

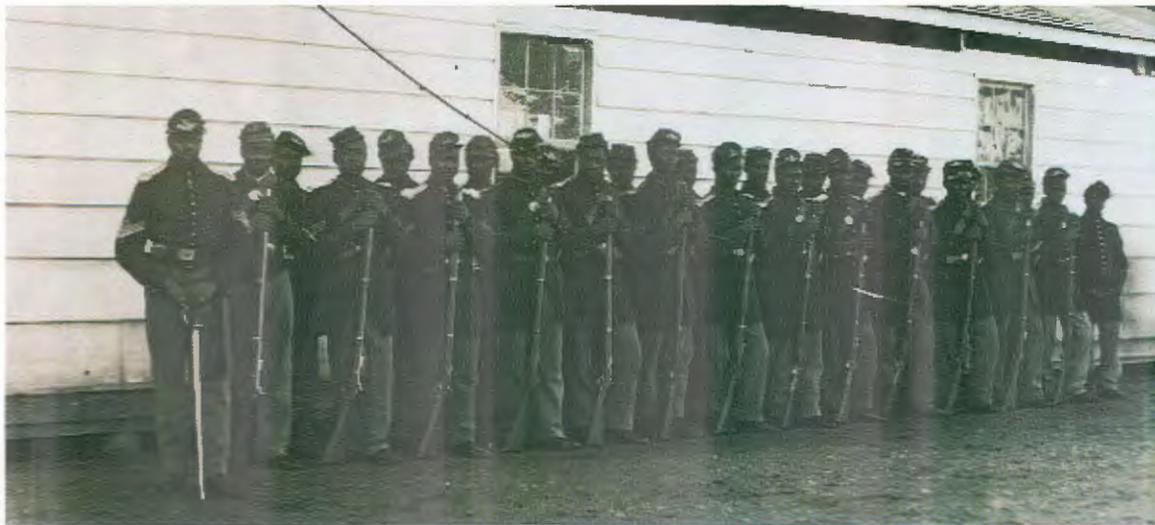


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Why Do So Few Blacks Study the Civil War?

By Ta-Nehisi Coates



Members of Company E, Fourth U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment, pictured at Fort Lincoln, in Maryland. The regiment, which was organized in Baltimore after the war broke out, lost nearly 300 men. (Library of Congress)

In my seventh-grade year, my school took a bus trip from our native Baltimore to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the sanctified epicenter of American tragedy. It was the mid-'80s, when educators in our inner cities, confronted by the onslaught of crack, Saturday Night Specials, and teen pregnancy, were calling on all hands for help—even the hands of the departed.

Preposterous notions abounded. Black people talked openly of covert plots evidenced by skyrocketing murder rates and the plague of HIV. Conscious people were quick to glean, from the cascade of children murdered over Air Jordans, something still darker—the work of warlocks who would extinguish all hope for our race. The stratagem of these shadow forces was said to be amnesia: they would have us see no past greatness in ourselves, and thus no future glory. And so it was thought that a true history, populated by a sable nobility and punctuated by an ensemble of Negro “firsts,” might be the curative for black youth who had no aspirations beyond the corner.

The attempt was gallant. It enlisted every field, from the arts (Phillis Wheatley) to the sciences (Charles Drew). Each February—known since 1976 as Black History Month—trivia contests rewarded those who could recall the inventions of Garrett A. Morgan, the words of Sojourner Truth, or the wizard

hands of Daniel Hale Williams. At my middle school, classes were grouped into teams, each of them named for a hero (or a “shero,” in the jargon of the time) of our long-suffering, yet magnificent, race. I was on the (Thurgood) Marshall team. Even our field trips felt invested with meaning—the favored destination was Baltimore’s National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, where our pantheon was rendered lifelike by the disciples of Marie Tussaud.

Given this near-totemic reverence for black history, my trip to Gettysburg—the site of the ultimate battle in a failed war to protect and extend slavery—should cut like a lighthouse beam across the sea of memory. But when I look back on those years when black history was seen as tangible, as an antidote for the ills of the street, and when I think on my first visit to America’s original hallowed ground, all is fog.

