

# Civil War Memories: Contesting the Past in the United States since 1865

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## Review

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**Cook, Robert J.** *Civil War Memories: Contesting the Past in the United States since 1865*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$24.95 ISBN 9781421423494

If Robert J. Cook's *Civil War Memories: Contesting the Past in the United States since 1865* makes one clear point, it is that while the collective memories of the Civil War have always been fluid, they tend to veer, flow, and fracture alongside America's racial transformations. So, with Black Lives Matter activists in the streets and white nationalists in the halls of government, those memories in 2018 are undeniably raw and relevant. Current debates surrounding the removal of Jim Crow era Confederate statuary, starkly divided attitudes toward the Confederate Battle Flag, and divergent responses to violence by white supremacist defenders of Confederate "heritage" in Charleston, South Carolina, and Charlottesville, Virginia, betray how the historical memory of the Civil War continues to illuminate regional, political, and, most especially, racial disunity in the United States. Simply, black and white Americans inhabit separate realities when it comes to how race and historical memory intersect. (For instance, according to recent polling data, 75% of white Southerners view the Confederate flag primarily as a symbol of "Southern pride"; 75% of Black Southerners view it primarily as a symbol of racism.)

This racial chasm is not merely intellectual or cosmetic; it is material, experiential, and all-encompassing. As Cook maintains near the beginning of his book, all collective memory is generated within a social framework, and the ability to construct "hegemonic narratives" is a key component of social power (4). In other words, recent debates about flags and monuments are far more than mere interpretive disagreements; they are age-old contests of social power as it relates to race, class, gender, and region, deeply enmeshed with justice struggles and rights revolutions. Highlighting this linkage between present and past through popular culture, literature, songs, speeches, parades, memorials, reunions, veterans organizations, civic monuments, and various social, cultural, and political movements, *Civil War Memories* spans a considerable amount of chronological and explanative ground.

Divided into two sections, the first half of covers the postwar period through the late Gilded Age. Addressing Reconstruction politics, the construction of the Lost Cause, the Union Cause, and the forces for and against sectional reconciliation, the author puts forth the various strands of Civil War memory that developed after the war. Although much of this content will prove familiar to readers of David W. Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Belknap, 2001) or Caroline E. Janney's *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (UNC, 2013), Cook has a knack for both distilling and supplementing complex ideas. For instance, his insights into Unionist memory—its self-congratulation, its role in Republican politics, and its (sometimes uneasy) adjacency to emancipationism and racial

justice—are especially nuanced and thoughtful. Wading into the historiographical debate over whether white Civil War veterans reconciled with their former foes or remained mostly irreconcilable, Cook argues that it was not primarily the veterans who chose to “forget” or suppress the causes of and debates coming out of the war. Rather, it was their children, grandchildren, and others with no personal connection to the war who opted to move beyond sectional division.

In addition to underscoring generational issues, Cook also reiterates the theme of class. He is explicit that the bulk of remembering agents were middle and upper-class people and organizations, and that Blue-Gray reconciliation performed a “consensus-building function” that served the interests of political, military, publishing, and business elites (6). This top-down orientation—a class analysis that restates the disproportionate role of dominant institutions in forging white reunion—is too often taken for granted or omitted from Civil War memory studies.

Part 2 of Cook’s volume assesses Civil War memory since the Progressive era, or the period in which Civil War veterans were no longer the prevailing memory-makers. He pays particular attention to the use of Civil War memory in reform and social movements, and the role of commercial artists and consumer capitalism—novels and films—in promoting popular (and problematic) ideas about the Civil War. The author capably details how white reactionaries deployed what W.E.B. Du Bois termed “The Propaganda of History” to underwrite segregation as African Americans used folk memories of Black activism during Reconstruction to buttress the Freedom Movement. Yet Cook’s strongest chapters—those with the most original interpretive contributions and greatest analytical weight—deal with the Civil War centennial and Civil War memory after the civil rights era, into the rise of the neo-Confederacy and subsequent “culture wars,” through the Age of Obama, and up to the sesquicentennial. Cook has already written a full-length monograph on the war’s centennial years, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (LSU, 2007), so this is deeply researched and well-reasoned (if recognizable) terrain. Subsequently, the role of Civil War imagery and kitsch in election of the first Black president (“Abraham Obama”) and the connection between neo-Confederate ideology and symbols and recent race hate crimes demonstrate that Civil War memory remains incredibly versatile and socially germane.

Finally, Cook suggests that the battles over Civil War memory provide modern readers with several crucial lessons: the importance of concerted action by and in alliance with disempowered groups; the continued relationship between the memory of the war and racial injustice; the necessity of intellectual rigor in the face of propaganda related to the war; and the dangers of “cozy consensus,” including among academics (213). Indeed, Cook is right to allude to the dangers of celebrating, rather than critically analyzing, any military conflict. As he explains, even a well-intentioned emancipation narrative can be wielded to legitimize self-styled “humanitarian” military action. The rejection of this “good wars” notion explains in part the recent growth of a so-called “neo-revisionist” school.

Another strength of *Civil War Memories* is its consistent illustration of the relationship between popular memory and social power. “All modern nation-states strive to disseminate coherent visions of their history consistent with internal power relations,” Cook reminds (211). Outlining various competing and overlapping veins of Civil War memory, he argues that “group

memories” became infused with interparty competition and racial ideas to forge “consolidated, ideologically driven grand narratives” that have jockeyed for position against persistent counter-memories, mostly articulated by African Americans and their civil rights allies (3). Although this is not a novel argument, Cook concludes with an important reminder that collective memory is a function of the capacity to exert influence. He alleges that in the United States that has traditionally meant the marginalization of, among others, Native Americans and African Americans (I would of course add Latinx, women, LGBT+, and working-class people to this list).

While much of this is familiar interpretive ground, the conspicuous achievement of Cook’s study is the author’s ability to synthesize the concepts of so many Civil War memory historians—Blight, Janney, Gaines Foster, John Neff, William Blair, Barbara Gannon, Stuart McConnell and others—so concisely and cogently. That Cook is able to condense the critical and chronological heft of an increasingly weighty sub-field into 288 coherent and very well-written pages is notable indeed. Although students and scholars of Civil War memory will find no new analytical framework in Cook’s volume, *Civil War Memories* might prove an ideal text for undergraduate courses or for readers in search of a succinct and engaging overview of the sub-field. It certainly helps bring clarity out of chaos.

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