

Reconstructing Childhood: Youth, Citizenship, and the American Civil War.

Abstract

This paper argues that the unprecedented propaganda effort directed at children during the Civil War marked the first instance where children were transformed from passive citizens to active military participants, structurally embedding childhood as a political institution required for wartime success. Through an exploration of different mechanisms to garner war support, including interviews, pictures, songs, and textbooks, the paper situates a comparative analysis between the Union's and Confederacy's modes of education and propaganda. It then investigates some of the roles children played during the War, once again comparing the North and South. The paper then transitions to arguing that the Civil War's devastating effects planted the seeds for the later Progressive Era child reform movement, exploring connections between the two through reactionary literature and legislation. It ends with a critical examination of how the competing conceptions of childhood formed within the Civil War persist today, articulated through debates between Republicans and Democrats on child safety, education, and civic engagement.

Introduction

On April 12th, 1861, shortly after 4:30 a.m, a cannon struck Fort Sumter, situated in the middle of Charleston Harbor, South Carolina.¹ Its deafening boom, echoing across the Charleston Bay, marked the beginning of the deadliest war in American history — the Civil

¹"Fort Sumter," *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, last modified February 21, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/civil-war/fort-sumter>

War. Pitting the North's abolitionist nationalism against the South's pro-slavery sectionalism, this war arose as a result of fundamental ideological divisions. However, despite their many differences, both the North and South embraced one common grim imperative: the enlistment of children in the war effort. Through indoctrination that glorified militarism within schooling and media, young Americans were transformed into ardent supporters of the war effort.

Propaganda and Youth Indoctrination

Southern Cultural Propaganda: Songs, Art, and Textbooks

The South mobilized various instruments to induce a sense of regional identity. As part of the broader effort to indoctrinate the youth and promote regional unity, Confederate leaders converted patriotic songs into unifying sources, often embedded with cultural themes. A prominent and early one of these songs, *The Bonnie Blue Flag*, propagated lyrics reminding children of their shared Southern heritage:

We are a band of brothers. And native to the soil. Fighting for the property we gained by honest toil. And when our rights were threatened. The cry rose near and far "Hurrah for the Bonnie Blue Flag That bears a single star!."²

The song pridefully sings about the Confederate *Bonnie Blue Flag*, a symbol of the South's new beginnings. Lyrical patriotism was similarly found in the South's unofficial national anthem, *Dixie (or Dixie's Land)*. When Confederate President Jefferson Davis took the oath of office, this regional anthem was played in the background.³ Opening with a catchy patriotic melody, it

²Harry McCarthy, *The Bonnie Blue Flag* (A.E. Blackmar, 1861), <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/civil-war-music-bonnie-blue-flag>.

³Sheilla Gaffney, "Dixie," Song of America, accessed January 18, 2026,

romanticizes the lost culture which the South sought to regain from the war.⁴ *Dixie* endured as a pervasive element of Southern folklore; many decades after its inception, the Ku Klux Klan employed it as a backtrack for their “Birth of a Nation”.⁵ Through song, children were exposed to themes of sectional power and Southern pride, indoctrinating the youth. Reverential songs like *The Blue Bonnie Flag* and *Dixie* were then combined with war posters and textbooks infused with Southern ideology to induce a sense of Southern nationalism within school classrooms.

The first of these classroom tools was war posters, which contained patriotic writing and garnered popular attention to the military effort. In 1864, the Governor of Alabama promoted a poster titled *To The Youth of Alabama: We are Calling to Arms!*, which asserted:

In a cause that appears to every son of Alabama at a time when our sacred soil is polluted by the foot of the insolent invaders, WE ARE CALLED TO ARMS! WE MUST FIGHT!!⁶

The South integrated these inspiring war posters into their broader artistic and architectural effort aimed at enticing many children to join the war. In this movement, patriotic southern children who died in the war effort were exalted by confederate media, with statues being erected to commemorate their young deaths.⁷ Such actions contributed to a rising glorification of self-sacrifice by the youth, one of the many ideas classroom teachers reinforced through a carefully curated list of textbooks.

The creation of new Southern —*Dixie*— textbooks, involved ideologically brainwashing the youth. Primarily authored by Marinda Moore, these textbooks inculcated certain confederate

<https://songofamerica.net/song/dixie/>.

⁴“Civil War Music: Dixie,” American Battlefield Trust, March 30, 2017, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/civil-war-music-dixie>.

