Soldiers' Tales: "What Did You Do in the War, Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandpa?"

It might have been old age that dimmed his memory and robbed him of a garrulousness that likely tired his grandchildren. It might have been the diffidence of a habitual loser unaccustomed to telling officialdom something good about himself. It might have been a posttraumatic reluctance to delve too deeply into old memories of terror and pain.

Civil War Veterans and the Limits of Reconciliation

By the summer of 1881, news of the recently discovered Luray Caverns in Virginia's famed Shenandoah Valley had spread throughout the East Coast. Hundreds of curious visitors read accounts of the spectacular grottoes and began to flood the small farming town to see what was being touted as one of the world's geological wonders. The Union veterans of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, were no exception—but theirs was not to be a sightseeing adventure alone. In June, the Carlisle post of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) wrote to the prominent men of Luray proposing an excursion of the ladies and gentlemen of Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley to the caverns. They suggested "a friendly exchange of greetings" with "yourself and other surviving members of the Confederate army." There was no need for "ostentatious show" or "expensive reception." Rather, they merely desired a "friendly hand-shaking." "We will furnish a band of music," the GAR post gladly wrote. "If you think favorably of meeting us there, with as many comrades as you can conveniently muster, we should be pleased to form the new acquaintances."

On July 21, nearly 2,000 people, most of them Confederate veterans from the Shenandoah Valley, gathered at the newly opened Luray train station to greet 600 Pennsylvanians—their former enemies. Lieutenant Andrew Broaddus, Confederate veteran and editor of the local paper, delivered an address calling upon the veterans of both sides to forget the war, reminding them "that only cowards bear malice, and that brave men forgive." He ardently believed that

partisan leaders continued to employ political issues to “keep down the cry of peace that comes from every section,” but hoped that this meeting would do much to end such sectional animosities. In language that would prove representative of Blue-Gray reunions for decades to come, GAR Post Commander Judge R. M. Henderson concurred with Broaddus, but added that the veterans should “forget everything except the lessons of the past.” Veterans might gather on the former fields of battle to ceremoniously shake hands over the proverbial bloody chasm, but as Henderson observed, they would not surrender their cause.

> Rather than fostering a memory of the war that erased the causes and consequences of the conflict, Blue-Gray “love fests” often created a deeper attachment to the respective Union and Lost Causes.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, such affairs helped convince Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line that the horrors of war and the upheavals of Reconstruction were behind them. The creation of the first national military parks, popular magazines, plays, and even political campaigns encouraged northerners and southerners to embrace their former foes in the spirit of brotherly love and American progress. In recent years, historians such as David Blight, Nina Silber, and Timothy Smith have interpreted these gestures as evidence of a new national memory of reconciliation that triumphed over earlier memories of the war. Forgotten was the Union Cause with its emphasis on preserving the republic and ending slavery, they argue. Buried were the disputes over the war’s causation. Instead, northerners appeared to buy into the Lost Cause sentiments that extolled the battlefield bravery and valor of all (white) soldiers. Reconciliation, these scholars contend, offered both a white-washed memory of the war and a vision of sectional healing on Confederate terms.

This vision of sectional harmony premised on amnesia about the war’s causes, however, was not shared by most veterans. Instead, the majority adamantly defended their own cause as righteous and just while refuting that of their opponent as without merit. Rather than fostering a memory of the war that erased the causes and consequences of the conflict, Blue-Gray “love fests” often created a deeper attachment to the respective Union and Lost Causes. While they might occasionally meet in the spirit of reconciliation as they did at Luray in 1881, neither Union nor Confederate veterans were willing to forget—much less forgive—all that had happened. True, heart-felt feelings of reconciliation were rare indeed.

Setting the soldiers’ monument in place at Gettysburg in 1869. Courtesy of the Gettysburg National Military Park (1997), Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Reunion of the 87th Pennsylvania in 1869. Courtesy of the Gettysburg National

Military Park (T-2792-B), Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

To understand the role of Reconciliationist sentiment in shaping the memory of the Civil War, it is helpful to recognize the various memory traditions of the conflict. The Lost Cause, a romanticized interpretation of the war in which Confederate defeat was presented in the best possible terms, emerged even before the soldiers of the Army of Northern Virginia had stacked their weapons and signed paroles. On April 10, 1865, Robert E. Lee read his General Order No. 9 to his men at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. In it, he lauded the loyalty, valor, and "unsurpassed courage and fortitude" of "the brave survivors of so many hard-fought battles" and assured his men that the surrender was through no fault of their own. Instead he insisted that the army had been "compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources." By the 1870s, through the efforts of elite white southern women of the Ladies' Memorial Associations who helped establish Confederate cemeteries and the first Memorial Days, as well as such former Confederate leaders as Jubal A. Early, most white southerners had embraced the Lost Cause. Defenders of this version of the war's history repeatedly maintained that states' rights, not slavery, had caused the conflict and held that most slaves remained faithful to their masters even after emancipation. They claimed that Confederate soldiers had fought honorably and bravely and that the South had not been defeated but overwhelmed by insurmountable odds (and therefore was destined to lose). They maintained that, throughout the war, southern white women remained loyal and devoted to the cause. Finally, they heralded Robert E. Lee as the epitome of a southern gentleman and the greatest military leader of the war.

White northerners likewise began to memorialize their cause in the postwar period. But instead of women, the Union army performed the burials while veterans' organizations, such as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), orchestrated Memorial Days. As former Confederates sought to explain their defeat, the triumphant North needed to elaborate on what victory meant for the nation. Most northerners celebrated the Union Cause, which argued that the war had been fought to preserve the republic from secessionist fanatics who threatened the Founding Fathers' vision, and therefore, the future viability of democracy. Many of those who espoused the Union Cause included emancipation of the slaves within the accomplishments of victory, but others, such as Frederick Douglass, believed that emancipation was the *most* important cause and accomplishment of the war, and as such, espoused an Emancipationist memory.

By the early 1870s, these were the three clear memories of the war: the Lost Cause, Union Cause, and Emancipationist Cause. After federal troops withdrew from the South in 1877, a fourth memory of the war appeared: Reconciliation. In the 1880s and 1890s, a heightened spirit of national reconciliation peaked in the United States. Union and Confederate veterans commenced participating in joint Blue-Gray reunions, while popular magazines such as *The Century* increasingly valorized the battles and leaders of the war. In the 1890s, extolling the bravery of former foes would reach its zenith at the first national military parks—Chickamauga and Chattanooga, Gettysburg, Antietam,

Shiloh, and Vicksburg—created through the joint efforts of Union and Confederate veterans. But when the two groups met at Blue-Gray reunions, they agreed to remain silent on the divisive political issues that had caused the conflict as well as the turmoil of Reconstruction. Instead they commiserated about the severity of camp life and marches while commending each other for their bravery on the field of battle. For Reconciliation to flourish, white northerners and southerners had to reach a compromise predicated upon the exaltation of military experience and the insistence that the causes of the war as well as the postwar consequences, namely Reconstruction, be ignored.

But this reverence for Reconciliation was never complete, nor was it without qualifications. Union veterans continued not only to espouse their allegiance to the Union Cause (and in many cases, emancipation) at monument dedications and Memorial Days, they also maintained that theirs was the only good and noble cause. In southern periodicals and at Confederate reunions, former rebels persisted in their tributes to the Lost Cause. The Blue-Gray reunions and Reconciliationist rhetoric did not mean that animosity between the former foes had vanished. Instead, sectional animosity continued to linger, a fact made evident in the former Confederate capitol in the mid-1890s, during the so-called heyday of Reconciliationist sentiment.


“Marker Erected by Lt. Col. Albert A. Pope As A Memorial of His Dead Comrades at Antietam.” Photograph No. 20 taken from album “Views of Antietam Battlefield,” by W.B. King, Hagerstown, Maryland (1870). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.


1st Massachusetts Monument at Gettysburg, dedicated in July 1886. Well into the 1890s, Gettysburg was chiefly a Union memorial park dedicated to the memory of those who fought for the United States. Courtesy of the Gettysburg National Military Park (T-1969), Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

On May 30, 1894, tens of thousands of former Confederates gathered in Richmond for the unveiling of the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Monument on Libby Hill. It was not the monument itself that would cause so much friction; rather, it was the words of the day’s orator, Rev. R. C. Cave, that sparked a national debate and stirred the embers of sectional animosity, violating the unspoken truce of Reconciliation. In the course of his address, Cave spoke the standard lines about soldiers’ bravery and devotion common at every monument dedication, be it Union or Confederate. But he went further that day, delivering what many northern writers described as a eulogy for the Confederacy. Appomattox had not been a divine verdict against the South, he argued; instead it had been the triumph of the physically strong. Going beyond the traditional Lost Cause message of overwhelming northern resources, he intoned that “brute force cannot settle questions of right and wrong.” “The South was in the right,” he maintained, noting that “the cause was just; that the men who took up arms in her defense were patriots.” And yet he still went further, denouncing the

character, motives, and actions of the North and suggesting that it was southerners, not northerners, who had been more devoted to the Union. “Against the South was arrayed the power of the North, dominated by the spirit of Puritanism,” he intoned, “which … worships itself and is unable to perceive any goodness apart from itself, and from the time of Oliver Cromwell to the time of Abraham Lincoln has never hesitated to trample upon the rights of others in order to effect its own ends.” When he was finished, newspapers reported that the crowd leapt to their feet in thunderous applause.

