

American Memories

Contributed by James Preston Allen
Friday, 14 November 2008

One of the treasured objects of my childhood is a Civil War bullet I bought at Harper's Ferry when I was ten years old. You see, at that age I was fascinated by all things dealing with that particular American conflict between North and South. I had an army of blue and gray toy soldiers that numbered in the hundreds, a copy of the American Heritage Civil War edition with all the color maps of the battles, and those horrific historic photos of the aftermath of Gettysburg or Bull Run. Like most young boys of that age do, we reenacted the battles with bloodless exuberance gloriously commanding our troops in heroic and often inaccurate victories.

These were the innocent days before the political assassinations of the 1960's and the blood of the Vietnam War stained the contemporary landscape. I grew into manhood understanding the connection between politics and the disasters of war, and realizing that the idealization of the latter from my childhood was false. I came to the obvious conclusion that war was terribly wrong and misguided then, eventually that most of the wars this nation has fought weren't much better. What got me thinking about this recently was the divide on the political map of the recent national election—red states versus blue—divided along the historic Mason-Dixon line mostly of North and South with the exceptions of Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia. A century and a half ago, this division became the issue that brought Congress to the Missouri Compromise, the demise of the Whig Party, the creation of the Republican Party, and the election of a young Illinois politician to the Presidency followed by the Civil War.

There is a latent memory that persists even today in the American consciousness about that war and the huge toll that it took in American lives—more in that one war than all the other wars we have fought combined—a blood purchase that brought the abolition of slavery. This election of America's "first black President," in a way, is the bookend to history of the struggle from that time to this, which finally lives up to the Jeffersonian promise, "that all men are created equal." But Obama's election does not forever solve the conflict of racism in America as this current map alludes. It is as one black columnist ascribed, "only a bridge over the racial gap." The differences between red and blue in many parts of the country seem deeply rooted and only adroitly abridged. But if they can be bridged the new President-elect is uniquely suited for this task.

I wonder though. Did Thomas Jefferson foresee, when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, that it would take some two and a quarter centuries to achieve the fundamental promise of the American experiment? That it would take a national crisis of a bloody civil war, the addition of multiple amendments to the US Constitution, decades of segregation, bigotry, riots, lynchings, assassinations and finally a national civil rights movement before this promise of liberty was finally and imperfectly reached? It was completely improbable that even a year ago that this man of bi-racial parentage with such an unusual name could succeed, even excel, in bringing about such a profound yet symbolic end to our age-old dilemma. Yet he has done so with both confidence and eloquence.

Yet the map that divides us still seems to haunt the national landscape. We remain a union but with substantive differences. It's strange. Let's take the example of Kansas—it was the free state created by the compromise between North and South—the original "battle ground" state along with Missouri, which allowed slavery. Five generations ago, the grand patriarch of my family migrated to Kansas from North Carolina to homestead the land. He was a free thinking social-populist who probably voted for Lincoln and endorsed the abolition of slavery then raised a family of seven on the pioneer ethic of hard work and book learnin'. His daughter Fay, my grandmother, was the direct inheritor of this free-thinking Midwestern politics that was so deeply rooted in the Kansas landscape of that era. So what happened to Kansas?

This November, Kansas voted Republican by almost a two to one margin for McCain and I'm wondering if all the Mid-Western populists have left for the coasts and the rest have forgotten their political roots? Perhaps it will just take just a bit longer there, but what was really accomplished this time was the resolution of a conflict without the war—a bloodless revolution of government—a transfer of power from one party to another, ballots not bullets. And this was essentially part of Jefferson's original intent. It is one we can stand up for, and admire, and be proud of, finally as Americans.