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Abstract

Following the bloody years of the Civil War, veteran organizations became a breeding ground for nationalism making and memory shaping. Historians, like Caroline Janney and David Blight, have debated what these memories meant for northern veterans. Did members of the Grand Army of the Republic [G.A.R.], the Union veterans association, reconcile with the South over a shared whiteness, as Blight suggests? Or were the memories of Northerners less reconciliatory, as Janney argues? Using Iowa G.A.R. reunions as a case study, this article demonstrates that Union veterans were shaping a pro-Union nationalism distinct from the Lost Cause. From songs praising the moral rightness of the Union to speeches calling Confederates traitors and unpatriotic, Union veterans in Iowa created shared memories of their experiences. These shared memories formed the basis for a nationalism which remained distinctly pro-Union and anti-Confederate and which would be perpetuated well into the twentieth century by Iowa veterans even as a younger generation pushed for reconciliation.

Keywords

Civil War, Public Memory, Civil War Memory, Grand Army of the Republic, Nationalism

The Memory of Battle Surrounds You Once Again: Iowa Grand Army of the Republic Reunions and the Formation of a Pro-Union Nationalism, 1886-1949

Peter Bautz

Five years after the Civil War ended, Secretary of War William Belknap delivered a keynote address before a group of veterans at the 1870 Reunion of the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.). A former Major General in the Union Army and a fellow Iowan, he began his address by invoking the memory of the war that had recently ended: "In the joyous satisfaction of a Union rescued and under the control of peace, you are, in imagination, my brothers, in the midst of an Army of which you were a part. You are among memories which no influences can now dispel." Belknap then spoke about memories of muskets firing, friends falling, and the triumph of patriotism. He memorialized valorous Iowans who had given their last for their country and reminded the living to honor their sacrifice as Lincoln had asked in the Gettysburg Address.¹

Belknap concluded his address with another strong reminder about the role of Civil War memory in American society. He told the veterans, "History will tell of the deeds of those days. Artists will sketch in colors the memorable actions which will to all ages illustrate the art and science of war. Songs will recount the heroic labors of the Union's brave; but soon of those whom the Nation honored there will be only a memory left." He then reminded veterans

¹ William Belknap, "Address of General Wm. W. Belknap Secretary of War at the Re-union of Iowa Soldiers, Des Moines, Iowa," August 31, 1870, 3-4.

that the duty of reminding the nation about what memory should be preserved would fall to them as they aged: “[The memory of the war], though, will still endure, and as the last actors in those scenes, with trembling limbs and silvered locks, are singled out as survivors of a patriotic Army ... children will hasten to gather around them as they tell the stories of the days of the great rebellion.” Belknap had, in short, instructed the Union veterans before him to pass their memories on to the next generation and to ensure that the patriotic, Union version of the war was not lost.²

Speeches like Belknap’s illustrate how powerful veterans were in shaping the memory of the Civil War. Veteran societies, like the G.A.R. and the United Confederate Veterans (U.C.V.), and their reunions buttressed and emboldened their respective section’s national myth. Public memory has become an increasingly important area of research for historians, who have begun to recognize that the creation of memory is often just as important as the events that the memory seeks to enshrine.³ Undervalued in much of the recent public memory work by historians of the Civil War has been the impact Union veterans had in shaping a pro-Union nationalism. Many historians, like Caroline Janney and John Neff, have found it difficult to pin down exactly what the pro-Union nationalism was. Janney views the nationalism as a

² William Belknap, “Address of General Wm. W. Belknap Secretary of War at the Re-union of Iowa Soldiers, Des Moines, Iowa,” August 31, 1870, 14-16.

³ Some examples from historians include: David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Sarah Purcell, *Sealed With Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

reconciliatory, umbrella one which everyone from suffragettes to imperialists could get behind.⁴ These definitions of a pro-Union nationalism have been unsatisfying at best. But perhaps this difficulty can be explained by the fact that most historians have insisted on treating the North as one monolithic group. Most works on Northern memory include veterans' memories as part of their study but fail to separate them from politicians and home front memories of the war.

