

## The Bushwhacker

We have finally resumed in person meetings and thank goodness for that. It was so fantastic to see actual people instead of faces on a screen (although I missed the occasional dog barking and overheard telephone calls—please mute when you are on Zoom!).

The speakers so far have been excellent and you will like the ones lined up for the rest of the campaign. We had Lance Geiger talk about "The Civil War Career of James Burklow, Private in Battery K of the First Illinois Volunteer Light Artillery" to kick off the 2021-2022 Campaign and Nick Sacco from Whitehaven to speak on "Civil Rights Legislation During the Reconstruction Era" in October. Shawn Williams, one of Nick's compatriots from Whitehaven, spoke on one of the most requested subjects in the members' survey of suggested topics, "THE CITY CLASS IRONCLADS: The Brown Water Navy that Saved the Union" in December. Look for the following speakers for 2022:

January 26, 2022. Robert Girardi: The Importance of Civil Engineers During the Civil War

February 23, 2022. Samuel Wheeler: Robert Todd Lincoln's Civil War(s)

March 23, 2022. Robert O'Neil: Bob is an expert on Union cavalry and cavalry tactics.

April 27, 2022. Thomas L. Jessee. Following his recent surrender to Grant at Appomattox, "Robert E. Lee" returns to St. Louis -- his first trip back since the 1830's.

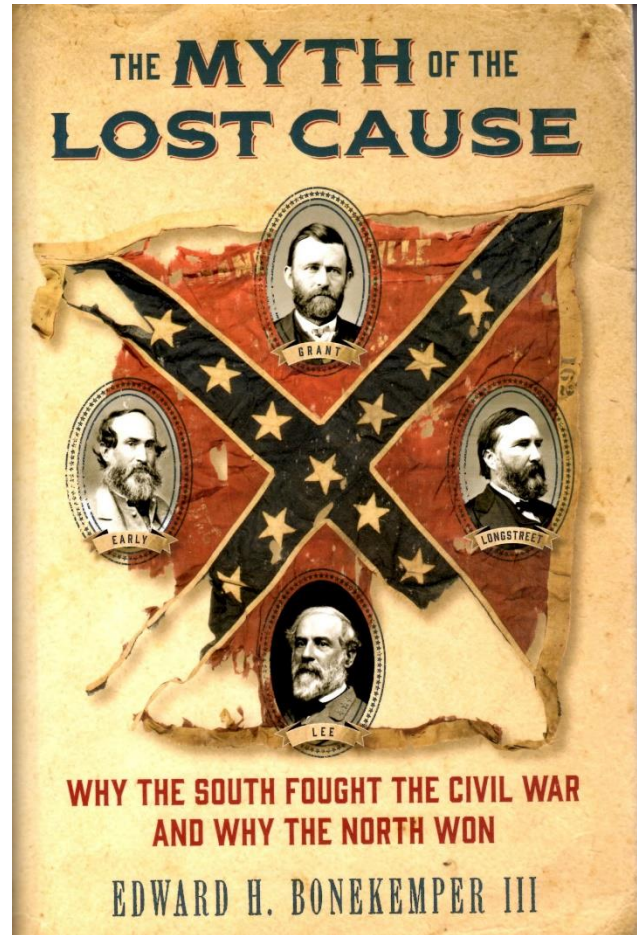
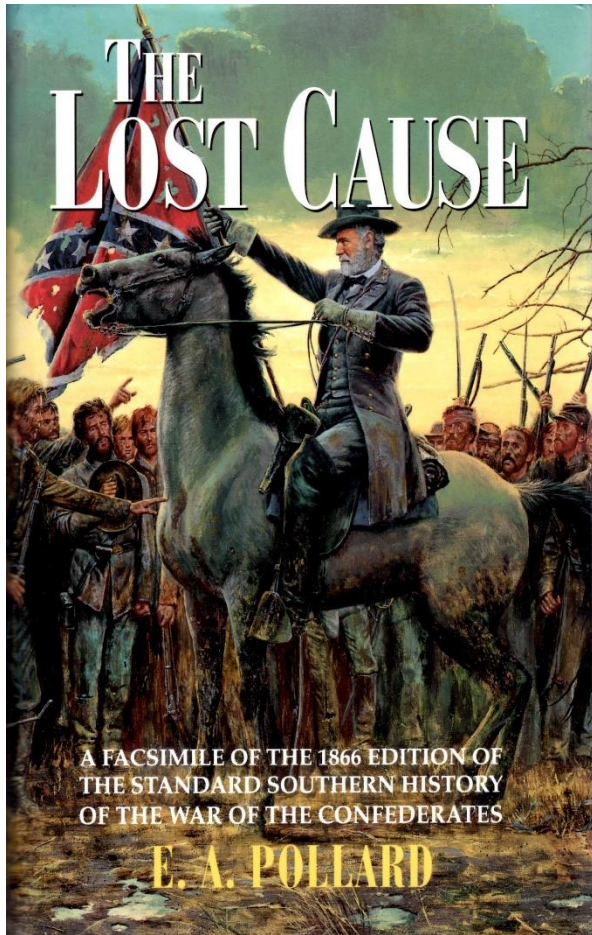
May 25, 2022. Gene Schmiel: The Civil War in Statuary Hall. Author/historian Schmiel discusses his recently published book focusing on the question, "Who Should be Memorialized in the U.S. Capitol?"

