

Civil War changed Americans' view of Providence, historian says

October 6, 2011

WACO—Americans in 1860s viewed the Civil War through the lens of God at work in human affairs—a lens left shattered by that bloody conflict, according to historian George Rable.

Rable, the Charles Summersell Chair in southern history at the University of Alabama and author of [*God's Almost Chosen Peoples*](#), spoke at a symposium on the Civil War and religion sponsored by Baylor University's [Institute for the Studies of Religion](#).

"As Abraham Lincoln stated in his second inaugural address on March 4, 1865, both sides prayed to the same God and read the same Bible. Indeed, religious language, imagery and ideas were pervasive during the Civil War era," Rable said.

Americans in the mid-19th century held "a strong belief that the story of America was a part of a larger story of human history, an unfolding of a providential design," he explained.

Consequently, Americans saw the hand of Providence at work in the events surrounding the Civil War. They just couldn't agree on how God was working.

"Sectional tensions of the 1850s and the secession crisis in the winter of 1861 were seen as providential—punishment for individual and collective sin," Rable said.

However, while abolitionists in the North saw the events as God's punishment for allowing slavery to exist, preachers in the South listed other transgressions, such as omission of God from the United States Constitution, in contrast to the Confederacy's governing documents that explicitly invoked God's favor.

"Religious voices, whether Union or Confederate, seldom expressed much doubt that God was on their side," Rable noted.

Throughout the war, ideas about Providence and God's judgment helped provide for some an explanation of both victory and defeat. For others, those notions raised questions—particularly as casualties grew and the tide of the war ebbed and flowed.

"As was typical after almost every battlefield loss, the defeated side attempted to figure out which sins had stirred up God's wrath," Rable said.

Debates about the role of slavery Soldiers pray during the Civil War. cut across all dividing lines.

"Throughout the war, denominations, churches and individuals—North and South—agonized and argued over the role of slavery in the war," he noted. "Christians of various stripes had long debated whether God opposed, sustained or was indifferent to slavery, and the war reshaped the discussion in both the North and the South."

On the battlefield, some soldiers—in both Union and Confederate armies—turned to God. By 1862, reports grew of religious revivals, particularly in the Confederate ranks.

When Richmond fell and a Union victory seemed assured, some people in the North immediately believed "the Lord had finally smiled on their cause," Rable said.

However, Lincoln shared neither the sense of certainty nor the joy some Union supporters felt.

"Throughout the war, he had refused to automatically equate the Union cause with God's larger purposes," Rable said. "Even as the Confederate armies appeared to be collapsing in the spring of 1865, he refused to yield to the temptation of triumphalism."

Lincoln noted neither side in the conflict expected the war to be so lengthy or so bloody. He concluded God had his own purposes, but Lincoln did not presume to know them.

"The Union victory and Confederate defeat left many hard questions about Providence and the role of God in human history unanswered, as Lincoln himself readily acknowledged," Rable said. "And of course, the whole idea of unanswered questions would deal a body blow to providential interpretations of history, and never again would an American war be interpreted in such openly religious terms."