

Lost Cause Memory in America: Then and Now

Daniel R. Braswell II

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As the Civil War came to an end, America found itself in a strange state, one it had never experienced. For the last four years, the country had been torn in two, fighting a deadly, historically significant war. Looking to move past the war and the destruction it brought, the defeated former Confederate States of America sought to re-assimilate themselves into the country. The solution decided upon became known as Lost Cause memory. According to historian David Blight, Lost Cause memory is easily defined as “a public memory, a cult of the fallen soldier, a righteous political cause defeated only by a superior industrial might, a heritage community awaiting its exodus, and a people forming a collective identity as victims and survivors.”<sup>1</sup> Put simply, it was the South making up excuses for their transgressions, while simultaneously corrupting the true cause and motives of the war. Immediately after the Civil War, Lost Cause memory emerged through literature, a status promotion of Confederate leaders, a romanization of antebellum southern life and slavery, and Confederate excuses for motive and defeat. Although the Civil War ended 154 years ago, the effects of the immediate aftermath can still be felt in today’s world. Today, Lost Cause memory manifests itself still through use of Confederate flags, the erection and defense of Confederate monuments, and modern-day sympathizer organizations, such the Sons of Confederate Veterans, also known as SCV.

After the Civil War had ended, the south was eager to rejoin the union out of pure desperation. Due to the freedom of the slaves, there was a giant deficit of labor available. Millions of bodies that once worked for free, were no longer available. Additionally, a majority of the land that they had once worked on was decimated by a bloody, violent four-year war.

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<sup>1</sup> Burkhardt, Patrick. “The Lost Cause Ideology and Civil War Memory at the Semicentennial: A Look at the Confederate Monument in St. Louis.” *Confluence* (2150-2633), Spring/Summer2011 2011, 16.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=98523080&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Therefore, the South, along with the North, sought reunification as soon as possible. The quickest way to reunification was to develop excuses for the war, its results, and its causes. According to historian David Blight during an interview with Richard Ernsberger, the first excuse for Confederate defeat came from General Robert E. Lee himself, as the confederacy surrendered at Appomattox Court House. Blight says, “General Robert E. Lee told his starving troops that they had only been beaten by ‘superior numbers and resources’. The concept took hold among Confederate officers who wrote the Southern Historical Society Papers. Published for more than a decade, these documents chronicled a fight for home, for sovereignty, for honor and valor, and not, the authors claimed, for slavery.”<sup>2</sup> In this quote, Blight perfectly defines the origin and the true purpose of the Lost Cause. This spun history and propaganda was perpetrated throughout the south, and the nation as a whole. In American memory, instead of a war in which states seceded from the Union over slavery, it became a war of brother versus brother, American versus American.

Part of the Lost Cause in the time period after the end of the war was the legend of General Robert E. Lee. After the war, and even more so after his death in 1870, Lee became not only a symbol of the South, but an American icon. “Former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass complained bitterly that he could scarcely find a northern newspaper ‘that is not filled with nauseating flatteries of the late Robert E. Lee,’ whose military accomplishments in the name of a ‘bad cause’ seemed to somehow entitle him ‘to the highest place in heaven’”.<sup>3</sup> By elevating Lee to such a status while simultaneously ignoring the transgressions of the Confederacy, both the North and South fed into lost cause memory.

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<sup>2</sup> Ernsberger JR., Richard. “‘Cause They Lost.” *American History* 53, no. 2 (June 2018): 14.  
[http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=128764781&site=eds-live&scope=site.](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=128764781&site=eds-live&scope=site)

<sup>3</sup> COBB, JAMES C. 2011. “How Did Robert E. Lee Become an American Icon?” *Humanities* 32 (4): 28.  
[http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=62984560&site=eds-live&scope=site.](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=62984560&site=eds-live&scope=site)



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An additional element of Lost Cause memory worth mentioning is the romanization of antebellum Southern pre-Civil War life and the institution of slavery. A mainstream example of this is the 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, which was later turned into a motion picture in 1939. In *Gone with the Wind*, Mitchell, a Southerner from Atlanta, Georgia, depicted Northerners, Southerners, and enslaved African-Americans in very particular ways, doctoring each to fit a pro-Southern view. Peter Feuerherd, journalism professor at St. John's University in New York, describes the depictions in her novel: "The Yankee soldiers in the novel are inevitably mean and corrupt. The freed slaves, taken out of their shackles, lack direction and

