

## Editors' Introduction

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- 1 A new birth of freedom. These words spoken by Abraham Lincoln on a Civil War battlefield catch what this volume intends to explore. Repeatedly wars have been seen as offering new beginnings, requiring a new start, promising rejuvenation. At the time of World War I Randolph Bourne advocated American non-intervention, seeing it as America's chance to cut the umbilical cord with the English mother culture, as a chance for America finally to come into its own as a "transnational culture."<sup>1</sup> If war in this case was seen as offering a promise of American cultural emancipation from European tutelage, almost a century later leading European public intellectuals, such as Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, saw the Europe-wide protest against the American-led invasion of Iraq as the harbinger of a truly European public finding its voice, a new birth of European freedom. Clearly, in the trans-Atlantic relationship, times of war may exacerbate the quest for a collective identity through strategies that cast either America or Europe as an oppressive and overbearing "Other." On different occasions, as in the years following World War II, war brought the two sides of the Atlantic together, in a shared sense of having to "start from scratch," as artist Barnett Newman put it in 1967, of erasing the past and make a tabula rasa. From the arts to the world of politics renewal and reconstruction were the key words in those years, with America prominently weighing in as a force for renewal. Later, in April 2007, Barack Obama, while still a senator and a presidential contender, gave new resonance to those words, when he said: "The American moment has not passed. The American moment is here. And like generations before us, we will seize that moment, and begin the world anew" thus proving that the trope is still very much alive today and may still strike "mystic chords of memory" for present-day audiences.
- 2 This volume sets out to explore the various ways in which wars have given rise to moods that inspired a language of renewal, rejuvenation or even a fresh start. It intends to explore the various configurations of America and Europe either as adversarial parties divided by the Atlantic, or as partners joined together by it. A central question throughout these explorations is the issue of American exceptionalism. Is it typically for Americans to conceive of wars as offering a release from history, an opportunity to start the world anew? Are Europeans mired too much

in the tragedies of their own war-torn histories, where wars only lead to further wars in an unending settling of scores? Do Europeans need the inspirational model of the American idealist rhetoric before they make such language and tropes their own? Does it take a European's cynical eye to deconstruct the language of wars and new beginnings and see it as a case of American cant and hypocrisy, a rhetorical façade hiding the more mundane motives for waging war that Europeans would instantly recognise, such as national and security interests, and balances of power? As recent studies such as Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Culture of Defeat* again illustrate, the French after the Franco-Prussian War, and the Germans after World War I, all emphasized the fact that the next war would lead to a new beginning, yet one rooted in victory over the former foes.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the new beginnings as envisaged here are more like cycles repeating themselves, as if "Europe [were] too thickly planted with Kingdoms to be long at peace," to quote Thomas Paine (*Common Sense*, 1776).

- 3 As for Americans, on the other hand, it is not simply a matter of wars being waged "to end all wars." Not long before his untimely death the historian Tony Judt observed that "For many American commentators and policymakers the message of the twentieth century is that war works."<sup>3</sup> As military historian Andrew Bacevich, quoting Judt, adds: "Judt might have gone even further,"<sup>4</sup> in the sense that well beyond the circle of experts and insiders, many ordinary Americans even today at least tacitly share that view.
- 4 This reading of the twentieth century has had profound implications for U. S. policy in the twenty-first century. Bacevich goes on to say that with the possible exception of Israel, the United States today is the only developed nation in which belief in war's efficacy continues to enjoy widespread acceptance.
- 5 Others – the citizens of Great Britain and France, of Germany and Japan – took from the twentieth century a different lesson: War devastates. It impoverishes. It coarsens. Even when seemingly necessary or justified, it entails brutality, barbarism, and the killing of innocents. To choose war is to leap into the dark, entrusting the nation's fate to forces beyond human control. Recent U.S. military history confirms this somber premonition. Has the country thereby gone against its long-standing foreign-policy wisdoms formulated by George Washington in his Farewell Address (1796) : "Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all"? Issues such as these are central to the various contributions to this volume.
- 6 They range over time, from the early days of the American republic, when the renewed conflict with England in the War of 1812 offered the occasion for a re-invigorated debate on the identity of the new nation, through the years of Civil War when the nation had torn itself apart and found itself in need of giving meaning to the sacrifice both sides in the conflict had made. From the Spanish-American War in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on through two World Wars Americans had to explain to themselves in what different ways and on what different grounds they waged international wars, different from the traditional war aims that motivated European countries, aims seen as colonialist or imperialist. These wars occasioned Americans to develop a national rhetoric and form of public speech to express their exceptionalism, giving shape to a rhetorical tradition that time and again as an inspirational language would serve to ready the nation for war through a renewal of the national sense of mission and "manifest destiny." In this respect, this collection revisits and rehabilitates the *longue durée* in American history, the deep pattern that recent historiography has tended to

