



## *Looming Civil War: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Imagined the Future* by Jason Phillips.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018. Pp. xi, 320. ISBN 978-0-19-086816-1.

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In recent decades, studies of constructed memory have made important contributions to Civil War historiography. A growing number of historians have asked insightful questions about how Americans looked back on the war. By contrast, in *Looming Civil War*, historian Jason Phillips (West Virginia Univ.) explores just how they looked *forward* in the antebellum era to the prospect of a civil war.

How Americans imagined their future had sweeping consequences for their interpretations of political debates, migration, market forces, and the seemingly constant stream of innovations that challenged their understandings of time and space. Phillips identifies two competing temporalities. In the case of what he calls *anticipation*, some Americans envisioned “traveling through time, into a future ahead of them, and forging that future and their lives in the process” (4). In the case of *expectation*, some Americans saw the future as approaching them. “Instead of focusing on an open future that people fashioned with acts and ideas, these Americans imagined a closed future that other forces, impersonal and supernatural, had already determined” (5).

This framework of dual temporalities serves several functions that make *Looming Civil War* an essential study for students and scholars of the nineteenth century. First, Phillips disputes the widely accepted maxim that Americans overwhelmingly believed that the Civil War would be a brief and romantic affair. While many politicians, military leaders, and newspaper editors expected a quick and glorious resolution, less vocal groups such as women, blacks, and ordinary civilians foresaw a protracted and catastrophic conflict. Phillips’s dualistic paradigm belies the short-war narrative and illuminates the perspectives of previously ignored voices. In particular, he reconciles the two dominant but discrete characteristics of nineteenth-century American culture: progress and providence.

In a wide-ranging exploration of Americans’ writings about the future, Phillips critiques proponents of

a false dichotomy between a modern North and a pre-modern South ... [who] assigned progressive traits to the North, including technology, industry, immigration, and democracy while they saddled the South with stagnant agriculture, declining population, arcane aristocracy, and chronic lassitude. As their “go-ahead” mantra and “get off the track” anthem implied, champions of the free labor North imagined one fixed track to modernity and the future. The South was as modern as the North but imagined a different track.... Across society in the South as in the North, people imagined living in the future. (64)

Drawing on rich and diverse sources for the sectional crisis, the author highlights the diversity of Americans’ meditations about the future. He carefully contrasts the language of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams to exemplify the difference between the outlooks of particular Americans: “While Jefferson deemed disunion over slavery a tragic suicide, Adams considered it a just reckoning” (19). Phillips adduces the rhetoric of other important sectional actors, like the “Wide Awakes”

and such proslavery ideologues as James Henry Hammond and George Fitzhugh to shed light on their views of western expansion, labor, and the future of slavery.

Signs of these ideologies were detectable in material culture as well. Southern gentlemen carrying Bowie knives were evoking their status as “masters of their universe” (28), while John Brown’s pikes symbolized “weapons defending free homesteads from slavery’s myrmidons” (47). Phillips is especially discerning on Americans’ views of the transformative technologies of the telegraph and the railroad. These inventions altered everything from their understanding of humankind’s place in the universe to their potential to influence the course of the future.

At times, though, Phillips’s framework, which is so strongly predicated on the analysis of language, seems imprecise at best and too convenient at worst. For example, when analyzing the proslavery rhetoric of John Beauchamp Jones and Edmund Ruffin, he writes that both men “speculated that southern harmony would eventually overcome northern anarchy and win the looming civil war” (73). But the author never makes clear whether such a view represents an expectation or an anticipation. His use of the term “speculation” is not helpful in this regard.

Elsewhere in the book, Phillips’s choice of words leaves the language of his source open to conflicting interpretations. For instance, assessing the writing of minister and journalist George Barrell Cheever as evidence of how Americans thought about the future after the Panic of 1857, he states that Cheever “blamed slavery for America’s immoral economy and expected a divine reckoning” (75). Although Phillips construes this as evidence of the expectation temporality, one could see it as espousing the ideology of anticipation, whereby people determine the future by their own actions. Cheever seems to be claiming that tolerance of slavery was placing the nation on an apocalyptic course that Americans could avert through abolition.

These complications actually make *Looming Civil War* all the more innovative and cutting-edge by provoking readers to reconsider their understanding of how nineteenth-century Americans thought about the tremendous events of their time and their future consequences.