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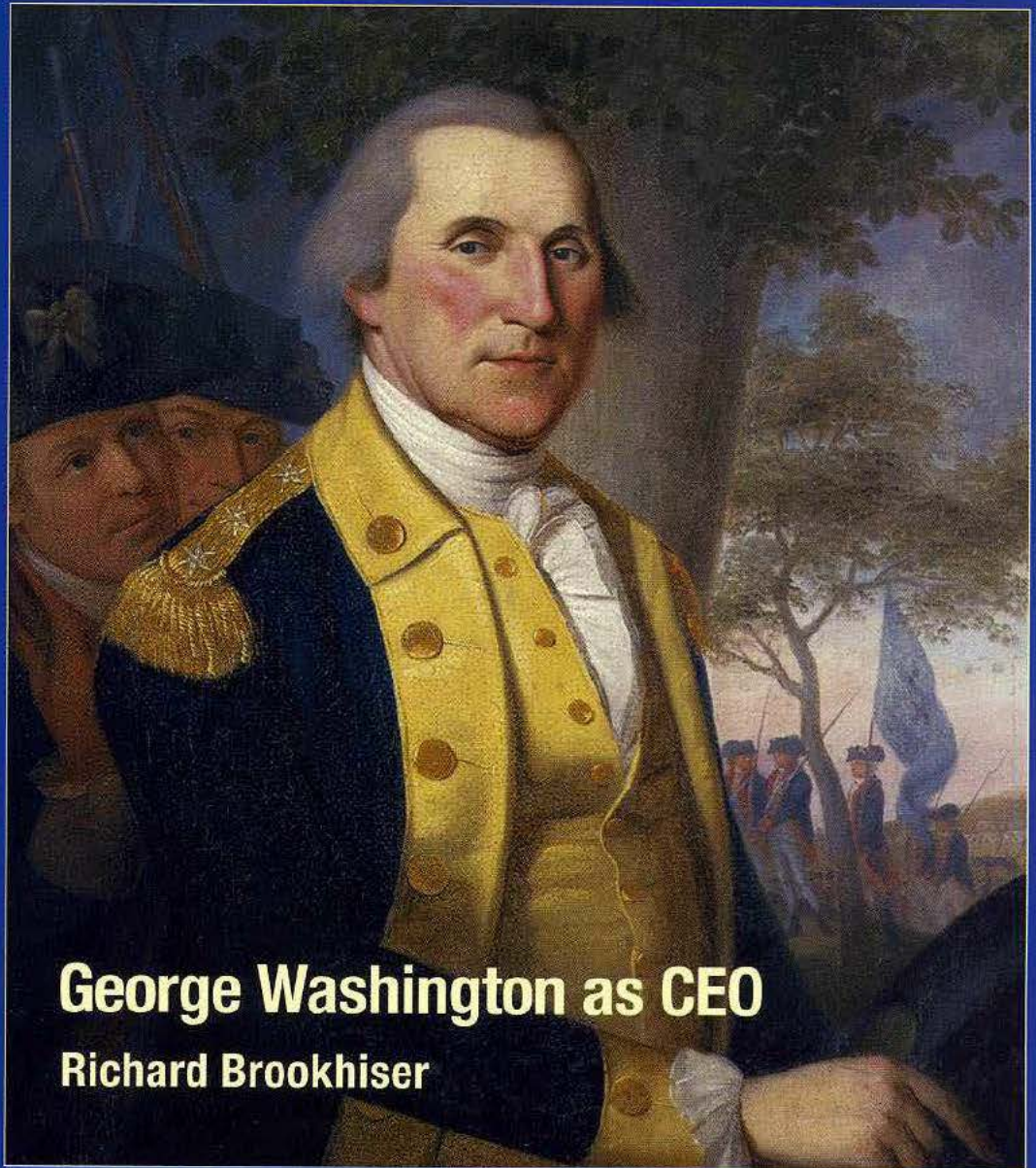
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When the Reaper Came Calling

By Philip Kopper

TO WRITE A GREAT BOOK choose a great theme, said Herman Melville, one of the sages, fools, and common folk who appear in this vivid panorama of tragic history. So let us now praise Drew Gilpin Faust for tackling such a theme in *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (Knopf, 346 pages, \$27.95): We all die, yet in one particularly gruesome war men died so differently that their survivors made a new and different world.

