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For the Union Dead

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NCR Today

Allow me, if you will, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War to borrow a title from poet Robert Lowell. Lowell wrote in 1964, nearly 50 years ago, about the commercialization of downtown Boston in contrast to the revered Robert Gould Shaw memorial, which still stands at the top of Beacon Street.

My lament is literally for those Union dead, the men who perished fighting for the cause of the Union. In our current climate, they are usually no longer even afforded the privilege of being an afterthought. At most times, they seem to be barely thought of at all.

We are at one of those times of racial disquiet in this country, where our old sins and improperly healed wounds have been re-opened. The election of President Obama seems to have inspired anxiety in certain segments of our society and those fears are often exploited by those who will take political advantage of the individuals who possess them. And so at a point of one of our nation's greatest social triumphs -- our ability to show that as Americans, we can move beyond prejudices to recognize and elect a leader whose comfort with his racial identity is one of his strengths, just as President Kennedy's comfort with his religious identity was one of his -- we hear specious arguments about Hawaiian birth certificates, Kenya and the Mau Mau revolution.

And we also see the glorification of the Confederacy. A few months ago, the Sons of Confederate Veterans proposed that the state of Mississippi issue a license plate celebrating Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest. The proposal rightly caused controversy because Forrest was the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan but few seemed much fazed that Forrest was a general in a rebellious army. Last year, Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell issued a proclamation for Confederate History Month that made no mention of the institution of slavery. Again, McDonnell was properly criticized for that omission

but no one really questioned the wisdom of the entire enterprise.

There is no Sons of Union Veterans. Or a Union History Month. The very idea of such things seems ridiculous. Yet, the winning side -- the Republic, as mentioned by Lowell -- is so much more than the events that took place during those four years 150 years ago and its geographical boundaries. Its history is comprised of the Industrial Revolution and Manifest Destiny, of women's suffrage and the temperance movement, of World War II and Vietnam and Korea. Of Kennedy's assassination and September 11th. Of the whole of American history, including the Civil War. In contrast, the Confederacy is set in amber. It seems to have acquired an air of gentility and a patina of respectability, despite the reality that cannot be ignored -- it was built upon the immoral enslavement of fellow citizens.

In Lowell's poem, he speaks of "a thousand small town New England greens" where stand "the stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier". A century and a half later, it is easy to forget that men fought and died. Our culture's representations of soldiers in the Civil War -- in books, in movies -- so often focus on the gallant but doomed Confederate soldier. As the Mississippi and Virginia examples demonstrate, it is the Confederate dead that are often remembered and honored. But step into most towns in Massachusetts, read the names of the dead on the "stone statues" and you will be reminded that the Union soldier was not so abstract to the towns and villages that lost so many young men.

In the intervening years, the North changed so much and so quickly. My mother's grandparents stepped onto a ship in Naples and arrived in Boston, expecting streets paved in gold, decades after the end of the war. They joined millions of other immigrants, Italians, Irish, Eastern Europeans, whose connection to the great schism of American society was tenuous at best. And they -- along with other waves of immigrants -- helped to shape the North, and the Midwest, and the rest of the country as it is today.

But over the next four years, we will be reminded over and over again of this nation-defining war as important battles are commemorated: Bull Run, Antietam, Gettysburg, Chattanooga, Appomattox Courthouse. More than 600,000 Americans died during the war, and as we remember them all, spare some time for the more than 360,000 Union dead. Their names and their cause are so often forgotten.

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