THE NOT SO LOST CAUSE

How Historians Endorsed a False History

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What is the Lost Cause and how is it impacting American society?

The Lost Cause is an ideology that developed soon after the Civil War; the movement perpetuates the idea that the real causes for the Civil War have been “lost.” It includes beliefs that war was never about slavery but instead was an issue of states’ rights, slavery was a benign institution, often exaggerates the accomplishments of Confederate war heroes and pushes for Southern advocacy. The question arose of whether the American Historical Association, the oldest and largest society of historians and professors of history in the United States, had made any statements regarding apparent complacency in the spread of the Neo-Confederate ideas that have helped fuel the former and recent white nationalist movements. There has been no apology or statement issued from the association as of date. Through the close examination of articles spanning a total of sixty-eight years, a group of students used a self-created coding system to identify the frequency of Neo-Confederacy ideas in over 80 articles published by American Historical Review (the historical journal of the AHA). The students coded for both ideas of the Lost Cause and the antithesis of those ideas in order to present statistics that could prove the AHA published information that solidified the ideology.

Table 1: The above graph displays the frequency that each of the codes appear in each of the time frames studied. From this, it was clear that Code 1 and Code 4 had the largest presence across the entire timespan studied. It can also be asserted that while the 1920s saw a large growth in publications containing Lost Cause ideologies pertaining to slavery, the 1990s witnessed a large growth in publications containing Lost Cause ideologies about secession and southern advocacy.

“"We are not makers of history; We are made by history"
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Table 2: The above graph displays the frequency of each of the codes over the years researched for this project. From this graph, it can be observed that 1906 and 1925, there was a large increase of codes pertaining to slavery. In addition, there was a drastic increase in the Code 1n in the middle of the 1950s. This could possibly be due to the growth in unity and nationalism in the nation as the Cold War escalated during this time. Due to this increase in nationalism and unity, many historians were likely deterred from writing about a time when America was in fact not united.