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<sup>4</sup> Chris C, *Tomb of Gen. Robert E. Lee, Lee Chapel, Washington and Lee Univ, Lexington, VA*. 2013. 640 x 240. Flickr.com, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eastcoaster/9793537185/>.

are prone to base instincts. The novel reads more like propaganda at times than it does literature. The slaves seem unbothered by their workloads; in one scene field hands return from a day's labor singing and laughing."<sup>5</sup> What Feuerherd is insinuating in this passage is that Mitchell deliberately skewered the descriptions of groups, in this case, enslaved African-Americans and Union soldiers. Union soldiers and enslaved African-Americans being falsified in literature and film makes sense, given thought. A southerner born at the turn of the century (Mitchell was born in 1900) is going to be fed certain falsehoods about the war, slavery, and southern life.

Another similar example would be D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*. "Griffith's notorious film portrays the overthrow of debasing black rule in the Reconstructionist South through the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The film's black characters (many of them white actors in blackface) are either servile or savages; Klan members are represented as both heroic and romantic."<sup>6</sup> The film was so widely accepted upon its release that President Woodrow Wilson held a showing in the White House. In a similar fashion to *Gone with the Wind*, African-Americans and northerners are demoralized, whereas southerners and the Ku Klux Klan members are looked as the heroes of the story. Therefore, these lies surfaced once again in literature, and then in film. Southerners felt as if the Union army was almost like an invading army on their land, so villainizing Union forces makes sense for Southerners to do. Also, de-villainizing slavery makes sense as well. With the Civil War calling into question the morality of the act of owning and inhumanely treating another human being because of the color of their skin, and the south seeking to defend themselves, depicting slaves as happy, well-treated, and enjoying their work was to combat the questions of morality. These attempts to make the South

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<sup>5</sup> Feuerherd, Peter. "The Dangers of *Gone with the Wind*'s Romantic Vision of the Old South." Daily.jstor.org. November 8, 2017. <https://daily.jstor.org/the-dangers-of-gone-with-the-winds-romantic-vision-of-the-old-south/>.

<sup>6</sup> Freund, Charles Paul. "Dixiecrats Triumphant." *Reason* 34, no. 10 (March 2003): 16. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=9119943&site=ehost-live>.

look better in light of controversy and to deter blame from the South lead to further implications of Lost Cause memory.

Another element of lost cause memory is what Robert Penn Warren calls the “Great Alibi”.<sup>7</sup> “The Great Alibi liberated the South from blame and rendered the region ‘the innocent victim of a cosmic conspiracy,’ it allowed ‘any common lyncher’ to be raised to the status of venerable ‘defender of Southern tradition.’”<sup>8</sup> The Great Alibi is at the core of Lost Cause memory, and was very important. It served as a tactic that attempted to exonerate the South from all of their past actions; seceding from the union, fighting over ownership of other human beings, and also excused the state of race relations that would continue in the South for another century, and some may even argue continues still today, except more closeted than in the past because of the higher lack of tolerance in the country today for racism and bigotry.

Fast forward 150 years. The arguments made immediately after the Civil War are still made today. Today they are in reference to different things, such as the use of Confederate flags, the removal of Confederate statues and memorials, and the continued existence of veteran’s organizations, such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans. The Confederate flag is an example of the lost cause still being present in today’s world. Originally, the Confederate flag was used as a battle flag for the Confederate armies. It even initially disappeared after the Civil War. Today, it continues to be flown, claimed to be a symbol of Southern pride. So, when and why did it reappear? “It wasn’t until 1948 that the Confederate flag re-emerged as a potent political symbol. The reason was the Dixiecrat revolt – when Strom Thurmond led a walkout of white Southerners from the Democratic National Convention to protest President Harry S. Truman’s push for civil rights. The Dixiecrats began to use the Confederate flag, which sparked further interest in it.

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<sup>7</sup> Grow, Matthew J. “The Shadow of the Civil War: A Historiography of Civil War Memory.” *American Nineteenth Century History* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 77–103. doi:10.1080/14664650312331294324.

<sup>8</sup> Grow, 81

Consequently, the flag became strongly linked to white supremacy and opposition to civil rights for African Americans.”<sup>9</sup> The flag reappeared in 1948, 83 years after the Civil War ended. This revelation makes the “heritage not hate” narrative around the use of the confederate flag irrelevant and incoherent. In addition to the flag being the flag of a treasonous state Confederacy that almost tore apart the Union, and the inhumane reason they did so, the heritage of the flag itself is based in hate.

