National Identity and Civil War Memory in the American South: How History, Ideology, and Media Inform the Culture Wars of the Late Twentieth Century

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NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CIVIL WAR MEMORY IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH: HOW HISTORY, IDEOLOGY, AND MEDIA INFORM THE CULTURE WARS OF THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

On Veterans Day weekend, 1994, the remains of a Confederate soldier named Lewis Powell were reinterred in a cemetery in Geneva, Florida and given military honors. This thesis begins by historicizing Powell’s burial ceremony to the final decades of the twentieth century to argue for new ways of viewing and understanding how Americans engaged with Civil War memory and legacy at a time of particularly felt social and cultural change. The ‘culture wars’ of the 1980s and 1990s describe the many battles and debates fought over issues as wide-ranging as race, politics, gender, sexuality, religion, and education, and were often contended with alongside and within the shadow of the Civil War. Extending outward from the initial example of Powell’s burial, this project examines various features of American culture and society of the era, from the ways political figures invoked images and representations of the Civil War to navigate these ‘culture wars,’ to the ways ideology and material practices inform contemporary Civil War remembrances, to the popular embrace of Civil War themes and depictions in numerous texts and media of the time, to argue that the preoccupation with the Civil War at the end of the twentieth century proves crucial to the ways Americans understood and navigated national change.
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INTRODUCTION

Lewis Powell’s Reinternment and the Origins of this Project

On Veterans Day weekend, 1994, a group of historians, journalists, and spectators gathered at a small cemetery in Geneva, Florida to reinter the remains of Lewis Powell. Originally born in Florida, Powell joined the Confederate army in 1861 and remained a soldier until the war concluded in 1865. Arriving in Washington, D.C. shortly after Robert E. Lee surrendered his army at Appomattox, Powell met John Wilkes Booth and was persuaded to take part in a conspiracy to murder several high-ranking members of the United States government. On the night of 14 April 1865, as Booth was preparing to assassinate President Abraham Lincoln, Powell broke into Secretary of State William Seward’s house and brutally attacked him with a knife. Seward was badly injured in the assault, violently stabbed in the face and neck, but he survived and eventually made a full recovery. Powell was arrested, convicted of treason, and executed in July 1865. When his remains were returned to Florida in 1994, they were draped in a Confederate flag and given a military burial. At the burial ceremony, Powell was honored as a hero (Hodges).

The origins of this project can be traced to Powell’s story. The history and consequences of the 1865 assassination plot are interesting in their own rights, but even more interesting is how a known criminal and attempted murderer like Powell could be remembered and revered in this way by the end of the twentieth century. By the 1980s, Powell’s legacy had already been considered and reexamined from more supportive viewpoints. In 1989, five years before the burial ceremony, the Orlando Sentinel published an article about Richard Adicks, an English professor at the University of Central Florida who had recently published a historical novel about Powell and the Civil War called A Court for Owls. The novel is sympathetic to Powell and
sometimes, by extension, to the Confederate cause. Adicks is quoted in the Sentinel article as saying, “Most of the people who had written about [Powell] treated him like a big dumb brute, but there were historical accounts that described him as a gentleman devoted to his cause, the Confederacy. What I finally saw in him was a kind of innocent manipulated by Booth. I developed a paternal feeling for him” (Hodges).

Implicit in this statement is the correlation between devoting oneself wholeheartedly to a cause and being revered as noble and honorable for doing so. It is not an uncommon sentiment to hold, but how should one square the facts that Adicks applies these sentiments here to a man who fought for years defending the institution of slavery and who attempted to assassinate another man? It is not so simple to say that such a man is a ‘gentleman’ just because he has devoted himself to a cause which he believes in. Adicks is not the only person to express this. At the burial ceremony in 1994, a Baptist pastor named Rev. Daryl Permenter was quoted in the Orlando Sentinel as saying, “Had I lived when [Powell] did, I probably would have done the same thing. War is war, and I believe he did what he did believing he was right” (Robison). Once more simply believing in a cause, even if that cause is the preservation of the Confederacy and its memory, casts Powell in a sympathetic and heroic light.

