

White gloves or White supremacy?

The Lost Cause as a Palatable Counter Movement to Civil Rights: The 1964 Erection of the Jefferson Davis Statue in Memphis, Tennessee

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Historian Gaines Foster asserts,

The New South of the twentieth century remained a land haunted by the ghosts of the Confederacy. The ghosts had helped make it a conservative, deferential society; they had contributed to an unquestioning patriotism and respect for the military. Sometimes they had supported the cause of reaction. They were not ancestral spirits who exercised constant or crucial influence, however. Rather, they were phantoms called forth from time to time by various people for differing purposes. The ghosts of the Confederacy had shaped the New South, but in the twentieth century they had become too elusive and ephemeral to define its identity.¹

Jefferson Davis was one such phantom, summoned by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in Memphis, Tennessee and immortalized in an eight foot bronze statue. In 1964, the statue purposefully imposed a proud symbol of Southern heritage and tradition on the heart of downtown Memphis.

The basic facts are not debatable: In 1956, Mrs. Harry D. Allen, Vice President of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, urged the Memphis chapter of the Children of the Confederacy to begin raising money for a statue of Jefferson Davis. After several years passed without much progress, Mrs. Allen decided to take a more active role and formed the Jefferson Davis Memorial Association. After eight years of fund raising and planning, a statue of Jefferson Davis was unveiled in Confederate Park. A question that is not so straightforward is why this happened at this moment in time. What compelled this group of educated, society women to erect a statue to the first and only President of the

¹Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 198

Confederacy? More importantly, was their desire a result of the racial turmoil building at that moment in American history?

In order to correctly discern the relationship between the building of this statue and the Civil Rights Movement, one potential mistake must be avoided. Because the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis is remembered primarily from the perspective of the Sanitation Strike and the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, many assume that was the racial climate in 1964. However, African Americans were gradually given concessions in order to maintain the peace of the city. As historian and Memphian Janann Sherman notes, “Whites believed they had been most cooperative and race relations were moving along quite nicely.”² Memphis did not experience the same violence and racial turmoil that affected other areas of the South in the early sixties for several reasons. For example, by 1954 whites and African Americans in Memphis registered to vote at approximately the same rate. Memphis was also largely desegregated before the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Instead, this statue must be understood in its true historical and racial context.

In 1964, Freedom Summer and the Civil Rights Act stirred up a lot of previously unspoken feelings among white Memphians about the Civil Rights Movement. The so-called “Invasion of Mississippi” involved many Northern college students traveling to Mississippi in order to register Southern African Americans to vote. When several members of the Ku Klux Klan murdered three of these young activists on June 21, 1964, much unwanted national attention was directed towards the Delta region. James Chaney, a black volunteer, and his white fellow activists, Andrew Goodman and Michael

² Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), p. 137

Schwerner were arrested for alleged traffic violations on their way to investigate a church bombing near Philadelphia, Mississippi. Six weeks after their release from jail, their badly decomposed bodies were discovered under a nearby dam. Goodman and Schwerner deaths' were the result of single gunshot wounds to the chest, while Chaney had been savagely beaten.³ Although it did not directly affect Memphis, Freedom Summer significantly challenged the segregationist mindset of white Memphians.

From the earliest stirrings of the Civil Rights Movement, white Memphians reacted in a multitude of ways. The activities of the Klu Klux Klan, for example, represent an extreme reaction to racial change. However, such blatant displays of white supremacy were not acceptable for civilized, socially respected Christians. Thus, esteemed white Southern elites – especially women – reacted differently to the racial turmoil. An alternate, more palatable response to the Civil Rights Movement, involved the recycling of Lost Cause activities and rhetoric. The Lost Cause can most broadly be defined as a cultural movement revolving around the distinct Southern interpretation of the Old South, the Civil War and Reconstruction. In many ways, the Lost Cause was the method through which many Southerners defended their unique way of life, their cause during the war and its aftermath. By recycling the symbols of the Lost Cause movement, the Jefferson Davis Memorial Association was able to react to the Civil Rights Movement in their own quiet, polite way. The Lost Cause therefore was serviceable in the 1960s in a way that scholars have not taken seriously before – as a response and, in some ways, a counter movement to Civil Rights.

³ Website for The Congress of Racial Equality, "Freedom Summer," http://www.core-online.org/history/freedom_summer.html, (Accessed July 6, 2005)

As evidenced by 1964 letters to the editor in the *Commercial Appeal*, white Memphians responded to the Civil Rights Movement in a myriad of ways: Many white Memphians interpreted the Northern Civil Rights activists who traveled to Mississippi during Freedom Summer as invaders. Mrs. Charles E. Steele wrote, “Invasion into any section of our country where customs are different, where habits and backgrounds are different so that often there is no ‘meeting of the minds’ engenders turmoil, bitterness, malice and evil speaking that make up the ingredients of hatred.”⁴ In addition to condemning Freedom Summer in general, some Memphians criticized the youthful arrogance of the Northern activists. Mrs. Melvin Beasley asked, “Just what kind of trouble makers use their children to invade another state for the purpose of disrupting the lives of people who are trying to mind their own business. I suppose it is easier to tell other people of their faults than it is to confess to other people our own faults.”⁵ Although Freedom Summer did not affect the city directly, many Memphians objected to the greater idea of outsiders traveling to the South and stirring up trouble. Occasionally, this mentality lent itself to Civil War references. J. R. Simpson claimed, “Sources north of the Mason-Dixon Line are still fighting the Civil War. They look southward into Dixie for civil rights problems to solve when all they would have to do is simply look around in any of their own cities.”⁶ Many letters to the editor expressed this belief that the North was very hypocritical in its criticism of the South’s racial policies on the basis of the racial violence in the North, for example, the race riots which occurred in Harlem during 1964.

