lungs. The Forging of the nation, undertaken in blood and faith in 1776 and culminating in the Constitution in 1787, brought the American people together as a single nation, not a country club of members who could choose to leave at the slightest sign of discomfort. The Civil War finalized that contract and gave to all men the promises of the Declaration and the purposes of the Constitution. (Schweikart, Allen 2004, 352)

Given the above, it seems obvious that the nationalist narrative emanating from these words means that the "new Republic" desperately needed absolution, a convincing argument that could serve as an unquestionable dogma in the pages of history. This dogma, fostering unification and national consolidation, was supposed to definitively bind the ideas of the Union together. The Union cause, therefore, required some form of humanitarian justification (cf. Hall, Charles 2019, 114–135). It was justified by three additional factors: the full-fledged saving of the Union from disintegration, the full-fledged realization of Manifest Destiny,⁸ and, in accordance with "divine law," punishment and revenge against the South for its practice of slavery (Adams 2000, 123). In this narrative, "the American nation

⁸ Yet another theory is that Lincoln gave meaning to the entire war doctrine when, through the Proclamation of Emancipation, he was to restore democracy to the American republic, thus outlining America's historic mission in the Gettysburg Address: "(...) this nation shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people..." (Merk, 1970, 261–262).

was born in the war and came into its full being in the decades after the war” (Huntington 2004, 119).

The Civil War not only expanded presidential powers and prerogatives but also forged a new foundation for moralizing the world. Robert Kagan particularly emphasized this when he wrote that: “The Civil War also affected Republican attitudes toward foreign policy” (Kagan 2006, 283). According to the neo-abolitionist camp, even if the abolition of slavery was used purely instrumentally, it allowed the world to be told that America was on the right side of history. The Republic, as neo-abolitionist historians argue, has cleansed itself of its original sin. Over time, however, as theorists of nationalism argue, based on moral victories, a centralized “national government” should abandon ineffective federalism and begin to constrain or coerce individual states into adapting their local constitutional traditions to behaviours deemed acceptable within the Union (cf. Hazony 2018, 141–154). Such processes certainly occurred within the economic perspective, in which “the post-Civil War Republican Party normalized vast government interventions in the nation’s economic life” (Will 2019, 292). In turn, from an interventionist perspective, “the Civil War was the standard against which all other American endeavours must be judged” (Kagan 2006, 283). So, advocates for the South perhaps rightly point out that:

(...) [T]he simple fact is that Lincoln wanted war. He had the chance to save the Union without war before he took office. He had the chance to save the Union without war in March 1861. He rejected attempts to peacefully purchase federal property and began polling his cabinet about provisioning Sumter less than a week after taking office knowing full well it would cause war. (McClanahan 2021, 142–143)

Additionally, in economic matters, Lincoln, as it is commonly believed:

[P]ursued an American System agenda on an epic scale. Having long advocated for protective tariffs, he raised them two times in the course of just three years. From Lincoln’s presidency through World War II, the American home market was the most protected in the world. Lincoln also re-created a federal financial system. (King, 2020, 29)

As Colin Dueck (2021, 14) points out:

[I]n this sense the Civil War resolved not only the issue of slavery and the issue of union, but also the issue of which great-power or assortment of powers would be dominant on the North American continent – an issue of evident concern to Lincoln. With the North’s victory in 1865, any possibility of balance of power on that continent was removed.

The belief that Abraham Lincoln, as an autocrat or – as Clinton Rossiter (2011, 224–225) argued – a dictator, could defend democracy in the broad sense, in turn gave rise to the belief in the possibility and necessity of such actions in specific circumstances. Lincoln was undoubtedly the first to accomplish this on such a large scale. Like Caesar – as some point out – he crossed the legendary Rubicon (Adams 2000, 35–36).

Adding elements of theological dispute to the Civil War provides justification and absolution through so-called just wars. For the Northern side:

[S]uppressing the southern rebellion seemingly met popular criteria for a just cause. The legitimate election of Lincoln, the attempt of a minority to defy the will of a majority, and the southern attack on the flag all buttressed the idea that the Federal government and the northern people had right on their side. (Rable 2010, 53)

Meanwhile, “the Lincoln legend has come to have a hold on the American imagination that defies comparison with anything else in political mythology” (Hofstadter 1973, 121). The expanding American empire may have lost all restraint and, over time, abandoned the binding bonds of the Monroe Doctrine. It also undoubtedly broke with the message of George Washington, the father not only of the American nation but also of the somewhat forgotten and overlooked concept of isolationism. This isolationism, emphasized by Washington in the Farewell Address, stated that America had no significant interests in Europe or anywhere else (Ellis 2004, 235).

