Introduction: The Problem of the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars

When describing the American Civil War, many historians focus on the “unprecedented” casualties in battle. The exceptionalism so often tied to the American narrative demands special attention for America’s bloodiest war, whose cost has been attributed to advanced weaponry and lagging tactics. However, as this paper will demonstrate, the casualty rates in the Civil War were actually strikingly similar to the Napoleonic Wars, another continental conflict that left a lasting and inescapable impact on later commanders. The following comparison between two battles, Austerlitz from 1805 and Chancellorsville from 1863, demonstrates the striking similarity in army size, tactics and cost of the two wars. This begs another question: can other developments during the first half of the nineteenth century better explain that difference in the development of historical memory of the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars?

Consider two commanders, each preparing for an inevitable battle. Each readies an outnumbered army for the strategic defense of a capital city, although the confrontations will be far from the objectives. Each weighs the organization and mettle of the enemy, and they come to the same conclusion. Their deficit in numbers may be overcome through tactical aggression and the element of surprise. Though separated by almost sixty years, the described generals’ experiences will differ very little in their inevitable fights. However, the memory of the human cost of these battles will vary
greatly, due to technological advances which had little effect on the military but a great impact on the perception of war.

One of these commanders was Napoleon Bonaparte. On November 30, 1805 his army stood on the Pratzen Heights, a dominating defensive position that blocked his Austro-Russian enemies’ path to recapture Vienna. Instead of merely staging a defense, he chose to abandon the heights and set a trap for the eager allied army under the personal supervision of Francis I of Austria and Alexander I of Russia. The stage was set for Napoleon’s 70,000 men (I, III, IV and V Corps and Cavalry Reserve) to face the Third Coalition’s 80,000 men (I, II, III, IV and V Columns and Imperial Guard).¹

The other commander was the equally legendary Robert E. Lee. On April 30, 1863 his army of 60,000 men stood on the heights above Fredericksburg, defending the same positions used in the December 1862 confrontation. He faced a daunting challenge, as his opponent, Major General Joseph Hooker, commanded a total of 130,000 men. Hooker divided his forces in an effort to outflank Lee, with a large body of troops at Fredericksburg and Hooker’s personal command at Chancellorsville. Lee reacted by dividing his own army to face the multiple threats, setting the stage for a decisive confrontation between all 60,000 available Confederates (I and II Corps with Stuart’s Cavalry) and 105,000 deployed Federals (II, III, V, VI and XI Corps).²

Although Lee’s soldiers had significantly superior weaponry, such as rifled muskets and artillery, to that used by Napoleon’s troops, he adhered to the same tactics.

¹ Ian Castle, Austerlitz: Napoleon and the Eagles of Europe (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2005), 125-137.
² Daniel Sutherland, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 131-140.
From the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War to today, many historians have assumed that the improved military technology of the mid-nineteenth century revolutionized warfare. However, as this short narrative demonstrates, that simply was not the case. The rifled musket did not significantly impact the linear tactics developed in the smoothbore age. The influence of these tactics, especially as employed in Napoleonic battles, was inescapable for Civil War commanders like Robert E. Lee and Joseph Hooker, Lee’s chief opponent from January to June 1863. They based their operations on the famous successes of the Napoleonic age. Their hastily trained soldiers could not fully harness the increased destructive potential of their arms, resulting in firefights at much closer distances than the maximum effective range of modern small arms. However, other advances from the fifty years separating these battles may explain how battle deaths in the Civil War, though comparable to those of previous conflicts, generated a greater impact on historical memory.

The tactical elements of the Battles of Austerlitz and Chancellorsville are strikingly similar. The larger armies, both the strategic attackers, found their assaults stymied by relatively small enemy contingents. The critical moment in each occurred when Napoleon and Lee launched their flank counterattacks, led by Marshal Nicholas Soult and General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson respectively. In each case, two hours gained a decisive advantage, and neither Napoleon nor Lee held back. In the afternoon of December 2, 1805, Napoleon massed artillery on the Pratzen Heights and collapsed the salient around Sokolnitz defended by two Allied columns.\(^3\) On the morning of May 3,

1863, Lee massed artillery in the Hazel Grove and squeezed the salient around Fairview defended by the Union III Corps. While the bulk of the Allied and Union armies had each been flanked, a detached reserve of each force found itself pushed back as well. The Allied V Column and Union VI Corps suffered defeats in separate regions of each battle that mirror one another as well as do the main flanking attacks. Napoleon and Lee achieved impressive offensive victories by taking the same risks: dividing an outnumbered army and attacking a superior force.

Although these tactical gambles paid off for the defenders-turned-aggressors, neither could completely seal off their opponents’ escape routes. Four of the five Allied columns eluded capture at Austerlitz in 1805, and Hooker’s entire army escaped across the Rappahannock after Chancellorsville on the night of May 5, 1863. Still, the overall achievements of the Grande Armée and the Army of Northern Virginia were undeniably impressive. The victorious commanders used maneuver and economy of force to derail a potentially fatal enemy campaign.

Perhaps the most striking similarity here lies in the human cost. At Austerlitz, the French lost roughly 8,800 soldiers of 74,000 engaged, and the Allies lost roughly 21,500 of 81,000 engaged, for an overall casualty rate of 20.2%. At Chancellorsville, the Confederates lost roughly 13,200 men of 60,000 engaged, and the Union lost roughly 16,900 of 105,000 engaged, for an overall casualty rate of 18.2%. The total raw number of all casualties in each confrontation presents another poignant comparison: 30,300 at

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4 Sutherland, 162-169.
5 Goetz, 277-280.
6 Sutherland, 178-181.
Austerlitz and 30,100 at Chancellorsville. These battles developed over comparable terrain, with similar tactics and resulted in nearly identical human carnage.

The vast majority of historians have viewed the American Civil War as a divergence from previous conflicts in terms of the destructiveness of warfare, particularly in casualty rates. This opinion is clearly evident in the titles of a variety of works, from Charles Royster’s *The Destructive War* (1991) to the Fellman, Gordon and Sutherland’s more recent textbook, *This Terrible War: The Civil War and Its Aftermath* (2002). Even James McPherson has embraced this idea, as demonstrated by Drew Gilpin Faust’s review of his *Tried by War: Lincoln as Commander in Chief*. McPherson argues that “this was a new kind of warfare. This was a kind of warfare that no general had learned at West Point,” incorporating previously unseen “bloody cost.”

A study of casualty rates fails to support this widespread conclusion, as demonstrated by the synopsis of Austerlitz and Chancellorsville. Though these events are very similar, they have been remembered quite differently. Over the past decade, several historians have begun to challenge the traditional view of the Civil War, offering competing explanations for the discrepancy between event and memory. However, the actual means that information was created and received by Civil War Americans – the means to memory formation – have not yet been considered.

Author Earl Hess suggested that simple overestimation of the impact of military technology accounts for the perception of Civil War losses as unprecedented. In *The Rifle*

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*Musket in Civil War Combat,* Earl Hess argued that the notion of the rifle musket revolutionizing warfare and making linear tactics obsolete dates to the time of its invention, and that most authors since have simply built on unsupported past assumptions. He averaged casualty rates from a number of European battles and Civil War battles to support his claims.9 Though these statistics drawn from conflicts spread over several centuries helped place the Civil War in an international context, the failure to enumerate compelling similarities beyond percentages made for an apparently random study of warfare from the Spanish Succession to the Franco-Prussian War. He also failed to extend his critique of the exceptionalist view beyond military theory.

In *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction,* Mark Neely asserted that deliberate attempts to focus on casualties has driven the view of the Civil War as exceptionally costly. He observed the tendency to “underestimate other important features of the conflict because of the fixation on violence,”10 but he attributed this focus to a desire to “sensationalize” history and sell more books, rather than searching for any of the other “features” he alludes to. His work ignored the importance of the Civil War in American consciousness over time, as he considered only the motivations of modern writers. His attempt at a numerical study also undermined the work as it appeared under-researched and failed to move outside an American perspective.

Two works on the culture of death in the nineteenth century have suggested that the impact of the Civil War on contemporaries was minimal, portraying the mid-

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10 Neely, 218-219.
nineteenth-century American as completely inured to viewing bodies or confronting death. In *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, Mark Schantz argued that ideas regarding death, especially the “good death” offered on the battlefield, prepared the soldiers to produce and accept tremendous losses. However, Schantz’s thesis remains predicated on the assumption that the Civil War produced unprecedented casualties, and that this requires a special explanation. Similarly, in *John Brown’s Body* Franny Nudelman argued that portrayals of death were so common in antebellum America that the public felt acceptance rather than grief at the losses reported in the Civil War, allowing violence to feed violence. She even dismissed battlefield pictures’ impact because she compared them to the mourning portraits and photographs commonly taken of deceased family in the home. Though Americans may have been more familiar with death and less detached from the funeral process, a general cultural apathy to the deaths of six hundred thousand young men seems implausible at best. Nudelman and Schantz’s theses validate the exceptionalist view of Civil War deaths as an historiographical construction, and allows sources regarding losses to be associated with a “culture of death” rather than a “culture of remembrance.” However, they have ignored the incontrovertible written and material evidence that Americans did feel the need to memorialize the war in a unique way.

Alan Forrest, a Napoleonic historian, has shifted the discussion of memory to the way information passed and allowed a society to feel the need to commemorate. In

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Napoleon’s Men, a study of French soldiers’ letters from the Napoleonic era, he touched on the limits of communication in that period, from poor education to government censorship of the press to a lack of photography. He noted the comparative deluge of letters sent by soldiers during the Civil War, but failed to provide analysis regarding effects on Civil War memory because that was not his focus.13 He instead contrasted the relative lack of Napoleonic monuments with the widespread commemoration of the Great War in Europe. His work considered the development of a culture of remembrance, and hinted at developments in communications that might have caused it.

Although these authors have attempted to explain the current prevailing view of the Civil War as an unprecedented tragedy, they have failed to explain the consistent and exceptional emphasis on loss in both historical works and sources contemporary to the Civil War. Despite the similarity to casualty rates of previous conflicts, Civil War combat has been consistently described as uniquely costly. A possible explanation lies in the non-military technological and cultural developments that introduced new media during the nineteenth century. During the fifty years between the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars, a number of developments occurred that changed the way that events passed into memory. The telegraph, imbedded correspondents, photography, lithography, greater literacy through public education, and even better transportation of mail allowed the American public to experience the realities of war in a way that European populations did not. This increased exposure to the reality of war forged a popular memory centered on loss and sacrifice rather than the personal glory of leaders. This paper incorporates

13 Alan Forrest, Napoleon’s Men (London: Humbledon and London, 2002); 38, 74, XIII, 47.
progress in means of communication into the discussion of Civil War memory. By placing this American conflict in a larger context through comparison with the Napoleonic Wars, the differences in information technology that have been ignored can be seen as significant factors. The developments in correspondence, print culture and images, which lie outside the oft-cited improvements in muskets and cannon, better explain the vast differences in the memory of the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars.
Chapter One: Letters, Diaries and Reports

Soldiers! When the French people placed the Imperial Crown on my head, I entrusted you to keep it always in a high state of glory, which alone could give it value in my eyes; but at that moment our enemies thought to destroy and demean it; and that Iron Crown, which was gained by the blood of so many Frenchmen, they would have compelled me to place on the head of our cruelest enemies; an extravagant and foolish proposal, which you have ruined and confounded the very day of the anniversary of your Emperor’s coronation.