I remember riding in a beautiful coach bus, as opposed to the hated yellow cheese. I remember stopping at Hardee’s for lunch, and savoring the respite from my vegetarian father’s lima beans and tofu. I remember cannons, and a display of guns. But as for any connections to the very history I was regularly baptized in, there is nothing. In fact, when I recall all the attempts to inculcate my classmates with some sense of legacy and history, the gaping hole of Gettysburg opens into the chasm of the Civil War.

We knew, of course, about Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. But our general sense of the war was that a horrible tragedy somehow had the magical effect of getting us free. Its legacy belonged not to us, but to those who reveled in the costume and technology of a time when we were property.

Our alienation was neither achieved in independence, nor stumbled upon by accident, but produced by American design. The belief that the Civil War wasn’t for us was the result of the country’s long search for a narrative that could reconcile white people with each other, one that avoided what professional historians now know to be true: that one group of Americans attempted to raise a country wholly premised on property in Negroes, and that another group of Americans, including many Negroes, stopped them. In the popular mind, that demonstrable truth has been evaded in favor of a more comforting story of tragedy, failed compromise, and individual gallantry. For that more ennobling narrative, as for so much of American history, the fact of black people is a problem.

In April 1865, the United States was faced with a discomfiting reality: it had seen 2 percent of its population destroyed because a section of its citizenry would countenance anything to protect, and expand, the right to own other people. The mass bloodletting shocked the senses. At the war’s start, Senator James Chesnut Jr. of South Carolina, believing that casualties would be minimal, claimed he would drink all the blood shed in the coming disturbance. Five years later, 620,000 Americans were dead. But the fact that such carnage had been wreaked for a cause that Ulysses S. Grant called “one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse” invited the damnation of history. Honor is salvageable from a military defeat; much less so from an ideological defeat, and especially one so duly earned in defense of slavery in a country premised on liberty.

The fallen Confederacy’s chroniclers grasped this historiographic challenge and, immediately after the war, began erasing all evidence of the crime—that is to say, they began erasing black people—from the written record. In his collection of historical essays *This Mighty Scourge*, James McPherson notes that before the war, Jefferson Davis defended secession, saying it was justified by Lincoln’s alleged

radicalism. Davis claimed that Lincoln's plan to limit slavery would make "property in slaves so insecure as to be comparatively worthless ... thereby annihilating in effect property worth thousands of millions of dollars." Alexander Stephens renounced the notion that all men are created equal, claiming that the Confederacy was

founded upon exactly the opposite idea ... upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition.

He called this ideology a "great physical, philosophical and moral truth."

But after the war, each man changed his interpretation. Davis referred to the "existence of African servitude" as "only an incident," not the cause of the war. Stephens asserted,

Slavery, so called, was but the question on which these antagonistic principles ... of Federation, on the one side, and Centralism ... on the other ... were finally brought into ... collision.

Davis later wrote:

Never was there happier dependence of labor and capital on each other. The tempter came, like the serpent of Eden, and decoyed them with the magic word of "freedom" ... He put arms in their hands, and trained their humble but emotional natures to deeds of violence and bloodshed, and sent them out to devastate their benefactors.

In such revisions of history lay the roots of the noble Lost Cause—the belief that the South didn't lose, so much as it was simply overwhelmed by superior numbers; that General Robert E. Lee was a contemporary King Arthur; that slavery, to be sure a benevolent institution, was never central to the South's true designs. Historical lies aside, the Lost Cause presented to the North an attractive compromise. Having preserved the Union and saved white workers from competing with slave labor, the North could magnanimously acquiesce to such Confederate meretriciousness and the concomitant irrelevance of the country's blacks. That interpretation served the North too, for it elided uncomfortable questions about the profits reaped by the North from Southern cotton, as well as the North's long strategy of appeasement and compromise, stretching from the Fugitive Slave Act back to the Constitution itself.