As news of Cave’s remarks made its way northward, a storm of denunciation flowed from every corner of the nation. From newspapers in Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Portland, Oregon, came headlines of “Unreconstructed Rebel” and “The Rebel Yell is Heard: Treason Preached at Richmond’s Monument Unveiling.” The *Washington Post* declared Cave’s statements out of place in this “era of reconciliation,” reminding southerners that Union soldiers had recognized the “valor, the devotion, and the fine manhood of the Confederates” and tried to spare “them every possible humiliation in their defeat.” Surely the South would denounce such brazenly treasonous speech, the paper observed. A handful of southern papers did dismiss Cave’s remarks as ill-conceived and hardly representative of the South, but many southern newspapers either reprinted his speech without any commentary or explicitly endorsed him. And each time they did, northern papers responded in turn. With each salvo, the conflict continued to escalate.

The *Richmond Times* rushed to defend Cave and to reject claims of northern magnanimity at Appomattox—part of the foundation for reconciliation. “What did that ‘affectionate’ and ‘magnanimous victor’ next do?” the paper asked, “He subjected people of the South to a rule of thieving carpetbaggers, voted into place by a population of ignorant, semi-barbarous slaves and sustained in place by the bayonets of that ‘affectionate and magnanimous enemy.'” By invoking the “evils” of Reconstruction, the Richmond paper had broken the precarious compromise implicit in the Reconciliationist memory of the war. Similarly ignoring the compromise, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* fired back, attacking both Confederate soldiers’ honor and their cause: “They were not defending their common country,” the *Tribune* declared, “They were trying to disrupt it … The Confederates fought for the perpetuity of slavery and the destruction of the National Union.” The paper went on to forcefully declare, “[the Confederate] cause was wrong.”

The real battle, however, erupted not between newspapers but among veterans. In early June 1894, the Columbia Post GAR of Chicago wrote to the Lee Camp of Confederate Veterans in Richmond; the letter was republished in northern newspapers. Two years earlier, the Columbia Post had travelled to the former Confederate capital, where they enjoyed “the hospitality and generous welcome” of the Lee Camp. But upon hearing of Cave’s oration they were outraged. The Columbia Post informed the Lee Camp that on the very day Cave had delivered his oration, they had joined with Confederate veterans in Chicago to decorate the graves of Confederate prisoners of war without mentioning the cause of the

conflict or its final settlement. Certainly, they felt, the Lee Camp that had so graciously hosted them would not endorse Cave's statements. "If the sentiments uttered by Rev. Cave … and [the] 'tremendous applause' from the audience assembled there, be the true sentiments of the average ex-Confederate veteran," they noted, "then will it indeed be hard to ever heal the breach between 'brothers of one land,' engendered by that awful conflict, and the generous action of our Union veterans seems truly wasted." Invoking Reconciliationist sentiment as a way to contest Cave's combative Lost Cause rhetoric, the Union veterans noted that, "While anxious to look with pleasure upon these reunions in your sunny South land, we cannot but regret such disloyal sentiments as these, and must protest in the name of the fallen of both sides." In the estimation of the GAR, the Confederate veterans' insistence on defending Cave's statement displayed a new surge of rebel disloyalty, more than thirty years after secession.


"Reunion of Company B 25th Mass. Vols. and Generals William F. Draper, Packett and Sprague." Photograph taken at their reunion at Northboro, Massachusetts, June 5, 1903. Courtesy of the Regimental Photographs of the Civil War Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.


Reunion of Regimental Co. C51, Worcester, Massachusetts. Photograph taken at their reunion in 1908. Courtesy of the Regimental Photographs of the Civil War Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Upon receiving the letter, the Lee Camp was at first unsure how to respond. Some favored tabling the discussion in order to avoid a national controversy, while others remained indignant. But continued newspaper coverage stirred the debate, with one southern paper referring to the Chicago GAR post as "a lot of hoodlums, cattle, and vulgarians." Soon other Confederate organizations began to rally behind Cave. The Southern Women's Historical Society of St. Louis sent the reverend their "heartfelt thanks," while the Pickett Camp of the United Confederate Veterans voted to remove the photograph of a Federal officer from its camp walls.

Finally, in July—more than a month after the unveiling—the Lee Camp responded to the Columbia Post. Expressing shock at the post's response to Cave's speech, the Confederate veterans observed that while they did not suspect "any purpose on your part to provoke sectional controversy or add fuel to the dying embers of sectional hate; but such seems to be its natural tendency." The Lee Camp proclaimed itself unable to understand how Cave's words could be interpreted as "disloyal" and affirmed his contention that Appomattox had settled the military questions but not the Constitutional ones. "Physical might cannot determine the question of legal or moral right," they observed. They noted that both sides had erected monuments to their respective causes, and that they too had laid flowers on the graves of their former foes. But most importantly, the camp noted that Cave had not spoken on Memorial Day or a monument unveiling at a

battlefield in which both sides were meant to be honored. Instead, “his oration was delivered *at the unveiling of a monument to the private soldiers and sailors* who died in behalf of the Southern cause, in resistance to an armed invasion of their native land, and in defense … of their personal liberties and constitutional rights.” It was therefore right, they argued, that “he should also refer to and vindicate ‘the cause for which they fell.'”

This was the crux of the matter. Confederates believed that they were free to observe, defend, and memorialize their cause when speaking only to other Confederates. For them, the Lost Cause was the primary memory of the war. When they came together at Blue-Gray reunions or battlefield dedications, they were willing to embrace Reconciliation and remain silent on the issues of causality and consequence. But when honoring their cause among their brethren, they would not be silent. And the same held true for Union veterans. They, too, espoused not only the righteousness of the Union cause—and in many instances, Emancipation—at GAR functions and monument dedications, but they readily held that the Confederate cause had been wrong and without moral worth.

Perhaps it is not surprising to find Confederates defending their cause or Union veterans doing likewise. But the commotion caused by Cave’s remarks and other such incidents force contemporary Americans to reevaluate our understanding of Reconciliation and larger patterns of Civil War memory. They reveal that even though Reconciliationist sentiment might have reached its apex in the 1880s and 1890s, it was never complete nor uncontested. Nor was it the dominant interpretation of the war. Instead, veterans and civilians from both sides tenaciously clung to their own cause, whether that was the Union, Lost, or Emancipationist. Attention to continued divisiveness among veterans also reminds us that Reconciliation was not solely based upon a white-washed memory of the war, as historians have argued. In this case, as in countless others, northerners had not forgotten (or agreed to forget) that slavery caused the war. This was not the issue that stirred so much antagonism; rather, it was the GAR Post’s insistence that rhetoric such as Cave’s was disloyal. Reconciliation was therefore built on a compromise much more tenuous than the veterans who met at Luray in 1881 predicted, and much more complicated than historians have so far acknowledged.

The battles that ensued in the decades after the war were more than just semantics, boasting, or even nostalgia. Instead, veterans of both sides employed competing memories of the war, its causes, and its consequences to advance their own personal and political agendas. At monument dedications, GAR post meetings, or Confederate reunions, veterans revived the animosities of 1861-1865 for reasons ranging from rousing partisan furor in the name of political power to fear that their sacrifices were being forgotten by the next generation. Union veterans simultaneously recalled their pride in the American flag and their loathing of the slaveholding oligarchy when they waved the bloody shirt. Former Confederates defended their actions as sanctioned by the Constitution and rejected the notion that Union soldiers had marched off to war to free the slaves. In the process of remembering and defending their

respective causes, the veterans of both sides ensured that Reconciliation would not come to dominate the landscape of Civil War memory—at least during their lifetimes.

But where do we stand 150 years after the war? So far, the sesquicentennial has left us with a mixed legacy with which to judge war memory. Countless journalists, event organizers, and other public figures have embraced Reconciliation, resurrecting the images of the Blue-Gray love fests. There was no right or wrong cause, they argue—northerners and southerners both believed they were right. Others have emphasized Emancipation, using commemorations to correct what they perceive as versions of the war that focus only on white combatants, highlighting instead slavery as the war's primary cause as well as the contributions of African Americans to both emancipation and the overall war effort. Still others have feared offending either those who still promote the Lost Cause or those who advocate an Emancipationist memory, electing to forego any observance of the 150th anniversary. Hence there is no national sesquicentennial commission, and only a handful of state commissions devoted to marking this moment in American history.


Union veterans at the 1913 Gettysburg reunion. Contrary to many images of veterans shaking hands over the proverbial bloody chasm, many veterans elected to spend their time with their comrades, not their former enemies. Courtesy of the Gettysburg National Military Park (2693), Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

It is too soon to tell exactly what the sesquicentennial's overall impact will be on the course of Civil War memory. But several issues remain clear. First, Reconciliation never was, nor has it ever been, the predominant memory of the war. Try as they may, Americans have never succeeded in finding a memory of the war that absolves all parties of blame and is palatable to northerners and southerners, white and black, men and women. Second, slavery was not forgotten by the war generation—not by white Union veterans, Confederates, or African Americans. To somehow "discover" that slavery was at the center of the conflict is patronizing to those men and women. Finally, it is clear that the Civil War is far from forgotten. Indeed, it seems likely that for decades and perhaps generations to come, Americans will continue to grapple with questions of the war's memory, of what to commemorate and what to condemn.


