

CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: the Lost Cause

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Feature Essay

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Foster, Gaines *CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: The Lost Cause.*

Fascination with the Lost Cause seems to know no end—at least among historians, who keep publishing books on the topic. Since at least the 1940s, the topic has attracted many scholars, who, like Robert Penn Warren, seem to have concluded that “at the moment of death the Confederacy entered upon its immortality.” Studies of the Lost Cause have proliferated not only because historians seem to agree with Warren but because of trends within their profession. In the 1960s, many southern historians assumed that the study of myths and symbols offered the best way to understand the “Mind of the South,” and the Lost Cause fit naturally into such an approach. In the last few decades, among historians, myth has given way to memory. Indeed, the study of memory, how people interpret events and how that interpretation then shapes behavior in the present, has become a near obsession among historians and many other scholars in the humanities. The combination of persistent interest in an old topic and new terminology no doubt has spurred even greater scholarly attention to the Lost Cause—what they now call the South’s memory of the Civil War, how people understood it and how that understanding shaped southern society and identify.

Most of the scholarship on the Lost Cause has focused on the period from the end of the Civil War to roughly the beginning of World War I. During these years, when Confederate veterans’ reunions drew crowds to rival modern day Superbowls and most of the Confederate statues, which remain so iconic for at least some southerners and many journalists, went up, the Lost Cause unquestionably served an important cultural function within the South. Scholars have reached a fair amount of agreement about the role the Lost Cause played in those years, although the scholarship on the Lost Cause, like the memory itself, remains contested.

The white South, most agree, dedicated enormous effort to celebrating the leaders and common soldiers of the Confederacy, emphasizing that they had

preserved their and the South's honor. Led by their magnificent generals, particularly Lee and Jackson, the Confederates had fought heroically and well. If not for the overwhelming numbers and resources of the North, the Confederacy might well have won. The Lost Cause thereby served to ease white southerners' fears for lost honor even as it offered, with its emphasis on deference to beloved leaders, a model of a hierarchical society in the midst of rapid social change and the Populists' political revolt.

When the shapers of white southern memory turned to the cause of the conflict, they claimed Confederates had acted honorably, maintaining that secession was constitutional and a legitimate assertion of states' rights. They certainly denied that secession or the war had anything to do with slavery, though they quickly added that there was certainly nothing wrong with slavery. The refusal to confront the evil of slavery or acknowledge any role for it in the conflict contributed to making the cause more honorable. By claiming that the South did not fight to preserve slavery, white southerners also tried to deny the Confederacy's defeat any role in justifying racial change. Indeed, the Lost Cause served an opposite function: it helped preserve white supremacy. Most scholars who have studied the white South's memory of the Civil War or the Old South conclude that both portrayed a past society in which whites were in charge and blacks faithful and subservient. Here, as in so many ways, the vision of the past served as a model for the present and future.

African Americans, South and North, again most scholars agree, crafted a very different memory of the war, a contested or counter memory, to use terms popular among scholars who write about memory. The African American memory puts slavery at the center of the conflict and therefore contends that Union victory brought not only emancipation but a justification for an expansion of African American rights and the creation of a just and equal society. Like the Lost Cause, the African-American memory of the Civil War celebrated the role of soldiers, in this case black Union soldiers, who played a crucial role in Union victory, thereby demonstrating their manhood and their qualification for citizenship.

Contested memories also developed in the interpretations of the image of women in the Lost Cause. Many, particularly male, perpetrators of the Lost Cause celebrated white women's loyalty during the war and their devoted support of the defeated Confederates after Appomattox. The celebration of the Lost Cause thereby promoted a vision of society in which women remained

supportive of and subordinate to men. Many female proponents of the Lost Cause, particularly among southern women's rights advocates, but other women as well, offered a contrasting interpretation of the women's role in the war. They emphasized how, when the men went off to fight, women took over the management of their homes and plantations and aided the war effort in various ways. Their memory thus offered a very different image of the Confederate woman, one that encouraged women's activism and equality rather than perpetuated more traditional female roles.

