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## Flip Side of the Coin: The Unpleasant Reality of Hatred

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# Flip Side of the Coin: The Unpleasant Reality of Hatred

## **Abstract**

November 19th saw the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, and with it, one of the highlights of the year: The annual Fortenbaugh Lecture. The goal of the annual Fortenbaugh lecture is to capture the spirit of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and make academic history accessible to the general public. This year's lecturer was Dr. George Rable, Professor Emeritus and formerly the Charles G. Summersell Chair in Southern History at the University of Alabama. Dr. Rable's reputation as a prolific scholar of the Civil War era is well known, with 6 books to his credit, including *Fredericksburg, Fredericksburg!* which won the 2003 Lincoln Prize. [excerpt]

## **Keywords**

Fortenbaugh Lecture, George Rable, Hatred, Vengeance

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

### Flip Side of the Coin: The Unpleasant Reality of Hatred

By [Cameron Sauers '21](#)

November 19th saw the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, and with it, one of the highlights of the year: The annual Fortenbaugh Lecture. The goal of the annual Fortenbaugh lecture is to capture the spirit of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and make academic history accessible to the general public. This year's lecturer was Dr. George Rable, Professor Emeritus and formerly the Charles G. Summersell Chair in Southern History at the University of Alabama. Dr. Rable's reputation as a prolific scholar of the Civil War era is well known, with 6 books to his credit, including *Fredericksburg*, *Fredericksburg!* which won the 2003 Lincoln Prize. As I sat in the Majestic Theater eagerly waiting for the lecture to begin, I talked with one of the other CWI Fellows about our work this semester. One of the things we mentioned was that, by constantly being exposed to the photos, first-hand accounts, and statistics of the Civil War, we had become somewhat numb to the horrors and atrocities of the conflict. This conversation ended up being the perfect lead-up to Dr. Rable's talk, *Fighting for Reunion: Dilemmas of Hatred and Vengeance*.



**Dr. George Rable**

Rable began with a disclaimer that his talk would not be pleasant, as he was going to explore hatred and vengeance. He then made a simple, but extremely important, assertion: Hatred and war go together. However, Rable argued that students of the Civil War ignore or take for granted the true meaning and far-reaching implications of this hatred. This introduction really hit home for me, especially since I had just discussed my own numbness to aspects of the Civil War. I knew that hatred existed on both sides, but I had never considered the full implications of that hatred. Hatred involves revulsion, disgust, and anger, all of which lead to social contempt and ostracization or, in extreme cases, unrelenting violence and the deep political ramifications of that violence. Laying this simple foundation was key to Rable's topic of understanding northern hatred of the South, and vice versa.

Beginning with the start of the war, Rable pieced together primary source documents, such as letters and newspapers, to create an understanding of the northern political climate. Rable was motivated by what he called the "flip side of the coin," the already well understood southern hatred for the North. He briefly explored southern hate of the North, including one startling anecdote from a southern newspaper about graffiti left on a Union hospital encouraging the wounded within to die "on the double-quick." From this discussion, Rable pivoted to the North's own assertion that they had never responded in kind to southern hatred. However, as the lecture progressed, Rable made it clear that the North lacked the self-awareness to understand the vitriol of hate they poured forth, as well as the breadth and depth of its ramifications. Henry Adams, grandson of President John Quincy Adams and United States Ambassador to the United Kingdom during the Civil War, recognized that politics as a practice, whatever its professions, had always been a systematic organization of hatred. Despite Abraham Lincoln's inaugural address claim that North and South were friends, not enemies, the firing on Fort Sumter soon brought volleys of rhetorical and physical hatred from the North onto the South. Lincoln's message had little effect on Wisconsin Governor Alexander W. Randall, who wrote that people would not be content with any cessation to the war until all of the traitors were hung or driven into exile, and that was only the beginning of Randall's venom towards the South.

Rable did concede that, for a time, Lincoln's message did have an impact on the North. At the start of the war, ministers and religious leaders in particular advocated that it be fought on Christian principles. Ministers wanted soldiers to develop or remain pious individuals who fought a conflict that adhered to their religious creeds. They wanted soldiers to shun drinking, gambling, and other forms of vice and sin while in camps. In battle, ministers encouraged soldiers to be merciful to wounded and captured, but most importantly to be brave in their faith – willing to accept martyrdom. To these leaders, the erring southerners were still Christian brothers. Even William Lloyd Garrison called for mercy toward the wayward southerners. These messages fit in neatly with Lincoln's conciliatory policy towards the South at the start of the war. However, northern patience eventually ran dry. The more blood that was shed, the harder reconciliation was going to be. As the war became more violent, northern politicians began to debate how to act toward and think about southern soldiers and civilians.

