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PHILLIP SHAW PALUDAN'S "A PEOPLE'S CONTEST"

by Matthew Noah Vosmeier

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M.E.N., Jr.

On July 4, 1861, when the Civil War was not yet three months old, President Lincoln spoke of the purposes of the war:

This is essentially a People's contest. On the side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men — to lift artificial weights from all shoulders — to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all — to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.

From Lincoln's words, Phillip Shaw Paludan finds meanings which illuminate a period when Northern society changed in the

midst of war. He sees two great forces at work in Northern society. The first, industrialization, increasingly imposed changes on society, both in the way society operated and in how it understood itself. The second, civil war, would test whether the republic could endure. Respectful of the complexity of these two experiences, historians have treated them as though each occurred without affecting the other, though in fact

A full fabric of life was at stake: not just a form of government but its substance — a polity, a society, and an economy all were challenged. The war was thus entwined with the forces that were shaping that fabric, forces born in the emergence of a modern industrializing nation. Between them, war and industrialization would change the lives of the American people (p. ix).

To remedy this oversight in Middle Period historiography, Professor Paludan has written "A People's Contest": *The Union and Civil War, 1861-1865*, published by Harper & Row in 1988 as part



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 1. A woodcut honoring the women of the United States Sanitary Commission, from *Harper's Weekly*, April 9, 1864.

of the New American Nation Series, edited by Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris.

"*A People's Contest*" is described as the first book to investigate the war's effects on Northern society in a single volume since the publication of Emerson David Fite's *Social and Industrial Conditions in the North During the Civil War* in 1910. When Fite conducted his study, Civil War historians were concerned almost wholly with military and political issues. Fite's questions anticipated modern historians' concerns, for he attempted "to ascertain what the people at home were doing to gain their livelihood during the memorable struggle; what were their personal interests and pleasures; what attention they gave to other than political and military matters; how far the normal activities of the nation were maintained; how far and in what aspects they were changed." However, his book was a static description of the economy, education, and entertainment during the war, and he concluded that, for the most part, "war and war politics did not subvert these phases of national life."¹ Professor Paludan's interpretation is more complex. In "*A People's Contest*," he combines the "new social and economic history" with political, diplomatic, intellectual, and military history to create a picture in which Northern society changed the nature of war as much as the war changed it.

Professor Paludan emphasizes the idea that community life formed Northerners' social vision and most directly affected their understanding of political affairs. It was here that people prospered or suffered, worked in the fields or, increasingly, in factories. In this nation of communities, Americans were closely involved with ensuring their own law and order and felt little presence of the national government.

Self-government went hand-in-hand with the belief that one could prosper in a country which appeared to have unlimited economic possibilities. Since the 1840s, the economy had begun to grow rapidly. Yet this economic and technological progress was beginning to change American society, and not entirely in positive ways. Industrialization and economic inequality had increased the plight of the urban poor, and gave many Americans reasons to harbor doubts about American society.

Professor Paludan illustrates this doubt effectively through the diary of George Templeton Strong, a wealthy New York lawyer. After a Lawrence, Massachusetts, factory fire killed hundreds of women workers in January 1860, Strong criticized the victimization of the urban poor as vehemently as any Southern apologist of slavery: "It becomes us to prate about the horrors of slavery! What southern capitalist trifles with the lives of his operatives as do our philanthropes of the North?" (p. 4)

Nevertheless, when Fort Sumter fell a little over a year later, a surge of patriotism shifted the North's attention to the defense of the Union. In communities throughout the North, citizens devoted to the survival of government saw secession as an attack on law and order. Governors oversaw the calling of militia units to meet quotas while communities and states competed with each other in registering new enlistments. This fervor caused Horace Greeley to beam:

Let no one feel that our present troubles are deplorable, in view of the majestic development of Nationality and Patriotism which they have occasioned. But yesterday we were esteemed a sordid, grasping money-loving people, too greedy to gain to cherish generous and lofty aspirations. Today vindicates us from that reproach, and demonstrates that beneath the scum and slag of forty years of peace, and in spite of the insidious approaches of corruption the fires of patriotic devotion are still burning (p. 23).