⁵Francis J. Grimké and Daniel Murray, *The Birth of a Nation* (Washington, 1915), Grimké and Murray Collection, Library of Congress, 1:16:25, <https://www.loc.gov/item/95522190/>

⁶William Rivers, “To the Youth of Alabama,” *American School*, March 25, 1864.

⁷Susan R Hull, *Boy Soldiers of the Confederacy* (Legare Street Press, 2023).

ideas: secession was justified, the North was tyrannical, Abraham Lincoln was a failure, and Northern writings, which were innocuously framed as guidance for national prosperity, should be rejected.⁸ Children were heavily influenced by these books, as Moore often leveraged a historical context to justify her ideas — for instance, claiming African-American inferiority was enshrined in the Constitution and Divine Law.⁹ However, to effectively incorporate these textbooks across the various southern schools, the Confederates convened the Educational Association of the Confederate States of America in 1863.¹⁰ The primary resolution espoused from this meeting was the complete discarding of all foreign education textbooks, and the institutionalization of regional textbooks, like that of Moore's, instead.¹¹

Southern Military Indoctrination

Southern schools, however, functioned not only as ideological centers but as a mechanism for mobilization during the war effort. In the South, practically every university and school became a site for converting children.¹² In one residential school, nearly 20% of the faculty and 25% of the students left to join the 32nd Virginia infantry.¹³ Discipline was maintained among the boys through a military-type training program, preparing them for future military service.¹⁴ Schooling focused on simulating war conditions, hence, it instilled key

⁸Marinda Branson Moore, *The First Dixie Reader* (Branson, Farrar & Co., 1866).

⁹Nathan Ryalls, "For Dixie Children: Teaching Students What It Meant to Be Confederate Americans through Their Textbooks" (2013), <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1322&context=master201019>.

¹⁰Neil P. Chatelain, "Weaponizing Children's Education," *Emerging Civil War*, June 10, 2024.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²LibraryofVa, "Frances M. Clarke & Rebecca Jo Plant | of Age: Boy Soldiers and Military Power in the Civil War Era," YouTube, June 18, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7K848npczA>.

¹³Juanita Leisch, "Education during the 1860s," American Battlefield Trust, October 23, 2018, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/education-during-1860s>.

¹⁴Ibid.

military values: valor, bravery, fearlessness, persistence, and strength. An infamous culmination of this preparation occurred when Virginia Military Institute (VMI) cadets, some as young as fifteen, stormed the field during the Battle of New Market.¹⁵

The Battle of New Market did more than just serve a didactic purpose; it highlighted a moral flaw with the Southern government — namely, their willingness to enlist and contribute boy soldiers. Vice President John C. Breckenridge even declared, “So God forgive me, we must enlist boys in the war,”¹⁶ when affirming his decision to employ children. Northern leaders, by contrast, derided such practices. General Ulysses S. Grant famously lampooned Breckenridge’s decision with a cartoon titled *Robbing the Cradle and the Grave*, in reference to Southern youth enlistment.¹⁷ This disjunction can be partially explained by the contrast in resources: the North, an industrial economy with numerous foreign allies, had enough money to fund all kinds of military ventures; on the other hand, the South, an agrarian and unsupported economy, were forced to deploy whatever resources were available. As the war progressed and became more dire, this transformation encompassed child soldiers. The scarcity of resources also explains why there was a much more infectious and wide-spread propaganda attempt to rouse the children as military youth in the South compared to the North.

Tradition of Participation

To that end, the South could not just indoctrinate the youth through didactic teaching but had to find some way to engage and immerse the children in the reeducation process. This idea was facilitated through immense psychological pressure. While some parents accosted the high

¹⁵VMI Archives, *The History of Virginia Military Institute: A Digital Collection*, Virginia Military Institute Digital Archives, accessed January 18, 2026, <https://vmi.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15821coll11/id/1074/rec/1>

¹⁶LibraryofVa, *Frances M. Clarke & Rebecca Jo Plant*, 2:59.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 4:35.