Separating out veterans as a select sub-category of the Northern population allows a deeper look at what veterans thought about the war in its aftermath. It becomes clear when considered separately that veterans created and maintained a distinctly pro-Union nationalism which undercut Lost Cause claims, reminded the nation that the Union fought for the right cause and the Confederacy fought for the wrong cause, and argued for the remembrance of Union sacrifices but not Confederate sacrifice. These themes crop up in many states around the country, including Iowa. In particular, publications of the Iowa Department of the G.A.R. from its founding in 1868 to its dissolution in 1949 provide an excellent case study of how reunions played a major role in forming a pro-Union national identity.

The Grand Army of the Republic

In 1866, Major Benjamin Franklin Stephenson and Chaplain William Rutledge founded the G.A.R. in Illinois. From there, the G.A.R. grew from a small group into a large national organization which became a breeding

⁴ Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 8-11. John Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 1-15.

ground for pro-Union nationalism. From its inception, the G.A.R. earned the reputation of a bloody-shirt-waving, Republican partisan organization for Union veterans.⁵ Low participation rates among veterans forced the G.A.R. to undergo a transformation into a fraternal order dedicated to a three word motto: “fraternity,” “charity,” “loyalty.”⁶ The new G.A.R. gathered a large number of veterans to the organization and by the 1880s could claim over 400,000 Union veterans among its ranks.⁷ The late 1880s also saw another shift in the G.A.R. as it became one of two Civil War veterans’ associations. The rise of the U.C.V. in the South at the end of the nineteenth century began the dissemination of the Lost Cause in opposition to the pro-Union nationalism espoused by the G.A.R.⁸ While

⁵ State Historical Society of Iowa, *The Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic* (Iowa City: Athens Press, 1936), 18-19.

⁶ Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xiii-xiv.

⁷ State Historical Society of Iowa, *Iowa Department of the G.A.R.*, 20-24. In this case, “ranks” is both figurative and literal. The G.A.R. was arranged in a quasi-military structure with a Commander-in-Chief, Department Heads, Quartermasters, etc.

⁸ The U.C.V. was not the creator of the Lost Cause but the organization did help to make the Lost Cause a mainstream notion in the South. Foster Gaines notes that the Lost Cause was based on tropes: “states’ rights,” “white supremacy,” “[defending Southern] actions in 1861-1865,” and “[insisting] that the North acknowledge the honor and heroism of [the Southern] cause.” This was often a far cry from the Union nationalism found in the G.A.R. For more, see: Keith Bohannon, “‘These Few Gray-Haired, Battle-Scarred Veterans’: Confederate Army Reunions in Georgia, 1885-95,” in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, edited by Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 89-110; Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3-8; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory* (New York:

continuing to bolster a pro-Union nationalism, the G.A.R. campaigned heavily for pension reforms and Republican political candidates. In fact, it was often thought that, through the end of the nineteenth century, a Republican candidate could not secure the party nomination for president without G.A.R. support.⁹

However, the G.A.R. provided more than simply political support and a voice in government for its members. G.A.R. departments were divided into posts, serving towns and cities of various sizes. At post buildings, veterans would gather to talk about politics, war memories, and anything else that might be in vogue.¹⁰ The G.A.R. also sponsored numerous reunions at the national, state, and local levels. These annual reunions were called “encampments” and normally involved veterans gathering to remember the war and discuss army memories with their fellow veterans over the course of a few days. Encampments involved a day of formal, official meetings and informal campfires at night. Campfires involved singing songs, reciting poetry, and listening to informal speeches – in other words, the perfect environment to facilitate the development of nationalism.¹¹

The Iowa G.A.R. was a particularly well organized state department of the G.A.R. and was active at the national level as well. The Iowa Department kept some of the best records of their reunions and was one of the largest

Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); Robert E. Lee, “General Order No. 9,” April 10, 1865.

⁹ State Historical Society of Iowa, *The Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic* (Iowa City: Athens Press, 1936), 20-24.

¹⁰ McConnell, *Glorious Contentment*, xiii-xiv.

¹¹ Iowa Grand Army of the Republic, *Journal of the Forty-third Annual Encampment Department of Iowa Grand Army of the Republic at Davenport* (Des Moines: J. H. Welch Printing Co., 1917).

and best organized G.A.R. state departments. Iowa provided three Commanders-in-Chief of the G.A.R. and was prominent at many reunions. Founded in 1868, the Iowa Department was the third G.A.R. department to be formed, and many national G.A.R. reunions were held in the state.¹² In short, Iowa was a major participant at all levels of G.A.R. reunions.