⁴ Mrs. Charles E. Steele, Letter to the Editor, *Commercial Appeal*, 7 June 1964

⁵ Mrs. Melvin Beasley, Letter to the Editor, *Commercial Appeal*, 19 July 1964

⁶ J. R. Simpson, Letter to the Editor, *Commercial Appeal*, 6 September 1964

Other white Memphians interpreted the Civil Rights movement as a government conspiracy towards Communism. Sherrye Johnson pondered,

Civil Rights? – It is more appropriately labeled ‘Federal control.’ Our ‘intelligent’ Government officials are using the ‘uneducated’ Negro as a stepping-stone for their own power. Of Course, the Negro should have his chance at voting, education, and every public facility. But, from past experiences he proves a bit undependable. Why should he work – when 10 or 12 children can bring him enough money for living – and a new car! So it appears that this step is from American freedom – to socialism – to the inevitable – Communism! Wait till you must abandon your job to an unqualified Negro. Americans – where is our country going?”⁷

As this letter illustrates, many Southerners remained skeptical of the federal government’s power and intentions.

A candid group of white supremacists existed in Memphis as well. Paul W. Denton asked,

What’s become of the epithet spelled m-i-s-c-e-g-e- n-a-t-i-o-n? Have the mongrelites become so entrenched among us that the moral values upon which this classic epithet was conceived have vanished? Do we not know that an ultimate objective of the Negro racists is unrestrained intermarriage of Negro men with white women? Let those of us who believe that miscegenation between white and Negro is inherently evil support men for and in office who will not yield to threat-backed demands for ‘rights’ to encroach on the rights of others.⁸

Although such blatant displays of white supremacy were less common than other reactions to Civil Rights, they clearly existed.

Other white Memphians responded in a very paternalistic fashion to the plight of African Americans. Mrs. P. R. Mathis claimed, “Most of we Mississippians are proud of our native Negroes who for many generations have worked for, and with the white people amicably, peaceably, and respectfully. We are proud of our increasing educational facilities for Negro children and young people who hope to further their education and

⁷ Sherrye Johnson, Letter to the Editor, *Commercial Appeal*, 12 July 1964

⁸ Paul W. Denton, Letter to the Editor, *Commercial Appeal*, 7 June 1964

raise their standard of living. [Mahalia Foote, Larry Thomas] are living examples of the ol' time Negro citizens who have won respect of the white race. We want our Negroes to have a chance in life, but they are being misled by agitators, misused by the upper courts. They need help and leadership in the right direction, and now!"⁹ This response to Civil Rights interestingly exhibited a common white feeling of responsibility for African Americans, whom they believed to be incapable of knowing what was in their best interest.

Although the editorials were overwhelming against the Civil Rights Movement, a small but nonetheless evident group of white Memphians were sympathetic. For example, many ministers challenged the city's racism and the South's violence in general, claiming it was unchristian. Father John E. Leone responded to Mrs. P. R. Mathis asking her "and all others who agree with her to read 'God's great plan' in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 10."¹⁰ Verse 10:28 in particular addresses Father Leone's point. "And he said unto them, ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean."¹¹ Father Leone clearly condemned those justifying segregation in the name of Christianity.

Other sympathizers pleaded for justice in the name of true American democracy. A writer identifying itself only as "A Worried Member" stated,

I think it is about time that the thinking moderate citizens speak up. All that the average Negro in America wants is to be treated as another human being. Mississippi is full of fine people of both races and they should be allowed to live here as first class citizens. I was not entirely in favor of the civil rights law as it stands but it is now the law of our land and as such

⁹ Mrs. P. R. Mathis, Letter to the Editor, *Commercial Appeal*, 14 June 1964

¹⁰ Father John E. Leone, Letter to the Editor, *Commercial Appeal*, 28 June 1964

¹¹ Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 10, King James Version of the *Holy Bible*

should and will be enforced. You have an opportunity to lead a quiet revolution in Southern government. Please reconsider.¹²

This editorial exemplifies the careful tone of many of the sympathizers to the Civil Rights plight, in particular because of the fact that the author chose to remain anonymous.

One particularly interesting response illustrated the feeling that Southern women were unable to voice their opinions and sympathies. Mrs. N. J. Bell wrote, "I would like to let Mrs. Bob Lyons know that she is not alone when she sits silently by while her friends try to rescue her from her political thinking. I and many others that I know of feel that we must remain silent on the candidates and the issues, as we will have to live with these friends and neighbors for years to come. They are such fanatics on the subject they will not listen to the other side anyhow so it is best to remain silent and try to retain their friendship."¹³ Although it is not possible to know how many women felt this way, this editorial clearly shows that many Southern women felt that they were not supposed to publicly voice their political or social opinions.

