1861: The Civil War Awakening by Adam Goodheart

New Insight On The Start Of The American Civil War

As the United States marks the 150th anniversary of our defining national drama, 1861 presents a gripping and original account of how the Civil War began.

1861 is an epic of courage and heroism beyond the battlefields. Early in that fateful year, a second American revolution unfolded, inspiring a new generation to reject their parents’ faith in compromise and appeasement, to do the unthinkable in the name of an ideal. It set Abraham Lincoln on the path to greatness and millions of slaves on the road to freedom.

The book introduces us to a heretofore little-known cast of Civil War heroes—among them an acrobatic militia colonel, an explorer’s wife, an idealistic band of German immigrants, a regiment of New York City firemen, a community of Virginia slaves, and a young college professor who would one day become president. Adam Goodheart takes us from the corridors of the White House to the slums of Manhattan, from the mouth of the Chesapeake to the deserts of Nevada, from Boston Common to Alcatraz Island, vividly evoking the Union at this moment of ultimate crisis and decision.

Features:
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With the 150th anniversary of the start of the American Civil War I wanted to add a series of books to my reading list to compliment this fact. To be honest with you, I was only somewhat excited about this literary endeavor, having already read a multitude of books on the Civil War over the years - including the Shelby Foote trilogy, Shaaras The Killer Angels, and too many more to list here. I really didn't want to simply rehash the many famous battles that took place during this great conflict unless some new and intriguing data could be added. With that in mind, I struck out on Adam Goodhearts 1861. While I plan on reading a few books over the sesquicentennial, I am very glad I started with this book.

Bottom line: this book offered me a take on the Civil War that was entirely new and interesting to me. Goodheart started with a research question: How does a nation of real people go from a relatively peaceful state to a willingness to engage in bloody civil war in just a short matter of time? What changed within the minds of individuals, never mind the political and military figures, that allowed for this to happen? It is a question worth asking when you consider the price that was paid and the sacrifice required to bring the war to an end over the course of four years. The answer to this question offers guidance for us to this day.

To answer the research question, Goodheart chose to look at the lives of several individuals, who, at least in my case, were relatively new case studies to the American Civil War. The timeframe essentially takes place from the Presidential election of 1860 through First Manassas. He looked closely at the lives of figures associated with key milestones, such as Major Anderson at the Siege of Fort Sumter and Nathaniel Lyons securing the federal armory in St. Louis. But, I think more importantly, he looked at the lives of some lesser know but still key figures in drawing the nation into a willingness to enter civil war. A sampling of this includes James A. Garfield, the final living participant in the Battle of Bunker Hill, Benjamin Franklin Butler, and many more. The one character he uses to carry the book through from start to finish is that of Elmer Ellsworth - a showman, friend of Lincoln, and former of the first Zouave union army unit to see combat. In that final role, Ellsworth was also killed removing a confederate flag from a hotel in Alexandria, Virginia. Goodheart tells this story, as he successfully does with many others, to progress the understanding of how the nation moved so quickly into civil war. Goodheart noted that while Fort Sumter was a rallying cry to war for the north, the death of the famed Ellsworth is what pushed many over the edge in their desire to engage with the confederacy.

Perhaps the best part of 1861 though is its case for war against slavery. Goodheart does an amazing job of tearing down the myths of the Civil War as it relates to slavery. He accurately portrays the feeling of many in the north and south at the time regarding their views of slavery, pro or con, or somewhere in between - which is in fact where many stood, including in the north. The true abolitionists of the day were viewed as radical, and were few in number. That said, most had serious doubts about slavery as
an institution, which Goodheart went to great lengths to describe. While the Civil War for many was about states rights versus federal, for many others, slavery was from the beginning the only issue worth discussing. In studying the history of the Civil War we seem to fluctuate greatly between the causes of the conflict, at times downplaying the role of slavery, at times increasing it. Goodheart, I believe, strikes a true path of understanding, by studying the lives of many, and their varying beliefs on the subject. With this line of understanding, it becomes obvious why emancipation was soon to follow, despite what many originally stated as their willingness to go to war.

On the whole, this was a refreshing, novel, and highly informing read for me on the topic of the Civil War. For others who wish to read about the subject, and are already very familiar with various battles, I highly recommend this book. It will offer new insight.

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