

RACIAL INJUSTICE IN AMERICA

EUROPE IN 1989, AMERICA IN 2020, AND THE DEATH OF THE LOST CAUSE

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Protesters call for the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue in Richmond, Virginia, in June. Photograph by Eze Amos / Getty

In November, 1989, when the Berlin Wall suddenly began to crumble and then fall, much of the world watched in awe. Could it be true that Communism was about to collapse? For seventy years, it had been a system, an ideology, that ordered large swaths of the globe. Now a whole vision of history—a vision meant to maximize freedom, but which had turned, over time, into tyranny—seemed to be leaving the stage.

Many people still possess, as I do, little pieces of concrete from the Berlin Wall. And many of us feel some awe in seeing, during these past few weeks, Confederate monuments in America likewise reduced to pieces, relics of the collapse, after a hundred and

fifty-five years, of the public vestiges of the Lost Cause tradition. The summer of 2020, like the autumn of 1989, could mark the death of a specific vision of history. If so, it has taken a long, long night—to borrow from Robbie Robertson and the Band—to drive old Dixie down.

We should not celebrate too much as monuments topple and old slave-auction blocks are removed. History did not end when the Soviet Union dissolved, and it will not end now, even if a vibrant movement sweeps a new age of civil rights into America. Most of all, we must remember what the Lost Cause is and was before we try to call it past. As so many now understand—whether they have read William Faulkner or Toni Morrison or the thousands of scholars who have reshaped American history in the past three generations—slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and segregation are never purely historical. They still haunt the air we breathe, or cannot breathe. They are what W. E. B. Du Bois once called, in 1901, our “present-past.” They are a history never to be erased, even if and when the bronze Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee can be carried out of the U.S. Capitol and left at the Smithsonian Castle, for a decision on their final resting place.

The Lost Cause is one of the most deeply ingrained mythologies in American history. Loss on an epic scale is often the source of great literature, stories that take us to the dark hearts of the human condition. But when loss breeds twisted versions of history to salve its pain, when it encourages the revitalization of vast systems of oppression, and when loss is allowed to freely commemorate itself in stone and in sentimentalism across the cultural landscape, it can poison a civil society and transform itself into a ruling regime. Some myths are benign as cultural markers. Others are rooted in lies so beguiling, so powerful as engines of resentment and political mobilization, that they can fill parade grounds in Nuremberg, or streets in Charlottesville, or rallies across the country.

The Lost Cause ideology emerged first as a mood of traumatized defeat, but grew into an array of arguments, organizations, and rituals in search of a story that could regain power. After the Civil War, from the late eighteen-sixties to the late eighteen-eighties, diehards, especially though not exclusively in Virginia, and led by former high-ranking Confederate officers, shaped the memory of the war through regular publications and memoirs. They turned Robert E. Lee into a godlike Christian leader and a genius tactician, one who could be defeated only by overwhelming odds. Their revolution, as the story went, was a noble one crushed by industrial might, but emboldened, in the eighteen-seventies, by righteous resistance to radical Reconstruction, to black suffrage, and to the three Constitutional amendments that transformed America.

The Lost Cause argued that the Confederacy never fought to preserve slavery, and that it was never truly defeated on the battlefields of glory. Lost Cause spokesmen saw the Confederacy as the real legacy of the American Revolution—a nation that resisted imperial and centralized power, and which could still triumph over rapid urbanization, immigration, and strife between labor and capital. Above all, the Lost Cause seductively reminded white Americans that the Confederacy had stood for a civilization in which both races thrived in their best, “natural” capacities. The slaughter of the Civil War had destroyed that order, but it could be remade, and the whole nation, defined as white Anglo-Saxon, could yet be revived.

By the eighteen-nineties, the Lost Cause had transformed into a widespread popular movement, led especially by Southern white women in the United Daughters of the Confederacy (U.D.C.), and by an increasingly active United Confederate Veterans association (U.C.V.) and its widely popular magazine, *The Confederate Veteran*. The first commander-in-chief of the U.C.V. was General John B. Gordon, a leader of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia and a former governor and senator for that state. Gordon became famous for his particular brand of reconciliation, which involved popular lectures that humanized soldiers on both sides of

the war, and for his tales of the “kindest relations” between masters and slaves in antebellum times. He is one of the ten former Confederates for whom United States military forts are named across the South.

From the eighteen-nineties through the First World War, as Jim Crow laws and practices spread across Southern states, and as lynching became a ritual of terror and control, it was organizations like the U.D.C. and U.C.V. that placed hundreds of monuments, large and small, all over city squares and town centers. By 1920, virtually no one in the South, black or white, could miss seeing a veterans’ parade, or a statue of a Confederate soldier leaning on his musket with sweet innocence and regional pride. Schools, streets, and parks were named for Confederates. And, at one dedication after another, the message sent to black Southerners was that the Lost Cause was no longer lost. It had, instead, become a victory narrative about the overturning of Reconstruction and the reestablishment of white supremacy. The myth had become the ruling regime, which governed by law and by violence, and because it controlled the story. What’s more, the nation largely acquiesced to, and even applauded, this dogged Southern revival.

