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Civil War Memory

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It may seem strange to talk about the memory of a war that ended almost 160 years ago. None of the people for whom the war was a lived experience still live. Despite the passage of time and generations, Civil War "Memory" is still shaping modern life, including our cultural and political wars. It has caused much strife among an already divided nation today. In some of the most tragic moments in twenty-first-century life, the 2015 shooting of nine members of a Black church in Charleston by Dylan Roof and the 2017 death of a young woman, Heather Heyer, in Charlottesville, we see the reverberations of the Civil War long after the guns fell silent. [1]

Understanding the enduring nature of Civil War Memory requires an examination of the whole idea of memory and Memory. Most of us recognize memory as small "m" memory. What individuals recall of our lived experience. As individuals, we do not remember everything that happened to us. We often forget the mundane, including what we had for lunch a week ago or what we choose not to remember—our failures. Our memories are sometimes indelible; what cannot be forgotten—trauma. These unforgettable memories produce the post-traumatic stress that affected soldiers of all American wars, including both sides in the Civil War. In contrast, capital "M" memory includes Historical Memory, the Memory of those with no individual memory. Today, when we speak of the Civil War, it represents a Historical Memory. [2]

A critical battleground between individual and Historical Memory exists—Collective Memory, which is how individuals with a lived experience of events decide as groups to remember. Historical Memory often reflects the most resonant Collective Memory once the generation who created it passed into Memory. In the case of the Civil War, groups formed by individuals with shared wartime experiences consciously articulated these distinct memories to shape how people remembered this cataclysm. The better-known Civil War Memory, the Lost Cause--Confederate

[1] Jennifer Berry Hawes, *Grace Will Lead Us Home: The Charleston Church Massacre and the Hard, Inspiring Journey to Forgiveness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019); Minyvonne Burke and Marianna Sotomayor, "James Alex Fields Found Guilty of Killing Heather Heyer During Violent Charlottesville White Nationalist Rally," *NBC News* (Online), December 7, 2018, accessed March 12, 2024, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/crime-courts/james-alex-fields-found-guilty-killing-heather-heyer-during-violent-n945186, accessed August 1, 2025. Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, "A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylan Roof," in *GQ*, August 21, 2017, https://www.gq.com/story/dylann-roof-making-of-an-american-terrorist, accessed August 1, 2025.

[2] Memory is an interdisciplinary subfield; sociologist pioneered this field, and historians only later realized its relevance to their field. See Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," in *Representations* 26, (Spring 1989), 7-24.

Civil War Memory, was more successful than the victors' lesser-known Memory—the Union Cause. Veteran's groups fought this postwar Memory battle for their respective causes: the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)—the Union Army's largest veterans' group—articulated and advocated the Union Cause. Confederates Veterans formed their own Veterans group, the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) Ironically, when one examines Confederate Civil War Memory, women groups shaped Collective Memory, their Lost Cause, more effectively than men in the UCV who served in this cataclysm. Initially, the immediate postwar activities of Confederate women in the Ladies Memorial Association (LMA) and its successor, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), promoted the Lost Cause that won the critical Memory battle.[3]

Their victory rested on their success in Historical Memory when most white Americans who had no lived memory of the war accepted the Lost Cause as history rather than Memory. As a result, Confederate Memory dominated the Civil War's Historical Memory in the twentieth century, a legacy we still wrestle with in the twenty-first. While it's a well-known saying that winners write the war's history, in this case the losers won the history battle. The Lost Cause served the interest of white Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line who supported the racialized domestic and world order that emerged at the nineteenth century's end. At home, Americans embraced Jim Crow segregation and the concept of separate but equal as codified by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision and failed to enforce the Fourteenth Amendment. While Plessy represented formal acquiescence to white southerners' answer to what they called "the Race Problem." Overseas, this same racism manifested itself when white Americans embraced the British Imperial ideal of a "white man's burden," as part of it triumph in the Spanish-American and Philippine-American War.[4] As decades passed, American imperialist ventures seemingly ran aground in Vietnam while changing racial attitudes, and the Civil Rights movement challenged the Lost Cause's ascendancy at home. As a result, the Collective Memory of Federal supporters, including African Americans, of a dual US Cause of Union and Emancipation reemerged to challenge the triumphant Lost Cause as part of the long struggle for Black civil rights in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