Before the Civil War, most people accepted death as a fact of life, but then something new happened under the American sun: mass deaths of healthy men at the hands of other men. In 1861 death became unprecedented in its numbers, unspeakable in its violence, incomprehensible in its distances from home.

In the South, three men out of four answered the call to colors; one out of five Southern men perished. Some 360,222 men in blue died, and an estimated 258,000 in gray, twice as many of them from disease as from battle.

Previously most people died at home, among family who engaged in familiar rituals. One's last words were noted as an index of one's state of mind and readiness to meet his maker. These concepts were part of an ancient rite of passage, called the "Good Death" by the Victorians. "Dying was an art, and the tradition of *ars moriendi* had provided rules of conduct for the moribund and their attendants since at least the 15th century," Faust writes.

But now as armies fought battles of attrition, men (mostly) who were beloved somewhere died afar, alone and "Unknown" in Walt Whitman's word; 40 percent of Union soldiers (and more Confederates) were never identified. Absent notification procedures,

military authorities never reported many deaths to relatives. Survivors exerted heart-wrenching, vain efforts to find their missing.

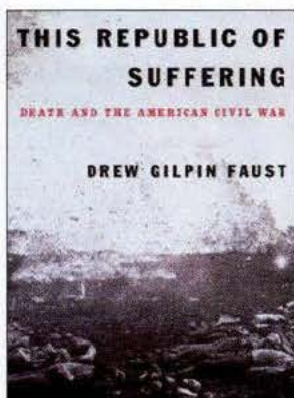
Faust cites the universal instinct among humankind to respect human remains, to honor the dead with "decent" burial. But the sheer numbers at an Antietam or Petersburg overwhelmed that practice; neither army had the manpower to deal with bodies. Homely rituals became less common; normal forms of grieving were abandoned at awful psychological cost in a kind of national epidemic of denial. In some realms, proto-NGOs began to act *in loco familiae*. Having waged war over the equality of all human beings, the federal government accepted its responsibility to respect those

who had done the dirtiest work and paid the highest price.

In these new circumstances, new rituals evolved and new institutions arose. New dress codes appeared for ladies in periods of "half" and "full" mourning. The government ordered the reporting of every death, the systematic registration of graves, the establishment of our National Cemeteries. President Lincoln enunciated the nation's renewed commitment "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."

The war brought a new schizophrenic confusion. How could any benevolent God allow such horror? These questions led to new crises of faith among people who considered religion more important than politics. Yet the trauma of the War and its innumerable sorrows also prompted a revival of faith, particularly in the South.

Faust identifies the cause of many post-war changes as death, one of only two events that every human experiences. So what could



be a more accessible portal through which to examine so cataclysmic a period? Next question: Why didn't some historian do this before? Answer: for the same reason *Moby Dick* had to await Melville. No one had such vision, dedication, and skill.

—Philip Kopper a Washington author, editor, and publisher, is working on a book about death in the 21st-century America.

Did Alexander Graham Bell Steal the Telephone Patent?

By Edwin S. Grosvenor and Ralph O. Meyer

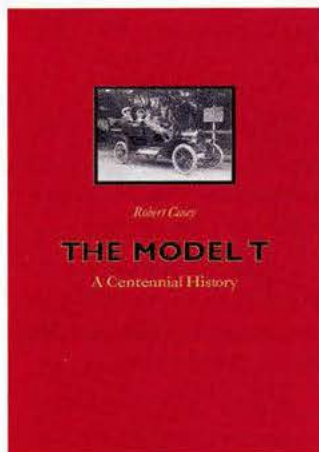
IN HIS NEW BOOK, *The Telephone Gambit: Chasing Alexander Graham Bell's Secret* (Norton, 256 pages, \$24.95), Seth Shulman states that the famous inventor "was plagued by a secret: he stole the key idea behind the invention of the telephone."

In this well-written but critically flawed account, Shulman tells the story of his research in the Bell-versus-Gray controversy—the question of who first came up with the key technological innovation for the phone. He digs into archives and discovers a critical page in Bell's notebook from March 1876, a sketch drawn shortly before the time that Bell uttered the famous phrase, "Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you." Shulman claims that the drawing of a liquid transmitter is strikingly similar to the earlier drawing in Elisha Gray's patent caveat. Shulman's conclusion is clear: Bell saw the caveat and copied the idea into his notebook. Bell subsequently built the liquid transmitter, which worked, and the rest is history.