As early as the Spring of 1862, schisms opened in the North amongst Copperheads and Republicans about the proper policies needed to wage war and pursue eventual reconciliation with the South. Political name calling, something not unfamiliar to a 21st century audience, was rampant as northern Republicans and Democrats jockeyed in Congress to validate their courses of action. This became especially prevalent as the war transitioned from a conciliatory war to a hard war, bringing Emancipation to the forefront of political consciousness. Divisions also opened up between religious sects, as Protestant and Catholics clashed over the Bible's teachings and how they influenced this subject. Rable drew more than one laugh when he included an anecdote from a Catholic priest who derided the Protestants for their mercy towards the South, attributing it to the fact that Protestants are schismatic by nature.



Rable tracked how northern ideas of hatred and vengeance changed throughout the war, with the Emancipation Proclamation and increasing bloodshed further intensifying the northern zeal for hatred against the South. Following the Emancipation Proclamation came the enlistment of USCT troops and subsequent northern fears that they would seek revenge on former slaveholders. While USCT troops did not seek revenge on former slaveholders, their presence did lead to hatred from politicians and Confederate soldiers. Throughout their service in the war, USCTs received horrific treatment from

southerners, treatment much worse than what their white northern comrades experienced. For example, at the Battle of the Crater, USCT Troops were shown no mercy when they tried to surrender, with many of them being shot or bayoneted in cold blood. This horrific treatment of USCTs intensified politicians' debates about the future and how to deal with whites and freedmen. For as vocal as northern politicians were with their own hatred and vengeance towards the South, they had yet to develop a plan for what should be done to slaveholders. Should they be punished? Politically ostracized? Northern politicians realized that the fates of former slaveholders and freedmen would be highly interconnected after the war, especially after witnessing the intense violence exhibited against USCTs. The surrender at Appomattox further raised the stakes for northern politicians. The long national nightmare was over. What had been rhetoric for four years was going to have to become enacted policy. While northern leaders were willing to entertain a merciful response to the South at the behest of Lincoln, his assassination made mercy an infeasible model.

Abraham Lincoln's plan for the post-war years and Andrew Johnson's actual actions differed greatly. Lincoln had wanted mercy for the southern states so as not to increase the hatred and divisiveness between the sections. Although Lincoln deeply hated slavery, he wanted mercy for the slaveholder, which followed the theme of "hate the sin, love the sinner" emphasized by so many northerners throughout the war. Johnson, a Tennessee man himself, harbored deep hatred toward southern elites. If Lincoln embodied New Testament mercy, Johnson reflected Old Testament vengeance. To many in the North, Johnson's ascension to the presidency was a sign of God's Will, making Johnson an instrument of Divine Retribution. The rhetoric of hatred and vengeance played a definitive role in shaping policy throughout Reconstruction, inhibiting progress and resolution to the conflict despite belief from both the North and the South that such hatred was needed to ensure the success of their cause.

Rable concluded by saying that some may have found his lecture vague and contradictory, which he admitted it was. However, that was exactly Rable's point: Countless different viewpoints and perceptions of right and wrong existed during the Civil War, forcing northerners and southerners to grapple with their hatred and thirst for vengeance. Rable presented these conflicting ideas to the audience with the reminder that the "new birth of freedom" was not easily decided upon. Within "the new birth of freedom" was the complex task not only of national reunion, but also of emancipation and ensuring economic, social, and political legitimacy for African Americans, a monumental, but necessary, task for the nation.

As I filed out of the Majestic Theatre, I reflected on my takeaways from the lecture. Rable's talk expanded the traditional historical narrative to include the evolving, and often conflicting, thoughts and ideas of different groups of northerners. He depicted the inner divisions within the North itself, which are frequently glossed over in celebratory or romantic narratives of a monolithic and strongly unified northern populace. Rable's talk was a reminder about the destructive power of hateful rhetoric, and that even the "good guys" hate. When we generalize about how groups of people thought, felt, or act,

we lose the divisions within that group. I had never considered that the North found itself consistently susceptible to in-fighting; the narrative I knew was always the North acting as a single cohesive political unit, which turns out to be far from the truth. The lecture was a reminder to me of the need to constantly analyze and dissect what we believe to be norms so that we remain open to new avenues for historical understanding. Complete with countless primary source references, Rable's talk was an important example that there are no shortcuts to good scholarship.