While Collective and Historical Memory matters, in the beginning, there is individual memory. In the case of the Civil War, Americans fought each other and created distinct collective memories based on these disparate individual memories. The two primary memories of the war, the Lost Cause--Confederate Civil War Memory and the Union Cause--US Memory, began as individual memories that coalesced around distinct collective memories of the war. Imagine that a

[3] For an introduction to Collective Memory, see Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, eds., *The Collective Memory Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For the progenitor of this notion, see Maurice Halbwachs, ed. And Lewis Coser, trans., *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[4] For an explanation of Collective and Historical Memory as it applies to the Civil War generation and their successors, see Barbara A. Gannon, *Americans Remember their Civil War* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), xiv-xv.

Confederate soldier, his family at home, and someone who did not serve might have individually remembered the war differently, though they may have shared some similar memories. One of these individuals tepidly supported the Confederate cause; for example, the government conscripted a soldier into the Army. His wife might have resented having lost his help on their farm. An enslaver's teenage son, too young to have participated, may have not served. His support of the Confederacy might have been stronger than the others because protecting slavery mattered to his family, and he had no memory of wartime trauma to dampen his enthusiasm for martial glory.

Collective Memory develops as an agreement among those with similar memories and needs. It is neither a signed agreement nor officially codified. Nevertheless, it is powerful because it is enshrined in the discourse of those who have lived experience of an event or era. People who share a Collective Memory cannot commune with one another without invoking its touchstones; for example, no Confederate supporter could suggest that the war was a mistake; no Union supporter would have ever posited that the Union was not worth the blood sacrifice required for its preservation.

In the case of the Civil War, or any war, there are two sides; they usually do not share the same memory. Winners and losers may have different needs; one society destroyed by its defeat must rebuild its corporeal and spiritual existence. Beyond that, there are often distinct groups that had different experiences, including battle-hardened soldiers, their unenthusiastic conscripted/drafted comrades, and their deprived families at home. The reluctant Confederate soldier may have been eager to join a veteran's group, such as the United Confederate Veterans, and celebrate the nobility of the Confederate Cause despite his unwilling military service. His wife may have become involved in memorializing the local Confederate dead and joined the LMA, the first women's group that articulated the Lost Cause, because she shared their desire to bring home their community's fallen soldiers. Former enslavers and those who never owned slaves embraced the Lost Cause as a way of ensuring the postwar racial order in the aftermath of emancipation. A young slaveowner may not have been old enough to fight during the war, but he most certainly could terrorize his family's former slaves in its aftermath. Much of the previous explanation hinges on the Lost Cause, as opposed to the Union Cause, because Confederate Collective Memory resonated with future generations and was, for many decades, the Historical Memory of the Civil War. Even today, many Americans wave the Confederate flag and, in their Memory, pledge allegiance to the failed slave Republic.

Since Confederate Civil War Memory remains influential, we must review what Confederates collectively agreed to remember. First, the war had nothing to do with slavery; instead, Confederate supporters asserted that threats to some theoretical state rights justified secession. That notion may seem to have been a challenging bit of amnesia, given that secession documents that justified disunion repeatedly invoked the federal government's threat to slavery. Despite their amnesia about more than four million enslaved people, Confederate supporters argued that their way of life, including enslaved labor, made them a nobler society as opposed to a free labor society, which featured a mercenary elite who made money with free labor. While some may see free labor as desirable, Lost Cause advocates did not. In their mind, a forced labor

regime that sold children and families was more benevolent than a free labor regime that allowed you to keep your family intact. These noble enslavers and their brave yeoman comrades in the Confederate Army won nearly all battles, and any battle with Lee or Jackson in command, because of the superiority of their society and its defenders. When explaining why their military prowess did not translate into military victory, Confederates asserted that the Union's victory rested on the federal government's material superiority bolstered by the use of mercenary immigrants, and other undesirables. None of these undesirables include African American soldiers who were quickly erased from the wartime Memory because their sacrifice suggested that not all African Americans supported their benevolent institution as loyal slaves.[5]