The Memory Debate and Imagining Communities

Scholars of Civil War memory have worked to formulate an idea of how Americans created imagined communities in the aftermath of the Civil War via shared experiences. David Blight argues that Confederate and Union veterans came together over a shared whiteness, forgetting about slavery as a cause of the Civil War in favor of a more neutral memory of soldiers' valorous sacrifice.¹³ Christopher Waldrep, likewise, argues that the North capitulated to Southern racial views, using the Blue-Gray reunion at Vicksburg in 1917 as a case study.¹⁴ Some scholars have sought to chip away at this reconciliationist position. John Neff argues that Union memorial services and memorials helped solidify a pro-Union nationalism rather than a capitulation to the Lost Cause.¹⁵ Barbara Gannon emphasizes black integration in the G.A.R., which was much more widespread than previously thought, as a primary conduit for the formation of a pro-Union

¹² State Historical Society of Iowa, *The Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic* (Iowa City: Athens Press, 1936), 28-30.

¹³ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 3-5.

¹⁴ Christopher Waldrep, *Vicksburg's Long Shadow: The Civil War Legacy of Race and Remembrance* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 1-5.

¹⁵ Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead*, 1-15.

nationalism.¹⁶ Caroline Janney directly pushes back against Blight and argues that the North never forgot that the Civil War was fought to free the slaves and that these veterans were developing a pro-America nationalism.¹⁷ In sum, there is an ongoing debate in the historical community regarding how much the North capitulated to the South over issues of memory.

All these scholars share one thing in common: a focus on memory and the development of nationalism. Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" framework for nationalism provides a useful tool in this case study for understanding how Iowa veterans were creating a pro-Union nationalism. Anderson defines a nation as imagined because "members ... will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."¹⁸ He recognizes shared songs, poems, and printed works as key to developing the imagined communities – they are the tools by which people imagine what their fellows must be like. All of these types of community-building activities occurred at reunions, making the "imagined communities" framework highly useful in evaluating Iowa G.A.R. reunions.

Another common element to these scholars' work is their treatment of the early years of the G.A.R.. None of these scholars contest the idea that the G.A.R. was a partisan Republican, pro-Union group in its early years.¹⁹

¹⁶ Barbara Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1-11.

¹⁷ Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 3-11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ See for instance, Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 141-142, where Blight describes the fierce partisanship which he argues "gave way" to the

Disagreement over the level of reconciliation only arises in when historians consider the era after the Lost Cause emerged in the mid-1880s. For this reason, this study focuses on the years 1886-1949 for this study.

The Peak Years of the G.A.R.: 1886-1913

By the end of the nineteenth century, the G.A.R. had become a vast organization with hundreds of thousands of members. These members retained Republican allegiances and were responsible for getting numerous Republican candidates elected to office.²⁰ As its members aged, it became a powerhouse for securing pensions for Union veterans and establishing Soldiers' Homes for poor veterans.²¹ G.A.R. national encampments and national campfires became larger and the memories created at these events reached wider audiences as the G.A.R. became better organized and published more literature for its members.²² Here, too, Iowa mirrored larger trends in the G.A.R. as Iowa veterans helped get Republican governors, senators, and representatives elected. They voted for Republican presidential nominees. The Iowa encampment journals became longer and contained better notes, and Iowa encampments became bigger.²³

The songs, poems, and speeches at Iowa G.A.R. reunions from 1886 to 1913 demonstrate that sectionalism

reconciliation of the late 1880s onwards. The Iowa G.A.R. was just as partisan as the national G.A.R. during its early years, if not more so.

²⁰ McConnell, *Glorious Contentment*, xiv-xvi.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xiv-xvi. State Historical Society of Iowa, *Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic*, 23, 37-38.

²² State Historical Society of Iowa, *Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic*, 23, 37-38.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35-40. Given the context of the definition, "perpetrate" was likely a phonetic (mis)spelling of "perpetuate." As it is, perpetrating a memory the organization cherished makes no sense.

was very much alive well into the twentieth century. When the Torrence G.A.R. Post in Keokuk, Iowa, adopted a new set of by-laws in 1891 at their annual post reunion, they included an introductory section in which they defined the three watchwords of the G.A.R.: “fraternity,” “charity,” “loyalty.”²⁴ However, it is apparent that fraternity did not mean fraternity for all veterans of the Civil War. They defined fraternity as bringing together the men who “united to suppress the late rebellion” and to “perpetrate [sic] the memory and history of the dead.”²⁵ This is hardly a definition of reconciliation. Instead, these Iowa veterans established a fraternal club that excluded ex-Confederates. The most interesting definition they gave, though, was of “loyalty”:

To maintain true allegiance to the United States of America, based upon a paramount respect for, and fidelity to, the National Constitution and Laws, to discountenance whatever tends *to weaken loyalty, incites to insurrection, treason or rebellion*, or in any manner impairs the efficiency and permanency of *our free institutions*.²⁶

Notably, the G.A.R. veterans chose to emphasize their position against treason and rebellion – two terms that were frequently used to describe Confederates even after the war by these veterans. They also chose to emphasize how they would protect their free (i.e. not slave) institutions. These

²⁴ *By Laws and Roster of Torrence Post No. 2 Grand Army of the Republic Department of Iowa* (Keokuk: No Publisher Listed, 1891), 2-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ *By Laws and Roster of Torrence Post No. 2*. Emphasis mine.

lines do not sound like those of an organization dedicated to “reconciliation and fraternalism” with their ex-Confederate counterparts.²⁷

Iowa G.A.R. members went beyond simply invoking sectionalist definitions of their organization at reunions, though. They also read poems with a definite pro-Union, anti-Confederacy message. At the second reunion of the 35th Iowa Infantry in 1889, Blair Wolf of Company G rose to recite a poem he had written for the occasion. He reminded his audience that when “foul rebellion arose in the land / ... / The Northland stood firm in upholding the laws.”²⁸ He argued that the Union had “stood up for justice” and “fought for the truth.”²⁹ This recitation was “heartily received” with a “storm of applause” according to the report of the reunion.³⁰ This type of poem fits well within the model Anderson presents in *Imagined Communities*. Wolf invoked the plural “we” to describe his fellow Union veterans and reminded them of the cause for which they had fought – national unity. The lines of this poem celebrate a heroic memory inseparable from the pro-Union cause.³¹ These poems were ways for veterans to partake in a shared memory of the war and to reaffirm their pro-Union nationalism.

²⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 198.

²⁸ Blair Wolf, “Untitled Poem,” in *First and Second Re-unions of the Thirty-Fifth Iowa Infantry Held at Muscatine, Iowa* (Muscatine: 1890), 34. It is possible that this was John Wolf, who also served in the Thirty-Fifth Iowa. Both men were present at the reunion, and after a person spoke for the first time his name was recorded from then on as their last name preceded by the title “Comrade,” which was the title of choice for fellow G.A.R. members. Context suggests that the speaker here was Blair Wolf.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 146.

Poems such as these continued to be publicly recited at G.A.R. reunions well into the twentieth century. At the 1913 Department of Iowa encampment, Henry Field of Gordon Granger Post 64 in Grinnell rose to recite a poem about the service rendered by Union veterans written by a friend who was unable to make the reunion. The poem invoked themes of patriotism and loyalty and urged veterans to recall how they had fought to see “That the wrong might fall forever, / Neath the onward march of right.”³² This type of language was repeated often in songs, poems, and speeches at Iowa reunions and national reunions. His wording is characteristic of other similar works which praise the triumph of right over wrong, in which freedom for the slaves and restoration of the Union were on the side of the right, while treason and slavery were on the side of the wrong. By contrasting the two forces in terms of right and wrong, Iowa G.A.R. veterans created a pro-Union nationalism that rejected treason and Confederate sympathies.