The language of the Lost Cause, as well as its monumental presence, is now what many of us desire to banish. But as we do so it is useful to hear its chords, since they still echo today in precincts of the American right. In 1868, Edward A. Pollard, the former editor of a Richmond newspaper, in his book “The Lost Cause Regained,” urged “reconciliation” with conservative Northerners, as long as it was on Southern terms. “To the extent of securing the supremacy of the white man,” he wrote, “and the traditional liberties of the country . . . she [the South] really triumphs in the true cause of the war.” Such an achievement would take years, but it did come. When a former Confederate officer, John T. Morgan, addressed a meeting of the Southern Historical Society, in 1877, he framed the preceding nine years as the “war of Reconstruction.” The South, he maintained, had just won this “second war,” and therefore no one “need inquire who was right or who was wrong” in the first war. This was never easy for Union veterans to swallow, but it was how white supremacy became an integral part of the process of national reconciliation.

The ultimate sick soul who had to be healed was Jefferson Davis, the former President of the Confederacy, whose large memorial has now been toppled in Richmond. After he was released from prison, in 1867, without ever having been tried for treason, Davis gave a heartbeat to the Lost Cause story. His two-volume, 1,279-page memoir, “The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government” (1881), is the longest and most self-righteous legal brief on behalf of a failed political movement ever produced by an American. Davis laid all responsibility for secession and the war on the “unlimited, despotic power” of the North. To Davis, slavery was in no way the cause of the conflict, and yet, like almost all Lost Causers, he went on at great length to defend the enslavement of blacks. Black people had already been enslaved in Africa, Davis argued. In America, they had been “trained in the gentle arts of peace and order,” and advanced from “unprofitable savages to millions of efficient Christian laborers.” The “magic word of ‘freedom’ ” had ruined this peaceful world like the “tempter . . . the Serpent in Eden.”

Confounding as these arguments may seem to most twenty-first-century minds, Lost Cause spokesmen were deadly serious, and their ideas propped up a story that many Americans still accept. Around Memorial Day in Richmond, 1890, when the spectacular Robert E. Lee equestrian statue was unveiled before a crowd of up to a hundred and fifty thousand people, a Lee cult seemed in total triumph. Confederate flags waved everywhere. A women’s memorial association had managed to wrangle many factions into agreement on a design and artist for the statue, and on elaborate ceremonies to anoint it. Twenty-five years after Appomattox, the general who had led the crusade to divide and destroy American democracy stood high astride his monument, the first in a series of statues that became Monument Avenue. Much of the Northern press called the statue evidence that Lee had become, as the *New York Times* put it, a “national possession.”

Not everyone was celebrating, of course. Many black men, needing jobs, had worked on the crews that pulled and set the giant granite structure into place. The three black men on the Richmond City Council had voted against an appropriation for the Lee monument. And John Mitchell, the editor of the Richmond *Planet*, the city's black newspaper, wrote that those who wore the "clinking chains of slavery" had a perfect right to denounce the spectacle of the unveiling and all that lay behind it. Black men, Mitchell said, helped "put up the Lee Monument, and should the time come will be there to take it down." The state of Virginia apparently wishes to do just that, in an act that many of us who have studied these matters thought would never occur. When it does, one can hope that a line of black citizens might be given pride of place in holding the ropes.

What comes after this change in commemoration will determine whether we are truly witnessing the death of the Lost Cause. Structural racism remains present in nearly every corner of the United States—in the material worlds of health care, economic inequality, and policing, and in our politics, which are split between a white-people's party and a party trying in fits and strides to be a voice of pluralism. When the Berlin Wall opened and then fell, and as Eastern European countries began to move from Communism to democracy, we learned that their path was not easy. Some, like Hungary, have collapsed into authoritarianism. Russia itself, now run by a dictator, is a mockery of democracy that tries its best to poison our own.

The term used for the great changes spurred, in 1989, by the reunification of Germany was *die Wende*, which can be translated as the *turning*, or the *change*. When the Cold War came to an end, societies and minds seemed to be opening, and democracy seemed to have new traction. Around that time, in the early nineties, I was a visiting Fulbright professor in Germany. I travelled all over the country and, at one particular stop, in a small provincial town near Dresden, I lectured to a room full of East German high-school teachers, who were just beginning to develop curricula that might include U.S. history. My host was a local school principal named Matthias, who had been born near the end of the Second World War, in Dresden. His family had escaped the city in 1944, just before its near-total destruction. He grew up amid the rubble, and he had spent his entire life under the East German Communist regime and its controls on thought and behavior.

Die Wende was challenging and overwhelming for Matthias. Once, over dinner, he told me that he did not think he and his generation could adapt to what capitalism and democracy would bring. He was more hopeful for his son's generation: he thought it had a chance to secure not just a future but a new history, a story true to reality. Then he uttered something that I will never forget. He said, "I know your country. I have been to your country with my fingers on a map." He spoke at length of how he had memorized American states and their capitals. He had never been to the country, but, for him, America was an idea to wrestle with, its political creeds an obsession.

The statues are being toppled, but the story that built them remains. If Matthias could visit America, one hopes that he would see a country trying to transcend that story—trying, like his son, to capture not just a brighter future but a truer sense of the past. If he were here, I would tell him of a history full of suffering, hypocrisy, and tragedy, along with sublime creativity and advancement. I would tell him how Americans have been rewriting this history for a long time, and we could talk to each other about the link between public memory and the grind of progress. It would be the beginning, I think, of a long conversation. But if this is to be our 1989, we must make the most of it. The whole world may be watching.

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