-Emperor Napoleon I, excerpt from Austerlitz address, December 2, 1805

I commend to the particular notice of the [Confederate War] department the brave officers and men mentioned by their superiors, for extraordinary daring and merit, whose names I am unable to enumerate here.

-Robert E. Lee, excerpt from Chancellorsville report, September 21, 1863

These quotations, taken from Napoleon’s official rendition of the Battle of Austerlitz and Lee’s official report of the Battle of Chancellorsville, exemplify the shift in martial accounts from focus on generals to focus on the individual soldiers. Although

Napoleon praised his men, his speech emphasizes his own importance to their achievements. In contrast, Lee avoided crediting his own decisions, attempting to acknowledge the courage and contributions of all soldiers. This shift from personal triumph to glory for individual soldiers reflects a larger concern for human suffering in the American Civil War that was largely unseen in the Napoleonic era. The personal writings and official correspondence of the Civil War emphasized the common soldier’s plight and made the public aware of the sacrifices demanded by war. The growth of literacy and education in antebellum America allowed most Civil War soldiers to keep letters and diaries. The effects of the dissemination of war stories through personal writing were felt even by army commanders, who addressed individual effort in their own writing. The public realization of the sacrifices for victory required that it be recognized a collective, rather than personal, achievement.

**Napoleonic Background**

Napoleonic soldiers experienced a ferocious, prolonged continental war. During the long months of campaigning far from home, they must have missed their loved ones and wished to communicate with them. Unfortunately for them, the absolutist regimes of Europe provided neither the public education nor the established postal service that Civil War Americans enjoyed. The low literacy rate among soldiers, need for surrogate letter writers and readers, and ad hoc or nonexistent mail delivery systems naturally limited the expression of Napoleonic soldiers’ wartime suffering in both personal letters and journals.
The literacy rate among the armies that clashed at Austerlitz trailed that of Civil War armies by a wide margin. Education did not flourish in the empires of the eighteenth century, and the brief progress of the French Revolution could not significantly alter that trend for the average Frenchman. “The [French] Revolution certainly talked of providing primary education for all, secular and freely obtained, in pursuit of its dream of a more enlightened population, but that remained a dream, far removed from the reality of rural life.” Though literacy rates for the Grande Armée itself are lacking, “in the years after 1830, when we do have usable figures, the percentage of conscripts able to sign their names did not pass above 52 percent.”\(^3\) This should come as no surprise, as overall figures for the French male population hovered at only fifty percent literacy over the entire period of 1800-1840.\(^4\) No more than one in two French soldiers had the ability to produce even a signature, let alone a letter.

Their allied opponents suffered from even greater deficiencies in literacy. Reliable data for the male populations of the two other empires at Austerlitz appears only around the 1870s. At that time, roughly sixty percent of Austrians and eighty percent of Russians remained illiterate, so the likelihood of a lowly conscript in either army six decades prior even knowing a literate man was slim. Even for Great Britain, male illiteracy remained at a level forty percent in the Napoleonic era, and the selective impressment and conscription of lower classes naturally led to higher illiteracy among the

armed forces. The private soldier of a lower class did not have the educational tools to communicate his feelings with pen and paper.

These uneducated warriors nevertheless desired to communicate with those back home, so they turned to their literate counterparts as surrogate writers. Those fortunate enough to have a command of written language would serve as scribes, but this necessarily limited emotional expression. Non-commissioned officers often took up the task, but this further restricted the common soldier’s ability to communicate concerns about leadership. “Indeed, it is noticeable that letters written by [non-commissioned] sous-officers and other authorised scribes are often more careful in the opinions they proffer, avoiding any criticism of the officer corps and any reference to army positions and troop movements.” The recipients of these messages often suffered from the same lack of education, thus “very often neither the writer of the letter nor the ultimate reader was literate.” This deficiency required concerned relatives to turn to local priests or craftsmen as interpreters. Thus, even an educated son might censor his writing to avoid drawing suspicion from a surrogate reader. The low literacy hampered genuine communication on both ends of correspondence.

Military postal service provided yet another obstacle to written correspondence. Again, hard data for Russia and Austria remains scarce before the 1870s, but even then the civil postal service provided only a trickle of letters, less than five annually per capita. Although the French government diligently established a military courier system

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5 Vincent, 9-11.  
6 Forrest, 37-40.  
7 Vincent, 19.
at the outset of war in 1792, the demand became overwhelming as the field armies gradually stretched across Europe. The process of censorship also prolonged travel time and at times damaged or destroyed the precious letters. French soldiers “regularly complained of mail being ripped open, of letters being lost and money stolen, and of a callous disregard for their feelings by the military authorities.”\(^8\) Not only did the censors perform their assigned duty, which demanded the altering or destruction of some letters, but they could also confiscate money and goods. The loss of just a few letters, particularly those containing money, could undermine a soldier’s confidence in the postal system. Of course, a coalition soldier of the same period would be fortunate to have any sort of military post at all.

Extant letters of Napoleonic soldiers reflect these challenges. Westphalian soldier H. Eschrath served as a surrogate writer for a comrade by including a separate paragraph in a personal letter: “Dear Mother, go to Elhardorf to Hossfeld’s parents and tell them that he is still in good health. You [and they] can write together as I am his sergeant.” As a non-commissioned officer, Eschrath could serve as an official intermediate for his fellow soldiers’ correspondence, but here this was limited to the most basic of information. Johann Warncke, the son of a stonemason conscripted into the Grande Armée, expressed his lack of faith in military post during the 1812 Russian campaigning, writing “one can’t write much [from] here. Sending [the letter] takes a long time.”\(^9\) The majority of Napoleonic soldiers communicated only through others, and these letter authors could only send news when the military post reached the front lines. The

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\(^8\) Forrest; 42-47, 165.
necessity of translators and unreliability of transportation significantly hampered the personal communication of Napoleonic soldiers.

Illiteracy often limited expression throughout a veteran’s lifetime. Few returning soldiers had the opportunity to improve their education, so their memories of the war perished with them. Some managed to find a scribe, such as Rifleman John Harris, who served in the British army for twelve years with both the 66th Foot and 95th Rifles. Henry Curling of the Oxfordshire Light Infantry encountered Harris working as a cobbler decades after the Napoleonic Wars. Curling recorded Harris’s recollections, but the passage of time and Henry’s limited vocabulary affected the resulting manuscript, which is one of roughly twenty surviving autobiographies of British soldiers from the period.10 This small number of unpolished journals could not convey the scale of the suffering of a continental war to a wide population.

Though usually well-educated, officers often ignored the plight of the common soldier and omitted losses entirely from their official correspondence. This approach could help garner support from both the government and population, but has not left an accurate record of the losses incurred in Napoleonic battles. In a report during the Italian campaign written June 18, 1796, French General Massena stated that “our carabineers killed forty men and made fifty prisoners, all of the regiment of Tuscany” during the pursuit of the enemy after the Battle of Castiglione. He did not mention any casualties of his own that had occurred in the confrontation or its aftermath.11 Such reports could

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11 The Bonaparte Letters and Dispatches, Secret, Confidential and Official: From the Originals in his Private Cabinet (London: Saunders and Otley, Conduit Street, 1846), 161-162.
enhance the prestige of a commander and the army in general, but did not create an accurate public record.

Napoleon’s own letters adhered to this strategy also. In a November 1813 letter to his second wife, Marie-Louise, the Emperor of the French wrote, “I am sending you 20 flags taken by my arms at the battles of Wachau, of Leipzig, and of Hanau; it is an homage that I like to pay to you.” Napoleon made no reference to the disastrous outcome of the Leipzig campaign, which essentially decided the War of the Sixth Coalition in allies’ favor, instead focusing only on captured standards, typically seen as a benchmark for victory. His “Queen-Regent” Marie Louise controlled military news in a similar fashion. In an “intelligence update” of September 17, 1813, based on news from her husband, she wrote that “the enemy was followed and driven with greatest disorder into Bohemia” over a period of three days. She avoided referencing specific numbers, stating only that the Prussians “lost many men” while “our loss was trifling.”¹² The Emperor and Empress of France knew the value of concealing casualties in personal correspondence, which in this case allowed them to maintain support and confidence despite mounting losses in late 1813.

The letters, memoirs and dispatches of the Napoleonic Wars reflect the limitations and agendas of their authors. Even if a lowly recruit could send a letter, its content might be altered by the surrogate author, surrogate reader or government censor. This limited the public’s knowledge to the carefully controlled updates published by military and civilian leaders. In the years after the war, few veterans had sufficient education to record

and share their experiences. The personal writing of the Napoleonic era simply did not convey the plight of the common soldiers who fought and died on a massive scale.

**American Advantages and Developments**

The young United States already enjoyed a very high literacy rate in the Napoleonic era, and this only increased over the next several decades. Improvements in transportation, such as the steam boat and locomotive, allowed a fast and reliable postal service to spread throughout the nation. The availability of primary education and reliable post to nearly all white men in the first half of the nineteenth century, although notably not women and minorities, enabled Civil War soldiers to record their thoughts in both letters and journals in ways their predecessors could not.

Antebellum Americans benefited from a well-developed system of primary education that attracted students from all social classes. While “European educational systems, with few exceptions, were elitist well into the twentieth century,” students in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century enjoyed a “distinctly egalitarian” system of education. This system has always been highly decentralized, although this local freedom seems to have encouraged attendance as teachers modified their curriculum to suit each township. Economic and religious factors predisposed Americans to better education also. A high average income allowed families to fund primary schooling, and the prevailing protestant denominations emphasized reading of the Bible, encouraging basic
literacy for all individuals. Concerning basic education, the young American male had political, social, economic and religious advantages over his European counterparts.

The establishment of rapid and reliable government post encouraged letter writing and made sending easy. The Post Office Department was created in 1775, and initially relied on individual riders, much like the French service of the Napoleonic era. Stagecoaches and rowboats were slowly incorporated into mail transport, but steam power provided significant advancements. Compulsory mail delivery was required of steamboats from 1815, and steam locomotives began transporting packages in 1840. Although Mexican Cession settlers remained very isolated until after the Civil War, the postal service east of the Mississippi was both reliable and affordable in the mid-nineteenth century. These mechanized conveyances laid the groundwork for accommodating the letter-writing explosion of the Civil War, precipitated as millions of educated recruits attempted to relay the experience of war to loved ones at home. This personal testimony left a vast record used to reconstruct the conflict in both official stories and published memoirs for years to come.