play down. Yet, as recent controversies have taught us, it is at the same time a tradition that on occasion appears as its own travesty, debasing a language of high ideals for purposes of naked belligerence. The Iraq War is the most recent illustration of that happening.

- 7 This volume explores the formation of this national rhetoric as well as its transformation over time. It was never uncontested, nationally nor internationally. From the early days on there was always this paradox of a nation defining itself against others, as non pareil, while at the same time, on behalf of those others as it were, speaking the language of universalism and internationalism. It may have been for others to try and “deconstruct” such language and translate it in the more cynical terms of national interest and political realism. If such deconstruction served as a tool of anti-Americanism abroad, it may paradoxically have served as well to inspire America’s critics with precisely the sort of idealism they may have accused America of subverting. If in their eyes America was falling short of living up to its vaunted ideals, such ideals then became the standard for others in taking America’s measure. Thus, paradoxically, America through its wars and international conflicts may have inspired others with its language of new beginnings.
- 8 There are those whose life history has come to illustrate the paradox. Thus, Jürgen Habermas in the early days of the Iraq War may have felt the inner stirrings of anti-Americanism, while conceiving of the moment as Europe’s new beginning, a promise of emancipation from American tutelage; he could at the same time be aware of what he owed America. In a 2004 interview in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, he testified to his current disillusionment and disenchantment with the U.S. administration and its standard-bearers. The experience, he said, was all the more painful because, as he acknowledged, he could not have come into his own as a philosopher of public space and democratic debate without the impact of America’s pluralist liberalism and its philosophy of pragmatism. Ever since he was sixteen, his political ideas had been nourished by the American enlightenment ideals, thanks to a sensible reeducation policy in the postwar years of American occupation in Germany.<sup>5</sup> If there had been a paradox then, it was of an occupying power successfully transmitting the ideas and ideals by which it professed to live, successfully articulating the concept of “war of liberation” and reinventing the boundaries of international law. If there was a new beginning at the time, for Germany and other countries in Europe, it was one designed in America, not one that had to be defined against America as in the days of President Bush’s Iraq War. If America was “right on message” at the time, with the American Century, presciently announced by Henry Luce in 1941, rapidly shaping up, it was more a matter of Europe being ready to receive the message than of America inventing one for the occasion. In a sense America was reiterating language it had been using from the days of its Declaration of Independence, if not before, going back to colonial times.<sup>6</sup> From the height of its City upon a Hill, it spoke in a voice of universalism, for all of humanity. Although geographically at the margin, far from the center of world history, it arrogated the role for itself of pilot nation, charting the course of world history for others to join. This discourse was powerfully rearticulated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a secularized Christian mythology named “Manifest Destiny,” and expressed in the most successful historical text of American history, Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier thesis.<sup>7</sup>

