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Camp of 31st Pennsylvania Infantry near Washington, D.C., 1862

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

Making Sense of the American Civil War

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FROM THE MOMENT AMERICANS FOUND themselves pulled into a civil war of unimaginable scale and consequence, they tried desperately to make sense of what was happening to them. From the secession crisis into the maelstrom of battle, from the nightmare of slavery into the twilight of emancipation, Americans of all backgrounds confronted the chaos with stories to explain how things had come to be. People continued to tell themselves those stories about the war and its meaning for the next century and a half, and they probably always will.

Stories about the American Civil War have been told in many forms, often disguised as something else. Most of the stories at the time came in letters or diaries or reports, fashioned from whatever materials were close at hand. Speeches, made up on the spot or carefully crafted for the world to read, told stories that placed blame and laid out strategies. Newspaper articles written overnight shaped fragments and reports into narratives of victory and loss. Memoirs, short stories, novels, and histories written months or years later wove new patterns of storytelling.

Whatever their origins or timing, all these stories tell more than appears on the surface. They speak, often in spite of themselves, of larger purposes and patterns. Looking back, we can see that they sometimes belied themselves, were often proved wrong by unfolding events, were full of wishful thinking and self-deception. The historical stories we tell today strive for balance and inclusion, but we must recognize that we tell them to ourselves for our own reasons.

The readings selected for "Let's Talk About It: Making Sense of the American Civil War" give us a glimpse of the vast sweep and profound breadth of Americans' war among and against themselves. Each kind of story carries its own power and its own limits. Eyewitnesses had the advantage of firsthand experience, but could see things only through their own eyes. The passage of time offers perspective, but intervening events introduce their own distortions. Fiction allows us to engage with the interior

lives of characters, but those characters did not actually walk and breathe; they are, unavoidably, projections of ourselves. History, despite its dedication to evidence, has roots in its own time as well as in the past.

"Making Sense of the American Civil War" is organized as a series of five "conversations" that are meant to be considered together. Each conversation is itself arranged as an unfolding story, moving forward in time. The selections necessarily foreshadow and fold back on themselves, for each aspect of life touched every other aspect during these densely packed years. Readers will want to pay attention to when the selections were written, for what purposes, and for whom. Some were composed for one reader — perhaps the author alone — while others were imagined for vast audiences. Some were written for a moment, others to endure for as long as people care about the United States.

The purpose of the selections is to give people interesting things to talk about. The American Civil War is intrinsically interesting, though it has often been buried in cliché and overfamiliarity. Historians' understanding of the global significance of the war has shifted from fifty years ago, at the time of the centennial, when its major consequence seemed to be the unification of a nation that would stand against communism. Today, the Civil War matters just as much, it seems, for bringing an end to the most powerful system of slavery in the modern world. A hundred and fifty years after the defining war in our nation's history, we are still discovering its meanings.

Imagining War

READINGS: *March* by Geraldine Brooks; *America's War* anthology—Part One

THE FIRST CONVERSATION BEGINS WITH a novel of our own times, a work that imagines our way into the past. Geraldine Brooks's *March* tells its story through the characters of another novel: *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott's story of sisters and a mother, published in 1868, only three years after Appomattox. Brooks tells the story of the father and husband of those women, the Reverend March. In Alcott's story, he is beloved but significant mainly by his absence. In *March*, we see the story through his eyes, eyes that do not always comprehend clearly what they perceive. We travel with the chaplain into places where he is not wanted, where his values elicit ridicule and contempt. The harsh world of slavery, men, and war challenges everything the March family believes in, including one another. Brooks's novel is a lovely and powerful meditation on America as it descended into the chaos of war.

Another voice in the first conversation is Louisa May Alcott's, drawn from her journal of her experiences as a nurse for the Union in 1862. In this remarkably frank document, the unmarried 30-year-old tells of her determination to find a purpose for her life by helping in the hospitals of Washington, D.C., an important setting in Brooks's novel. Alcott experiences horror, satisfaction, and deep personal trials during

her time with the wounded, ill, and dying men. Her journal allows us to compare fiction and firsthand testimony, and to think about what we can learn from each.

