

DEEP DIVE

The South lost the Civil War — but won the PR War

Propaganda and psychological warfare helped perpetuate false narratives about the Confederacy that still persist

By **MATTHEW ROZSA**

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Vintage Civil War print of the Battle of Fort Sanders (Getty Images/Stock Montage)



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The violence broke out after the losing side in a presic
accept their defeat.

No, we're not talking about the **January 6th Capitol Riots**, but the American Civil War. On a basic level, the Civil War was little more or less than 11 states violently seceding from the Union **after the 1860 election** because they opposed the victorious candidate, Republican nominee Abraham Lincoln. Correctly or otherwise, they feared that Lincoln was an abolitionist and opponent of white supremacy, both ideals that they held to be central to their Southern identity. Despite Lincoln's repeated reassurances that he only wished to limit the expansion of slavery and would otherwise leave it untouched, the newly-formed Confederate States of America waged bloody war to form their own country so they could keep slavery intact.

"Imagine being a newly freed slave having to pass by an outsized monument of your enslaver."

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Four years and **620,000 deaths later**, slavery had been abolished anyway and the South had been defeated — on the battlefield, that is. In the equally important war of public relations, the South slowly yet assuredly won a considerable victory: They convinced Americans about their defeat known as the **"Lost Cause" narrative**. Coined by James M. Pollard in 1866, the phrase "Lost Cause" referred to a narrative that glorified how Confederates committed treason and were primarily motivated by a desire to preserve slavery, in a war catalyzed by a refusal to accept a lost election. ~~the Confederates and their sympathizers insisted on being told they had fought a valiant and heroic crusade for "states'~~

rights" against unprovoked aggression from the North. The Lost Cause narrative was given a boost when the **controversial 1876 presidential election** proved so close that, to prevent a second Civil War, Republicans and Democrats struck a **so-called "Compromise of 1877."** This agreement ended the remaining federal attempts to dismantle systemic racism in the South in return for allowing Republican Rutherford Hayes to win the presidency. Before long, all mention of slavery related to the Civil War was downplayed or rationalized away, at least in mainstream culture; the focus, perhaps best epitomized by Hollywood epics like the 1930s novel and film "Gone with the Wind," was on a supposedly chivalrous golden age tragically lost. Blacks, by contrast, were depicted as the enemies of both northern and southern whites, a notion that underpinned discriminatory racial laws and laid the foundations for a strong trend toward racism among police officers. Even though Black Americans had suffered as slaves for more than two centuries, Lost Cause advocates claimed that they had actually liked slavery. Some even perpetuated **the myth that there had been Black Confederates.**

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In other words, the South and its supporters engaged in large-scale psychological manipulation against the rest of America so they could save both their dignity and their white

supremacist society — and it worked like a charm.

"Imagine being a newly freed slave having to pass by an outsized monument of your enslaver," Lecia Brooks, Chief of Staff and Culture at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), wrote to Salon. Brooks was referring to the mass production of Confederate monuments (which often occurred in Northern states), a process that reached a peak in the 1890s and occurred alongside a surge in white supremacist terrorism against Black Americans.

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According to the SPLC, there are roughly 2,000 Confederate monuments still in the United States today. "While the term 'domestic terror' did not exist back then, the actions of those who championed the so-called Lost Cause mirror what we see today," Brooks added. In addition to building statues and other memorials, Confederate sympathizers and other supporters of Jim Crow policies renamed streets, courthouses, schools, parks and military bases after either prominent Confederates or the Confederate cause more broadly. They targeted public property in both Union and neutral states to make sure their message spread far and wide.

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"The perception of being disrespected, dishonored, rejected, or treated as inferior — what psychological professionals call 'narcissistic wounds' — can be powerful drivers of violence."

"All of this iconography was used as racist props to intimidate and remind African Americans of their place, first and foremost," Brooks explained. "Their widespread placement allowed the Confederacy to reimagine its treasonous acts as a noble effort while minimizing their brutal role in preserving slavery."

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In addition to terrorizing racial minorities and tricking whites into misremembering their own history, Confederate sympathizers had more personal psychological reasons for engaging in this campaign.

"Developmentally speaking, shame develops before guilt, and speak of shame cultures and guilt cultures," social psychiatrist Salon. "The American South is a shame culture, where feeling central, and the perception of being disrespected, dishonored, — what psychological professionals call **'narcissistic wounds'** — can be powerful drivers of

violence. Hence, there will be a great incentive to create a narrative that signifies the opposite — pride, self-love, and innocence — even if it is false."

Dr. Edward Blum — a historian at San Diego State University who wrote the book "**Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898**" — told Salon by email that it was not simply Southern white pride and racism that made their "Lost Cause" mythology so persuasive. White Americans outside the South were all too willing to acquiesce for their own reasons.

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"I think northern whites had the very real problems of governance after the Civil War," Blum explained. "They needed to govern the northern states who had just won the war; they had to somehow convince former Confederates to re-determine the legal and civil status of African Americans (those who had been free, but relegated to marginal status)."

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"As these northerners dealt with of-the-moment social issues, they had less time and energy to fight a culture war with Lost Cause enthusiasts," he continued. On top of that, some saw there was money to be made off of it, but others were less blatantly cynical. The Civil War had drained America's energy as well as its manpower; many whites simply had no more stomach for rehashing what seemed to them to be dead conflicts. Even if they didn't agree with the Lost Cause characterization, the path of least resistance was often simply ignoring it — even if the price of letting it go unchallenged was lending credibility to a lie.