command for sending their children to war, many others encouraged their children to support the war effort — oftentimes, participating in the war themselves. Furthermore, the Confederates would mobilize entire military academies, like that of the North Carolina Military Academy, to conscript within the war.¹⁸ As the combination of familial and friendship reverence to military service perpetually exposed students to the ideas of its glory, the South had effectively formed a foundation built as much on relationships as it was on education. When friction was created between what a family desired and friends were doing, students opted to go with what they observed. James Dinkin, a son of rich parents fervently against wartime participation, still enlisted motivated by peer pressure from other students.¹⁹ The socially-engineered tension was not solely limited to the Southern military hierarchy, with entire towns reinforcing this sentiment. Notably, town judges would perpetuate this culture by giving incarcerated teens an ultimatum: remain in jail, or secure early release by agreeing to compulsory service.²⁰

Sectional Conclusion

This section of the paper has explored how the South worked to mobilize and indoctrinate students to participate in the war effort, and more importantly, unquestioningly believe in the value of military service for the ‘greater good’ of the South. Architected through textbooks, songs, schooling, and military training, the Southern brainwashing program proved very successful, with conscription of teens morphing into a common-place phenomena. The next section will focus on the North, arguing that unlike the South which saw the youth as a political instrument, the North worked to construct a national narrative built upon morality and ethical

¹⁸*of Age: Boy Soldiers.*

¹⁹LibraryofVa, 20:21

²⁰Library of Va, 12:38.

responsibility. In that way, education was a much less aggressive force — cannot be appropriated as indoctrination— but still just as potent as in the South.

Northern Education and Media: National Unity and Cultural Narratives

Unlike the South’s regional indoctrination, Northern education intended to erase sectional identity completely and instead focus on national unity. Within New York City, textbooks integrated geography to promote unity; the 1862 edition of the Johnson’s family *Atlas*, approved by the New York City Board of Education, made no mention of regional conflict or even the war itself.²¹ Furthermore, it included Nevada and Colorado as states within the union; in reality, they had only been appropriated as territories during this period.²² This clear omission evidenced an attempt to exclude a sense of regional division from taking hold of child education, instead promoting the Union as a sanctimonious whole. To further this directive, the Union assured teacher loyalty, compelling newly captured confederate state teachers to take oaths of allegiance before being issued documentation of citizenship.²³ Immigrants also underwent this process, with the U.S. issuing orders requiring citizenship for all prospective foreign teachers. By promoting a cohesive national narrative, the Union was gradually shaping the youth’s outlooks on their role in society.

Beyond education, *The Little Corporal*, a children’s magazine, heavily inspired Union children to fight in the war. Organized by publisher Alfred L.Sewell, it initially enlisted

²¹Neil P Chatelain, “Weaponizing Children’s Education during the U.S. Civil War - Emerging Civil War,” Emerging Civil War, June 10, 2024, <https://emergingcivilwar.com/2024/06/10/weaponizing-childrens-education-during-the-u-s-civil-war/>.

²²“Order of States' Admission,” *Arkansas Secretary of State*, accessed January 18, 2026, <https://www.sos.arkansas.gov/education/arkansas-history/history-of-the-flag/order-of-states-admission>

²³Chatelain, “Weaponizing Children’s Education”

thousands of children to raise money by selling war memorabilia.²⁴ Leveraging this base of support, Sewell infused the paper with messages of patriotic pride, engendering a new ideological foundation for many children.²⁵ This transformation propagated a collective intrigue within the war.

Reading served as one of many aspects of leisure for Union children. Board games were just as important, with cards emerging as a hobby during the Civil War (see appendix A). The Union encouraged board games not only to unite child soldiers but to instill moral messages. For instance, one of the most recognizable and popular Union board games, Milton Bradley's *The Checkered Game of Life*, rewarded truth through moves forward on a game board and punished vice with moves back.²⁶ Within three years of the war, the Union had elevated this game's popularity by incorporating it into their care kits distributed to many war children all across America.²⁷ This careful distribution reflects a genuine desire to establish an ethical foundation to guide Union kids as they navigated the arduous war journey, in stark contrast to the more ambitious and hostile approaches used to get children to join the war in the South.

Militarizing Northern Youth

Even the militarization process of the North was different, with there being a much more wide-ranging and inclusive utilization of kids to support the war effort. Their roles comprised various jobs: suppliers on the home front, drummers, couriers and actual soldiers. In New York, thousands of young men and women went to work in factories to replace the older men who

²⁴Kelly Gordon, *Children's Periodicals of the United States* (Greenwood, 1984), 277–82.

²⁵Ibid., 245.