How did they create this cause? First, survivors, including women who lived through the war, buried the wartime dead and justified their sacrifice. The former Confederate states needed to recover the bodies of the men scattered across the Southern states and Northern states, including Gettysburg. Initially, the LMA collected and commemorated the Confederate dead; later, their successors in the UDC continued their work; both groups used their efforts to venerate the dead to honor their cause. The UDC was particularly effective because these elite women used their social status to build monuments to men like Robert E. Lee and edit Southern school textbooks to reinforce the Lost Cause narrative. The destruction of these monuments has been central to the recent, sometimes violent, struggle over Civil War Memory. [6]

Second, soldiers who survived the war needed to justify their defeat. Much of this effort involved former Confederate generals using the written word to win a war in Memory they had lost in reality. Men like Jubal Early continued supporting the Confederate cause after its surrender. Early and others wrote memoirs glorifying Confederate leadership and Confederate followership. In Early's writing, Lee was the greatest general of his age, commanding the greatest army of this age—the Army of Northern Virginia. The Southern Historical Society, dedicated to preserving the Confederacy's legacy through its archives, represented the Lost Causes' most influential institution. Early's West Point classmate, Braxton Bragg, one of the less effective Confederate generals, helped found this organization. [7]

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[5] For the essential works on Lost Cause and memory, see Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Rollin G. Osterweis, *The Myth of the Lost Cause, 1865-1900* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1973); Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause and the Emergence of the New South, 1865–1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Thomas Lawrence Connelly and Barbara L. Bellows, *God and General Longstreet: The Lost Cause and the Southern Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); William C. Davis, *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

[6] Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Hillary N. Green and Andrew L Slap, eds. *The Civil War and the Summer of 2020* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2024).

[7] Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998).

Because of the efforts of men such as Bragg and Early, scholars neglected the Collective Memory of those who supported the Union during the war--the Union Cause. Union soldiers and their supporters knew what they had achieved with their victory. In their mind, a dual victory preserved the Union and freed the enslaved. While freeing the enslaved mattered, much of the emphasis of their Memory focused on their role in putting down an insurrection against the legal government of the United States—treason. Ironically, these men understand that initially, they did not go to war to end slavery. They remembered that they supported emancipation as a military measure. Accepting emancipation did not mean they embraced equality; however, they understood that they freed the slaves so that the formerly enslaved might experience the natural rights described by Lincoln, such as the right to eat the bread you produced with your own labor. Despite this seemingly limited definition of freedom, these men remembered the end of slavery as central to the Union Cause and their Collective Memory.[8]

As one might imagine, the Civil War generations, North and South, participated in a highly contested dispute over Civil War Memory. Loyal Americans' commitment to their Union Cause equaled Confederate devotion to their Lost Cause. While women's groups mattered in the South, the largest Union veteran's organization, the GAR, represented the most effective Union Cause advocacy group. These men, assisted by their affiliated women's groups, battled the Lost Cause over several elements in their Memory. First, they rejected the notion that secession was justified. Union Veterans and their supporters reminded other Americans who had not lived through the war that defending slavery prompted this insurrection. Finally, they continually reminded those who did not remember the war that victory resulted from the determination of Union soldiers who, regardless of their background, suffered and sacrificed in the service of the United States.[9]

African American veterans and other members of the Black community represent the most determined advocates of the Union Cause. Some Black loyalists had been enslaved before the war, and others had been free. Some of these men belonged to the GAR. African American women belonged to the auxiliaries of this group, the Women's Relief Corps (WRC), and the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic (LGAR). All these men and women used their involvement in larger interracial organizations to advocate for the Union Cause with a particular emphasis on emancipation, including the notion that African Americans were both loyal to the Union and that Black soldiers delivered their people from slavery. While sometimes scholars viewed Black Civil War Memory as separate and distinct from white Civil War Memory, the Civil War generation, white and black, shared a Collective Memory that included a dual cause of preservation of the Union and emancipation.[10]

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[8] Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 145-177.

[9] Ibid., 117-44.

[10] Ibid., 35-84.