Elite Southern women, to an even greater degree than men, were not able to publicly voice their resistance to Civil Rights. Although great advances in women's rights had certainly been made by the 1960's, proper Southern ladies simply did not speak out about politics or other things because they were considered to be the business of men. These women therefore had to create their own niche in public life. Often, Southern women engaged in public activities by forming clubs or organizations that supported Southern men. Historian Leeann Whites explains,

The Ladies Memorial Associations that were formed in the South in the war's immediate aftermath were clearly dedicated to the reconstruction of Southern white men. These associations took as their first charge the care

¹² A Worried Member, Letter to the Editor, *Commercial Appeal*, 12 July 1964

¹³ Mrs. N. J. Bell, Letter to the Editor, *Commercial Appeal*, 18 October 1964

of the most defeat of Confederate men – those who actually fell in the conflict, the Confederate dead. They saw to it that these men received a decent burial, that the sacrifice of their lives was honored at least once a year on Confederate memorial Day, and that their story was emblazoned on monuments to the Confederate soldier that are to be found to this day in ever Southern town of any size.¹⁴ The integration of women’s previously privatized domestic labor into public life ... In the postwar South this step towards the integration of white women and white domestic relations into the public arena not only failed to underbut white male domination, it in fact served to reinforce it.¹⁵

Therefore, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, for example, was formed to memorialize the honor of Southern men who fought in the Civil War. By engaging in a public activity that honored men, rather than challenged them, the women of The United Daughters of the Confederacy were able to make public statements – for example erecting a statue to Jefferson Davis – in socially respectable ways.

Mrs. Harry A. Allen would have absolutely fit this mold of the proper Southern lady. Friends and family have deemed Louise Martin Allen “a life-long patriot of America’s past and present eras.” Although most active in the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Mrs. Allen was also a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, a participant in the Women’s Society of Christian Service of The Methodist Church, an officer in the Maternal Welfare League and the Nineteenth Century Club, and a member of the Rhodes College’s Kappa Alpha’s Mother’s Club. She was also listed in “Who’s Who among American women” and “Personalities of the South” and was once a finalist in the “Tennessee mother of the Year” designation.¹⁶

¹⁴ Leeann Whites, “Stand by Your Man”, *Women of the American South*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 136

¹⁵ Leeann Whites, “Stand by Your Man”, *Women of the American South*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 146

¹⁶ Mr. Ray Allen, “A Proud Patriot”

One of Mrs. Allen's most visible contributions to Memphis civic life involved her effort to erect the Jefferson Davis Statue in Confederate Park. Mrs. Allen promoted the idea of the statue, organized and served as the president of the Jefferson Davis Monument Association, helped to raise funding, commissioned the making and erection of the statue, and presided over its dedication and unveiling ceremony.

In 1956, Mrs. Harry D. Allen, the third Vice-President General of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, proposed that the Children of the Confederacy erect a statue in honor of Davis at their national convention in Memphis. Mr. Thomas M. Pappas, a reporter for the *Press-Scimitar* agreed to aid the campaign by publicizing the effort in the paper. However, according to the history written by the statue association, "after a year or so some of the boys and girls went off to college, some married and moved away. The *Press-Scimitar* said the money had stopped coming in, so the [project was turned] over to Mrs. Allen."¹⁷ In 1961, the state United Daughters of the Confederacy Organization decided to help sponsor the project. Mrs. Allen then met with Memphis Mayors Edmund Orgill and Henry Loeb as well as several City Commissioners who gave their consent as well as personal donations. The Memphis Park Commission and the City of Memphis granted their permission to place the statue in Confederate Park.¹⁸ In a public address Mrs. Allen stated, "This is a matter of pride for Memphis. Memphis is the only major city in the South that does not have a statue of this great man. Every citizen should consider it their privilege to send a contribution to the statue fund.

¹⁷ Pamphlet from the Dedication of the Statue of Jefferson Davis, 4 October 1964, Memphis Room of the Memphis-Shelby County Public Library

¹⁸ Brown Alan Flynn, "Statue of Dixie's Jefferson Davis Will Go Up in Confederate Park", *Press-Scimitar*, 1 March 1962

We of the UDC feel it is a project for all of Memphis rather than for one or two organizations.”¹⁹

On April 25, 1962, the UDC Jefferson Davis Monument Association received its Charter of Incorporation “for the purpose of receiving gifts and contributions for the erection of a monument to the memory of Jefferson Davis ... and taking all steps necessary and proper for the erection of said monument in the City of Memphis, Tennessee, and the appropriate dedication thereof” from the Tennessee Department of State.²⁰ The group received a permit for the solicitation of funds in the City of Memphis from Mrs. Frank H. Duffy, Secretary of the Board of Supervisors of Public Solicitation of Funds.²¹

On August 28, 1962 at a meeting necessary for tax exemption held in Mr. Chandler’s Office to complete the Charter, the “The Jefferson Davis Memorial Association” was officially formed. The by-laws were corrected and accepted and officers were elected as follows: Mrs. Harry D. Allen, President; Lt. Col. Byron G. Hyde and Walter Chandler, Vice Presidents; Mrs. Wm. Osceola Gordon, recording secretary; Miss Lottie Blount, corresponding secretary; Mrs. Charles A. Crump, treasurer. Mr. John W. Apperson, of the Press-Scimitar, and Mr. St. John Waddell, of the Commercial Appeal, were later added as additional Vice Presidents. Other committee members included Frank Ahlegren, Edward J. Meeman, Lawrence B. Gardiner, O. D. Bratton, Alvis Downs, and the presidents of the Memphis, Millington, and two Collierville chapters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