Choosing Sides

READINGS: *America's War* anthology—Part Two

THE SECOND CONVERSATION TAKES US directly into the world Geraldine Brooks imagined. Selections from *America's War* allow us to see through the eyes of people who had to decide for themselves where justice, honor, duty, and loyalty lay. Since struggles over slavery underpinned everything associated with America's Civil War, Frederick Douglass begins the conversation by challenging us with a searing speech from 1852. Asked by people much like the March family and their abolitionist friends to give a speech on the Fourth of July, Douglass gives them more than they asked for. His speech strips away any illusions white Americans may have had about their innocence, confronting them directly with the hypocrisy of a nation dedicated to freedom and built on slavery.

Henry David Thoreau, a character in *March*, confronts his friends with a blistering defense of John Brown after the aborted 1859 raid on the armory at Harpers Ferry. While much of the nation rushed to denounce and ridicule Brown, Thoreau celebrated him and all that he stood for. Such defenses confirmed the worst suspicions of white Southerners.

Abraham Lincoln, elected the year after Harpers Ferry, found himself confronted with disunion even before he took office. By the time he delivered his first inaugural address, presented here, the seven states of the Deep South had already formed the Confederate States of America. His speech was an attempt to reassure the voters who had elected him, announcing that he would not betray their trust by allowing the nation to be divided; that same speech was also an attempt to reassure white Southerners that he would not drive them away. Alexander Stephens of Georgia, the vice president of the new Confederacy, replied to Lincoln in the most direct way imaginable, celebrating slavery as the very cornerstone of the new nation.

With the alternatives so starkly drawn, a convention in Virginia debated, week after week, what course that state should take. Priding itself on being the birthplace of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, Virginia knew that its decision whether to join the new Confederacy or to remain with the Union would change everything that followed. Robert Montague and Chapman Stuart crystallized what many had been saying: Secessionists argued that they had no choice but to defend themselves; Unionists argued that choices did indeed remain, that the country must be saved. Such debates collapsed as soon as Lincoln called for militia from Virginia and other states to put down the rebellion in South Carolina after the firing on Fort Sumter. The convention in Virginia, which had voted for union only weeks before, now voted for secession. Soon, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas would follow. The Confederacy would

embrace eleven states, a vast new nation determined to make itself independent of the United States and to make its place in the world.

Robert E. Lee embodied the agony of disunion. A former commandant of West Point, a man who had lived his entire life in the United States Army, Lee traveled from his posting in Texas to his Virginia home not far from Washington, D.C., to confront the decision. In a recent work of imaginative scholarship, Elizabeth Brown Pryor reconstructs the tortured days in which Lee struggled with the decision of whether to follow his oath to the United States — indeed, to command its armies — or to follow Virginia on a course about which he was profoundly ambivalent.

Mark Twain tells, with his characteristic self-deflating humor, of his own wayward path in the confusing early days of the war. Along with other boys of his Missouri neighborhood, Twain joined the Confederacy only to decide that he had no real stake in the war, and headed west. Sarah Morgan, an 18-year-old girl in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, had been, like her father, a staunch Unionist. But in the first nine months of the war, with her town already occupied by the United States Army, Morgan alternated between defiant glorification of the Confederacy and deep doubt about the war and her own role in it. Like the March girls, her contemporaries in the North, Morgan finds herself surrounded by a war she feels herself powerless to alter.

Making Sense of Shiloh

READINGS: *America's War* anthology—Part Three

THE HORRIFYING BATTLE OF SHILOH changed Americans' understanding of the Civil War. Occurring in April 1862, almost exactly a year after Fort Sumter and the secession of Virginia, the battle near the Tennessee-Mississippi border not only redefined the boundaries of the military conflict but also the boundaries of the imaginable. Thousands of men with little training and no experience in war were thrown against one another in days of inexpressible suffering and waste. A desperate, defiant effort by the Confederacy to stop the progress of the Union Army and Navy in the Lower Mississippi Valley — indeed, to push the Union Army all the way back to the Ohio River — the Battle of Shiloh shattered any fantasies people had that the war would be won easily by either side. While the United States prevented the Confederacy from seizing the great victory it had imagined, Union general Ulysses S. Grant was widely attacked for incompetence and worse.

The third conversation in this series, which uses the Battle of Shiloh to confront the experience of war, also features voices from *America's War*. Ambrose Bierce, perhaps the best writer to emerge from the American Civil War, offers an unflinching report of what he saw at Shiloh. Although writing in 1881, when formulaic and self-congratulatory memoirs of the war became bestsellers, Bierce wrote in a self-mocking, disillusioned tone of his own role at Shiloh. Four years later, Ulysses S. Grant, by now a hero and former president of the United States (and dying of cancer), tells what he

saw of Shiloh. In what is often considered one of the finest pieces of writing to come out of the war, Grant's *Memoirs* presents the Battle of Shiloh from the perspective of the general responsible for coordinating the movements of tens of thousands of men, many of whom will be killed or shattered for life.

