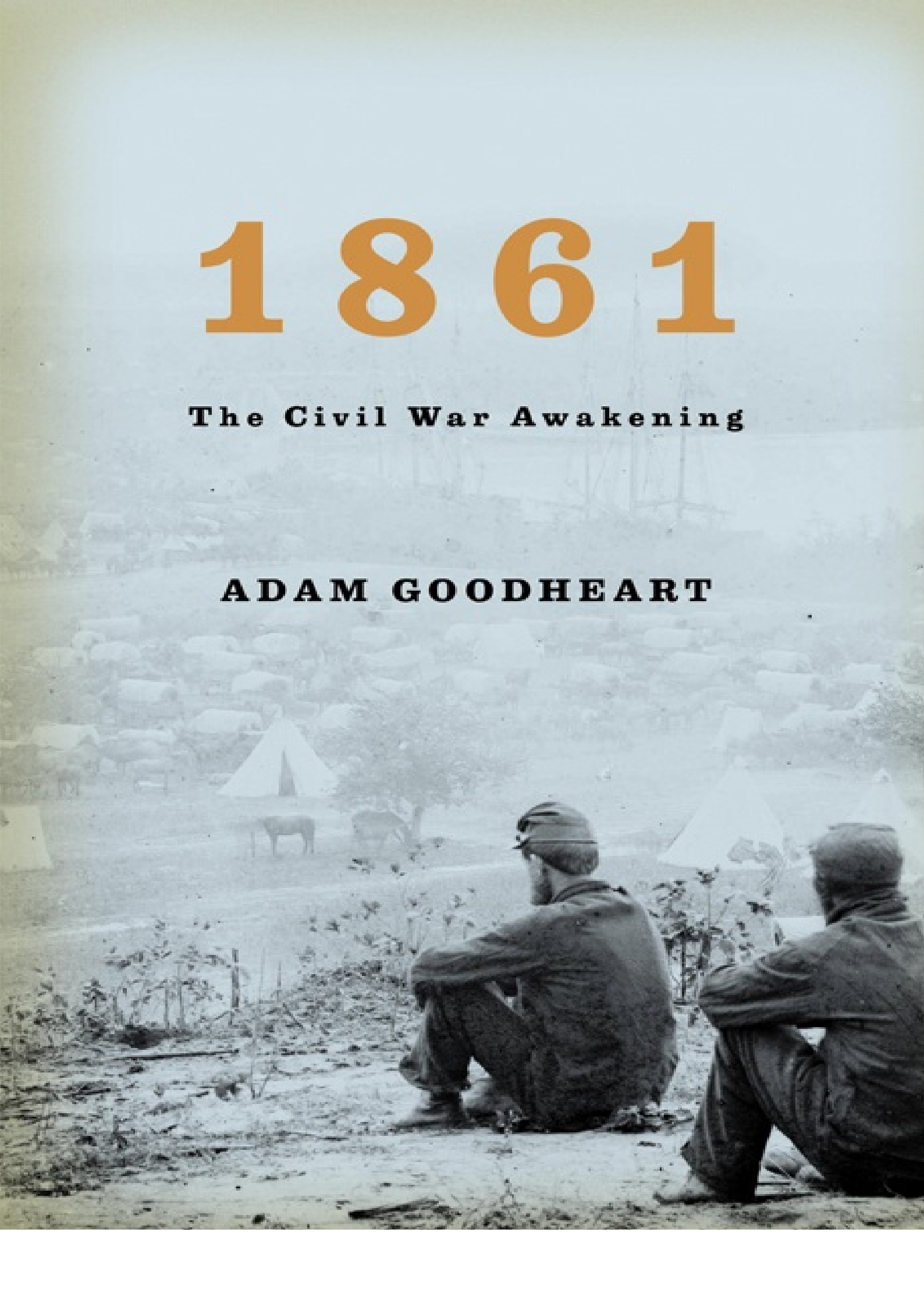


1861

The Civil War Awakening

ADAM GOODHEART



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Adam Goodheart



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Jacket image: Cumberland Landing, Virginia. Federal Encampment
on the Pamunkey River by James F. Gibson, May 1862 (detail).

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

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For my family

and in memory of

Rose Sudman Goodheart

(Teleneshty, Russian Empire, 1905–Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1997),

who made America's history ours, too.



Union rally, San Francisco, 1861 (photo credit fm.1)

ARM'D year! year of the struggle!

No dainty rhymes or sentimental love verses for you, terrible year!

Not you as some pale poetling, seated at a desk, lisping cadenzas piano;

But as a strong man, erect, clothed in blue clothes, advancing, carrying a rifle on your
shoulder,

With well-gristled body and sunburnt face and hands—with a knife in the belt at your side,

As I heard you shouting loud—your sonorous voice ringing across the continent;

Your masculine voice, O year, as rising amid the great cities,

Amid the men of Manhattan I saw you, as one of the workmen, the dwellers in Manhattan;

Or with large steps crossing the prairies out of Illinois and Indiana,

Rapidly crossing the West with springy gait, and descending the Alleghanies;

Or down from the great lakes, or in Pennsylvania, or on deck along the Ohio river;

Or southward along the Tennessee or Cumberland rivers, or at Chattanooga on the mountain
top,

Saw I your gait and saw I your sinewy limbs, clothed in blue, bearing weapons, robust year;

Heard your determin'd voice, launch'd forth again and again;

Year that suddenly sang by the mouths of the round-lipp'd cannon,

I repeat you, hurrying, crashing, sad, distracted year.

—WALT WHITMAN, "1863"

It seems as if we were never alive till now; never had a country till now.

