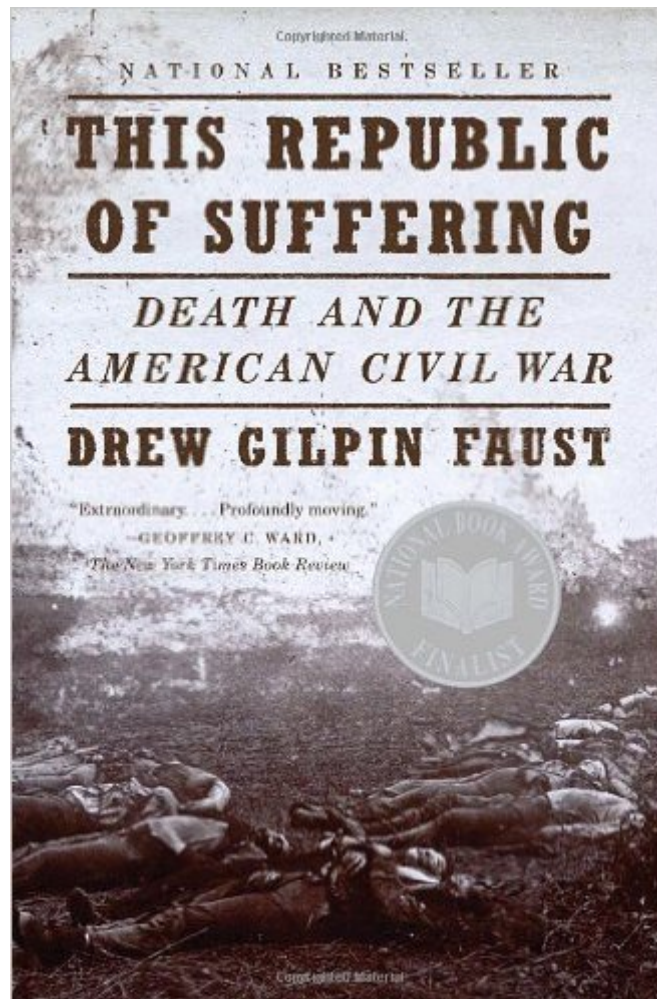


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This Republic Of Suffering: Death And The American Civil War (Vintage Civil War Library)



Synopsis

More than 600,000 soldiers lost their lives in the American Civil War. An equivalent proportion of today's population would be six million. In *This Republic of Suffering*, Drew Gilpin Faust reveals the ways that death on such a scale changed not only individual lives but the life of the nation, describing how the survivors managed on a practical level and how a deeply religious culture struggled to reconcile the unprecedented carnage with its belief in a benevolent God. Throughout, the voices of soldiers and their families, of statesmen, generals, preachers, poets, surgeons, nurses, northerners and southerners come together to give us a vivid understanding of the Civil War's most fundamental and widely shared reality.

Book Information

Series: Vintage Civil War Library

Paperback: 346 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (January 6, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0375703837

ISBN-13: 978-0375703836

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (263 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #23,964 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) [#27 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States > Civil War](#) [#62 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War](#) [#263 in Books > History > Military > United States](#)

Customer Reviews

So wrote a stunned and anguished Walt Whitman as he and the rest of the nation struggled to deal with the incredible carnage of the Civil War. In this eagerly awaited (certainly by me!) book, brilliant Civil War scholar Drew Gilpin Faust documents the social, religious, and psychological coping mechanisms adopted by Civil War America. It's difficult for us today to appreciate just how deadly the Civil War was. The numbers are staggering--620,000 dead soldiers, at least 50,000 dead civilians, an estimated 6 million pounds of human and animal carcasses at Gettysburg, etc--can't convey the concrete horror of a nation living day after day with the shock, disorientation, and despair caused by the bloodiest war in the country's history. The war years surely did transform the nation into a "republic of suffering" (a phrase coined by Frederick Law Olmsted). Faust argues that

the nation tried to keep its head above water by, for example, ritualizing the final moments of wounded soldiers to make them more compatible with mid-nineteenth century models of a "good death"; justifying increasing levels of battlefield slaughter by invoking God, patriotic duty, and justice (which frequently was vengeance); trying to identify and bury bodies of the slain in such a way as to preserve some semblance of their humanity, despite the horrible maiming many of them suffered; creating public and private rituals of mourning; holding "the enemy" accountable for the carnage; and keeping the memory of the slain alive after the war (feeding into Lost Cause sensibilities on the one hand and Bloody Shirt ones on the other). To a certain extent, as Faust acknowledges, similar kinds of coping mechanisms are adopted by Americans during any war.

This is a powerful book that deals with one aspect of the Civil War in a very different context than normal--death. Many books speak of the sanguinary nature of the Civil War, death due to battlefield trauma as well as death due to disease, accident, and so on. But this book, written by Drew Gilpin Faust, addresses death on a much broader basis. As a result, this is a powerful work. One simple fact to begin: the number of Civil War soldiers who died is about equal to the number of American dead from the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Mexican War, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and Korea combined. The focus of the book is briefly stated at the outset (Page xv): "Beginning with individuals' confrontation with death and dying, the book explores how those experiences transformed society, culture, and politics in what became a broader republic of shared suffering." Each chapter has a poignancy that is almost palpable. Chapter 1 focuses on the dying by soldiers. The effort to die a good death was one that manifest itself for many a soldier--Yankee and Rebel. One interesting issue--soldiers appeared to fear death by disease more than death in the heat of combat. Soldiers often carried letters to battle, containing their last words to families and loved ones in case they perished. This is an eye opening chapter. Chapter 2 deals with the other side of the coin--killing the enemy. Many were torn by their Biblical desire to avoid killing others versus their duty to try to do so. Killing others sometimes changed troops, numbing human feeling and producing aftereffects. Chapter 3 addresses burying the dead. After battles, there was often little time and the dead were buried in mass graves, often with no identification (no dog tags then).

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