**Personal Writing of the Civil War**

Available and affordable public education and postal service enabled mid-nineteenth century Americans to compose memoirs and send letters; the Civil War motivated them to do so on an unprecedented level. In a study of the Confederate Army,

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Bill Irvin Wiley observed that the Civil War sparked “an unprecedented ‘tide of letter-writing’ for the American South, which had never previously seen such a large proportion of its people uprooted from their homes at any one time.” The North experienced a similar wave of correspondence. Soldiers, from privates to officers, and their families wrote untold millions of letters, delivered by the United States Post Office Department and its Southern imitation, the Confederate Post Office Department. These letters brought the emotional effects of war into nearly every American home, and along with memoirs found their way into numerous contemporary and later publications, shaping public memory ever since.

Unlike in the Napoleonic Wars, privates composed the majority of letters in the Civil War, and their literate families could read their genuine correspondence without interference. Private Davenport took advantage of this freedom, criticizing a speech by George McClellan given after the Battle of Malvern Hill in an 1862 letter:

General McClellan’s address was read off to us on parade Sunday evening. It is very eloquent and about true, but the details are not thought of in a move of this kind – the dead and dying, the wounded and sick, left behind on the road, or prisoners. No one can tell the individual suffering and misery that takes place in such times as we have just gone through.

Unlike a Napoleonic soldier, limited by having a superior serving as scribe, Davenport expressed disappointment with his commanding general’s apparent indifference to the losses incurred during the Seven Days’ Battles. He addressed the personal tragedy of war, speaking of casualties and individual misery, providing a much more touching message.

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15 Forrest, 47.
than a mere update on health and survival, which was all many Napoleonic soldiers could manage. These elements made Davenport’s letter appealing to a U.S. Sanitary Commission letter collection published in 1865. Davenport’s revelations intended for his family were eventually used to depict the Civil War for a wide audience.

Letters like Davenport’s also helped to prevent the self-aggrandizement so prevalent in dispatches of Napoleonic commanders. Civil War commanders did not enjoy a monopoly on the creation of knowledge as their predecessors had. Though generals like McClellan could claim success, their soldiers had the tools to contradict them. Many simply addressed losses directly, as Grant did in the following excerpt from a report on April 9, 1862: “The country will have to mourn the loss of many brave men who fell at the battle of Pittsburg, or Shiloh, more properly. The exact loss in killed and wounded will be known in a day or two. At present I can only give it approximately at 1,500 killed and 3,500 wounded.” Grant did not attempt to hide his battlefield losses, and his estimates proved fairly accurate as they deliberately did not include the numbers from Buell’s command. 18 Grant could not solely address the achievements of himself and his lieutenants. He demonstrated concern for the common men who fought and died.

Though commanders might still wish to hide losses for both political and military purposes, they could not blatantly turn a defeat into victory. In his report on the Battle of Chickamauga, submitted September 30, 1863, General George H. Thomas did not attempt to hide the tactical and strategic defeat. He described the retreat on September 21,

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stating “the order for withdrawal being received at 6 pm, the movement commenced at 9 pm,” and then detailed the redeployment in defensive positions near Chattanooga. However, he was careful not to discredit the efforts of his soldiers. He stated that “the troops under my immediate command fought most gallantly on both days, and were ably handled by their respective commanders,” and referred his superiors “to the reports of division, brigade, and regimental commanders for the names of those of their respective commands who distinguished themselves.” Thomas wanted to ensure that common soldiers received credit for their contributions. He described the fighting in detail, rather than glossing over the combat itself, and provided an accurate report instead of a piece of propaganda.

Other letters from common soldiers focused on described the writers’ devotion and patriotism rather than the details of battle and the competence of commanders. Letters expressing a genuine willingness to make sacrifices naturally appealed to publishers after the war. Private Hutchinson volunteered for a storming party, commonly referred to as the “forlorn hope” because they often suffered high casualty rates, during the siege of Port Hudson in the summer of 1863. In a letter dated July 3rd he described his motivation:

I am for the second time a volunteer – one of the “Forlorn Hope.” Yet I think our party ought not to have this dismal name, we being, as General Banks has told us in an address, the hope of the country, and I am sure that is not forlorn, thinkest thou so? You must think I have been rash in thus volunteering... [but] I have acted only from the principles of duty.

20 Post, 226-227.
Hutchinson’s words epitomize the idealized, self-sacrificing patriot. He attached a greater meaning to the conflict, which required that its martyrs be remembered. His letter also attracted publishers because unlike the European conscripts often drawn from the lowest classes of imperial society, most Civil War soldiers volunteered to serve, and many came from comfortable, middle-class backgrounds. Where the courage of an Austrian or Russian soldier might pass unnoticed by the privileged, educated elite of the Napoleonic era, an American soldier’s bravery represented an equal citizen with a willingness to sacrifice for the nation. Hutchinson’s words communicate motivations that few conscripts could have described during the Napoleonic Wars, and whose meaning touched literate Americans when printed widely at the war’s end. These publications brought the personal aspects of war to a national stage.

Though the lower ranks generated a great portion of Civil War correspondence, officers continued to author accounts that contained valuable perspectives and moving revelations. Lieutenant Ward Frothingham of the 59th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment desired to reenter combat in early 1864, despite a recent arm wound: “As far as my wound is concerned, I am entirely recovered, and eager to join the army once more, and lend a good right arm, to give my blood, and, if needs be, my life, to the service of my country.” Frothingham conveyed his personal commitment to the Union cause in his letter, which overshadows the initial message of his letter – his full recovery from a wound. He reaffirmed his devotion and shared it with those close to him, justifying a lengthy letter when he was likely corresponding frequently. Lieutenant Dougal McCall of the 66th U.S. Cavalry also included his reactions to events in messages, as demonstrated
by this description of the war’s impact on him in an April 14, 1865 letter: “My faith in Republicanism is strong, and much increased during the war.” This sentence demonstrates a desire to analyze events, made possible by educated writers and readers. McCall attached a greater significance to the conflict because he could create and communicate his own perspective. This quest for significance was not limited to just officers; the entire nation experienced the emotion of war through letters from friends and loved ones. The letters of citizen-soldiers demonstrated self-sacrifice worthy of special significance in popular culture.

The story of sacrifice established in personal letters, official reports and published collections remained in public memory long after the war as soldiers published memoirs years later. Lieutenant W.H. Empson of the 124th Ohio Volunteer Infantry published one such recollection around 1895, centered on his experience as a prisoner of war in the South. He vividly described the emotional and physical difficulties with the following quote:

Happily there was no one to tell us [in autumn 1863] that of every six in our party, four would never stand under the stars and stripes again; but, succumbing to chronic starvation, long continued exposure, the bullet of the brutal guard, the loathsome scurvy, the hideous gangrene and the heartsickness of hope deferred, would find respite from pain in the barren sands of that hungry Southern soil.

Stories like Empson’s kept the horror of the Civil War fixed in the minds of Americans. However, few accounts described the suffering of soldiers on prison barges in the decades after the Napoleonic wars. While the individual experience of that conflict

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21 Post; 383, 466.
slowly faded from memory, the continuous publication of Civil War memoirs maintained Americans’ awareness of the sacrifice required by war. Empson’s reflections kept the memory of soldiers’ suffering alive. He merely maintained what had been established by millions of letters written by men such as Hutchinson, Davenport, Frothingham and McCall and reinforced by the reports of generals sympathetic to the suffering of common soldiers.

Effects

The personal writing of the Civil War spread the experience of battle to the wider public and encouraged the attachment of special significance. The continued publication of such works as the Civil War generation aged kept the memory alive in popular memory for decades. This pattern of memory formation was clearly unique, as Napoleonic armies had neither the education nor infrastructure to maintain similar levels of correspondence and later publication. However, historians have attributed this uniqueness to the conflict itself. The emotional connection these writings created at the time continue to aid exceptionalists today, as they emphasize personal sacrifice in a previously unseen way.

Ken Burn’s series The Civil War demonstrated the usefulness of a poignant Civil War letter. When discussing the First Battle of Bull Run, the film included a reading of Union Major Sullivan Ballou’s last letter to his wife, written one week before the battle. It described his willingness to “lay down all the joys in this life, to help maintain this
Government,” because his “love of Country comes over [him] like a strong wind.”

His tragic death at Bull Run completed the story perfectly for the film’s purposes. While nothing should detract from the patriotic sacrifice of Major Ballou, millions of officers have perished in conflicts before and since. However, many officers of previous wars lacked the education necessary to produce moving similes in writing, and served absolutist regimes where personal allegiance to a monarch motivated any potential sacrifice. Civil War exceptionalists exploit these letters to create an emotional connection with the audience. This undermines the actual significance – the emotional connection the letters nurtured with their intended historical recipients, who shared in the soldiers’ tribulations and commemorated their sacrifices. Language like Major Ballou’s moved contemporary Americans to memorialize the Civil War as an exceptional event, and his surviving words have caused modern historians to do the same.

The official reports of Civil War generals do not provide the same emotional impact as a personal letter, but they demonstrate a concern for accuracy and individual sacrifice that Napoleonic reports did not. The democratization of knowledge prevented commanders from creating their own version of events. The wave of information provided in comprehensive reports, newspapers and letters forced generals to admit their losses and failures, while ensuring that credit was given when due. Though Napoleonic generals witnessed no less incredible efforts from their men, they had the ability to control official stories and claim credit and glory as they saw fit.

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Better education and postal systems provided American Civil War soldiers with the tools to correspond with loved ones at home. These letters provided the entire nation with an unprecedented window on the personal experience of war without actually serving in the Union or Confederate armies. These personal testimonies must have impacted the way Americans understood the conflict and its significance. Napoleonic civilians, if informed at all, knew only general details of daily army life, as censorship and poor education prohibited significant commentary. American civilians received vivid descriptions often laden with analysis and interpretation, which provided the war and casualties with greater significance. Letters and diaries brought the experience of the Civil War home, and the plethora of publications afterward has kept that memory alive for generations.
Chapter Two: Newspapers

“Tremendous Allied Victory!”
   - *London Times*, December 18, 1805

“From the ROTTERDAM COURANT: Important Battle has taken place, to the advantage of the French.”
   - *London Times*, December 30, 1805

“General Hooker Reported Defeated!”
   - *Portland Daily Advertiser*, May 8, 1863

These headlines exemplify the difference in both travel time and accuracy of information in newspapers between the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars. Exactly four weeks passed between the actual event of the Battle of Austerlitz, which took place on December 2, 1805, and the first accurate report in the *London Times*. An inaccurate report, based on speculation from a letter, still took more than two weeks to reach circulation. In contrast, only two days passed from the conclusion of the Battle of Chancellorsville on May 6, 1863 and the appearance of an accurate news story in a local paper in Portland, Maine. The *Times* story took nearly a month to reach London.