—A YOUNG WOMAN IN NEW YORK WRITING

TO A FRIEND, MAY 1863

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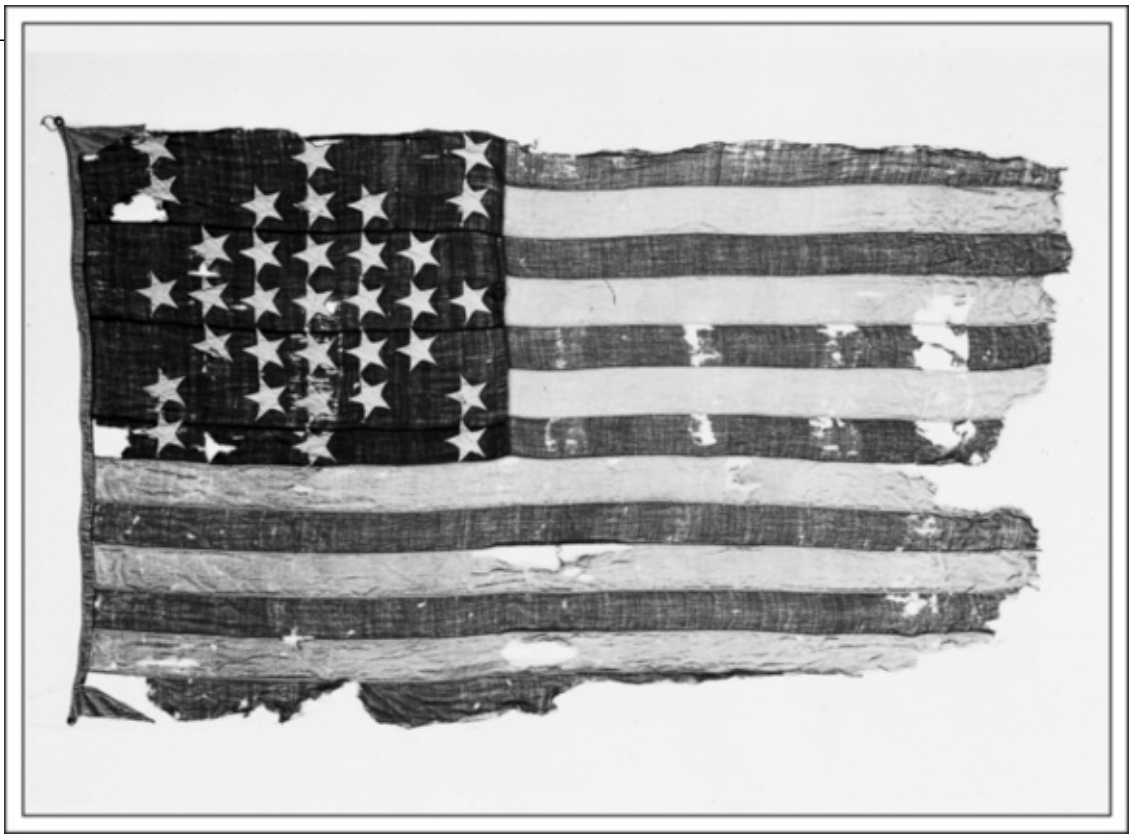
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A Note About the Author



Storm flag of the United States garrison at Forts Moultrie and Sumter, 1860–61 ([photo credit fm.2](#))

A Banner at Daybreak

Then over all, (aye! aye!) my little and lengthen'd pennant shaped like a sword,
Runs swiftly up indicating war and defiance—and now the halyards have rais'd
it,
Side of my banner broad and blue, side of my starry banner,
Discarding peace over all the sea and land.

—WALT WHITMAN

“Song of the Banner at Day-Break” (1860–61)

Charleston Harbor, December 1860

NIGHT FELL AT LAST. Boats slipped off the beach, swift and almost silent, drawn by skilled oarsmen across the water. The rowers labored hatless and in shirtsleeves, breath visible in the chill air, blue uniform coats draped over their muskets, concealing the glint of bayonets. Somehow all three of their vessels eluded the patrolling steamers, crossing the broad belt of reflected moonlight at barely a hundred yards from the nearest one, then vanishing, undetected, into the gloom on the far side of the channel.

Only a few of their comrades had remained behind at the old fort, working hour after hour in the darkness, attending to the final tasks. Last of all, they had been told, the towering flagstaff must come down. No easy task: it was well over a hundred feet tall and rooted deep in the earth, constructed to withstand shot and shell. As midnight passed and daybreak drew nearer, men toiled with saws at the rock-hard pitch pine, like woodsmen at the base of a great tree. They fastened ropes to guide its fall. The soldiers carefully arranged bags of gunpowder, placed the fuse, lit a match. With a splintering crack the staff snapped perfectly at the cut, toppled forward, and split again upon the parapet. It lay at the foot of the wall irreparably broken.

The work was done. That morning, for the first time in half a century, the flag of the United States would not fly above the citadel.¹

THE MAN WHO LED that dangerous transit had arrived in Charleston just five weeks earlier.

Major Robert Anderson had been sent to command the federal garrison at Fort Moultrie, a stronghold at the tip of Sullivan's Island, just across the harbor from the city wharves. His official orders were to strengthen the harbor's defenses against the far-fetched possibility of an attack by Great Britain or France, but everybody knew this was a sham.² The real reason for his appointment had to do with the looming crisis threatening to split the country in half. Abraham Lincoln had been elected president just weeks earlier, and in response, the Southern states were moving quickly toward secession. It seemed certain that South Carolina would take the lead.

The three forts commanding Charleston Harbor—Fort Moultrie, Fort Sumter, and Castle Pinckney—not only dominated the very hotbed of disloyalty but could also, if properly manned, instantly shut down the largest Southern port on the Atlantic seaboard. More important, holding on to them would be a crucial symbolic statement to the nation and the world: the United States would not relinquish its grip on any federal property, nor on any of the states, without a fight. It would deal with secession as treason. If, however, it let the forts go peacefully, the national government would be sending quite a different message: that it was ready to negotiate with the aggrieved leaders of the slaveholding South, and perhaps even let the seceding states go peacefully as well. The new commander in Charleston Harbor had to be a dependable messenger—faithful and prompt—of either message, as circumstances might warrant.