If historians agree on the fundamental nature of the Lost Cause and on the existence of contested or counter memories of it as well, they still disagree on various points—that, after all, is what historians do. One point still in dispute concerns the relative importance of veterans and women in shaping Civil War memory. A few historians stress that women played a central role in the early stages of the creation of Confederate memory, when Ladies' Memorial Associations and the process of mourning shaped it, and later in the years after 1910 or so, when the veterans had passed from the scene and the Sons of Confederate Veterans were not yet strong. More historians, arguing that women are the keepers of memory, stress the crucial role women played in the creation and persistence of the Lost Cause, pointing to the work first of the memorial associations and later that of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Another issue in dispute is the extent of sectional reconciliation following the war. Most early studies of the Lost Cause and those of the white northern memory of the Civil War as well argue that over time, certainly by the Spanish American War, most veterans of Blue and Gray had tacitly agreed to downplay if not ignore the issues of the war, such as slavery and the legitimacy of secession, and instead focus on the heroism and sacrifice of combat along with the difficulties and joys of camp life. Southern and white northern veterans held these memories in common and could recognize each other's honorable behavior—by ignoring that which had once divided them. Such a memory thereby served as the basis for a reunion and reconciliation. More recently historians have challenged that view; they stress that the issues of the war remained very much alive, particularly among northern soldiers who still condemned southern secession and, unlike the white South, still saw slavery at the center of the war. These historians conclude that, though there may have been reunion, reconciliation was far from achieved.

The debate over reunion and reconciliation reflects in part a deeper issue, perhaps the most important question about the Lost Cause, one on which historians have reached no agreement. How important was the Lost Cause in shaping white southerners' behavior? And, how long did its influence persist? Some historians have portrayed the Lost Cause as critically important in healing the scars of defeat and shaping the structure and nature of the society of the New South. They admit that some white southerners never accepted defeat but conclude that most did and embraced not only reconciliation but a strong American nationalism as well. Other historians disagree. They portray the Lost Cause as a "civil religion" that perpetuated a special sense of southernness, including a sense of moral superiority that continued to shape the South's role in the nation. Still others adopt the term nationalism and speak of a persistent Confederate or southern nationalism that shaped southern behavior well into the twentieth century. They and other scholars note the role of Confederate symbols in the white South's battle against the civil rights movement and federal efforts at desegregation and posit the continuing influence and power of the Lost Cause in the 1960s.

For many scholars and journalists, the idea of a persistent and powerful role for the Lost Cause extends beyond the 1960s; they claim to find in the contemporary South a widespread and deep commitment to the Lost Cause or see various examples of the white South still fighting the Civil War. The continuing battle over the Confederate flag and other Confederate symbols would seem to support such views, although the flag fights may be even more immediately shaped by matters of race than the Lost Cause celebrations of the late nineteenth century.

The Sesquicentennial, thus far at least, seems to provide conflicting evidence about the continuing power of the Lost Cause and the centrality of the Civil War to American historical memory. Congress, despite lobbying by various groups, has not created a commission to oversee a national commemoration of the Civil War, as it did for the centennial. The National Park Service has pointedly sought to commemorate and not celebrate the war and has done a very good job of trying to promote a complex view of its history. Many museums and historical societies, as well, have sponsored programs or exhibits. Anniversary celebrations, such as those marking the firing on Fort Sumter or the battle of Gettysburg have occurred, but seem hardly as popular as one might expect. Save for Bill O'Reilly's *Killing Lincoln*—which gave birth to a "Killing" and not a Civil War franchise—books about the Civil War have not stormed to the top of

the best seller lists.

Two polls taken in conjunction with the Sesquicentennial yielded different results and do show some persistence of Civil War memory, but at least one of them also points toward a fundamental change. A Pew Research poll found that 56 percent of Americans still think the Civil War is relevant to American political life today. That same poll found that 48 percent of Americans, north and south, thought the war was about states' rights and only 38 percent said it was about slavery. A CNN poll, released about the same time, found that 54 percent of Americans thought slavery was the main reason for the war and 42 percent said it was not. (The difference in the two polls on the cause of the war may result from the differing ways each posed the question. That with the higher figure for slavery as the cause did not offer "states' rights" as an alternative; the other did.) Blacks remain much more likely to say that slavery was the main cause, while white southerners were less likely to say so than white northerners. Still, these polls found that almost 49 percent of southerners said the war was mainly about slavery and that only 52 percent of them said it was appropriate for politicians to praise Confederate leaders,—percentages that would have been very different, I'm willing to wager, if a poll had been taken in 1913.

Historians need to do more work on the Lost Cause, both on what happened to it between World War I and the end of the civil rights movement and on the influence of Civil War memory in the contemporary South. Unquestionably, some whites still seem driven to preserve the memory of the Confederacy and employ it in behalf of current politics; the Sons of Confederate Veterans, for instance, have a loyal, though small, and very vocal base. And some small minority of southerners, along with many outside the region, remains fascinated by the story of the war. Nevertheless, slightly older polls suggest little widespread interest in the war and less public knowledge about it. I suspect that careful analysis will show that the Lost Cause has a weaker hold on the contemporary southern imagination and less influence in shaping southern behavior than many people assume. I am sure that some studies will disagree and that additional books will not eliminate the contested nature of the study of Civil War memory, much less convince many in the public to change their view of the Lost Cause's impact on the South and the nation. That, historians of memory have taught us, is the nature of historical memory.

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