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Historians Under Fire

The Public and the Memory of the Civil War

A few years ago, I participated in a symposium on “southern symbols” at a southern university. After my presentation on the Confederate battle flag, an undergraduate student beckoned me out of the room and explained with startling candor his own feelings about the flag. He explained he was from rural Mississippi, ashamed of the virulent racism of his father, and now recognized why the flag offended African Americans. But, he insisted, he still did not abide the growing tendency to vilify all things Confederate and wanted to know why he should be ashamed of his ancestors. We had a long chat and returned to the room for the next presentation — which was about the latent, even subconscious, racism of some Civil War reenactors. The same student felt emboldened enough to stand up during the question and answer period and essentially repeat the story he had told me. The reaction of the session moderator was swift and unequivocal. She told him that he was out of line and, in so many words, to sit down and shut up. I’m ashamed to say that I did not intervene and insist that he and his question be treated with due respect.

There is an unfortunate dynamic that exists between professional historians and the millions of Americans who sympathize with the Confederacy in the Civil War. These neo-Confederates whom Tony Horwitz depicted — accurately, I believe — in his book “Confederates in the Attic”¹ are proud of their Confederate ancestors, conservative in their politics, and increasingly sensitive to what they believe are unfair attacks upon their ancestors and their values. Confederate sympathizers ascribe, consciously or unconsciously, to what many historians generally consider an erroneous and distorted interpretation of the Civil War that dates back to the Lost Cause era.² There is a large and easily-identified body of neo-Confederate literature that competes with academic scholarship, but the

neo-Confederate viewpoint is more evident and oft-expressed in the frequent public disputes over Confederate flags, monuments, and other symbols and over the names of streets, bridges, or public buildings.

I confess that my perspective may be skewed. I have worked for nearly 14 years in an institution — the Museum of the Confederacy — that has had to find and maintain balance between sensitivity to the views of a core pro-Confederate constituency and scrupulous attention to scholarship and inclusiveness. Also affecting my viewpoint is the recent collapse of that balance. The museum is now explicitly courting the financial support of those individuals and groups who insist that it must be a museum for (not of) the Confederacy, a result that would threaten the institution’s scholarly integrity and credibility.

The museum’s fate is caught up in a strong backlash among white southerners and white Americans in general against a perceived political correctness running amok in America today. As we know from many other celebrated incidents, a large segment of the American population believes that politically correct or “revisionist” historians have hijacked history and have distorted truth with “context.” The contested memory of the Civil War is just one example of the ongoing “history wars.”

Resentment over political correctness and the ongoing campaign by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People against the publicly-sponsored or -endorsed display of Confederate symbols explains much about the gulf between scholars and the pro-Confederate public, but there are other contributing factors. The most important and consistent factor is ancestry. Perhaps more than any other avocational historians, many pro-Confederate Civil War buffs perceive the subject as synonymous with the honor and reputation of their ancestors. Discussions of slavery as the cause and issue of the war are considered an implicit condemnation of their ancestors. They are quick to fire back with arguments that have prima facie validity — but which historians dismiss as simplistic or irrelevant — that the vast

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majority of white southerners and Confederate soldiers in particular did not own slaves and that Abraham Lincoln was, by modern definition, a “racist” (as were most people of his generation by today’s standards) for whom the emancipation of the slaves was not a primary objective and who tried mightily to colonize African Americans out of the country.

How should professional historians respond to such arguments? According to a recent trend within the profession, historians should encourage people to study their personal pasts and help create a “participatory historical culture.” The most common personal pasts are built upon a foundation of family history.³ When you add to this tendency an emphasis on the need for public historians to consult with and listen to their stakeholders, it would seem that historians ought to respect the arguments of Confederate descendants.⁴

Furthermore, the history profession has for decades encouraged the study and celebration of distinct racial, ethnic, and life-style-based subcultures, in what some within our ranks denounce as therapeutic, feel-good, or compensatory history.⁵ Should not the study and celebration of Confederate American history also receive the blessing of the profession?

My experience suggests that most professional historians hold Confederate Americans and their brand of history in great contempt. Rarely do historians discuss neo-Confederate thought without expressing either incredulity that anyone ascribes to it or fear of its persistence and apparent influence. Where then is the respect for the opinions of people who are stakeholders in their Confederate/Civil War past? Is there a double standard at work? I believe there is.

The lack of respect extends even deeper. Professional historians who share the conservative faith of neo-Confederates have felt so unwelcome in the profession that they have formed their own organizations. At mainstream historical conferences, I have heard respected Civil War historians criticized because they are too soft on Robert E. Lee and other Confederate leaders. These historians frequently address popular audiences and emphasize the centrality of slavery in the coming of the war. Civil War historians in academia — especially those writing military history — face an uphill battle to prove the legitimacy of their subject, even though — probably because — it is so popular with the wider public. Is it any won-

der that there is a gulf between historians and the public?