The debate over the "Lost Cause" began almost immediately after the close of the Civil War with the publication of *The Lost Cause* by E. A. Pollard in 1866. Many books and articles have been written about the subject pro and con (see the selection at the end of this issue).

In September 2016, about a year before his untimely death, Edward H. Bonekemper III, spoke at our Roundtable on "The Myth of the Lost Cause," based on his book of the same name, presenting his case against the Pollard thesis and its supporters (the man was a lawyer, after all).

In May 2021, our own John Harris provided his take on the issue, which we present here. Members, what do you think? Argue away!

—Jim Erwin—



## **THE MYTH OF THE MYTH OF THE “LOST CAUSE”**

### **THE “LOST CAUSE”**

The “Lost Cause” ideology began almost immediately after Confederate surrender<sup>1</sup> to cope with the social, political, and economic changes of defeat and reconstruction. The losses were attributed to factors beyond their control and to betrayals of their noble cause. including:

1. State’s rights and secession, not slavery, was the primary cause of the war.
2. Slavery was a “benign” institution, slaves were treated well, were “faithful” and loyal to their masters, and slavery was gradually dying out on its own anyway.
3. Confederate loss was inevitable given Northern superiority in resources and manpower.

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1 Pollard

4. Confederate generals such as Lee and “Stonewall” Jackson represented southern virtue, Lee was one of the greatest generals in history.
  5. The betrayal and incompetence of subordinates like Longstreet led to some losses.
  6. Grant was an incompetent butcher winning by brute force and superior numbers.
  7. Northern generals were characterized as having low moral standards and engaging in “total war” against Southern civilians.
- Is this view true or false? Arguments can be made pro and con for each factor.

### **“THE MYTH OF THE LOST CAUSE”**

The “Myth of the Lost Cause”<sup>2</sup> considers the “Lost Cause” to be the most successful propaganda campaign in American history, a “false concoction”<sup>3</sup>, lasting 150 years and attempting to rationalize Secession as a justified response to cultural and economic aggression by the North.

The “Myth” proponents argue that the “Lost Cause” claims are nearly all false and that:

1. Slavery, and not state’s rights and secession, was the primary cause. Secession was illegal.
2. Slavery was not “benign” but was a “cruel” institution maintained by force and “slave catchers.” Slavery was not dying out with slave prices at an all-time high in 1860. As land was being depleted for growing cotton, slaves were being utilized in manufacturing and other jobs.
3. Confederate loss was not inevitable. Although the Union did have superiority in resources and manpower, its strategic burden was far heavier than the South’s. The Confederacy occupied an enormous territory that had to be conquered for Northern victory. A tie or a stalemate would amount to a Southern victory.
4. Lee was not one of the greatest generals in history, Lee’s actual record left much to be desired. He was a one-theater general apparently more concerned with the outcome in Virginia than in the Confederacy as a whole. Lee was too aggressive, both strategically and tactically.
5. Lee’s advocates decided to make James Longstreet their scapegoat to justify some of Lee’s losses. They argued that Gettysburg cost Lee the war and that Longstreet was responsible for that loss. Longstreet was made the scapegoat due to his friendship with Grant and to his becoming a Republican.