Iowa veterans also sang songs intended to perpetuate the pro-Union imagined community that they had created. These songs included patriotic songs, pro-Union nationalism songs, and anti-Confederate songs. At the 1913 Iowa reunion, “Battle Cry of Freedom” was sung to wild applause as three veterans paraded across the stage wearing Union blue, carrying the Stars and Stripes, and brandishing muskets from the war. They sung “The Boys Who Wore the Blue,” which celebrates the bravery of Union soldiers under heavy fire. Other songs included patriotic, pro-America songs like “The Star Spangled

³² Pierson H. Bristow, “Retrospection,” in *Journal of Proceedings Thirty-ninth Annual Encampment Department of Iowa G.A.R.* (Des Moines: J. H. Welch Printing Co., 1913), 168-170.

Banner” and “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean.” These songs reminded veterans that they had fought for America and for a just cause. They also sang pro-Union nationalistic songs like “Up with the Flag!” and “Marching through Georgia,” which helped solidify the pro-Union nationalism of the veterans. Veterans also sang anti-South songs like “We Rose a Band of Patriots,” a rewording of the Confederate national anthem “Bonnie Blue Flag” which, among other things, changed a line about Southern rights and liberties into one about “foul treason.”³³ These songs were clearly intended to take shots at Southern views of the war by twisting pro-Confederate words to be anti-Confederate.

Yet for all the importance of songs and poems in building nationalist ideology, orations both published and spoken tell a much more explicit tale of a developing pro-Union nationalism and pushing back against the Lost Cause. Speeches also demonstrate the emerging gap between civilians’ and veterans’ memory of the war. As years passed, public officials who had not lived during the war began to reshape the memory of the war to fit a more reconciliatory tone. Veterans, however, never entirely accepted this new way of thinking about the war. At the War Department, semi-official discrimination occurred against Confederate groups during the 1890s led by the Secretary of War, Russell Alger. A former G.A.R. commander, Alger would, for instance, divert tents to G.A.R. reunions while refusing to give any to U.C.V. reunions. In the 1910s, a new Secretary of War, Lindley Garrison, who had just been born when the war ended,

³³ William Smith, *Complete G.A.R. Songbook* (Detroit: Herald Publishing House, 1887), 31.

insisted upon equal treatment for all veterans' groups.³⁴ As veterans began to leave public office, their non-veteran replacements tended to be more reconciliatory in their approach to sectionalism, as can be seen in Iowa.

In 1913, both the current governor of Iowa and a former governor of Iowa gave speeches to the annual encampment of the Iowa G.A.R. at the evening campfires. Both men had grown up during the war and were old enough to remember the fighting. George Clarke, the sitting governor who was thirteen years old when the war ended, addressed the veterans first. He invoked Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to remind veterans of the good they did in the war. He argued that the Union army had "made possible... a great destiny for the United States."³⁵ He highlighted the significance of the results: "No slavery, an indissoluble union."³⁶ Just a few hours later, ex-Governor Frank Jackson, who was eleven when the war ended, rose to address the veterans, invoking similar imagery and themes. He began by telling veterans that he, too, had been there – that he had lived through the war just as they had.

³⁴ This conclusion is drawn from careful analysis of press copies of letters sent by the Secretaries of War from 1896 to 1913. For instance, in 1897, a U.C.V. reunion was denied access to Department tents for use at their reunion under the claim that some tents had been provided for the general festival where the reunion was to occur and that the rest of the tents were needed elsewhere. Two days later, a similar request from the G.A.R. was approved and the tents which had been "unavailable" were diverted to the G.A.R. reunion instead. By 1913, the Secretary began chastising G.A.R. veterans for trying to valorize the Union too much over the Confederacy on a monument. *Press Copies of Letters Sent, War Department, 1896-1913*, record group 107, entry A1 82, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

³⁵ George W. Clark, "Address to the Iowa Department of the G.A.R.," *Journal of the Thirty-ninth Annual Encampment*, 120.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

This created a shared space where an imagined community could be built. He then went on to talk about how the veterans had “licked the Southern Confederacy” and could still play an active role in upholding the doctrine of “human liberty” and progress as championed by the Republican party. His speech was a call to the victorious veterans to embrace the South to “reunite” the country but not failing to be watchful of the South nonetheless.³⁷