The junior officers waiting to salute his arrival could have been forgiven if their first sight of Anderson, as he stepped gingerly from a small launch onto Moultrie's wharf, failed to

inspire great confidence. Everything about their new commander seemed middling: he was a man in his fifties, of midlevel rank, medium height, and moderate demeanor; mild-mannered, nondescriptly handsome—the sort who left few vivid impressions even on those who had known him well. (None, surely, could have guessed that women would soon beg for locks of that meticulously combed gray hair; that woodcuts of that bland, impassive face would appear on the front pages of magazines on both sides of the Atlantic.) A scrupulously methodical man, he was known in the service mainly for having translated certain French artillery textbooks into English. And yet here was the person to whom the United States government had just entrusted one of the most delicate military and political assignments in American history.³

Anderson was, moreover, a Southerner who had grown up with slavery, and whose family included strong partisans for the South. Nearly all of the staff officers at Moultrie happened to be from the North. They included men like Captain Abner Doubleday, a New Yorker and radical by army standards. The mustachioed, barrel-chested Doubleday considered himself a thoroughly modern man, unencumbered by the cheap affectations of honor and chivalry with which so many officers still bedecked themselves. Not one to keep his opinions to himself, he unabashedly opposed slavery and had voted for Lincoln. (He was probably the only man within two hundred miles of the Charleston Battery who would admit aloud to having done so.) He relished being hissed in the streets as a “Black Republican” when his official duties took him over the water to downtown Charleston. The fort’s other company captain was a lean, introspective Yankee named Truman Seymour, son of a Methodist minister from Vermont.

Anderson had no reputation as a fire-breathing secessionist. Nor were Doubleday and Seymour the kind of men to question the honor of a superior officer—at least openly. But would a man of his background and temperament be ready to wrestle the Southerners into submission, if it came to that?

Not that the federal force at Charleston appeared capable, as yet, of much coercion. Luckily for the founding fathers of the nascent Republic of South Carolina, Anderson’s three federal citadels “guarded” the harbor in only the most figurative sense. Waiting on Moultrie’s parade ground to welcome Anderson was a tiny detachment of soldiers that could scarcely be termed even a garrison: just two companies of barely thirty men each, not counting a small brass band. Sumter, in the harbor’s mouth, lay unfinished after decades of start-and-stop construction, and housed just a few military engineers supervising some civilian workmen. Castle Pinckney, whose guns overlooked the town itself, was manned by a single ordnance sergeant.⁴

And even if Moultrie, the Charleston post’s official headquarters, had been garrisoned with hundreds of men rather than a few dozen, it wouldn’t have been much of a stronghold.

During the Revolution, the fort had been the site of a famous American victory. In the summer of 1776, just a few days before the passage of the Declaration of Independence, a single regiment of South Carolina troops held it against an entire fleet; British cannonballs sank harmlessly into its fibrous palmetto-log ramparts while the American artillerymen exacted a terrible toll on enemy officers and sailors. (South Carolinians adopted the palmetto tree as their state symbol shortly after the battered enemy turned tail.) That victory at Moultrie—a thousand miles south of the previous American triumphs at Boston—was

celebrated throughout the newborn United States, and was seen by many Americans as a sign perhaps even a heaven-sent portent, that the loose concatenation of former colonies could stand together as one nation.⁵

But by 1860, no foreign power had sent its fleets against America's coastline in almost two generations. Moultrie's defenses, built early in the century atop the old palmetto fort, were antiquated, its brick walls cracked and eroding. Sand drifts nearly buried its outer fortifications; stray cows from nearby farms could—and occasionally did—wander across the ramparts.⁶ Moreover, the southern end of Sullivan's Island had become a fashionable beach resort in recent decades. Wealthy Charlestonians had built summer cottages among the sand dunes overlooking the fort, and on pleasant evenings would saunter through its open gates or promenade on the parade ground with wives and sweethearts. It was clear to everyone, from Anderson down to his last private, that the place was about as defensible as a public park.⁷

Nonetheless, as November turned into December, it also became clearer and clearer that Moultrie might soon need to be defended—and from attackers based not in the mouth of Charleston Harbor, toward which the fort's gun platforms faced, but onshore. When the new commander arrived, South Carolina's legislature had just unanimously passed a resolution calling for a statewide convention to discuss secession, and local militia had placed the U.S. military arsenal in town under guard, ostensibly to defend it in case of a slave revolt.⁸ On November 29, the *Charleston Mercury* published a draft ordinance of secession.⁹ Visiting the city daily to procure fresh provisions, the men of the Moultrie garrison heard bands playing “La Marseillaise,” and saw the streets draped with banners bearing slogans like “Good-by Yankee Doodle” and “Let Us Bury the Union's Dead Carcass.”¹⁰ The state's governor was whipping up excitement with talk of the glorious future that awaited an independent South Carolina—promising laws that would reopen the African slave trade, officially declare white men the ruling race, and punish “summarily and severely, if not with death” any person caught espousing abolitionist views.

Charleston was filling up with militiamen who drilled under the state flag—a white banner with a palmetto tree and single red star—and spoke openly of hauling down the Stars and Stripes, which flew above the harbor fortifications.¹¹ On December 1, a rumor reached the garrison that South Carolina was about to place artillery just across Sullivan's Island, pointing directly at Moultrie.¹²

In letters and telegrams to their superiors back at the War Department, Anderson and his staff described their increasingly desperate situation in the tones of cool appraisal befitting seasoned officers. If they were to hold on to Charleston Harbor, additional troops, ammunition, and supplies were needed immediately. Fort Moultrie must be reinforced, and the two other federal strongholds in the harbor—Fort Sumter and Castle Pinckney—garrisoned with soldiers loyal to the United States. The sand hills looming just yards from Moultrie's walls must be leveled, or they could quickly become nests of sharpshooters who could pick off the men inside, one by one, in a matter of hours.¹³

Replies from Washington were dilatory, vague, and ambivalent. More troops would be sent—at some point. The garrison's officers must prepare to defend Moultrie as best they could—but not touch the sand hills, which were believed to be private property. (They weren't, in fact.) Above all, they must not do anything that the hot-tempered South Carolinians might find provocative—a category that seemed to include almost any action whatsoever that the

little band of men might take.¹⁴

The U.S. forts in Charleston Harbor were ground zero in the exploding secession crisis, yet no one at the War Department seemed to be taking their defense seriously. In fact, the garrison's only direct communication from the secretary of war lately had been a one-sentence telegram ordering them to return a few dozen muskets that Seymour had managed to extract from the federal arsenal in Charleston.¹⁵