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2 Times Archive, “From the ROTTERDAM COURANT: Important Battle has taken place, to the advantage of the French,” *London Times*, 30 Dec 1805, http://archive.timesonline.co.uk/tol/keywordsearch.arc.
miles from Austerlitz; the Advertiser story took less than forty eight hours to reach Portland, 533 miles from Chancellorsville.⁴

This remarkable increase in speed of communication was made possible through the advent of the telegraph and the embedded newspaper correspondent. European publishers of the Napoleonic era relied on reports from observers, often deliberately biased. This personal testimony could only be carried on horse and by ship, causing a long lag between event and report. In most countries, the government had established an official version of the event by the time a story reached the presses, and strict censorship required compliance, despite any contradictory evidence. The resulting newspapers were only occasionally factual, and often circulated poorly as populations expected and received little real information.⁵

The increase in speed during the mid-nineteenth century, enabled by the invention of the telegraph, led to greater accuracy and made strict censorship impossible. This meant that reports from the Civil War kept the American public in both the Union and Confederacy well-informed. Civilians had a sense of being part of the war in the way previous populations did not, and they had daily access to the descriptions of suffering and brutality inherent in a continental conflict. The improved newspaper reporting made Americans engage the Civil War in an unprecedented way, allowing them to form a collective memory conscious of a significance of battlefield sites where tremendous sacrifices had been made.

Napoleonic Background

The first daily newspapers had appeared throughout Europe at the end of the seventeenth century. Initially free press flourished, but Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI imposed the first significant limitations by outlawing slander in 1715. By the middle of the eighteenth century both Prussia and Austria had official censors, which exercised tight control over the press. France and many small German states set up government-sponsored newspapers that out-competed the free press, so in 1789 finding “untainted” news was difficult for literate continental Europeans.⁶

Those French “citizens” who could read found a wide variety of published material available during the French Revolution, but this tapered off quickly with the censorship of the Directory and of Napoleon. Though hundreds of regular circulars were published in France in the early 1790s, Directory censors reduced this number to around eighty by 1799.⁷ Once Napoleon took power, he exercised even stricter control over information, closing sixty of the remaining papers in his first year as Consul. By 1811, he had shut down all but four papers, whose editors he had appointed.⁸ Especially during Napoleon’s empire, only the government’s official spin was allowed to be printed, keeping truth about military casualties hidden safely away from public eyes.

Napoleon’s infamous Bulletins, published throughout his campaigns from 1805-1812, strictly controlled the news that reached soldiers. In the Eighth Bulletin of the 1805

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⁷ Forrest, 74.
campaign, written on October 20, Napoleon stated that the surrender of General Mack’s Austrian army at Ulm included 60,000 prisoners, and that “never were victories made more complete nor at less cost.” The Fifty-eighth Bulletin of the Prussian/Russian campaign exaggerated the outcome of the Battle of Eylau even more, stating that the “plan of the enemy...has completely miscarried” and that the battle “proved extremely fatal to them.” While Ulm was undeniably a remarkable success, it was not a bloodless victory, and the Battle of Eylau saw the French suffer more losses than the Russians in a sanguine stalemate. Napoleon combined patriot rhetoric with blatant exaggeration to create a personal image of glory and victory.

The French press published the official reports from the Bulletin de la Grande Armée also, usually in the Moniteur, the most closely controlled Parisian paper. The Moniteur blatantly underestimated losses for nearly every battle reported, especially during the War of the Sixth Coalition. After the disastrous 1812 campaign in Russia, Napoleon began to send reports directly to the Moniteur, without attempting to publish Bulletins in the field. Frenchmen quickly realized that the “triumphalist tone” hid the truth from them, with the result that the Moniteur “might be dismissed as the Menteur.”

The slow movement of information meant that the Moniteur suffered great delays in its reporting. Although the Bulletins were often printed from forward bases, allowing them to be distributed within a few days of being composed, the Moniteur often lagged behind events in the field by a full month. The October 30, 1813 edition chronicled the

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9 J. David Markham, Imperial Glory: The Bulletins of Napoleon’s Grande Armée (London: Greenhill Books, 2003); 1-3, 21, 143-144.
10 Forrest; 34, 75.
Grande Armée’s actions in Silesia as of October 4; on October 30, the army was actually three hundred miles from Silesia on the banks of the Rhine.\textsuperscript{11} Even when the Moniteur published somewhat accurate accounts, they appeared long after the situation in the field had changed.

Elsewhere in Europe, censorship remained as tight as ever during the Napoleonic Wars. Austrian censorship remained tight until the end of the nineteenth century, and Russia had a particularly low demand for circulars as it had the lowest literacy rate among major European powers. Only in England did the middle-class enjoy relatively high literacy and free press. British newspapers could report reversals if they were truthful, but the channel crossing often delayed information from the continent and established and accepted bias encouraged significant inaccuracies.\textsuperscript{12}

This obvious control over the news eventually produced a disinterested population, aware that few or no accurate sources were available to them. In France particularly, the very purpose of newspapers died away under Napoleon, as they contributed only to a “culture of victory.” As civilians and soldiers alike realized this, papers failed due to lack of circulation. Slowly suspicion and distrust gave way to acceptance of ignorance, and the result was a detachment from events because accurate accounts and critical reviews were nonexistent.\textsuperscript{13}

Of course, a low literacy rate plagued much of Europe. Only small sectors of continental European society could read, so the newspapers had a more specific and

\textsuperscript{11} Markham; 377, 386.
\textsuperscript{12} Martin and Copeland, 96-99.
\textsuperscript{13} Forrest, 74-76.
targeted audience than those in widely-literate America. This audience might have accepted the government’s version of events because they came from aristocracy and supported the limited press. Even those from lower classes might embrace positive reports simply for emotional satisfaction; “after all, a young conscript had every reason to share in official optimism if he possible could.” The literate segments of society could form opinions about the war from papers, but the censors made critical evaluation impossible. The articles could be better classified as propaganda than journalism.

Napoleonic newspapers often conveyed only a thinly-veiled agenda, not the suffering and chaos of war experienced by the millions of participants. This obvious distortion created a generic narrative of the conflict that lost credibility over time and did not encourage widespread public recognition. The gap between rhetoric and reality could not be bridged in the Napoleonic era.

**Developments**

Between the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars, the speed and accuracy of news, and particularly military news, increased dramatically. The two major developments that enabled this, the telegraph and imbedded correspondents, both appeared first in the 1840s. They matured just as sectional tensions peaked, and when secessionists finally fired on Fort Sumter, correspondents were witnesses, ready to telegraph their results in time for an evening extra eagerly awaited back home.  

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14 Forrest, 76.
Samuel Morse first began working with electric current to speed up communication in the early 1830s, but the first regular telegraph line, laid between Baltimore and Washington, was not established until 1844. His famous first message, “What hath God wrought!,” inaugurated the era of instant communication. Instant news followed closely behind, and messages for the press accounted for one-third of all the profits of the telegraph in the year 1845. The telegraph spread rapidly, bringing information with it. By 1852, more than 23,000 miles of telegraph wire had been laid in the United States.16

Embedded correspondents first appeared during the Mexican-American War, but only in limited numbers. The lack of telegraph wires across the entire country meant reports were few and far between. The concept survived after that conflict as a means to generate exclusive stories free of the Associated Press. By the 1850s, the Associated Press ensured that every newspaper received stories simultaneously, so exclusive reports were rare. Large papers, like the New York Herald, kept three or four “roving correspondents” at any time, hoping they might stumble upon an exciting event and submit the occasional piece ahead of the competition. However, with the outbreak of the Civil War, the opportunities for unique stories increased dramatically. Nearly every paper in the nation dispatched military correspondents to search for news of the war; in the case of the New York Herald, as many as sixty-three “special correspondents” were following the military at any one time.17

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17 Blondheim, 130.
By the time of secession, thousands of telegraph lines connected even minor cities with major hubs. Information could be sent across the country in a matter of minutes, with translation of the “dots and dashes” of Morse code being the only limitation. Newspapers had some experience with correspondents, and their ranks could be rapidly increased in response to the crisis. America was poised for a news revolution that changed the way civilians perceived war.

**Civil War Newspapers**

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Americans on both sides thirsted for the latest information, turning to the numerous daily newspapers published in major cities. Though millions eventually became involved either as soldiers or civilians caught in the path of an army, “most Americans experienced the Civil War on a daily basis not through combat but by reading about it in the papers.”\(^{18}\) The combination of telegraph communications and embedded correspondents allowed newspapers in both the North and the South to report accurately on events within hours of their occurrence, keeping Americans connected to the conflict in real time in a way previous civilian populations were not.

Telegraph companies were vital to reporting during the Civil War. At the outset, the Associated Press circulated breaking news throughout the United States by means of the American Telegraph Company. However, the Confederacy lost that service in the summer of 1861, and Lincoln’s administration began to censor all stories that passed

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\(^{18}\) Coopersmith, xiv.
through the Associated Press. Fortunately for interested Americans, alternatives formed rapidly. In the North, the United States Telegraph Company began building alternative lines between major cities in the East to provide largely uncensored reports, while Western Union served that role in the West.\(^{19}\) In the South, the Confederate government kept telegraph lines running and functioned as a cooperative news source much like the Associated Press, though sole government control over the lines also gave them greater powers over censorship.\(^{20}\)

The reports of the first battle of the war, which took place near Bull Run (and Manassas Junction) on July 21, 1861, demonstrate some of the advantages and the challenges of telegraph communication. In many parts of the North, reports appeared the next morning, though most of the correspondents who submitted them had left the battlefield too early and predicted a crushing Union victory. The headlines of the *New York Herald* on July 22 read “A Great Battle and Brilliant Union Victory” and “The Rebels Routed and Driven Back to Manassas.” Similarly, the *Boston Journal* declared “The Rebels Completely Routed!” and the *Albany Evening Journal* claimed a “Great Union Victory!” the same day. Though certainly misleading, the time taken to correct the errors was much shorter than the four weeks needed to print accurate accounts of Austerlitz in London in 1805. In an “extra” published by the *New York Herald* the same evening as the erroneous headline, a report by Henry Villard accurately described the

\(^{19}\) Blondheim, 133-144.  
\(^{20}\) Coopersmith, xviii.
Union rout, providing engaged New Yorkers with the disappointing truth. The *Boston Journal* and *Albany Evening Journal* had the facts straight by the following day.

Elsewhere in the North, other newspapers related more truthful accounts of Bull Run on the first printing. The first report in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* appeared on July 23, with the simple title “The Battle of Bull’s Run.” The article provided a rough account of the battle in three paragraphs and admitted the defeat, though it predictably bent the truth, saying that “our troops fought at great disadvantage” and casualties were only “about one hundred killed and wounded.” Newspapers had the crucial role of reporting casualties, but the *Enquirer* informed readers that the “ranks and names of the killed and wounded will not be secured until tomorrow.” However, the *Daily National Intelligencer* of Washington D.C. secured a list of names of the dead on July 23. Where possible, the *Intelligencer* included family contact information for those wishing to attend the funeral. Readers followed battlefield news closely to learn about friends and loved ones, and the newspapers embraced this function. Family members could never hope to be informed of a soldier’s death in a matter of days during the Napoleonic wars. The transmission of names by telegraph constituted just part of the information revolution of the Civil War.

