

COLUMN: The Centennial, the Sesquicentennial, and the Lost Cause in American Society

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Feature Essay

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Cook, Robert J. *COLUMN: The Centennial, the Sesquicentennial, and the Lost Cause in American Society.*

Four years ago – how time flies – I contributed to a *Civil War History* roundtable looking ahead to the Sesquicentennial commemoration in the context of its ill-fated Centennial predecessor in the 1960s.¹ I predicted a well-intentioned but low-key ‘event’ that would be far more inclusive than the Centennial but perhaps less successful in its capacity to excite the American public. I also suggested that the Sesquicentennial would only make the headlines if a major racial controversy occurred – one comparable to the exclusion of black delegate Madaline Williams from a hotel hosting an official Centennial gathering in Charleston, South Carolina, in March 1961. While I make no claims to be a fortune-teller (let’s face it, it’s hard enough trying to interpret the past) the Sesquicentennial passed off as quietly as I thought it would do. The period between April 2011 and April 2015 did witness several high-profile incidents reminding us that the civil rights revolution of the 1960s has not ended the oppression of African Americans. One thinks, for example, of the fatal shooting of black teenager Treyvon Martin by an armed vigilante in Sanford, Florida, in February 2012 and the police killing of Michael Brown in August 2014 that triggered weeks of unrest in the St Louis suburb of Ferguson. Instructive though these cases were, however, they had no direct link to the ongoing Sesquicentennial which therefore continued its largely untroubled progress until its conclusion this spring.

One reason why the Sesquicentennial passed off so quietly was the organizers’ stress on racial inclusivity. Although Congress opted not to set up a federal commission to oversee Sesquicentennial events, its landmark decision in 2000 to ‘encourage’ the National Park Service to incorporate slavery into its interpretive narratives helped lay the foundations for an interracial commemoration – one that took full account of African Americans’ remembrance of the Civil War as a watershed moment in US history that was intrinsically connected to the history of slavery, black military service on behalf

of the Union, and, of course, emancipation.²

In marked contrast to their Centennial peers, Sesquicentennial planners at every level took steps to involve African Americans as well as southern and non-southern whites in their commemorative schedules. While Park Service sites such as Gettysburg, Petersburg, and Harpers Ferry incorporated racial themes in their interpretive displays, southern state organizers and museum curators made sterling efforts to attract African American visitors to their events. The energetic and well-funded Virginia Sesquicentennial Commission, for example, launched a successful series of annual conferences on the Civil War that included one gathering devoted solely to the subject of race and slavery. Its North Carolina counterpart – a committee rather than a commission – planned what it described as ‘a multi-year program of state-sponsored activities to commemorate, in an appropriate and historically accurate manner, the richness, diversity, and significance of the state’s participation in and contributions to the American Civil War.’³ Events organized under this rubric included a conference entitled ‘Lay Down My Burden: Freedom and the Legacies of the Civil War’ that was held in Winston-Salem in October 2013.

Whereas military history had dominated Centennial planning, Sesquicentennial organizers looked to persuade Americans that they could not understand the Civil War simply as a series of battles. Their thrust was therefore educational as well as inclusive. Fifty years ago liberal historians including Bruce Catton, Allan Nevins, and Bell Wiley – each committed to the idea that high-quality history was essential to the maintenance of a healthy democracy in the United States – rescued the embarrassing Centennial from disaster by altering the commemoration’s official focus from commercialized pageantry to serious scholarship. The downside to this shift, however, was a decline in popular interest. Ordinary Americans, especially children, were genuinely excited by the Centennial in part because of the accompanying commercial paraphernalia – most of it focused on generals and battles.

The educational focus of the Sesquicentennial inhibited business involvement in the commemoration, thereby limiting the event’s salience in the public consciousness. One disenchanted manufacturer of toy soldiers was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying, ‘If it’s a celebration, it’s a celebration that the public is either not aware of or not interested in.’⁴ This negative description cannot stand as an adequate summation of the Sesquicentennial. The *New York Times*’ popular Disunion blog sparked many intelligent debates and there is no

question that visitors to many of the battlefields as well as to museums such as the American Civil War Museum in Richmond received a more balanced account of the war than their peers were given at these kind of sites in the early 1960s. The Sesquicentennial may have touched fewer people than the Centennial but those who were touched by it garnered a far more thoughtful and informed appraisal of the Civil War – one that in many respects justified the early hopes of historian David W. Blight for an adult commemoration that would give Americans the chance ‘to find unity in a shared history of conflict, in a genuine sense of tragedy, and in a conflicted memory stared squarely in the face.’⁵

Then came the brutal murder of nine African Americans attending an evening Bible class at the historic Emanuel AMA Church in Charleston on 17 June 2015. Unlike the deaths of Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown, this proved to be an outrage that did alert Americans to the ways in which their ghastly civil war is remembered. Perceptions were changed less by the scale of the massacre than by the fact that the perpetrator, Dylann Storm Roof, was a committed white supremacist who viewed the past and the present through the lens of neo-Confederacy. His allegiance to this contemporary manifestation of a nineteenth-century worldview was uncovered by the swift appearance on the internet of photographs of Roof posing with the Rebel battle flag and a Confederate automobile license plate. It was confirmed by the discovery, also on the web, of a rambling personal manifesto in which Roof announced that he hated the sight of the US flag.

