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Five Persistent Myths About the American Civil War That Refuse to Die

Let’s set these straight



Paul Combs Follow 7 min read · Apr 12, 2026

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"Battle of Spotsylvania" by Thure de Thulstrup, 1887 (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

I've been re-watching Ken Burns' outstanding 1990 series, *The Civil War*, over the past few nights, and since it's been more than a month since my last article debunking historical myths, I decided to do one specifically on the American Civil War. While there is no truly complete count of the number of books written about the Civil War, a rough estimate puts the total at close to

100,000 (with around 1,500 new titles being published every year). Even harder to count are the online articles about the war, which surely number in the millions. This is not surprising, given that more Americans died in the four-year conflict (620,000) than nearly all other American wars combined and the fact that scars from the war continue to plague the nation more than 150 years later.

It is also no surprise, though it is regrettable, that more myths about the Civil War persist to this day than any other conflict the United States has engaged in. It was, after all, a battle between two diametrically opposed sides, with the South seeing it as a war for independence and the North viewing it as outright rebellion. Even the titles of early history books about the war reflected this division, as did the versions of the history of the war they told. That's not history, however, but rather propaganda.

And it is dangerous propaganda, much of it forming the "Lost Cause" narrative that has been believed and taught in the South for far too long. It's long past time to debunk the propaganda and accept the real history of the war. In that spirit, here are five persistent myths about the Civil War that must be set straight.

1. The issue of states' rights, not slavery, was the cause of the war. This is a myth that many people still believe today, one that some school textbooks

teach as a reason for the war, and one that white supremacist groups expound regularly; it also not a new one. From the moment states of the newly formed Confederacy began to secede from the Union, Southerners claimed it was not over the issue of slavery, but rather to defend the rights of the states against a tyrannical Federal government.

That makes a fine rallying cry, but it's a rallying cry that completely ignores a simple fact: nearly every state's secession declaration, as well as the Constitution of the Confederacy itself, spoke of the preservation of slavery, often in the very first paragraphs. In the Mississippi Declaration of Secession, for example, 401 of its 710 words directly reference slavery, beginning with this line: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery — the greatest material interest of the world." And while they did mention states' rights in these documents, they were almost always talking about a state's right to allow its people — its white people — to own slaves.

2. Robert E. Lee was far superior to Ulysses S. Grant as a military strategist but was simply overwhelmed by the Union's advantage in men and equipment. The common narrative, even in textbooks, has always been that Robert E. Lee was a brilliant strategist and tactician who did more than anyone could have imagined or expected with far fewer men and resources. But did he really?

It is a fact that Lee won several impressive victories early in the war, most notably at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. But these victories aside, Lee's near-obsessive desire to destroy the Army of the Potomac caused him to repeatedly take unacceptable losses in situations where victory was clearly not attainable, Antietam and Gettysburg being the most egregious examples. Far too often he refused to listen to his commanders or delegate responsibility to them, preferring to issue all commands himself. The only exception was Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, whom Lee did clearly trust; Jackson proved instrumental in Lee's victories and was sorely missed after his death on May 10, 1863.

Another advantage Lee enjoyed early in the war was the complete ineptitude of the Northern generals prior to Grant taking command of the Army of the Potomac in May 1864. Earlier commanders (like Gen. George McClellan) never pressed their tactical or numerical advantage when they had it; this allowed Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia to escape what should have been complete annihilation on numerous occasions. Once Grant took command, that weakness on the Union side ended and the Confederacy was doomed as a result.

It would have been far wiser for Lee to have fought a defensive war rather than the all-out offensive he usually favored. Historian James McPherson,

author of the excellent book *Battle Cry of Freedom* said it best: "The South could win the war by not losing, but the North could only win by winning."

3. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery in the United States. This one is probably more misunderstanding than myth, but the Emancipation Proclamation, which was issued on September 22, 1862, and became effective on January 1, 1863, did not end slavery in the entire country. It only freed the slaves in the ten states that were still, at that time, in rebellion and not under Union control. It did not include Tennessee (then under Union control) or the slave states that had remained in the Union: Maryland, Delaware, Missouri, and Kentucky.

Even with this limited scope, there was no way for the North to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation in those areas of the Confederacy it had not yet recaptured. But the Proclamation had the effect Lincoln intended: it kept France and Great Britain, both of which were anti-slavery, out of the war. Slavery as an institution did not officially end across the entire country until the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on December 6, 1865.

4. Thousands of Black soldiers fought to defend the Confederacy. This is one myth that has not existed since the time of the war itself. In fact, it only gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s. This was the very time both historians

and much of the public were finally acknowledging that slavery was the true cause of the war, and it is no coincidence that a myth like this would spring up at the same time. It allowed defiant proponents of the Lost Cause narrative, those who felt guilt about the actions of their ancestors, and those in denial in general to throw up an argument that was, to put it lightly, quite ridiculous: the claim that Black soldiers fought to preserve the Confederacy too and thus the war couldn't have been about slavery.

Except that Black soldiers didn't fight for the Confederacy. The Confederate government forbade the enlistment of Blacks, whether free or slave, for service in the Confederate Army for the majority of the war. Blacks were drafted for service as cooks and laborers, but that simply shifted their bondage from the plantation to Army camps.

Shortly before the end of the war, with defeat already certain, the Confederate Congress finally voted to allow slaves to become soldiers. It was far too late by then. As Encyclopedia Virginia says on its website: "Only a few black men were ever accepted into Confederate service as soldiers, and none did any significant fighting."

5. Most Confederate monuments were erected shortly after the war to honor the soldiers who died. These so-called "memorials to the heroic dead" might have made at least some sense had they actually been erected

immediately following the war's end in 1865; defiance in the face of defeat is not uncommon. However, and this is something far too few of their defenders seem to know, the bulk of the monuments were erected in two specific time periods: the years between 1900 and 1930, and again between 1954 and 1965. The first period saw the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan in the South, and the second was the period of the civil rights movement that brought an end to segregation.

Looking honestly at the timing of this surge in memorials to the men who led the fight to preserve slavery in America, it's hard to claim it was about honoring their sacrifice. If that were true, they would have been built in the late 1860s and 1870s. The actual timing points to something far more shameful.

These statues were not odes to the past, but rather symbols, justifications, and encouragements of a future that still saw whites as superior. They were meant, whether we want to admit it or not, to show Blacks their "place" in Southern life, history, and culture not just in the past, but in the future as well. They were not memorials; they were warnings in stone.

Let me be clear about something at this point. I am not advocating the removal of the history of the Civil War, the history of the Confederacy, or the history of slavery. We have to know our history or we will never learn from

it. But history is taught through books, museums, and classrooms. Statues, by contrast, are erected to glorify their subjects. We would not put statues of Aaron Burr or Benedict Arnold on the courthouse lawn; Jefferson Davis doesn't belong there either.

These five myths are by no means the only ones about the Civil War, but they are among the most persistent. Removing them from our national discussion is imperative if we are to ever fully heal the wounds of that cataclysmic conflict and that starts with getting the facts right.

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