Veteran rhetoric remained pro-Union, but other civilian leaders who had not lived during the war, such as Mayor James Hanna of Des Moines, focused their speeches on sacrifice and duty, two motifs of the reconciliationist camp of Civil War memory.³⁸ Hanna began his address to the 1913 Encampment of the Iowa G.A.R. in Des Moines by calling the 1860s a “heroic age... filled with heroic issues and heroic deeds.” He went on to remind veterans of “the sacrifices and deeds of that time” which would inspire generations to come. He even went so far as to hint that the veterans were unjustly biased in their sectionalism, saying “We are sometimes too close to things to see them fully.”³⁹ Noticeably absent from Hanna’s address are any references to the triumph of the Union, Southern traitors, and the rebellion that was the war. Union veterans called the Civil War “the rebellion” or “treason;” Hanna termed it the “situation” or the “great issues of the country.”⁴⁰ He spent more time emphasizing shared sacrifice and heroism than anything else. Clearly, Hanna had bought into the idea of reconciliation.

³⁷ Frank Jackson, “Address to the Iowa Department of the G.A.R.,” *Journal of the Thirty-ninth Annual Encampment*, 139-141.

³⁸ James Hanna, “Address to the Iowa Department of the G.A.R.,” *Journal of the Thirty-ninth Annual Encampment*, 122-123.

³⁹ Hanna, “Address to the Iowa Department of the G.A.R.,” 122.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 122-23.

Another good example of this civilian-veteran divide came in the form of how Iowa veterans reacted to the praise showered on the memory of Robert E. Lee by Northerners and Southerners alike on the one hundredth anniversary of his birth in 1907. When a New York magazine, *Collier's Weekly*, published an editorial valorizing Lee in 1907, Iowa veterans blasted the editorial in a pamphlet which was circulated to all G.A.R. posts around the country. *Collier's* wrote that "America has had no nobler citizen," calling Lee "grave, strong, devoted" and asking all Americans North and South to rally behind him.⁴¹ To the Iowa G.A.R. Patriotic Instructor, Robert Kissick, these eulogies were "teaching false patriotism."⁴² He laid into *Collier's* in an editorial he sent in response and in a pamphlet that was circulated to G.A.R. posts around the country. He argued that Lee had been "a traitor" and likened him to Benedict Arnold, the infamous turncoat of the Revolutionary War.⁴³ He went on to quote the responses of numerous veterans from Iowa to his article. W. D. Kinser, for instance, was disgusted that anyone would honor a traitor who fought to prop up a government founded on slavery. This pattern held true for most Iowa veterans who either criticized Lee as an uncaring traitor who backed the moral evil of slavery or sent simple letters of concurrence with Kissick's opinions.⁴⁴

As politicians and civilian publications moved towards reconciliation, veterans, like those in the Iowa G.A.R., continued to maintain a pro-Union nationalism that

⁴¹ "Robert E. Lee," *Collier's Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 17 (January 1907), quoted in Robert Kissick, *The Duty and Necessity of Teaching True American Patriotism* (Des Moines: J. H. Welch Printing Co., 1907), 9.

⁴² Kissick, *Teaching True American Patriotism*, 7.

⁴³ Kissick, *Teaching True American Patriotism*, 10-12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-19.

fought to beat back the reconciliationist views of civilians. While civilians lavished praise on Southern heroes, Iowa veterans were busy singing anti-Confederacy songs, reading poems about how Southerners were traitors, and reciting speeches about the patriotism of Union veterans.⁴⁵ Historians claim that reconciliatory rhetoric arose during this period, but records from Iowa G.A.R. encampments reveal that veterans remained sectional, sometimes strongly so, even in the twentieth century. This pattern continued even as the rest of the country tried to move beyond the sectionalism of the Civil War Era.

The G.A.R. In Decline: 1913-1956

Although most historians view the G.A.R. as a slowly declining power relegated to Memorial Day commemorations and the occasional sentimental Blue-Gray reunions after 1913, Iowa G.A.R. reunions demonstrate that veterans still actively promoted a pro-Union nationalism, albeit with slightly altered rhetoric and actions.⁴⁶ It is true that the declining population of veterans meant that grand reunions occurred less frequently. Historians are correct in arguing that the power of the national G.A.R. was on the decline. The last large national G.A.R. encampment occurred in 1922 in Iowa, and it was billed as such.⁴⁷ It was

⁴⁵ The editors at *Collier's Weekly* were just one example of this phenomenon of civilians praising Southern heroes. Theodore Roosevelt in his 1907 address in Washington, D.C. on the anniversary of Lee's birthday praised Lee as an American hero and one of America's greatest generals.

