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## Review Essays: "A Nation Divided: Robert Leckie's Narrative Account"

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**REVIEW ESSAY**  
**A Nation Divided:**  
**Robert Leckie's Narrative Account**

by WILLIAM WARREN ROGERS

*None Died In Vain: The Saga of the American Civil War.* By Robert Leckie. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990. xvii, 682 pp. Acknowledgments, maps, selected bibliography, index, \$29.95.)

Robert Leckie is a prolific author of books concerning history, autobiography, "belles lettres," and fiction, not to mention eleven others for young readers. His most recent is entitled *None Died In Vain: The Saga of the American Civil War*. It is a large book (sixty-seven chapters and 658 pages of text), and, having no footnotes, it may be described as "popular" history. Even so, there is a bibliography, and it is the product of considerable scholarship. The person who begins and finishes the work will find no new materials presented and no new interpretations offered. Yet, the reader has the right to expect a skillful blending of standard Civil War monographs, biographies, and autobiographies that provides an intelligent and well-written synthesis of America's greatest tragedy. Mr. Leckie is equal to such expectations.

Because the author is a Marine veteran of World War II, he is at his best in writing about battles, the men who fought them, and the consequences. He is less at home describing political, social, and economic conditions, although his first chapter is an effective summary of the Mexican War and its significance. Less well done is chapter two on "The Crisis Of Slavery." John Calhoun (Leckie omits the usually included middle initial "C.") was not a United States Senator in 1820 (p. 7), and many will be surprised to learn that John and John Quincy Adams were members of the "Virginia Dynasty." The chapter on slavery does not go beyond simplistic generalizations. While northern farmers chose horses over oxen because they were more productive, it was not true that their counterparts in "the South chose mules

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because they could endure the most abuse" (p. 22). Mules were preferred because they were stronger than horses and could stand the heat better. Since the cost of a mule was over twice that of a horse, it usually was not abused. One could not be a planter without owning slaves, but possessing fifty, as Leckie says, was no absolute minimum, and there were other criteria. In "The House Divides," a quick trip through the 1850s Stephen A. Douglas gets short shrift.

By chapter five ("The Rail-Splitter") Leckie introduces an effective writing device—the quick, succinct biography of a principal player, including a revealing physical description. For example, Union General Winfield Scott Hancock is introduced as "Tall, strongly built, extremely handsome . . . [and] also admired or abhorred by his versatility in the art of profanity" (p. 490). Elsewhere, General William Tecumseh Sherman is characterized as "an unusually perceptive, gifted and complicated human being, in whose character and career can be found perhaps more marks of genius than in those of any other American commander before or since" (p. 620). Another merit is that the chapters are brief and never get bogged down in detail. Chapters six through eleven are well organized and get the reader through the traumatic years of John Brown, mounting sectional crises, and the election of Lincoln. With Lincoln's victory, the lower South withdrew from the Union, and, while Leckie sees no way it could have been avoided, he is less than positive. "Secession had come. Had it been inevitable? Probably" (p. 84).

In his analysis of Jefferson Davis, Leckie agrees with other students of the Civil War that the Mississippian by way of Kentucky was ill fitted to be president but well fitted to be a general. Some scholars defend Davis, and others question both his executive and his military talents. The account of the crisis at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, is well done, but little mention is made of the simultaneous standoff at Fort Pickens in Pensacola harbor. In back-to-back chapters the cabinet personnel of Lincoln and Johnson are deftly sketched, and Leckie draws a flattering picture of Florida's Stephen R. Mallory as Confederate Secretary of Navy. Native Montgomerians will not like Leckie's description of the Cradle of the Confederacy, and local historians will point out that the city's major thoroughfare (later famous in the civil-rights struggles of the 1960s as Dexter Avenue) was then known

as Market Street, not Main Street. Leckie makes a somewhat larger error when he ascribes to Georgia's Robert Toombs the famous words, "The man and the hour have met." They were uttered by William Lowndes Yancey, an Alabama "fire-eater," to introduce Davis to a crowd of Montgomerians.