Shelby Foote, later famous for his three-volume history of the war, juxtaposes the perspectives of Northerners and Southerners, enlisted men and officers, in his 1952 novel based on the battle. Foote, like Bierce, acknowledges that everyone in a battle sees only a small part of something no one can fully comprehend. In this selection, Foote adopts the perspective of a young Mississippi man, a boy really, who sees war for the first time. His innocence strips away the bombast of speeches he can barely hear. In a very different kind of story, written thirty years after Foote's, Bobbie Ann Mason uses Shiloh as a window on life in our own times. The gory battlefield has become a picnic spot, a bucolic park where a husband hopes that broken lives can perhaps be put back together.

The final selection for this conversation is only a single page long, a letter from Confederate General Braxton Bragg to his troops a few weeks after Shiloh. In his words, we see the fierce dreams that would keep the Confederacy alive for three more years, unbowed by the horror at Shiloh.

The Shape of War

READINGS: *Crossroads of Freedom* by James McPherson; *America's War* anthology—Part Four

THE FOURTH CONVERSATION IN OUR series begins with James McPherson's study of Antietam. The most widely recognized Civil War historian of the last quarter-century for his Pulitzer Prize-winning survey, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, McPherson works here on a smaller canvas. The historian does what novelists and writers of memoirs do not: tell the story in as objective a way as possible, with documentation. In McPherson's understanding, Antietam, fought in Sharpsburg, Maryland, in September 1862 — months after Shiloh, but in a different theater of the war, with different leaders and armies — was the pivotal point in the war. As at Shiloh, neither the Union nor the Confederacy could claim a glorious victory at Antietam, but the Union turned back another Confederate offensive that could have altered the course of the war. For McPherson, the crucial victories at Antietam lay beyond the battlefield, in the diplomatic, political, and racial realms. England and France might well have sided with the Confederacy had it won in Maryland; Lincoln's party, under relentless attack from the Democrats, gained credibility; and emancipation was announced as a war aim by the United States. After those three events, McPherson believes, the stage was set for ultimate Union victory.

Other historians, of course, differ in their interpretations, pointing out that the Confederacy fought effectively for two more years, that the European powers never came to the side of the United States, that Lincoln was barely renominated by his own

party in 1864, and that slavery proved remarkably resilient in places where the Union Army could not reach. The selection from Gary Gallagher in *America's War* emphasizes the strength of the Confederate Army and the nation it embodied across four years of all-consuming warfare, suggesting that Antietam may not have been as decisive a crossroads as McPherson argues. The Confederate Army fought many more battles after the summer of 1862, after all, and believed that the crucial test would come in the Northern election of 1864.

A different kind of perspective on the war appears in Drew Gilpin Faust's prize-winning *This Republic of Suffering*, published in 2008. In the excerpt reproduced in *America's War,* Faust shifts our focus from the course of battle and politics to the suffering of families and communities. She wants us to understand the many meanings of death and the ways death was confronted. Faust would not deny the importance of understanding the issues that McPherson and Gallagher wrestle with, but she would ask that we broaden our vision.

War and Freedom

READINGS: *America's War* anthology—Part Five

THE FINAL CONVERSATION IN THE series draws from readings included in *America's War*, and concerns the most unanticipated outcome of the American Civil War: the immediate, uncompensated emancipation of four million people who had been held in slavery for over two centuries. The United States was the most powerful nation sustaining slavery in 1860, and few imagined the institution being abolished as rapidly as it was.

Abraham Lincoln, in the first selection, tries to persuade a group of visiting African American clergymen to support his plan for colonizing freed blacks in Central America. Lincoln thinks, at this early point in the war, that it would be better for white and black alike if the two races were separated. Even as Lincoln struggled with the issue, enslaved people were making themselves free whenever and wherever they had access to the Union Army. John Washington, in a memoir written for his family in 1873 but published only recently, tells of his escape from slavery in Virginia in the midst of the war.