- 9 When Lincoln spoke on the battlefield of Gettysburg he saw it as his mission to remind the nation of its founding creed, to take it back to its republican origins and enthusiasms. Only in the return to republican ideals could the nation hope to give a new birth to freedom and to give meaning to the death of so many in the fraternal carnage of a nation gone astray. Lincoln's address is in the rhetorical mode of the Jeremiad, reconfiguring a tragic present with a view to evoking the promise of the past.<sup>8</sup> Lincoln thus followed Machiavelli's precept that for republics to survive they need to go back to their origins and founding principles, in order that –as Lincoln reminded his audience – “government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”
- 10 Although his language was universalist, speaking of the Americans as “a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” it was not inclusive of all Americans. Lincoln had come to dedicate and consecrate a national cemetery for those who had given their lives that that nation – “so conceived” – might live, not a cemetery for those who had given their lives for a different cause, the “Lost Cause,” as Southerners would ruefully remember it. Or could it be argued that in Lincoln's rhetorical gesture, conceiving of the Civil War as a testing ground for the endurance of republican principles, the Southern sacrifice of life had in its defeat contributed equally to the “new birth of freedom”? It is certainly not the reading that the South, in its retrieval of meaning in its defeat, chose to adopt. As the only section in the reconstituted United States that knew the experience of defeat and the tragic sense of life, it lived within existential parameters that brought it closer to a European sense of history, as the great historian of the South, C. Vann Woodward, never tired of reminding us.<sup>9</sup>
- 11 Yet, in the decades following the Civil War, Lincoln's reference to “the brave men who struggled here” suggested an inclusive reading of the battle that came to dominate the shared remembrance, North and South, of the Civil War as the testing ground, if not crucible, fomenting a revolution in the way whites would henceforth think about themselves in terms of shared racial identification.<sup>10</sup> The South powerfully contributed to this new reading, turning defeat into eventual victory, in *The Birth of a Nation*, a film classic based on Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman*. A view of the United States as a White Republic, to use historian Alexander Saxton's coinage,<sup>11</sup> undergirded numerous revisits of Civil War documents, such as photographs re-combined and re-contextualized in popular albums, as in the 1911 ten-volume *Photographic History of the Civil War*, assembled by Francis Trevelyn Miller.<sup>12</sup> In the ritualized memories of the war which entered popular culture in the early twentieth century, the war came to seem an experience Americans shared rather than one that had divided them. In this volume Mark Meigs traces a similar development in the reading of Civil War photographs, while contrasting it to the sobering anti-war readings later given to World War I photographs. He thus emphasizes the inherently unstable quality of war photographs as historic documents and their ambivalent place in cultures of memory.
- 12 Yet another Southerner, Woodrow Wilson, in a remarkable address entitled “The Ideals of America,” delivered in 1901 on the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Trenton, held out the prospect of a new American revolution, one that would restore national unity by transforming the United States into an imperial power capable of taking up Rudyard Kipling's challenge to the Americans to take on “the white man's burden.” Indeed, according to Wilson, that new American revolution had already occurred when the

United States occupied the Philippine Islands during the Spanish American War. "No war," Wilson declared, "ever transformed us quite as the war with Spain transformed us." As a result, the "nation that was one hundred and twenty-five years in the making has now stepped forth into the open arena of the world."<sup>13</sup> American popular culture was quick to reflect this general attitude and to disperse it among a mass audience. A popular song at the time played on this theme of a newly found unity of purpose among Civil War veterans in North and South: *He Laid Away a Suit of Gray to Wear the Union Blue*. The role played by the early popular music industry, *Tin Pan Alley*, centered on Northern and mid-Western cities like New York and Chicago, is the topic of one chapter in this volume by Robert W. Rydell. As he reminds us, what is striking is that so many compositions attempted to use the Spanish-American War to bleach out - not to say: "whiten" - the "bloody shirt" of still lingering Civil War memories and erase memories of the bitter sectional conflicts.

- 13 For readers of this volume this is an important point to keep in mind. Lincoln's ringing invocation of a new birth of freedom captures a high-minded republican creed wrested from the carnage of Civil War. It inspired his fellow citizens, while giving succinct expression to an Americanism that would henceforth also inspire non-Americans, like Jürgen Habermas in the ruins of war-ravaged Germany. But it was never the whole message. As we have just seen it could also be a message giving a much narrower reading of the idea of America and the Americans, excluding race and gender from its definition while at the same time justifying an American imperialism as a white man's mission. This alternative conflicting reading of America has always been one that the outside world had to sort out for itself and make sense of.
- 14 Wilson saw in the Spanish-American War the moment when America finally came into its own, giving it a civilizing mission in the world as well as internally, in a moral mode of uplift and paternalism. It was also a war, in his eyes, that had a healing effect on the nation allowing it to overcome the wounds of the Civil War, in a new configuration of cultural hegemony.
- 15 More generally this volume looks at wars as defining, if not re-defining, moments where the sacrifice of life and limb of American citizens transmuted into the sanctification of the nation. Lincoln's Gettysburg address can be given such a Durkheimian reading, as suggested by Agnieszka Soltysik in this volume. For both North and South, blood spilled on the battlefield could sacralize such tokens of remembrance, if not totems of collective survival, as the flag, confederate or Union, the bloody shirt, or the national anthem. Ironically, the "Star-spangled Banner" evokes a previous war in American history, the War of 1812, which Soltysik dismisses as among the less significant wars, leaving no trace in American self-reflection. In disagreement, Jaap Verheul takes up the opening chapter arguing that more than the Revolutionary War, which brought political freedom and independence, the War of 1812 led Americans culturally to emancipate themselves from tutelage of the old mother-country, and to explore and define the contours of American nationhood. Cultural forces came to a head which had been building before, even in colonial times, leading colonial subjects to conceive of themselves, no longer as British subjects, but as Americans. Cultural nationalists had spoken up before 1812. In an early burst of nationalist rapture the American poet Joel Barlow dedicated his epic poem *The Columbiad* (1807) to Columbus, the visionary, the man able to foresee the later glory of the American republic. But the War of 1812 may well have brought the full birth of