By chapter eighteen the reader knows about the South's General P. G. T. Beauregard— Leckie sees him as inflexible, belligerent, too bookish, and politically inept. With the reduction of Fort Sumter, the secession of the Upper South, and Lincoln's call to arms, the Civil War takes center stage. Leckie has a low opinion of United States General Irwin McDowell, whom he describes as "dogmatic and didactic" (p. 160). In clear prose (sometimes Leckie gets too dramatic) the reader sees McDowell routed and Bull Run described as "the first battle of modern arms" (p. 172). In writing of First Bull Run, Leckie does what he will do often in his narrative, and that is to inform the non-military expert about certain weapons. He does not do so in a condescending manner, and most readers will be grateful. He notes that the old-fashioned muzzle-loaded muskets whose bullets had a range of 100 yards were improved by the conical minié ball with a range of 500 yards and devastating impact, a fact that explained why there were so many amputations.

After detailing how the border states of Missouri and Kentucky were saved for the Union despite the bumbling of Union General John Charles Fremont, Leckie provides a psychological profile of McDowell's successor as commander of what became the Army of the Potomac, General George B. McClellan. The self-confident McClellan was a master of "fine and stirring phrases" (p. 188), a romantic who loved his men and had that love returned. Yet McClellan's "terrible defect" was that he had to be sure, to be ready before taking action. "He did not want to win as much as he feared to lose" (p. 189). The reader is told of McClellan's troubles with the northern press, the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, and various generals.

The author skips next to the Confederacy where Davis had trouble with Unionists in East Tennessee and difficulties abroad when James M. Mason and John Slidell sought recognition and, if possible, military alliances respectively in England and France. The Confederate emissaries were forcibly detained by the Union navy, but Lincoln avoided diplomatic embarrassment by permitting them to proceed on their unsuccessful diplomatic ventures.

Leckie is thorough and along the way Ambrose Burnside, Henry W. Halleck, and Don Carlos Buell for the blue-clad Federals are introduced, and the early combat experiences of Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman are recounted. The mini-biography of Grant particularly is convincing. He emerged as a Union hero with his western victories at forts Henry and Donelson. In these chapters, the author uses his biographical approach to introduce Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston and his commanders.

Despite northern success in taking Nashville and achieving victory in Arkansas at the Battle of Pea Ridge in 1862, Lincoln had to play the role of consummate politician in dealing with Congress and his own cabinet, particularly his secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton, who was obsessed with treason and was always on the lookout for it. But victories in the field continued at Island No. 10 and New Madrid, and there is an excellent account of the bloody fighting in Tennessee at Shiloh. There, Confederate generals Beauregard and Johnston (the latter's death in battle was a severe blow to the southern cause) were pitted against Grant and Sherman. Shiloh was the first Civil War battle with over 100,000 men engaged. Union forces suffered more casualties, and, tactically, Shiloh was a standoff, "although in possessing the field the Federals may be said to have won a victory" (p. 288). Actually, according to the author, "Shiloh was a decisive victory for the North." It revealed that the war would be hard and tough, and, as Grant said, "I gave up all hope of saving the Union except by complete conquest" (p. 289).

A good account of the common soldier— "Billy Yank" and "Johnny Reb"— is a welcome diversion in the recitation of battles. The author reminds his readers that the Civil War fundamentally was a war fought by the infantry: 80 percent of the Union army and 75 percent of the Confederate army were foot soldiers. The cavalry was flashy and important, but Daniel Harvey Hill, a Confederate general, once "offered a reward of Five Dollars to anybody who could find a dead man with spurs on" (pp. 293-94). Although black soldiers were used by the North, the rank-and-file white troops mistreated them. Leckie cites instances of brutal treatment in battle by southern troops to black soldiers. Not until a month before the war ended would the Confederate Congress authorize the enlistment of blacks. As Howell Cobb, the Georgia politician-soldier put it, "The day you make soldiers of them is

the beginning of the end of the revolution. If slaves will make good soldiers, our whole theory of slavery is wrong" (p. 296).