The government, however, was not fully prepared to carry out a war which was to be costly in financial as well as in human ways. The pre-war government was a small-scale operation which included a financial structure unable to meet the demands of a major war. From the time of the Jackson administration, Democratic policies had built a financial structure without a national banking system, national currency, or federal income tax or excise tax. Its Independent Treasury system conducted government business in specie, physically moving gold and silver in and out of the Treasury on horse-drawn drays. In 1861, government expenditures amounted to 67 million dollars. Increasing to \$475 million the following year, expenditures reached \$4 million per

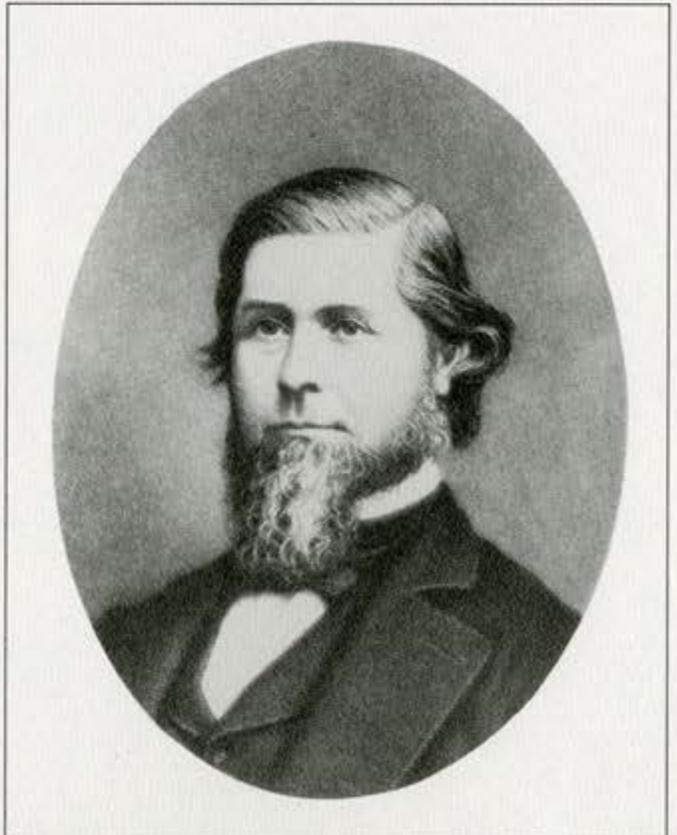
day in 1865.

Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase at first proposed traditional means to raise revenue to fight the war: raising import fees, increasing public land sales, and reviving an excise tax. In addition, he asked for \$100 million in low-denomination Treasury notes and another \$100 million in denominations of up to \$5000 at 7% interest.

When lack of faith in the government drove gold out of circulation and banks suspended specie payments, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens proposed that the government print paper money backed only by the government's promise to pay. This proposal horrified Chase and other hard money advocates, but financial necessity drove Congress to pass the Legal Tender Bill in February 1862 establishing a currency of "greenbacks" (pp. 108-112). According to Professor Paludan, this act changed the way the people of the North viewed the national government: signs of its [the government's] influence would now abide in the pockets of people throughout the North and later throughout the nation....While they [the people] continued to see states and communities as vital to their needs and more easily accessible to their demands, they added a new dimension to their image of government of the people, a new appendage, capable and willing, when called on, to meet their needs (pp. 112-113).

At the same time, the private sector of the economy came to the aid of the government in its war effort. According to Paludan, "as of 1861, the national government did not have the facilities, tradition, or public support to take up the war effort by itself" (p. 114). Decades of laissez-faire policies had kept the government out of the economy for the most part. The government called private expertise into public service, including the financier Jay Cooke of Philadelphia, who successfully marketed government loans and worked to establish national banks in New York City.