cultural freedom, the freedom to define the national identity by American, not British or European standards.

- 16 This is not to deny that the American War of Independence — tellingly known as “the American Revolution” — is the fount of many of the emblematic tropes that have inspired America’s rhetorical and iconographic tradition. It has spawned collectively shared repertoires of images and remembered stories that serve as so many places of memory, instantly triggering feelings of national affiliation and patriotism. Mention a crucial historical moment like George Washington crossing the Delaware and people will see an image before their eyes resembling the painting by German-born painter Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, which as an icon has entered the domain of the mass-circulation of images and can be found on stamps, coffee mugs, and T-shirts. As Jutta Ernst points out, the painting itself, more than being simply the source of later heroic readings, is already in a traditional painterly mode of heroic representation. It stands in a line of what we called emblematic tropes that travel back and forth between linguistic forms of rhetoric and their visual equivalents. Tracing the afterlife of this established emblem Ernst finds it meeting its deconstruction at the hands of contemporary American artists.
- 17 In the interplay of wars and a rhetoric of new beginnings in visual and linguistic forms, as explored in this volume, time and time again wars have served as the triggering moments for a dormant repertoire of emblematic tropes to spring back to life and to serve in the quest for meaning to be salvaged from the wreckage of war. One such repertoire in America has always had to do with a sense of the new and modern as a defining element in the American sense of self. It is a Promethean quality, cherished by Americans themselves, and recognized early on by outside observers.<sup>14</sup> Over time American modernity has shown various faces, of political modernity, of technological and entrepreneurial prowess, and of existential modernity where the American appeared as “a New Man,” to the point of providing French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre with the cinematic persona of the lone existential hero in Hollywood movies.<sup>15</sup> In various combinations these faces of modernity were assembled to give expression to the sense of a new beginning through the test of wars.
- 18 While America had gained expertise in this exercise for domestic use throughout its nineteenth-century wars, the following century would challenge it to produce visions of new beginnings for international use, as a tool of cultural diplomacy. How well it did this, particularly in connection with World War II, is explored in several chapters. David Ellwood looks at the role of American armies in Europe as a revolutionary force affecting the traditional cultural place of women in European countries. Peter Schrijvers, focusing on the liberation of Belgium, looks at American armies as a publicity caravan, as ambassadors of abundance, setting in motion what David Ellwood calls a revolution of rising expectations. In the Belgian case they were expectations of personal pleasure, inspiring a cult of abundance. The Americans, moreover, displayed new models of interracial and gender interaction which worked to undermine established cultural patterns in Belgium. Marja Roholl explores the inventive new ways in which the American Office of War Information (OWI) packaged American forms of modernity, in industry and economic life, in politics, in education, and had them ready for distribution in various printed media. Frank Mehring continues in this vein, looking at films made for the Marshall Plan, educating Europeans in a new scale of self-



conception transcending their narrow national identities and instilling a message of trans-national co-operation.