¹⁹ Brown Alan Flynn, “Statue of Dixie’s Jefferson Davis Will Go Up in Confederate Park”, *Press-Scimitar*, 1 March 1962

²⁰ State of Tennessee Charter of Incorporation of UDC Jefferson Davis Monument Association, 25 April 1962

²¹ Mrs. Ed H. Reeves, Letter to Mrs. Harry D. Allen, 15 February 1962

On July 3, 1963, the G. C. Crone Monument Co. of Memphis was selected as the contractor and on May 29, Mrs. Harry D. Allen, President of the UDC Jefferson Davis Monument Association, entered into a contract with Mrs. Margaret S. Crone, owner of the G. E Crone Monument Company.²² An Italian Sculptor, Alto Pera, was chosen and the statue ultimately stood 19'6". In March of 1964 the statue arrived in Memphis but was displayed in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel because funds remained short.²³

The City Beautiful Commission stated that they would "be happy to cooperate with [Mrs. Allen] on beautification of the Jefferson Davis statue."²⁴ Thousands of letters were also sent out largely at personal expense requesting donations. Book reviews, silver teas, and luncheons were given, all to raise money for the fund. The Commercial Appeal and The Memphis Press-Scimitar also contributed to the campaign through publicity. After the final payment of the total cost of \$17, 473 was made on September 23, the statue was unveiled in Confederate Park and accepted for the city by John R. Tucker on behalf of the ailing Mayor William Ingram on October 4, 1964 at 2:00 in the afternoon. Elinor Kelley of the Commercial Appeal wrote, "Confederate Park was no place for Yankees when the Old South came alive for an hour yesterday afternoon."²⁵

Humans everywhere unite during times of hardship: in the Southern United States this manifested itself during the civil rights movement, at a time when whites felt their world was being turned upside down. The responses among whites across the region varied greatly, but the persistent trait of all of the reactions was the resistance to

²² Contract between UDC Jefferson Davis Monument Association and G. E. Crone Monument Company, 20 May 1963, (Jack McNeil, Attorney).

²³ "Davis Statue Left Baseless As Funds Lag", *Commercial Appeal*, 5 March 1964

²⁴ Mrs. Robert W. Shafer, Letter to Mrs. Harry D. Allen, 22 May 1964

²⁵ Elinor Kelley, "Statue of Davis Proudly Placed in Proper Place", *Commercial Appeal*, 5 September 1964, p. 1

relinquishing power to blacks. It was during these times that the Ghosts of the Confederacy, as Gaines Foster referred to them as, rose from the ground. Whites feared that they would lose it all, became aggressive and hostile towards the north, and “supported the cause of reaction”.²⁶ Southern pride surged during this period, and lost cause rhetoric began to reemerge.

A turning point in the Civil Rights movement was the *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* decision in 1954 that legally banned segregation in public schools. This milestone achievement for blacks also had major repercussions from the southern white community. It made them feel insecure, and as such they began to remember the heroes from their confederate past. Only two years after this decision, Mrs. Allen came up with the idea of erecting the Jefferson Davis statue. While initially met with enthusiasm, the idea of the statue lost steam when the racial strife in America cooled towards the end of the 1950's. Funding lagged, support waned and the idea was put on a shelf for a few years. But just as soon as it cooled off, the early 1960's brought a new wave of racial controversy. Most notably was the desegregation of the University of Mississippi with the admission of James Meredith in 1962. When Governor Barnett blocked Meredith's admission in defiance of the Supreme Court ruling, race riots began and President Kennedy was forced to send in federal troops. At this time, the effort to erect the statue picked up steam again, and in combination with Freedom Summer and the Civil Rights Act, funding for the statue swelled. The ghosts in Memphis, while they had been under wraps, reached a boiling point during 1964 and the statue was completed.

These issues are clear in the speeches and activities at the statue's unveiling. Mr. Lee Meriwether, a St. Louis attorney and author, accepted the Jefferson Davis Memorial

²⁶ Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 198

Association's invitation to be the honorary speaker at the dedication ceremony. Mr. Meriwether, 101 years old at the time, spoke about his experience meeting Jefferson Davis as a small child.²⁷ Meriwether asserted, "Toward the end of the War Between the States many Southerners came to believe Davis, in some things, was arbitrary and unwise, but after he was kept in a dungeon in chains he was regarded as a martyr for the South and criticism of him ceased."²⁸ Many historians of the American South note this symbolic shift in Southern consciousness.

The interpretation of Jefferson Davis as a symbol of the Confederacy has evolved considerably since the end of the Civil War. Because of the controversial myth that Davis donned feminine apparel in an attempt to escape capture by union armies, many Northerners deemed him un-honorable, un-heroic, and un-manly after the war. Historian Nina Silber asserts that "even if the Confederate leader had not attempted some type of disguise, it would not have been surprising to find ludicrous and unmanly portrayals of Davis in this, his most un-heroic moment. What is significant here is not the accuracy of these accounts but the way in which northerners adopted and embellished the tale of the Confederate chieftain, fashioning an image that thoroughly confirmed their view of the postwar South."²⁹ Unsurprisingly, various Southerners have felt it necessary to defend the honor of Davis in much the same way that they have attempted to justify the Southern cause during the war.