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Rejecting the Memory of an interracial coalition explains why the Lost Cause emerged victorious. An examination of Civil War Memory in the first half of the twentieth century reveals the virtual erasure of the Union Cause, black and white, from American Historical Memory. Much of this victory rested on a type of white American unity that would have shocked the Civil War generation. It is not surprising that the next generation of white Southerners, mostly Democrats, used the Lost Cause triumph in Historical Memory to support their efforts to ensure white supremacy, segregation, and disenfranchisement in former slave states. Similarly, the Civil War generation, suspicious of mid-nineteenth-century Northern Democrats, might have felt their mistrust vindicated by their support for Southern counterparts in the first half of the twentieth century. On the one hand, you had a solid Democratic South committed to white supremacy. On the other hand, you had Democrats outside the South embracing American apartheid for their political ends as part of a strange alliance many would not recognize today because of the shift of the party allegiances—it's now the solid Republican South.

Exacerbating this intersectional political allegiance, many non-Democrats embraced Lost Cause Historical memory. Regardless of their partisan affiliation, the Lost Cause seemed more useful as America rose to world power and engaged in the many wars of the 20th century. American military intervention prompted Americans of all sections to accept the racial equilibrium established in the postwar era. For decades, Americans somehow balanced the rhetoric of fighting for freedom and democracy overseas while ensuring none in much of the Southern United States. It was only when the white racist consensus began to crack in the 1950s, the decade after a type of virulent racism led to the slaughters of Jews and millions of others when our Communist enemies used our bigotry against us, that the national allegiance to the Lost Cause began to crack.[11]

One reason this bipartisan and unholy alliance survived until the atomic age, movies portrayed racism as central to the masculinity of white men and the femininity of white women. The most egregious case of movie racism, D.W. Griffith's silent "Birth of a Nation" (1915), represented a frontal assault on the citizenship of African Americans and their very humanity. In this panegyric to the Lost Cause, the director portrayed African Americans as rapists who oppressed Southerners; only the heroism of the Ku Klux Klan saved white women from their brutality. This portrayal likely inspired the white men and women who lynched more than one hundred black Americans in 1915 and 1916. Twenty-four years later, "Gone With the Wind" (1939) retold the Reconstruction story of white victimhood with sound and featuring technicolor. The central drama revolves around noble white slave owners and their romances, the supporting cast composed of loyal, enslaved buffoons, cruelly freed and torn away from their homes and benevolent masters. Both movies were blockbuster hits in their eras, premiering two years before the United States entered a world war.[12]

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[11] Gannon, *Americans Remember the Civil War*, 37-60.

[12] Dick Lehr, *The Birth of a Nation: How a Legendary Filmmaker and a Crusading Editor Reignited America's Civil War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), For more on how romance in popular culture shaped Civil War

These world wars and their aftermaths affected the racial consensus. During World War I, even before the United States became involved, African Americans migrated north while few Europeans immigrated during this conflict. Partly, they did so to create the racial social order facilitated by the triumph of the Confederacy in Memory, if not reality. Ironically, the Democratic party in Northern cities often welcomed Black voters as part of their voting bloc. These Black migrants supported the New Deal and other Democratic initiatives. Franklin Roosevelt welcomed this support, and his wife Elenor assured that his administration repaid their loyalty. Just before the US joined the War, an executive order prohibited discrimination by federal defense contractors. Similarly, the Tuskegee Airmen, all Black pilots, represented only one way a largely segregated military advanced the status of African Americans. Harry Truman, FDR's Democratic successor, angered by the blinding of a Black veteran by whites, supported Civil Rights legislation that prompted some Southern Democrats to create a Dixiecrat party committed to white supremacy. At the same time, the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s meant the United States engaged in an ideological fight against communism; the southern states' racial order weakened efforts by the US to claim the mantle of freedom's defenders. [13]

African Americans had not sat idly by during this era. While much of the attention of modern scholarship focuses on the 1960s, the first breakthrough occurred a decade earlier with *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), argued by Thurgood Marshall, later the first African American justice on the Supreme Court. While this case concerned segregation in Topeka, KS, schools, it rejected the "separate but equal" doctrine, the legal basis of Jim Crow segregation in many other institutions and accommodations. At the grassroots level, African Americans challenged segregation. One year after Marshall triumphed, Rosa Parks refused to give her seat to a white woman; her arrest led the Black citizens of Montgomery to boycott the bus system. This civil disobedience was neither the first time nor the last time African Americans rejected white supremacy.[14]

Despite these efforts, the racial consensus had cracked, but it was not broken. It took a decade-long struggle to pass the federal Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act. Not surprisingly, as the Civil Rights movement prospered, the Lost Cause gained new life in southern states. The Klan began to protest integration using Confederate symbols, including the Confederate battle flag.