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2 Gallagher and Nolan

3 Bonekemper

6. Grant was not an incompetent butcher. His victories at Forts Henry and Donelson, Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga and his brilliant Vicksburg campaign continue to be studied around the world because of the deception and concentration of force with which he baffled and defeated his opponents. He was clearly the best general of the Civil War and one of the greatest in American history.
7. The allegation that Northern generals had low moral standards engaging in “total war” against Southern civilians fails to distinguish between “hard war” which involves a destruction of enemy armies and enemy property of all sorts, and “total war” which additionally involves the deliberate and systematic killing and rape of civilians. The Civil War saw some localized and vicious guerilla warfare but was not a “total war” on the part of anyone, certainly not the Union.

### **REALITY?**

The main difference between the “Lost Cause” and the “Myth of the Lost Cause” is the role of slavery as the cause of the war. One hundred years after the war, during the Centennial celebration, little was discussed about slavery. 150 years after the war, during the Sesquicentennial celebration, slavery was in the forefront. The only difference being the passage of time and change in perceptions and political climate.

The United States of America would not exist without compromise. The three-fifths clause, the fugitive slave law, and the 20-year prohibition against interference with the International slave trade accomplished that Constitutional compromise regarding “persons held to service or labor.” Compromises regarding slavery continued until the issue was resolved by war. The Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854 all represent additional compromises regarding slavery. In 1857 the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott decision that property in slaves was a vested right under the Constitution.<sup>4</sup> The decision to permit or abolish slavery was left as a “state’s right.”

Compromise only works if both sides are willing to accept the resulting new rules. But the multiple compromises did not lead to resolution, only to more compromises. If the Supreme Court ruled in 1857 that Congress had no authority over slavery in the territories then why did the Republican Party make the prohibition of the expansion of slavery into the territories its main platform in 1860? Was a peaceful resolution possible?

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4 Wilentz

Both sides believed they had God on their side. Was the Republican Party's goal of limiting the expansion of slavery an issue of morality or an issue of money, not wanting the competition of slave labor with wage labor in new territories? Anti-slavery was not pro-equality. Both sides were just wandering around in the swamp trying to find moral high ground for justification, but there wasn't any moral high ground for anyone to stand on.

### **CONCLUSION**

White supremacist society, predominant throughout the United States, was not ready in 1865 to grant equality to an "inferior race". Where were the abolitionists after emancipation? Who really cared about the emancipated slaves? It took two centuries of enslavement followed by a century of segregation and "Jim Crow" before Civil Rights could progress.

I don't recall learning in grade school or high school in the 50s and 60's about the White Supremacist component of the history of America. As soon as colonists arrived on our shores they began exploiting and displacing the indigenous people. Enslavement of African Americans soon replaced indentured servitude. Our founding fathers, the ones that espoused "all men are created equal," provided constitutional protection to slavery. By "all men" did they just mean all white male protestant landowners? Slavery wouldn't be abolished until 1865, women couldn't vote until 1920, Japanese American citizens were interned in camps during World War II, our schools were segregated until 1950.

Arguing about the "Lost Cause" 150 years after the war is just another way of shifting attention from the genuine issues that divide us. Removing Confederate flags and monuments and renaming streets and schools will not change that. And why stop there? Will removing all things that remind us of our history change anything?

So, myth or reality, which is it? It boils down to your "perception" of reality. In today's world that "perception" is based on fake news, political correctness and few facts. Which means it is totally dependent on your personal values, experiences, biases, prejudices, etc. So, there's no such thing as a "correct" view, especially when views are skewed by "presentism." Something that's not considered acceptable today may have been the norm in the past. Maybe we need to focus less on finding a "correct" view and work more on achieving "all men are created equal."

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