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Embedded newspaper correspondents enabled these rapid updates, as they followed the armies and provided the latest stories for their editors to publish back home. Though often criticized for inaccuracy, which was sometimes glaring even by nineteenth century standards, they performed a remarkable task with few previous examples to draw on. Many of them had never reported news before, being know for creative writing instead. New York World reporter Edmund Clarence Stedman, formerly a poet, reflected on the challenge he and other correspondents faced years later: “The early correspondents, of whom I was one, knew nothing of military life, tactics, modern warfare... We pioneers were creating the profession of the War Correspondent.” Stedman rose to the challenge and provided some of the most accurate battlefield reports throughout the war, but the occasional failure of others to do the same should not taint a historical view of Civil War reporting. Providing a “synthetic narration of a whole battle,” as Stedman classified the stories, was a monumental task. 25

The reporting of the Union triumph at Gettysburg in early July 1863 provides an example of the communication made possible by embedded correspondents with access to the fast communication of the telegraph. In the North, the victory was reported in some places within a matter of hours. The Baltimore Sun published the “highly interesting details” of “a Battle near Gettysburg” on July 4, 1863. These included a description of the death of the commander of the First Corps; the Sun reported on “a shot from one of their [Confederate] pickets, which struck Major General Reynolds in the head, killing him instantly.” The violence of combat came across in the report, describing how “on

25 Perry, 33-35.
Pennsylvania soil, has been fought one of the most desperate and bloody battles of this accursed rebellion.” These depictions brought the reality of war home to readers. Instead of minimizing losses and focusing on glory, these stories emphasized the brutality of fighting and the real cost in human life. A Baltimore resident reading the Sun could visualize the last moments of Reynolds’ life, as well as thousands of others, through a daily newspaper costing a few pennies.

On July 6, the New York Herald reported on “The Great Three Days’ Battles of Gettysburg” and “The Great Victory of Friday.” The latter headline refers to failure of Pickett’s Charge on Friday July 3, the decisive moment of the battle, which is recounted in detail. In addition, the Herald enticed readers to continue following the story by suggesting that “the nation, with breathless suspense, is watching the termination of this campaign, to see whether it will virtually end the war or protract the struggle into another year.”

Civil War articles such as this encouraged further reading by suggesting possible outcomes on the horizon. This kept American readers engaged in a way that previous population were not. A Napoleonic reader often only received accounts of campaigns after they ended, often after an official state version of events had been created. During the Civil War, readers felt connected to events because they could follow in almost real time, waiting in suspense for the outcome.

Newspapers in the South also covered the developments in the aftermath of battle. The Richmond Examiner had first reported on Gettysburg on July 7, notably placing all

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blame for the failure of Pickett’s Charge on the North Carolina regiments involved to preserve the reputation of Virginia’s soldiers. For days after the defeat, the *Examiner* followed the Army of Northern Virginia’s retreat into Maryland. On July 11 the paper reported that “a cavalry skirmish took place yesterday” and “the army is quiet at Hagerstown.” As with the *New York Herald*, the *Richmond Examiner* kept its readers involved in military events by following the army after the battle. Richmond residents had more interest in a successful retreat than perhaps anyone in the country, as the capture of Lee’s army would have rendered the city virtually defenseless.

Other newspapers kept readers throughout the Confederacy informed. The major circular in Macon, Georgia often merely reprinted articles that came over the wire, calling itself the *Macon Daily Telegraph*. On May 4, 1863, the *Telegraph* presented a report “From Richmond” referring to the first stages of the Battle of Chancellorsville. Based on dispatches from Milford, the *Telegraph* stated that “General Jackson penetrated to the rear of the enemy and drove him from all positions from the wilderness to within one mile of Chancellorsville. He was engaged at the same time in front by two of Longstreet’s divisions.” Just two days after Jackson’s famous flanking march, a succinct and accurate account was available to Georgia civilians, allowing people hundreds of miles from the battlefield to follow the progress of Confederate arms.

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28 Carol Reardon, *Pickett’s Charge in History and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 216-223.
Correspondents and telegraphy enabled civilians on both sides during the Civil War to read newspapers that followed the progress of their army, keeping them aware of their own safety and the safety of their loved ones off at war. This constant flow of information kept civilians intimately involved in the progress of the conflict. Knowledge could be created and transmitted by hundreds of reporters, allowing it to be processed by millions of readers. Correspondents’ words conveyed the reality of the battlefield to every town, creating an accurate public record. The democratization of knowledge allowed the reality of the horrors of the Civil War to be included alongside the timely and accurate descriptions of battle.

**Effects**

Embedded correspondents, telegraphy, and literacy combined to promote a large number of accurate stories in daily newspapers throughout the United States during the Civil War. The educated populace produced an insatiable demand for information, which editors filled by sending large numbers of writers into the field to seek military information. With several armies moving at all times in multiple theaters, the Civil War offered numerous events for journalists to report on, keeping the civilian population engaged with a constant flow of information. Both Union and Confederate readers stayed abreast of victories, defeats, leadership changes and casualties, allowing them to stay connected to the experience of war.

The reports still created a consciousness of the war that would have been absent if Americans were kept disconnected from current events, despite the inaccuracies
introduced by opinionated writers and their editors. The stories produced almost always contained some slant or bias, and the correspondents of the Civil War were indeed “mostly rough” as James Perry described them. Public interest varied also as the armies alternated between periods of combat and inactivity, and “after large-scale battles or pivotal political events, sales would spike and then settle.” However, the average American was much more aware of the progress of arms than the average European of the Napoleonic era. Where only an elite European had use for papers, with information twisted for the government’s benefit, “newspapers were a constant part of life” for Americans during the Civil War.\(^\text{31}\) The quick reporting offered by the telegraph permitted rapid gratification of the reader’s curiosity, and the collective efforts of newspapers brought more detailed reports every day. Over time, almost every American constructed their own narrative of the war based on the daily information available to them. A rural Frenchman in 1805 learned of military campaigns through the occasional *Bulletin* or *Moniteur*, if he could read at all, and found only the predictable rhetoric of victory. A rural American in 1863 almost certainly had the basic education to read, and followed campaigns day by day with accurate stories supplied by the telegraph network.

Though these national reports came from a variety of sources, they were homogenized by the limited number of telegraph companies, allowed the experienced narratives to be consistent and coherent. Interpretations of rhetoric might vary, but Civil War civilians read about the hardships that soldiers endured and this encouraged empathy on a wide scale. This created a complete image of war and therefore a desire to

\(^{31}\) Coopersmith, xiv.
commemorate the great events they had read about. The reports of sacrifice made Americans want to preserve the hallowed ground at Antietam, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. Newspapers created a popular fervor around battles and encouraged commemoration at the sites of combat. Common Europeans ignorant of the details of battle felt little need to memorialize Austerlitz or Waterloo, as they never connected with the soldiers there or had the sources to share in their experience. Common Americans familiar with the tribulations of their armies felt compelled to preserve their stories of sacrifice for posterity. Their unprecedented efforts have affected the writing of historians ever since. The casualties at Chancellorsville were not unique to history; the reports about the battle created a unique need to preserve the event among the wider American population.
Chapter Three: Images

- *La Bataille d’Austerlitz*, François Gérard, 1810\(^1\)

- *Stone wall, rear of Fredericksburg with rebel dead*, A. J. Russell, May 3, 1863\(^2\)

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\(^{2}\)
These images demonstrate the very different ways that civilian populations viewed battlefield carnage in the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars. In 1810 Napoleon commissioned François Gérard to create a painting emphasizing greatness and victory in the Battle of Austerlitz. The result, *The Battle of Austerlitz*, became one of the most iconic images in French art of the nineteenth century. This stylization of battle, centered on leaders rather than casualties, gave Napoleonic populations a romantic view of battle that ignored the tremendous loss of life involved.

By the time of the Civil War, photography had succeeded painting as the major medium for public exhibition. Photographers flocked to battlefields after the armies clashed, seeking compelling shots for the galleries of men like Mathew Brady. Others, such as Captain A.J. Russell of the 141st New York Volunteers, took photographs for the army while serving. While still with his unit, Russell captured the above photograph of dead rebel defenders within minutes of the successful capture of Marye’s Heights during the Battle of Chancellorsville. Though this photograph was distributed only to leaders, it demonstrates the type of material available to Civil War Americans.

Photographs paired with lithographs to bring the reality of loss home to Civil War civilians. Union and Confederate photographers captured the horror of war, and thousands viewed these images in exhibitions. Artists then took inspiration from the images, creating lithographs that could be published in newspapers, carrying these

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snapshots of carnage to millions of readers. Instead of Gérard’s stylized view centered on the bravery and calm of leaders, men like Russell presented the reality of contorted bodies of young men left after battle. Photography and lithography played a crucial role in the formation of memory. Americans came to associate battles with death, not glory, as images of dead and wounded soldiers replaced depictions of victorious leaders. Viewing the contorted corpses of soldiers in real perspective demonstrated the cost to Civil War Americans as never before.

**Napoleonic Images**

Both political leaders and artists understood the power of images in the Napoleonic age. Widespread illiteracy inhibited the effective transmission of ideas through writing, but art could be understood and appreciated by all. Rulers commissioned portraits to enhance the prestige of themselves and their accomplishments, while artists themselves used their work to communicate approval or disdain for those in power during times of war. Art played a crucial role as propaganda during the Napoleonic wars.

In France during the Napoleonic Wars, Bonaparte took advantage of art to cultivate his image as a brave leader and a protector of the French people. In 1801 then First Consul Bonaparte had Antoine-Jean Gros paint *General Bonaparte on the bridge at Arcole*, which portrays Napoleon as a dashing general with both flag and saber in hand. This emphasized his willingness to sacrifice along with the millions of other Frenchmen in military service. It also indirectly downplayed the lethality of battle; Napoleon’s survival after conspicuously leading a charge suggests that soldiers could not easily
inflict death at range. As emperor in 1812, Napoleon commissioned a portrait from Jacques Louis David. *Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries* showed the emperor as an active ruler, writing laws in the middle of the night. He appeared in uniform, but chose the blue of a common soldier instead of his usual green to show humility. Napoleon used these paintings by elite artists to control his public image. They were often copied for widely-distributed prints, creating a balanced portrayal of the emperor as a dedicated civil and military leader. He hid the bloody cost of war by emphasizing his personal participation in combat, and justified those losses incurred through the resulting triumph and prestige.