Many elements of neo-Confederate orthodoxy are interpretations familiar in academic circles. For instance, the South was as much American as the North in the antebellum era; the constitutionality of secession was open to debate in 1861; Abraham Lincoln maneuvered the Confederacy into firing the first shot of the war; Lincoln violated the Constitution in his successful effort to preserve the Union; Lincoln was not committed to emancipation at the beginning of the war; and northern victory in the war fundamentally changed the nature of the Union and was an important step in the creation of modern American capitalism and the “imperial presidency.”

Why is it that these and other familiar arguments seem less valid, less acceptable when espoused by neo-Confederates? The answer, it seems, is the belief that neo-Confederate thought is more akin to religious dogma and propaganda than inquiry — received truth rather than the process of trying to determine truths. And, most importantly, neo-Confederate thought amasses and arranges facts and interpretations with the express objective of vindicating Confederates and the Confederacy and of disassociating the Confederacy and the war from slavery. Believing that the preservation of slavery was the Confederacy’s cornerstone and that slavery was the indispensable cause of the war, professional historians are determined not to let neo-Confederates get away with this denial.

Historians are afraid of giving aid and encouragement to the neo-Confederates and seeming soft on people and ideas that in the modern era we find prudent to condemn. We are afraid of being party to an unholy bargain of the kind that David Blight describes in his book “Race and Reunion” and, yes, afraid of offending African Americans whose beliefs and feelings now figure prominently — as they should — in how we understand and present our history.⁶ The result of these fears is being painted into corners when engaging in debates over Confederate symbols. Perhaps it is time to change the terms and the nature of these debates.

What I have come to believe is the desirability and necessity of giving serious attention to the neo-Confederate presentation of history — a policy of “constructive engagement.” Won’t this

give credibility to arguments that could be dismissed as the voice of a “lunatic fringe”? These views have credibility with untold numbers of Americans — numbers that swell when Confederate symbols come under attack. We must do a better job of presenting compelling explanations to non-academic audiences of what we must admit are complex conundrums — how, for example, slavery could have been the root cause of the Civil War even though 75 percent of white southerners and perhaps 90 percent of Confederate soldiers didn’t own slaves. We must be more straightforward in acknowledging fundamental agreement with some of the neo-Confederate points about Lincoln’s equivocation over emancipation and his abuses of power. Failure to acknowledge this lends credibility to the neo-Confederate’s argument that these are suppressed truths. The case for the watershed importance of slavery to the Confederacy and the Civil War can be made while avoiding the perception that it is a condemnation of Confederate ancestors or the promotion of a neo-Reconstructionist agenda.

Historians should seek opportunities to address Civil War Round Tables and Sons of Confederate Veterans camps and engage members in serious dialogue. Many academic historians are already doing just that and are using the pages of *North & South* magazine, a publication that within a few years has established itself as the best of the popular Civil War magazines and has tackled sensitive issues and encouraged serious dialogue between academics and laymen. As others would quickly point out, however, *North & South* also offers sobering evidence of the limits of constructive engagement. The months-long dialogue over James McPherson’s article on the causes of the war reveal that even deliberate and reasoned explanation cannot overcome some peoples’ devotion to dogma.⁷

I am not proposing some kind of centrally organized campaign of scholarly propaganda; Confederate sympathizers can spot truth squads as easily as we can. What I am recommending is a genuine effort by academic historians to engage with a segment of our stakeholders and the historically aware public that have often been treated as pariahs. They, of course, have come to regard us as pariahs. We should not only talk; we must also listen. Like it or not, their understanding of the Civil War is persistent and influential. If historians of the Civil War are under fire, it is

both logical and prudent that we seek to understand more about the people who are doing the firing.

Notes

- 1 Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Random House/Pantheon, 1998).
- 2 Originating with the book, *The Lost Cause* (1866) by Richmond editor and historian Edward A. Pollard, the South’s Lost Cause ideology stressed that the North’s greater numbers had destined the South to lose on the battlefield. Even more so, the war was not fought over slavery, an institution deemed beneficial to the happy and devoted slaves, but over States rights. Between the 1880s and the 1910s, Confederate veterans’ and descendants’ organizations elaborated upon this ideology and lobbied heavily and successfully to make it orthodoxy among white southerners; see also 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); Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980); Rollin G. Osterweis, *The Myth of the Lost Cause, 1865-1900* (Hamden, CT: Anchor Books, 1973).
- 3 Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
- 4 Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Englehardt, editors, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995); “Museum Exhibit Standards Society for History in the Federal Government,” *OAH Newsletter*, May 2000, 29; Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the American Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).
- 5 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1992).
- 6 David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). Blight argues that postwar Americans chose “healing” over “justice” and that white northerners and white southerners fashioned a memory of the war that emphasized soldierly valor over the war’s issues and neglected the contributions of African Americans.
- 7 James M. McPherson, “What Caused the Civil War?” *North & South* 4:1 (November 2000): 12-22; “Special Crossfire,” *North & South* 4:3 (March 2001): 5-7+; 4:4 (April 2001): 5-6+; 4:5 (June 2001): 5-6+; 4:7 (September 2001): 5-7+.

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