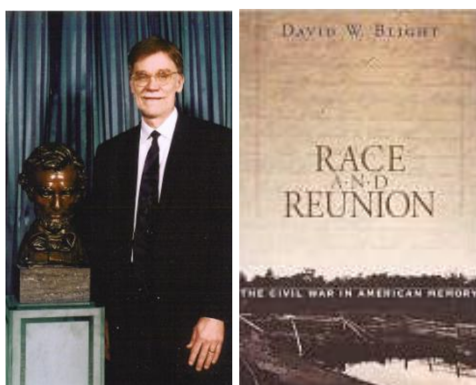
2002 Lincoln Prize Winner David Blight for Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory



Lincoln Prize Acceptance Speech

I accept this honor with a profound sense of gratitude to the Lincoln and Soldiers' Institute of Gettysburg College, to Gabor Boritt, its director, to the members of the Lincoln Prize jury, and especially to Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman for their extraordinary promotion of American history in so many forums across the United States. I have often been asked how and why Mr. Gilder and Mr. Lehrman have developed such a passion for American history. It is not for me to explain; their words and actions in support of scholars and teachers speak for themselves.

I owe special thanks to several more people—to two Amherst College presidents and deans for their support of my work over many years, to some of my colleagues from Amherst who are here tonight, to Axel Schupf, a member of the Board of Trustees of Amherst College, to Randall Burkett, the finest bibliographer of African American studies and archives in America, and to my wonderful editor, Joyce Seltzer, whose skill and generous personal support made this book possible. Finally, I want to thank at least four mentors of differing kinds: Richard Sewell, my mentor in graduate school and for many years beyond who still reads my work with the keenest critical eye I have ever known; Eric Foner, a historian whose work many of us have sought to model and whose generosity is legendary; Michael Kammen, the pioneer in the study of cultural and historical memory who took me under his wing when he had no obligation and corrected my nonsense as he nurtured my zeal to probe the problem of memory; and the late Nathan Huggins,

who changed my life by hiring me at Harvard as his junior colleague in 1987 and helped me grow in my understandings of African American history, discovering as I went that I had been a Hugginoid all along. How and why we all do history or came by our sense of a historical imagination has many answers, but none better than Huggins' explanation in his entry in *Who's Who* in 1982: "I find in the study of history the special discipline which forces me to consider peoples and ages, not my own…. It is the most human of disciplines, and in many ways the most humbling. For one cannot ignore those historians of the future who will look back on us in the same way."

It humbles me down to my soul to accept an award named for Abraham Lincoln about the era I have studied all my life, and to realize that I have been able to know and learn from these historians, and more, who have helped me understand this craft. Doing history is always stepping across some barrier of race or ethnicity, of cultural mores or religion, of nation, or of time itself. We do reaffirm our own humanity by studying all the contradictions and the beauty, the darkness and the triumph, in the humanity of others. Our future desperately needs historians as a compass. Maybe I began to understand that as a boy because I simply loved history. But the love is not enough. I dearly needed my teachers to know how to find those tenuous, exasperating, exhilarating ties between research and finding one's voice, between *knowing* something and having something to *say*.

It is somewhat of a tradition that the Lincoln Prize recipients speak in an autobiographical voice. When I read the speeches of my predecessors I found myself in awe. These are historians I grew up, or came of age, reading. How often I have taught the books of Don Fehrenbacher, James McPherson, Bill McFeely, Kenneth Stampp, Ira Berlin, and a genuine hero of mine, John Hope Franklin. It seems an impertinence to speak any further in an autobiographical voice following such scholars. So I won't.

Instead, let me reflect with you briefly on the problem of historical memory. *Race and Reunion* is a book about how Americans faced, or sometimes did not face, the meanings of their

most conflicted and treacherous past during the fifty years after the Civil War. How do nations revive or re-imagine themselves after terrible wars? What kind of memorial culture is necessary to rekindle a nation from all-out civil war or other such traumas? Why and how did an American reunion of North and South occur while the races, black and white, fell into an era of social, political and psychological apartheid? Did a segregated American society require a segregated historical memory? Are we still overcoming the generations of historical consciousness nurtured in such a divided sense of memory? How did versions of history and memory, in both individual and collective forms, shape the ever sovereign present in which Americans contended for the meaning of their Civil War? How did a society so divided eventually reunify around a master narrative that declared everyone right and no one truly wrong in the nation's remembered Civil War? Was this the tragedy that somehow infested the heart of American history from Appomattox to at least World War I? Indeed, how much of any historical moment can we understand by examining how versions of the past are employed to shape it? These questions and more drove my fitful effort over more than ten years to try to explain the boundaries and character of Civil War memory. To me, the story behind these somewhat obvious questions has always seemed to be but a half-told tale.

