

# We're still fighting, more than 150 years after Appomattox

Deep divisions remain between north, south

By JAY REEVES and FELICIA FONSECA  
Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — When the Civil War was over, when the dead were buried and the union was reunited, it came time to tell tales and write history. In reunion gatherings and living rooms alike, differing versions of the causes of the conflict became as hardened as sunbaked Georgia clay.

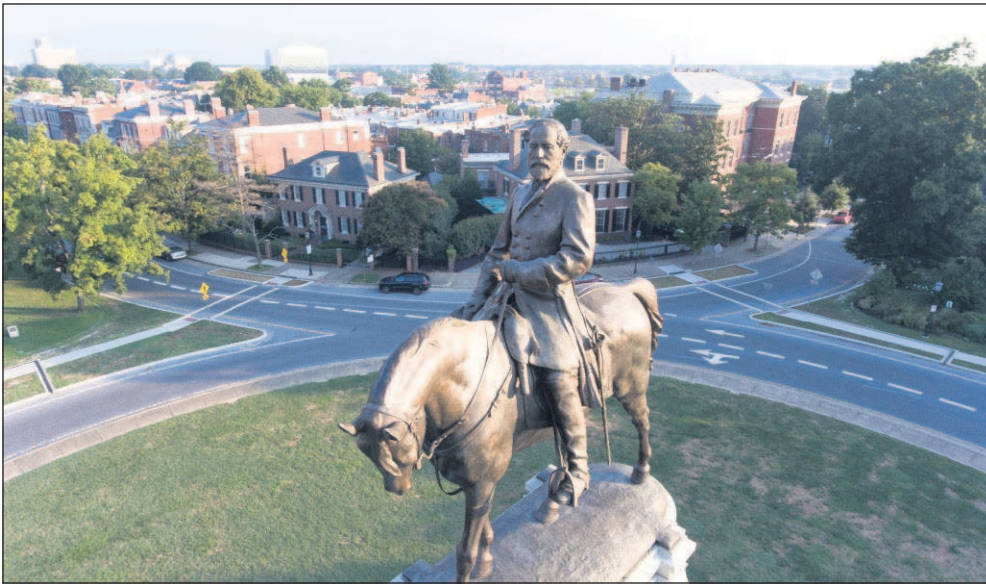
More than a century and a half later, those dueling narratives are with us still.

Did 620,000 die, as Northerners would have it, in a noble quest to save the union and end slavery — the nation's horrific original sin? Or was the "War Between the States" a gallant crusade to limit federal power, with slavery playing a lesser part, as Southerners insisted? Who was worthy of honor — Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, or Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee?

After all this time, it could be argued that it doesn't matter, but the blood that was shed over a statue of Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia, is powerful evidence that it does. The national dispute over the fate of stone and bronze monuments begs this larger question: How does one country with two histories move forward?

The answer, some say, is by seizing a rare chance to build a shared history through small steps.

"This is a moment to acknowledge the incredible change that we have seen among American people when they look at their past," said Peter Carmichael, a history professor at Gettysburg College. "They're not trying to sweep things under the rug. There are no saints and there are no sinners back in 1861. Everyone was to blame, except for the slaves."



The statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Va.

## Aftermath

Other countries have dealt more forthrightly with the aftermath of horrific violence or oppression. After apartheid's end, South African leaders formed the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation to promote national unity in the early 1990s. Rwanda's community courts investigated the slaughter of as many as 1 million people in 1994. Post-World War II Germany outlawed Nazism and its symbols.

Sanford Levinson, a University of Texas at Austin law professor, said such commissions generally focus on terrorist activity by nationalist governments, killings and torture immediately after they happen to hold oppressors accountable.

The United States could examine aspects of the Civil War, such as military prisons, the massacre of black soldiers or slavery itself, he said. But, "it would turn inevitably into historians testifying," he said. "There aren't concrete individuals who are going to come up and say 'yes, I did this and I really beg your apology.' All those people are dead."

Americans also would need to reach genuine consensus that the Civil War should be confronted, a willingness to dredge up repressed memories

and someone to lead the effort, he said.

Academics and others told The Associated Press the road to avoiding a more divisive future may be lined with discussions rather than shouting matches; more complete history lessons; local, rather than state or national action; and a renewed focus on individuals who fought and were impacted by the war, including the deprivations they endured.

The drafting of men for the war, desertions in the Confederate and Union armies, political disagreements and dissent are among things not well represented in the memories of the conflict, especially not through monuments, said Stephen Rockenbach, history professor at Virginia State University. Americans can draw on primary sources, including writings of people who lived during that time period and their diaries to understand different viewpoints.

"The danger occurs when you only look at one aspect, one person, one battle, even one time frame," he said.

Historians often don't reach consensus on interpretations of the past and the general public can't be expected to, either, Rockenbach said.

"How then do we convey this huge experience that

all kinds of Americans went through in meaningful way?" he said. "Statues do not do a very good job of doing that on their own."

Joe Zuniga, a 60-year-old school teacher in Rio Rancho, New Mexico, wants to see Confederate statues in museums or part of historical sites or battlefields so that visitors have the context they need to understand what happened.

"We are talking about history," said the self-described conservative. "We don't have to have it on top of a building overlooking the city with the idea of it being glorified. But, nonetheless, it is history. Whatever is in a person's heart can be there. It doesn't have to be replicated by granite or marble."

Carmichael, the Gettysburg College professor, said some of the problems of today could be addressed by doing a better job of explaining the war and how it affected a group that generally was ignored by both sides after Appomattox Court-house: black Americans.

Rather than simply tearing down statues, interpretive markers should be used at Confederate monuments to show the systematic oppression of black people through lynching, the denial of voting rights, and segregation, he



A statue of Confederate Gen. J.E.B. Stuart on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Va.

said. That way, Americans can understand that the system of slavery destroyed by the Civil War didn't create equality but instead ushered in Jim Crow laws.

Reconciliation won't happen in the immediate aftermath of Charlottesville, he said. The best change might be through local efforts where people who know each other can hash things out.

"The more it's done from far away, the more I think it's likely to provoke resentment and anger, and not lead to anything wonderfully productive," he said.

## Reunited

Civil War veterans reunited on battlefields for years after the fight. But today, organizations composed of descendants of the armies that battled from 1861 to 1865 have few dealings with each other or conversations on a broad level.

The head of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Mark Day, said opening a shared dialogue about the nation's history might be a good start.

"We're Americans. We have an ability to hold different opinions and share different opinions," said Day, the national commander. "I think it's a national thing that we maybe have to talk to each other."

Thomas V. Strain Jr. is Day's Southern equivalent, commander-in-chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans,

which is more than three times the size of the Union group with some 33,000 members. Strain doesn't mind talking to Union descendants — he recently attended a gathering of the Northern group — but he doesn't know that discussions will help.

People are more interested today in fighting battles with monuments as proxies than in figuring out what happened long ago, said Strain.

"Until society as a whole changes and we start seeing things for what they are, I don't think at any time we're going to be able to sit down and reconcile," said Strain, of Athens, Alabama.

The Southern descendants' group supports the preservation of Confederate monuments and members often espouse the traditional, Southern view of the war that minimizes the role of slavery in the conflict. But it didn't officially participate in the Aug. 12 demonstration in Charlottesville that ended in multiple injuries and the death of a woman who was killed when a car allegedly driven by a man aligned with white supremacists plowed into a crowd.

The group continues to memorialize its forbears; members were on hand for the dedication of a monument to unknown Confederate dead on private property in rural south Alabama on Aug. 24. The NAACP spoke out against the project, calling it a step backward.

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