In the diplomatic sphere, where the Lincoln administration was then managing relations with European states, and where the fate of the Confederacy’s international recognition hung in the balance, the Civil War meant that “Union victories and Union power had fortified Lincoln’s diplomacy” (Buchanan 1997, 133). Therefore, nothing stood in the way of America entering a phase of global competition. As Arthur E. Schlesinger (1986, 128) points out, “The United States has been an expansionist country. In the two centuries since the adoption of the Constitution, the national area has more than quadrupled.” The undoubted apogee of the United States’ imperial path was its victory over the Soviet Union in the so-called Cold War. Over time, from a geopolitical perspective, the United States embarked on a strategy of liberal hegemonism (cf. Mearsheimer, Rosato 2023). An empire that began to examine the “illiberal” sins of other states in international affairs. Washed of its own sins, convinced of its uniqueness, it began to develop and engage with other regions of the world.

To sum up, the implementers of this policy were a group known as neoconservatives,⁹ drawing on the political philosophy of Leo Strauss. The expansion of the federal government went hand in hand with warfare, interventionism, and militarization. Old American conservatives, however, who advocated for “small government,” did not share this path, because, like their counterparts in the young American Republic, they knew that “nothing expands a government like a war” (Norton 2004, 172).

⁹ One of its leading ideologists, citing Abraham Lincoln, justifying why America had to abandon isolationist concepts, states directly that: “...this attitude simply could not withstand the pressure of events and the insistent demands of world realities” (Kristol, 1995, 85).

5. THE POLITICS OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE NEED FOR A POLITICAL MYTH

“How do we choose to tell this story helps define our nation” Ray Raphael (2014, 2) asks in his work dispelling the founding myths of the United States. Why is this myth important? Finally, in summary, we must answer this question. We understand the myth here as a political myth that serves as a driving force behind the actions of specific political factions. A myth that is the foundation of a specific political thought and tradition. Without it, it would be impossible to prioritize this issue. A myth is “a particularly effective political tool because it unquestionably imposes a certain way of thinking, thus creating not only patterns of social behavior but also lays the foundations for the language of power” (Siewierska-Chmaj 2009, 12).

The United States needs a myth, perhaps more than ever. A myth that will sustain the existing vision of the republic, initiated after the Lincoln Revolution. The neo-abolitionist historical narrative maintains that one of the fundamental civilizational and cultural achievements that emerged from the Civil War was the emphasis on freedom and equality, thus reducing the concept of freedom to philosophical reflection. As James M. McPherson (2015, 13–14) states, “the tension between negative and positive liberty did not end with the Civil War, of course,” but “the need to understand and manage this balance offers another example of why the Civil War matters.” And while some classics of American conservatism, such as Russell Kirk (2003, 449), view Lincoln’s actions as an expression of the continuity of the republic and a defence of the existing order, analyses of the early formation of American statehood can undoubtedly also provide evidence to the contrary. These actions resulted in a rather radical departure from the federalist concept of the Founding Fathers, stripping the states of their sovereignty and leading to an attempt to “re-create” the republic.¹⁰

While Southern historians and advocates have, quite rightly, pointed out, and continue to point out, the destruction of the foundations of the republic and the Constitution that occurred during the Civil War, the Northern narrative and neo-abolitionist historiography point rather to its renewal and the consolidation of the Founding Fathers’ assumptions. By means of a nationalist narrative of the unity of

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that historians note that the construction of American identity was necessarily hardened amid conflict and violence from the very beginning. As it is suggested: “The American Nation was created through violent demarcation from its major reference points in two wars, but when Great Britain and France lost their existential importance as foreign templates for the domestic struggle over America’s identity after 1815, the sections gradually began defining America in opposition to each other rather than to foreign Others. It would finally break apart when a foreign threat could no longer unite the sections and overshadow the contradictions and diverging interests between its parts. The union would have to be reborn in a civil war” (Trautsch 2018, 269).

the United States' identity, the neo-abolitionist movement attempts to address the previously diagnosed problems. American nationalists point out that:

This clash gave us Abraham Lincoln, the most important American nationalist besides George Washington. Lincoln believed that we were a nation, bound together by our Constitution, our common history, our ideals, and our geography, not just a compact of states. The Civil War definitively settled the question and established once and for all the standing and legitimacy of American nation-state. (Lowry 2019, 137–138)

In view of the above, it rightly follows that “disputes over the meaning of the Constitution produce ambiguous consequences” (Szklański 2008, 117). On the one hand, we have the notorious references to the foundations and origins of the American state, and on the other, the desire for radical transformation and attempts to rewrite history. “The American experiment,” as historian Jill Lepore (2018, 786) tells us, “has not ended.”