Curiously enough, the only measure that the War Department fully supported was an all-out effort to buttress the fortifications themselves. Nearly a quarter of a million dollars was allocated to the building project, and throughout the autumn more than a hundred laborers—many of them Irish and German immigrants brought down from Baltimore, toiled busily at Sumter, rapidly completing the officers' quarters, raising the height of the walls, and readying the upper tiers of the fort to support cannons. Back at Moultrie, an even larger group dug ditches, built makeshift gun platforms, and cleared sand from the outer walls—discovering, in the process, quite a few cannonballs that had been casually mislaid over the years. Anderson sent a third detachment of the civilian workers over to Castle Pinckney to commence repairs on the assumption that Washington would soon send enough troops to man all three forts. This construction further infuriated many Charlestonians, who assumed that the Yankees were preparing to bombard their city. Bands of secessionists now patrolled day and night outside Moultrie, itching for any pretext to commence hostilities. The little garrison was stretched so thin that officers' wives were taking shifts on guard duty.¹⁷ And still no reinforcements came.

What Anderson and his men didn't realize is that the secretary of war was playing a double game—or at least would shed no tears if their citadel fell to the rebels. John B. Floyd was a former governor of Virginia firmly aligned with states' rights and the South—within a few months, he would wear the uniform of a Confederate brigadier general. Since his appointment by President James Buchanan, the War Department had become a den of graft and speculation, his staff entangled in an under-the-table scheme funneling government money held in trust for Indians into the pocket of a crooked military contractor.¹⁸ Afterward, it would remain unclear if Floyd had been involved in the scheme himself, or if he had simply allowed it to happen out of innocent laziness and incompetence.

So, too, his response—or lack of response—to the Sumter crisis may have been rooted in treasonous tendencies, or may have been due to simple indifference. In the Charleston predicament, Secretary Floyd may have seen an opportunity: if no troops were sent to man the three harbor forts, no amount of sprucing up would prevent their tumbling into the lap of the South Carolinians. That way, the three citadels would be in tiptop shape, at the expense of the U.S. government, just in time to protect Charleston from any federal fleet that might come steaming down to crush the rebellion. (This was what Doubleday would later come to believe.)¹⁹ Or he may simply have wished to passively let the situation drift along, sparing himself the mess, unpleasantness, and extra work that might come from more decisive action. Either way, the result would be the same.

In fact, the reason Floyd had dispatched Anderson to Moultrie in the first place was his expectation that the major would not raise any sort of fuss. Anderson, a Virginian by ancestry and a Kentuckian by birth, was known to sympathize with the grievances of Southern slaveholders. His wife, a more ardent Southerner, was the daughter of one of Georgia's

wealthiest rice planters; she and the major had recently sold off most or all of her inherited slaves and their progeny, causing him once to quip that “the increase of her darkies” had made him rich.²⁰ Nor did the major appear to be the sort to attempt an inconvenient act of heroism. When Floyd plucked Anderson out of the middle ranks of the officer corps for the Charleston appointment, he was serving on a commission to revise the curriculum at West Point, where he had once been an instructor. Anderson’s rigid deference to military duty was, as everyone in the service knew, exceeded only by his Christian piety.²¹

Even the junior officers at Moultrie were at times beginning to suspect their new commander of disloyalty to the Union or simple lack of backbone—not that it was clear what even a loyal stalwart could have done without more arms and men. Their best tactical move, Doubleday and Seymour knew, would be to occupy Castle Pinckney, where they could easily bring Charleston to heel by lobbing artillery shells into the city at close range. But, as Doubleday put it sardonically, “with only sixty-four soldiers and a brass band, we could not detach any force in that direction.”²² Pinckney lay more than three miles across the harbor from Moultrie, a stone’s throw from the downtown promenade known as the Battery, with its high row of fine mansions that housed many of Charleston’s wealthiest citizens—and its leading secessionists. Even under cover of darkness, there was no way that Anderson’s men could make it there without being intercepted.

Their other option was Fort Sumter. Sumter sat on its own artificial island—a sturdy pedestal of granite boulders, hewn from the quarries of New England—just inside the narrowest part of the harbor’s mouth, alongside the main ship channel. Though still unfinished after decades of fitful progress, because no one had expected that Charleston Harbor would ever again become a key strategic point, its 360-degree view of the surrounding water made it more or less impregnable to sneak attack, and its high brick walls, designed by the Army Corps of Engineers to withstand modern artillery fire, were much more formidable than Moultrie’s. Its armaments included a fearsome array of heavy mortars and columbiads, the bulbous ten-ton cannons that could hurl a heavy projectile as far as three miles—though many of these guns still lay dismantled and inoperable beneath the unfinished gun platforms. Sumter’s location in the port’s tight entrance, with land close by in three directions, might make it vulnerable to shot and shell fired from batteries onshore: the fort’s builders, like Moultrie’s, had never anticipated the need to defend against an attack from “friendly” territory. But that position, however vulnerable, did command the shipping lanes. Most critical of all, Fort Sumter lay barely a mile from Moultrie—just close enough that the garrison might, with a bit of luck, slip across under the secessionists’ noses.

The junior officers, Doubleday most of all, pleaded with their commander to make the move. Anderson dug his heels in and refused. The War Department had assigned him to Fort Moultrie, he said, and he would not budge without an official order to do so. The officers pointed out that if the Carolinians themselves occupied Sumter—which they might do at any moment without so much as firing a shot—its columbiads turned against Moultrie could pound the old fort’s walls into rubble. Still the major blandly demurred. His resistance seemed incredible. Any captain or lieutenant in the army was used to dealing with the stubbornness or even stupidity of his superiors, but Anderson’s position defied common sense as well as basic principles of military science that he had taught at West Point. Worse yet, in the event of forced surrender, the power and prestige of the entire army—perhaps even the

entire national government—might be sacrificed to a few thuggish traitors.