²⁶David Wallace Adams and Victor Edmonds, "Making Your Move: The Educational Significance of the American Board Game, 1832 to 1904." *History of Education Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1977): 373 <https://doi.org/10.2307/367865>

²⁷ Ibid., 374.

enlisted to fight.²⁸ Furthermore, these kids would procure supplies for the Union cause, including wooden cloth for army blankets, textile for military uniform, and the linen to create American Flags.²⁹ Many young girls were also trained as nurses, exposing them to the bloody nature of war for the very first time.³⁰ In fact, Clara Barton, the founder of the American chapter of the Red Cross, was a nurse during the war, working under chief of Staff Dorothea Dix. Though Dix required strict age confinements for service, many girls found ways to bypass it — for example, working in the sanitary commission, lying about their age, or apprenticing under older women.³¹ Young men, on the other hand, were inspired to preserve the intact Union and uphold the abolition of slavery. Hence, they sought more direct ways to involve themselves in the battlefield.

The role children played eventually intensified to soldiers and drummer boys. Nearly 10% of Union soldiers were underage.³² One of the youngest of these soldiers was John (“Johnny”) Clem. At merely 12 years old, he enlisted in the Union Army, where he became the drummer boy for the 22nd Michigan Infantry. He eventually played a key role within this group, reportedly shooting down a Confederate general during the Union retreat at Chickamauga.³³ His impact on the battlefield was propagandized through a popular Civil War song *The Drummer Boy of Shiloh*.³⁴ Clem even inspired the creation of posters depicting Union boys standing next to weaponry (see appendix C). Glamorous Civil War adventure stories, like that of Clem’s,

²⁸Greene Janet, *From Forge to Fast Food: A History of Child Labor in New York State*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (1994; repr., Troy, NY: Council for Citizenship Education, Russell Sage College, 1995), 73–79, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED393723.pdf>.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 78–80.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 73.

³¹L.P. Brockett and Mary C. Vaughan, *Woman's Work in the Civil War: A Record of Heroism, Patriotism and Patience* (Philadelphia: Zeigler, McCurdy & Co., 1867), 78–82, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21853/21853-h/21853-h.htm>

³²LibraryofVa, 5:12.

³³American Battlefield Trust, “John Clem,” *Battlefields.org*, accessed January 14, 2026, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/john-clem>

³⁴American Battlefield Trust, “John Clem,”

encouraged boys to “play” war and join local company drills.³⁵ Many children were impelled to either lie to recruitment officers about their ages or gain the confidence of an officer to enlist.³⁶ This strand of romanticized militarism reinforces a difference in ideology underpinning how youth participated in the war — not through systematic brainwashing, but through personal fulfillment and moral beliefs.

Sectional Conclusion

This section has reiterated the way children in the North were inspired to join and how they contributed to the war effort. It argues that the mechanisms to attract children were less aggressive, citing reading, board games, and moral incentives as primary evidence. It then compares the scope of these jobs, arguing that there was a greater variety in the North. The paper further delves into this variety by exploring two cases: nurses and soldiers. The next part of the paper will cover a thesis connecting the Civil War to the future child reform movement and Progressive Era.

The Legacy of Child Mobilization

As a direct result of youth participation in the war, historians estimate that around 100,000 children died.³⁷ However, the war’s end initialized the ideological and institutional foundation for the future child reform movement found in the Progressive Era.

³⁵James Alan Marten, *The Children’s Civil War* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2000).

³⁶Emmy E Werner, *Reluctant Witnesses* (Westview Press, 1998).

³⁷City of Nashville, *Children and the Civil War: What Did the Civil War Mean for Children?* (Nashville: City of Nashville, 2025), https://www.nashville.gov/sites/default/files/2025-10/Children-Brochure_FNVC.pdf?ct=1759521121

Immediate Impacts

The Civil War redefined how children engaged with society. Many children were left orphaned and oftentimes, poverty-stricken.³⁸ Furthermore, many slaves left southern plantations, thrusting children into isolated domestic work.³⁹ The war also initiated heavier parental protection within society. Afraid of war dangers, many parents sought moral equivalents of war without any violence.⁴⁰ Therefore, emerging movements, like scouting and camping, attracted a lot of attention. Many parents viewed it as the perfect alternative to war.

Reform Laws and Progressive-Era Connections

In the decades following the Civil War, during the period of Reconstruction, state governments aimed to mitigate the war's pernicious effects on children through legislation. An initial law promulgated was the Pensions Act of 1862, which extended pensions to orphans and widows, improving the conditions for soldiers and children alike.⁴¹ Future Progressive reformers would expand on this law by providing all mothers with pension, enabling children to stay at home.⁴²

³⁸ Bvt. Maj. Genl. R. "Report of Conditions and Operations — Savannah, GA, September 1, 1865," in *Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of South Carolina*, Natl. Arch. Microfilm Publ. M869, Roll 34, *The Freedmen's Bureau Online*, accessed December 21st, 2025, <https://freedmensbureau.com/southcarolina/scoperations4.htm>

³⁹ Marten, *The Children's Civil War*.

⁴⁰ University of Houston, *Digital History*, "The War's Legacy," Digital History, accessed January 14, 2026, https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/children_civilwar/legacy.cfm

⁴¹ Claire Prechtel-Klusens, "A Reasonable Degree of Promptitude," *Prologue Magazine*, April 2010, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/spring/civilwarpension.html>.

⁴² Illinois General Assembly, *An Act to Provide for the Aid of Mothers with Dependent Children*, Laws of Illinois, 47th General Assembly, 1911.

One of the biggest proponents of child safety, Vermont, mandated compulsory education in the late 1860s. Quickly following suit, Connecticut in 1872 and New York in 1874 instituted laws requiring all children between 8-14 to attend school.⁴³ In the South, the combination of infrastructure and economic devastation rendered their education system untenable. Therefore, labor laws occurred later, between the 1890s and 1900s.⁴⁴ Eventually, Southern states like Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama, legalized the same restriction that the North did, intending this statute to punish child labor. The various child labor initiatives — both in the South and North — would culminate in the Keatings-Owens Act of 1916, a Progressive-Era directive that outlawed any child-made goods.⁴⁵

Reactionary Literature

A complement to reform legislation was the development of reactionary anti-war rhetoric. One of the most significant examples, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, directly drew on the author's personal experiences as a Union nurse.⁴⁶ When the titular sisters' father leaves for military conscription, the girls, mere teenagers, are thrust into domestic responsibilities around the house. They must support the family. This early maturation exemplified the moral and emotional burdens placed on young girls in the war.

Another story, Stephen Crane's *the Red Badge of Courage*, speaks to the horrors of war from a youth's perspective.⁴⁷ It allegorized the reality for youth during the Civil war: how young teenagers sought to join the war, motivated by an idealistic vision of fighting; then, how that

⁴³Mary K. Novello, A Case Against Compulsion, policy brief, Washington Policy Center, March 1, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/a-case-against-compulsion>

⁴⁴Infoplease, "State Compulsory School Attendance Laws," updated August 5, 2020, <https://www.infoplease.com/us/education/state-compulsory-school-attendance-laws>

⁴⁵Edward Keating and Robert Owen, "Keating-Owen Child Labor Act" (1916).

⁴⁶Monica Kulling and Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: Random House, 2005).

⁴⁷Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895.)

vision comes crashing down after truly experiencing war: the blood and the trauma. Crane used Henry Fleming, the main character of the book, to depict war as something *not* to idealize, an idea largely unfamiliar to the populace at the time.

The usage of literary devices as a form of protest would continue into the Progressive era, through the National Child Labor Committee. Formed in 1904, this organization became prominent for writing and distributing pamphlets that protested child labor.⁴⁸ Information contained in these pamphlets ranged from descriptions of children working in Virginia Cotton Mills,⁴⁹ (see appendix C) to paper collections elucidating children labor in the seafood industry.⁵⁰ Settlement houses were also created during this time period. They became a powerful source of progress for orphaned children, enhancing children's reading and writing skills with early education.⁵¹ Consequently, a new era of childhood was being actively fostered — one that excoriated child labor and consecrated education.

Redefining Childhood

The postwar shift in attitudes produced a new notion of American children that emphasized intellectual and moral wellbeing, which came to be known as the *Romantic child* ideology. Rooted in Enlightenment and Romantic thought, this theory posited that children are born inherently innocent, and therefore deserving of moral cultivation rather than labor or

⁴⁸National Child Labor Committee, "National Child Labor Committee," *Social Welfare History Project*, Virginia Commonwealth University, accessed January 18, 2026, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/child-welfare/child-labor/national-child-labor-committee/>

⁴⁹Alexander J. McKelway, *Child Labor in Virginia*, NCLC Pamphlet no. 171 (New York: National Child Labor Committee, ca. 1911), William Smith Morton Library digital collection.