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memory, see Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*: *Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

[13] Gannon, *Americans Remember the Civil War*, 66-67.

[14] Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters, American in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989).

Similarly, the Confederate battle flag appeared as part of newly designed southern state flags; removing this official Lost Cause panes from these standards took decades.[15]

The Civil War centennial commemoration began less than a decade after the modern Civil Rights movement's first success. At this time, the Lost Cause version still ruled most white Americans' hearts and minds. The March on Washington and Martin Luther King's remarks at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial best illustrate the relationship between Civil War Memory and Civil Rights reality. While most people remember this as his optimistic vision of an interracial future, summarized by his "I have a dream" remarks, this speech was as much about the past as it was about the future. He began his remarks by summarizing the Civil War's emancipationist Memory. "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity." While acknowledging this achievement, he reminds Americans that "100 years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination." Earlier that year, on Memorial Day, Lyndon Baines Johnson invoked the same sentiment. "One hundred years ago, the slave was freed. One hundred years later, the Negro remains in bondage to the color of his skin. The Negro today asks for justice. We do not answer him—we do not answer those who lie beneath this soil—when we reply to the Negro by asking [for] "patience." LBJ rejected placidity. "It is empty to plead that the solution to the dilemmas of the present rests on the hands of the clock. The solution is in our hands. Unless we are willing to yield up our destiny of greatness among the civilizations of history, Americans, white and Negro together, must be about the business of resolving the challenge which confronts us today." Less than two years after King spoke of his dream, LBJ signed the Civil Rights (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965) into law.[16]

When LBJ signed these laws, Bill Moyers, one of his closest aides, remembered that Johnson believed that Democrats had lost the South for his and Moyers's lifetime. He was incorrect; the South is still Republican sixty years later. It was his successor, Richard Nixon, and his successors that embraced a Southern strategy that invoked the Lost Cause and other racist dog

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[15] Technically, todays commonly recognized Confederate flag is the Confederate Naval Jack. For a broader discussion, see John M. Coski, "The Confederate Flag," in *Essential Civil War Curriculum* (Blacksburg: Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, October 2010), https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/the-confederate-flag.html, accessed August 1, 2025.

[16] NPR, "Read Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' Speech," see https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety, accessed August 1, 2025; University of Virginia Miller Center, Lyndon Baynes Johnson "May 30, 1863 Remarks at Gettysburg on Civil Rights", see https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/may-30-1963-remarks-gettysburg-civil-rights, accessed August 1, 2025; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire; America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

whistles to achieve this dominance. Ironically, the Democratic Party, which had rejected emancipation initially, became the champion of racial equality. The first Black president of the United States shared the same party affiliation as the people who fought so hard to deny their community the vote in the first nine decades after the Fifteenth Amendment enfranchised Black men.[17]

From the perspective of Memory, many people see Obama's election as a catalyst for change. Instead, he emerged at the end of a larger Civil Rights struggle. Similarly, the more recent success of the Union Cause resulted from the changing racial attitudes that elected Obama. The first real breakthrough for the Union Cause in the cinematic Civil War occurred when *Glory* (1989), the story of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts (Colored), an almost all-black unit with white officers, attack on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, debuted twenty-four years after the codification of civil and voting rights. In the decades since *Glory*, the conservative movement's rise solidified some modern Americans newfound allegiance to the Lost Cause.[18]

So, wither Civil War Memory; it is hard to say. Given the history of Memory, a very odd thing to say, the contest over the Civil War Memory will likely continue well into the twenty-first century. However, we may do well to understand that Civil War Memory is like a myth that resonates; it merely justifies what people already want to believe about our history.

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[17] Charles Kaiser, "'We May Have Lost the South': What LBJ Really Said about Democrats in 1964," *The Guardian,* January 23, 2023, see https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jan/22/we-may-have-lost-the-south-lbj-democrats-civil-rights-act-1964-bill-moyers, accessed August 1, 2025.

[18] Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

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