In bewilderment, the staff officers returned to overseeing the ceaseless—and, it seemed pointless—work of digging sand away from the walls, building picket fences, and moving cannons from one place to another.²³ Occasionally Captain Doubleday would relieve his frustration by loading a howitzer with double rounds of canister shot, pointing it out to sea and blasting a furious volley against the insolent Southern waves. It was the only thing he could do.

Just before sundown on December 20, the rooftops and church steeples of Charleston lit up with flashes of red, as the reflected lights of bonfires and Roman candles flared amid the gathering darkness. From across the harbor, the soldiers at Moultrie could hear booming cannons and pealing bells. The city was celebrating. Delegates to the Convention of the People of South Carolina, meeting downtown in St. Andrew's Hall, had voted unanimously that afternoon to approve a resolution: "The Union now subsisting between South Carolina and other states, under the name of the 'United States of America,' is hereby dissolved."

Almost immediately afterward, the Convention took up another pressing matter: what should be done about "the property of the United States"—now considered a foreign nation—"in South Carolina." This referred especially, everyone knew, to the three harbor forts.

One of Moultrie's officers, Assistant Surgeon Samuel Wylie Crawford, was in the city on that historic day. He even made his way into the Convention itself, where he took note of a gavel on the Speaker's desk with the word secession cut deep into it in black letters. In the streets he saw almost every hat sporting palmetto leaves or a blue secession cockade, and almost every shop and house flying a palmetto flag. There were also, as he would recall years later, "coarse representations on canvas" crudely allegorizing the politics of the moment: one portrayed the detestable old rail-splitter himself, Abraham Lincoln, wielding his axe ineffectually against a stout palmetto log, while another "showed the anticipated prosperity of Charleston, the wharves crowded with cotton bales and negroes."²⁴

Still, Crawford discovered, very few of the patricians who had led the charge toward secession actually wanted all-out war. Rabble-rousing newspaper editors, upcountry militiamen, and assorted urban rowdies might clamor for the chance to shed Yankee blood and even take a few potshots at Fort Moultrie, but most worldly men of good sense believed that the South should, and eventually would, be left to go in peace. There would be heated talk on both sides, negotiation, some gentle—or, if necessary, not so gentle—arm-twisting, but in the end, frock-coated dignitaries of the North and of the South would come to a mutual understanding, and the federal garrison in Charleston Harbor would board a government steamer and vanish conveniently into the wide Atlantic. Indeed, some of the South's best statesmen were already in Washington, working discreetly toward just such a resolution.

Yet it was also obvious to Crawford that Charlestonians were doing a collective war dance. The city's streets were filled with men in militia uniforms, from young recruits performing their first musket drills to old colonels, buttoned laboriously into epauletted tunics they had last worn twenty years before. "Military organizations marched in every direction, the music of their bands lost amid the shouts of the people," Crawford later wrote.²⁵ There could not have been a greater contrast with the lassitude and bureaucratic foot-dragging of the "loyal" commanders back in Washington.

Across the water on Sullivan's Island, the noose seemed to be drawing tighter. Word came

that the harbor pilots of Charleston were all made to swear an oath that they would not bring any U.S. government vessel into port, lest it be carrying reinforcements. Steamers manned by secessionist militia—each with more men aboard than were in the entire federal garrison—patrolled the harbor every night, their dark silhouettes visible from the parapets of Moultrie.

For each of the fort's officers, these days of anxiety and frustration were also tinged with melancholy. Trained to defend their nation against its foreign enemies, they now faced siege and possible attack by their own countrymen. Whatever might be the outcome of the present crisis, the nation they had grown up in already seemed irretrievably lost. Not long after the secession vote, an elderly South Carolina statesman, Judge James L. Petigru (born days after George Washington's inauguration), came across the harbor to bid a sad farewell to the garrison, and, by proxy, to the United States of America. Doubleday went down to the wharf to greet the old man. "The tears rolled down his cheeks," the Yankee captain later recalled "as he deplored the folly and the madness of the times."^{26*}

And all the while, just across the water—so close that you could almost touch it—loomed the commanding citadel of Sumter, seeming to represent all that Doubleday and his comrades longed for: Safety. Honor. Perhaps even, in the end, victory. The junior officers redoubled their pleas. Their commander, as ever, refused to budge.

What the junior officers didn't know is that beneath his inscrutable gray exterior, the major was as frustrated as any of his men. Since the third day after his arrival, Anderson had been barraging Washington with ever-more-urgent letters and telegrams, pleading with his superiors for orders to make just such a move. It was as obvious to him as to anyone that an attack on Moultrie could end only in a humiliating surrender or the wholesale slaughter of his force. The War Department sent cursory replies, blithely assuring him that no assault on Moultrie was imminent—this despite the shrill war cries in almost every newspaper of the South—but that if one were, he was, of course, to defend it "to the best of your ability." On December 23, an adjutant arrived with a two-paragraph letter from the secretary of war himself, the first time that Floyd had deigned to communicate directly with Anderson.

Writing on the morning after secession became official, the secretary wished to clarify—strictest confidence—Anderson's previous instructions. While the major ought to defer to himself if attacked, he must not take this to mean that he should sacrifice his men's lives "upon a mere point of honor." Indeed, it was neither wished nor expected in Washington that Anderson should undertake "a hopeless conflict in defense of these forts." Floyd continued, "If they are invested or attacked by a force so superior that resistance would, in your judgment, be a useless waste of life, it will be your duty to yield to necessity, and make the best terms [of surrender] in your power. This will be the conduct of an honorable, brave, and humane officer, and you will be fully justified in such action."²⁷

Floyd's meaning was unmistakable. If Anderson were threatened directly by any military force stronger than his own contingent of sixty-four men and a brass band, he was free to surrender all of Charleston Harbor without firing a shot. Perhaps the letter even assumed that Anderson, a good Southerner, would be happy to do so. Between the lines, Floyd could almost be seen winking.

