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Review: Looming Civil War

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Abstract

In *Looming Civil War*, Phillips writes about the future, specifically, the one predicted by nineteenth-century Americans in the years preceding the Civil War. Challenging dominant narratives of the war, Phillips argues that nineteenth-century individuals were fully aware of a looming civil war and that many believed it would be a long, bloody, and disastrous conflict, not just a short excursion. As individuals looked to the uncertain future, they all made predictions unique to their race, religion, gender, and location. Some white southern elites saw the looming war as an Armageddon that would destroy civilized society, while abolitionists and slaves saw war as a harbinger of freedom. Phillips seamlessly blends these abstract conceptualizations of war with physical realities by using material culture as his driving impetus, illustrating how nineteenth-century Americans interacted with the physical world in a way that both illustrated and influenced their conceptions of the future. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CWI Summer Conference, Jason Phillips

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Review: Looming Civil War

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#)

Looming Civil War: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Imagined the Future

[Jason Phillips](#)

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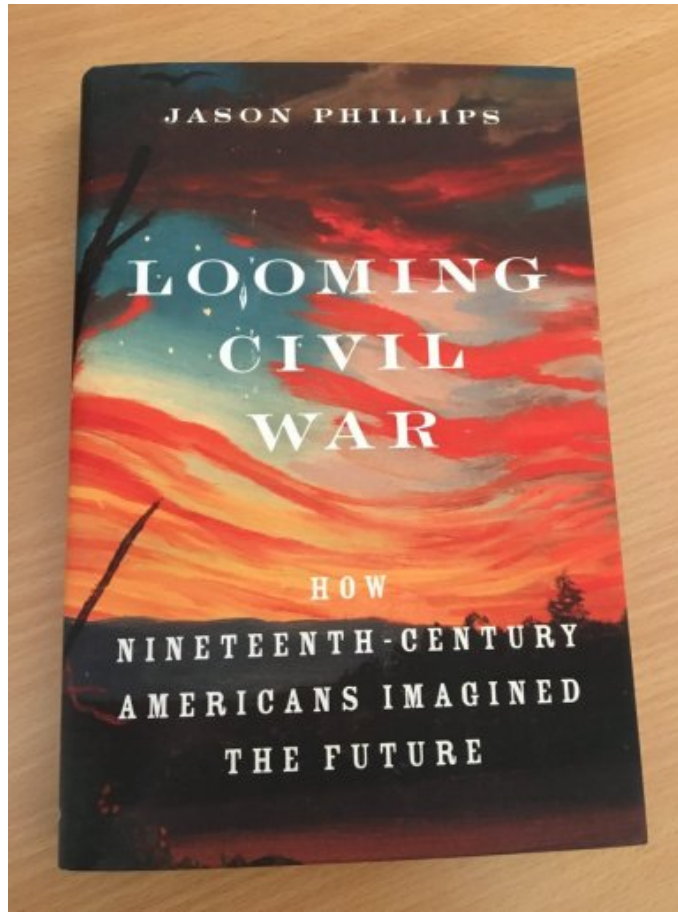
In *Looming Civil War*, Phillips writes about the future, specifically, the one predicted by nineteenth-century Americans in the years preceding the Civil War. Challenging dominant narratives of the war, Phillips argues that nineteenth-century individuals were fully aware of a looming civil war and that many believed it would be a long, bloody, and disastrous conflict, not just a short excursion. As individuals looked to the uncertain future, they all made predictions unique to their race, religion, gender, and location. Some white southern elites saw the looming war as an Armageddon that would destroy civilized society, while abolitionists and slaves saw war as a harbinger of freedom. Phillips seamlessly blends these abstract conceptualizations of war with physical realities by using material culture as his driving impetus, illustrating how nineteenth-century Americans interacted with the physical world in a way that both illustrated and influenced their conceptions of the future.

Phillips begins his book by distinguishing between two distinct ways of understanding the future, or temporalities: Anticipation and expectation. Although the two words are used interchangeably today, Phillips explains that there is a difference between the two that stems from their Latin roots. Anticipation refers to acting on the future, such as buying on credit before actual money is at hand. Expectation is a state of waiting in suspense. Although both terms rely on predictions of the future, they differ in how the individual reacts to the future: Through action or inaction. Those who *anticipated* the future believed they could influence and shape events through their own active participation. Although Phillips cautions that generalizations about worldviews cannot be universally applied to members within a group, he notes that anticipation was more common amongst white men who were financially independent, like John Brown who anticipated the looming civil war and the emancipation of slaves. Brown believed that the only way to force emancipation was through action, so he killed members of the pro-slavery Doyle family in Kansas and raided Harper's Ferry in order to help spur mass emancipation. Individuals who *expected* the future, on the other hand, believed that

providence would ensure that events happened according to God's will. Phillips points to the slaves who expected that Abraham Lincoln's election as president would eventually lead to their freedom. While some slaves anticipated freedom, and thus ran away to Union lines to guarantee their freedom, others waited in bondage until freedom came to them, thus expecting freedom. As Americans marched towards what many saw as an inevitable conflict, their temporal understanding of the future influenced how they viewed the war and its causes, as well as what they believed the outcome of the war would mean for the nation.

Regardless of whether an individual anticipated or expected the war, their views were equally influenced by the myriad material objects they interacted with on a day-to-day basis. One of the objects Phillip focuses on is the bowie knife. When Henry Clay Pate set out to capture John Brown for the violence he inflicted in Kansas, Pate was carrying a bowie knife with him, a bowie knife which eventually became the possession of John Brown. To Phillips, the presence of the bowie knife was significant. Like many others, Pate acquired his bowie knife when he decided to move to Kansas. The bowie knife was not just a present for his journey, but a symbol of the type of political atmosphere Pate would be entering. Kansas, which was deciding whether to enter the United States as a free or slave state, had become a territory of intimidation. Most men carried bowie knives on their person, both to use in political intimidation and for protection. One Kansas resident told a reporter that a man needed to grab his bowie knife the second he saw another man reach towards his hip.

In one sense, the proliferation of the bowie knife was a reaction to the violent atmosphere in Kansas; however, as illustrated by the aforementioned Kansas resident, the knife also contributed to the rampant violence. Kansas had become a place of anticipation, with men carrying bowie knives in order to shape the future they wanted. Charles Sumner noted this aura of violence in his speech to Congress right before being caned by Preston Brooks, who chose to use a cane with great deliberation. The cane represented his class status as a wealthy southern slaveowner and gentlemen, the caning of Sumner thus symbolically reminding people of a slaveowner's right to punish his slave for bad behavior. In practical terms, the cane was less likely to fall into Sumner's hands during the altercation than a whip, another object closely associated with slavery. Throughout his book, Phillips shows the intentionality of individuals' use of objects which speak to their predictions of the Civil War. His study of material objects grounds the more abstract ideas of the future in the concrete realities of the physical world, allowing readers to understand pre-war America in a way that is very similar to how nineteenth-century citizens would have experienced the world.



Jason Phillips will be speaking at this summer's [2019 CWI Conference](#).