In the paintings portraying battles themselves, artists consciously stylized combat and casualties. Few commissioned painters ever saw the fields the painted, instead relying on the official reports. Gérard’s *The Battle of Austerlitz* exemplified these romantic works. The painting focused on Napoleon and French leadership, with only a few casualties shown, all enemies. In addition to its exhibition in the Salon in Paris, it inspired numerous woodcut engravings that were available throughout the country, making the image available to the masses. Pellerin, a popular engraver in the 1830s, copied Gérard’s vision of Austerlitz for his print *Gloire Nationale-Napoleon* in 1835. Future generations of Frenchmen learned of the war through romanticized images that kept the focus on the personal triumph of leaders instead of the greater tragedy suffered by individual soldiers.

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6 Day-Hickman, 117-120.
Gérard’s version of Austerlitz was just one of many paintings commissioned by Napoleon. Antoine-Jean Gros entered a commemorative painting in a competition in March 1807, just one month after the bloody and inconclusive Battle of Eylau. In *Napoleon visiting the battlefield of Eylau*, Gros revealed the “dark side” of a battle that had been publicized as a victory. The painting depicts several wounded Frenchmen, but all are receiving medical care. Napoleon appeared compassionate, while his marshals focused on the victorious legions in the background. Napoleon’s commissioned works showed only a faint glimpse of the horror of war, and only then for the propaganda value of portraying him as a concerned leader.7

France’s enemies in the Napoleonic Wars understood the value of images also. The Spanish provisional government commissioned Francisco Goya to create some of the most famous paintings of the era in 1814—*The Second of May 1808* and *The Third of May 1808*. Unlike the French paintings, which glorified combat, Goya condemned warfare. The former painting featured Napoleon’s Mameluke cavalry, loyal Arabian horsemen from his Egyptian campaign, attacking Spanish soldiers in the streets of Madrid. In the latter painting, Spaniards, apparently civilians, await execution as French soldiers aim their muskets. Both feature bleeding bodies to emphasize French brutality. However, Goya did not render the figures in high detail or realistic perspective. The “fluid brushstrokes” reflect the influence of previous great painters, and while they contribute to Goya’s unique style, the imperfection keeps the viewer aware of the artist’s

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7 “Key Paintings – First Empire.”
staging. These paintings clearly communicated Goya’s anti-war sentiments, but they did not depict casualties realistically.⁸

The paintings of Gérard, Gros, Goya and others contributed to a rich artistic tradition and inspire popular prints after the Napoleonic Wars. However, they did not present realistic visions of battle and its costs. The artists had rarely visited the battlefields, and painted to relay a stylized message rather than accurate visual accounts of war. Europeans of the Napoleonic age expected symbolism in art, not reality. As a result, they were visually detached from the brutality of a conflict they did not experience first-hand. The paintings of the Napoleonic era conveyed a romantic view of warfare that omitted death wherever possible, creating lasting images of bravery and victory, but not courage and suffering.

Developments

Napoleonic artists focused on painting, the major image medium available at the turn of the nineteenth century. Printers often based their etchings off of famous paintings, but this limited the quality of mass-produced prints. In 1799 Alois Senefelder of Bavaria developed a purely chemical printing process that required only paper: lithography. The lithograph took advantage of hydrophobic paper and fat-soluble ink to reproduce highly detailed and colorful images. Publication of Senefelder’s work only occurred in 1817,

after the Napoleonic Wars had ended, but it quickly became a common method for the mass production of prints.9

Just as lithography gained acceptance, several Europeans began experiments to capture images in real perspective. Louis Daguerre finally perfected the first practical photograph in 1837. Exhibitions of his daguerreotype began appearing in the United States two years later, and the new medium quickly spread. Within a decade, photographers opened studios in most major American cities. By 1853, around three million daguerreotypes a year were being taken in the United States.10

The photograph changed rapidly in the decade before the Civil War, becoming more widely available and easily reproducible. Frederick Scott Archer, a British sculptor, developed a wet collodion process in 1851 that allowed photographers to produce a positive image with just a few seconds of exposure. The image could be placed either on glass to produce an “ambrotype” or on a thin sheet of iron to make a “ferrotype.” The ferrotype became known to most Americans as the “tintype,” although tin was never used. Daguerreotype negatives were almost never sold commercially in 1860, though they could be used to make a cheap carte de visite or a stereograph that could be sold widely. The carte de visite could be viewed directly, while a stereograph, or stereoscopic image, had the same photograph reproduced twice. When viewed through a stereoscope, the image took on a three-dimensional quality. The advent of the carte de visite and

10 Zeller, 3-5.
stereograph allowed photographs to be manufactured and consumed widely, making certain photographs popular and famous.\textsuperscript{11}

The new technology was quickly mimicked by printers of lithographs. The highly accurate ink transfer allowed for black-and-white prints that had high contrast and accurate perspective, like photographs. Many printers used paintings or photographs as templates for lithographs, which could then be reproduced and sold cheaply. By the time of the Civil War, photography had altered the nature of printed images. Lithography became a cost-effective alternative to the new media sweeping America. Indeed, newspapers could never reproduce photographs during the Civil War, so lithographs provided “illustrations.”\textsuperscript{12} Though this prevented exacting detail from reaching the masses, the inspiration provided by photographs was indispensable, allowing artists to produce realistic instead of romantic settings.

Nevertheless, photographers thrived producing both portraits and landscape images. Though few small towns had studios, photographers from other cities would travel for days at a time to take portraits, usually purchased as ambrotypes or tintypes. When Americans traveled, they purchased \textit{cartes de visite} and stereographs as keepsakes or gifts. Photography was a profitable and growing industry until 1857, when personal portraiture suffered during the economic downturn known as the Panic of 1857. Photographers faced financial ruin until the outbreak of the Civil War reversed their fortunes. By the time of Fort Sumter, nearly every American was familiar with

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Zeller, 16-21.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Mark E. Neely, Jr. and Harold Holzer, \textit{The Union Image: Popular Prints of the Civil War North} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 199-200.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
photography, and many had been involved in a portrait of some kind. Volunteers flocked to galleries to preserve their bravery for future generations. While portraits promised profits, a few pioneers turned instead toward the battlefield.\textsuperscript{13}

**Civil War Images**

The Civil War was not the first conflict to be photographed, but photographs from the war were the first to widely inspire lithographs and focus on the human toll. Only a scant thirty-five daguerreotypes survive from the Mexican War (1846-1848). None showed actual combat, and only one ever inspired a lithograph, which limited the exposure of those few existing images to the public. The Crimean War (1853-1856) drew the attention of English photographer Roger Fenton, who took over three hundred photographs during the Siege of Sebastopol in 1855. Though Fenton claimed to have witnessed many combat deaths, he photographed only landscapes, never casualties. His exhibition that fall drew attention in London, but his prints sold poorly, especially when peace came in 1856.\textsuperscript{14} At the start of the American Civil War, no photographer had ever exhibited images of casualties of a continental war.

Andrew Gardner took the first photographs of Americans slain in battle in the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam in September 1862. Employees of Mathew Brady, a photography pioneer hoping to profit from the Civil War, had captured hundreds of photographs of the Army of the Potomac since the Peninsula campaign in April, but had never correctly predicted the time and location of a great battle. Lee’s invasion of

\textsuperscript{13} Zeller, 21-29.  
\textsuperscript{14} Zeller; 8-9, 28-29.
Maryland demanded a Union response, so Gardner followed the commanding General McClellan throughout the short campaign leading up to Antietam, allowing him to capture some of the most dramatic images of the war. He roamed the field for two full days, collecting over one hundred images, including twenty showing dead soldiers. Gardner favored stereo plates that could be used to make the widely marketable stereographs.\(^\text{15}\)

Brady presented the Antietam photographs in October in both his Washington and New York studios, the latter exhibit bearing the simple title “The Dead of Antietam.” They had an immediate and profound impact on viewers. On October 20 the *New York Times* reported on the photographs: “If he [Mathew Brady] has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along streets, he has done something very like.” The article moved beyond individual soldiers, generalizing to the cost for families and society as a whole: “Homes have been made desolate, and the light of life in thousands of hearts has been quenched forever. All of this desolation imagination must paint – broken hearts cannot be photographed.”\(^\text{16}\) Photographs brought the reality of war home in a brutal way, connecting visible humans with the casualties reported in the news. Instead of stylized figures from an artist’s imagination, Brady’s subjects were real men torn and twisted in mortal combat. On October 18 *Harper’s Weekly* reported that the exhibit “shows through what tortures the poor victims must have passed before they were relieved of their

\(^{15}\) Zeller, 70-80.
sufferings.”\(^{17}\) Photography brought a new level of empathy to civilians, arousing concern for the physical pain endured in death and the emotional pain of the family left behind.

The only battlefield photographed to the same extent as Antietam was Gettysburg, site of the bloodiest battle of the war. By summer 1863, Gardner had ceased to work for Brady, instead pursuing his own fame and fortune through photography. He arrived at Gettysburg just two days after the battle ended and managed to capture unburied dead wearing both blue and gray. Without Brady, Gardner’s roughly ninety images received far less public attention, but they contributed to the war’s memory in another way. Printers drew inspiration from the photographs as they created woodcuts and lithographs showing dead soldiers. On July 22, 1865, *Harper’s Weekly* combined five Gettysburg photographs into one scene to accompany a description of the battle. The illustration carried the same name Gardner had given to one of his photographs: “The Harvest of Death.”\(^{18}\)

Newspapers did not repeat shocked reactions to the second round of photographs of the battlefield dead. By July 1863, bloated corpses had become linked with battle to the point that they did not require comment. The photograph exposed the horror of war and shocked the public in 1862; in later years it merely reiterated the uncomfortable truth. Photographs continued to improve the accuracy of newspapers and reports by inspiring lithographs and sketches. Artists no longer had to imagine the battlefield; they could accurately render famous locations from Burnside’s Bridge to Cemetery Hill from

\(^{17}\) Zeller, 80-81.

\(^{18}\) Zeller, 105-112.
They also included the eviscerated corpses of soldiers from the original photographs instead of stylized figures drawn from the artist’s imagination.

Of course, not all lithographs found inspiration in photography. Thomas Nast produced some of the most influential prints of the Civil War, often featuring crafted images instead of realistic landscapes. The German immigrant became a loyal New Yorker, and his prints for Harper’s Weekly often served as blatant propaganda, portraying brutal excesses of Southern soldiers and leadership. In the print “Southern Chivalry,” Nast depicted Southern soldiers bayoneting the wounded and decapitating the dead, fostering patriotism by turning enemy combatants into monsters. His work encouraged voluntarism in the North by creating a harsh and immoral foe. It also relied on the theme of death, engendering anger and sympathy for the Union soldiers who had been killed. Nast’s lithographs acknowledged the omnipresence of death and communicated the price of war by emphasizing losses in addition to depicting a depraved enemy.