Cooke had made his fortune in the Philadelphia banking house of E.W. Clarke and Company, and entered private banking in 1857. When the war came, he became concerned about the government's ability to raise money, and, as he wrote later, "having had many long years of experience in negotiating loans for the



From the Lincoln Museum
FIGURE 2. Jay Cooke, the "Financier of the Civil War," from a steel engraving in L.P. Brockett's *Men of Our Day* (1868).

government, railroads, etc., I felt it my duty to give a portion of my time and efforts to the work of raising funds for the use of the Treasury of the United States...to the extent of many millions of dollars without hope of or any expectation of commissions or rewards of any kind."²

Appointed official agent for the Treasury Department, Cooke tried every method to advertise and to encourage the purchasing of bonds. His marketing skills created great public financial support for the government. Professor Paludan uses a March 7, 1865 *New York Tribune* article to describe a bond agency:

A glance at the characters...will give some idea of the universality of this impartial money distribution. Out of the 100 bond buyers who crowd the office...at least 60 are mechanics or laborers, 20 are saloon keepers, small dealers and soldiers, and the rest are almost nondescript condition of vendors, clerks, and even boys, mixed in with a number of women in faded calico or mourning — toil, sorrow, wrinkled thrift, or the working woman's work-a-day written upon their features (p. 116).

Here, then, is one more picture of how this was truly a "people's contest." Both bonds and greenbacks, says Paludan, helped to unite Northerners behind the war effort: "They put people throughout the North in personal contact with symbols of national authority and wealth. They linked individual fortunes in shops, stores, and farms as well as in banks with the survival of the nation. And they provided the means to pay the soldiers and to buy the guns, supplies and equipment to win victory. In doing this, of course, they also brought fully to light the awesome power, dedication, and resources of northern society" (p. 117).

This theme of interaction between government and society continues in Paludan's description of Northern wartime economy. After an economic downturn early in the war, the economy experienced an astonishingly vibrant and prosperous boom.

Particularly profitable were the railroads, which had started to become a major participant in the northern economy before the war. Railroads were large and far-flung businesses which demanded an efficient and well-organized operation capable of moving people and freight quickly and cheaply (pp. 138-139). Now they became indispensable to carrying out the war, and as the government had no experience with running railroads, it let the experts do it. Professor Paludan quotes General William Sherman who said that one single stem of railroad during his campaign through Georgia

supplied an army of 100,000 men and 35,000 horses for the period of 196 days...To have delivered that amount of forage and food by ordinary wagons would have required 36,800 wagons of six mules each, allowing each wagon to have hauled two tons twenty miles a day, a simple impossibility in such roads as existed in that region (pp. 139-140).

Justifying them as war measures, Republican advocates of a second "American System" implemented a program of internal improvements. Congress passed higher protective tariffs, the Morrill College Land Grant Act, the Homestead Act, and the Union Pacific Railroad Bill. The Republican Congress may have subsidized internal improvements as necessary for the war effort, nevertheless, the political tradition Republicans inherited from the Whig Party led them to believe that government-assisted enterprise could develop the resources of the country and thereby expand economic opportunity for individual Americans.

Abraham Lincoln, an admirer of Henry Clay and former Whig, advocated these ideas. Having little romantic fondness for the frontier of his youth, he believed the North's growing capitalistic society offered average laboring people opportunities:

There is no permanent class of hired laborers amongst us. Twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday labors on his own account to-day and will hire others to labor for him to-morrow. Advancement — improvement in condition — is the order of things in a society of equals. As labor is the common burden of our race, so the effort of some to shift their share of the burden onto the shoulders of others is the great durable curse of the race.³

If before the war, Northerners had winced at accusations about the brutalizing effect of an industrializing, capitalistic society on workers, the war changed that. According to Paludan, "the evils of slavery had smothered much of that critique, branded it as

hypocrisy, and helped a burgeoning Republican majority to forge its own [economic and social] vision" (p. 127).

For the laboring classes, fighting for free labor against a slave economy became a noble cause. But Professor Paludan points out that the advancement of working class goals were undercut because their aspirations were absorbed into the North's general, ill-defined concept of free labor. In this not-yet industrialized society, workplaces were still generally small, workers often perceived their interests to be in harmony with their employers', and they saw their lives more strongly linked to community than to class. As linguistic evidence of an ill-defined concept of class, Professor Paludan explains that manufacturers frequently called themselves "workingmen" or "labor." The older merchant elite were called "capitalists" (pp. 170-174).

If Northern industry enjoyed a wartime boom, Northern working families suffered a decline in their standard of living. Though the working class expressed patriotic duty throughout the war by their participation on the battlefield and on election day, discontent increased. The New York Draft Riot of July 1863 was an explosion of worker discontent caused by the passage of the Conscription Act and the combination of war losses with "economic suffering, racial hostilities, and cultural antagonism to the modernizing forces of industrial society." The \$300 commutation fee, which few could afford, led to an outcry that this war was a poor man's fight, and, in fact, the working classes did march to war in great numbers, suffering "the most heartrending of the costs of war in proportions larger than almost any other group in the population" (pp. 189-190).

