

The Myth of the Lost Cause

Lee surrendered to Grant on April 9, 1865.

Early Southern hopes of victory had fallen apart.

One in four Southern white males of military age were dead.

What could explain this catastrophe?

The South had been the noble underdogs.

They succumbed only to superior numbers and industry.

This was “The Lost Cause”.

The chief tenets of the Myth of the Lost Cause were:

- The war was not about slavery.
- Slaves in the South were treated well.
- The South could never have won the war.

The first two claims are not true. The third is debatable.

The words of Southern leaders prove that the Confederacy was formed in the defense of slavery.

The North had greater mineral resources, which fueled industry.

The Southern economy was principally agricultural.

Colonial Southerners resorted more and more to slave labor. 90 percent of slaves were in the five southernmost colonies.

The Northern economy was more Hamiltonian, the South more Jeffersonian.

Northern Puritans and Quakers traditionally opposed slavery. Northerners did own slaves, but far fewer.

In 1794 Eli Whitney patented his cotton gin. It mechanically separated cotton fibers from the seeds. “King Cotton” came to dominate Southern agriculture. To pick more cotton, the South needed more slaves than ever.

The Articles of Confederation left slavery to the individual states.

The Constitution of 1789 dealt with it in euphemisms. Each state was allocated seats in the House in proportion to “free Persons” plus three fifths of “all other Persons”. Delegates from the slave-holding states insisted. The “Three-Fifths Compromise” gave the South extra seats in the House and more votes in the Electoral College.

The House “gag rules” prohibited the discussion of slavery.

In the 1840s and 1850s most immigrants settled in the North. From 1830 to 1860 the Northern population grew from 7 million to 23 million.

The Three-Fifths Compromise no longer protected the South.

The Fugitive Slave Clause: any “person held to service or labour” who escaped must be returned.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 let slave-catchers retrieve escaped slaves with minimal proof.

In 1850 the second Fugitive Slave Act increased penalties for shielding escaped slaves.

Northern states largely ignored or evaded the law.

Southern slaveholders resented the North’s refusal to comply.

Northern states resented being made the South’s police force.

Numerous Southerners defended slavery as a blessing to slaves. Congressman James Henry Hammond of South Carolina in 1836:

There is not a happier, more contented race upon the face of the earth...Lightly tasked, well clothed, well fed—far better than the free laborers of any country in the world,...their lives and persons [are] protected by the law, all their sufferings alleviated by the kindest and most interested care...

Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina in 1837:

I may say with truth, that in few countries...is more kind attention paid to [a laborer] in sickness or infirmities of age. Compare [a slave’s] condition with the tenants of the poor houses in the more civilized portions of Europe—look

at the sick, and the old and infirm slave, on one hand, in the midst of his family and friends, under the kind superintending care of his master and mistress, and compare it with the forlorn and wretched condition of the pauper in the poorhouse.

In 1839 the American Anti-Slavery Society published *American Slavery As It Is*.

It included hundreds of eyewitness accounts of atrocities by slaveowners.

In 1842 Charles Dickens published his *American Notes for General Circulation*.

The final chapter quoted newspaper notices of runaway slaves:

Ran away, a negro man, named Ivory. Has a small piece cut out of the top of each ear.

Ran away, a negro woman named Rachel. Has lost all her toes except the large one.

One hundred dollars reward, for a negro fellow, Pompey, 40 years old. He is branded on the left jaw.

Ran away, Anthony. One of his ears cut off, and his left hand cut with an axe.

Ran away, a negro woman and two children. A few days before she went off, I burnt her with a hot iron, on the left side of her face. I tried to make the letter M.

By the late 1850s it was widely illegal to teach a slave to read, to distribute anti-slavery literature, or to free one's own slaves.

British diplomat Robert Bunch described the atmosphere:

I do not exaggerate in designating the present state of affairs in the Southern country as a reign of terror. Persons are torn away from their residences and pursuits, sometimes "tarred and feathered", "ridden upon rails", or cruelly whipped; letters are opened at post offices; discussion upon slavery is entirely prohibited upon threat of expulsion, with or without violence, from the country.