In the case of the Civil War, whether it was necessary or not to bring about the desired transformation, Lincoln's actions could somehow be considered contrary to the will of the Founding Fathers, who pointed out that in the scheme of federalism, “it was possible for slave States and free States to coexist under our Federal Constitution” (Herbert 2021, 74). Lincoln's biographer, Merrill D. Peterson (1994, 382), notes, however, that: “Lincoln's fundamental cause and purpose in the Civil War, many came to believe, was not to save the Union but to advance human freedom (...) The Civil War came to be understood less as a war to preserve the old Union than as a revolutionary founding.” Lincoln himself, in turn, “never told Confederate leaders he would end the war if the Rebels merely freed their slaves” (Leigh, 2014). Today, the growing dominance of the neo-abolitionist movement in American historiography is undoubtedly supported by the cultural transformations taking place in the United States. This is arguably evidenced by the fact that “over time, Lincoln the Great Emancipator eclipsed Lincoln the Savior of the Union in the national imagination” (Gallagher 2011, 117).

The emphasis on the issue of African American slaves in the collective memory of the Civil War seems to be a natural tendency of the neo-abolitionist movement, which simply assumes that until then “Blacks had become alienated from the national community's remembrance of its most defining event” (Blight 2001, 380).¹¹ The very name of the Civil War seems to be of significant importance in the debate over the Civil War. For several decades, a fierce debate raged between different camps of historical interpretation. For Northern Unionists

¹¹ It's worth mentioning that it was this belief, among other things, that led to the creation of the federal African American holiday, Juneteenth (cf. Gordon-Reed 2021). Contemporary Southern advocates criticize this holiday, believing that, firstly, it incorrectly assigns the date of the end of slavery. Secondly, as Southerners point out, elevating it to the federal level fosters historical ignorance because: “it will help perpetuate the Righteous Cause myth of history, that the North fought for the glorious purpose of freeing their fellow men from the chains of slavery, and that Southern white men went to war only for the sinister purpose of keeping Black people in bondage” (Ashwood 2021).

and the neo-abolitionist camp, describing the secession of the Southern states as a rebellion “implicitly denied that the Confederate States of America legally existed” (Foster 2024, 87). The natural consequences of the neo-abolitionist view, which becomes irresistible, concerns the question of slavery in the entire genesis of the United States, which is a key issue. The culminating and extreme moment, marking a certain caesura in the research approach, was the publication of the famous and controversial publication *The 1619 Project* (2021). While it is not strictly an academic work, in our view it is undoubtedly the result of a radical neo-abolitionist interpretation. It almost entirely negates the assumptions of the main historical schools analysing the foundations on which the United States was founded.¹² This work has been meticulously and thoroughly criticized by leading historians of the early American republic period, considering it to be an attempt to “displace historical understanding by ideology” (Allen et al. 2020).

The emergence of *the 1619 Project* (2021) points to a serious phenomenon in historical scholarship. Indeed, it seems that in certain aspects, the aggressively argued neo-abolitionist movement is somehow responsible for distorting research, the ultimate result of which may be an ideologization leading to an abomination of US history.¹³ It is important to remember, however, that it is not limited to this one research camp. It is a trap that every strand of historical research characterized by ideological commitment or political motivations falls into. Therefore, delving into the origins of the American republic may simply stem from the fact that the causes of the Civil War are not clear.

The South had developed an original political thought and republican concept many years earlier, which simply cannot be reduced entirely to the defence of a “particular institution.” The Righteous Cause myth seems to simplify the processes taking place at the time and ultimately undermine the entire body of research on American history to date.

Of course, in the case of a radical revision of American history, we must also consider cultural changes, accompanied by demographic shifts. These changes undoubtedly contribute to the intensification of the so-called “culture wars.” History is constantly subject to modifications and pressures, as can be observed in the changes in local communities, which themselves decide to build specific

¹² In the case of the Civil War, *The 1619 Project* is surprisingly selective in its analysis of sources preceding the outbreak of the war. For example, it lacks references to the House Divided speech and passages from the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, crucial for academic integrity (cf. Grabar 2021, 196).

¹³ One of the conclusions of *The 1619 Project* is the proposition of reparations for slavery. Public opinion polls, particularly among African Americans, show strong support for such solutions (Cox, Edwards, Pew Research Center 2022). It is also worth mentioning what Francis Fukuyama has described as the result of the left’s identity politics. The flaw in this politics lies in the fact that, in its revolutionary approach to legitimizing certain identities, it ignores others (cf. Fukuyama 2018, 119; Kaufmann 2019, 518).

memory policies within their public spaces. The neo-abolitionist camp particularly focuses on the interpretation of Confederate monuments and the justification for their removal as a legacy of “white supremacy” (Cox 2021).