After 1862, when photographers began to show actual battle sites and the carnage that resulted, Nast also turned to battlefields for inspiration with his patriotic art. At the suggestion of Art Director John Bonner, Nast produced many “fierce portrayals of the bloody trade of war.” With works such as “A Gallant Color Bearer,” he showed the heroism of individual soldiers. Unlike romanticized Napoleonic works, soldiers were shown being wounded or suffering on the ground, glorifying those still pressing forward while not hiding the realities of combat. He also included images of generals on the

19 Neely and Holzer, 219-224.
battlefield, such as “Little Mac Making his Rounds,” but he focused his work on the dead and wounded soldiers instead of merely placing the commander in an impressive pose. These works “inspired men to go forth to avenge their country’s wrongs,” but they also contributed to the public conception of war.\(^{22}\) Though Nast and *Harper’s Weekly* clearly had an agenda, they used casualties for emotional impact instead of hiding them away as propagandists had in previous conflicts. Nast took inspiration from battlefield photographs and spread images of the battlefield dead, emphasizing the tragedy of war as much as glory. In doing so, he enabled average Americans to see the suffering of common soldiers and visualize the horrors of combat.

New technologies combined to give Civil War Americans unprecedented visual access to warfare and its cost. Photographs created powerful exhibitions and provided accurate inspiration for woodcuts, drawings and lithographs. The detail made possible by photography encouraged greater detail in other images also, giving their contact greater impact. Lithography enabled detailed depictions to be disseminated on a wide scale. The images of the Civil War moved far beyond the stylized environments and figures seen in Europe during the Napoleonic Wars. They showed average Americans in both North and South the price of war by tempering visions of glory and triumph with the reality of the wounded and dead left behind.

\(^{22}\) Paine, 81-83.
Effects

The images of the Civil War offered a far greater degree of realism than those of the Napoleonic Wars. The development of the photograph allowed the reality of war to be preserved in exact detail. The lithograph allowed a complex image created by an artist to be copied hundreds of times and distributed widely. The visual media available to Civil War civilians far outweighed that of the Napoleonic era in realism and quantity.

The commissioned paintings that dominated Napoleonic art were fundamentally contrived in a way that Civil War images were not. Gérard’s instructions required him to create a vision of glory and victory based on a few icons. *The Battle of Austerlitz* contained the “sun of Austerlitz” and dashing generals on horseback, but had no references to accurately render the location. While Gérard failed to include the Pratzen Heights, a dominant feature crucial to the battle on December 2, 1805, Russell’s photograph centered on the decisive point of the battle on May 3, 1863: the stone wall. Images of the Civil War accurately showed where and how soldiers died, while images of the Napoleonic Wars showed an idealized battle where men reveled in victory or died heroically.

Even “propaganda” embraced a new degree of realism in the Civil War. Though Nast did not work for the government, his art for *Harper’s Weekly* conveyed a clear agenda. He included dead soldiers in a number of works, to show the courage of the living, the crimes of the enemy, and the reality of sacrifice. His lithographs conveyed a far more accurate vision of combat that the paintings commissioned by Napoleon and his contemporaries, although they both sought to harness patriotism. Nast helped create a
public conception of war that focused on the cost of victory in lives of common soldiers; artists like Gérard simply painted glorified visions of triumph brought by the efforts of a few generals.

Images, and especially photography, have supported the exceptionalist view of the Civil War because modern students of history can see the cost of war, just as Americans could at the time. As David McCullough stated in a recent address given at Miami University, “We have seen the dead of the Civil War in pictures, but it is hard to imagine those who died in the American Revolution when we have seen only paintings.” Gardner’s Antietam images retain their gritty, tragic power that captivated New Yorkers in October 1862. The paintings of Goya could never be mistaken for anything but romantic images, communicating ideas and impressions rather than actual events. Photography and lithography ensured that casualties in battle were no longer “faceless,” and this brought the reality of death to millions of Americans far from the front lines.
Chapter Four: Memory

When describing the American Civil War, most historians emphasize the sheer human cost and assume that the 620,000 casualties require an exceptional explanation. Many have argued that military technology had outpaced linear tactics, making war itself deadlier.¹ Others have proposed that Americans simply embraced death in the nineteenth century, creating a cultural phenomenon where the losses did not concern either soldiers in the field of the millions of civilians at home.² However, the incorporation of technological developments, such as photography and telegraphy, and cultural advantages, such as high literacy, offers a more complete understanding of the popular memory of the Civil War. Civil War Americans perceived the conflict in a way that previous populations, such as those involved in the Napoleonic Wars, could not. The conflict itself did not occur under exceptional military circumstances, but in a time and place where the experience of war could be disseminated to the civilian population with unprecedented speed and veracity. Records, rather than weapons, forged the popular memory of war.

Military Technology and Tactics

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the smoothbore musket and linear tactics had dominated warfare for over two centuries. They had resulted in high casualty rates

² Mark Schantz, Awaiting the Heavenly Country (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); 134, 5-10.
throughout this period, causing notably bloody engagements from Lutzen in 1632 to Malplaquet in 1709 to Borodino in 1812. Napoleon had revolutionized military organization, which had a great effect on strategic speed and coordination, but his battlefield tactics remained fundamentally unchanged. Antebellum American officers studied Napoleonic battles and the linear tactics employed, and the future Civil War generals applied them effectively as junior officers in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). As the Civil War loomed, the introduction of the Minie system produced a tremendous increase in the accuracy of both muskets and artillery. Some strategists of the 1850s predicted an apocalyptic increase in the deadliness of warfare, but most officers had little cause to abandon the traditional strategies of war.

Many historians cite the high casualty rates of the Civil War, which reached nearly thirty percent in some engagements, as evidence that linear warfare had become outdated. They portray officers as foolish, shortsighted barbarians “throwing” their men to their deaths. However, “casualties amounting to thirty percent were not unusual in major smoothbore battles.” Similar rates had been seen in continental European wars for centuries, and various battles from the American Revolution, War of 1812 and Mexican War all reached similarly striking levels of bloodletting. The armies of the Civil War experienced heavy losses, but not unprecedented carnage as has often been suggested.

In the context of the nineteenth century, linear tactics were “highly successful in the Civil War,” despite the improved technology. A variety of factors contributed to the

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3 Hess, 199-200.
5 Hess, 1.
6 Hess, 199.
continued viability of the linear warfare of the smoothbore age, from a scarcity of rifles to poor training to military tradition. Many units in both armies carried smoothbore weapons for the first half of the Civil War, and some Confederate units relied on dated weapons to the end of the conflict. Even when soldiers had the latest technology, they rarely had the experience to employ it. Hitting a target at the maximum target distance of a rifle required a clear line of sight and a firm understanding of the arced trajectory. Since soldiers normally lacked both of these necessities in the confusion of battle, the potential accuracy of their arms had little effect.7

The crucial conclusion regarding battlefield casualties transcends tactics, numbers and rifles. Though the emphasis on “violence” and “destructiveness” has been attacked recently as “sensationalization,” the simple truth remains: losses of the Civil War were terrible.8 However, it was not necessarily more terrible than previous wars. Napoleonic soldiers suffered greatly; “their generation had had a terrible burden to bear.”9 Individual battles had regularly claimed three or four out of ten soldiers engaged for generations. The losses of the Civil War should be viewed as an example of continuity in the human experience, not an exceptional or decisive diversion in history.

The Culture of Death in Nineteenth Century America

Recent scholarship has argued that a culture of death allowed Americans to produce and accept unprecedented casualties in the Civil War. Some historians believe

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7 Hess; 6-10.
8 Neely. 205-208.
that a conflict producing a far greater number of deaths than the United States had
previously witnessed in war required a level of detachment among the general
population. However, the consciousness of loss in historical memory demonstrates that
Americans were deeply affected by deaths during the war. Those who witnessed the Civil
War, from rural women to powerful Congressmen, mourned the dead and showed serious
concern for the value of human life.

Despite the omnipresence of death in the nineteenth century, civilians still
expressed deep grief and horror at the huge number of losses in the Civil War. Widows
diligently maintained the tradition of two years’ mourning for a dead husband, feeling
just as affected as they would have in peacetime. Though the tradition of holding
funerals in the home granted antebellum Americans a degree of familiarity with corpses,
they remained shocked by photographs of battlefield dead. The loss of a large number
of young men has always impacted societies, even those acquainted with natural deaths.
Indeed Herodotus himself noted the traumatic shift during war, writing the following in
the fifth century BCE: “In peace, sons bury their fathers. In war, fathers bury their
sons.” In the case of death and loss in the Civil War, “familiarity bred contempt” rather
than comfort.

The huge losses did not lessen the concern for human life among leaders during
the war. In February 1864, the Confederate House of Representatives launched an
investigation of the court martial of just one man, Virginian W.E. Coffman. Coffman, a

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civilian and Union sympathizer, apparently sabotaged a Confederate brigade during a march in December 1863. Brigadier General Imboden tried him in a military tribunal, rather than a civilian court. When the legality of the process was challenged, he argued for a military execution in a letter to Congress:

This criminal [Coffman] ceased to be entitled to the protection of our laws when he took sides with our enemy, and I hold I had the right to hang him as soon as caught, without a trial; but, out of abundant caution, I gave him a trial. He is found guilty. I have sentenced him to death and will hang him.

The Confederate House requested all papers pertaining to the case from the Secretary of War, and a seven page pamphlet was produced for examination. Even in the midst of a bloody war, the life of one man proved important to the Confederate Congressmen. Had death been culturally accepted, the government would have taken little or no notice of the execution of an enemy sympathizer. Instead, Coffman’s execution was stayed until he received due process in civilian courts.¹⁴

Even President Lincoln took notice of the sacrifices made by individual families. In the fall of 1864, he sent his personal condolences to Mrs. Lydia Bixby. All five of her sons had served in the Union Army, although Lincoln had been erroneously informed that all five had died in battle. The President wrote of the Bixby sons:

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

¹⁴ “Message of the President, Feb. 12, 1864” (Richmond, VA: War Department, 1864), 1-7.
The *Boston Evening Transcript* reproduced Lincoln’s letter to spread the knowledge of this personal tragedy.\(^{15}\) The Bixby letter demonstrated that newspaper editors expected Boston readers to share Lincoln’s interest in recognizing the significance of each individual sacrifice made in war.

Americans on both sides during the Civil War demonstrated extreme concern for human life. The high death tolls bothered poor farmers and elite politicians alike, and individual lives never lost their value. The omnipresence of death during the Civil War did not make it more acceptable to those who witnessed it.

**Media as the Means to the Formation of Memory**

Understanding the past requires an appreciation for the way memory was constructed. The “events” presented in historical sources, primary and secondary, have passed through a human lens. Each perspective reveals and limits in its own way. While the need to consider political, social and economic biases seems rather obvious, the inadvertent bias created by the very means of information transfer can be overlooked. The media available to historical figures controlled their understanding of the world around them. In many ways, this makes the means of transmitting information more important than the source event.