Confederate veterans at the 50th anniversary of Gettysburg in 1913. While the occasion celebrated reunion, sectional discord lay just beneath the surface for many veterans on both sides. Courtesy of the Gettysburg National Military Park (2694), Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Further Reading

On reconciliation, see Nina Silber, *Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993); David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Timothy B. Smith, *The Golden Age of Battlefield Preservation: The Decade of the 1890s and the Establishment of America's First Five Military Parks* (Knoxville, Tenn., 2008).

The literature on the Lost Cause is voluminous. Readers might begin with Gary W. Gallagher and Alan Nolan, eds.,*The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000); and Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York, 1987).

For historians who have discussed the Union cause at length, see Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011); and John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2005): 8-10.

On the Emancipationist Cause, see Blight (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); and Kathleen Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration & Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005).

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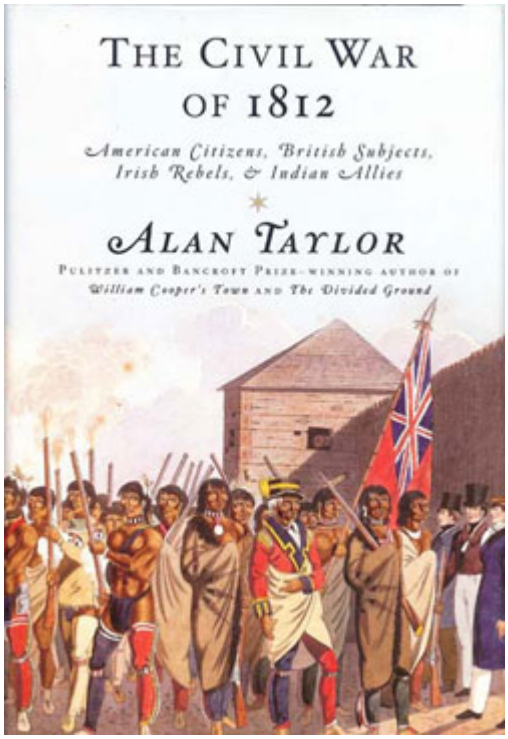
The Not-So-Civil War



British flogging of impressed American sailors was particularly resented because of its association with the treatment of slaves in the southern states.

“A Brave and Gallant Soldier”

Civil War Monuments and the Funerary Sphere

In a quiet glade amid the trees and lawns of Boston's Forest Hills Cemetery, a bronze soldier of the American Civil War stands on a low plinth clutching his rifle (fig. 1). His posture is reminiscent of parade rest, a pose often assumed by soldiers on ceremonial occasions, but he gazes downward and to his right with a wistful air (fig. 2). He wears the standard overcoat and forage cap issued to soldiers of the Union Army for winter service, and his finely modeled, unbearded face reflects the youth of the typical Civil War volunteer. The base of the statue declares that it was "Erected by the City of Roxbury in honor of Her Soldiers, who died for their Country in the Rebellion of 1861-1865." Its grassy clearing is enclosed with a low stone fence inscribed with the names, units, and dates of death of the Civil War soldiers of the Boston suburb of Roxbury (fig. 3). Amid the rolling hills and screening vegetation of the cemetery, the stone fence demarcates a space for quiet reflection. Overall, the monument is part gravestone and part triumph, mourning the deaths of the young soldiers of Roxbury while honoring their valorous deeds in the successful Union war effort.

This monument to the soldiers of the Civil War was designed and sculpted by Boston artist Martin Milmore and erected in 1867, just two years after the bloody conflict came to a close. The Roxbury monument is an early example of a nationwide impulse to erect monuments to the war's soldiers in the decades

following the Civil War. Before the war, few public monuments existed in the streets and parks of cities in the United States, and most of these were in honor of famous men. But in the years after the war, as both North and South tried to recover from a conflict that had caused more than 750,000 soldier deaths, communities across the nation began overwhelmingly to erect monuments to the memory of the citizen soldier. In the term *citizen* soldier, there is a strain of civic responsibility and behavior: these men were seen as volunteers for the cause of their nation, exemplars of how participants in a democracy should ideally behave. The monuments to their sacrifice sparked an industry that provided constant employment for both trained sculptors and artisan gravestone carvers who rushed to meet the demand for memorial sculpture. These sentinels in bronze and granite, placed in town squares or garden cemeteries, linked local loss with the broader national implications of the Civil War. With their presence, they created sites where families could remember the loss of loved ones killed and interred on faraway battlefields, and where communities could celebrate and commemorate their role in a cataclysmic national event.

These sentinels in bronze and granite, placed in town squares or garden cemeteries, linked local loss with the broader national implications of the Civil War.

1. Martin Milmore, Roxbury Soldier Monument, Forest Hills Cemetery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1867. Photograph courtesy of the author.

The first Civil War soldier monuments were more explicitly connected with mourning the war’s dead than later monuments, which focused mainly on civic pride and responsibility. Most of the early monuments were placed in cemeteries, and many were fabricated by carvers who also specialized in gravestones. Like gravestones, these monuments bore the names of a town’s dead. For many families who had lost loved ones in the war, these tombstone-like monuments may have stood in as surrogate tombstones for soldiers who never came home. As Drew Gilpin Faust has illustrated, the sudden confrontation with the realities of war death on the Civil War’s grand scale forged a deep sense of anxiety for a society that had grown used to a certain amount of ceremony accompanying the end of life. The enormous and costly battles of the Civil War left hundreds of dead soldiers littered across Southern battlefields, and the job of cleaning up this horrific mess

often fell to local citizens. Gruesome and disfiguring battlefield injuries were compounded by days or weeks of exposure, making bodies difficult to identify, and thus many soldiers were buried in unmarked graves, their identities lost. Families who mourned their inability to tend to their soldier dead could turn to a town soldier monument as a site for remembrance.

2. Martin Milmore, Roxbury Soldier Monument, Forest Hills Cemetery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1867. Photograph courtesy of the author.

A poem that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on April 1, 1865, shows how the soldier monument worked as a mourning site. The six stanzas describe a small town erecting a monument, first in memory of one slain soldier, and then for more and more, as war casualties grow and new names are engraved onto the same stone. Two stanzas in particular evoke the relationship between the monument and the grave that cannot be visited:

The grass had not been touched by spade
Where its slant shadow lay,
The soldier's resting-place was made
On red field far away,
And yet with bowed, uncovered heads
They kneeled around to pray.

[…]

So let the soldiers' monument
In every grave-yard stand—
Although their buried forms be blent
With distant sea or sand—
To keep their memory for aye
Within a grateful land.

The poem makes the relationship between the monument and the grave abundantly clear. The soldier's actual grave is far away, as is indicated by the fact that the ground around the monument "had not been touched by spade," and yet this imagined monument is a site for the enactment of the types of rituals usually held at a gravesite, namely prayer or later, patriotic celebration. The poem's writer makes clear that even if the remains of soldiers are encased in "distant sea or sand," the monument placed at home is an important repository for soldiers' memory.

Debates over the erection of individual town monuments reflected the rhetoric of the *Harper's Weekly* poem. In an 1866 meeting devoted to

the question of whether to erect a monument to the soldier dead of Illinois, Major General Benjamin M. Prentiss explicitly advocated for the soldier monument as a duty to soldiers who had not returned home:

When we persuaded these boys to go into the army, we pledged not only the faith of the nation, but our own and that of the State that they should not be forgotten. At this day there are thousands of our Illinois soldiers who are lying in Southern soil, and many of their parents and those who loved them, ignorant of their last resting place. It would be a consolation to the families bewailing the loss of those dear to them, to know that the people of the State, and particularly their military associates, do not forget them.

For Prentiss, the soldier monument served as an answer to the dispersal of the remains of Union dead and a site for mourning families to remember their lost sons.

3. Martin Milmore, Roxbury Soldier Monument, Forest Hills Cemetery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1867. Photograph courtesy of the author.

In shaping local sites for remembrance of fallen soldiers, the Northern towns that sponsored soldier monuments may have been looking to emulate the recently created national cemetery system. During and immediately following the war, the loose connection of burial grounds that had been instituted by military leaders was reconstituted into a network of national cemeteries with the help of federal and local governments. The first of these was the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg. It was dedicated on November 19, 1863, five months after the battle of Gettysburg, as the first of many cities of the dead that would honor fallen soldiers with uniform white headstones. One of the earliest citizen soldier monuments, an elaborate assemblage of allegorical figures surrounding a central columnar element, was designed by James Batterson for this cemetery (fig. 4). The monument is topped by an allegory of Liberty, with the four statues around the base representing War, History, Peace, and Plenty. This basic arrangement of figures around a column remained popular for the priciest soldier monuments through the end of the nineteenth century, although the taste for allegory eventually gave way to soldier figures representing the Army, Navy, Cavalry, and Artillery. These elaborate assemblages soon began appearing in town squares in addition to national cemeteries.

4. “National monument to be erected at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania,” engraving by Major & Knapp from the original design by James G. Batterson, Hartford, Connecticut (1863). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

For both Northerners and Southerners interested in reburying their soldier dead, new cemeteries were the response to a sense that most soldiers did not receive a proper burial on the first attempt, and that these hastily dug and shallow graves might be disturbed by animals or enemies. To create the national cemetery at Gettysburg, the bodies of Union soldiers were disinterred from the temporary graves where they had been laid to prevent decomposition in the late summer heat and reburied in a new cemetery on land that had been purchased as a planned extension of the town’s burial grounds. At Gettysburg and other national cemeteries connected with Civil War battlefields, only Union soldiers were allowed in the hallowed grounds, with careful attention paid to the deceased’s uniform to determine which side of the conflict the individual had supported. The macabre business of disinterring and reinterring bodies was famously captured in a photograph from *Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War* titled “A Burial Party on the battle-field of Cold Harbor,” in which the faces of five African American members of a burial party at the scene of the battle of Cold Harbor are juxtaposed with five bleached skulls atop a cart filled with human remains. The men who worked to rebury Union troops, many of them members of the United States Colored Troops who continued to serve the army after the war had ended, played a significant role in creating a memorial landscape to honor the soldiers of the Civil War. And yet, the contribution of African American men to the war effort was not recognized in sculptural form until 1897, when Augustus Saint-Gaudens included troops of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in his famous *Shaw Memorial* in Boston.

In the decades following the Civil War, the national

cemeteries served as pilgrimage sites for the families of fallen soldiers. The uniform headstones of the cemetery, arranged in even geometric lines, echoed the precision of military drill, and often an elaborate monument served as a commemorative focal point. An 1865 writer in the *New York Times*, advocating for a soldier monument at Fortress Monroe in Hampton, Virginia, saw the monument as a centerpiece for a cemetery where families of soldiers could "visit their graves in future years with a quiet, though sad satisfaction, and plant thereon the flowers of the most sacred affection." A lithograph by Currier and Ives showing the national cemetery and monument at Fortress Monroe depicts two pairs of mourners visiting the graves of departed soldiers (fig. 5). While two adult men lean against the fence surrounding the cemetery's central obelisk, another man holds the hand of a small boy as both ponder a single white headstone, perhaps discussing a father's sacrifice for his country. For these visitors, the national cemetery served as a site for mourning and moral instruction.

5. "Monument. 75 feet high containing 720 tons solid granite. Erected in the National Cemetery near Fortress Monroe by subscriptions of loyal citizen in northern cities in memory of Union soldiers who perished in the War of the Rebellion," lithograph by Currier & Ives (1865-1870). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

6. The Soldier's Grave, lithograph by Currier & Ives (1862). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

But not all families who lost a loved one could afford to visit the faraway national cemetery where their son, father, or husband was buried. For these people, a kind of solace could be found in images like*The Soldier's Grave*, an 1862 lithograph by Currier and Ives that provided buyers with space to write the name of the deceased onto an elaborate gravestone (fig. 6). Images like this one participated in a trend toward memorial lithography, existing in the United States since at least the 1830s. In the antebellum convention, a printed gravestone with space to write the identity of the deceased would be accompanied by mourners, usually a lone female in mourning costume, and other emblems, often including a willow tree. In *The Soldier's Grave*, this conventional type is adapted for a military purpose. Instead

of an urn or other Greek Revival symbols, the gravestone is decorated with the accoutrements of war: rifles, drums, cannons, and an eagle with outstretched wings bearing a laurel wreath. As the young lady in mourning leans against the gravestone, a column of marching troops appears to the right. And as Mark S. Schantz has pointed out, the unmediated space for inscribing the name of the dead on the antebellum lithographs has been replaced by a much more regimented form: "In memory of [Name of deceased] of the [Corps, Brigade, Regiment, etc.] who died at [Place, date], 186[year]." The discipline of military life is reflected in the structuring of form.

Soldier monuments like the Roxbury monument by Martin Milmore were public, permanent versions of these paper gravestones. Like the more ephemeral mourning lithograph, the soldier monument often employed iconography such as the eagle, the laurel, and the collections of armaments. Both, too, helped to ameliorate the anxiety of losing a loved one in a distant land. Those who bought copies of *The Soldiers' Grave* could inscribe the paper gravestone with the memory of their lost loved one to display in the home as a replacement for another resting place that might be too far away to visit, or even unknown. Likewise, the soldier monument provided a physical location for enacting rituals of grief and memorialization in front of a stone carved with the names of the dead. Even the regimented formal structure of *The Soldier's Grave* reflects the monument. The lithograph provides the generic inscription "A brave and gallant soldier and a true patriot," alongside a poem evoking the "victory won" and the soldier's final rest. Rather than leaving space for the owner of the lithograph to write her own description of the deceased, the image assumes that all soldiers are "gallant" and "true," and that a single inscription can be adapted to any circumstance. The soldier monument participates in the same form of collective rhetoric, providing a list of names along with an inscription meant to speak for all of them. Even in memory, the soldier is memorialized through military discipline.

7. Stonewall Confederate Cemetery, Winchester, Virginia, with 1879 Confederate Monument, attributed to Thomas Delahunty. Photograph (February 2012) courtesy of the author.

Southern communities that erected soldier monuments also incorporated both mourning and commemoration into their memorial programs, but for Southerners, the mourning aspect was even more pronounced than it was for their Northern counterparts. In the North, communities mourned a great loss of life as families lamented the faraway or unknown graves of loved ones, but victory in the war served as a balm for grief. In Southern towns, where much greater percentages of the white male population had participated in the war, grief over individual loss was coupled with the need to cope with the defeat of the Southern cause. Further, while Union soldiers who had died in battle were given dignified burials in national cemeteries, Confederate remains were denied entrance into these spaces. Instead, Southern women formed Ladies' Memorial Associations, organizations that established Confederate cemeteries and paid for the reburial of Southern soldiers' bodies and the erection of monuments to their memory. Stonewall Confederate Cemetery in Winchester, Virginia, with its even rows of simple headstones and tall columnar monument, is such a site (fig. 7). Founded in 1866 as a section of the larger Mount Hebron Cemetery, this resting place for the bodies of 2,575 Confederate soldiers received its soldier monument in 1879.

The long delay 8. Confederate Monument, Winchester, Virginia, 1879, attributed to Thomas Delahunty. Photograph courtesy of the author.between the founding of Stonewall Confederate Cemetery and the dedication of its monument speaks to the scarcity of funds for monument building in the war-ravaged South. In the first years after the war, most Southern communities prioritized the rebuilding of towns and the reburial of Confederate soldiers over the purchase of memorial sculpture. But as a famous poem by Henry Timrod implies, a monument was usually part of the plan. Timrod's "Ode Sung on the Occasion of Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead" was written for a ceremony that took place on June 16, 1866, at Magnolia Cemetery in Charleston, South Carolina. In the first few stanzas, Timrod explains that a monument will soon watch over the deceased in their sleep:

Sleep sweetly in your humble graves,
Sleep, martyrs of a fallen cause;
Though yet no marble column craves
The pilgrim here to pause.
In seeds of laurel in the earth
The blossom of your fame is blown,

And somewhere, waiting for its birth,
The shaft is in the stone!

Timrod makes clear that while the soldiers' cause is lost, their fame carries on, and he reassures the sleeping soldiers that their marble monument is already planned, lying in wait in a stone block. Soon, just as the finished shaft will be born from the uncut stone, its memorial function will grow in the visitor's mind from the presence of the monument.

Like Martin Milmore's Union soldier in Forest Hills Cemetery, the Confederate soldier in Stonewall Confederate Cemetery stands at quiet rest, gazing off to one side as if remembering fallen comrades (fig. 8). But this soldier takes the mourning motif even further by standing with reversed arms, his rifle barrel pointed at the ground. The command to "reverse arms," first appearing in infantry drill manuals around the time of the Civil War, was employed at solemn occasions, such as soldiers' funerals or military executions, to symbolize mourning, respect, and even surrender. A connection between soldier monuments and "reverse arms" is evoked in the first verse of the song "Brave Battery Boys," composed for the dedication of a monument to the Bridges Battery at Rose Hill Cemetery in Chicago on May 30, 1870:

We come with reversed arms, O comrades who sleep,
To rear the proud marble, to muse and to weep,
To speak of the dark days that yet had their joys
When we were together—
Brave Battery Boys.

In the poem, joy and sorrow are merged in front of the marble monument, which is honored by the ceremonial rifle gesture. In a Confederate context, this gesture points to the still-complicated position of Southern memory toward the end of the Reconstruction era. This monument mourns the dead Confederate soldiers and the Lost Cause for which the war was fought.