⁴⁶ McConnell, *Glorious Contentment*, xvi. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 198-201. It should be noted that Blight essentially sees the G.A.R. as early as the mid-1890s.

⁴⁷ State Historical Society of Iowa, *Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic*, 25. The 1922 G.A.R. reunion in Des Moines was

at this reunion that, for the second time in the history of the G.A.R., an Iowan became Commander-in-Chief of the G.A.R.. By 1917, the Iowa G.A.R. membership had dwindled to a few thousand veterans. This did not mean the G.A.R. had lost all its power, though. Indeed, local posts such as those in Iowa continued to push for the placement of American flags in every classroom and other such patriotic activities. In other words, although the Iowa Department was in decline in terms of members, it retained considerable public influence.

The report of William Johnson, the Department of Iowa G.A.R. Patriotic Instructor, at the 1917 state reunion gives a good glimpse at the work the Iowa G.A.R. was undertaking to promote patriotism in the state. The report includes a list from the national office with responses from the Iowa Patriotic Instructor. Of note are the following details: of the forty-three posts in Iowa in 1917, thirty-six had provided over 300 American flags for placement in every school in their area, all posts ensured that a state law requiring the flag to be raised at school every day was enforced, most posts ensured that the Pledge of Allegiance was said daily in those schools, all posts ensured that “patriotic days” were observed in schools, and most posts reported on how Memorial Day was observed at schools and in towns.⁴⁸ These actions held a special significance for

billed as “The Last Great Encampment.” The last G.A.R. reunion was held in 1949 with a scant six attendees.

⁴⁸ Iowa Grand Army of the Republic, *Journal of the Forty-third Annual Encampment Department of Iowa Grand Army of the Republic at Davenport* (Des Moines: J. H. Welch Printing Co., 1917), 46-47. Of the 206 schools in the state, 160 reported to statistics to Johnson. “Patriotic Days” included Lincoln’s Birthday, Washington’s Birthday, Memorial Day, and Flag Day. The Fourth of July is conspicuously absent from the list.

the pro-Union nationalism that these veterans were trying to promote – they pushed for the Union to be celebrated in every classroom, reminding students that they were part of one nation under one flag because the Union had won the war.

The placement of flags and other pro-Union imagery was a way for local posts to solidify pro-Union nationalism even as the national G.A.R.'s power declined. Flags and national symbols play a large role in the creation of imagined communities. Anderson notes, "Out of the American welter came these imagined realities: nation-states, republican institutions, common citizenships... national flags and anthems, etc."⁴⁹ That G.A.R. veterans were working to ensure that national flags and pledges were in schools speaks powerfully to the nation-building occurring through the G.A.R.. But it was a pro-Union nationalism that the G.A.R. was trying to foster. Alongside the flag, the Iowa G.A.R. placed copies of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to assert to a new generation that the Union had fought to free slaves and protect the country.⁵⁰ Students would celebrate the Union Memorial Day, not the Confederate ones.⁵¹ Rather than simply being a Memorial Day organization after 1913, the G.A.R. worked feverishly to ensure that the pro-Union nationalism they had fostered among themselves would be passed on to future generations.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 81.

⁵⁰ Iowa G.A.R., *Journal of the Forty-third Annual Encampment*, 46.

⁵¹ Confederates and many Southern states tended to celebrate a Southern Memorial Day which varied from the day Lee surrendered to Jeff Davis' birthday. "8 Things You May Not Know About Memorial Day," History Channel's History in the Headlines, last modified May 24, 2013, accessed March 25, 2015, <http://www.history.com/news/8-things-you-may-not-know-about-memorial-day>

