Unit 1: Lecture C - The American Civil War

The American Civil War plays a huge role in American culture, determining how Americans fought the war and how the war changed Americans and America.  Though myriad topics exist for our examination, we will address only a few: attitudes, customs, and rituals toward dying, death, and burial; American honor culture; American views regarding manhood; freedom for black Americans; this war as the first modern war and its legacy for future wars; and war memory.

Before the Ci vil War, most Americans died at home and followed traditional rituals for dying, death, and burial.  Faust will go into great detail on this in our readings for Units 4 and 5, so I will be brief here.  Before the war, and when possible, Antebellum Americans observed prescribed rituals for dying, death, and burial.  The dying person needed to know he was dying and was expected to perform his part in the death ritual.  Loved ones, neighbors, and sometimes even strangers would gather around the deathbed for observe the ritual.  The death ritual had certain requirements for all involved – the dying and the observers.  The dying was supposed to make peace with those in attendance and then calmly and quietly await death.  Observers wanted to know that death was not to be feared, and watching someone correctly perform the death ritual was a comfort to the living.  After death, the family prepared the body, constructed or bought the casket, and performed the burial ceremony from start to finish.  Many times, the dead were buried in a family plot, though community plots were also in use.  The Civil War destroyed all these customs and rituals.  People died far from home.  The dying was denied the deathbed ritual.  The loved ones were denied everything else.  As Faust makes clear, many Civil War dead remained anonymous and lost to their families.  In addition, the sheer numbers of dead posed challenges not faced before.  Dying, death, and burial changed forever in Americans and America.  We will examine all this in Units 4 and 5.

Antebellum and Civil War Americans were concerned about the cultural characteristics of honor – for the South – and manhood – for the North.  Honor and manhood shared many characteristics and comprised an honor culture which determined behavioral guidelines for all Americans.  Southern historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown, in Southern Honor, Ethics and Behavior in the Old South, page xii, says, “If honor had meant nothing to men and women, if they had been able to separate it from slavery, there would have been no Civil War.”  Northerners referred to this cultural characteristic and customs as manhood.  Northerners feared losing their manhood as a result of wage labor employment and temperance and religious groups’ attempts to control their behavior concerning alcohol and violence.  They saw war as the best and fastest way to regain and prove their manhood.  These cultural characteristics and customs fueled the path toward war and motivated Americans to enthusiastically support the war.  Honor was also on the lips of many men volunteering for service in Europe’s Great War.  For more information on the concept, history, and power of honor, I refer you to James Bowman’s book entitled Honor.  Bowman details the influence of honor throughout history and how Americans and Europeans turned their backs on honor after the Great War, leading some Americans to see the honorable thing to do regarding Vietnam as going to Canada.  Today, honor cultures refer to honor in terrorist attacks and in honor killings of family members.  Honor is a powerful cultural characteristic that has driven war throughout history.

Another cultural change involved black Americans.  Four million slaves took advantage of experiences not possible before.   One of those experiences was the chance to fight in the war itself.  Black troops first fought at Island Mounds, Missouri, in October of 1862; however, blacks were not officially recruited, trained, or even "allowed" to serve as soldiers until after the Emancipation Proclamation (EP).  Before the EP, they (mostly slaves who ended up behind Union lines) were called "contrabands" by the Yankees - basically considered property - and were used for labor only. They were not allowed to carry weapons. After the EP, large numbers were recruited, mostly from occupied areas in the South, with the newly-created Bureau for Colored

Troops handling the process. These troops were organized into segregated units (a practice continued for several more wars) with white officers. They were paid about one half of what white soldiers were paid; their pay was reduced further with a clothing deduction instead of the clothing allowance white soldiers received. Reactions to this discrimination varied: some regiments, like the 55th and the 3rd South Carolina Volunteers, threatened mutiny, resulting in at least one courtmartial and execution and some incarcerations; the 54th Massachusetts refused to accept any pay at all.

Black troops suffered about 35% more losses than their white counterparts. Why? Some Confederate commanders killed black soldiers rather than take them prisoner. Also, because of the clothing allowance discrimination, they were very poorly dressed. They suffered a disease rate more than twice as high as white soldiers.

By the end of the war, nearly 180,000 blacks had served as soldiers and sailors for the Union, over 37,000 of whom died as a result.

The "54th" was not the only black regiment in the war, but it was the first and the most famous. It was comprised of 650 volunteers from throughout the Northern states, all free men (unlike the popular myth that has many of them as escaped slaves). They assembled in February, 1863, and began training. In July of 1863, the 54th was sent to spearhead the assault on Fort Wagner in what could easily be viewed as a "forlorn hope" situation. Killed in the assault were forty percent of the 54th, as well as Colonel Shaw. The entire campaign was a Union massacre and defeat. So…

Why was the 54th's assault on Fort Wagner significant?

This assault, even though it resulted in an extremely high "butcher's bill" and a defeat, was the culmination of the overcoming of many obstacles, some of which are mentioned above. Some of the biggest obstacles to be overcome had to do with attitude, belief, and perception. Even though a few people were advocating the recruitment and training of colored troops (even in the South), there were widely-held beliefs and attitudes weighing against the whole idea:

beliefs that blacks were incapable of learning how to fight and be soldiers. Moreover, it was argued that, even if they were allowed to be soldiers, they would wither and show a cowardly side in the face of battle. Did people really believe these things? Some may have. Others quite possibly played on these beliefs for propaganda. Why? Using colored troops would undoubtedly lead to emancipation. Some used the idea of armed colored troops as scare tactics propaganda. The reality was much different. The 54th displayed incredible fortitude and bravery in the face of a terrific onslaught of rifle and artillery fire and in intense hand-to-hand combat. As their comrades fell around them, they continued the fight. They were not deserters or cowards. They forged a reputation for themselves and all black soldiers to follow: a reputation for bravery, courage, sacrifice, endurance, honor, and dedication.