Central to Shulman's argument was his "discovery" of two affidavits written by Zenas Wilbur, the clerk in the Patent Office who examined Bell's application, in which ten years after the fact he claimed the inventor slipped him a \$100 bill to reveal Gray's patent caveat. By now an ill and penniless alcoholic, Wilbur contradicted his earlier testimony that



BOOK REVIEWS



The Model T A Centennial History Robert Casey

Richly illustrated with archival photos from The Henry Ford—many never before published—*The Model T* is the definitive history of an iconographic piece of American technology.

Just in time for the centennial celebration of the Model T, Robert Casey captures the remarkable story of that car's history and development and of its long-lasting impact on America. Here are the people who built the Model T and how, the folks who purchased it and why, and the profound technological leaps in mass production and mass consumption that we rightly associate with the Model T.



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everything was routine in the Bell patent application. Shulman relates how these new documents were discovered in an attic and *never played a role in any of the legal challenges to Bell's claim to the telephone.* [authors' italics]

In fact, these affidavits are far from unknown. They played a central role in the notorious "Pan-Electric Case," which erupted into the largest scandal of the Grover Cleveland Administration. Wilbur's alleged deathbed confession was not the work of an old man with a burdened conscience, but a carefully crafted legal document written with the help of lawyers working for a company seeking to steal rights to the most lucrative patent ever issued in U.S. history. This dubious testimony has been at the center of a very public debate over the telephone patents for 125 years. It is hard to understand how Shulman could have missed or ignored the question of their credibility.

By 1886, the Bell companies had defended their patents in some 600 court cases, before hundreds of judges in many jurisdictions. Bell never lost a case. Having exhausted all other channels, the only remaining means of attacking the patents was to allege that they had been obtained fraudulently. The founders of Pan-Electric took this course, filing their own patents, which bore a striking resemblance to Bell's, and then urging the government to have the Bell patents annulled. To aid their cause, Pan-Electric quietly distributed thousands of shares in the company to a variety of federal officials. Sure enough, the U.S. government decided to weigh in and brought fraud charges against Alexander Graham Bell.

For eight years, Bell had fought one company after another trying to steal his patents. One of the most difficult challenges had come from the richest and most powerful corporation in the world, the Western Union Telegraph company, which had a monopoly on communications in the U.S.; they had hired Thomas Edison and Elisha Gray to invent around Bell's patent; thus acquiring rights to the telephone. Bell Telephone defeated the goliath in court. Now, it was the Federal Government, led by Augustus Garland, the U.S. Attorney General, which was accusing Bell

of fraud. All this was based on the scandalous allegations in Wilbur's affidavit, which Shulman believes are new revelations.

Unfortunately for Pan-Electric's promoters, their scheme was exposed in a dramatic story in *The New York Tribune*, which revealed that the U.S. Attorney General owned 500,000 of the company's shares. The paper revealed that other shareholders included two senators, two key congressmen, and several government officials. The Speaker of the House launched a Congressional investigation that conducted extensive hearings and published a thick volume of testimony. The Congressmen voted on party lines and, not surprisingly, the Cleveland Administration decided not to investigate its own perfidious behavior.

Shulman's book also falls short as a result of his tenuous grasp of electricity and magnetism. There are two ways to vary current in a telephone circuit in order to transmit sound. One is to vary the battery voltage or resistance in the circuit, and the other is to induce a current with a varying magnetic field. Bell chose the latter.

Shulman claims that Bell's "eureka moment" occurred on March 10, 1876, when the inventor made the liquid variable transmitter work, after having stolen the idea from Gray. However, Bell's real breakthrough took place the year before on June 2, 1875, when he realized that the induction method would work—and the following day, when he constructed the so-called Gallows telephone.

Having first written down his theories in November 1874, Bell already had a very sophisticated understanding of the principles of the telephone—he was just having trouble making it work. The liquid transmitter work he did was inconsequential since he quickly returned to the induction transmitter design of the Gallows telephone. The liquid transmitter experiment simply didn't matter, so even if the idea had been stolen it would be irrelevant.

—**Ralph Meyer** is a physicist and author of *Old-Time Telephones*.
Edwin S. Grosvenor is the author of *Alexander Graham Bell: The Life and Times of the Inventor of the Telephone* and Editor-in-Chief of *American Heritage*.