Of course, it is difficult to morally square abandoning millions of people to the apartheid conditions that existed in Jim Crow America. As Blum explained, white Americans had a "a lot" of rationalizations to get around that conundrum, "which is an indication that they knew better."

The Lost Cause narrative prevailed in America by, in essence, resorting to the oldest bully tactic in the book: Win by psychologically wearing down the opposition.

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"Some used flat-out racism, the idea that white people (however defined) were just better than non-whites," Blum wrote. "Then there were culturalists, those who believed the environment from which people came directed how they would be in society. So well-educated northerners saw themselves as better to lead, better to run the country, than uneducated African Americans. The direct reasoning was not nature, but nurture. Then there were those who invoked tradition. This is how things had been in the past, and things in the past were somehow more moral or better."

Yet among all these groups, the one that Blum observed "seemed to really win out" were those who argued that it was simply unrealistic to hope to create a racially equal society. In their mind, "the price of change was simply too high," Blum argued. "The cost to transform the United States, to genuinely recognize African Americans as equal Americans would have meant massive shifts to the economy, large-scale penalties and imprisonments for those who stood in the way, and ultimately a willingness to change the entire course of the past."

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While this decision likely seemed practical at the time, that sense of necessity existed because the South and its supporters abused the rest of the country into accepting its own **Big Lie**. The Lost Cause narrative prevailed in America by, in essence, resorting to the oldest bully tactic in the book: Win by psychologically wearing down the opposition. Confederate sympathizers repeated their lies so often, and engaged in both figurative and literal violence so often, that white America gave up in a state of collective exhaustion.

Even today, there are still many American whites who are prone to being psychologically manipulated by Confederate sympathizers. The only thing that has really changed are the tactics.

"When a shame culture becomes pathological — that is, no longer affirming life — it will use the same maladaptive manipulations that narcissistically-disordered individuals use."

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"People feel protective of their lineage and culture," Brooks wrote. Confederate supporters claim they only want to protect their heritage, but it is implied that anyone venerated by a statue or a building named in honor of a Confederate is part of the heritage. "The Confederacy existed for a group of states wanted to keep and spread white supremacist slavery and believed that the

winner of the 1860 presidential election, Abraham Lincoln, threatened their "peculiar institution." By definition, this means that the cause was, as Brooks put it, "actually rooted in an ideology of hate." Despite this, Brooks added that "the Confederacy continues to be branded as a victim of the 'War of Northern Aggression,' whose soldiers fought a noble effort solely to protect states' rights. Anyone who romanticizes the Confederacy chooses to ignore what history has already proven — the Civil War was fought entirely to maintain chattel slavery for the Confederacy's own selfish purposes."

Lee broke down the dynamics at play in the continued embrace of Lost Cause ideas by using directly psychological terms.

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"When a shame culture becomes pathological — that is, no longer affirming life — it will use the same maladaptive manipulations that narcissistically-disordered individuals use: denial of reality, reversal of victim-perpetrator status, and exploitation of others for self-interest," Lee explained. "Denying that Black slaves were treated badly, insisting that the South was the valiant and righteous party, and using a myth of victimhood to justify the war through racism, sexism, and religious authoritarianism are such

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By **MATTHEW ROZSA**

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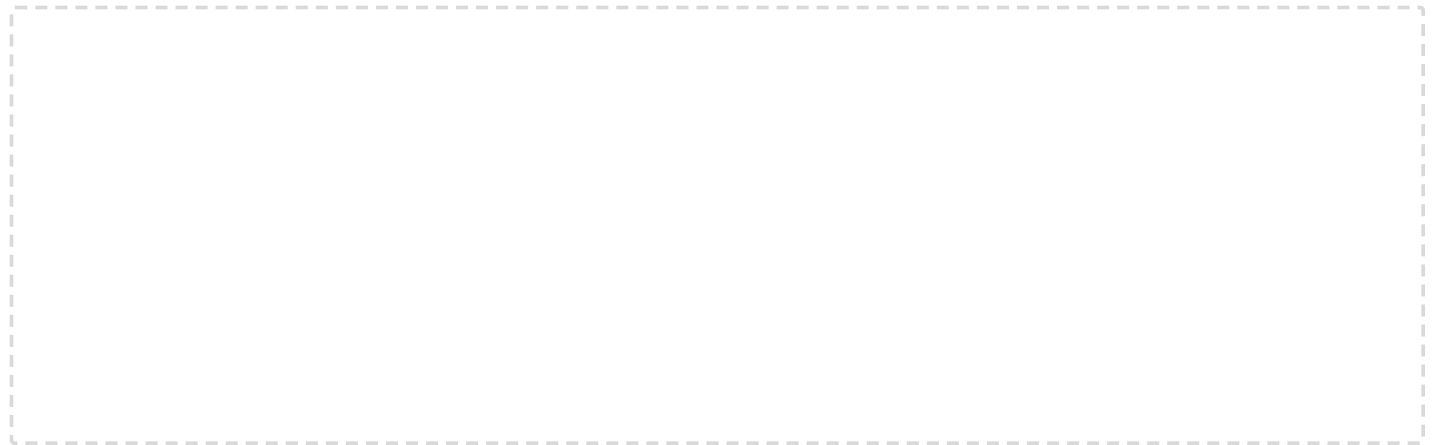
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