This process, however, causes “old myths” to be replaced by “new myths.” In our opinion, researchers should remain unfazed by these fluctuations. As C. Vann Woodward (1989, 278) pointed out: “Serious history is the critique of myths, however, not the embodiment of them. Neither is it the destruction of myths.” Nations and states need some myths, especially those that lead to the peaceful resolution of internal disputes. This is perhaps desired by a community that shares a specific, uniform system of values that unites it. The example of the Civil War illustrates the myth of sacrificed blood, which has become the foundation of historical policy. An almost quasi-religious perspective is adopted, namely: “For the Civil War to achieve its messianic destiny and inculcate an ongoing civil religion, it required a blood sacrifice that appeared total” (Stout 2007, 459).

On the other hand, federalism, so fundamental to America, was and is an undoubted safety net for relieving emotions and social tensions. Or, as Clyde N. Wilson puts it, “the true solution to our present dilemma would be a dismantling of the federal monopoly of power” (Wilson 2016, 162). The freer states, counties, cities, and provinces are in their decisions, the more they allow for the venting of social discontent.

The aforementioned Eric Foner (2014) referred to the Reconstruction period as a time of “unfinished revolution,” and David Blight (2001, 397), in his summary of *Race and Reunion*, almost explicitly indicates that bringing racial issues to the forefront was merely the initial goal of memory politics. This outcome, however, in his opinion, should be pursued through human rights and equality policies.

6. CONCLUSIONS

When interpreting the Civil War, priority is given to issues that presently reflect current social sentiment. To other ones are considered less worthy of attention. Historian Harry S. Stout summarizes his considerations as follows: “Why is it important to finally write the moral history of the Civil War? It’s important because we are its legates, and if we question nothing from that costly conflict, then we need to question nothing in the conflicts of the present and future” (Stout 2007, 461). In fact, we have to agree that “one of the enduring consequences of the American Civil War is its profound effect on historical perception of earlier year of republic” (Fehrenbacher 1980, 9).

At least, as we mentioned at the beginning, three politically motivated groups are involved in promoting the Civil War in American historiography as an emanation of the Righteous Cause. Each of them, however, seeks its own perspective by drawing on a completely different ideological vision supported by

analysis of historical events. Thomas J. Pressly (1965, 360) rightly observed that: “it was nevertheless true that the disagreement among historians over the meaning of the Civil War experience was matched, in the middle of the twentieth century, by sharp controversy in the arena of politics over issues related to those Civil War days.” The connections between the interpretation of history and politics seem to still be significantly intertwined in the United States.

The noticeable growth of neo-abolitionist research is perhaps directly proportional to the growing expectations of certain social groups demanding that their political postulates be articulated through historical experience. Some researchers explicitly state that: “Americans in the twenty-first century need to address not just the memory of the Civil War but also the national legacy of slavery and racism. They need to understand not just the racial but also the social, economic and cultural divisions in the nation today” (Foster 2024, 250).

This trend, which examines the Civil War from a single perspective, necessitates, however, to finally reflect on the practice of history as a scientific discipline. In attempting to answer the initial thesis of these considerations: is it justified to limit the Civil War to one or two social issues, it must be unequivocally affirmed, following Arthur M. Schlesinger (1998, 77), who decisively pointed out that: “History as a weapon is an abuse of history. The high purpose of history is not the presentation of self nor the vindication of identity, but the recognition of complexity and the search for knowledge.” In historical research, a differentiated approach to the very causes of the Civil War seems always most honest, in which, for example, one can distinguish the following factors: “short-term origins” and “long-term origins.” The former include different understandings of the constitution and form of government and system, while the latter includes the dispute over slavery (Masur 2020, 5–29). This was expressed concisely and decisively also by Felix Morley (1981, 71), who stated that “we shall not understand the inherited problems that the Union confronts today if we think that slavery issue did more than exacerbate the constitutional issue.”

Despite narrowing the subject of consideration, we have presented here a fairly broad spectrum of research approaches to the interpretation of the Civil War. The complexity of the causes and phenomena stemming from sectional differences brings the conclusion that, in light of the available sources, the Civil War cannot be considered a war waged solely for moral reasons. Moral implications certainly resulted from it, but they were not its cause *per se*. Focusing on issues of social equality and settling scores for the undoubtedly committed sins and errors of the past, the neo-abolitionist movement has dominated the discourse of contemporary studies on the Civil War, the period preceding and following it. This important voice, however, seems troubling, because the purpose for which it undertakes research is presented in an extremely dogmatic manner and has “descended into a presentism” (Hummel 2014, 21). It creates what one might call “radical history” (cf. Fynn-Paul 2023, 17–23), simultaneously building on this framework

political programs focused on confrontation. In the academic sphere, it causes avoidance of a broader perspective on the highly complex and complicated course of events of the past. In its attempt to provide a simple, easy, and convenient answer, it often abandons balanced, honest opinions and interpretations of history free from emotional pretensions. In pessimistic result, history becomes hostage to ideology.

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