Making war inevitably led to suffering both on the battlefield and at home. Families found life difficult with husbands and sons gone, and grieved when they did not return. The human costs of the war were great: an estimated 623,000 men died in the war, 360,000 of whom were from the North. Another 275,000 Northerners received nonmortal wounds. In "The Scars of War," Professor Paludan describes the state of medical practice and beliefs about mental health through statistical records, period medical publications, and more recent secondary sources. But within this framework, he effectively uses family sources to show the human cost of war and how people found consolation.

Not unexpectedly, soldiers corresponded with their families about the horrors of the battlefield, about their own discomfort, bad food, and bad weather, while their families described their own financial troubles and loneliness. As well as causing us to empathize with the struggles of these families, this correspondence opens one more window into Northern family and community life.

One such Northern man who left his ordinary life in New York was Jacob Van Vleck, who missed his wife and daughter terribly and sensed frustration that he could not help them more. This correspondence describes problems of family finance, family news, and whether Jacob could return home on furlough from Petersburg, Virginia, where his regiment camped in 1864. In February 1865, Van Vleck's brigade was involved in a confused and "desperate" battle in which Jacob was killed. An officer wrote a letter of condolence to his family using paper found in his uniform: "This is part of his paper...this is Jacob's blood on it — I could get no other to send" (pp. 323-324).

At home, families tried to maintain as normal a life as possible, and their letters contain descriptions of routine daily life in addition to events of the war. According to Professor Paludan, this was a "practical and emotional necessity" both for the families and for the soldiers who longed for temporary escape from the war. But the war periodically "knives through this correspondence, revealing the dialectic of common daily life in an uncommon time." Augusta Noyes of Worcester, Massachusetts, for example, wrote sadly of a soldier killed leading his regiment but then added, "I will leave this dreadful war picture and come back to a little more town news." (pp. 326-328).

Religion, which had profoundly influenced American society before the war, also found a meaningful role during the war, as Professor Paludan explains:

No force shaped the vision that Northerners had of the war more forcefully than religion. Religion struck at matters of ultimate concern. It justified their accomplishments, explained their tragedies, consoled and inspired them. Their poli-

ticians merged the metaphors of theology with the words of partisanship....And, of course, soldiers and their families found comfort and strength by looking to heaven (p. 339).

Paludan traces the influence of religion in the years before the war from revivalistic concern for personal salvation to reform and antislavery movements aimed at changing American society to meet God's purposes. Clergy, as well as social critics, saw a decline in Northern virtue, attacking, in addition to Southern slavery, Northern "luxury, extravagance, ostentation, and corruption of morals...[and] the growing indifference as to methods of acquisition" (p. 342).

With the outbreak of the war, many denominations came to the banner as defenders of law and order if not necessarily as strong opponents of slavery. Professor Paludan describes well how various denominations, particularly peace sects like the Quakers, confronted the reality of war. As the war progressed, religious imagery and ideals and military goals became connected through rhetoric and songs and in organizational efforts like the Christian and Sanitary Commissions.

