

Arguing against the Lost Cause Narrative of the US Civil War.

At the time of secession, the Vice President of the Confederate States, Alexander Stephens, made the now famous “Cornerstone Speech”, from which this quote is drawn; “Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”¹. The founders of the Confederacy, and the contemporaries of the Civil War showed no qualms, and if anything showed pride, in accepting that slavery was the central cause of the US Civil War.

Only since the end of that conflict has the centrality of this issue been questioned. In the intervening 157 years there arose a so-called “Lost Cause” narrative of the war, which attempted to redeem the fallen heroes of the South by arguing that they fought and died for something other than an abhorrent socioeconomic institution, the true nature of which has been lost to history. How then, when the stated causes of secession and therefore the Civil War by those who led it are so clear, has doubt over the importance of slavery become so popular amongst the Southern public today?

In those states which issued a declaration of causes for secession, many discuss issues of race and slavery as their primary causes. For example, the “Declaration of the Causes which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union”, quotes slavery, slaves and race, a total of 30 times, or once every 54.1 words.

Despite the fact that most primary figures regarded it as axiomatic that slavery was the cause of the civil war, concerted efforts by individuals such as Thomas Dixon², Woodrow Wilson³, and by groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Dixiecrats and Ku Klux Klan, to systematically change the view of the Civil War and its causes in the South, have largely been successful. The various Confederate resurgences of the late 19th, and 20th centuries saw a mass rewriting of history, through the implementation of Confederate iconography in state flags, sculpture and art, and the glorification of the CSA, and its heroes, and finally the legal, and extrajudicial, demonisation of African Americans.

¹ Alexander H. Stephens, Savannah, Georgia (March 21st, 1861)

² Thomas Dixon (1864-1946), a preacher, lawyer, white supremacist, politician and writer.

³ Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), historian and 28th President of the USA.

It is through this process, that the names of Robert E. Lee, P.G.T. Beauregard, Stonewall Jackson and J.E.B. Stewart, became so synonymous with heroism and civic duty in the South. As historian, David Goldfield commented: “History, at least the history written and remembered by white southerners, trivialized blacks’ aspirations and condemned their efforts. History provided the foundation for white supremacy over the next century, justifying racial segregation, disenfranchisement, lynching and the erosion of economic and civil rights.”⁴. Here is neatly identified the results of a mass whitewashing of American history, amongst the products of which lie a century of Jim Crow segregation, and deprivation of every kind.

According to these revisionists, rather than fighting to preserve an internationally hated and banned practice, the South had fought to protect their homes and families from an evil, rich northern oppressor, a much more palatable narrative. Lost cause revisionists managed to simultaneously convince the South that the war was about states rights, and the preservation of a simpler way of life, not about slavery, whilst pursuing racist policies in their political lives. The most violent acts of sedition in US history and those involved in them have, in some circles, become bywords for patriotism. It is ultimately the greatest trick that any set of historians has ever pulled, and for that reason it is best referred to as the lost cause narrative rather than any legitimate form of historical revisionism. Within this narrative are two key components, firstly, the belief that the war was about a long running constitutional crisis, between individual states and federal government, and secondly, that the war was primarily the defence of the Southern, agrarian, Jacksonian manner of life.

Within the realm of the “states rights” narrative, the most common argument is that secession was primarily about Southern concerns of a Northern dominated federal government, that would not respect the constitutional right of state governments to arbitrate and decide on issues key to their citizens, not what those issues may have been. Early questions on what exactly the American model of economics and government should be, that had dominated the first 50 years of the young nation’s politics, were never satisfactorily resolved, and continued to echo in antebellum America. During the second party system of America, the federal government, and federal courts, in seeking to maintain harmony between the various constituent states of the Union, often found themselves at odds with other states, either Northern or Southern. Each of the Missouri

⁴ Goldfield, D (2001), Still Fighting the Civil War, Ch. 7 pg. 192.

Compromise (1820), House Gag Rule (1836), the Amistad Decision (1841), the Wilmot Proviso (1846), the Fugitive Slave Act of (1850), the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) and the Dred Scott Decision (1857), represented, to either Northerners or Southerners, abolitionists or retentionists, an overreach in power by the federal government or courts.

Foremost amongst this brand of revisionist was Woodrow Wilson. Born in 1856, his boyhood was spent in Augusta during the civil war years, a stone's throw away from the route of William T. Sherman's devastating "March to the Sea". He identifies, as early as the Nullification Crisis of the 1830s, that "the North was now beginning to insist upon national government, the South was continuing to insist upon the original understanding of the constitution; that was all"⁵. As far as Wilson was concerned, the ultimate cause of secession was not necessarily the free soil/slight abolitionist tendencies of the Republican Party, but because "power had been given to a geographical, sectional party, ruthlessly hostile to her [the South's] interests"⁶, in other words, the Republican Party definitionally represented that differing view of the constitution. The South did not, therefore secede as a result of slavery, rather differing views of the constitution.