The public response was dramatic. After an earnest commemoration of the Civil War that had sought to do equal justice to the narrative traditions of blacks, Confederates, and white Unionists, Roof’s vicious killing spree in the basement of ‘Mother Emanuel’ appeared to demonstrate the inherent danger of acknowledging Confederate memory as the moral equivalent of either its Unionist peer or the newly assertive black counter-memory of slavery and emancipation. Politicians, some of them southern Republicans who had cultivated links with neo-Confederate ‘heritage’ groups like the Sons of Confederate Veterans, lined up to demand an end to the official recognition of Confederate symbols. Governor Nikki Haley of South Carolina backed removal of the Southern Cross flying prominently on the state capitol grounds in Columbia – a call that triggered decisive legislative action in July.

Two weeks before the Rebel flag came down in South Carolina, President Barack Obama traveled to Charleston to deliver a eulogy for Mother Emanuel’s

murdered pastor, Rev. Clementa Pinckney. Obama claimed that the recent killings had enabled his compatriots to see that the Confederate battle flag was ‘a reminder of systemic oppression and racial subjugation.’ During the course of his passionate oration in which he sang lines from the antislavery hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ and urged attention to the bigger question of racial injustice, the president threw the weight of his office behind removal of the flag from the grounds of the South Carolina capitol. Hauling it down, he said, ‘would not be an act of political correctness; it would not be an insult to the valor of Confederate soldiers. It would simply be an acknowledgment that the cause for which they fought – the cause of slavery – was wrong – the imposition of Jim Crow after the Civil War, the resistance to civil rights for all people was wrong.’⁶

This was a striking statement, coming as it did from a president who had previously tried to foster a non-partisan approach to Civil War commemoration by sending floral tributes to both the Confederate memorial in Arlington Cemetery and the African American Civil War Museum in Washington, DC. It begged a key question: Was the Charleston massacre the final nail in the coffin of the Lost Cause, at least in terms of the official recognition it received at both the national and the state level in the United States? Sesquicentennial organizers had tried to incorporate black perspectives into their plans without alienating whites who revered the courage and conviction of defeated Confederates. The hostile reaction to Rebel symbols that followed hard upon the dreadful events in Charleston suggested that this consensual approach to the Civil War was no longer acceptable to a majority of Americans.

Notwithstanding the country’s growing intolerance of the Lost Cause in the wake of a particularly heinous hate crime, it seems unlikely that all Confederate symbols will go the way of Columbia’s battle flag. Resistance to their disappearance remains strong in several states of the Deep South including Mississippi, and demand actually increased when several major businesses including Walmart and Amazon announced they would cease trading in Confederate-themed merchandise. But after the Charleston killings the Lost Cause is now definitively lost – devoid of respect in most public and many private circles across the United States.

From the perspective of anti-racism there is much to rejoice about here. However, historians must be attentive to the pitfalls too. If white southerners outside the confines of neo-Confederacy lose their enthusiasm for Robert E. Lee

and Stonewall Jackson, how can educators hope to interest them in the history of the Civil War? Will consigning the Lost Cause to the dustbin of American history really help to eradicate individual and institutional racism and improve the desperate condition of many black people in the United States? Does the removal of a Confederate place name or statue necessarily advance the cause of historical understanding? My own view is that modern historians should work to ensure that Americans, white and non-white, do not lose sight of the Lost Cause and its Confederate symbols. When taught effectively in the context of how the Civil War has been commemorated in the United States since 1865, these things can deepen our understanding of their relationship to evolving power relations in the United States.

Like it or not, efforts to impose and maintain white supremacy constitute a leitmotif of American history. One very good way to explain the development and impact of white supremacy is to demonstrate how a statue of Confederate president Jefferson Davis ended up in Congress. Another is to show why so many of the country's schools and streets were named after Robert E. Lee, perhaps the most dangerous insurgent ever to confront the government and people of the United States. The Sesquicentennial was an eminently worthy venture. It began the important task of disseminating accurate information about the Civil War in the light of the burgeoning scholarship on both that conflict and its checkered career in American memory. As historians we should seek to carry that work through to fruition.

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¹'Historian's Forum: The American Civil War's Centennial vs. the Sesquicentennial,' *Civil War History* 57 (December 2011): 380–402.

²Quoted in Jennifer M. Murray, *On a Great Battlefield: The Making, Management, and Memory of Gettysburg National Military Park, 1933–2013* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014), p.171.

³<https://www.facebook.com/pages/North-Carolina-Civil-War-Sesquicentennial-Committee/105784479554?sk=info&tab=overview> (accessed 15 April 2015).

⁴*Wall Street Journal*, 10 April 2014.

⁵David W. Blight, 'The Civil War Sesquicentennial,' *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 June 2009.

⁶Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney, 26 June 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney> (accessed 23 July 2015).