Northerners and Southerners interpreted the Bible differently regarding slavery.

Southerners cited references to slavery in the Old Testament. Paul's Epistles called for slaves to be obedient and for masters to treat their slaves well.

Presbyterian preacher James Henley Thornwell of Columbia, South Carolina owned slaves and equated opposition to slavery with opposition to Christianity.

In 1839 Pope Gregory XVI condemned slavery.

Bishop John England of Charleston, South Carolina explained this meant only trading in slaves.

Yet selling and breeding slaves was big business in the South.

In 1845 Baptists in nine Southern states founded their own Southern Baptist Convention in defense of slavery.

After the American Revolution the North and the South disputed the admission of new lands as free or slave.

In 1787 the Northwest Ordinance doubled the size of the United States.

It forbade slavery in what would ultimately become six new states.

Between 1791 and 1820 four new free states and five slave states joined the union.

In 1820 the Missouri Compromise admitted Maine as free and Missouri as slave; all territories north and west of Missouri's southern boundary would remain free.

Another compromise bill in 1850 admitted California as free and let New Mexico and Utah choose for themselves.

In 1854 Kansas and Nebraska were also allowed to choose, in violation of the Missouri Compromise.

In 1856 Preston Brooks of South Carolina brutally beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with a wooden cane.

Hundreds of Southerners sent Brooks more canes.

In 1857 Dred Scott sued for his freedom after spending several years in free lands.

U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney denied Scott's claim.

He further ruled that negroes could never be American citizens or have any constitutional rights.

Taney also declared the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional.

In October, 1859, John Brown attacked the Federal Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia.

He and his small following were quickly captured.

Brown was hanged for treason.

But in the North he became an abolitionist martyr.

In November 1860 a Republican, Abraham Lincoln, was elected President.

The Republican Party's main platform was restricting the expansion of slavery.

Lincoln had declared the North should not intervene in Southern domestic affairs.

Nevertheless, in December South Carolina seceded.

Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana seceded in January.

In February, Texas also followed.

The Constitution did not mention secession.

The question was part of a larger debate over Federal versus state powers.

The Southern states had repeatedly claimed a constitutional right to secede.

The secession crisis led to numerous proposed constitutional amendments to protect slavery.

On February 28th one passed in the House, and on March 4 in the Senate.

Ratification was too slow to prevent a war.

The Corwin Amendment does prove that every senator and congressman knew that secession was driven by slavery.

Excerpts from the declarations of secession from three states are sufficient to prove that they seceded to preserve slavery.

South Carolina:

[Thirteen states in the North] have enacted laws which either nullify [the Fugitive Slave Acts] or render useless any attempt to execute them...The non-slaveholding States...have assumed the right of deciding upon the propriety of our domestic institutions; and have denied the rights of property established in fifteen of the States and recognized by the Constitution; they have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery; they have permitted open establishment among them of societies, whose

avowed object is to disturb the peace and to eloin the property of the citizens of other States. They have encouraged and assisted thousands of our slaves to leave their homes; and those who remain, have been incited by emissaries, books and pictures to servile insurrection...All the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery.

Mississippi:

Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world...A blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization. That blow has been long aimed at the institution, and was at the point of reaching its consummation. There was no choice left us but submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the Union, whose principles had been subverted to work out our ruin. [The abolitionist movement] has grown until it denies the right of property in slaves, and refuses protection to that right on the high seas, in the Territories, and wherever the government of the United States had jurisdiction...It refuses the admission of new slave States into the Union, and seeks to extinguish it by confining it within its present limits...It has nullified the Fugitive Slave Law in almost every free State in the Union, and has utterly broken the compact

which our fathers pledged their faith to maintain. It advocates negro equality, socially and politically, and promotes insurrection and incendiarism in our midst.

Texas:

[The North has shown an] unnatural feeling of hostility to these Southern States and their beneficent and patriarchal system of African slavery, proclaiming the debasing doctrine of the equality of all men, irrespective of race or color—a doctrine at war with nature, in opposition to the experience of mankind, and in violation of the plainest revelations of the Divine Law... We hold as undeniable truths that the governments of the various States, and of the confederation itself, were established exclusively by the white race, for themselves and their posterity; that the African race had no agency in their establishment; that they were rightfully held and regarded as an inferior and dependent race, and in that condition only could their existence in this country be rendered beneficial or tolerable. That in this free government all white men are and of right ought to be entitled to equal civil and political rights; that the servitude of the African race, as existing in these States, is mutually beneficial to both bond and free, and is abundantly authorized and justified by the experience of

mankind, and the revealed will of the Almighty Creator, as recognized by all Christian nations.

The Constitution of the Confederate States of America was mostly identical to the original U.S. Constitution. It did contain several new provisions regarding slavery.

Article I, Section 9:

No bill of attainder, ex post facto law, or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed.

Article IV, Section 2:

The citizens of each State shall be entitled to all the privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States; and shall have the right of transit and sojourn in any State of this Confederacy, with their slaves and other property; and the right of property in said slaves shall not be thereby impaired.

Article IV, Section 3:

The Confederate States may acquire new territory; and Congress shall have power to legislate and provide governments for the inhabitants of all territory belonging

*to the Confederate States, lying without the limits of the several States; and may permit them, at such times, and in such manner as it may by law provide, to form States to be admitted into the Confederacy. **In all such territory, the institution of negro slavery as it now exists in the Confederate States, shall be recognized and protected by Congress, and by the territorial government.***

This last article is the clearest evidence that secession was impelled by slavery.

In its own constitution the Confederacy renounced states' rights and imposed slavery in every state.

On March 21 Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens spoke before an audience in Savannah.

His address became known as the "Cornerstone Speech":

The new constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution—African slavery as it exists amongst us—the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this, as the "rock upon which the old Union would split." He was right. What was conjecture with him, is now a realized fact. But...the prevailing ideas entertained by him and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the

formation of the old constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with, but the general opinion of the men of that day was that, somehow or other in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away...Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone 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...All of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place...By experience we know, that it is best, not only for the superior, but for the inferior race, that it should be so. It is, indeed, in conformity with the ordinances of the Creator.

On April 12 Confederate batteries opened fire on Fort Sumter. The fort surrendered the next day.

On April 15 Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the rebellion.

In May, Tennessee, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Virginia joined the Confederacy.

In 1863 the Confederate Congress adopted a new, mostly white national flag.

Late in the war some Southerners advocated conscripting slaves to fight.

Major General Howell Cobb responded, "If slaves will make good soldiers, then our whole theory of slavery is wrong."

On March 13, 1865 the Confederate Congress allowed slaves to fight for the South, but *not* to be freed.

Lost Cause advocates have maintained that life as a slave in the South was not that bad.

The Fugitive Slave Clause, the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850, and the Underground Railroad prove otherwise.

According to the Lost Cause Myth the South never had a chance against the North.

But the South only had to avoid being defeated long enough to discourage the North.

It is a tenet of the Lost Cause that most Union generals were incompetent and the North won only because it had more soldiers and resources.

Northern armies did suffer more casualties, because military technology had outstripped tactics.

Northern armies were usually on the offensive.

Confederate assaults were similarly costly.

Confederate generals and soldiers are considered superior to their Northern counterparts.

Southern generals, including Lee, did commit their share of military blunders.

States' rights often hamstrung the South.

Confederate states mistrusted Richmond and Jefferson Davis. They often withheld funds and soldiers.

In mid-1864 Lincoln's re-election seemed unlikely.

His opponent, ex-General George McClellan, favored ending the war.

Victories at Atlanta and Mobile Bay restored Northern support of Lincoln.

One of the first hints of the Lost Cause Myth can be found in Robert E. Lee's Farewell Address at Appomattox.

It attributed defeat to the North's manpower and manufacturing capacity.