The Lost Cause can most broadly be defined as a cultural movement revolving around the distinct Southern interpretation of the Old South, the Civil War and

²⁷ David Pollard, "One Who Knows Says New Statue Resembles Davis", *The Commercial Appeal*, 23 March 1964

²⁸ Lee Meriwether, "He Met Jefferson Davis", *The Commercial Appeal*, 3 May 1953

²⁹ Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) p. 30

Reconstruction. In many ways, the Lost Cause was the method through which many Southerners defended their unique way of life, their cause during the war and its aftermath. Thus, the symbolism of Jefferson Davis was largely linked to the Lost Cause, as he became, as Gaines Foster puts it, “a symbol of the South’s righteous cause.”³⁰ The statue of Davis in Memphis is inherently tied to this cultural movement because the Lost Cause was primarily concerned with ritualizing and romanticizing the memory of the Old South – in this case, through the raising of a statue to a Confederate hero. Lee Meriwether’s speech at the dedication ceremony in 1964 similarly defended Davis’ honor. Meriwether claimed,

Few men in history suffered the extremes of fortune that Jefferson Davis suffered ... Although the North had five times the South’s population and resources; it required four years to conquer the South. Then the North treated Jefferson Davis and the Southern people with a ferocity unparalleled in history ... In 1887, two years before his death, I was Jefferson Davis’ house guest in his Biloxi, Miss. Home. Every afternoon in those four days visitors called; some had exalted his office: Governor of a State, U. S. Senators, etc. Davis listened silently and turned the topic to other subjects. Jefferson Davis was not included in the amnesty given other Southern leaders. Davis alone was never given a voice or a vote in his native land. If this treatment wounded him he did not let the world know it. To his last day he remained a philosopher, unmindful of the ocean of abuse and slander the North poured upon him. A gold nugget may be covered with dirt; remove the dirt and the gold still shines. So with a noble spirit. For a hundred years the North has covered Jefferson Davis with libelous lies, but in spite of those lies Jefferson Davis, like the gold nugget, remains unsullied, unstained. Yonder statue will remind generations not yet born of Jefferson Davis, a great and good man and AN AMERICAN PATRIOT.³¹

This United Daughters of the Confederacy also interpreted Davis as a Confederate hero and martyr. One of the most interesting aspects of interpretations of Davis in the sixties revolves around the fact that Davis was not just interpreted as a Southern hero, but also as

³⁰ Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 122

³¹ Lee Meriwether, “My Remarks At the Unveiling of a Statue of Jefferson Davis in Memphis”, 4 October 1964

an American hero. This belief was based on the fundamental Lost Cause idea that the Civil War – or The War Between the States as the United Daughters of the Confederacy declare – was purely an issue of states rights.³² The United Daughters of the Confederacy assert that by defending states rights, Davis and the South were in essence defending true American democratic ideals.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy Magazine contained two articles about Davis in June of 1956, the same year that Mrs. Allen proposed the statue in Memphis. This view of Davis and the Civil War is clearly expressed in an article entitled, “A Reappraisal of the Life of Jefferson Davis,” written by Senator John Stennis for the Magazine. Stennis claimed,

The South was fighting, not for slavery, not for any white-pillared aristocracy, not for its own independent economy. She was fighting for a principle as old as the hills and as sacred as the covenants of all God-fearing peoples. She was fighting for autonomy and local self-government, something men call ‘freedom,’ something known as ‘Liberty,’ which men had fought and died for since the dawn of civilized man ... The truth is, the frightful and bloody fratricidal war she was called upon to wage in defense of her soil and rights to self-government, was merely a single engagement in the still greater and continuous war which has been waged for centuries by free men everywhere for freedom, for the right of self-determination, for local self-government, and for freedom from colonialism and empirical controls.³³ Jefferson Davis, a man of vision, saw the necessity of preserving the powers of the States. Otherwise and inevitably a strong centralized government would eventually destroy personal freedom.³⁴

³² The organization’s insistence on calling the Civil War, The War Between the States is actually quite indicative of their beliefs about the war in general. An article entitled “Let’s Say....The War Between the States” on their current website claims, “The name “Civil War” has also been widely accepted, no doubt because it is short. Actually the term “Civil War” is misleading and inexact. The war was not a class struggle, but a sectional combat, having its roots in such complex political, economic, social and psychological elements that it is difficult for historians to agree on all its basic causes.”