During and after the Napoleonic Wars, few accurate records existed outside of the letters and diaries written by those privileged few who were literate. The restrictions

imposed on society by the monarchies of Europe prevented the development of significant memorials, and the masses lacked the knowledge to desire commemoration. “It was, of course, a less democratic society, less concerned to resurrect the lives of ordinary soldiers than to preserve the memory of their leaders.” The kings and generals won renown, but after the French Revolution no monarchy wanted to champion the combined efforts of lower class conscripts, even to acknowledge the bravery of soldiers. Thus “the soldiers’ war was largely left to private memory and reflection” and “to the conversations of old comrades.” The controlled European societies of the Napoleonic age did not bring the reality and horror of battle into the public discourse, hiding the emotional significance that might have encouraged commemoration from the masses.

The developments in communication and education enabled nineteenth-century Americans to follow and comment on their Civil War. While only a handful of Napoleonic soldiers even kept diaries, let alone preserved them long enough to see publication, Americans “left behind a profusion of letters, diaries and memoirs for the years 1861 to 1865.” Civil War Americans shared knowledge through letters, newspapers and images with a freedom unfathomable for the average Frenchman at the time of Austerlitz. In an essay on the effects of the Civil War in two small communities, Thomas Kemp noted that “for the first time, the harsh reality of war made itself known to the people back [home] in New Hampshire through each week’s newspaper. The same letters that filled the newspapers with the deaths of residents also contained unflattering

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16 Forrest, 202.
accounts of war.” The widespread literacy of common Americans and the free discourse through letters and newspapers brought the Civil War into every home.

This phenomenon has not been limited to conflicts of the nineteenth century. The perception of war has continued to change as education and communication technology have developed worldwide. Soldiers of later conflicts “left behind a far richer variety of writing, more subtly expressed, more carefully crafted to describe the most harrowing moments of their lives.” These records have fueled tremendous efforts at commemoration of twentieth-century conflicts, enabling tremendous monuments on the coasts of Normandy while the field at Waterloo sits in obscurity. Consider the obvious effects of popular media on the memory of many famous modern conflicts: the Lost Generation literature after World War I, the black-and-white films from World War II, the television coverage of Vietnam, and the internet discourse about the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan today. The very medium of communication affects our own perceptions and memory of events, as it has for previous populations.

Some nineteenth-century Americans were aware of the power that media, and especially the press, held over them. An 1885 article in the San Francisco Post noted that William Henry Smith, joint manager of the New York and Western Associated Press, “wields more power for good or evil, more power to raise or depress the fortune of the country, more power to make men and women rich and famous or poor and infamous, than any man in America.” Media sources “effect change or reinforce ideas,”

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18 Forrest, 202.
transmitting the knowledge that societies used to form popular memory. The visual and printed media of the Civil War presented the nature of war, and particularly its carnage, much more candidly than the media available to Europeans during the Napoleonic Wars. Therefore, one would expect the popular reactions to the conflicts to be very different, as they were largely shaped by the media available, even if the conflicts themselves have marked similarities.

Historians usually consider the biases inherent in their sources, but fully realizing the profound effects of new technology can be difficult. One expects similar events to produce similar records, even if separated in time. However, many forces affect the constructed memory of events, and the popular memory lies at the mercy of the sources available to common people. Napoleon himself embraced memory as consensus rather than fact, describing history as “the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.” The high control exerted by governments over knowledge in the Napoleonic era limited the memory of the violence of war. The high literacy and free press of Civil War America largely eliminated this restriction, allowing millions to contribute to the formation of memory. Thus, however similar the actual death tolls of the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars, a wide gulf in the information available and means of communication drastically changed the way that European and American societies chose to remember each conflict.

Usefulness of the Exceptionalist View

The construction of the Civil War as an exceptional event has proved useful for politicians, historians and common Americans since the 1860s. The tremendous coverage of the conflict made it a traumatic and defining period for those who experienced it, creating a potent topic that could be harnessed for other purposes. The scale of the losses sustained certainly justifies recognition, but the political and emotional value of an exceptionalist view discourages a critical examination of the Civil War in a larger context. From Radical Republicans to modern historians, many have found a practical purpose for emphasizing the “maddening carnage”22 of the war between the North and the South.

The most obvious political consequence of the Civil War was Reconstruction, and Radical Republicans used the fresh memories of terrible cost to support the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and their policies regarding the South. However, the political value of the Civil War extended throughout the Gilded Age, with both major parties managing to employ the specters of the war and sectionalism. Even as the Radical Republicans sought to break down racial discrimination within the Constitution, Democrats in the South rallied “Lost Causers” to overthrow the process of Reconstruction, install Jim Crow laws against former slaves, and oppose the Republican party in general elections. Former General Jubal Early, the “prototypical unreconstructed Rebel” according to Foster and Blight, encouraged a public memory of sacrifice and glory by recalling the Confederate soldiers “who by their deeds caused so many

22 Vinovskis, 75.
battlefields of the South to blaze with a glory unsurpassed in the annals of the world.”
Southerners like Early used an exceptionalist position which differentiated the Civil War from previous conflicts to rally support to attack Northern legislation and government policy.ató

In the North, the veterans’ organization called the Grand Army of the Republic proved to be a powerful political force, which demanded attention for state legislatures, Congress, and the Presidency. Gaining momentum in the late 1870s, the “GAR” was “the single most powerful lobby of its age,” especially attracting the attention of Republican politicians. This organization kept the Civil War alive through “memoir, parade, war story, monument, pension bill, [and] Memorial Day oration.” The GAR also encouraged an exceptionalist view of the war to attract membership and keep the memory of sacrifice alive. In the Memorial Day parade in New York City in 1877, “one GAR post carried twelve stained and torn battle flags, and on the sides of one floral wagon a veterans’ unit had displayed photographs of dead comrades.” This largest veterans’ organization relied on the symbols and images of the Civil War in creating a useful memory of it. Throughout the Gilded Age in the formerly opposed regions, this extreme memory of the war was cultivated to serve a purpose.

The trauma of the Civil War served a different political purpose in the 1896, when the McKinley campaign used exceptionalism and reconciliation to discredit running-mates William Jennings Bryan. McKinley’s “well financed campaign” had great power to

24 Vinovskis, 139-140.
25 Fahs and Waugh, 113-114.
shape popular opinion, and “nationalist rhetoric played an important role in solidifying the reconciliationist vision within American culture.” The Democratic campaign adhered to the traditional policy of appealing to sectional values, and at the Democratic Convention in July Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina unwisely invoked sectionalism in an effort to rally support in both southern and western states. His insistence that the gold standard was “a sectional issue” allowed his Republican opponents to encourage reconciliation to the detriment of Bryan’s campaign. The Chicago Chronicle commented that “history repeats itself, and threatens a renewal of its calamitous episodes.” Republican leaders put the exceptionalist portrayal of the death caused by war to a new use, crafting a “historical recollection that reminded voters of national division’s perilous consequences.” As a result of this remaking of “national consciousness,”26 many Americans embraced the Civil War as a shared experience among North and South, while still acknowledging its deadly horror. This allowed the exceptionalist view to remain useful beyond the Gilded Age. Instead of decaying along with the membership in the Grand Army of the Republic and the United Confederate Veterans after the 1890s,27 the memory of the war assumed a new role that enabled it to unify the nation in the twentieth century.

The recrafted memory of the Civil War allowed it to serve as a trial by fire, an anvil to be suffered in the forging of a modern nation. The homogenization of the war experience among North and South secured a united nation as the United States “stood

27 Vinovskis, 143.
ready to enter as an aggressive player on the world stage.”

This same approach continues to function today, as historians appeal to nationwide audiences by glorifying the soldiers on both sides and criticizing commanders who allowed their troops to march to slaughter. Though the sheer numbers lost in the Civil War will continue to stand out within the American narrative, placing the conflict in a global context tempers the general perception of it. The Civil War reflected other conflicts of that century, and the losses in battle do not stand out statistically, even against other American wars if analyzed as a percentage of combatants involved. The usefulness of emphasizing loss, to highlight courage of participants and garner the empathy of readers, must be understood. After all, “remembering the dead is a matter of deliberation and craft.”

The Civil War has remained exceptionally deadly in the popular consciousness partially because a number of Americans have found that depiction useful over time.

**Conclusion**

Few would argue that the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars have been memorialized in a similar way. While most Napoleonic battlefields sit in obscurity, largely unmarked by monuments, Civil War battlefields draw vast crowds and contain hundreds of markers commemorating the sacrifices of generations past. Many historians have assumed that the difference in memory can be explained by the events themselves: the Civil War must have been more costly and terrible than the Napoleonic Wars. However, a study of actual battles, such as Austerlitz and Chancellorsville, reflects

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28 Fahs and Waugh, 207.
29 Nudelman, 3.
striking similarities in both tactics and casualties. The difference, therefore, lies in the way memory was constructed, rather than the events themselves.

Advances in communication technology and education changed the experience of war for civilians between the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars. Public education ensured that nearly every American recruit could read and write, while illiteracy plagued Napoleonic soldiers. Telegraphy and free speech produced a variety of daily papers in the United States that reported on distant events in a matter of hours. Napoleonic peoples received only official government reports, often weeks after events occurred. Photographers and lithographers produced realistic depictions of military life in the Civil War, including the devastation of battle. Napoleonic artists worked for elite aristocrats, glorifying the ruling class and often ignoring the suffering of individuals, or showing it obliquely in an unrealistic way.

The letters, articles and images of the Civil War proved more accurate, informative and touching than the analogous reports and paintings of the Napoleonic era. Napoleonic populations received only limited information about the progress of the wars, carefully controlled by the government. This enabled them to remember only on a limited, personal scale, precluding efforts to create national memories across all levels of society. Civil War media integrated everyday Americans into the narrative of the conflict and gave them a desire to remember the efforts of the soldiers whose exploits they shared in, both visually and emotionally, through the records available to them. This bridged the gap between history as “event” and “experience,” as defined by Paul Cohen. Though the “experiences” of battle in the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars were not significantly
different for individual soldiers, the “events” remembers by European and American societies were. Napoleonic populations remained detached due to deliberate efforts at propaganda and censorship. American society created a consciousness of struggle and sacrifice that preserved the Civil War’s brutality in popular memory.

Having examined the power of communication technology in the Napoleonic and American Civil Wars, one must consider its role in other conflicts also. As new media have developed, the experience of war has continued to evolve in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Motion picture, radio, television and internet have given each generation new tools for observing conflicts, from World War II to Vietnam to Iraq. Military technology has progressed, but the conditions have combat have had strikingly similarities “from the age of Marlborough to the Cold War.” The popular military video game series Call of Duty retains one line as a motif: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” In many ways, the soldier’s experience of war has been the same for centuries. It may be true then that communication technology, rather than conflict itself, is the most important factor in the formation of any society’s historical memory of war.

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31 Hess, 224.
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