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Ideology and Memory

The Continuing Battles

The past isn't dead. It isn't even past.

William Faulkner

The pain of the great historical wounds flows on, taking advantage of whatever occasion.

Francisco Nieva, member of the Spanish Royal Academy, 2006

The bloody conflicts in Spain and the United States would not be forgotten. As costly internecine conflicts they demanded postwar justification and explanation. The death toll produced psychic pain. The scale of destruction challenged national pride. What had gone wrong to produce such conflict?

Before their civil wars, both Spain and the United States were proud nations in an era of nationalism. Spain, once Europe's dominant imperial power, entered the twentieth century mindful of its great heritage and troubled by its precipitous decline. Long before the disaster of 1898, when Spain lost virtually all that was left of its once vast empire, leaders had been debating the causes of national weakness. The conservative and reactionary elements in Spanish culture blamed departures from tradition and changes in the nation's character. They saw the Enlightenment, and even before it the influence of humanists such as Erasmus, as insidious cultural forces that had undermined Spain's strength. More forward-looking and secular forces in Spanish culture felt a need to modernize the nation and align its life more closely to that of Western European nations that were gaining in power. The chasm between these opposed diagnoses of Spain's decline as a world power reflected the forces that led to civil war.

The United States, though a newcomer to the world of nations, had yielded nothing to ancient Spain in respect to national pride. The colonists had wrested their independence from England, then the greatest of European powers, and citizens and leaders of the new nation took enormous pride in their ideology of political liberty and representative government. A bumptious conviction that the nation was the new model for human progress expressed itself among southern planters, northern businessmen, and small farmers of both sections. Although the divergent social systems of North and South were on a path that would lead to war, national pride was potent and growing even in the 1850s. With striking casualness, leaders of the South could talk of extending the virtuous American system to Mexico and the Caribbean, while their counterparts in the North could mention the annexation of Canada as a likely future event.

When such deep-seated attitudes had to confront the reality of fratricidal slaughter and division, national pride collided with national failure of an essential kind. The contrast demanded both explanation and expiation, for the hugely destructive civil wars were an offense against the national ideal. At the level of national culture efforts would have to be made to explain and justify what had taken place. To rescue the national narrative, civil war would have to be reinterpreted as something positive both for Spain and for the United States.

For individuals, too, a challenge of reorientation lay ahead. Deep and bitter conflicts like these do not resolve themselves cleanly or with finality. Although military battles identify the victor and the vanquished, long-lasting and painful emotions remain. No matter how severe the ramifications of victory or defeat may be, the arguments about who was right and who was wrong, who should be honored and who should be condemned, continue. Quickly or eventually, the contest moves to another plane—that of morality—where for many combatants and their descendants consensus becomes extremely difficult to reach.

Ideology magnified the bloodshed and destruction of internecine conflict. For Spain the ideological conflicts between bolshevism and fascism that soon engulfed all of Europe obviously were of great importance, but across the Atlantic the racial issue had a similar intensifying impact. A set of beliefs was necessary to justify the extent of slaughter, and each side relied on an ideology to explain its cause and sustain its mounting sacrifices.

In both countries it identified each side with some transcendent good. As a result, the men and women who sacrificed but survived, who fought and absorbed losses, were not likely to abandon their ideology lightly. It made sense of their commitment and justified their descent into violence. Once the shooting stopped, their wartime ideologies would be transformed into historical memories and commemorations. These collective acts of memory and commemoration would elevate individual acts to the plane of virtue and explain away vast societal failure.

Divisive experiences and emotions extend also to the children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren of those who fought the war. Victory and defeat had ramifications for them that were both personal and familial. They felt the war directly, for changes to society affected them personally, often in painful or disadvantageous ways. They also felt the war indirectly but strongly, for they were socialized by their families into beliefs that linked personal identity with their ancestors' role in the war. Thus for succeeding generations the war continued as well, although the passage of time created some differences. Because later generations lived under different conditions, they naturally thought and acted in ways appropriate to *their* time and circumstances. But ideology, memory, and commemoration continued to be important.

These patterns—national and personal—characterized both countries, although some notable differences in their histories created significant variation as well. What was common was the underlying process by which people carried their beliefs into postwar reality, creating historical memories and commemorations. After both civil wars the persisting arguments about who was right and who was wrong followed the same logic. The victors sought to elaborate, or stand by, their original justification for beginning and continuing a war. As time passed and conditions changed, they adapted their arguments to serve new purposes. Those on the losing side, on the other hand, needed to reduce or expunge the stigma of being in the “wrong” and having history’s verdict pronounced against them. They could approach this task in different ways. Insistence on the original justifications was common, but some efforts involved a new or creative argument that might make the losers’ case more convincingly or effectively. Other defenses had a reactive character—responses designed to counter the criticisms of the victors. As the argument continued, the victors then would respond to

their opponents, leading to a sequence of charge and countercharge with repetitious elements.

In both countries certain points became central pillars of justification or core grievances against the other side. In the United States, for example, southerners modified their defense of slavery to insist repeatedly that slavery was only the occasion for war, not its cause, while they lovingly crafted an attractive myth about the lost glories of a plantation society where black and white had lived in harmony. As key grievances, southerners cited the destruction and damage to civilians of Sherman's March to the Sea or complained of the "horrors" of Reconstruction. In Spain, Republicans emphasized that Franco's uprising had destroyed a democratically elected government, while Nationalists stressed their defense of church and nation and then evolved a number of arguments over time to stress the benefits of Franco's dictatorship. To counter criticism of his attack on a democratically elected government, they emphasized the disorder and dangers of prewar society. As repetition made these elements familiar, the passage of time and the arrival of new generations brought novel points into the discussion. For example, the *nietos*, or grandchildren, in Spain have raised issues that their parents and grandparents chose to leave unaddressed, while the mythology about Lincoln has evolved away from historical reality to serve society's changing needs.

The main differences between Spain and the United States in these areas are the product of contrasting experiences during the immediate postwar decades and contrasting governmental structures. In Spain General Franco imposed a harsh, repressive dictatorship that lasted more than thirty-five years. Throughout this period he insisted on controlling the argument and imposing his interpretation, using the cause of National Catholicism as justification for warfare and postwar rule. The Republican side of the debate was silenced. Only exiles living abroad were able to write or speak about their beliefs. After Franco's death circumstances further delayed the surfacing of internal debate over the rights and wrongs of the war. The agenda of the Transition—shaped by widespread desires for democracy and fears of another military uprising—put a premium on consensus rather than debate.

Defeated Confederates, on the other hand, rapidly seized the high ground in establishing their interpretation of the war. There were racial