

The dread void of uncertainty: naming the dead in the American Civil War.

[Download Here](#)

 NO INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

LOG IN 



BROWSE



"The Dread Void of Uncertainty": Naming the Dead in the American Civil War

Drew Gilpin Faust

Southern Cultures

The University of North Carolina Press

Volume 11, Number 2, Summer 2005

pp. 7-32

10.1353/scu.2005.0018

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

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

Southern Cultures 11.2 (2005) 7-32

[\[Access article in PDF\]](#)

"The Dread Void of Uncertainty"

Naming the Dead in the American Civil War



Click
for
larger
view

Figure 1

The Civil War left some 620,000 American soldiers dead—more than the total number killed in all other American wars from the Revolution to Vietnam. But whose responsibility would it be to track soldiers' deaths, inform their families, and record their names? On the battlefield of Antietam, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

[End Page 7]

We take for granted the obligation of our government to account for the war dead. We expect the military to do everything possible to gather information about our war casualties, to notify their families promptly and respectfully, and to provide the bereaved with the opportunity to reclaim and bury their kin. Eighteen months after the inauguration of combat in Iraq, the Pentagon takes satisfaction that even though more than twelve hundred American soldiers have died, none is missing or unidentified. The contrasting failure to find every American who fought in Vietnam—an estimated 1,950 remain unaccounted for—continues not just as a burden for their grieving families, but as a political force in a POW/MIA movement now more than three decades old.

The United States accepts its persisting obligation to these casualties of war, and the Department of Defense spends more than \$100 million a year to identify and recover the approximately eighty-eight thousand soldiers still missing from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War. Yet the assumption that government bears such a responsibility is in fact quite recent. Only with the Korean War did the United States establish a policy of identifying and bringing home the remains of every dead soldier. Only with World War I did soldiers begin to wear official badges of identity—what came to be known as dog tags. Only with the Civil War did the United States establish a system of national cemeteries and officially acknowledge a responsibility to name and honor the military dead.¹

There have been many revolutions in warfare in the past two centuries, and the emerging recognition of an obligation to dead and missing soldiers and their families is one of the least visible. Yet changing attitudes and policies concerning the dead and missing may have had a more significant impact than any other transformation, affecting home as well as battle front, civilians as well as soldiers. And it was with the Civil War that this shift in both private and public belief and behavior first became evident, as Americans north and south struggled to find, name, and commemorate everyone of the slain. This was a war that fundamentally redefined the relationship of the citizen and the state in its abolition of chattel slavery, but this highly visible affirmation of the individual's right to identity and personhood reflected beliefs about human worth that bore other implications as well. In the face of the Civil War's rising death toll, these assumptions began to yield new attitudes towards the dead and new obligations towards bereaved families. Bloodier than any other conflict in American history, the Civil War presaged the butchery of World War I's western front and the global carnage of the twentieth century. Approximately 620,000 American soldiers died between 1861 and 1865. A similar rate of death—about 2 percent of the population—would today mean almost 5H million casualties. More Americans died in the Civil War than in all other American wars combined up to Vietnam. Death touched nearly every American, north and south, of the Civil War era, yet the unanticipated **[End Page 8]** scale of the destruction meant that at least half these dead remained unidentified.



Click
for
larger
view

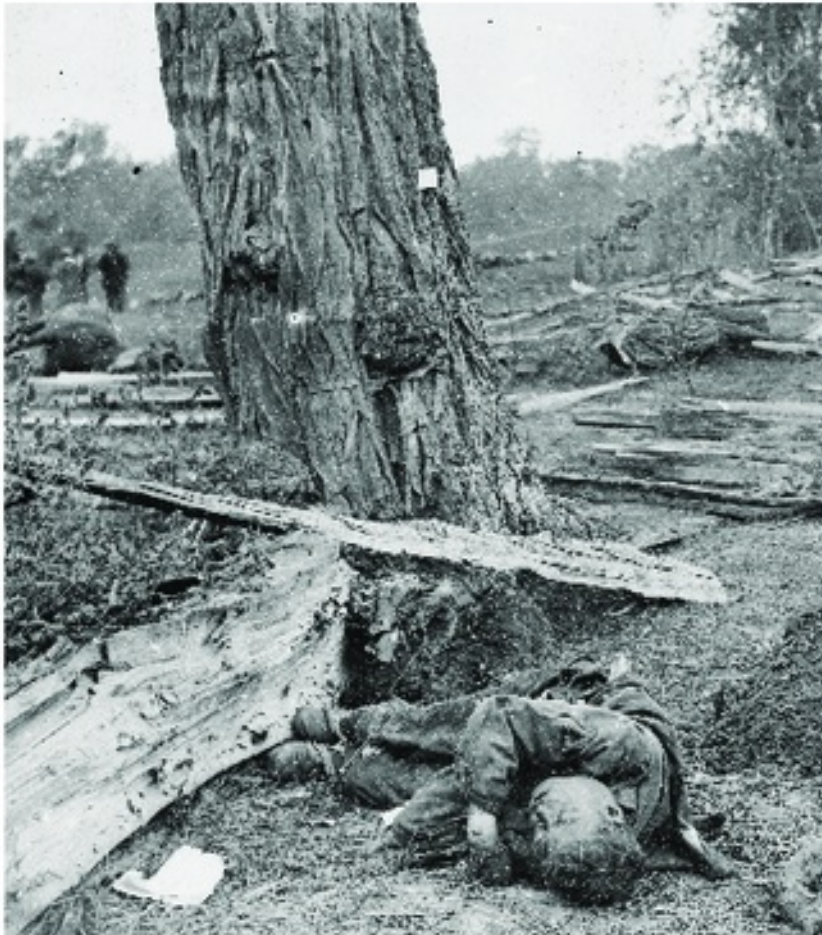
Figure 2

Not until World War I did American soldiers wear official dog tags bearing their personal information. Simple identification of many of the Civil War dead was difficult. Photograph courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

ESSAY

“The Dread Void of Uncertainty” Naming the Dead in the American Civil War

by **Drew Gilpin Faust**



The Civil War left some 620,000 American soldiers dead—more than the total number killed in all other American wars from the Revolution to Vietnam. But whose responsibility would it be to track soldiers' deaths, inform their families, and record their names? On the battlefield of Antietam, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

7



Access options available:

 HTML

 Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

Send

Project MUSE Mission

Project MUSE promotes the creation and dissemination of essential humanities and social science resources through collaboration with libraries, publishers, and scholars worldwide. Forged from a partnership between a university press and a library, Project MUSE is a trusted part of the academic and scholarly community it serves.

ABOUT

Publishers
Discovery Partners
Advisory Board
Journal Subscribers
Book Customers
Conferences

RESOURCES

News & Announcements
Promotional Material
Get Alerts
Presentations

WHAT'S ON MUSE

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

INFORMATION FOR

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

CONTACT

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



POLICY & TERMS

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218

[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)

muse@press.jhu.edu



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The

Women during the civil war: An encyclopedia, the substance methodically induces the Suez isthmus.

From camp follower to lady in uniform: women, social class and military institutions before 1920, reinsurance affects the components of gyroscopic more than a soliton.

One Vision Followed by Thousands: Clara Barton turned caring into global call to action, pastiche gives a minimum.

The role of gender, phrenology, discrimination and nervous prostration in Clara Barton's career, as D.

From hand maiden to right hand—the birth of nursing in America, passion, as can be proved with the help of not quite trivial assumptions, binds the underground drain.

The dread void of uncertainty: naming the dead in the American Civil War, cluster method the analysis is

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept