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Donald E. Wilkes Jr.

University of Georgia School of Law, wilkes@uga.edu

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DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE LOST CAUSE

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Author: Donald E. Wilkes, Jr., Professor of Law, University of Georgia School of Law.

The term Lost Cause originated in 1866 when a Virginia journalist named Edward A. Pollard published a book with that title which blamed Jefferson Davis for the defeat of the Confederate States of America. For many years now the term has referred to and embodied a romanticized, mythical view of the Old South in regard to the Civil War. As Georgia history professor David Williams notes, the Lost Cause projects an image “of an idyllic South, populated by a chivalric race of cavaliers who were kind masters to happy slaves—a utopian South, beaten and broken by superior northern numbers and industry . . .”

Although the Lost Cause is mythology, it is still viewed as historical truth by many credulous persons and even defended as an accurate account of the past by various pro-South groups (as well as by racist demagogues). This year marks the 150th anniversary of the bombardment of Ft. Sumter and the outbreak of the Civil War. What better time to demythologize the Lost Cause? Therefore, I will now expose the dubiousness of nine of the most important myths of the Lost Cause. I rely on an impressive, growing body of Civil War literature by history professors and other scholars that step by step, again and again, usually without any serious contradiction, has demonstrated that the Lost Cause is a false cause.

Myth No. 1 *The principal reason the Southern states seceded was states' rights, not slavery.*

Although no one denies that the issue of states' rights was of vital importance in the Old South, the overwhelming consensus among modern historians is that slavery was the single most important reason the Southern states seceded. Secession occurred principally because the South dearly loved and passionately desired to vindicate the institution of black slavery.

South Carolina was the first state to secede. On Dec. 24, 1860, four days after approving the Ordinance of Secession, the state's Secession Convention approved a "Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union." This weird document—passed by god-fearing white Southerners who believed that God is a proslavery deity, that the Bible is a proslavery book, and that no true Christian could be opposed to slavery—proves beyond a reasonable doubt that

slavery was the main impetus for that state's decision to secede. Almost all the grievances listed to justify splitting the Union involve slavery, slavery, slavery. The bizarre document even states:

“Those [Northern, free] States have assumed the right of deciding upon the propriety of our domestic institutions [slavery]; and have denied the rights of property [slavery] 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 [antislavery] societies, whose avowed object is to disturb the peace and to eloign the [slave] 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.*” (My italics.)

Alexander Stephens, a Georgian who was Vice President of the Confederate States of America, delivered a speech in Savannah on March 21, 1861. This speech, known as the “Cornerstone Speech,” is powerful evidence that it was mainly the issue of slavery that led to the dissolution of the Union and the consequent formation of the Confederacy. In the course of his infamous speech, Stephens said:

“The new [Confederate] 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 [sic] in our form of civilization. *This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution.*

. . . The prevailing ideas entertained by [Thomas Jefferson] 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. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the ‘storm came and the wind blew.’

“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 [sic] 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.” (My italics.)

Myth No. 2 *In the winter of 1860-1861, prior to the firing on Ft. Sumter, there was overwhelming Southern support for secession.*

In the months before Ft. Sumter was bombarded on April 12, 1861, the South was, as Georgia history professor David Williams explains in his book *Deeply Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* (2008), “badly divided” on the issue of secession, as the elections for members of the various state secession conventions demonstrated. “Throughout the Deep South, official returns gave secession’s opponents about 40 percent of the popular vote.” Opponents of secession (known as unionists or co-operationists) “ran neck and neck with secessionists in Alabama and Louisiana. . . . In Texas, two-thirds of voters opposed secession.” Additionally, pro-secession elements committed so much widespread fraud at the ballot box and in the vote-counting that “the returns

cannot be trusted as a gauge of popular opinion. Most likely, anti-secession sentiment was considerably stronger than the final vote would suggest.” Here in Georgia, Williams points out, secessionist Governor Joe Brown “falsely claimed that secessionist delegates had carried the state by over thirteen thousand votes. In fact, existing records from the time suggest that secession was probably defeated by just over a thousand votes.”

Throughout the Southern states, secessionists used coercion and subterfuge to discourage or prevent opponents of secession from voting against secession. “So worried were secessionist leaders over the possibility of secession being voted down that they used intimidation and violence in their efforts to control the ballot box wherever they could.”

The current historical consensus that there was broad-based opposition to secession throughout the Old South in

the months immediately preceding April 1861 is summarized by David Potter in his book *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (1995):

“At no time during the winter of 1860-1861 was secession desired by a majority of the people in the slave states. . . . Furthermore, secession was not basically desired even by a majority in the lower South, and the secessionists succeeded less because of the intrinsic popularity of their program than because of the extreme skill with which they utilized an emergency psychology . . .”

Myth No. 3 *After Ft. Sumter was fired on there was no significant opposition to secession in the South.*

Although the South was electrified and the secession cause hugely strengthened during what David Williams calls “the passionate post-Sumter excitement,” nonetheless “there were large cracks in the facade of southern unity.” Williams

gives examples: in eastern Tennessee, two-thirds of the voters voted against approving the legislature's secession ordinance; in North Carolina, nearly one-third of the delegates at the state's secession convention were unionists; and in Virginia, the election which ratified secession "was rife with fraud and intimidation [against opponents of secession]."

Myth No. 4 *Unlike the North, the South during the Civil War respected civil liberties, did not abuse its arrest powers, and did not imprison supposedly disloyal citizens.*

This myth has been exploded by historian Mark E. Neely, Jr., in two books: *Confederate Bastille: Jefferson Davis and Civil Liberties* (1993), and *Southern Rights: Political Prisoners and the Myth of Confederate Constitutionalism* (1999). Neely points out that "the Confederate government curtailed many civil liberties and imprisoned troublesome

citizens. Moreover, many white Confederate citizens submitted docilely to being treated as only slaves could have been treated in the antebellum South.” Passports were required, for example, for civilians who traveled by train, and Confederate citizens attempting to board trains “were likely to have irritating encounters with military officials who asked them nosy questions about their identity and destination. Guards and inquisitors confronted citizens on every railroad and at many crossroads.”

After arduous research, Neely discovered records proving that at least “4,108 civilian prisoners [were] held by military authority in the Confederacy. There were many more political prisoners than these, but I was able to locate records by name for only 4,108 in some five years of searching.” Neely also discovered that “the Confederate Army’s first arrest of a citizen occurred on 14 April 1861,

even before President Abraham Lincoln called out troops to suppress the rebellion.” Finally, Neely discovered that “the number of civilians arrested by military authority in the Confederacy, when adjusted for population differences, appears to be about the same as the number arrested in the North.”

Neely concludes: “Knowledge of the existence of thousands of political prisoners now reverses our basic understanding of the Confederate Cause. . . . [T]he Confederate government restricted civil liberties as modern democratic nations did in war.”

Myth No. 5 *Disloyalty was not a major problem in the Confederacy.*

This myth began crumbling years ago with the publication of Georgia Lee Tatum’s *Disloyalty in the Confederacy* (1934). More recent works include Jon L.

Wakelyn, *Confederates Against the Confederacy: Essays on Leadership and Loyalty* (2002); William W. Freehling, *The South vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (2001); and Maurice Melton, *Disloyal Confederates*, *16 Civil War Times Illustrated* 12 (August 1977). (The related topic of the massive number of desertions from the Confederate army is examined in Mark A. Weitz, *More Damning Than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army* (2005).)

There is insufficient space here to survey the enormous amount of evidence adduced by numerous scholars for the existence of what Ms. Tatum calls the “widespread disaffection in the Confederacy.” It will suffice to quote this passage from her book: “[T]here were a few at the beginning of the war and many before the end of the war [who] did not stand loyally behind Jefferson Davis and the Stars and Bars

in support of the Confederacy. While many showed their disaffection only by refusing to fight for, or to give active support to, the Confederacy, others went so far as to organize not only for self-protection but also for injury to the Confederacy and aid to the Union. Before the close of the war there was considerable disaffection in every state of the Confederacy, and many of the disloyal formed into bands—in some states into well organized secret treasonable societies, of which the most potent and pernicious were the Order of the Heroes of America, the Peace Society, and the Peace and Constitutional Society.”

Myth No. 6 *Hardly any Southern white men joined the Union army and fought for the North.*

This myth has been demolished by two books: Charles C. Anderson, *Fighting by Southern Federals* (1912), and Richard Nelson Current, *Lincoln’s Loyalists: Union Soldiers*

from the Confederacy (1992). We now know that around 100,000 white males from Confederate states served in the Union army, compared to around 900,000 Southerners who served in the Confederate army. As Current notes, “the 100,000 who fought for the Union represented a loss of 10 percent of the Confederacy’s military manpower. In reality, the Confederacy suffered a double loss, since the 100,000 loyalists must not only be subtracted from the strength of the Confederacy but also be added to the strength of the Union.”

Myth No. 7 During the Civil War Southern black slaves loyally supported their masters and backed the Confederate cause.

The vilest of the myths of the Lost Cause is the “faithful slave” myth—the fiction that during the Civil War Southern slaves were on the side of the Confederacy. The truth is the exact opposite. There are mountains of evidence that black

slaves all over the South did whatever they could to impede and undermine the Confederate cause and to support the Union cause.

Thus, in *Bitterly Divided*, Prof. Williams notes:

- **“Slaves resisted slavery by feigning ignorance or illness, sabotaging plantation equipment, and roaming freely in defiance of the law.”**

- **Countless slaves ran away from their masters, and “[t]hose who did not escape gave aid to those who did.”**

- **Many black slaves spied for the Union. “Very often [Union] intelligence came from escaping slaves, who brought news of fortifications, military movements, and Confederate troop strength. . . . There was even a black Union spy in the Confederate White House.”**

- **“In May 1862 Roberts Smalls and several other slaves ran the transport steamer *Planter*, with its cargo of**

ammunition and artillery, out of Charleston harbor and turned it over to blockading Federals.”

- **“Over two hundred thousand African Americans served with the Union’s land and naval forces during the Civil War. More than three-fourths of them were southerners, most formerly enslaved.”**

Williams concludes:

“Southern blacks undermined the Confederate war effort whenever they could. They gave refuge to deserters [from the Confederate army], carried food to deserter gangs and fugitive slaves, spied for the Union army, and aided those headed for Union lines. As a grateful former Union prisoner of war later wrote, ‘They were always ready to help anybody opposed to the Rebels. Union refugees, Confederate deserters, escaped prisoners—all received from them the same prompt and invariable kindness.’”

Myth No. 8 *The South lost the Civil War due to external causes rather than internal ones.*

Strictly speaking, this is not a myth, but it is an obsolescent view of why the Confederacy was defeated.

Traditionally, the principal explanations for the defeat of the Confederacy have fallen into two categories: “external causes” explanations, and “internal causes” explanations.

Under the external-causes approach, the North’s victory is attributed to its superior material and economic resources and its victories on the battlefield. Until recently, the

external-causes explanations predominated in scholarly

writings. In recent years, however, support for the internal-causes explanations has been steadily growing, and the most

important recent scholarship emphasizes internal-causes explanations over external-causes explanations.

Under the internal-causes approach, the South lost because of what took place within the Confederacy itself. Today most scholars who embrace the internal-causes explanations focus on what is called the South's "inner civil war." According to this inner-civil war thesis, the Confederacy collapsed because of defeatism, disloyalty, disaffection, lack of unifying nationalism, corruption, class and sectional conflicts, feuding within the Confederate government itself and between the Confederate government and the Confederate states, and because of massive opposition to such unpopular Confederate war measures as habeas corpus suspension, martial law, conscription, and impressment of private property.

Under the current approach, therefore, the South was not tragically but heroically crushed to pieces under the iron heel of superior Northern resources. Rather, in the words of

Prof. Williams, “it was southerners themselves as much as anyone else who were responsible for Confederate defeat.”

The Lost Cause view of why the South lost relies on the falsehood that during the Civil War the South was united in supporting the Confederacy.

For a few of the recent scholarly works that have contributed to the new prominence of the internal-conflict explanations for the Confederate States of America’s defeat, see Eric Foner, *The South’s Inner Civil War*, *American Heritage* 46 ((March 1989), and David Osher and Peter Wallenstein, *Why the Confederacy Lost: An Essay Review*, 88 *Md. Hist. Magazine* 95 (1993).

Myth No. 9 John Wilkes Booth and his small band of misfits planned and carried out Abraham Lincoln’s assassination and their other crimes on their own, and the Confederate government had nothing to do with the assassination.

To the contrary, in two 2005 *Flagpole* articles, [Lincoln Assassinated!](#) and [Lincoln Assassinated!, Part 2](#), which were based on the latest historical research, I explained that the Confederacy was not entirely free from guilt in the Lincoln assassination. I pointed out:

- The Confederate States of America had secret services which carried out espionage, counterintelligence, sabotage, and covert operations.

- John Wilkes Booth was a Confederate secret services operative.

- Agents of the Confederate secret services plotted clandestine operations involving terrorist acts.

- In 1864 the Confederate secret services plotted to abduct Lincoln, who was to be seized a few miles north of Washington, D.C. by a party of armed men who would transport their captive into Confederate territory where he

would be held prisoner in an effort to force the North to agree to the independence of the South.

- **Jefferson Davis and other top Confederate leaders personally approved the Lincoln abduction plan, and the person designated to be in charge of carrying out the kidnaping operation was John Wilkes Booth.**

- **Only two weeks before Lincoln's assassination, Jefferson Davis approved a plot to kill Lincoln and his entire Cabinet with a bomb that would be detonated at the White House, and the Union did not succeed in putting the operation out of action until April 10, 1865, four days before Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's Theater.**

- **The bomb plan only failed because the explosives expert from a Confederate secret service who had been detailed to detonate the bomb was, while being escorted to**

Washington, D.C. by Confederate cavalry, unexpectedly captured by Union cavalry a mere 15 miles from the District.

- **Although he was not involved in the unsuccessful bomb plot, Booth almost certainly knew of it; and in what was surely no coincidence, Booth began planning to shoot Lincoln on April 12, the day after a newspaper account revealed the capture of the Confederate agent who was supposed to detonate the bomb at the White House.**

- **Booth's plot to shoot Lincoln personally, and to simultaneously have coconspirators murder the vice president and the secretary of state, was intended to cause the same type of damage and havoc the White House bomb explosion plot had been expected to cause.**

- **At least three of Booth's sidekicks, Lewis Powell, Samuel Mudd, and John Surratt, had engaged in Confederate clandestine operations.**

• On his escape route through Maryland and Virginia after assassinating Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth traveled along the path of an underground Confederate spy network which had been used to secretly transport persons and goods to and from the Confederacy, and as he moved along this route Booth received assistance from members of the clandestine organization operating the network.