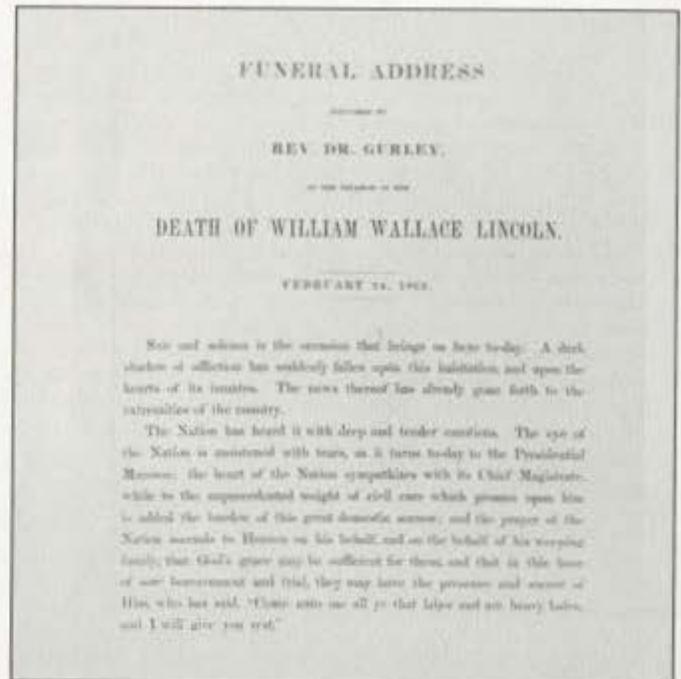
Professor Paludan then discusses mid-nineteenth century perceptions of death and heaven. He explains that widespread childhood mortality compelled a sensitivity to death which reminded parents and others of the dangers of becoming too attached to newborn children and that antebellum Americans saw death as a reminder that "the world is not our home." It was expected that family members and friends would be present at the dying person's side, where they "might both help and learn." As they gathered around the death bed, they were to comfort the dying relative, but not by denying that death would come; rather, they were to make sure the individual was ready to face God and eternity (pp. 364-365).

This family preparation for the death of a relative was not possible when the husband, son, or brother died in the field. Had these men prepared themselves to accept death? When one young soldier from New Hampshire named Austin Whipple died in Libby Prison, the nurse comforting him understood the necessity that his family know how he died. In a letter to Whipple's mother, she assured her: "Whatever the Lord knew was best for him he was ready to acquiesce in" (pp. 321-322, 365).

According to Professor Paludan, there was little interest in the nature of the afterlife in antebellum America, though a sentimentalization of heaven as a serene, homelike place had begun. The Civil War "amplified this process of transforming the afterlife into a place of human contentment by the terrible toll it took in the lives of men." If young men had to die far from home, at least family members were comforted by the assurance that they would meet them on the other side (p. 368).

In the White House, the Lincoln family suffered the loss of Willie in February 1862. This event, believes Professor Paludan, changed President Lincoln's conception of heaven, for he needed to know that Willie was happy: "My poor boy, he was too good for this earth. God has called him home. I know that he is much better off in heaven, but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die." This death also added personal meaning to President Lincoln's sense of sorrow over the death of soldiers and, says Paludan, deepened "his understanding of the religious and theological nature of the war" (p. 370). Seeking meaning for death and suffering, he reconciled himself "to the will of God" and found "peace in believing that the divinity of God was demonstrated by the fact that His purposes could not be facetiously understood by men." Lincoln expressed this understanding of the war in the religious imagery of the Second Inaugural Address, in which he warns against Northern self-righteousness, places both North and South under divine judgment, and explains that, lacking complete understanding of the right, Americans were to show "malice toward none...charity for all" (p. 372).

"A People's Contest" successfully blends the views of different perspectives of the North to create a three-dimensional picture



From the Lincoln Museum

FIGURE 3. Funeral Address of the Reverend Phineas D. Gurley, of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C.

of Northern society during the Civil War. Professor Paludan describes a society at once awed and uneasy about the changes going on around them. Northern society was comprised of many communities and a small, unobtrusive national government both unprepared for war. Yet with the outbreak of war in 1861, Northern society rose to the call and became transformed in the interplay between war and other social and economic forces.

"A People's Contest" is effective in bringing out the North's understanding of the issues of free labor and slavery, industrialization, and war. Its strength rests heavily on Professor Paludan's descriptions of people's perceptions of the war. Northerners' doubts, struggles, and tragedies are powerfully expressed through diaries and correspondence, making "A People's Contest" a full, varied, and at times, moving account of the Civil War. As the book is focused on wartime Northern society, students of Abraham Lincoln will find he enters the story only periodically, as in discussions of policy or party politics. Even so, Professor Paludan sees Lincoln as a provider of meaning for this "struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men." By the war's end, the martyred President's "experience provided a spiritual meaning for the war that would deserve respect long after the trumpets of glory had ceased to echo" (p. 369).

FOOTNOTES

1. Emerson David Fite, *Social and Industrial Conditions in the North During the Civil War*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), p.v.
2. Ellis Paxton Oberholtzer, *Jay Cooke: Financier of the Civil War*, (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs and Company, 1907), p. 142.
3. July 1, 1854, Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols., (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), II, p. 154.