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Work of Harvard's Faust gets the PBS treatment

2-hour film based on Civil War study

By **Joseph P. Kahn**
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MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

"A lot of our assumptions today have their roots in that period," says Drew Gilpin Faust (right) with Ric Burns.

Before assuming the presidency of Harvard University in 2007, Drew Gilpin Faust was a respected historian and author, with five books published and a sixth on the way. Now, she'll be reprising that scholarly role in a very public manner.

Along with filmmaker Ric Burns, Faust will be traveling the East Coast to promote a new two-hour film, "Death and the Civil War," premiering on Channel 2 on Sept. 18. She and Burns closely collaborated on the project, based on Faust's 2008 best-selling book, "This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War." Her travels will include visits to Civil War battlefields to discuss the film.

A National Book Award finalist, Faust's book traces the transformative effect mass carnage had on the nation's institutions — and psyche — during and after the Civil War. Some 750,000 Americans, or 2.5 percent of the population, died during the conflict, according to the latest estimates. "This Republic of Suffering" sheds fresh light on what those numbers meant to a country with no national cemeteries, no Memorial Day celebrations, no sense of obligation to reclaim, bury, or honor the corpses of its fallen warriors.

"I never expected it to be made into a film," Faust said at the WGBH offices last week, where she and Burns met to kick off their publicity tour. Later this week they'll speak together at Antietam National Battlefield in Sharpsburg, Md., one of the war's bloodiest settings. Faust will also deliver an address at Harpers Ferry, W.Va., site of John Brown's raid in 1859, on the broader subject of telling war stories. Other stops include New York and Washington.

Writing a book about death and the Civil War was "an extremely powerful experience," Faust continued, that summoned "an intensity I had not felt with my earlier books." But, she added, "What you can do with a film is much different from what you can do in a book."

A smiling Burns quipped that enlisting the president of Harvard as his chief research assistant was quite a coup. More seriously, he said, he chose Faust's book for his first Civil War-related project in 20 years because it powerfully humanizes an aspect of the war often overlooked by historians preoccupied with themes like battlefield strategy and the campaign to end slavery.

"The first time I interviewed Drew, you could feel all that stuff she was talking about," Burns recalled. "The scholar in the archives, confronting those letters" written by dying soldiers and bereaved family members. "That well of emotion that comes up. It's beyond ideology. It's basic and human, it's about love and loss."

Part of public television's "American Experience" series, the film is narrated by Oliver Platt, with additional commentary by historians David Blight, Mark Schantz, David Hacker, and Vincent Brown, poet-essayist Thomas Lynch, and journalist George F. Will. Faust is featured in several key scenes as well.

Like the ground-breaking 1990 series "The Civil War," produced by brothers Ric and Ken Burns and co-written by Ric and Geoffrey C. Ward, the new film draws heavily upon archival photographs and letters to tell stories of human courage and dignity amid widespread suffering and loss.

Half of all casualties occurred in the war's final two years, and more than 40 percent of the bodies were never identified. Death would "enter the experience of the American people" as never before, the film affirms.

Many of the photos shown are grisly reminders of what happened on killing fields like Antietam and Gettysburg. This is not warfare sentimentalized or airbrushed. It is visceral, discomfiting, often heartbreaking to gaze at and absorb in detail.

At a time when Americans are once again asking hard questions about war and its consequences — Can the public stomach graphic pictures of the dead and wounded? Should the media publish these images? What does America owe to its fallen soldiers and their families? To the wounded? To all war veterans, past and present? — the film's themes seem especially relevant.

"A lot of our assumptions today have their roots in that period and the transformation of consciousness that took place," Faust noted, speaking emotionally about the personal stories and artifacts she encountered in her research for the book. "The recognition that citizenship has its obligations. And that the government has its obligations to its citizens, in death as well as in life. They shape how we think about war now and our relation to those who fight the wars."

She added, "I've also thought a lot about how when any nation makes the choice to go to war, we need to understand what that choice entails. It's part of making a democratic choice, a national choice, to recognize what you're asking of those who fight on your behalf."

After the book appeared, Faust heard from many veterans expressing their appreciation. "They know, profoundly, what it means to be called upon to go to war," she reflected. "Because they see it. Those of us more separated from the military may not."

In the two decades since making "The Civil War," Burns has tackled subjects ranging from Ansel Adams and Andy Warhol to Coney Island and the whaling industry. His epic eight-part series "New York: A Documentary Film," airing episodically from 1999 to 2003, won a pair of Emmy Awards.

Although approached many times to revisit the Civil War in some form or other, Burns demurred until three years ago when Mark Samuels, the film's executive producer, urged him to read Faust's book. Burns soon embraced the project, enlisting Faust's aid as a consultant and on-camera commentator.

Two lengthy interviews with Faust were shot, and she and Burns shared notes on the film as it progressed from script to raw footage to editing room. Still, Faust insists that it's Burns's film, not hers.

"From the start, I trusted Ric," she said, smiling warmly at Burns. "He asked me the kinds of things I would have wanted to be asked. And he responded in a way that made me understand he would do the right thing."

While noting that the book's chopped-up chronology made it "anti-narrative" to some degree, and therefore not so filmable, Burns kept returning to Faust's source material for inspiration.

"There's a kind of heartbeat there that's moving through the war," he said earnestly. "There's the book, and there's the film. Drew's interviews are at the universal juncture of the two."

For Faust, the broadcast of "Death and the Civil War" marks a rarity for a Harvard president, never mind a deeply respected academic: seeing one's work enter the pop culture mainstream. And with the Burns brand name on it, to boot.

How different is that from running a major university like Harvard?

"It is, and isn't," Faust replied. "For me, being an historian has been a central part of being a president. Running an organization that's thinking about change and how change happens — that's what historians do."

In both jobs, she added, "The key question is, What is meaningful to people, and how do you make them understand the world in which they live?"

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