Other action in 1862 saw Union triumphs at New Orleans (here the abilities of naval commanders David Dixon Porter and especially David G. Farragut become evident), Roanoke and New Bern in North Carolina, and Fernandina, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine in Florida. Charleston was menaced and Savannah neutralized with the fall of Fort Pulaski, and conditions were such that in April 1862 the Confederacy resorted to the draft. In the East, there was the complicated and eventually unsuccessful Peninsula Campaign that proposed to take Richmond. Important for the South was Joseph E. Johnston, whom President Davis disliked, and for the North, McClellan, of whom Lincoln said, "He has got the slows." Leckie is good on Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson with his stern Presbyterianism, abstentiousness, eccentricities, "lifelong hypochondria," and brilliance as a military commander. Joe Johnston, who was always getting shot, was wounded so badly during the campaign that he was replaced by Robert E. Lee as commander of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Leckie is objective in his appraisal of Lee. He sees him as having too much humility and too much kindness. He was not ferocious enough, yet he was a great general. He also inspired his troops who literally worshipped him. So did civilians, and as one southern woman remarked, "I've heard of God, but I've seen General Lee" (p. 340). In battles that included Mechanicsville, Gaines' Mill, and Malvern Hill, McClellan could not overcome his caution, and, although he could have taken Richmond, he retreated. The Peninsula Campaign failed.

In the West, Beauregard made a skillful and necessary retreat but was replaced by Braxton B. Bragg (whom President Davis greatly overrated), when Federal forces took Memphis by water and Farragut captured Baton Rouge. Except for Vicksburg, the Mississippi River was in Union hands. The Confederates registered a victory when Union General John Pope was defeated at Second Bull Run (here Lee and Jackson and such able generals as Jeb Stuart, James Longstreet, and A. P. Hill were at their best). By going on the offensive and winning a victory outside the South, Lee hoped to revitalize the South and perhaps bring England and France into the war on the side of the Confederacy. To that end he moved out of Virginia, accompanied by Longstreet, D. H. Hill, and A. P. Hill (the latter was removed

by Jackson from his command). McClellan followed Lee to Sharpsburg, Maryland, and found him at Antietam Creek. After a bitter struggle that resulted in 26,000 casualties, Lee retreated to Virginia, and McClellan let him get away.

Even so, the standoff at Antietam allowed Lincoln to issue a famous pronouncement. He and certain members of Congress had been moving toward making the abolition of slavery co-equal with preserving the Union as a wartime objective. The statement freed the slaves in Confederate states, but obviously had no immediate application. Yet, the Emancipation Proclamation gave the United States a firm moral position, and it had the added benefit of making foreign intervention unlikely. It confirmed the beliefs of abolitionists, galvanized the faith of blacks, and, while alienating some Northerners, it convinced many more that slavery had to be abolished.

Back in the West, William Rosecrans defeated the gray-clad forces of General Earl Van Dorn at Corinth, Mississippi, and the fighting ended in Kentucky when General Don Carlos Buell, with the aid of the pugnacious General Philip H. Sheridan, forced Bragg and Florida's Edmund Kirby Smith to retreat after the Battle of Perryville. The victory was less than brilliant, and Lincoln replaced Buell with Rosecrans. On the Virginia battlefields, the war continued to go badly for Yankee forces. General Ambrose Burnside, lacking confidence in himself, moved against Richmond by attacking Fredericksburg where he suffered a decisive defeat and was relieved of his command. At Fredericksburg, Lee remarked, "It is well that war is so terrible— we should grow too fond of it!" (p. 412).

Failing at Richmond, the North hoped to divide the Confederacy by taking Vicksburg. Before that was done, Bragg attacked Rosecrans in Tennessee at Stones River and Murfreesboro. The useless slaughter saw Bragg disengage, resulting in a Union victory. Bragg still blocked Rosecrans from Chattanooga. In his interpretation of the battles, Leckie is sharply critical of Bragg as a man and as a general.