- 19 As we have argued before, this shining message of American modernity was never the sole and uncontested face of its self-presentation to the world. There was always the darker side of patterns of racial, gender and class inequality, translated into repertoires of stereotypical representation permeating American popular culture. Mehring finds one example of this in his close reading of one Marshall Plan film where a black boy is cast in the mould of old "Coon" or Sambo stereotypes, which take us back to Robert Rydell's chapter in this volume. Jean-Paul Gabilliet more directly explores this reverse side of what was presented as America's Promethean modernity. Not all Americans at the time were quite so sure of this reading of themselves, universalist and cosmopolitan. Domestically, there was an anguished retrenchment from the frontiers of new beginnings behind a much narrower provincialism. Feelings of anxiety translated into a number of scares, of Communists, of organized crime, of Unidentified Flying Objects, which may well have been the contemporary response to the threats of an emerging Cold War. Europeans of a more critical bent were hard put to rhyme these conflicting faces of the new power orchestrating their collective lives. And diplomats and politicians were equally hard put to stay on message and salvage the vision of an Atlantic World as a new beginning. Kate Delaney has chosen to look at festive gatherings at one powerful site of memory, the landing beaches in Normandy. In the changing composition of the group of invitees she sees the continuing attempt at projecting new alliances among states and statesmen connecting them back to the hopes and enthusiasms of D-Day.
- 20 Once again our aim is not to oversimplify the issue, iron out differences and produce a historically erroneous unanimity called either modernity or universalism. On the other hand it would be a grave misunderstanding to see the contradictions within American history and society as the product of either hypocrisy (the moral reading) or the alienating power of ideology (the Marxist reading). Quite the opposite in fact. Because of its idealistic origins, origins it shares with many other nations, the United States is structurally caught in the classic dilemma of interests versus principles.
- 21 This is why this book about new beginnings must have an open ending. The last chapter explores a tension within the Obama administration between the high hopes it brought after the warmongering political culture of the preceding years and the inspirational rhetoric it applied to the task, and the constraints set by entrenched political groups and the vitriolic and toxic language that seems to define the political culture in the land. The two faces of American power that publics abroad have become intimately aware of and which have fed feelings of affiliation and of disaffection alternately pop up. The jury is still out on what in the end will be the real face of the Obama administration.
- 22 One thing, however, seems clear. The possibility of new beginnings, the permanent myth of reincarnation that has constituted one of the sturdiest fabrications of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is over. Despite the powerful attraction of the United States for millions in the world, the very possibility of eternal rebirth and eternal youth that the country invented for itself is gone with the end of exceptionalism. Of course such an enduring and endearing myth will not disappear overnight. But we believe that it will as it came to represent the last triumphant embodiment of perhaps the most central trope of the western world: that of resurrection.



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NOTES

1. Randolph Bourne, "American Independence and the War," *The Seven Arts*, supplement to the April issue (May 16, 1917).
2. Wolfgang Schivelbusch and Jefferson S. Chase, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003)
3. Tony Judt, "What Have We Learned, If Anything?" *The New York Review of Books* (April 13, 2008)
4. Andrew Bacevich, "The Revisionist Imperative: Rethinking Twentieth-Century Wars," The annual George C. Marshall Lecture on Military History, delivered on January 7, 2012. The History News Network (HNN) recorded video of the lecture available at <http://hnn.us/blogs/andrew-j-bacevich-revisionist-imperative>
5. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 18, 2004, p. 15.
6. S. Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).
7. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1953; reprint: New York: Dover, 1996), 1-38.
8. S. Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).
9. C.Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955); *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North-South Dialogue* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964). In *Culture of Defeat* (Cf. note 2), Schivelbusch and Chase include the American South, comparing it as an American case to Germany and France.
10. In Lincoln's own words: "But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract."
11. Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (London: Verso, 2003).
12. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images As History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989) 76-79.
13. Woodrow Wilson, "The Ideals of America," *Atlantic Monthly* 90 (1902), pp. 726, 730-732.
14. Our use of the word Promethean may put the reader in mind of David Nye's work, particularly his recent *America As Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003) But ever since early work like *The American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) Nye has revisited the theme of the Promethean quality of American culture as second creation, as natural, or divine creation done all over again under human auspices.
15. On this point, see: Rob Kroes, "Traveling Theories, Traveling Theorists: French Views of American Modernity," in: *Them and Us: Questions of Citizenship in a Globalizing World* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000) 147-166.

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