

<Book Review>

The Un-Civil War: Shattering the Historical Myths.

By Leonard M. Scruggs (Universal Media, 2011)

Reviewed by: Tadashi Hama

The most destructive conflict in American history, in terms of both lives lost and property destroyed, the so-called American Civil War, has been poorly represented in modern American history classes and, concurrently, everywhere else. Author Leonard Scruggs points out that the American “Civil War” was “not really a civil war”—the Southern states had no desire of imposing their political will on Washington, D.C. Rather, the Southern states sought to free itself from Washington, D.C. To Northerners, Southern resistance to the narrow interests of Northern industrialists and Northern radical Republicans was entirely unacceptable. The war to Northerners was a “War to Prevent Southern Independence. It was not a glorious crusade to free slaves.”

A key misconception of the so-called Civil War is that President Abraham Lincoln waged war against the South to end African slavery. Scruggs points out that ending slavery was not the most critical issue at the time—ending slavery was important only to extremist abolitionists. The greater issue that loomed over America before the first shots were fired was the Republican’s ham-handed imposition of their political and economic will onto the Southern states.

The conventional narrative is that Southern secessionists fought to preserve African slavery. In fact, few Southerners at the time had an economic interest in slavery. Scruggs points out that an average of 26% of Southern households owned slaves and that about 20% of Confederate soldiers owned slaves. Furthermore, Scruggs points out slave owners were more than willing to do away with slavery if it did not involve “extreme economic hardship,” as the South’s agrarian and export dependent economy was inextricably tangled with slave (that is, cheap, imported) labor. Indeed, the South’s agricultural exports, including cotton, made it the “richest section of the country in 1860.” There were calls well before 1861 for gradual emancipation and compensating slaver owners. What extremist abolitionists and their Republican allies had in mind, however, was immediate emancipation of all black slaves. What the newly freed but under-educated and unemployed blacks were to do after that was not fully spelled out by Republicans.

For President Lincoln, Scruggs points out, freed blacks were to be deported, either sent back to Africa or to colonize Central America; Lincoln did not see any hope of blacks and whites living together. Lincoln was hardly alone in this line of thinking—Northern states such as Indiana, Ohio, Oregon, and Michigan enacted laws that pointedly excluded blacks from white society. Northern states had long-standing laws against interracial marriage. As a member of the state legislature, Lincoln “fully approved” of prohibiting blacks entry into “free state” Illinois.

Was slavery ever an issue before the outbreak of the so-called Civil War? Before becoming president, candidate Lincoln campaigned on leaving slavery as is in states that allowed it but for prohibition of slavery in the new Western territories. A constitutional amendment (what Scruggs calls the “first Thirteenth Amendment”) that prohibited Congress from interfering with slavery in any state was introduced and passed the U.S. House on February 28, 1861 and then the Senate on March 2, 1861. This amendment was proposed at the time to “reassure Southern States that were threatening to leave the Union that there was not and never would be any danger of any Congressional or Federal interference with slavery in the States.”

Did anyone at the time think that slavery was the key war issue? Following the outbreak of hostilities in April 12, 1861, President Lincoln ordered state governors to supply an army of 75,000 to “put down the Southern rebellion.” A joint Congressional resolution of July 22, 1861 stated that the war was not for the purpose of “overthrowing or interfering with the rights or established institutions [i.e. slavery] of those [Confederate] states, but to ... preserve the Union.” In fact, “Northerners actually feared that emancipated Southern slaves might emigrate to the North.” Scruggs points out that even the purpose of the war was clear even to Karl Marx in October 1861: “The war between the North and South is a tariff war. The war is further, not for any principle, does not touch the question of slavery, and in fact turns on the Northern lust for power. ” Lincoln himself stated in 1861 to abolitionist Horace Greeley that his main goal was to “save the Union”: “If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do it...”