This however remains a poor explanation for the Civil War. Even when taking the "constitutional watershed" argument at its best, there remain fundamental issues. The simple question is, why, besides slavery, was there no other issue upon which this occurred? It is not that the interests of the North and South, were so uniform that there was only one fundamental issue upon which the sections of the sectional crisis could have been drawn. Besides slavery, there were wildly differing demographic and religious makeups in the US, its role as an emerging power were bringing questions on foreign policy, and westward expansion brought up questions of integration and governance. If the North and South had been so irreconcilably different that a constitutional civil war was inevitable, why was it uniquely slavery that these issues occurred? Why did a civil war not materialise as a result of, for example, the admission of Texas to the Union, or the Nullification Crisis?

To view the Civil War as only the culmination in tensions between two constituent (and incompatible) parts of the same nation, without acknowledging the causes of that tension, would be wholly misleading. Yes, many historians can and do interpret the Civil War to be

⁵ Wilson, W (1893), *Epochs of American History - Division and Reunion*. Ch. II pt. 24.

⁶ Wilson, W (1893), *Epochs of American History - Division and Reunion*. Ch. VIII pt. 103.

the result of constitutional and structural abuse of the South by the federal government, but when arguing that “states rights” caused the war, it is important to remember what rights those states claimed; the right to own and abuse other humans as property. Fundamentally, this tension stemmed from the issue of slavery, and the constitutional crises of the antebellum US, were intertwined and irremovable from the institution of slavery, and the view of primarily African Americans as an economic asset, that could be traded and sold as a commodity.

Ultimately, the “lost cause” proved most persuasive to its adherents, not in arguing that the Civil War was the result of conflict between the federal government and states, but in suggesting that the war was primarily fought to defend a “Southern way of life”. Instead many Southerners are taught that their forefathers fought to protect their homes and families from an anthropomorphised; unchristian, greedy, Yankee, North. Hence the Civil War being known to many Southerners as “the War of Northern Aggression”.

The limitation or abolition of slavery, would have deeply effected the economic well being of the South, and what life would have looked like for many Southerners, it being a significant part of the ‘Southern way of life’. The Northern economic model necessitated a strong manufacturing sector, and access to high finance, and government investment in infrastructure, while the Southern lifestyle preferred a more laissez faire approach, and a tariff policy that would best suit its interest (i.e low tariffs on most domestic goods that Southerners would import). This divergence is neatly outlined by Arrington who notes “the South had little manufacturing capability, about 29% of the railroad tracks and only 13% of the nations banks ... the North, by contrast, was well on its way toward a commercial and manufacturing economy ... by 1860 90% of the nations manufacturing output came from Northern states”⁷.

According to Arrington: “In 1860, the South was still predominantly agricultural, highly dependent on the sale of staples to the world market. By 1815 cotton was the most valuable export of the United States; by 1840 it was worth more than all other exports combined”⁸. Should the guarantee of slave labour ever be threatened, so too would be the life of the South. And over the 19th century, that is what happened. Increasingly ardent and effective

⁷ Arrington, B (2014), *The Civil War Remembered, Industry and Economy during the Civil War*, pg. 104.

⁸ Arrington, B (2014), *The Civil War Remembered, Industry and Economy during the Civil War*, pg. 103.

calls for abolition from some Northern groups, the Raid at Harper's Ferry, and the activism of freed men and women, particularly the Underground Railroad, the work of Frederick Douglass, helped create an atmosphere of imminent danger amongst the slaveholding classes.

Most in the United States used theology as justification for their opinion on slavery, an in the case of the South, the "Southern way of life", and in doing so caused slavery to become a matter of moral crusade for many.

If, according to the beliefs of some minor protestant churches, religious truth was vested in the self, and it was through private study of scripture, and personal communion with god that we can achieve religious truth, then what fundamentally separates the white Protestant, from the African American slave? Were the slave to be emancipated, and through the help of others and a determination for self betterment, to become literate, could not he also become a man of god and faith? Given that line of rhetoric, many Yankee protestants began, throughout the 1800s, to see it as their duty to free the African-American, and bring him into the realm of god. Whilst this mindset remained comparatively small, it was especially well educated and vocal. Egnal details the training regime of T.D Weld and the American Anti-Slavery Society: "three weeks of twelve-hour days. They learned the economics, history and philosophy of slavery"⁹. That this group was so small in no way prohibited its role in the history, and the determination and education with which they spoke, and their proactivity, was more than sufficient enough to inspire that fear and suspicion of the Southern planting classes.

This suspicion was further intensified by a converse perspective amongst those Southern planters, who according to Goldfield felt that "the lesson of the Garden of Eden — that man had limits — seemed lost on the go-getters of the North. ... The North had transformed from the God-centred society of the Puritans; to the man-centered society of Wall street"¹⁰, and that the machinations of the Northern industrial-financial juggernaut would cost them their status and wealth.