The actions of the 54th and other black soldiers in the Civil War, along with the Emancipation Proclamation and Northern victory, paved the way for black freedom, though that freedom was still far in the future and would require more fighting to achieve.  The Civil War was the beginning of this cultural change.

Shell Shock:

“An apparition made its first appearance on the battlefield in the last week of August, 1914.  As the British official medical history of the war records: ‘During 1914, several men were evacuated from France to England owing to having been ‘broken’ by their experiences in the retreat from Mons.’  Within a month, at the base hospitals in France, Lieutenant-Colonel Gordon Holmes, an expert on nervous disorders, ‘saw frequent examples of gross hysterical conditions which were associated with trivial bullet and shell wounds, or even with only slight contusions of the back, arms, and legs.’  By the end of the year more than a hundred British officers and eight hundred men had been treated for nervous diseases, mostly what the official history called ‘a severe mental disability which rendered the individual affected temporarily, at any rate, incapable of further service.’  By the end of the war, as many as 80,000 officers and men had been unable to continue in the trenches, and many had been invalided out of the army altogether for nervous disorders, including what came to be known as ‘shell-shock’” (Martin Gilbert.  The First World War: A Complete History.  Holt, 1994, p. 61.)  Lloyd George said, “The world is suffering from shell shock.”

Former editor of the British Journal of Psychiatry, Charles Myers, was a middle-aged professor by the time of the outbreak of hostilities in the First World War.  The British army recruited him in 1914 as a captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps, where in December of that year, he received as a patient a soldier who had been trapped in the barbed wire of no man’s land, where several shells had burst quite near him.  Though he appeared to have no physical injuries, he was partially blind and had lost his sense of taste and his sense of smell.  Myers concluded that the extreme proximity of the shell burst concussions had rendered some sort of physical effect on the soldier, perhaps some sort of physical concussion to the brain, and called the condition shell shock.  Myers is sometimes credited for the original diagnosis and use of the term shell shock, perhaps because shell shock did not become a widespread problem until World War I, but he did not invent the term or the theory of shell shock.  He had read of shell shock in the works of others, including Brussels physician Dr. Octave Laurent, who encountered the condition in Bulgaria, and Frederick Mott, pathologist to the London County Council asylums (Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely.  Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War, pp. 17-18).  Myers later rejected the term, because, in light of subsequent cases, he realized it was an incorrect and inaccurate misnomer, but it was too late.  The already-popular term shell shock became the favorite buzzword for World War I doctors, soldiers, the press, and civilians.  It traveled quickly to Britain, across Europe, across oceans to Canada, the United States, and Australia.  Myers and others applied other more appropriate labels over the years, to the point where confusion abounded and no one knew what to call it.  Just a few of the names were hysterical paralysis, war neurosis, nostalgia, irritable heart, exhaustion, neurasthenia, hysteria, emotional disturbance, fatigue, trauma, war nervousness (kriegsneurose), mental confusion from the war (la confusion mentale de la guerre), nerve shock, wounded mind, combat stress reaction, battle stress, combat stress, battle fatigue, combat fatigue, post-Vietnam syndrome, and the list goes on (Hans Binneveld.  From Shellshock to Combat Stress: A Comparative History of Military Psychiatry.  Amsterdam University Press, 1997.   Ben Shephard, A War of Nerves).

Treating physicians and psychiatrists recorded other terms, to which we can match the appropriate war.  In summary, when psychological breakdown “first became widely recognized during World War I, such breakdown was called ‘shell shock.’  By the end of World War I, shell shock had been replaced by ‘war neurosis’ and psychoneurosis,’ which gave way during World War II to ‘combat exhaustion’ and then ‘combat fatigue.’  Combat fatigue remained in use through Korea and Vietnam but was supplemented by terms such as ‘combat reaction’” (Peter S. Kindsvatter S.  American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, & Vietnam.  University of Kansas Press, 2003, p. 155).

The Iraq War has provided yet a new term: Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), which is the result, once again, of explosive concussion.  These soldiers have no visible wounds but suffer from brain trauma as a result of the concussive force of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).  Regardless of better descriptors, and perhaps to Myers’ disappointment, shell shock is still the most widely-recognized and most-often used label.  Ironically, TBI suggests shell shock.

The debate surrounding shell shock began during the Great War, continued into World War II (Patton, the Allied general the Germans most feared, lost command of Operation Overlord as a punishment for slapping American soldiers he saw as cowardly and others saw as suffering from battle fatigue), hit a high mark during the Vietnam Era, when it was renamed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and registered as an official syndrome, and continues to plague us in our current conflict.  It remains difficult to diagnose, difficult to treat, and impossible to prevent, short of eliminating warfare altogether.  PTSD has come to be a part of our cultural fabric.  Legacy of the Great War will address this issue in Units 7 and 8.  Poetry from the Great War will illustrate its presence through the eyes of its participants.