But the secretary of war had misjudged his man.

To the civilian Floyd, Anderson looked like a reliably obedient officer, and he was. But even more, he was a career soldier. The middle-aged bureaucrat had—although he rarely

spoke of it—fought against Black Hawk and the Seminoles, and marched on Mexico City under General Scott, in that glorious advance from the shores of the Gulf to the Halls of Montezuma. At Molino del Rey, nearly at the gates of the enemy capital, he had charged the Mexican lines and taken a bullet in the shoulder, leading his outnumbered regiment through another two hours of battle before collapsing from loss of blood.²⁸ Such perils came all in the due course of military life, as they had also done for Anderson's father, a soldier of the American Revolution who had defended the old palmetto fort right here at Moultrie more than eighty years ago. Anderson had seen secretaries of war come and go—and he must certainly have known a good deal, mostly unflattering, about this particular one—but he also knew that acts of courage or cowardice on the battlefield echoed down through generations.

It would be one thing if President Buchanan had simply announced that he was withdrawing the troops from Charleston Harbor and turning the forts over to South Carolina—a decision that Anderson would certainly have obeyed, perhaps even welcomed. But he would be damned if he was to surrender—even worse, perform a shabby pantomime of surrender—before a rabble of whiskey-soaked militiamen and canting politicians. Still, an officer's orders were his orders. Anderson felt trapped.

But after poring untold hours over Floyd's infuriating letter, he suddenly saw a window—narrow one, but perhaps a way out. One might say it was not Anderson the gallant soldier who noticed it but rather Anderson the meticulous academic and scrupulous translator. Floyd had told Anderson to mount no hopeless defense of the *forts*, plural. This was possibly just a slip of the pen: the secretary was not known for verbal precision. But it could also be construed to mean that Anderson and his men were responsible for defending all three of the forts, not just Moultrie. In that case, a move from one to another would be no violation of orders, merely a slight tactical shift, like wheeling a cannon to a different side of the battlements. Nowhere in the previous orders had Floyd or his adjutants directly commanded Anderson *not* to occupy Sumter. They had merely ignored his pleas to do so.

It must have been just after Anderson's small epiphany that the sharp-eyed Captain Doubleday noticed something odd. He was out on Moultrie's parapet with his commander discussing the need to purchase some wire to make an entanglement at the base of the fort walls. "Certainly; you shall have a mile of wire, if you require it," Anderson replied—but in such a peculiar, distracted way that it was clear the major was no longer thinking much about Moultrie at all.²⁹

Anderson now sent his quartermaster over to the city to charter some boats, ostensibly to carry the fort's women and children out of harm's way. (Many of the men had their families living with them.) On Christmas Day, all hands at the fort were kept busy loading supplies aboard, on the pretext that these were only the families' effects and necessary supplies. A couple of local citizens showed up at the wharf to watch the preparations—incredibly enough, civilians were still permitted to wander freely into and out of the fort, perhaps because suddenly barring them would have put the secession forces on alert—and became suspicious when they saw a crate marked "1,000 ball cartridges" being stowed aboard. They were quickly assured that this had been just an error, and left after seeing the box off-loaded again.³⁰

On the 26th, just as the sun was setting, Anderson gave his officers and men twenty minutes to gather up whatever personal possessions they could and board the boats. F

ordered the guns of Moultrie to be aimed at the passage to Sumter, ready to sink any vessel that might attempt an interception. The major left a small rear guard, with instructions that once the rest of the garrison was safely across, it should spike the cannons (that is, hammer spikes into the touchholes so that they couldn't be fired), burn the gun carriages, and finally cut down the flagpole so that nothing but the Stars and Stripes could ever fly upon it. The Anderson himself took the folded garrison flag and, tucking it snugly under his arm, stepped aboard.³¹

The next morning, astonished Charlestonians saw smoke from the smoldering gun carriage curling into the clear air above Moultrie. At Castle Pinckney, secessionist riflemen stormed the all-but-abandoned fort.³² In Washington, Secretary Floyd was already dictating a furious telegram.

But by noon at Sumter, a flag—the one Anderson had carried with him from his father's old fort—was raised upon a new staff. It hung limp for a moment before the wind stirred life into its folds. Then it unfurled itself, the red stripes of war and white stars of union, a banner defiant.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2008, in a crumbling plantation house on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, my students and I discovered an attic full of family papers spanning thirteen generations of the owners' family—more than three hundred years of American history. There were land deeds in the spidery handwriting of the seventeenth century, from the earliest years of the colonial settlement. There was business correspondence about a slave purchase in Philadelphia during the American Revolution, transacted as the Continental Congress was meeting just a few blocks away in Independence Hall. But what fascinated me the most was a small bundle of old documents, wrapped in paper and bound up tightly with a faded yellow silk ribbon that clearly had not been untied in more than a century. On the outside of the wrapper was the date: 1861.

Carefully untying the ribbon and opening the wrapper's stiff folds, we found a series of private letters written in the spring of that year. They involved a member of the family, a career officer in the U.S. Army stationed at a remote fort in the Indian territory of the far West. Writing to his wife and brother back East, the colonel agonized over which side he should choose in the impending conflict. He was a Southerner and a slaveholder—yet in his heart of hearts he looked forward to the day when slavery would end. He was a close friend of Jefferson Davis's; had been at the Academy with Robert E. Lee—yet could he betray the flag under which he had served ever since that remote day when, at the age of fourteen, he had first donned the scratchy gray uniform of a West Point cadet?

