

The experiences of a civil war 1861 – 1865: the case of the United States of America

Nayani Melagoda¹

The Civil War in America is well documented during the war as well as in the post war period. It is a subject on which an abundance of books are available already numbering around 50,000 titles. It can be easily said that it is the most written about even in the history of the United States of America. It is a topic which has many facets that can be studied from number of perspectives. I would like to focus in this paper the reasons for the war and the cost of the war from human perspective.

I have selected few specialist writings on the subject for this paper. This is further supported by the primary sources I discovered at the Special collection and Archives of the University of Tennessee as a Senior Fulbright scholar few years ago. These primary sources are mainly letters and diaries of soldiers and their families describing their first hand experiences during the Civil War.

The objective of the paper is to focus on the lessons from the American Civil war taking into account the costs of the war. The paper will investigate the issues that were at stake: slavery and freedom; racism and equality; sectionalism and nationalism; self government and democracy; and life and death. The figure of 600,000 war graves is a reason enough for any country to learn from the experience and work towards avoiding such killings of each other who spoke the same language, who believed in the same god and who came under the same jurisdiction.

The famous American author Mark Twain wrote that the Civil War had "uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, transformed the social life of half the country and wrought so profoundly upon the entire national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations."

Key words: Civil war-USA, United States of America, History, Nationalism

¹ Department of History, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka