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The American South and the Myth of the Lost Cause

The American Civil War was by far the bloodiest conflict in America's history if the determining factor is the number of American soldiers killed. Today most Americans recognize that the driving cause of southern secession centered around maintaining the practice of chattel slavery in those states. We know as much from the constitution the Confederacy produced, yet a prevalent belief held by many southerners in decades past, and even into the modern day, is that the war was not actually about slavery but rather was a reaction to government overreach and an issue of states' rights. This framing is the result of a propaganda campaign that took place across the American south in the late 19th and early to mid-20th century which is commonly known as the Myth of the Lost Cause. Activist groups, made up largely of women's organizations, namely the United Daughters of the Confederacy, erected monuments across the south, organized public events, and demanded that school textbooks reenforce the Lost Cause narrative of a defeated, yet virtuous and honorable Confederacy.

Views central to the myth include the glorification of Confederate leaders and soldiers as freedom fighters, the insistence that states rights were at the core of secession, and reinforcement of white supremacist notions such as the romanticization of slavery as a benign or even benevolent institution. The disinformation campaign was so successful that elements of its legacy are still deeply embedded in southern culture today and have even spread to states that were allied with the North. A poll conducted in 2015 showed that nearly half of Americans

believe the war was not about slavery.¹ The overwhelming consensus of historians on the subject is that slavery *was* the primary motivating factor in the war, leading us to contemplate whether the revisionist efforts to spread the Lost Cause ideology may be the most successful propaganda campaign in America's history.

The origins of white supremacy and the prevalence of slavery in the American south have their roots in the climate of the region and the fertility of its soil. That is not to say that either were uncommon in early America, as it has long been understood that slavery and notions of the superiority of white Europeans were present in the US since the first colonies were established in what is now the northeast. Over time, however, slavery became less profitable and therefore less common in northern states as their economy shifted away from the raising of cash crops and became more industrialized and based on manufacturing.² Conversely, the fertile soil and warm climate in the southern states made them ideal places to raise crops that were in high demand such as exports like cotton, sugar, and tobacco, and so the region remained largely agricultural. These commodities were incredibly laborious to produce and so planters in the region came to rely more heavily on the unpaid labor of slaves than did northern businesses. In time, slavery fell out of favor in the North and was outlawed around the same time European nations were banning the practice. Slavery was so obviously a cruel and flawed system that it was clearly seen as such as soon as the incentives to justify its practice fell by the wayside. As the world industrialized and adopted Enlightenment ideas focused on freedom and liberty, slavery could no longer be justified or tolerated.

¹ "McClatchy-Marist Poll: A Nation Still Divided: The Confederate Flag," Marist Poll, August 6, 2015, <https://maristpoll.marist.edu/polls/86-a-nation-still-divided-the-confederate-flag/>.

² David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 91.

In order to defend the continued enslavement of Africans and their place in society as servants and agricultural workers, southern culture emphasized the perceived inferiority of black people, propagating ideas of paternalism that viewed blacks as unsuited to freedom and requiring the instruction and control of whites in order to flourish. Slavery formed the basis of white supremacy attitudes which came to be deeply engrained in southern culture. It was simply understood that blacks had been relegated to the position of servants by the natural order; by God. It was believed that outside of this role, Africans would be incapable of contributing to society. Most southerners did not see black people as fully human, let alone as equals to the white man.

By the eve of the Civil War, the number of free states in the union threatened to outnumber slave states as westward expansion added more and more new states, upsetting the delicate balance of slave and free state representatives in the Senate. The election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency was seemingly the last straw for the slave states who feared he would seek to abolish slavery across the whole of the country. Believing the United States would not long continue to protect their interests, southern states chose to secure those interests by seceding from the United States and forming their own country, the Confederate States of America, a nation wherein they would enshrine the institution of slavery into law and ensure it would be protected.

We know that slavery was the primary factor that motivated the Confederate states' decision to secede because their leaders stated so plainly, including slavery as a fundamental right when they constructed their new constitution. Article IV, section 3 of the Confederate Constitution reads: “*...the institution of negro slavery as it now exists in the Confederate States, shall be recognized and protected by Congress, and by the territorial government: and the*

*inhabitants of the several Confederate States and Territories, shall have the right to take to such territory any slaves lawfully held by them in any of the states or territories of the Confederate states”.*³

President Lincoln did not believe that the southern states had any right to secede, choosing to go to war rather than allowing them to freely exit the union. The war would last a total of four years before the North secured its victory in 1865.

The period that immediately followed the war is known as Reconstruction. This era saw the implementation of United States policy aimed at reintegrating the former Confederate states into the country and ensuring they complied with U.S. law which required they free their slaves and grant them rights as citizens. While moderately successful in certain aspects, namely in the eradication of chattel slavery, the process of reconstruction did not produce the desired results. For the most part, the South remained as racist and subjugating in its laws and treatment of its black population as it had been previously, despite all the legal reforms that were implemented.

After losing the war, morale in the southern states was low. Most southerners saw the conflict as an aggressive and tyrannical overreach in power, perpetrated by northerners in order to control and dictate life and culture in the South. This resentment would come to form the basis of a revisionist ideology known today as the myth of the Lost Cause.

At the heart of Lost Cause ideology was the belief that the Confederate states had every right to secede from the US as the government had failed to protect their interests, and that the soldiers who had fought for that right ought to be respected and venerated as heroes.⁴ They had

³ Montgomery Convention, 1861.

⁴ Mildred Lewis Rutherford, *Truths of History ...: A Fair, Unbiased, Impartial, Unprejudiced and Conscientious Study of History. Object: To Secure a Peaceful Settlement of the Many Perplexing Questions Now Causing Contention between the North and the South* (Athens, GA, 1920).

put forth a gallant effort and fought bravely, they believed, failing to secure a victory simply because they'd been outnumbered and outspent. The cause of the war was noble, in their eyes, and it was not fought over slavery but rather the issue of states' rights. The purpose of this distortion was to maintain the honor and pride of the South and to pass those ideas on to the younger generations.

Arguably the most successful propagators of Lost Cause revisionism were the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), a women's organization established in 1894 for the purpose of honoring Confederate veterans. Created around the time the last of the Civil War veterans were dying, the purpose of the group was to pay homage to these soldiers and perhaps more importantly, to ensure the youth, who had not lived through the war or its immediate aftermath, continued to recognize them as heroes after they were all gone.⁵ The UDC raised funds and erected monuments and statues all over the South and held events honoring Confederates, emphasizing the bravery they had shown in their fight for freedom, self-determination, and the southern way of life.⁶ These events often featured speeches given by prominent white supremacists and Confederate sympathizers who drew huge crowds across the southern states.⁷

One of the most successful methods of perpetuating the Lost Cause narrative over generations was through the widespread adoption of school textbooks that were written to show the Confederacy in the most favorable light. These revisionist textbooks would become

⁵ Amy Lynn Heyse, "The Rhetoric of Memory-Making: Lessons from the UDC's Catechisms for Children," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008): 408–32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40232600>.

⁶ "Reared to Heroes of the Lost Cause," *Documenting the American South*, accessed May 21, 2023, https://docsouth.unc.edu/static/commland/content/newspaper/NewsAndObserver_18990705_1-2.pdf.

⁷ Julian Kughes, "Julian S Carr Remembered for His Activities as Civil War General," *The Daily Times-News*, accessed May 21, 2023, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-daily-times-news-julian-s-carr/1050077/>.

ubiquitous in schools across the whole of the former Confederacy. The UDC and other activists and organizations lobbied intensely for textbooks that glorified the South, and against those which attributed the war in any way to the practice of slavery or portrayed the Confederates or their cause in a negative light.⁸

Shockingly, the use of textbooks that define the war as having been fought over states' rights and espouse other Lost Cause myths are still being used in southern classrooms into the modern day. In 2015, a Texas school was found to be using a history textbook that referred to slaves as "immigrants" and "workers", downplaying the inhumanity of slavery as has been tradition in southern curriculums for over a hundred years.⁹ The insidiousness of this type of historical whitewashing is that it fails to accurately depict the institution of slavery as the horrendous practice that it was and it largely or entirely ignores the abuses and indignity suffered by the millions who were enslaved under the system. The portrayal of southern slavery as a benevolent and mutually beneficial system for both slave and master is one of the main tenants of the Lost Cause and perhaps the most ahistorical belief central to the ideology.

Many historians and scholars have argued that there is a strong religious element to the Lost Cause belief system. Religion had played a prominent role in southerners' views of slavery for hundreds of years, justified by the Bible's sanctioning of the practice in both the Old and New Testaments. Some have argued that the Lost Cause myth itself, and the emotionally driven adherence to the ideology despite overwhelming evidence which contradicts it, is itself adhered

⁸ Fred Arthur Bailey, "The Textbooks of the 'Lost Cause': Censorship and the Creation of Southern State Histories," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (1991): 507–33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40582363>.

⁹ Tom Dart, "Textbook Passage Referring to Slaves as 'workers' Prompts Outcry," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/oct/05/mcgraw-hill-textbook-slaves-workers-texas>.

to as a sort of quasi-religious belief.¹⁰ They argue that the tenants of the ideology are based on what southerners would prefer to believe rather than what can be proven historically. The fanciful notions of happy, well cared-for slaves and benevolent, paternalistic white masters are so far outside of the understood realities of the Antebellum period that they must be taken on faith, reinforced with dogma, and perpetually shielded from the myriad of facts which dispute them.¹¹

The impact of more than a century of Lost Cause propaganda can be seen not only in the former Confederate states, but all across the United States and even globally. Monuments to Confederate soldiers and generals still stand today, mostly in the south but remarkably, in the north as well - and even in the west; in states that allied with the Union and in states that weren't even part of the US when the war was fought. Thanks to President Woodrow Wilson, numerous United States military bases bear the names of famous Confederates; men who literally waged war against the US army, killing thousands of US soldiers.

In recent years activists have sought to remove statues and monuments intended to glorify the Confederacy. These removals have led to bitter, sometimes violent confrontations between citizens who favor the removals and those who oppose them.¹² Many who do not favor removing these monuments argue that they help us to remember our history and allege that attempts to remove them are tantamount to erasing our history. In reality, it is the monuments themselves that obscure the real history of the Confederacy as an attempt by southern states to separate from the US in order to secure permanently the 'right' to own human beings as property

¹⁰ Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920," *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 2 (1980): 219, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2208359>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ben Paviour, "Charlottesville Removes Robert E. Lee Statue That Sparked a Deadly Rally," NPR, July 10, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/10/1014926659/charlottesville-removes-robert-e-lee-statue-that-sparked-a-deadly-rally>.

and deny them rights and legal personhood. Those who believe the monuments should be torn down insist that the monuments exist solely to glorify the Confederacy and the principles it fought for and that they have no educational or historical value since they do not teach us anything about the soldiers and generals they commemorate.¹³ Instead, they more often serve to intimidate African Americans, reinforce white supremacist attitudes, and propagate the idea of the Lost Cause.

Today many elements of Lost Cause ideology can still be seen across the United States thanks to the dedication of the UDC which still exists as a charitable organization with tax-exempt status. While not nearly as influential as they once were, the effect of their work is evident in schools and homes across the former Confederacy. Protests and riots ensuing over the removal of Confederate statues and monuments indicate a dedication to the Lost Cause that is as unfortunate as it is prevalent. The myth may require generations of accurate education regarding the war and its cause in order to correct within our culture as a direct result of the decades-long propaganda campaign which may be the most successful such campaign in all of US history.

¹³ Colleen Walsh, "Historian Puts the Push to Remove Confederate Statues in Context," Harvard Gazette, June 19, 2020, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/06/historian-puts-the-push-to-remove-confederate-statues-in-context/>.

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