

A Contest of Civilizations: Exposing the Crisis of American Exceptionalism in the Civil War Era, by Andrew F. Lang. The Littlefield History of the Civil War Era. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 558 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

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The notion of American exceptionalism is as old as John Winthrop's 1630 "City on a Hill" sermon. Two centuries later, Alexander de Tocqueville concurred on the United States' unique nature but in more secular terms. While this suggests continuity, Andrew F. Lang, an associate professor of history at Mississippi State University and the author of the award-winning *In the Wake of War: Military Occupation, Emancipation, and Civil War America*, identifies the Civil War era as a crisis of divergent exceptionalisms. Each section, the loyal free states and the rebellious slave states, understood America's uniqueness in disparate ways. Not surprisingly it was liberty and the ability of all men to rise that made the nation exceptional in the minds of Northerners. In contrast, it was their slave society that prompted Southerners to tout their exceptional Southern civilization.

Lang traces the origin of scholarly interest in exceptionalism to another war—the Cold War. Originally, consensus historians embraced American exceptionalism as a fact. Later, scholars rejected exceptionalism citing, among other things, slavery, deeming the United States unworthy of emulation. Despite scholarly skepticism, exceptionalism maintained its hold on the American mind. Politicians as recently as Ronald Reagan explicitly invoked the notion of the city on the hill and America's unique role in the world, demonstrating the strength and durability of this idea.

Lang's book is an extraordinarily comprehensive and well-researched study of American exceptionalism before, during, and after the Civil War. Beginning in the antebellum era, he examines "how could an inimitable republic, conceived in liberty and devoted to propositions of equality, stand by midcentury as the largest slaveholding nation in the modern world?" (13) The answer to this puzzle was that each section had a different notion of exceptionalism; Northerners argued that an America based on freedom for all was exceptional and Southerners understood the nation's unique status as based on slavery for some people. When war came because of these different visions, Lang demonstrates that each side saw itself as the defender of American exceptionalism. White Southerners believed that slavery represented the best of the Union. If the prewar Union failed to protect slavery, they would form a new Union that

would. To Northerners, slave states seceding confirmed their understanding of slavery's threat to the Union, the guarantor of republican liberty in a world of monarchies and authoritarian rule. While this sounds like a discussion among white Americans, Lang brings Black Americans into the discussion of exceptionalism—a singular contribution to scholarship. Black men and women embraced exceptionalism as their way of advancing their freedom agenda in the United States and the Western Hemisphere.

When the war ended, Black Americans wanted more than freedom; however, Lang convincingly explains the role of exceptionalism in the failure of these men and women to achieve their goals. While a great deal of progress was made during this era, Northerners rejected the kind of occupation that would ensure Black civil and political rights because it threatened their idea of Union. "Republicans ultimately traded the enforcement of racial equality for the enduring stability of the union (26)," which had always been critical to their notion of American exceptionalism, particularly in a hostile world.

Lang brilliantly delivers on his subtitle; he exposes the crisis of American exceptionalism in the Civil War era. Despite this value, I have one comment to the author and one for the reader. First, Lang should have qualified the scope of his study. His evidence documents elite Americans, people who thought about these things; men and women who had their views recorded and saved. None of this discourse indicates a broader understanding of American exceptionalism across class and gender lines, though his assessment demonstrates this discourse was shared among elites across racial lines.

Secondly, for readers, Lang performed an invaluable service with his outstanding assessment of Civil War era exceptionalism. This multifaceted study provides scholars and others insight into several vital issues related to this period including why some loyal Americans rejected a Union based on slavery and embraced a Union of free people. This volume helps explain why these same loyal Americans abandoned the freed people so central to demonstrating the exceptional nature of the American Union to the people who attempted to destroy it. Finally, and most important of all: why war? It is evident from Lang's analysis that there were not only two separate societies under one Union but also two different imaginings of Union under one nation. Lang's study explains why the United States was exceptional in one terrible way; it was the only nation that ended slavery in blood.