By the time of the 50th-anniversary commemoration of Gettysburg, this new and comfortable history was on full display. Speakers at the ceremony pointedly eschewed any talk of the war's cause in hopes of pursuing what the historian David Blight calls "a mourning without politics." Woodrow Wilson, when he addressed the crowd, did not mention slavery but asserted that the war's meaning could be found in "the splendid valor, the manly devotion of the men then arrayed against one another, now grasping hands and smiling into each other's eyes." Wilson, born into the Confederacy and the first postbellum president to hail from the South, was at that very moment purging blacks from federal jobs and remanding them to separate washrooms. Thus Wilson executed a familiar act of theater—urging the country's white citizens away from their history, while continuing to act in the spirit of its darkest chapters. Wilson's ideas were not simply propaganda, but notions derived from some of the country's most celebrated historians. James McPherson notes that titans of American history like Charles Beard, Avery Craven, and James G. Randall minimized the role of slavery in the war; some blamed the

violence on irreconcilable economic differences between a romantic pastoral South and a capitalistic manufacturing North, or on the hot rhetoric of radical abolitionists.

With a firm foothold in the public memory and in the academic history, the comfortable narrative found its most influential expression in the popular media. Films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind* revealed an establishment more interested in the alleged sins perpetrated upon Confederates than in the all-too-real sins perpetrated upon the enslaved people in their midst. That predilection continues. In 2010's *The Conspirator*, the director Robert Redford's Mary Surratt is the preferred victim of political persecution—never mind those whose very lives were persecution. The new AMC show *Hell on Wheels* deploys the trope of the blameless Confederate wife ravished and killed by Union marauders, as though Fort Pillow never happened.

The comfortable narrative haunts even the best mainstream presentations of the Civil War. Ken Burns's eponymous and epic documentary on the war falsely claims that the slaveholder Robert E. Lee was personally against slavery. True, Lee once asserted in a letter that slavery was a "moral & political evil." But in that same letter, he argued that there was no sense protesting the peculiar institution and that its demise should be left to "a wise Merciful Providence." In the meantime, Lee was happy to continue, in Lincoln's words, wringing his "bread from the sweat of other men's faces."

Burns also takes as his narrator Shelby Foote, who once called Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a slave-trader and Klansman, "one of the most attractive men who ever walked through the pages of history," and who presents the Civil War as a kind of big, tragic misunderstanding. "It was because we failed to do the thing we really have a genius for, which is compromise," said Foote, neglecting to mention the Missouri Compromise, the Fugitive Slave Act, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the fact that any further such compromise would have meant the continued enslavement of black people.

For that particular community, for my community, the message has long been clear: the Civil War is a story for white people—acted out by white people, on white people's terms—in which blacks feature strictly as stock characters and props. We are invited to listen, but never to truly join the narrative, for to speak as the slave would, to say that we are as happy for the Civil War as most Americans are for the Revolutionary War, is to rupture the narrative. Having been tendered such a conditional invitation, we have elected—as most sane people would—to decline.

In my study of African American history, the Civil War was always something of a sideshow. Just off center stage, it could be heard dimly behind the stories of Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, and Martin Luther King Jr., a shadow on the fringe. But three years ago, I picked up James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* and found not a shadow, but the Big Bang that brought the ideas of the modern West to fruition. Our lofty notions of democracy, egalitarianism, and individual freedom were articulated by the Founders, but they were consecrated by the thousands of slaves fleeing to Union lines, some of them later returning to the land of their birth as nurses and soldiers. The first generation of the South's postbellum black political leadership was largely supplied by this class.

Transfixed by the war's central role in making democracy real, I have now morphed into a Civil War buff, that peculiar specimen who pores over the books chronicling the battles, then walks the parks where the battles were fought by soldiers, then haunts the small towns from which the soldiers hailed,

many never to return.