The soldier monuments of the post-Civil War era were not always so explicitly connected with the funerary sphere. As the decades passed, the raw collective grief generated by the war's terrible losses mellowed into a general appreciation of the soldiers' sacrifice in battle. In other words, the monuments became less associated with individual mourning families, and instead answered a larger cultural need for civic pride and education. By the 1880s, monuments North and South were generally erected in prominent civic locations rather than in cemeteries. Soldier statues, too, lost their

mourning focus, and the contemplative air of the statues in Forest Hills Cemetery and Stonewall Confederate Cemetery was exchanged for a more militant, confident attitude. Monumental inscriptions focused less on reflections of loss and more on the war's nationalistic and ideological aims. But the soldier monument continued its material association with the cemetery industry, as the same monument firms were often responsible for producing both soldier monuments and funerary sculpture. This army of bronze and granite sentinels, dotted across the landscape, continues to evoke the enormous impact of the Civil War on the lives of American citizens.

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Further Reading

Civil War soldier monuments have been the subject of several scholarly works, including Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J., 1997); Thomas J. Brown, *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2004); Carol Grissom, *Zinc Sculpture in America, 1850-1950* (Newark, Del., 2009); and Cynthia Mills and Pamela H. Simpson, eds., *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory* (Knoxville, Tenn., 2003).

For more on how the Civil War affected America's culture of death and mourning, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, 2008); and Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008).

To learn more about the reburial of Civil War soldiers in the North and the South, see John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation*(Lawrence, Kansas, 2005); William A. Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004); and Caroline

E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008).

The Chipstone Foundation is a Milwaukee-based arts organization devoted to the study and interpretation of early American decorative arts and material culture.

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Innocents at War: Si Klegg's Civil War



Hinman's book was about the dirty, miserable, and joyful minutiae of soldier life in the Union army.

Mr. Owen Goes to Washington

Indiana's Infidel Congressman

Locals refer to southwestern Indiana as "The Pocket," but politicians know this region by a more ominous name: "The Bloody Eighth." The counties that fan north and east from the confluence of the Ohio and Wabash Rivers anchor Indiana's present-day Eighth Congressional District. In recent decades, candidates for national office in this district have waged savage partisan battles only for winners to find themselves retired in the next election by voters little enamored with incumbents. As a result, Indiana's Eighth is a swing district in an overwhelmingly Republican state. Rough-and-tumble elections have characterized Pocket politics since the 1820s when it was then the heart of Indiana's First Congressional District. During the 1840s, local voters alternated between Democratic and Whig Representatives in fairly rapid succession. For a time in this decade of political ferment, Democrat Robert Dale Owen represented the people of what might be called Indiana's "Bloody First."

Owen won election to the House in 1843 following a successful career in the Indiana General Assembly during the late 1830s.

Owen's political success in a district known for its fickle electorate indicates where he stood on the major issues that concerned the 28th and 29th Congresses. His tenure in office coincided with disputes between the United States and England over land claims in the Pacific Northwest, the annexation of Texas, debates over slavery's westward expansion, as well as long-standing matters of internal improvements and government fiscal policy. On each of these issues, Owen voted as a fairly moderate western Democrat. When Democrat James K. Polk won the White House in 1844, Owen found himself in the mainstream of his party.

At first glance, Owen's political career is notable primarily for his close adherence to the Democratic status quo of the day. Moreover, Owen might be considered a rather unremarkable politician in an era when more colorful personalities haunted Congress. Owen could easily disappear into the nation's tumultuous political seas of the 1840s only remembered today, if at all, for his integral role in creating the Smithsonian Institution toward the end of his time in the House. However, Owen's contemporaries knew more about him than simply his record of mainstream Democratic positions. Owen arguably stood out like few other Democratic politicians of his day because his life before elected office was so unlike his peers. Owen had a past, and pasts—in the 1840s just as now—could exalt or crush political fortunes.

> Owen's election to Congress attracted national attention because it occurred at a moment in American life when faith was an intensely bipartisan concern.

Clues to Owen's past and how it shadowed his reputation appeared during his first campaign in 1836 for a seat in the Indiana General Assembly. A Whig newspaper in Massachusetts succinctly reported the results: "Robert Dale Owen, another precious Infidel, has been elected to the Legislature of Indiana, through the influence of Van Buren's friends in that State." Whig editors and operatives in Indiana similarly characterized Owen's candidacy. Americans used the term "infidel" in the early nineteenth century to describe anyone who criticized, especially in public ways, widely accepted Christian beliefs along with the moral principles and social institutions deemed necessary to their survival. To contemporary observers, Owen wasn't an ordinary infidel. Rather, many would have known him as an infidel operative at

the center of an expanding network of associations and newspapers dedicated to a belief that traditional religion stood on a shaky intellectual and moral foundation that was about to crumble under the force of free inquiry. Infidel Owen's election to state and, eventually, national offices activated long-standing anxieties that anti-Christian ideas had broad popular consent in the United States.

Owen's election to Congress attracted national attention because it occurred at a moment in American life when faith was an intensely bipartisan concern. Nearly all political observers in the 1840s agreed that Congressman Owen held provocative religious opinions. Partisans from across the political spectrum drew lessons from Owen's political career to guide their respective parties toward future electoral victories in a society undergoing fundamental religious and economic changes. Ultimately, Whigs and Democrats in the 1840s responded to Owen's tenure in Washington by developing ideas of religious liberty suitable to their powerful constituencies. Although Owen eventually served only two terms in Congress, his relatively brief career raised questions about religion's place in American political life that remain unresolved in the twenty-first century.

By the time Owen ran for state office in Indiana, he had ensured his reputation as one of the nation's most prominent infidels. In 1825, Owen had helped his Scottish industrialist father, Robert Owen, establish a socialist utopian community in New Harmony, Indiana, bringing Robert Dale Owen to the Pocket. The New Harmony community collapsed by 1829, but before its demise Robert Dale took steps that ensured his later infamy.

Most importantly, he co-edited the *New Harmony Gazette* with Frances Wright, another Scottish émigré. Owen and Wright doubted many of their era's most deeply entrenched social, political, and religious values, and their newspaper became an outlet for such views. Under Owen and Wright's guidance, the *New Harmony Gazette* even outlived the community, albeit as the *Free Enquirer* published in New York. During the 1830s, the *Free Enquirer* was the most important journal in the United States devoted to undermining the power of revealed religion in American life, especially Christianity in all of its forms. Owen and Wright also publicized efforts by people in towns and cities—from the east coast to the Midwest—to form societies of "free enquirers" and "moral philanthropists." By organizing lectures and debates critical of Christian teachings and social influences, these various

associations were localized expressions of the religious opinions that Owen and Wright gave continental reach in the pages of the *Free Enquirer.* Indeed, under their editorship, 1,000 issues of the *Free Enquirer* appeared every week, and local subscription agents worked in eighteen of the republic's twenty-four states, the Florida Territory, and the British province of Lower Canada.

Owen and Wright took other steps to advance their views on religion. They published or imported controversial books by leading anti-Christian authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They also established New York's Hall of Science, a prominent venue in the city for free inquiry discussions and lectures. Finally, Owen was a supporter of the Workingman's Movement, a birth control theorist, and a critic of existing marriage laws and customs.

Title page, Moral Physiology; or, A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question, by Robert Dale Owen (New York, 1831). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Aware of his reputation, Owen devised ways to improve his electability. He presented himself as a different person upon returning to Indiana from New York in 1833. Although New Harmony was a place of failed designs for Owen's extended family, it held promise in light of his immediate concerns. He had recently married Mary Jane Robinson, the daughter of a New York merchant. Robinson was one of the female infidels who so vexed pious commentators in the 1830s. With her father's approval, she attended Frances Wright's lectures and events at the Hall of Science, where she first met Owen. Back in New Harmony, the newlywed Owen devoted his attention to managing and increasing the property value of his land in town. With this ambition he championed internal improvements, an issue with strong bipartisan support in Indiana. Once Owen entered politics, voters in and around New Harmony were familiar enough with Owen to know that Whig characterizations of his past were not entirely consistent with his current political concerns in the late 1830s. Finally, toward the end of his tenure as an Indiana Assemblyman, Owen distanced himself from his earlier life in terms that anticipated his moderate stance as a Congressman. "In that fresh and sanguine season," Owen reflected, "the warm conviction of what ought to be, often precludes the calm observation of what is."

However, with maturity, Owen confessed, “One becomes less confident in one’s own wisdom and more deferring to usage and experience.”

Although Owen expressed few fixed opinions of a radical nature during his first run for Congress, equivocation wasn’t valued in the prevailing political culture. By the late 1830s, Whig partisans had successfully portrayed themselves as the party of traditional Protestant propriety and their Democratic opponents as the party of subversive infidels. The outlines of this development are fairly well known to historians of the period. Less noted is the extent to which political observers of the day understood infidelity as more than the subject of vague political threats embodied in general references to Owen or Frances Wright. Rather, they believed that infidels were a real political force with evolving partisan aims, as evidenced in Owen’s move from infidel promoter to politician. Owen’s candidacy seemed to confirm why the prevailing partisan labels were useful. Democratic writers, especially supporters of the party’s more radical positions, celebrated Owen’s political ambition because they hoped that he would champion policies to undermine the economic and moral foundations of Whig appeal. Conservative Democrats viewed his entrance into national politics ambivalently. Of course, Whig writers challenged the outcome that radical Democrats desired. They insisted that elected office would afford Owen an opportunity to advance harmful reforms under the cover of popular sovereignty. Ultimately, partisans who responded to Owen’s pursuit of national office had every reason to prevent Owen from escaping his past, to describe him as beholden to views on religion and society set earlier in his life. As a result, Owen’s actions and writings from New Harmony’s early days and from New York defined him in public opinion for the rest of his life.

