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Losers have written the Civil War's history

The South won the struggle to define the conflict.

By Steven Conn

One hundred fifty years ago today, Edmund Ruffin proudly fired a shot at Fort Sumter, a federal military installation in the harbor of Charleston, S.C. Almost ceremonially, it began the Civil War.

Four years and more than 600,000 dead Americans later, Ruffin fired what some consider the last shot of the war when he killed himself, so distressed was he that his beloved Confederacy had lost.

History is written by the winners, the old adage goes. But in the case of the American Civil War, that hasn't been entirely true. In the years after the war, the interpretations of Southerners and their sympathizers dominated our understanding. They couldn't turn the military defeat into a victory, so they recast the meaning of the war, turning their struggle for slavery into a principled defense of "states' rights" and a noble "lost cause."

Make no mistake: The Civil War was fought over the question of slavery.

President Abraham Lincoln may have taken a few years to acknowledge that the abolition of slavery lay at the heart of the conflict, but Southerners understood this from the outset.

When Texans decided to secede from the Union, for example, they did so because, according to their official order of secession, "the destruction of the existing relations between the two races, as advocated by our sectional enemies, would bring inevitable calamities upon both and desolation upon the fifteen slave-holding States."

Likewise, the Confederate constitution, the document establishing the nation Southerners fought to create, makes the centrality of slavery to that nation clear, declaring, "No bill of attainder, ex post facto law, or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed." For Confederates, this was first and foremost a war to perpetuate slavery.

The end of the war did indeed bring about the end of slavery, just as Confederates had feared. They responded in the years that followed by rewriting the history of slavery, and thus the primary reason they fought the war.

By the 50th anniversary of the war, Southern historians and writers had substituted states' rights for slavery as the reason the South went to war. Southerners fought to uphold a constitutional principle, they insisted, and to defend their Southern "honor."

Besides, they argued, slavery itself wasn't really that bad. Historians such as Ulrich B. Phillips argued

that American slavery was benign and probably a worse deal for slaveholders than it was for slaves, because owners continued to care for their slaves long after they ceased to be able to work. Such writers were the Holocaust deniers of their day.

Their views were thoroughly mainstream by the turn of the 20th century. American slavery, to quote one prominent historian, "had done more for the negro in 250 years than African freedom had done since the building of the pyramids." The author of that statement was Woodrow Wilson.

Seventy-five years after the war, historians were arguing that it had all been an avoidable tragedy precipitated by a few "radicals." James Truslow Adams, among the most popular historians of the 1930s, believed Northerners wanted to destroy the South. In his 1934 history of the Civil War, he blamed the war on Northern politicians such as Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner and Pennsylvania Rep. Thaddeus Stevens. He called them "professional negro-philes" who "seemed to care only to raise the blacks and ruin the whites of the Confederacy."

No coincidence, surely, that the most popular American novel of the 1930s was *Gone with the Wind*. That book, and the movie version that followed, imprinted on the American imagination an image of the plantation South that was more "moonlight and magnolias" than bondage and brutality.

By the time the centennial of the Civil War rolled around, professional historians had begun to debunk Southern myths about slavery, the war, and Reconstruction. At the same time, however, many white Southerners were engaged in a full-blown Confederate revival as they defended racial segregation. They claimed to be protecting the South from an overreaching federal government hostile to their particular way of life, rather than just their particular system of racial apartheid.

Sadly, 150 years after Edmund Ruffin pulled the trigger, many Americans remain in thrall to a romanticized idea of the Confederacy. At Civil War reenactments, far more people show up dressed as Johnny Reb than as Billy Yank, and Confederate flags on car bumpers testify to the enduring notion that Confederates were brave and gallant - and to 150 years of history written by the losers.

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