³³ Senator John Stennis, “A Reappraisal of the Life of Jefferson Davis,” *The Daughters of the Confederacy Magazine*, (June, 1956), p. 18

³⁴ Senator John Stennis, “A Reappraisal of the Life of Jefferson Davis,” *The Daughters of the Confederacy Magazine*, (June, 1956), p. 27

This address typifies the way that the memories of the Civil War and Reconstruction were skewed in the South and recycled during the Civil Rights era. By adamantly arguing that the War was over state's rights and liberty not slavery, Southerners were able to nobly defend their cause. As Nina Silber claims, by reinterpreting the war in this way, "the North won the war, but the South won the peace."³⁵

The reemergence of the Lost Cause in the 1950's and 1960's illustrates that its rhetoric and symbols were serviceable to white Southerners in ways that have not been previously examined. Nearly every facet of the Lost Cause can be applied to the situation of white Southerners during the Civil Rights Movement. White Southerners' belief that the North had wrongfully and aggressively invaded them during the war can be directly applied to the feeling that the North was yet again invading and imposing Civil Rights on the South. The notion that abolitionists had invaded the South during the War to stir up trouble directly paralleled white Southerners' belief that Northern activists were invading the South during Freedom Summer. The belief that the war was primarily an issue of states' rights in an attempt to preserve their liberty from a tyrannical federal government corresponded to white Southerners' belief that the Civil Rights movement was merely a Communist conspiracy to destroy democracy. This potential for double meanings illustrates just how useful the Lost Cause was in resisting Civil Rights. The most appealing aspect of revitalizing Lost Cause sentiments, though, was the fact that it was such a subtle way of resisting Civil Rights. Elite, educated, respected white Southerners could not publicly denounce Civil Rights. They would not be able to continue believing that they were moral Christians if they blatantly advocated white supremacy in the same violent manner as say the Klan.

³⁵ Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) p. 3

This does not, however, mean that they were not still threatened by the changes Civil Rights was bringing. Elite white Southerners desperately wanted to hold on to the power they saw quickly slipping from their hands. By reminiscing about the antebellum South, when there were not challenges to their power, elite whites were clinging to the hope that their privileged way of life would not change. The Lost Cause therefore was extremely serviceable as a polite, under the radar, response to Civil Rights.

For many years this subtle act of resistance remained acceptable or at least of too little significance to merit the efforts of dissenters. However, because African Americans are now on a much more level playing field, this issue has reemerged. Confederate Park, where the statue of Jefferson Davis still stands, has come under considerable attack in the past decade. In 1999, the Park's Commission considered changing Confederate park to a Cancer survivor's park. The R. A. Bloch Cancer Foundation offered one million dollars to build a park "intended to provide education, information and inspiration, particularly to people battling cancer."³⁶ Confederate Park was chosen both because of its downtown location and its state of disrepair. The name of the park was to be changed and the statue of Davis would be moved to another park. However, when the possibility was announced, many Confederate heritage organizations in the area put up a huge fight. Strong feelings on both sides of the issue resulted in heated debates in the editorial page of *The Commercial Appeal*. A political cartoon by Bill Day in particular incited anger. On the left was a rebel soldier carrying a Confederate flag with the caption "Fought to preserve slavery and lost." On the right was a cancer survivor in a wheelchair with the caption

³⁶ Wayne Risher, "Defenders of park say history is at stake", *The Commercial Appeal*

“Fought to preserve life and won.” Above both was a caption asking, “Which symbol speaks better for Memphis?”³⁷

The opinions voiced in these letters to the editor clearly spell out the “heritage versus hate” debate. Those who wished to celebrate the confederacy claimed that they were simply honoring their Southern heritage, while opponents felt that Confederate commemorations were racially based attacks. For example, Johnnie R. Turner, the executive director of the Memphis branch of the NAACP at the time, stated her belief that Confederate symbols are detestable. She asserted, “You would have a hard time convincing my Jewish friends that anything having to do with Hitler has any historical value ... and that a remake of the park would have meant one more reminder of slavery gone.”³⁸ Those wishing to preserve the park argued the exact opposite. Franklin Sanders wrote, “How fitting that a cancer survivors park should be proposed to replace Confederate Park. How well it will symbolize the cancer of ethnic cleansing throughout the South. The concerted program to vilify everything Southern and to remove our banners and monuments sells itself as racial reconciliation. In Fact, it aims at the opposite. A Big Lie worthy of Adolph Hitler is being hoisted on this country. Many African Americans fought in, with, and for the Confederate Army, while others served white households faithfully and honorable during the war.”³⁹ The battle lines in this fight over memory were clearly drawn.

The Sons of Confederate Veterans immediately organized the Citizens to Save Confederate Park group and planned a Rally for May 19, 1999. A flyer instructed, “All Southerners and concerned Citizens are invited to attend and show support for the

³⁷ Bill Day, “Which symbol speaks better for Memphis?”, *The Commercial Appeal*

³⁸ Keith Chrostowski, “Park: Search for Bloch site in Memphis proves controversial”, *The Kansas City Star*

³⁹ Franklin Sanders, Letter to the Editor, *The Commercial Appeal*, 6 May 1999

preservation of this historic treasured Park ... Guest speakers, 1860's period music, a musket salute, and more ... Wear your period attire; bring your flags. STAND UP FOR CONFEDERATE PARK. Let the Memphis Park Commission know that you are here to preserve Confederate Park.”⁴⁰ However, the unanticipated public response led the Park Commission to announce on May 10, 1999 that they would begin looking for another location before the rally took place.⁴¹