This journey—to Paris, Tennessee; to Petersburg, Virginia; to Fort Donelson; to the Wilderness—has been one of the most meaningful of my life, though at every stop I have felt myself ill-dressed in another man's clothes. What echoes from nearly all the sites chronicling the war is a deep sense of tragedy. At Petersburg, the film in the visitor center mourns the city's fall and the impending doom of Richmond. At the Wilderness, the park ranger instructs you on the details of the men's grisly deaths. The celebrated Civil War historian Bruce Catton best sums up this sense when he refers to the war as "a consuming tragedy so costly that generations would pass before people could begin to say whether what it had bought was worth the price."

All of those "people" are white.

For African Americans, war commenced not in 1861, but in 1661, when the Virginia Colony began passing America's first black codes, the charter documents of a slave society that rendered blacks a permanent servile class and whites a mass aristocracy. They were also a declaration of war.

Over the next two centuries, the vast majority of the country's blacks were robbed of their labor and subjected to constant and capricious violence. They were raped and whipped at the pleasure of their owners. Their families lived under the threat of existential violence—in just the four decades before the Civil War, more than 2 million African American slaves were bought and sold. Slavery did not mean merely coerced labor, sexual assault, and torture, but the constant threat of having a portion, or the whole, of your family consigned to oblivion. In all regards, slavery was war on the black family.

African Americans understood they were at war, and reacted accordingly: running away, rebelling violently, fleeing to the British, murdering slave-catchers, and—less spectacularly, though more significantly—refusing to work, breaking tools, bending a Christian God to their own interpretation, stealing back the fruits of their labor, and, in covert corners of their world, committing themselves to the illegal act of learning to read. Southern whites also understood they were in a state of war, and subsequently turned the antebellum South into a police state. In 1860, the majority of people living in South Carolina and Mississippi, and a significant minority of those living in the entire South, needed passes to travel the roads, and regularly endured the hounding of slave patrols.

It is thus predictable that when you delve into the thoughts of black people of that time, the Civil War appears in a different light. In her memoir of the war, the abolitionist Mary Livermore recalls her pre-war time with an Aunt Aggy, a house slave. Livermore saw Aggy's mixed-race daughter brutally attacked by the patriarch of the home. In a private moment, the woman warned Livermore that she could "hear the rumbling of the chariots" and that a day was coming when "white folks' blood is running on the ground like a river."

After the war had started, Livermore again met Aunt Aggy, who well recalled her prophecy and saw in the Civil War, not tragedy, but divine justice. "I always knowed it was coming," the woman told Livermore.

"I always heard the rumbling of the wheels. I always expected to see white folks heaped up dead. And the Lord, He's kept His promise and avenged His people, just as I knowed He would."

For blacks, it was not merely the idea of the war that had meaning, but the tangible violence, the actions of black people themselves as the killers and the killed, that mattered. Corporal Thomas Long, of the 33rd United States Colored Troops, told his fellow black soldiers,

“If we hadn’t become soldiers, all might have gone back as it was before ... But now things can never go back, because we have shown our energy and our courage and our natural manhood.”

Reflecting on the days leading to the Civil War, Frederick Douglass wrote:

I confess to a feeling allied to satisfaction at the prospect of a conflict between the North and the South. Standing outside the pale of American humanity, denied citizenship, unable to call the land of my birth my country, and adjudged by the supreme court of the United States to have no rights which white men were bound to respect, and longing for the end of the bondage of my people, I was ready for any political upheaval which should bring about a change in the existing condition of things.

He went on to assert that the Civil War was an achievement that outstripped the American Revolution:

It was a great thing to achieve American independence when we numbered three millions. But it was a greater thing to save this country from dismemberment and ruin when it numbered thirty millions.

The 20th century, with its struggles for equal rights, with the triumph of democracy as the ideal in Western thought, proved Douglass right. The Civil War marks the first great defense of democracy and the modern West. Its legacy lies in everything from women’s suffrage to the revolutions now sweeping the Middle East. It was during the Civil War that the heady principles of the Enlightenment were first, and most spectacularly, called fully to account.

