

Remarks by Dr. Carroll Van West, Director, Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area

Tennessee Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission Inaugural Kickoff Signature Event  
Jackson Hall, Tennessee Performing Arts Center  
Nashville, TN  
November 12, 2010

Thank you, Commissioner Whitaker, for the kind words. Thank you to the hundreds of Tennesseans gathered for this historic occasion.

150 years ago, here in the heart of the South, was a state inflamed. Hundreds of thousands of Tennesseans spoke of secession; the specter of a Republican president – Abraham Lincoln – was unbearable. Hundreds of thousands of other Tennesseans said NO, they called for a renewed unity so that the grand promise of the United States of America not be carelessly tossed away. Still a third group of Tennesseans, also hundreds of thousands strong, were silent, because enslaved people had no recognized public voice. But they too wondered about the times – would disunion and war mean slavery confirmed, or freedom?

150 years ago, Tennesseans – black or white, east, middle or west, young or old – faced uncertainty to a degree that is unfathomable to us today. Their June 1861 decision to make Tennessee Confederate brought upon them a final reckoning that no one ever imagined. A vast Civil War touched every county; families ripped asunder, farms stripped of crops and livestock, towns and villages wrecked, and thousands of acres of Tennessee soil sanctified by the blood of tens of thousands dead – Secesh and Yank, white and black. What started 150 years ago transformed our state into one massive battlefield, with conflicts large and small, and it has taken another 150 years for those scars to heal.

But the healing doesn't mean that the forgetting can begin. We must work today, and every day after, to remind our fellow citizens that out of the Civil War's four years of death and

destruction rose a nation reborn, where the words that began our country - that *all* men are created equal – finally began to mean what they said. Without this Civil War, we would not have been a beacon for the world, protecting freedom and democracy in two great world wars nor the unified people who send their sons and daughters to faraway lands to protect freedom in a modern world where darkness still lurks.

Why does the Civil War matter today, the skeptic repeats, endlessly it seems. Tennessee's Civil War was a terrible fire that consumed so much of the old that it left a great sense of loss in the center of ourselves, but a fire too that ignited two flames that have burned ever so brighter as decades pass – the flame of a united strong nation, and the flame of freedom that burst into a fire of its own some 100 years later to consume the rest of the worst of the old. This Civil War allows our children in Tennessee classrooms today to acclaim a simple phrase that defines and binds us as this great country, the United States of America, of “One Nation, Under God, INDIVISIBLE, With Liberty and Justice for All.”