Hence, across almost all denominations (except some very particular denominations, such as Quakerism, and Congregationalism) saw a fracture into Northern and Southern wings.

⁹ Egnal, M (2009), Clash of Extremes. Ch. 5. pg. 126.

¹⁰ Goldfield, D (2011), America Aflame. Ch. 6. pg. 146.

In fact in the South, perspectives on race and slavery varied little from faith to faith and denomination to denomination. Just as the Baptist church was a solidly retentionist institution in the South, Southern Catholic bishops went out of their way to justify or excuse the peculiar institution. Edging around “In supremo apostolatus”, which condemned slavery, and the slave trade, southern Bishops pedantically focussed on the wording of the Bull, ably assisted by some more archaic verses of the Old Testament, and producing an argument, born in scripture, in defence of slavery.

Therefore, as many lost cause historians would argue, the war must have been fought to protect that way of life, it must have been the preservation of “the Old South”, that governed the causes of the war. This feeling is encapsulated by Wilson, who notes that “the triumph of Mr Lincoln was, in her [the South’s] eyes, nothing less than the establishment in power of a party bent upon the destruction of the southern system, and defeat of southern interests”¹¹.

Where this argument begins to fall apart, is in the second line of argumentation that many revisionists put forwards. Namely, over 75% of Southerners did not own slaves and even then, 17% more owned only less than 10 slaves¹². How, many revisionists ask, can a war have been fought to protect slavery, when the majority of those in the South did not have a vested interest in doing so? A fact that must then meant that each soldier’s individual cause must have been the protection of their family, and their property (principles near and dear to many Americans).

Simply put, it is impossible to separate the defence of the “Southern way of life” from the defence of slavery, given that the latter formed the basis of the former, and further impossible to make the claim that we cannot suggest the main cause of the war to be slavery given the infrequency of slave ownership.

What matters with the lost cause “arguments”, when examining why so many disagree on the centrality of slavery, is not their historical validity, but the reasons for their belief, and the fact that this narrative is swallowed so willingly, and by so many.

¹¹ Wilson, W (1893), Epochs of American History - Division and Reunion. Ch. VIII. pt. 102.

¹² <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-ushistory10s2xmaster/chapter/wealth-and-culture-in-the-south/>

This all comes back to the events and trends that occurred, not in the prologue, but the epilogue to the war. That revisionism, and rebranding of the war, provided a perfectly palatable story for many of those who still suffered from the effects of the war in the South, and its consequential period of “reconstruction”.

The total destruction of human and physical capital for the Confederacy, was estimated to be \$3.3 billion at 1860 price levels, the equivalent of ~\$114 billion in today’s money. The joint cost to the North and South was equivalent to two years of GDP, the brunt of which was borne by Southerners, for whom the per capita costs of the war were roughly three times higher than their Northern counter parts. The absolute destruction that was reeked by the war, and by Northern Armies in the South, is best characterised by Major General William Sherman’s March to the Sea, which exacted a grim regime of rape, robbery and violence on the civilian population of Georgia, and featured the raising of Atlanta, one of the South’s largest cities. This brutality and economic destruction was replicated across much of the South, and successive Yankee Republican governments did little to try and reintegrate the South, or its economy, into the broader US.

The overall result of this botched, and off-hand attempt at reintegration? A Southern identity that remained resilient and defiant in the face of what it sees as a Yankee government, the ripples of which can still be observed in popular culture and politics today. This is an identity that remains at least partially committed to the belief that the Civil War was entirely justified, and not predicated on the support of slavery. Goldfield describes the reasoning of white Southerners well when he says that “To justify the war, its great sacrifices, and its tragic conclusion, white southerners exalted the cause for which they fought. To that end, they rehabilitated the Old South and restored the principles upon which its civilisation rested: white supremacy, and patriarchy.”¹³.

The truth of the matter is that the reasons why historians and members of the public alike disagree on the centrality of slavery to the causes of the American Civil War are two-fold. Firstly, that the issue of slavery was unique in its all encompassing nature. It manifested itself in arguments of an economic, religious, political, constitutional, legal, ethical and personal nature, in a way that no other issue of the day could. The wide-ranging manifestations of the “peculiar institution” conveniently gave rise to multiple interpretations of the same issue, and it is this debate, over how exactly slavery may have

¹³ Goldfield, D (2002), Still Fighting the Civil War, Introduction, pg. 2.

caused the Civil War, that often causes those interpreting the events of antebellum America to become side tracked, and neglect the root of these debates; slavery.

This divergence in possible interpretations of the causes of the war, was further exploited by 20th century figures, who made a concerted effort to pervert the study of the Civil War period. Because of the economic conditions of the South, and therefore the course of its politics after the war, these revisionists saw great success. The diverse nature of the issue essentially gave rise to a “pick-and-mix” of interpretations that could be exploited by a devastated, humiliated and institutionally racist, post-war South, which were strategically used to whitewash the collective mind of a nation.