Confederate statues, monuments, and memorials are another manifestation of Lost Cause memory in today’s world. The debate over Confederate monuments re-emerged on the national stage after white supremacists protested the removal of a Robert E. Lee memorial in Charlottesville, Virginia. The protest ended in violence, and raised some questions about these monuments: Why are they still standing today? Why do they exist at all? The erection of these monuments is based in Lost Cause memory. As explained by Lucas Lixinski, Associate Professor of Law at The University of New South Wales, the end of the Civil War and abolition of slavery did not mean the end of racism in the United States. “The end of formalized slavery did not automatically mean the full gamut of rights for African-Americans, however. Neither did the end of the Civil War mean the termination of attitudes regarding racial inferiority (which endure even after formal legal rights based on anti-discrimination law, and in many ways hinder the effectiveness of these laws.).”<sup>10</sup> This lack of peace with racial relations in America lead to the building of monuments to deter civil rights, which is evident in a number of ways. One, their location. Lixinski claims that, “There are at least 1,500 monuments to the Confederacy across the

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<sup>9</sup> Strother, Logan, Thomas Ogorzalek, and Spencer Piston. "The Confederate Flag Largely Disappeared after the Civil War. The Fight against Civil Rights Brought It Back." *The Washington Post*. June 12, 2017. Accessed April 24, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/12/confederate-symbols-largely-disappeared-after-the-civil-war-the-fight-against-civil-rights-brought-them-back/?utm\\_term=.80e22ca99762](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/12/confederate-symbols-largely-disappeared-after-the-civil-war-the-fight-against-civil-rights-brought-them-back/?utm_term=.80e22ca99762).

<sup>10</sup> Lixinski, Lucas. “Confederate Monuments and International Law.” *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 549–608. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=134558798&site=ehost-live>.

United States, spread across 31 states. These are mostly in southern states, with Virginia having the largest number, followed by Texas.”<sup>11</sup> The location of these statutes is not a coincidence, seeing as Southern states were formerly part of the Confederacy. Second, the time they were erected. Most were not erected immediately after the Civil War, but generations later, during pushes for Civil Rights, and were promoted by hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and coinciding with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, both without consulting African-Americans first. “In other words, it has been argued that these monuments have often been used to assert white supremacy, while justifying Jim Crow in the South.”<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>11</sup> Lixinski, 566

<sup>12</sup> Lixinski, 556

<sup>13</sup> Mark W, *Robert E Lee Statue, Charlottesville*. 2011. 640 x 424. Flickr.com, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dmw8f/6207998629>

Finally, sympathizer organizations still exist in modern society, with The Sons of Confederate Veterans being a prime example. The Sons of Confederate Veterans is an organization for direct descendants of Confederate veterans. On the online homepage of the SCV, it reads, “The citizen-soldiers who fought for the Confederacy personified the best qualities of America. The preservation of liberty and freedom was the motivating factor in the South’s decision to fight the Second American Revolution.”<sup>14</sup> This statement alone is filled with Lost Cause sentiment. One telling sign is the renaming of the Civil War. Here, it is referred to as the “Second American Revolution,” in an attempt to place it on the same level as the American Revolution, during which the 13 Colonies fought for their independence against England and the tyrannical King George. The two are not comparable, and this attempt to do so proves possibly in the best possible way, that Lost Cause memory is alive and well today. 150 years after the war’s end, excuses are still being made for the Confederacy, their motives, and their defeat.

In conclusion, Lost Cause memory continues to be alive today, after its conception immediately following the Civil War. Through putting leaders such as Robert E. Lee on a pedestal, the Great Alibi, films such as *Gone with the Wind* and literature such as the Southern Historical Society papers, Lost Cause memory rose from the ashes of the Confederacy, mostly due to the encouragement of Southerners and Confederate veterans. Today, it still lives through use of the Confederate flag, the debate over Confederate monuments, and the existence of modern-day sympathizer organizations such as the SCV. Robert E. Lee unintentionally birthed this train of doctored memory during the Confederate surrender at Appomattox Court House, and sympathizers have continued to run with it ever since.

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<sup>14</sup> Sons of Confederate Veterans. "What Is the SCV?" Sons of Confederate Veterans. <http://www.scv.org/new/what-is-the-scv/>.

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