⁵⁰National Child Labor Committee, *The Child's Burden in Oyster and Shrimp Canneries*, Pamphlet no. 193 (New York: National Child Labor Committee, May 1913).

⁵¹William Dwight Porter Bliss and Rudolph M. Binder, eds., *The New Encyclopedia of Social Reform* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908), 587-90.

punishment; additionally, it viewed education as a way to nurture these qualities.⁵² In the decades following the civil war, this reconceptualization of childhood transcended into tangible reforms: the establishment of juvenile courts and the creation of reform schools meant to rehabilitate rather than punish children.⁵³ Decades later, the Progressive Era saw the Illinois Juvenile Court Act mandate the complete separation of adult and child jails.⁵⁴ This radical shift produced a new age in the American judiciary, which was incorporating the fate and ideas of child safety into the broader American psyche.

Sectional Conclusion

This section has covered the gradual yet significant progression of child reforms and protection spanning the Reformation Era to the Progressive Era. Initiating with an exploration of compulsory schooling laws, it finds a clear connection with the Progressive Era through the Keatings-Owen Acts. It then explores the development of reactionary anti-war rhetoric, examining its continuation in the 1900s through pamphlets and settlement house creeds. It argues that from this, a new ideology rooted in the *Romantic Child Theory* emerged, cementing the safety and security of kids within broader American society.

Summary

This paper has evolved in two connected parts: the first investigates how children were indoctrinated and weaponized during the Civil War through a comparative analysis of the North and South; the second section expands on the previous section by connecting the end of the Civil

⁵²Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 17.

⁵³B. Krisberg, *Historical Legacy of Juvenile Corrections* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 1996), NCJ 172268, NCJRS Virtual Library, Office of Justice Programs.

⁵⁴Lucy Flower, "Illinois Juvenile Court Act 1899," 1-11 § (1899).

War with the birth of the child labor reform movement, specifically arguing that the emotional turmoil, instability, and disrupted families generated by the war catalyzed reform movements which ultimately culminated in Progressive-Era campaigns intended to protect children. This shift was facilitated through compulsory education, child welfare efforts, and extensive legal protections. The moral decay which had enshrouded America throughout the Civil War was slowly dissipated through reform and rhetoric found in the Progressive Era.

Historical Trends

More importantly, the Civil War established an unprecedented pattern that would come to characterize American warfare for years to come. It represented the first instance by which the state aimed to directly incorporate children in order to further a political goal while simultaneously establishing a mandate for their protection. Subsequent wars, including the Spanish-American War, World Wars, and Cold War, saw the sustenance of this duality. Through folklore, sensationalist headlines, and mass media, thousands of children were attracted to the prospect of helping the United States military — instilled in them was a deep sense of patriotism.⁵⁵ However, combined with this politicization was an initiative to remove children from this pernicious space, whether through educator criticisms, newspaper headlines calling out how the government was leveraging kids for statecraft, or mass support for pacifist movements intended to dissuade future violence. The resulting combination produced a perpetual cycle where protection and weaponization reinforced one another.

⁵⁵Robert H. Bremner, ed., *Children and Youth in America: A Documentary History*, vol. 3, 1933–1973, assoc. eds. John Barnard, Tamara K. Hareven, and Robert M. Mennel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), <https://archive.org/details/childrenyouthina0003unse>.

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295 **Future Implications**

296 When thinking about contemporary political debates surrounding childhood, this lens of
 297 mutual protection and weaponization becomes a useful historical framework. Especially within
 298 the current political apparatus, which divides the *Republicans* and *Democrats* on two separate
 299 ends of the political spectrum, debates and concerns involving childhood have become even
 300 more pronounced.

301

302 **Florida Parental Rights Act: Weaponizing or Protecting Children?**

303 One example is shown in the recent implementation of the Florida Parental Rights in
 304 Education Act. Transcribed and enacted by the Far Right Party, it aimed to “restrict classroom
 305 instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity” within Florida.⁵⁶ Reframed through
 306 sensationalist newspaper headlines as the ‘Don’t say Gay Law’, it proscribed talk about sexual
 307 orientation and identity between kindergarten and third grade.⁵⁷ The law was justified as
 308 ensuring the complete safety and security of children. Republican Christina Pushaw, a sponsor of
 309 this bill, described it as an “an Anti-Grooming Bill”, while Governor Ron DeSantis asserted that
 310 LGBTQ talk is “trying to sow doubt in kids about their gender identity” when unneeded.⁵⁸
 311 Framed through such rhetoric, the FPRIE act, then, is not a moral intrusion but a structural
 312 imperative necessary to protect children from things they do not yet understand.

