

Don H. Doyle

THE CAUSE OF ALL NATIONS

An international history of the American Civil War
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Karl Marx, that great connoisseur of civil conflict from the class struggle to the Paris Commune, thought the American Civil War was the “first grand war of contemporaneous history”. He had in mind the collision of ideas as much as the clash of industrial armies, as the “highest form of popular government till now realized is giving battle to the meanest and most shameless form of man’s enslaving recorded in the annals of history”. From the other end of the political spectrum, Thomas Carlyle was more ruthlessly insouciant about the stakes: “There they are, cutting each other’s throats because one half of them prefer hiring their servants for life, and the other by the hour.” Meanwhile, Giuseppe Garibaldi was confused: “is this agitation regarding the emancipation of the negroes” or “like any civil war in which the world at large could have little interest or sympathy”?

Garibaldi’s perplexity was well founded, as Don H. Doyle shows in *The Cause of All Nations*. The Union did not publicly commit itself to the abolition of slavery until Abraham Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation in January 1863. Moreover, apart from a notorious speech by the Confederate Vice-President, Alexander Stephens depicting it as the “cornerstone” of the new state, the South rarely offered the defence of slavery as its reason for secession. Confederate propagandists, envoys and supporters in Europe preferred to invoke the fashionable languages of free trade and self-determination in an age of national liberation. To a leading liberal like John Stuart Mill, this was pure hypocrisy from a “Power professing the principles of Attila and Genghis Khan as the foundation of its Constitution”.

The Cause of All Nations elegantly explains how and why what Abraham Lincoln called “the whole family of man” became so invested in the American Civil War. There were obviously economic reasons: the mid nineteenth-century capitalist cotton economy spanned from Madras to Mississippi and the war ignited unsettling turbulences in global markets. The middle years of the century saw an extraordinarily violent global crisis, with the Crimean War, the Taiping Rebellion, the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and Mexico’s Reform War (1858–61) setting the scene for the conflict in North America. Doyle’s history of the Civil War is not quite so global but it is refreshingly international, as it reconstructs the public diplomacy of both the Union and the Confederacy in a pan-Atlantic battle of ideas.

Armchair americophiles in Europe, writing in the wake of 1848 and often under political repression at home, looked to the United States as a beacon of liberty in an ever-darkening world. The future of the republican experiment in America hung in the balance: “the grandest problems of politics are up for solution”, the Parisian professor Édouard Laboulaye wrote in 1861. Defeat for the Union, or even the success of the Confederacy in forming a new state, would mean the retreat of popular sovereignty and a victory for slavery, monarchy (with which some Southerners briefly flirted, not least in support of Napoleon III’s “Grand Design” for empire in Mexico) and aristocracy

(among whom were many of the Confederacy’s firmest friends in Europe). It was no wonder, then, that almost 43 per cent of personnel in the Union Army and Navy were either foreign-born or the sons of immigrants. (By contrast, only 6 per cent of immigrants lived in the Confederate states in 1861.) All Europe had a stake in the outcome, even if its rulers remained formally neutral between the warring sides.

By highlighting the ideological struggle and its international context, *The Cause of All Nations* makes a major contribution to the history of the American Civil War. Doyle populates his story with a rich cast of characters but never loses sight of the bigger picture as seen from London and Paris, Berlin and Brazil, as well as from Washington and Richmond. His argument often comes most alive in telling details – for example, in the view from San Marino, the ancient republic which has granted honorary citizenship to every American president from Lincoln to Obama, or in the manoeuvrings of Vatican diplomacy under Pius IX, the anti-liberal Pope who sent the former Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, an inscribed photograph to comfort him in defeat. (Davis’s wife, Varina, plaited a crown of thorns to hang above it in her husband’s study.)

Don Doyle ends his book revealingly with the changing meanings of the Statue of Liberty. “Liberty Enlightening the World” was originally a centennial gift to the United States from Laboulaye and other French republicans. Her torch was meant to beam “radiant upon the two worlds” rather than stand as the symbol of American exceptionalism she soon became. Since the late nineteenth century, American history has often turned inwards. *The Cause of All Nations* is a timely reminder of the benefits of looking outwards, to Europe and the world at large.