The past’s grip became instantly evident once Owen started his campaign for Congress. Critics outside of the state anointed Owen “the acknowledged leader of the Loco Foco party in Indiana” and “a declared candidate of the Loco Foco party for Congress in Indiana.” No label conjured the subversive elements within the Democratic Party more than “Loco Foco.” This name originally applied to a radical faction of New York Democrats critical of all monopolizing arrangements of state and financial power, especially banks, with strong support from the city’s working men. During a fractious meeting at Tammany Hall in 1834, the radical Democrats lit “loco foco” matches after their moderate Democratic opponents

extinguished the lights in an attempt to derail their movement. By the late 1830s, Whig partisans conveniently described all Democrats as Loco Focos. Whigs enhanced their claims by identifying Owen as the party's leader in waiting.

Owen's brand of Loco Focoism, his critics insisted, was especially hostile to Christianity. In public addresses, Owen had denigrated "the Bible as a book of 'marvels and mysteries,' and 'imaginary adventurers,' the invention of 'ignorant men.'" Owen's opponents also reminded readers that he did not view Jesus as the divine son of God but as "a Democratic Reformer." Jesus's mere mortality was the source of his greatest influence in the world, Owen seemed to suggest, for his life provided a model for improving society, not a guide to transcendent truths. By diminishing Jesus's true nature in order to exalt him, Owen's ideas offered troubling "signs of the times, from which the people may take warning, before it is too late."

Negative characterizations of Owen's Loco Focoism were not altogether wrong. Earlier in his life, Owen had championed economic views compatible with Loco Foco positions. William Leggett, the leading Loco Foco journalist and intellectual, explained the relationship between the movement's economic positions and religion, a connection that gave all candidates, regardless of their beliefs, an equal right to seek political office. Although Leggett did not share Owen's religious opinions, he did argue for "perfect free trade in religion—of leaving it to manage its own concerns, in its own way, without government protection, regulation, or interference, of any kind or degree whatever." As a result, Leggett insisted that a respected "divine" and an avowed "infidel" were equally entitled to elected positions. Although Owen would never carry the Loco Foco standard in Congress, his positions were close enough to those of leading Loco Focos that the term became a convenient badge of scorn that Whigs applied to Owen and the Democratic Party more broadly.

As the Democratic Party's standard bearer in the late 1830s, Martin Van Buren developed an Owen problem once the Indianan's political ambitions gained national attention. Conservative New York Democrats decried the pernicious influence of "foreign agrarians," Owen among them, "who are now the immediate friends of Van Buren, and the recipients of his political favors." Whig papers proclaimed that issues beyond banking and land policy connected Van Buren and Owen. According to one view, Van Buren's positions were activated

by “the leven brought to this country principally by the disaffected ‘radicals’ of Great Britain, and first infused into this community through the ‘Hall of Science’ and next through Tammany Hall, and now boldly partaken of by the chief Magistrate of the Union.” Another Whig editor asked rhetorically, “how many open and avowed infidels are there, who in other portions of the country are leaders and head-men in the ranks of the party.” Owen stood first among the Democratic leaders, but Abner Kneeland and George Chapman joined him. Kneeland was a candidate in Iowa territorial politics who had emigrated from Massachusetts after serving jail time for a blasphemy conviction. Chapman was a Democratic newspaper editor in Indiana and the former editor of the infidel *Boston Investigator* who supposedly toasted, “Christianity and the Banks—both on their last legs” during a Thomas Paine birthday celebration in Boston. “Verily is not a party, as well as an individual, known by the company it keeps,” concluded Whig opinion.

Owen’s record in state politics also gave Whigs fodder for attacking him and his party. In 1838 the General Assembly revised and expanded Indiana’s already liberal divorce statute. Under the law, either partner could seek divorce for specified causes including adultery, “matrimonial incapacity,” a husband’s habitual drunkenness or “barbarity,” and also the broadly worded phrase “any other cause or causes.” Indiana thus became firmly ensconced in the national imagination as the state where marriages ended quickly and easily. Owen participated in the revision of Indiana’s statute, which reflected opinions he expressed during his New York days in support of women’s property rights and against overly strict divorce laws.

“Alas! That it should have ever been born!” lithograph by Pendleton, frontispiece for Moral Physiology, by Robert Dale Owen (New York, 1831). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Critics looked to Owen’s writings in New York and his support for Indiana’s divorce laws as proof that he endorsed a view of marriage with dangerous consequences. One especially polemic writer argued that Owen’s concept of marriage amounted to “legalized prostitution.” Once couples could end their marriage for reasons of “impatience, caprice or disgust,” it seemed certain that many would so proceed merely

a month or a day after their weddings. Marriage would no longer serve as a God-ordained covenant but rather a cover for licentious behavior, the critic warned. If Owen's view of marriage had social consequences, then, other opponents argued, Owen was morally unfit for public office. Owen's "irreligious notions," his view of marriage chief among them, were essential to his "democratic creed." Whigs warned that many voters might actually elect Owen and others of his ilk, but such a person could not effectively steward the nation's interests. After all, "What regard can he be expected to pay to moral obligations, who believes himself bound only by convenience in the most important of all human relations?"

Whig portrayals of Owen as a leading voice for efforts to widen access to divorce conveniently overlapped with Whig opposition to Democratic banking policies. Drawing ideas from hard-money theorists in the early 1830s, President Van Buren proposed the creation of an independent treasury or "subtreasury" following the Panic of 1837. This plan called for the complete disentanglement of the federal government and private banks, what supporters called the "separation of bank and state." Whigs and conservative democrats strongly opposed this plan, with some turning this proposed "divorce" in government fiscal policy to powerful rhetorical ends. It was no coincidence, according to this view, that a president controlled by Owen and his supporters would accept a policy that would unleash chaos in the nation's economy just as sweeping rights to personal divorce would undermine the culture at large. Van Buren's Sub-Treasury plan threatened to destroy business by discouraging personal industry. Yet the long-term consequences were even greater. Whigs asserted that Van Buren's Sub-Treasury plan was apiece with his larger goal of consolidating all power in his hands. "Thus 'a divorce' of the Government from the people is sought that there may be a union of the purse and sword." There was a direct line, so Whigs argued, connecting Owen's idea of divorce to the destabilization of the nation's "Republican Institutions."

Once the votes were tallied in 1839, it became clear that Owen's past undid his first run for Congress. George H. Proffit, a formidable Whig candidate, handily defeated Owen in the wake of an organized campaign by Proffit's supporters to remind local voters that the Democrat had once been New York's leading infidel. Whigs outside of Indiana also recognized the larger significance of Owen's loss. A New Hampshire editor celebrated the "noble triumph of principle" over a "political party, which had supported for Congress a man who has delivered Sunday evening lectures on the 'Non-

existence of the Soul'—at six pence a head." For other Whig editors, Owen's loss taught clear political lessons about congressional elections more generally. A New York Whig newspaper recounted Owen's ties to the city's anti-Christian and labor activists; thus the defeat of "Owen, of Fanny Wright and Eli Moore odor" provided consolation for a larger number of Whig setbacks in the West.

Owen's defeat also suggested how Whigs might reverse their losses in future elections. One Whig editor found it remarkable that "Fanny-Wright men" who "would vote for [Owen] on account of his well known infidel principles" never combined with "the whole 'democratic' strength" to bring Owen victory. This editor credited sensible Democratic voters and "the virtuous and intelligent women" of Owen's district who "used their influence with their husbands, brothers, and sons" for preventing such an alliance. Whig observers concerned with Owen's political ambitions thus took his loss in 1839 as an opportunity to assess their party's future prospects.

Looking ahead, Whigs had good reason for optimism in 1839. Democrats faced external opponents and internecine clashes. President Van Buren could not escape blame for the economy's failure to fully recover from losses caused by the Panic of 1837. Discontent with Van Buren redounded to the Whigs. Continued economic troubles intensified factionalism within the Democratic Party on issues such as slavery and banking. And as at least one Whig editor believed, Owen's defeat suggested that religious issues could divide Democratic votes. Whig observers believed they could exploit Democratic weaknesses in order to win control of Congress and the presidency in 1840. Owen's initial run for the House thus proved useful to a Whig opposition strategy focused on depicting Democrats as the party of dangerous ideas about markets and morality.

By concentrating their attention on Owen as the embodiment of Democratic infidelity, Whigs borrowed an opposition tactic from an earlier period of partisan conflict. Federalists in the early 1800s attacked Republican officeholders, especially President Jefferson and members of his Cabinet, by tying them to a cast of familiar deist editors and organizers, people such as the Irish émigré Denis Driscol and Elihu Palmer, an erstwhile Presbyterian minister. Similar to earlier Federalist aims, Whigs highlighted Owen's political ambitions in order to ground their rhetoric. Rather than proffering only unsubstantiated charges of Democratic infidelity, savvy

Whig partisans by 1840 provided a genealogy for the Democratic Party of their day with an important line started by Owen and the infidel community he helped build over a decade earlier.

