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Point/Counterpoint: Insidious Cycle

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Abstract

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Point/Counterpoint: An Insidious Cycle

October 17, 2014

by Bryan Caswell '15 and Heather Clancy '15

Heather: In our last post, Bryan and I explored the unique challenges that the reenacting hobby poses to the interpretation and public understanding of the American Civil War. In it, we touched on just a few of the many motivations that inspire individuals to reenact. As we continue our Point/Counterpoint series below, we look to explore the relationship of the reenacting hobby with a particularly complex and problematic ideology—the Lost Cause.

Bryan: There are many breeding grounds for that despicable interpretation of the Civil War known as the Lost Cause. Perpetrated by Confederate veterans after the war, the Lost Cause teaches that the Civil War was neither caused by nor fought over the question of slavery, and that Confederates of all ranks, classes, and creeds were simply honest Americans nobly fighting for the doomed yet righteous cause of states' rights. These claims are dubious at best; the importance of slavery in particular is universally agreed upon in academic circles due to the indisputable evidence for its centrality to the official Confederate justification for secession. One of the most interesting venues for the propagation of this questionable ideology is, I have noticed, that of reenacting.

Reenacting is, at some level, based on the desire to emulate that which one is reenacting, and so it should be no surprise that the Lost Cause thrives in an environment where men and women garb themselves in the uniforms of the Confederacy and march off to 'fight' the Yankees. Yet the influence of the Lost Cause is not confined to those reenactors who wear grey. A surprisingly large number of reenactors who primarily portray Union soldiers buy into the Lost Cause. This paradox is facilitated by the nefarious nature of the Lost Cause and its co-option of notions of soldierly comradeship for its own purposes. The ideas that all who fought in the Civil War were Americans and that the personal fighting motives of so many Confederates (which should not be



confused with the cause of the war or official war aims of either side) did not hinge upon slavery give rise to the erroneous assumption that the Confederacy was not a morally reprehensible system of government founded upon the right to enslave other men. Similarly, the atmosphere of reenactments can foster just such a comradely atmosphere as men fraternize with their opposite numbers and even at times briefly switch sides to rectify an inequality in numbers. Out of this environment arise the perfect conditions for an increase in sympathy for those boys who wore grey, and so the appeal of the Lost Cause grows ever higher. One might even classify reenacting as a gateway drug for the Lost Cause.

Heather: Interestingly, it seems that the reverse is also true. Although the Lost Cause has undergone seemingly countless reinventions and reinterpretations in the decades since its advent, its enduring appeal to certain elements of the American public is inextricably linked to its function as a sanitizer and simplifier of one of the bloodiest and most irreparably messy periods in American memory. Because the Lost Cause functions as the whitewashing of a morally grey area of Southern history, its adherents cling to it with a ferocity that belies a desperate pursuit of both legitimacy and absolution. The ideology's function as simplifier and obscurer is undeniably problematic—its primary role is that of misrepresentation and misinformation, and its effect on Civil War memory can only be said to be recusant and limiting, if not downright treacherous.

Largely as a result of the Lost Cause's persistence in American memory culture, commemoration of the Civil War has sustained a surprisingly robust level of interest even 150 years after the conflict's conclusion. Its provision of an attractive interpretive alternative to the cruel realities of the Civil War era has drawn legions of misguided Americans to the study of the Civil War not as it was, but *as it might have been*. Among such groups, the Civil War offers a arena of self-aggrandizement and self-affirmation, an arena that is particularly well populated in the hobby of Civil War reenacting. For Lost Causers, reenacting provides a stage upon which to play out their most cherished ahistorical interpretations. It is among the company streets of reenactments that the Lost Cause has so often found its full potential, as bright-eyed newcomers of all demographics stride forward to stake their claim on their nation's understanding of its only civil war. It is by their hand that the Lost Cause enters the reenacting hobby, like so many wisps of gunpowder smoke through the air. In this way, it is not only reenacting that fosters the Lost Cause, but also reversely the Lost Cause that is the so-called "gateway drug" to reenacting.

Bryan: As with any aspect of historical memory, the relationship of reenacting to the Lost Cause is not nor ever will be as tidy as we might like. It would appear that the tradition of Civil War reenacting and the propagation of the Lost Cause ideology have formed a symbiotic relationship which, in turn, sustains that parasite of willful ignorance which feeds on the historical memory of the conflict. Only time will tell whether there will ever come an end to this insidious cycle. It is the very distance garnered by time that has resulted in the nostalgia so indispensable to the sustenance of the Lost Cause, so perhaps the prognosis may not be so rosy.

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