In our present time, to express the view of the enslaved—to say that the Civil War was a significant battle in the long war against bondage and for government by the people—is to compromise the comfortable narrative. It is to remind us that some of our own forefathers once explicitly rejected the republic to which they’d pledged themselves, and dreamed up another country, with slavery not merely as a bug, but as its very premise. It is to point out that at this late hour, the totems of the empire of slavery—chief among them, its flag—still enjoy an honored place in the homes, and public spaces, of self-professed patriots and vulgar lovers of “freedom.” It is to understand what it means to live in a country that will never apologize for slavery, but will not stop apologizing for the Civil War.

In August, I returned to Gettysburg. My visits to battlefields are always unsettling. Repeatedly, I have dragged my family along, and upon arrival I generally wish that I hadn’t. Nowhere, as a black person, do I feel myself more of a problem than at these places, premised, to varying degrees, on talking around me. But of all the Civil War battlefields I’ve visited, Gettysburg now seems the most honest and forward-looking. The film in the visitor center begins with slavery, putting it at the center of the conflict. And in recent years, the National Park Service has made an effort to recognize an understated historical element of the town—its community of free blacks.

The Confederate army, during its march into Pennsylvania, routinely kidnapped blacks and sold them south. By the time Lee’s legions arrived in Gettysburg, virtually all of the town’s free blacks had hidden

or fled. On the morning of July 3, General George Pickett's division prepared for its legendary charge. Nearby, where the Union forces were gathered, lived Abraham Brien, a free black farmer who rented out a house on his property to Mag Palmer and her family. One evening before the war, two slave-catchers had fallen upon Palmer as she made her way home. (After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, slave-catchers patrolled the North, making little distinction between freeborn blacks and runaways.) They bound her hands, but with help from a passerby, she fought them off, biting off a thumb of one of the hunters.

Faulkner famously wrote of Pickett's Charge:

For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863 ... and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet ... That moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think *This time*.

These "Southern boys," like Catton's "people," are all white. But I, standing on Brien's property, standing where Mag Palmer lived, saw Pickett's soldiers charging through history, in wild pursuit of their strange birthright—the license to beat and shackle women under the cover of night. That is all of what was "in the balance," the nostalgic moment's corrupt and unspeakable core.

FOR THE PORTION of the country that still honors, or traces its ancestry to, the men who fired on Fort Sumter, and thus brought war, the truthful story of the Civil War tells of a defeat richly deserved, garnered in a pursuit now condemned. For the blameless North, it throws up the failed legacy of appeasement of slaveholders, the craven willingness to bargain on the backs of black people, and the unwillingness, in the Reconstruction years, to finish what the war started.

For realists, the true story of the Civil War illuminates the problem of ostensibly sober-minded compromise with powerful, and intractable, evil. For radicals, the wave of white terrorism that followed the war offers lessons on the price of revolutionary change. White Americans finding easy comfort in nonviolence and the radical love of the civil-rights movement must reckon with the unsettling fact that black people in this country achieved the rudiments of their freedom through the killing of whites.

And for black people, there is this—the burden of taking ownership of the Civil War as Our War. During my trips to battlefields, the near-total absence of African American visitors has been striking. Confronted with the realization that the Civil War is the genesis of modern America, in general, and of modern black America, in particular, we cannot just implore the Park Service and the custodians of history to do more outreach—we have to become custodians ourselves.

The Lost Cause was spread, not merely by academics and Hollywood executives, but by the descendants of Confederate soldiers. Now the country's battlefields are marked with the enduring evidence of their tireless efforts. But we have stories too, ones that do not hinge on erasing other people, or coloring over disrepute. For the Civil War to become Our War, it will not be enough to, yet again, organize opposition to the latest raising of the Confederate flag. The Civil War confers on us the most terrible burden of all—the burden of moving from protest to production, the burden of summoning our own departed hands, so that they, too, may leave a mark.

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