From a Whig perspective, the fickle voters of Indiana's First had miraculously contained Democracy's moral threat to the republic, but the nation still needed a stronger bulwark. Whigs included Owen's candidacy as one among many reasons why the people should give them control of Congress and the presidency. Whig responses to Owen's failed bid for Congress in 1839 thus prefigured their larger religious campaign in the elections of 1840. In the presidential election that fall, Whigs cloaked their candidate, William Henry Harrison, and their party in the garb of Protestant moral propriety against their infidel Democratic opponents. Whigs won their first congressional majority and the White House in that election.

Owen's fortunes improved along with those of the Democratic Party. He entered Congress in 1843 as part of a larger wave that returned Democrats to national power, gaining them a House majority in the 1842 elections followed by a congressional majority and the presidency in 1844. Since his time in Washington marked a retreat from his radical past, he adopted positions that alienated former allies but, presumably, improved his electability. For instance, in 1845 Owen supported allocating federal lands in Indiana for canal construction. According to the *Working Man's Advocate*, Owen's vote contradicted his earlier support for protection of free public lands to assist the property-less. "Mr. Owen must now be classed among the enemies of the Equal Rights of Man," charged editor George Henry Evans. "I can only look upon Mr. Owen's vote in favor of Land-Selling," Evans concluded, "as I would upon a direct vote in favor of Serfdom or any other form of Slavery." To critics such as Evans, Congressman Owen had betrayed his reform principles. Anyone with market interests in Owen's district viewed him differently. By funneling government largesse into southwest Indiana, Owen expected climbing support when he sought re-election in 1847.

On the contrary, Owen lost reelection to a third term in Congress. This outcome surprised political observers across the nation. It caused a "Dewey defeats Truman" blunder for many papers that misreported an Owen victory. Whig Elisha Embree won the election, in part, by resurrecting Owen's infidel past. According to one account, Embree "took the stump and read to the people from his newspapers and

pamphlets, the religious views of Mr. Owen, as formerly communicated by him." George D. Prentice, editor of the prominent Whig newspaper the *Louisville Journal*, praised Embree for achieving "a moral as well as a political triumph."

"The Death of Locofocoism," lithograph by David Claypoole Johnston, published by James Fisher (Boston, ca. 1840). Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click image to enlarge in new window.

Partisans farther afield explained Owen's defeat with an eye on larger developments taking place in American life. Beginning in the early 1840s, immigration to the United States increased spectacularly; within a few years, several hundred thousand immigrants arrived annually. Between 1845 and 1854, the United States' immigrant population grew by almost 3 million. Migrants were principally Irish and German, and increasingly Catholic and impoverished. For political commentators—Whig and Democrat like—willing to take an expansive view, the rise and fall of Owen's political fortunes offered lessons for addressing the republic's changing religious demographics.

Increasingly during the 1840s, nativism colored Whig impressions of American politics. They traced their nativist views to recent books such as Lyman Beecher's *A Plea for the West*, published in 1835. Although principally an anti-Catholic work, Beecher was fundamentally concerned with the problem of consent, in particular the conditions that imposed necessary restraints on choice. These restraints operated tacitly on individuals based on their upbringing and cultural inheritance. Beecher, then in Ohio, compared his new home in the West to his native New England. Early New Englanders "were few in number, compact in territory, homogenous in origin, language, manners, and doctrines; and were coerced to unity by common perils and necessities." Shared experiences—strengthened by the powerful tethers of faith, family relations, and culture—allowed individuals, so Beecher believed, to make choices toward a common good. To the contrary, westerners, Beecher argued, were a "population … assembled from all the states of the Union, and from all the nations of Europe, and is rushing in like the waters of the flood, demanding for its moral preservation the immediate and

universal action of those institutions which discipline the mind, and arm the conscience and the heart."

Beecher's contemporaries described the consequences of religious infidelity in similar terms yet with greater urgency. Infidelity was a foreign threat that had already planted roots in American soil much to the detriment of the nation's republican institutions. Since Owen embodied the infidel threat, his defeat in 1847 was a nativist victory worth noting.

According to a Connecticut Whig paper, the Embree-Owen contest of 1847 would have inspired little interest had it merely concerned "two Native American republicans, the one calling himself a whig and the other a democrat." However, the election was nothing of the sort. Owen was the most recent agent in a long line of British-born radicals, beginning with Thomas Paine, whose "imported patriotism" actually produced "discontent, disorder and disregard for good government" while unsettling the established "habits of our people." Despite the harm posed by Owen and other infidels, Americans had no choice but to accept them, their ideas, and their political ambitions. "It is quite bad enough to have these pestilent intermeddlers in our midst, and to be obliged to tolerate their impudence as private and unofficial brawlers," the editor lamented, "but to make legislators and rulers out of such material" degraded "national character." Votes cast by an electorate of sound morals and faith were the only hope. Whigs, and respectable Americans regardless of party, were "greatly gratified in seeing an English radical of the infidel and Fanny Wright school fail to find American Jacobins enough to elect him to the national legislature, over a citizen of the soil, a *christian* and a man of character."

Owen's defeat thus suggested how Whigs might translate nativist anxiety into electoral success. Along the way, they could limit Catholic political power while still upholding principles of religious liberty. After all, foreign-born infidels were free to believe as they pleased but voters were equally entitled to deny them political power. The same could be argued for foreign-born Catholics. By challenging Owen as a partisan infidel, his opponents contributed ideas and methods that helped transform nativism into an organized political movement determined to curtail voting privileges for even naturalized immigrants, culminating in the advent of the Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s.

Democrats situated Owen's defeat in the same political landscape as their Whig opponents. In fact, Democrats had good reason to claim Owen as their own once he left Congress. By the 1840s, Democrats identified themselves as the party of a certain idea of religious liberty, one in which faith was incompatible with reform institutions and instances of government preference for one religious opinion over another were suspect. As a result, the Democratic Party proved popular with Protestant groups skeptical of evangelical calls for improvement, as well as communities such as Catholics and Jews who stood to gain little from the Protestant cultural order of the day. In light of the Democrats' religious constituencies, defending Owen against Whig attacks helped them further their image as defenders of basic religious liberties and freedom of conscience. As one Democratic partisan declared, Owen's earlier religious positions were ultimately irrelevant, as "Freedom of religious opinion must be tolerated." By attacking Owen, Whigs betrayed their "undying attachment to Church and State."

Following Owen's defeat, Democratic editors defended his political record and, with even greater zeal, his character. Although Owen denied such fundamental Christian beliefs as the Trinity, his religious opinions did not detract from his ability to govern. Democratic supporters emphasized Owen's conduct over his beliefs. "He regards a just life and pure motives, with honest conduct at all times, as of more value than empty 'professions.'" Whigs may have achieved short-term political gain by making Owen's religious opinions a political issue, but this strategy was ultimately unsustainable, for it was "antagonistic to the spirit of freedom" that animated the Republic.

Once the Democratic Party accommodated an infidel in its ranks, the door was open to attract other religious outsiders and immigrants. Assuming that future Archbishop of New York John Hughes expressed the general opinion of Catholic immigrants in the United States, it becomes clear why his fellow believers found a home in the Democratic Party. In a debate defending his faith and foreign birth against doubts about his allegiance to the United States, Hughes declared, "I am an American citizen—not by *chance*,—but by *choice*." Choosing one's allegiance, in this calculation, ensured civic virtue. The ultimate expression of this view from the Democratic perspective, one that elevates this position to one of nearly religious import, appears in Secretary of State Lewis Cass's opinion from the late 1850s that naturalized and native-born United States citizens were fundamentally equal.

According to Cass, “The moment a foreigner becomes naturalized, his allegiance to his native country is severed forever. He experiences a new political birth.” For Cass, immigrants expressed their political free will by becoming citizens.

“Funeral of Loco Focoism,” lithograph by Edward Williams Clay, published by John Childs (New York, 1841). Courtesy of the Political Cartoon Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click image to enlarge in new window.

In the end, Owen’s congressional career helped Democratic partisans articulate a political philosophy designed to win votes in an era of rising Catholic immigration. For Owen’s supporters, the “spirit of freedom” entailed a notion of choice exalted in Democratic thought, but one at odds with nativist assumptions about consent. Democratic writers were less inclined than their Whig counterparts to believe that a free person’s ability to express informed consent, and thereby participate in self-government, was determined by a specific faith, ancestry, culture, or tradition. Of course in the public realm, this concept of choice was fundamentally the privilege of free white men. However, it was also essential to broader Democratic positions on freedom of conscience, immigration, and citizenship. From this perspective, not only was Robert Dale Owen qualified for political life despite his foreign birth and anti-Christian opinions, any free white man, regardless of religious opinions, qualified for the same.

Public interest in Owen’s religious opinions revived with his return to national political life in the 1850s. Between 1853 and 1858, Owen was United States Minister to Naples, an appointment he received from President Franklin Pierce. During his time abroad, rumors spread in the American press that Owen was a Catholic convert. Owen denied these rumors after returning to the United States while affirming his respect for all religions when sincerely held. Regarding his personal beliefs, Owen tantalized the curious by announcing his forthcoming book about his religious opinions. *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* appeared in 1859.