In January 1863, Lincoln named the handsome ladies' man Joe Hooker as his fifth commander of the Army of the Potomac. The hard-drinking general's sexual exploits produced the modern synonym for a prostitute, "hooker." The new commander chose Dan Butterfield as his chief of staff and Dan Sickles as a corps commander. If Butterfield is not remembered for his mili-

tary talents, he was musically inclined and wrote the haunting "Taps." As for Sickles, he knew nothing of war but had made the headlines when he killed his wife's lover, the son of Francis Scott Key, was found innocent, and then took his wife back. The upshot of "Fighting Joe" Hooker's stint was the Battle of Chancellorsville. It occurred on May 2, 1863, and Hooker apparently thought Lee was retreating when actually the Confederates were attacking. Jeb Stuart was valiant in the Confederate victory, but Stonewall Jackson mistakenly was shot and killed by his own men. Leckie's description of Jackson's death is poignant.

Meanwhile, two attempts to take Charleston failed (the city did not fall until February 1865), and there were riots in New York City against the draft. Lee went on the offensive again, moving north toward the decisive battle at Gettysburg. Leckie thinks Lee should have left Virginia to fight in the West instead of Pennsylvania. He notes that Lee's army "was the worst-fed and worst-clothed army in military history" (p. 475). Beyond that, Lee had an "appalling indifference to [the] discipline" of his troops (p. 477). Lee's failure to assert his authority over Longstreet at Gettysburg when the latter openly opposed his plans was "incredible," "beyond belief," and "preposterous" (p. 507). Leckie faults Lee's strategy but praises his tactics.

At this time, Hooker was relieved, and his replacement was General George Gordon Meade. A West Pointer who was born in Cadiz, Spain, where his father was a merchant, Meade's genius lay with maps. The cautious Meade was a topographical expert without peer. Four chapters are devoted to the Battle of Gettysburg, and the account is excellent. The reader learns of the storied George Edward Pickett and his famous charge. He is informed that Pickett finished last in his class at West Point and that, whether on foot or horseback, "he carried an elegant riding crop, his short beard and drooping mustache were carefully groomed and his hair fell to his shoulders in perfumed brown ringlets" (p. 526). In his evaluation, Leckie believes that after the Confederate defeat Meade was right when he did not follow up immediately and counterattack. But he criticizes Meade for his slowness in pursuing Lee and counterattacking him at the proper time. Lee's army escaped when it should have been destroyed.

After Gettysburg, final victory by Union forces was inevitable, and many Southerners (including their leaders with the exception of Davis) realized it. The author has solid chapters on the



siege and fall of Vicksburg, as well as the roles played by generals George Henry Thomas, Rosecrans, Grant, and Sherman in the Union successes at Chickamauga and Chattanooga. Before describing Sherman's Atlanta campaign, march to the sea, and surge through the Carolinas, Leckie offers some well-chosen words on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. While the "invited orator" Edward Everett of Massachusetts declaimed at length, Lincoln confined himself to a few remarks. Yet the profound eloquence of his address continues to move succeeding generations of Americans.

Grant's final campaign before Richmond and Lee's surrender on April 9, 1865, at Appomattox are rendered in restrained, clear prose. The author might well have ended his book there, but he adds three chapters that deal with Lincoln's assassination, his burial, and the unraveling of the Confederacy, culminating in Johnston's surrender to Sherman at Durham Station, North Carolina.

Florida readers will find their state barely mentioned. When Florida enters the narrative at all, it usually is in connection with some Yankee or Rebel general having served there during the Second Seminole War. In commenting on Confederate cruelty to black soldiers, Leckie mentions "a minor battle in Olustee, Florida." Those wishing more would do well to consult William H. Nulty's recently published *Confederate Florida: The Road to Olustee*. Yet Florida did not play a major role in the Civil War, although Leckie might have mentioned the state's important contributions in men, agricultural produce, livestock, and salt. The author's book lacks the overview and balance of James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Era of the Civil War*, and it does not have the pathos and literary style of Shelby Foote's three-volume work on the war. Yet it is well written, lively, reliable, and informative. For the non-specialist, Leckie makes battles such as Gettysburg comprehensible. Few books on the Civil War can make that claim. Fair to both sides and balanced in its treatment, *None Died In Vain* makes a valuable contribution to Civil War history.