In the end, the colonel chose to stand by his country. In the process of deciding on that course, though, he had to wrestle with many different questions—and not simply those of honor, patriotism, and politics. What would his choice of allegiance mean for his family, for his friendships, for his ancestral farm, for his career? Whichever side prevailed in the war, the nation was clearly about to change forever: what kind of country did he want to live in, what kind of country would he want for his children? "It is like a great game of chance," his wife wrote. The urgent exchange of letters brought out tensions among his loved ones, too, and the colonel tried to assimilate conflicting reports and advice from two thousand miles away. His wife, a Northerner, had one set of ideas; his plantation-owning brother had another.³³

Reading those letters, across the distance of almost a century and a half, gave me a new appreciation of how history is decided not just on battlefields and in cabinet meetings, but in individual hearts and minds. The Civil War had fascinated me since I was a teenager, but most of the books about it seemed to dwell on whose cavalry went charging over which hill. (One historian has described this approach as treating the war like “a great military Super Bowl contest between Blue and Gray heroes.”)³⁴ Or else they treated American society as a collection of broadly defined groups—“the North,” “the South,” “the slaves”—each one mechanically obeying a set of sociological and ideological rules.

I realized I already knew from my own experience that this isn’t the way history works. On September 11, 2001, I had observed how everyone I knew responded to the terrorist attack in his or her own way. The responses didn’t derive simply from whether someone was liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat. They also depended on a whole complicated set of personal convictions, fears, character traits, religious beliefs. They depended on where people came from, where they lived, and where they had traveled. On how and where people had experienced the day of the attacks itself. And all these complications influenced not just ordinary people but also those I knew who worked in the media and in government. Presumably they influenced the nation’s leaders, as well.

In fact, the startling events in New York and Washington hadn’t simply changed the course of future history, they had shaken up old categories and assumptions. In a way, they had changed the past just as much as the future; rewritten not only our expectation of what was to come but also our sense of what had gone before. For a brief moment, in a most terrifying and thrilling way, anything seemed possible. The only certainty was the one expressed by a family member of mine phoning an hour or so after the first plane hit, one that no doubt occurred to countless others: “The world is never going to be the same again.”

When, seven years later, I came across that bundle of old letters, I realized that this very sense was what was missing from my understanding of the Civil War. I wanted to learn more about how Americans—both ordinary citizens and national leaders—experienced and responded to a moment of sudden crisis and change as it unfolded. I especially wanted to understand how that moment ended up giving birth to a new and better nation. I wanted to know about the people who responded to that moment not just with anger and panic but with hope and determination, people who, amid the ruins of the country they had grown up in, saw an opportunity to change history. Perhaps what I learned would even teach me things about our own time, too.

LIKE SO MUCH ELSE about the beginning of the Civil War, Major Anderson’s move from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter is largely forgotten today. At the time, however, the little garrison-mile-long journey was seen not just as a masterstroke of military cunning but as the opening scene of a great and terrible national drama. “War has begun,” one correspondent telegraphed from South Carolina. “Major Robert Anderson,” thundered the *Charleston Courier*, “has achieved the unenviable distinction of opening civil war between American citizens by a gross breach of faith.”³⁵ Northerners, meanwhile, held enormous public banquets in Anderson’s honor; cannons fired salutes in New York, Chicago, Boston, and dozens of other cities and towns.³⁶

And considered in retrospect, Anderson’s move seems freighted with even more symbolism.

He lowered his flag on an old fortress, hallowed by the past, yet half ruined—and then raised it upon a new one, still unfinished, yet stronger, bedded in New England granite. That folded banner's crossing of Charleston Harbor foreshadowed another defiant journey ahead, far longer and more perilous: from the old America to a new one.

Twenty years after the war, when officials at the War Department began preparing the *Official History of the War of the Rebellion*, a massive compilation of documents that would eventually grow to more than two hundred thousand pages,³⁷ the first of all the uncountable documents that they included was Anderson's brisk telegram announcing his arrival at Sumter. Nineteenth-century historians knew that without this event, the war might not have happened. A remarkable thing about Anderson's move, too, is that it was no calculated act of heroism or symbolism—much less the intentional commencement of a revolution. It was, indeed, motivated by the major's deep conservatism, by his desire to preserve his honor and his garrison. And yet its results were revolutionary; it ended up touching off a series of events whose repercussions would be incalculable.

When the saga of the Civil War is recounted now, it usually begins four months later, when the Confederate batteries at Charleston finally opened fire. That's the version that I, and probably most people, grew up with, and it's a good story, too. Yet it's also one that turns the Union side into simply the passive target of the Confederacy's aggression. It glorifies the "lost cause" at the expense of the one that would win. It elevates a moment when war was already a *fait accompli*, with Americans on both sides simply awaiting the opening guns.

The Civil War story told in this book begins with the raising of a Union flag, not the firing of a Confederate shot. The war described here was not just a Southern rebellion but a nationwide revolution—fought even from within the seceding states—for freedom. And when the South's rebellion failed, with the Confederacy fated to become a historical dead end, the revolution—our second as a people—reinvented America, and a century and a half later still defines much of our national character. It was a revolution that engaged both the nation's progressive impulses and, at the same time, some of its profoundly conservative tendencies. For many Americans saw it as a struggle to create new freedoms, many others as an effort to preserve a cherished legacy.³⁸ But in the end, the outcome would be the same. Swept away forever would be the older America, a nation stranded halfway between its love of freedom and its accommodation of slavery, mired for decades in policies of appeasement and compromise.

WALT WHITMAN FAMOUSLY WROTE that the "real war," by which he meant the squalor of hospitals and blood-drenched battlefields, would never make it into the history books. It was the heroism of the Union cause, he assumed, that would ring down through the generations.

Yet, if anything, the war's squalor is remembered today while its heroism, in the truest and most complicated sense of the term, has been gradually erased. Books and documentaries dwell on the blood and filth, the bloating bodies on the fields of Antietam, the sons and brothers lost. If heroism is to be measured by human suffering, surely both Northerners and Southerners were heroes in equal measure—indeed, by that measure, the South was probably more heroic. It is also intellectually fashionable to deprecate the Union cause, at least so far as it relates to slavery and race: to point out the casual racism of everyone from lowly infantrymen up to President Lincoln himself; to say that the Emancipation Proclamation was

simply a convenient military stratagem; to repeat the truism that the Civil War began not as a war to abolish slavery but as a war to save the Union. It is also common for historians to say that soldiers went to war in the spring of 1861 “more or less on a lark,” to quote one I recently spoke with. But people do not often go to war—much less against their own countrymen—on a lark.

Men and women at the time, on both sides of the conflict, did understand it as a war against slavery, even before it began. This is clear from what they said and wrote.

An important distinction must be drawn here: a war against slavery did not necessarily mean a war for abolition, at least not in 1861, or not for everybody. It did mean, though, that many white Northerners and even some white Southerners were ready to say *Enough*. Enough compromise of principles; enough betrayal of people and ideals; enough cruelty; enough gradual surrender of what had been won in 1776. The war represented the overdue effort to sort out the double legacy of America’s founders: the uneasy marriage of the Declaration’s inspired ideals with the Constitution’s ingenious expedients.

Just as impressive, or more so, was the heroism of black men, women, and even children who were ready not just to be free but also to become Americans. They were partners, and sometimes leaders, in the project to reinvent their country—a project that was still incomplete at the end of the Civil War, but which had been even less complete at the close of the Revolution. The fact that these former slaves and children of slaves were ready to make *their* project, to make it *their* country—almost from the moment that hostilities began—was perhaps the most strange and wonderful thing to come out of the war.

Americans today find it fairly easy to fathom the idea that there was a right side and a wrong side in World War II, a side that stood for freedom and a side that stood against it. It is possible to accept this even while acknowledging that both sides committed atrocities; that most Axis soldiers did not go to war in order to exterminate other races, nor most Allied soldiers to save them; and that in 1941, casual anti-Semitism was probably taken for granted among many GIs, as it also was in the clubby Anglo-Saxon milieu of Roosevelt and Churchill.

We find it harder, though—much harder than most people did in the 1860s—to accept that there was a right side and a wrong side in our own Civil War. It is difficult to fathom that millions of Americans could have fought as enemies of America. It is even harder to accept this when we come to realize that in some senses the Civil War really was, as some defiant Southerners still call it, a “War of Northern Aggression.”

Most accounts of the months leading up to war focus tightly on the parallel dramas in Charleston and Washington, as the clocks ticked away the last opportunities for peace. This is indeed an important, even essential, part of the story. But to get the full story of this moment in American history, it is necessary to go much farther afield: to the slums of Manhattan and the drawing rooms of Boston, to Ohio villages and Virginia slave cabins, and even to the shores of the Pacific. It is also necessary to consider people and ideas that were migrating from the Old World to the New. It is only then that this defining national event can truly be understood as a revolution, and one whose heroes were not only the soldiers and politicians.

That revolution began years before the first guns opened, as a gradual change in the hearts and minds of men and women, until suddenly, in the months before the attack on Sumter, this transformation attained irresistible momentum. One person at a time, millions of

Americans decided in 1861—as their grandparents had in 1776—that it was worth risking everything, their lives and fortunes, on their country. Not just on its present reality, either not on something so solid; but on a vision of what its future could be and what its past had meant.

Eighteen sixty-one, like 1776, was—and still is—not just a year, but an idea.

WALT WHITMAN UNDERSTOOD THIS, probably even before the actual year 1861 began. Sometime mid-1860, when the war clouds were gathering, still distant, on the horizon, he sat down to write a singularly prophetic poem.

“Song of the Banner at Day-Break” is a mystical, surreal vision, an American version of Ezekiel’s wheel turning in the sky. Instead of a fiery wheel, though, floating in Whitman’s sky is the American flag. What does it stand for? asks the poet. Is it simply a piece of fabric? Is it an emblem of America’s prosperity, of the banks and merchant houses that make the nation “envied by all the earth”? Is it a banner of war? Then the truth is revealed as the poet looks up to see the flag become an apparition of things soon to come:

I hear and see not strips of cloth alone,
I hear the tramp of armies, I hear the challenging sentry,
I hear the jubilant shouts of millions of men, I hear Liberty!
I hear the drums beat and the trumpets blowing ...
O you up there! O pennant! where you undulate like a snake hissing so curious,
Out of reach, an idea only, yet furiously fought for, risking bloody death, loved by
me!
So loved—O you banner leading the day, with stars brought from the night!
Valueless, object of eyes, over all and demanding all—O banner and pennant!
I too leave the rest—great as it is, it is nothing—houses, machines are nothing—I
see them not;
I see but you, O warlike pennant!—O banner so broad, with stripes, I sing you
only,
Flapping up there in the wind.

Though the poem is little read today, the poet himself cherished it almost from the moment he wrote it. Whitman originally intended to publish a book early in 1861 titled *The Banner at Day-Break*, with this strange prophecy leading off the volume. His publishers unexpectedly went bankrupt and the book never appeared. But Whitman, as was his custom, continued writing and rewriting the poem, at least until the country’s centennial year of 1876.

Another flag raising, that at Sumter on a chill December morning, also embodies the second American Revolution. Before that day, the flag had served mostly as a military ensign or a convenient marking of American territory, flown from forts, embassies, and ships, and displayed on special occasions like the Fourth of July. But in the weeks after Major Anderson’s surprising stand, it became something different. Suddenly the Stars and Stripes

flew—as it does today, and especially as it did after September 11—from houses, from storefronts, from churches; above village greens and college quads. For the first time American flags were mass-produced rather than individually stitched, and even so manufacturers could not keep up with demand.³⁹

As the long winter of 1861 turned into spring, that old flag meant something new. The abstraction of the Union cause was transfigured into a physical thing: strips of cloth that millions of people would fight for, and many thousands die for.⁴⁰

This book, like Whitman's poem, tells a story foreshadowing things to come. It is not a Civil War saga of hallowed battlefields drenched in blood, much less of which general cavalry came charging over which hill. It is a story, rather, of a moment in our country's history when almost everything hung in the balance.

It is a story of how some people clung to the past, while others sought the future; how a new generation of Americans arose to throw aside the cautious ways of its parents and embrace the revolutionary ideals of its grandparents. The battleground of that struggle was not one orchard or wheat field, but the quickly growing country itself.

*Not long earlier, Petigru had been asked by a Charlestonian whether he intended to join the secession movement. "I should think not!" the judge replied. "South Carolina is too small for a republic, and too large for a lunatic-asylum."

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