In the company of Brazil’s Minister to Naples and members of the Neapolitan royal family, Owen witnessed “certain physical movements without material agency.” So began *Footfalls,*

Owen's investigation into spiritualism, or what he described as the "great question whether agencies from another phase of existence ever intervene here, and operate, for good or evil, on mankind." For Owen, contemporary spiritualists attempted to conjure phenomena that were better explained by turning to psychological, natural, and, most importantly, historical inquiry. Owen devoted *Footfalls* to compiling and analyzing past accounts and explanations of spiritual interaction with the natural world. He considered a dizzying variety of evidence that past observers mistook for instances of hallucination, dreams, poltergeists, haunting, and demonic possession to authenticate spiritualist claims. Owen concluded *Footfalls* certain that spiritualist claims withstood tests of reason and historical investigation.

Owen's defense of spiritualism bemused American writers. It seemed like a shocking transformation within the mind of one of the nation's leading infidels. A reviewer of *Footfalls* in the *Saturday Evening Post* mockingly wondered what had happened to Owen's view that "the world was completely disenchanted," that "all the fairy wells fitted with patent pumps," and "all the apparitions referred to indigestion." On the contrary, by joining "the Spiritualistic ranks" Owen sparked "a decided 'bull' movement in the Spiritualistic market." At least in this instance, Owen's life exhibited the wide latitude available for personal religious choices at mid-century, preferences met without cautious toleration or unalloyed praise. Rather, such latitude was a routine feature of life in a religiously diverse society best confronted with humor, not fear.

Robert Dale Owen. Courtesy of W.H. Bass Photo Co. Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

Congressional candidates inspired by the spirit of Robert Dale Owen in the twenty-first century would likely face considerable challenges, whether running in Indiana's Eighth or virtually any other district. The 113th United States Congress elected in 2012 was remarkable for its religious diversity, with members from some religious communities represented for the first time. Hawaiian voters were largely responsible for this development. They elected the first Hindu to Congress, who filled a House seat vacated by Mazzie K. Hirono to become the Senate's first Buddhist. Outside the Hawaii delegation, two other Buddhists won re-election to the

House in 2012 as did two Muslims, joining a body in which Jews are also fairly well-represented. Nevertheless, Congress remained majority Christian, with Catholics the largest single denomination. All of this according to "Faith on the Hill: The Religious Composition of the 113th Congress," a recent report by the Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project.

Of the many fascinating details in the Pew report, one stands out in particular. The center classifies only two percent of Congress as "nones." The beliefs of these members are difficult to pin down. Some refuse to specify, one claims humanism, and Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth of Illinois is listed as a deist in some sources, a label she hasn't actively denied. "Nones," as defined in another Pew study, include atheists and agnostics but also adults who understand themselves as spiritual but not interested in joining a specific religious community. What nones share in common is a sense that organized religion has no special claim to morality while, at the same time, it has become too intertwined with money and politics in pursuit of power. As the Pew report notes, nones are likely the most underrepresented group in Congress. Nones, according to recent surveys, comprise twenty percent of the adult population in the United States. Their numbers are also growing quickly, especially for people under the age of thirty. Other indications suggest that their opinions on religion are relatively fixed, which means they are more likely to remain nones throughout their lives.

Although not a perfect fit, a comparison of today's nones to the early republic's infidels illuminates larger themes about the relationship between American religion and politics, past, present, and future. Throughout American history, religious positions viewed as overly critical of traditional faith claims or institutions consistently cross a threshold of acceptable opinion in terms of electability. Exploring moments when this threshold is breached, as with Owen's election, or broadened reveals much about historical changes in the relationship between religious belief and public life. The political successes of Catholics and, to a lesser extent, Mormons—groups despised as strongly as infidels in the nineteenth century and even later—emphasize this point. However, if the nones continue their "rise," as the Pew Research Center puts it, the United States could be on the verge of more polarizing battles over a range of religious and moral issues, especially since nones are most passionate about issues that indicate organized religion's influence on

society, and they currently identify overwhelmingly with one political party, the Democrats. Perhaps the spirits of late religious controversies are determined to rap in the Capitol for years to come.

Further Reading:

Richard William Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940) remains the most thorough biography of Robert Dale Owen, especially concerning his political career. For excellent overviews of the relationship between partisan politics and religion in the antebellum United States, see Daniel Walker Howe, "The Evangelical Movement and Political Culture in the North During the Second Party System," *Journal of American History* 77 (1991): 1216-1239, and Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1997). For readers interested in exploring the Pew Research Center data about contemporary religion and politics, see "Faith on the Hill: The Religious Composition of the 113th Congress."

Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*(New York, 1992).

Val Nolan Jr., "Indiana: Birthplace of Migratory Divorce," *Indiana Law Journal* 26 (1951): 515-527.

Eric R. Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia, 2013).

Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005).

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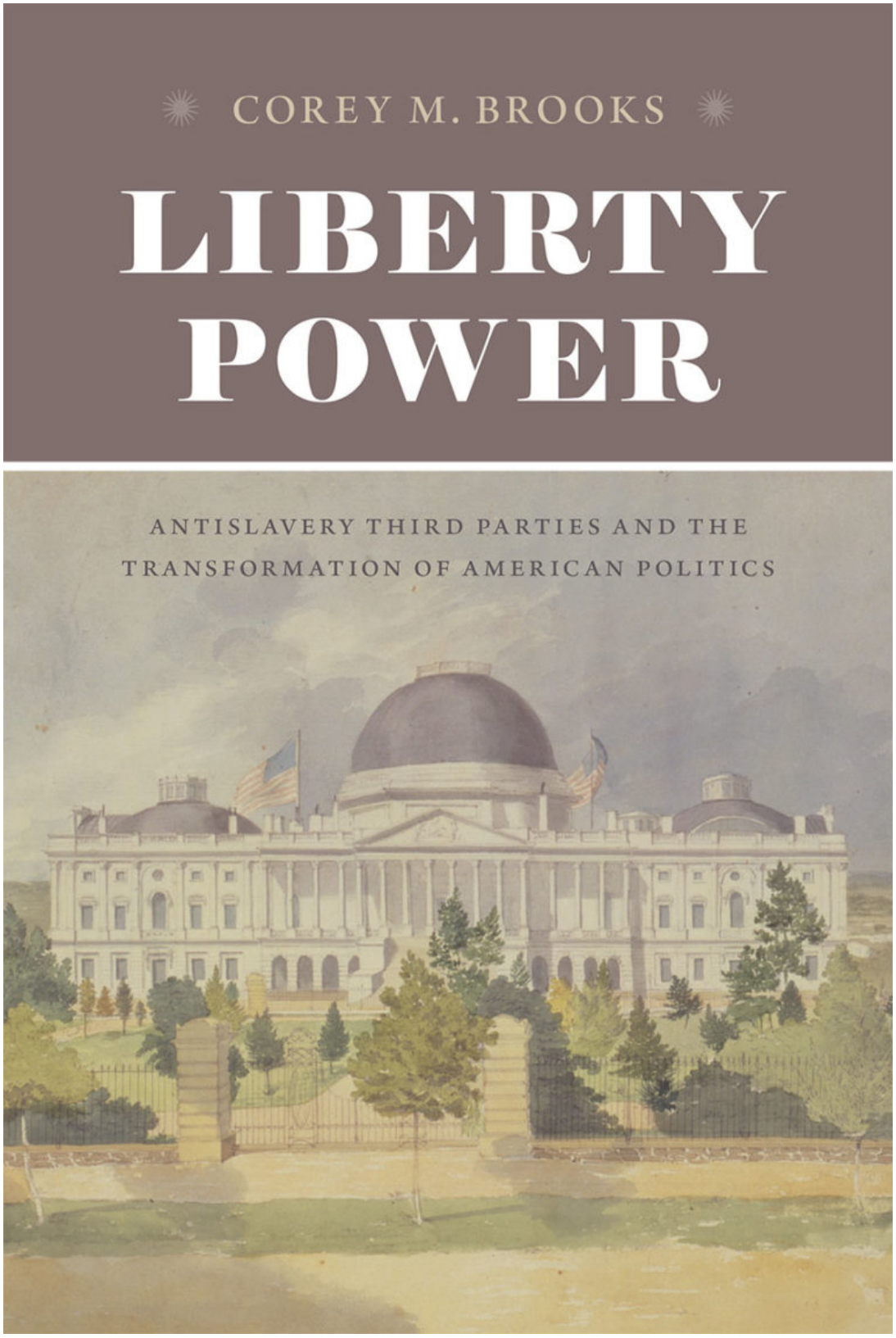
What We Talk about When We Talk about Democracy

Presented as part of the special Politics Issue

We ought to be asking ourselves what kind of democracy we want and what kind of democracy a particular leader or movement is offering.

#FeelTheBirney



For Brooks, antebellum political abolitionists—not the Populists, not the Progressives—deserve to be remembered as "the most important third-party movement in American history."

Black Work at the Polling Place

Presented as part of the special Politics Issue

[The County Election] also parodies the men in the crowd, who are divided…by the moral valence of their characters…

The Glass Ballot Box and Political Transparency

In an election year where claims to transparency seem deeply opaque, Foutch recalls the moment when the way to save democracy was clear as glass.