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Was the Civil War a Total War?

Mark E. Neely Jr.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Was the Civil War a Total War? Mark E. Neely, Jr. In a recent article, Charles Strozier, a Lincoln biographer and codirector of the Center on Violence and Human Survival, argues that the United States' demand for unconditional surrender in World War II, and ultimately the use of two atomic bombs on Japan, found antecedents in President Lincoln's surrender terms in the Civil War. Precedent, it might be said, is everything in human affairs. [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's inventive reading of the surrender at Appomattox draws us back into that most curious of American events, the Civil War, as the crucible in which the doctrine of unconditional surrender was forged. In this first of modern wars, a new technological capacity to kill and destroy emerged, along with a strikingly new set of ideas about military strategy, the relationship between a fighting army and noncombatant civilians, and the criteria that determine when war is over. The latter are of enormous significance and relate directly to the brutality, length, and totality of twentieth-century warfare. The crucial term here is not unconditional surrender, a phrase perhaps coined by Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at Fort Donelson early in 1862, but the idea of totality in war, a concept that comes from our own century. "It was

Lincoln, Grant, and the Civil War that incorporated total war into modern experience," Strozier maintains. "There is a clear connection here between the emerging nation-state, a new type of deadly warfare, and an ending in which an enemy capitulates completely. To put it epigrammatically, the totality of the modern state seems to require unconditional surrender as a necessary correlative of its total wars. The American Civil War brought that into focus."¹ The assertion that the United States insisted on unconditional surrender in the Civil War can be quickly proven wrong. Grant's terms at Fort Mifflin, "The Tragedy of Unconditional Surrender," *Military History Quarterly* 2 (Spring 1990): 12, 14; Charles Strozier, *Unconditional Surrender and the Rhetoric of Total War: From Truman to Lincoln*, Center on Violence and Human Survival Occasional Paper Number 2 ([New York]: Center on Violence and Human Survival, 1987). See also James M. McPherson, *Lincoln and the Strategy of Unconditional Surrender* (Gettysburg, Pa.: Gettysburg College, 1984), 11-13, 23-24. *Civil War History*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 1, © 1991 by the Kent State University Press 6 CIVIL WAR HISTORY

Donelson were not those of Abraham Lincoln in Washington. As the war approached its conclusion, Lincoln on three occasions wrote his peace terms down on paper. In the first instance, instead of demanding unconditional surrender, he insisted on two conditions for surrender. On July 9, 1864, he told Horace Greeley, who was about to meet Confederate agents in Canada, "If you can find, any person anywhere professing to have any proposition of Jefferson Davis in writing, for peace, embracing the restoration of the Union and abandonment of slavery, whatever else it embraces, say to him he may come to me with you. ..." Lincoln would negotiate any other terms the Confederate agents might have in mind. As the summer wore on, the Northern military cause, and with it Republican political fortunes, sank dangerously low. On August 24, Lincoln drafted a letter about peace for New York Times editor Henry J. Raymond, saying, "... you will propose, on behalf this government, that upon the restoration of the Union and the national authority, the war shall cease at once, all remaining questions to be left for adjustment by peaceful modes." The president chose not to use this letter and later insisted on the two conditions previously stipulated to Greeley, but he remained willing to negotiate other things.² True, Congress might have some say as well, and Union and emancipation amounted to a great deal when one considers that the Confederate states seceded in order to become an independent nation and a slave republic. Yet there were many other things a less lenient president might reasonably have demanded: the exclusion of Confederate political leaders from future public office, disfranchisement of Confederate soldiers, enfranchisement of freed blacks, legal protection for the Republican party in former Confederate states, recognition of West Virginia's statehood, the partition of other...

WAS THE CIVIL WAR A TOTAL WAR?

Mark E. Neely, Jr.

IN A RECENT ARTICLE, Charles Strozier, a Lincoln biographer and co-director of the Center on Violence and Human Survival, argues that the United States' demand for unconditional surrender in World War II, and ultimately the use of two atomic bombs on Japan, found antecedents in President Lincoln's surrender terms in the Civil War.

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The crucial term here is not *unconditional surrender*, a phrase perhaps coined by Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at Fort Donelson early in 1862, but the idea of *totality* in war, a concept that comes from our own century. "It was Lincoln, Grant, and the Civil War that incorporated total war into modern experience," Strozier maintains. "There is a clear connection here between the emerging nation state, a new type of deadly warfare, and an ending in which an enemy capitulates completely. To put it epigrammatically, the totality of the modern state seems to require unconditional surrender as a necessary correlative of its total wars. The American Civil War brought that into focus."¹

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