Over the next few years, the issue would reemerge for a few weeks but was not seriously addressed again until 2005. Shelby County Commissioner Walter Bailey first addressed the issue in 2002 after visitors from out of town criticized the Confederate symbols during the Lennox Lewis-Mike Tyson. When the issue gained support in 2005, Bailey stated, “My own feeling is these are relics of the past that I tend to think the community would be better served without.”⁴² A public forum to discuss the possibility of changing the names of Forrest Park, Confederate Park and Jefferson Davis Park was scheduled for May 19, 2005 at the Civil Rights Museum.⁴³

Letters to the editor flew in much like they had during the debate in 1999. The “heritage versus hate” debate was fully fleshed out this time. An article in *The Commercial Appeal* relayed, “Supporters and opponents of renaming Confederate Park, Jefferson Davis Park and Forrest Park have one thing in common: Each side views the debate itself as somewhat mortifying. Supporters of renaming the three Downtown parks contend the city's memorials to Confederate-era figures are embarrassing in 21st Century

⁴⁰ Citizens to Save Confederate Park Flyer announcing a Rally on May 19, 1999

⁴¹ Wayne Risher, “Public Outcry Saves Day For Civil War Park”, *The Commercial Appeal*, 12 May 1999

⁴² Jane Roberts, “Rename parks, Bailey urges - City's Confederate history under review”, *The Commercial Appeal*, 8 April 2005

⁴³ Bill Dries, “No middle ground on park names? - Public forum tentatively set for May 19 at Civil Rights Museum”, *The Commercial Appeal*, 22 April 2005

America. For opponents of the name change, what's embarrassing is the idea that Memphis might try to disavow or sanitize its history. It may be little consolation, but our community is far from alone in grappling with what to do about Confederate monuments and other symbols. Across the South, such debates have been common.”⁴⁴ These divisions are clear in the letters to the editor. Adam M. Woodford wrote,

When someone can adequately explain why 600,000 mostly poor, nonslaveholding Southerners would even dare to consider forming a volunteer army to fight against 2.8 million of their northern brethren in the name of slavery - of all things - then, and only then, I will buy into the notion that we should be ashamed of the Confederate citizen-soldier who placed everything he held dear on the line to combat a corrupt and pugnacious federal hierarchy that violated all applicable precepts of the Constitution amid their unlawful conquest of the South as they cowered underneath the mantra of freeing the slaves despite partaking in this malevolent practice themselves over the same period of time. They were our defenders and I will not allow demagogues to guilt-trip me into submission with a load of half-truths and demonizing lies to make me feel otherwise. This, if for no other reason, is why Davis, Forrest and Confederate parks should maintain their respective names.⁴⁵

This editorial clearly illustrates the strong sense of Southern pride many Memphians continued to feel.

On the other hand, many African Americans in Memphis ardently disagreed.

Charles Baker expressed,

My great-grandfather was a slave. I will never like the Confederate flag or the fact that some of our parks are named after Civil War participants who fought for a way of life they found religiously profitable and the finest social structure in the world. A few people who are descendants of slaves believe symbolism doesn't matter. These people (and there are only a few of them, thank God) don't understand that there can never be a bridge to cover the gap between those who glamorize the historical South and those who see every day the dirt that slavery left us. Many Southerners didn't want the Union Army to come south to defeat the Southern way of life; I'm glad it did. Many Southerners brag about Robert E. Lee, Jefferson

⁴⁴ Blake Fontenay, “Struggle to find a compromise proves past is not dead or past - In cities across the South, monuments and parks that evoke the memory of the region's troubled past have become another battleground”, *The Commercial Appeal*, 8 May 2005

⁴⁵ Adam M. Woodford, Letter to the Editor, *The Commercial Appeal*, 10 May 2005

Davis, Forrest and others. I don't. I may understand how people feel about the South. I may even respect their feelings, but I don't have to agree with them. Building a monument to an individual who fought to maintain slavery in the United States is like erecting a statue of Adolf Hitler on the lawn of every Jew who lives in Germany.⁴⁶

This extreme division of opinions on Confederate symbols is common throughout the South.

In order to gain a more historically based perspective, *The Commercial Appeal* interviewed Dr. Charles Crawford, a history professor at the University of Memphis:

Question: Do you believe there is validity in the argument that Confederate monuments and statues are racist symbols? Answer: It would not be historically accurate to consider these monuments and parks racist symbols. The terms "racism" and "racist" were not in use at that time, and it would not seem reasonable to convict persons for offenses that were not defined until after the era in which they lived. It is true that Jefferson Davis and Nathan Bedford Forrest were owners of slaves and their mistaken ideas of race, just like those of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and many other American presidents, would be unacceptable now. They were born, however, in an age when slavery was accepted by a majority of Americans and was recognized in the Constitution of the United States. Question: In your view, should Memphis rename the three parks? Answer: In my view, it is not necessary to delete or remove any part of the present system of historical parks and monuments of Memphis. Instead, we should add to it. My ideal vision for the city would be to see many more parks, markers and monuments to memorialize the varied aspects of Memphis history.⁴⁷

Dr. Crawford's views were shared by much of the academic historical community in Memphis who believe that the very fact that Confederate symbols are offensive to some means they should not be changed or erased because of the potential knowledge that can be gained from accurately studying them.