Following the Union victory at Antietam, President Lincoln drafted the Emancipation Proclamation as a "necessary war act" that would take effect in January 1863. This act allowed Frederick Douglass, a decade after he despaired of the plight of African Americans in a United States that seemed determined to deprive them of their rights and their humanity, to rally black men to the defense of the United States because it is now fighting for their freedom. Lincoln himself steadily broadens and deepens his commitment to emancipation, as two letters expressing his thinking reveal. In his 1863 letter to James C. Conkling, the president argues with those who want to end the war without driving it to its conclusion; in the letter to Albert Hodges, the next year, Lincoln lays out the reasons why the war must end slavery.

While the Gettysburg Address, given in November 1863, does not speak of slavery directly, its potent language frames the purpose of the war as freedom understood in its broadest terms.

After African American men were finally allowed, in 1863, to enlist for the United States, 200,000 black soldiers and sailors joined the service in just two years. The 1864 reports from James S. Brisbin and Thomas J. Morgan tell of their valor — and of the disrespect they often endured from their white compatriots. After it became clear that the United States would win the war and bring freedom with that victory, black Southerners struggled to secure the tools to protect that freedom. In early 1865, African Americans in Nashville petitioned the white leadership of the Union party for their rights as citizens in a free America. Their petition is a powerful statement of the highest American ideals. There is no record of a response.

Emancipation was not a single event but a long and uneven series of struggles on plantations and farms, in cities and towns, all across the South. Margaret Walker, in a powerful 1966 novel, *Jubilee*, turns stories she heard from her grandmother into a novel about the coming of freedom. In her telling, freedom arrived in degrees of uncertainty, unclear in its reach or its ultimate meanings. Leon Litwack's groundbreaking history of the end of slavery, *Been in the Storm So Long*, published in 1979, uses remarkable research to tell the story of freedom as it emerged in the burning of Richmond in April 1865, almost exactly four years after the convention there voted to lead Virginia out of the Union.

Abraham Lincoln would visit Richmond with his son Tad only days later, soon after his inauguration for his second term. That term, so much in doubt over the preceding four years, began with what is generally considered the greatest speech in American history, a brief reckoning with divine purpose and human frailty, a humble effort to find meaning in so much suffering. Six weeks after the speech and two weeks after his visit to Richmond, where newly freed men and women surrounded him, he was assassinated in Washington, D.C. Another chapter in American history began with his death.

Images used throughout *America's War* are a combination of firsthand drawings by "Special Artists" and printed lithographs based on those drawings. These artists sketched what they saw in the army camps and the midst of battle, and often did so under life-threatening conditions. The images they produced offer a perspective and have an immediacy not readily accessible through period photographs, which could capture only images of subjects who were still and safe. In a final essay on "Images of the War," *America's War* illuminates how these artists enabled the public to picture the war as it progressed, and to help us make sense of the American Civil War today.

Each of the reading selections in "Making Sense of the American Civil War" adds a crucial voice to our understanding of the war and its meaning. The silences or anger or idealism that separate the voices are as important as their commonalities. The American Civil War was not a single thing, a simple thing. It changed shape from the

beginning to the end. The war's full significance was not complete in 1865 and it is not complete yet.

EDWARD L. AYERS
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Additional Reading

In the Presence of Mine Enemies by Edward L. Ayers

Winner of the 2004 Bancroft Prize, Ayers's book views the issues of the Civil War as played out on a local scale. Two neighboring counties, one in Pennsylvania and the other in Virginia, had a shared history and a common ground for coexisting; when the sectional divide came in 1861, each county went the way of the state of which it was a part, but the process of separation was not easy.

The Black Flower by Howard Bahr

The focus of this tight first novel is the November 1864 Battle of Franklin in Tennessee. The experiences of Confederate rifleman Bushrod Carter speak to the terror of the common foot soldier, haunted by the gruesomeness of recent combat and facing future battle horror. The author's sound research is evident, and his eloquent voice is sure to capture the reader's interest.

Cloudsplitter by Russell Banks

This historical novel has deep psychological resonance, sensitively reconstructing the life of pre-Civil War abolitionist John Brown. His story is told by his third son, speaking to a historian years after the 1859 raid by Brown's band on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, for which Brown was later executed.

The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane

This slim but powerful novel is a classic of American literature, written by an esteemed fiction writer. The story's protagonist, Henry Fielding, is a soldier in the Civil War, but we are told little of the external circumstances in which he finds himself. Instead, the reader witnesses his deeply human responses to battle and observes that he is hardly the romantic notion of the heroic soldier.

Shiloh: The Battle that Changed the Civil War by Larry J. Daniel

The Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee, on April 6 and 7, 1862, stands out as a particularly bloody event in a war that became known for relentless bloodletting. This well-researched account offers not only vivid details of the battle, but also impressive analysis of troop movements, opposing commanders' judgments, and the consequences of this hard-won Union victory.