Rather than slavery, Scruggs shows that the conflict was due to Northern imposition of economically crushing tariffs. American government revenue at the time was derived largely through tariffs. While the South economically dominated the rest of the US through its exports, the South was heavily dependent on the North and Europe for manufactured goods. Tariffs instituted by Northerners, usually over the strenuous objection of Southerners, not only brought in money to fund the government but also protected Northern manufactures from foreign competition. Furthermore, Scruggs points out that revenues from tariffs benefited mostly the North—“80% or more of these tax revenues were expended on Northern public works and industrial subsidies.”

Tariffs on foreign imports in the first half of the 19th century ranged from 15% to a high of 50%, which, in 1832, evoked the “Nullification Crisis.” South Carolina “called a state convention and nullified the... tariffs as unjust and unconstitutional.” A compromise was eventually worked out, which forestalled armed conflict, with the tariff reduced to 15%.

The newly formed Republican Party, apparently bereft any historical insight, adopted high protective tariffs as major part of its platform. In 1860, the Republican-dominated House approved a tariff bill, sponsored by Republican Representative and “steel manufacturer” Justin Morrill of Vermont, which raised the tariff from 15% to 37%, with an increase to 47% in three years. During the 1860 presidential campaign, candidate Lincoln supported the Morrill Tariff. With such a tariff, Southerners saw Washington, D.C. and Northern industries raking in economic windfalls at their expense. At the very

least, this goes against the spirit of the Constitution wherein it states that “Congress shall have Power to lay and collect Taxes... and provide for the ... general welfare ... but all Duties, Imposts and Excises shall be uniform throughout the United States.”

By the time the Senate approved the Morrill Tariff bill on March 2, 1861, seven Southern states had seceded from the US—none of the remaining Southern Senators voted for it. President James Buchanan signed the bill into law and President-elect Lincoln vowed to “enforce it even on seceding Southern states.”

Scruggs notes a lesser-known but insidious by-product of the war: the rise of the Union League of America (also known as the “Loyalty League”). Union Leagues were formed in 1862 by Republicans throughout the North in response to early Confederate victories and to counter rising pro-Democratic sympathy in the North. At first, the goals of the Union League were to “support the war, the troops and the Republican Party.” Towards the end of the war, local Unionists in Southern states formed Union Leagues. Key leadership positions in these Southern groups transitioned to Northern “carpetbagger politicians and Federal Army officers.” Membership was “almost exclusively of former slaves and black soldiers of the Federal Army.” Indeed, carpetbaggers installed as governors in former Confederate states during Reconstruction used Union Leagues as their own “black militia” to keep themselves in power. The goals of the Southern Union Leagues were to ensure that blacks registered to vote and to vote Republican. Newly freed blacks were a substantial electorate in many former Confederate states, ranging from about 25% in Tennessee to almost 60% in South Carolina.¹ Union Leaguers resorted to terrorism, including lynching, against blacks to ensure that they voted “correctly”. Union Leaguers also used their newly found privilege as the Republicans’ militia to wreck revenge on Southern whites, with looting, arson and murder.²

Scruggs presents for the historically curious other hard facts about the so-called American Civil War. Thinking broadly, one should wonder why it is that demonstrable falsehoods are passed off as genuine history and why unpleasant but true history is diligently ignored. In the end, based on a distorted view of history, ostensibly intelligent Americans meekly yield to the political and economic demands of supposedly victimized ethnic minorities. In fact, Americans are now willing to yield their own rights and dignity for the sake of social harmony. As Scruggs notes: “... Even in the South there are those who are willing to accept an ignominious degradation of truth and venomous slander against the honor of the Confederate soldier in order to maintain social peace.”³ Such is the effect of a masochistic view of history. We should take heed that this thinking is not unique to Americans.

¹ https://faculty.weber.edu/kmackay/statistics_on_slavery.htm

² One is reminded of violence meted by majority blacks on minority whites in post-colonial Haiti and then in Zimbabwe, under the color of “land reform.” <https://www.newsweek.com/zimbabwe-president-robert-mugabe-white-farmers-651326>

³ “AEI Political Report: Polls on Political Correctness,” <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Political-Report-June-2017.pdf?x91208>