The histories we write have a complex relationship to the collective memories and acts of remembrance that the public engages in nearly every day. History is what trained historians do—a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research. It can be read by or belong to everyone; it is therefore more secular and more relative than what people commonly call memory, which is often treated as a sacred set of potentially absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community. Memory is often owned, history interpreted. Memory is passed down through generations of families; history is revised by professional scholars who are not always fully trusted by individuals or memory communities who rely on personal narratives and experience. History asserts the authority of academic training; memory carries the often more

powerful authority of group membership. History and memory need to be treated like unsteady companions in our quest to understand humankind's sense of the past.

What historians studying memory have come to understand is simply that the process by which groups or nations remember collectively itself has a history; we are writing histories of memory. We might agree that the world we live in is riven with too much memory—with nations and peoples held hostage to pasts they cannot escape. And while those memories, often untempered by careful history, can paralyze whole societies and stifle democratizing principles and the achievement of a humane world community, it is precisely because of this dilemma that we must study historical memory. We should know its uses and perils, its values and dark tendencies, and that Americans have never been immune to memory's selective damage. And we should remember that all memory is prelude to future reckonings, and the responsibility to rise above our pasts as best we can, and make the future.

Possibly no American has been the *source* as well as the *subject* of memory quite as much as Abraham Lincoln. At stake in Civil War memory, at least since 1863, has been just what extent Lincoln's notion of "rebirth," given voice at Gettysburg was the dominant legacy of the conflict. Did Lincoln "revolutionize the Revolution" at Gettysburg as Gary Wills famously wrote? At that moment or down through time? Are we still living and making our "rebirth" from the fundamental results of that war? Or are we, students of Civil War memory, forever responding, in our books and in endless public debates, to Lincoln's unforgettable simplicity in the "Second Inaugural" when he referred to slavery as the "peculiar and powerful interest" at the root of the war? When Lincoln declared that "All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war," he left the question that has lingered around virtually all lasting debate about the meaning of that conflict. His tenuous "somehow" has through time been richly probed and grandly avoided.

Thus in his mastery of language is Lincoln the source of our memory debates. But even more, he has been the subject or object of an endless refashioning in our collective memory. As

many scholars and writers have shown, there are many Lincolns to choose from. My own favorite is the man who grew so much, intellectually and ideologically, during the war, especially on the questions of race and slavery. I like this Lincoln precisely because he is not merely mythic (although he can be used that way), but historical as well. Lincoln's capacity for intellectual change has long been a subject of great attention, from poets and scholars, whites and blacks. On February 12, 1959, in his famous speech eulogizing Lincoln at a joint session of Congress (the Lincoln Sesquicentennial), Carl Sandburg rhapsodized about Lincoln's various personas. "Not often in the story of mankind," said the poet, "does a man arrive on earth who is both steel and velvet, who is as hard as rock and soft as drifting fog, who holds in his heart and mind the paradox of terrible storm and peace unspeakable…." Similarly, W. E. B. Du Bois, in 1922, reflected in unforgettable terms on Lincoln's capacity to grow. "I love him," wrote Du Bois, "not because he was perfect, but because he was not and yet triumphed…. The world is full of folk whose taste was educated in the gutter. The world is full of people born hating and despising their fellows. To these I love to say: See this man. He was one of you and yet became Abraham Lincoln." Like Sandburg, albeit in different tones, Du Bois was drawn to Lincoln's embodiment of paradox and change. "There was something left," he said of Lincoln, "so that at the crisis he was big enough to be inconsistent—cruel, merciful, peace-loving, a fighter, despising Negroes and letting them fight and vote, protecting slavery, and freeing slaves. He was a man—a big, inconsistent, brave man." I share Sandburg's and Du Bois's love of paradox and irony. But to love a memory is not enough; it has to have traction in history as well. In the spirit of Sandburg's and Du Bois's love of Lincoln, which I share, I am grateful for this award with all my heart. Thank you.