⁵⁶Florida Legislature, *Parental Rights in Education*, H.B. 1557, 2022 Reg. Sess. (Fla. 2022), § 1001.42(8)(c)(3), <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557>

⁵⁷“*Ibid.*”

⁵⁸Jacob Ogles, “DeSantis Press Secretary Spews ‘Unbridled Hatred’ of LGBTQ+ Community,” *The Advocate*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.advocate.com/politics/2022/3/06/desantis-press-secretary-spews-unbridled-hatred-lgbtq-community>

However, though the right views this as a vehicle for protection, the left views it quite differently: as a vehicle for statecraft and immoral politicization. In fact, the very students of this act were prescribed to ‘protect’ staged walkouts against the act!⁵⁹ Along with them, multiple corporate organizations, ranging from the American Psychological Association to the Walt Disney Corporation, protested fervently against the ratification of the law.⁶⁰ The primary argument of opposition revolved around this idea: if the law was promulgated, it would interfere with the rights and livelihood of gay students, which would further promote and perpetuate discrimination against them. The ensuing paradox — where the law was viewed as both an instrument of safety and weaponization — implies a dual interpretation largely remnant of the Civil War’s child safety concerns. Only this time, such worry was articulated with a collection of words.

Continuance of Mutual Reinforcement: Bipartisan Commuters Act

Similarly, the sustenance of this framework appears in the Bipartisan Commuters Act. This act, designed to reduce gun violence, enacted certain measures: increasing security checks for gun buyers under 21, preventing past domestic abusers from gun ownership, and creating school mental health programs for victims of gun abuse.⁶¹ Though this was heavily embedded in a moral architecture harshly repudiating the Uvalde High School shooting, nonetheless, it was met with significant resistance from the conservative elements of the Republican party. For

⁵⁹Madison Czopek, "'Don't Say Gay' vs. 'Parental Rights': Fact-Checking Claims about Florida's HB 1557," *PolitiFact*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2022/mar/23/dont-say-gay-vs-parental-rights-fact-checking-clai/>

⁶⁰Elizabeth Blair, "After Protests, Disney CEO Speaks Out Against Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' Bill," *NPR*, March 8, 2022, updated March 10, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085130633/disney-response-florida-bill-dont-say-gay>

⁶¹*Bipartisan Safer Communities Act*, Pub. L. No. 117-159, 136 Stat. 1313 (2022), <https://www.congress.gov/117/plaws/publ159/PLAW-117publ159.pdf>.

instance, Senator Ted Cruz denounced the law, alleging it “sought to disarm law-abiding citizens” unnecessarily.⁶² Republican Gus Bilirakis added that it would “single out law-abiding citizens under the age of 21 for heightened security”.⁶³ When the act was originally created, the Democrats had an intention to utilize this law as a vanguard to protect younger students from becoming victims of gun violence; yet, the Republican Party framed the law as a blatant intrusion on the rights and freedoms of younger Americans. Once again, childhood had become the political battleground where larger political disagreements were contested.

Conclusion

The significance of the Civil War therefore extends beyond simple military or political history. It entirely redefined the notion of ‘childhood’; the word no longer denoted a stage of life but a political instrument which the American government could make use of. That transformation engendered widespread disagreement and varying interpretations of how best to protect children; ideas of education, morality, public health, civil rights, and national security took center stage in this pivotal debate. The paradox of how the Civil War both instrumentalized and sought to preserve children, then, has never been fully resolved. And yet, it offers a comprehensive foundation that extends past its time period, illuminating a body that continues to remain, nearly two centuries later, one of the most contested political institutions: childhood.

⁶²Ted Cruz, "Sen. Cruz Statement on Gun Legislation Vote," June 23, 2022, <https://www.cruz.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sen-cruz-statement-on-gun-legislation-vote>

⁶³Gus Bilirakis, "Bilirakis Votes Against Unconstitutional Gun Control Bill, Urges Colleagues to Make Communities Safer by Addressing Root Cause of Violence," June 24, 2022, <https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/bilirakis-votes-against-unconstitutional-gun-control-bill-urges-colleagues>

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Appendix A

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Six men and boys relax outside a tent; two play cards, a drum by the boy's side.