In 1866 Edward A. Pollard of Richmond published *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates*. Pollard claimed Southern culture was more refined and less worldly than the North.

He insisted that slavery was not cruel, that it had contributed to national and worldwide prosperity, and that it was the foundation of the South's superior form of civilization.

The South was legally free to secede: the North misinterpreted the Constitution.

In 1866 General Jubal Early's *Memoir of the Last Year of the War for Independence, in the Confederate States of America* contained many of the same arguments for slavery and the South's right to secede.

Jefferson Davis's *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* was published in 1881, with similar themes.

But in 1869 the Supreme Court, in *Texas v. White*, had already ruled that the Constitution did not permit secession

[In the Articles of Confederation] *the Union was solemnly declared to "be perpetual". And when these Articles were found to be inadequate to the exigencies of the country, the Constitution was ordained "to form a more perfect Union". It is difficult to convey the idea of indissoluble unity more clearly than by these words. What can be*

indissoluble if a perpetual Union, made more perfect, is not?

After the war Alexander Stephens insisted that his Cornerstone Speech had been misunderstood. But in four years he had never clarified what he meant.

In 1869 the Southern Historical Society was founded. The monthly *Southern Historical Society Papers* was dedicated to vindicating secession and praising the Confederate military.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy was founded in 1894, and in 1896 the United Sons of Confederate Veterans. Both groups promoted, and still promote, the Myth of the Lost Cause.

Most Union soldiers were reconciled to their former adversaries within a few years. So many battles, so hard-fought, had created a bond of mutual respect. Many reunions—some Union, some Confederate, some Blue and Gray—fostered a wholesome camaraderie.

Still, not everyone was ready to forget who had started the war and why.

Some thought that the South was being let off far too lightly and making the most of it.

Grant could never overlook the origins of the war.

Describing his meeting with Lee at Appomattox he wrote,

I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought.

Frederick Douglas was unsure whether the war had made any difference in the South:

He pointed out that “there was a right side and a wrong side in the late war.”

The myth did more than boost Southern spirits.

Reconciliation hastened the end of Northern supervision of Reconstruction.

The North silently acquiesced to a resumption of white rule in the South.

On Christmas Eve, 1865, the Ku Klux Klan started with six members.

It soon became a powerful, and murderous, force in reasserting white supremacy.

Jim Crow laws, segregation, poll taxes and literacy tests, and racist terrorism made the 14th Amendment (due process), the 15th Amendment (voting rights), and even the 13th Amendment (an end to slavery) meaningless in the South for decades.

Birth of a Nation, released in early 1915, was true to the Lost Cause Myth.

The film was a mammoth commercial success.

Across the country, violence against black people increased.

The Ku Klux Klan was revived.

Gone with the Wind was published in 1936 and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

In 1939 it became an Oscar-winning film.

In a 2014 Harris poll, the Bible was the only book more popular, and *Gone with the Wind* was still America's favorite film.

Millions of readers and moviegoers have accepted it as historically accurate.

The opening narration of the film sets the tone:

There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South...Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow...Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave...Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered.

Stone Mountain, near Atlanta, is a striking symbol of the Lost Cause.

The park that surrounds it opened on the 100th anniversary of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

In 1915, reinvigorated by *Birth of a Nation*, members of the Klan met at the summit and burned a cross.

The sculptor Gutzon Borglum was a Klan fellow traveler.

Whether the Lost Cause is truth or myth is not just an academic question.

The Myth of the Lost Cause still has its faithful believers.

For decades in the late 20th century, the young black servers at Aunt Fanny's Cabin wore the menu like a yoke around their necks.

Some Atlantans still resent William Tecumseh Sherman and the Atlanta fire and "what those Yankees did to us in 1864".

The League of the South intends the same eleven states of the Confederacy to secede and form a nation ruled by white Christians.

Thousands of angry, violent protesters oppose the removal of statues of Confederate heroes.

The Confederate battle flag can be seen flying anywhere in the country.

The Lost Cause lives today.