As World War I approached, veterans continued to give pro-Union speeches, but now they emphasized their status as ‘true’ patriots during the Civil War in contrast to the Confederates. For example, Colonel Palmer, one of the last surviving officers from Sherman’s staff, rose at the 1917 Iowa reunion and reminded veterans of their wartime experiences. He attacked Southerners when he announced to the men that though he had not voted for President Wilson, he would stand by him during World War I like a true patriot.⁵² On the surface this may not appear to be overly insulting, but when considered alongside Southern secession after Lincoln’s election in 1860, the true implication of Palmer’s statement becomes clear. Palmer went on to rebut claims by the Daughters of Confederate Veterans (D.C.V.) and the U.C.V. that terrible prison conditions existed in the North and South. He reminded veterans that unlike Confederates, “When we captured [Confederates] they were cared for... and cared for humanely.”⁵³ This is hardly the kind of comparison a reconciliationist would make. The constant harkening back to proud Union victories in speeches by G.A.R. members encompassed both a patriotic furor for the U.S. in World War I and a pro-Union nationalism that was meant to bolster the support of Union veterans.

In stark contrast to Palmer’s speech, William Harding, the governor of Iowa and a man who had not lived during the war, told veterans to put aside their political and sectional differences to support the war effort during the First World War and not to be concerned with the president’s Southern roots and Democratic support – only

⁵² David Palmer, “Address to the Iowa Department of the G.A.R.,” *Journal of the Forty-third Annual Encampment*, 161.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 162.

with being patriotic in the war. His emphasis on sacrifice and duty were reconciliationist.⁵⁴ Harding attempted to instill a reconciliatory joint patriotism of the sort Blight identifies.

The songs sung at the 1917 Davenport reunion that later appeared in an Iowa G.A.R. songbook in 1923 retained their pro-Union nationalist bent. One veteran sang songs about how the flag that made America free in 1776 was the same flag that freed the slave and crushed the rebellion. He also sang songs of how the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in the South was a reminder that the Union had triumphed in the end.⁵⁵ The songs appearing the Iowa G.A.R. songbook included the patriotic songs "America" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and the pro-Union songs "Battle Cry of Freedom" and "Marching through Georgia." In fact, pro-Union songs make up half of the five-page song book.⁵⁶

After the World War I Era, the Iowa G.A.R.'s numbers continued to decline as did the frequency of their reunions. By 1935, only a few hundred members remained. In 1948, the last Iowa veteran of the Civil War died, and after a brief memorial reunion in 1949, the Iowa Department of the G.A.R. was disbanded.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it is clear from the reunions that did occur that pro-Union nationalism was still alive and well during the waning years

⁵⁴ William Harding, "Address to the Iowa Department of the G.A.R.," *Journal of the Forty-third Annual Encampment*, 145-154.

⁵⁵ Iowa G.A.R., *Journal of the Forty-third Annual Encampment*, 182-183.

⁵⁶ Iowa G.A.R., *Songs of the Grand Army of the Republic and Auxiliary Organizations Iowa Department* (Fort Dodge: Essenger Printing Co., 1923), 1-5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 35-48; Iowa Grand Army of the Republic, *Journal of the Seventy-fifth Annual Encampment of the Iowa Department of the Grand Army of the Republic* (Des Moines: Unnamed Publisher, 1949).

of the Iowa G.A.R.. Not even the collective national spirit of World War I was able to completely eradicate it in favor of the umbrella nationalism Janney argues for.

Conclusion

From its founding in 1868 to its dissolution in 1949, the Iowa Department of the G.A.R. played a major role in shaping a pro-Union nationalism among Iowa veterans at reunions and through pamphlets. The reunions of Iowa G.A.R. veterans demonstrate how sectionalism and pro-Union nationalism lingered in the G.A.R. well into the twentieth century. During the early years of the G.A.R., Iowans began creating a pro-Union nationalism founded on the idea that the right had triumphed over the wrong. They sang pro-Union songs and wrote pro-Union poems. During the 1880s to 1910s, Iowans continued the traditions they began in the early days of the G.A.R. singing pro-Union songs and giving sectionalist speeches. Even in the later days of the G.A.R., Iowa veterans continued to promote a pro-Union nationalism by demonstrating true patriotism in supporting a president during war regardless of party and having flags and pro-Union articles, such as the Gettysburg Address, disseminated in schools around the state. As Secretary of War Belknap had noted in 1870, these Union veterans were surrounding themselves with “the memories of battle ... once again.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ William Belknap, “Address of General Wm. W. Belknap Secretary of War at the Re-union of Iowa Soldiers, Des Moines, Iowa,” August 31, 1870, 14-16.

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