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369 *Drummer Boys Off Duty, Playing Cards in Camp, Winter of*, United States, 1862, photograph,
370 Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog,
371 <https://www.loc.gov/item/00651621> (accessed January 17, 2026).
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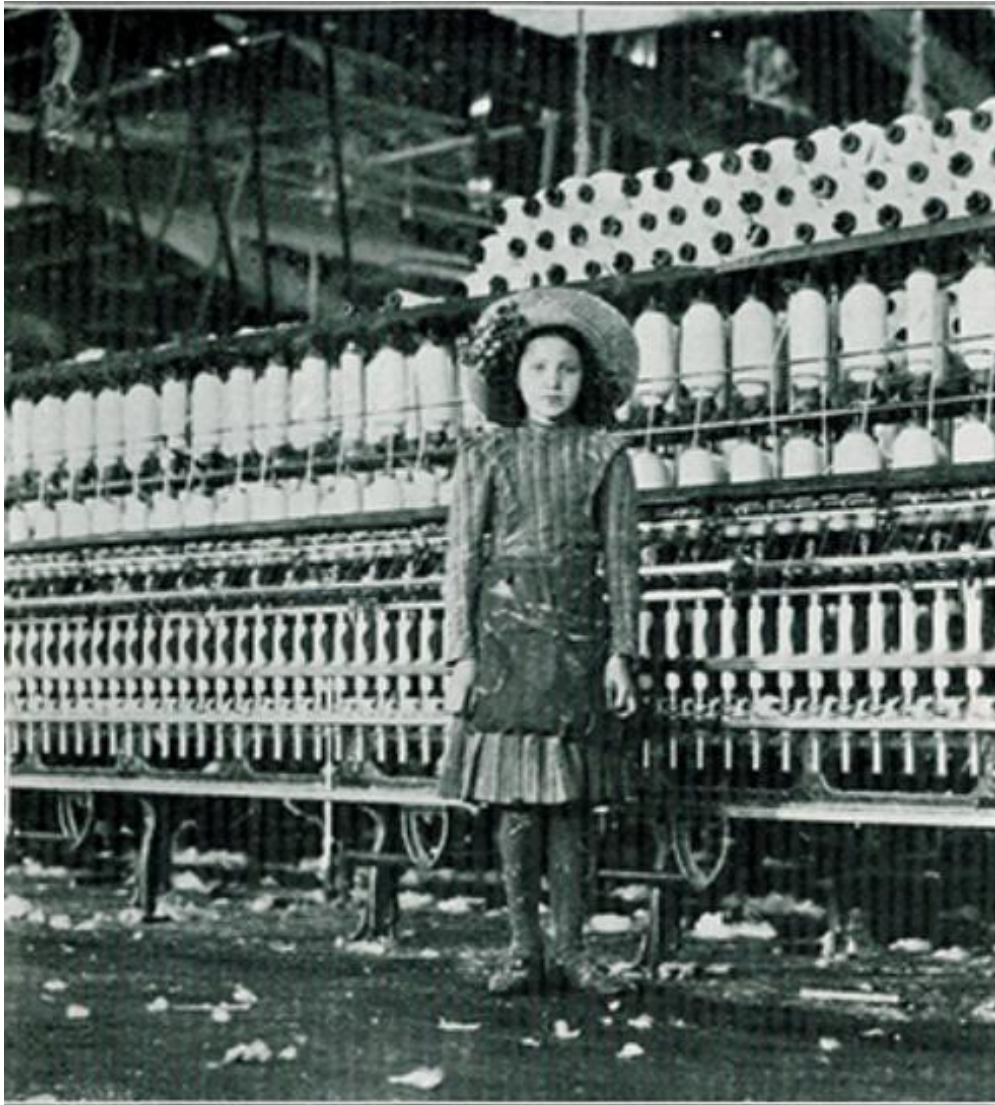
Appendix B



Young Johnny Clem stands proudly, rifle in hand.

James Fuller Queen, *Union Drummer Boy John Clem at Point Lookout, Tennessee*, lithograph, [between 1863 and 1880?], Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog, LC-DIG-ds-00297, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011645383/> (accessed January 18, 2026).

Appendix C



A young girl stands in front of the Mill where she works.

Lewis Hines, photograph of Roanoke Cotton Mill, in Alexander McKelway, *Child Labor In Virginia* (New York: National Child Labor Committee, 1911), 2.

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