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The March by E.L. Doctorow

General William Tecumseh Sherman's infamous March to the Sea — which carved a swath of destruction through Georgia and the Carolinas — broke the back of the Confederacy, hastening the end of the Civil War. In this novel, Doctorow turns his considerable talent for reconstructing periods in America's past to a gripping account of Sherman's march, told through the experiences of characters both real and fictional.

Struggle for the Heartland: The Campaigns from Fort Henry to Corinth by Stephen D. Engle

Union forces penetrated the western region of the Confederacy in a months-long 1862 military campaign that culminated in the capture of Corinth, Mississippi. Engle's vibrant prose brings to life this important episode, which bolstered the military reputation of General Ulysses S. Grant and showed the Confederacy that the conflict with the North would not be the brief encounter that many had expected.

The Imagined Civil War by Alice Fahs

Fahs, a professor of history, sets out to refute the conventional wisdom that says no significant literature arose during the Civil War years. In her highly original study, she contends that popular literature did indeed flourish, including poetry, novels, books for children, and songs, and that these were extensively disseminated in newspapers, illustrated weeklies, pamphlets, song sheets, and books. The author perceptively addresses how these written works shaped cultural attitudes at the time.

The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery by Eric Foner

In his latest book, which has won both the Bancroft Prize and the Pulitzer Prize for History, Eric Foner of Columbia University investigates Lincoln's attitudes toward slavery and African Americans. He chronicles the evolution of Lincoln's thinking, reflecting as it did the Union's wartime shift toward a more open-minded view of black freedom.

Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution by Eric Foner

Foner altered popular and scholarly perceptions of the post-Civil War period with this now-classic 1988 work. As he depicts that traumatic period, it did not live up to blacks' and progressive whites' initial high expectations of post-slavery America.

Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier

Paying homage to Homer's *Ulysses*, Frazier's highly successful first novel is a lavishly detailed chronicle of the journey of Confederate soldier Inman, who deserts his unit in Virginia and walks back to his North Carolina home to rejoin his sweetheart. Filled with authentic detail, the novel sparked the current renaissance in historical fiction.

Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand edited by James McPherson and William Cooper

This collection of 14 essays compiled by two outstanding Civil War historians covers a range of topics, all of which analyze from various angles — including political, military,

and economic — the historiography of the war. This book, then, is a history of the writing about the history of the Civil War, and will appeal to more advanced readers.

Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell

The ultimate American romance novel, set in Georgia during the Civil War and Reconstruction and published in 1936, should be approached with this caveat: Its depictions of slaves will strike some modern readers as an apologia for a way of life that, fortunately, is gone with the wind. Beyond that, the story of spoiled Scarlett O'Hara's evolution from plantation princess to blood-and-guts businesswoman still holds up as a riveting story of American fortitude and industry.

The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861 by David Potter

Potter, a professor of history at Yale and Stanford, was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1971 for this seminal work, which offers a comprehensive picture of the events and forces in the 1850s that led to the outbreak of armed conflict in 1861. This book is particularly instructive as we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the war's opening salvos.

The Killer Angels by Michael Shaara

Shaara's 1974 novel about the Battle of Gettysburg, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, has become a modern classic of historical fiction. The four days that he reconstructs in vivid detail are seen through the perspectives of a wide range of historical figures, with emphasis on the commanders from both sides.

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe

President Lincoln purportedly remarked to Stowe, upon meeting her in the White House, that she was "the little woman who made this great war." For many decades it has been commonly assumed that her novel, set primarily in the antebellum South, served as a wake-up call for Northerners about the evils of slavery and contributed heavily to the strains between North and South. Characters are stereotypical and the plot highly melodramatic, but the work remains a significant document in any discussion of slavery and the outbreak of sectional strife.

Patriotic Gore by Edmund Wilson

Wilson, one of the outstanding American literary critics of the twentieth century, turned his considerable skills here to a survey of Civil War literature, analyzing the lives and writing of such figures as Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ulysses S. Grant, and Mary Chesnut.

Glory directed by Edward Zwick (film)

Boasting an Oscar-winning performance by Denzel Washington, this movie is considered one of the finest ever made about the American Civil War. It dramatizes the heroic actions of the all-black Fifty-fourth Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, which courageously attacked Fort Wagner, South Carolina, held by 1,000 Confederate soldiers.

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