⁴⁶ Charles Baker, Letter to the Editor, *The Commercial Appeal*, 17 June 2005

⁴⁷ Dr. Charles Crawford, Interviewed by *The Commercial Appeal*, "A wider view - It is not necessary to delete or remove any part of the present system of historical parks and monuments of Memphis. Instead, we should add to it", *The Commercial Appeal*, 8 May 2005

The public forum was finally held on June 9, 2005. Forty spoke at the meeting, which lasted two hours. Of these, twenty-seven spoke against changing the parks and thirteen argued for. The fact that the viewpoints were divided along racial lines – African Americans favoring change and whites opposing – with only one exception is extremely significant. However, this telling division was underemphasized by the highly unusual nature of the exception. “H. K. Edgerton, a former NAACP chapter president from Asheville, N.C., wearing a Confederate Army uniform, spoke against any changes. Edgerton has campaigned nationally for more recognition of black soldiers who served in the Confederate army. Earlier in the day, Edgerton, who is a member of Sons of Confederate Veterans, marched in his uniform by the Forrest monument waving a Confederate flag. He said removing Confederate heritage from the parks would be "traitorous" and ended by saying ‘God bless Dixie.’”⁴⁸ Edgerton’s picture was of course on the front page of *The Commercial Appeal*. Although exceptions to the mainstream are important, the racial divide - minus Edgerton - illustrates the fact that the issue of race remains fundamental to the debate.

Ultimately, the Center City Commission approved a resolution on July 21, 2005 asking the Memphis City Council to “consider and evaluate” renaming the three Confederate Parks because of their desire to remove offensive symbols. *The Commercial Appeal* relayed, “Shelby County Commissioner and CCC member Walter Bailey pushed for the measure, saying the parks represent ‘skewed history.’ ‘Right or wrong, these parks are popularly perceived as racist to the community,’ Commissioner Paul Morris said. ‘Public parks should be places of relaxation and recreation.’ Said commission member

⁴⁸ Bill Dries, “Raw feelings - Idea of renaming Confederate parks fires up lively forum”, *The Commercial Appeal*, 10 June 2005

state Rep. Barbara Cooper, ‘We don't just go out and honor folks who murder folks.’”⁴⁹

The battle over Confederate symbols, for now, seems to be determined. In Memphis, as in many other cities across the South, the notion of Confederate symbols as “hate” triumphed over the view of them as “heritage” in public policy.

Initially, the African American community’s utter lack of care or notice of the Jefferson Davis statue was puzzling. The main African American newspapers in Memphis at the time, *The Memphis World* and *The Tri-State Defender*, did not mention the statue a single time in the six months around the dedication of the statue. It seemed that erecting a statue in honor of the only President of the Confederacy in the midst of the racial turmoil characterizing the 1950’s and 1960’s would be controversial. This lack of concern at the time the statue was unveiled seemed particularly paradoxical in light of the recent controversy surrounding Confederate Park. However, several issues explain this. The fact that African Americans were still largely repressed by the city’s segregationist mindset would have obviously discouraged public criticism. African Americans also had much larger goals in terms of racial advances at the time. However, the main reason there was not racial opposition to the statue involved the simple fact that it was the last thing the Jefferson Davis Monument Association was attempting to do. This group of Southern ladies responded to the Civil Rights Movement in such a palatable way that no one even thought to oppose it. By calling forth the phantom of Jefferson Davis, the Jefferson Davis Memorial Association in Memphis demonstrates how serviceable the Lost Cause remained in the 1960’s as a polite reaction against Civil Rights.

⁴⁹ Jacinthia Jones, “Dixie parks lose in CCC - Vote sends renaming issue to City Council”, *The Commercial Appeal*, 22 July 2005

This, however, was by no means unique to Memphis. Mrs. Allen received numerous invitations to other Confederate Memorial ceremonies sponsored by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. She was invited by the Florida Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy to the Dedication of a monument in the Florida Circle at the Vicksburg National Military Park in Mississippi on April 17, 1954. Mrs. Allen was similarly invited to the presentation of a portrait of General Robert E. Lee to the White House on October 28, 1961. Mrs. Allen received countless other invitations. Most notably however, Mrs. Allen was an exclusive guest at the Dedication of the Stone Mountain Memorial Carving in Atlanta, Georgia on May 9, 1970. Governor and Mrs. Maddox personally invited her to their reception the following day. Considering the similarities in date, themes, and participants, a detailed study of these occasions would very likely illuminate greater parallels and insights.

In his 1996 campaign, Bill Clinton turned around Bob Dole's reference of "building a bridge to the past" by promising to instead "build a bridge to the future". To use this analogy, the Jefferson Davis Memorial Association in 1964 was in many ways "building a bridge to the past." Their revitalization of the Lost Cause represented a way of politely resisting the rapidly approaching Civil Rights Movement. The ongoing struggle over the statue serves as a reminder of our nation's perpetual friction in the control over memory. As it stands today, the statue functions as a highly complimentary memorial to Jefferson Davis, depicting him as a larger than life American hero. Whether or not this portrayal accurately reflects the true character of Jefferson Davis, it does represent the subtle resistance of many Southerners to the debasing of the antebellum South. Supporters continue to interpret this monument as a celebration of Confederate

heritage while opponents view it as an insult to the freedoms obtained despite the racial position of Davis and others like him. The controversy over the statue in Memphis illuminates the ongoing battle between the phantoms of both sides of the issue.