Powell’s burial ceremony therefore explicitly reflects the pseudohistorical and mythological construct known as the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. David Blight defines this ideology as “an interpretation of the American Civil War viewed by most historians as a myth that attempts to preserve the honor of the South by casting the Confederate defeat in the best possible light” (“Lost Cause”). In the decades following the war, this mythology manifested across the South as a nostalgic celebration of the antebellum era which often downplayed the true centrality slavery had to both southern society and to the cause of Civil War conflict. Blight
continues that the Lost Cause mythology “became the philosophical foundation for the racial violence and terrorism employed to reverse Reconstruction and the re-imposition of white supremacy in the Jim Crow era” (“Lost Cause”). He argues that while the myth of the Lost Cause helped facilitate national reunion between the North and the South following the Civil War, it did so “at the cost of the civil rights of African Americans” (“Lost Cause”).

Commemorating a Confederate veteran like Powell as a hero, as someone who should be revered for fighting and willing to die for ‘a cause he was devoted to,’ as Adicks claims, or for an idea that ‘he believed was right,’ as Permenter claims, is closely tied to and informed by Lost Cause ideology. The nostalgic memory of a pre-war society characterized by principles like honor and moral righteousness remain crucial to the task of comprehending how the Civil War could be remembered in American culture and society in these ways. Memorializing Powell in a way that centers these principles to his legacy illuminates how ideologies like the Lost Cause myth continue to shade our understandings of Confederate memory even by the late twentieth century. Blight’s assertion that “the Lost Cause emerged among ex-Confederates as a series of mourning rituals and as a psychological response to the trauma of defeat” further explains why such an ideology should bear so heavily on an event like Powell’s burial ceremony, which was itself a symbolic performance that largely served to commemorate the memory of a past that, to some, should have been but never was (“Lost Cause”). Remembering Powell as a righteous hero and as a defender of his country, for instance, made the fact that it had taken until 1994 for him to receive a supposedly proper and honorable burial a more poignant sentiment among those present. The legacy of the Lost Cause myth and the ways it shades contemporary understandings of both southern and American culture remains an important and implicit theme throughout this thesis.
To be clear, Powell is not a hero, nor is he a person to be honored or admired, but the social, cultural, and political conditions of late-twentieth-century American life allowed his memory to become one of the many ideas situated to Civil War legacy that affected and influenced the national culture. It is not a coincidence that Powell is remembered in these ways at this specific moment, nor is it that material practices like burial ceremonies and texts like Adicks’s were performed and published at this time. This project begins with the intriguing example of Powell’s memory in late-twentieth-century society and expands outward to argue for new ways of understanding the general preoccupation with Civil War memory and legacy throughout 1980s and 1990s America. It is therefore crucial to historicize all of these examples to this particular moment, as doing so illuminates interesting connections between the ways the Civil War is remembered in contemporary American society and the ways the various social, cultural, and political battles and debates of the era were navigated and comprehended in everyday life.

History, in one sense, can initially be thought of as a set of facts or events that might be said to have ‘happened’ in one place or at one time or another. But analyzing history also entails interpretation, which always brings new issues and viewpoints to the various facts or events that comprise it. Gary Nash reminds us that “history without explanation, without analysis, without pattern is barren chronicle. . . . Even centuries ago, intelligent people would have laughed at the notion that the past is nothing but a set of agreed-upon facts” (9). To analyze and interpret the Civil War and Civil War memory from the vantage point of the late twentieth century offers new insights to both the 1860s and the 1980s and 1990s. The 1990s, for example, is historically far removed from the era of the Civil War in the 1860s; but the cultural, political, and ideological conflicts characteristic of both eras highlight important interpretive connections. In fact Nash, in
his 1997 book *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, directly appeals to Civil War memory and its deep connections to his own time in the late twentieth century. Throughout the text he considers a wide range of American historical events and the ways these events are taught in American society, ultimately claiming that within the contexts of the culture wars of his own time, “history matters” (9). As proof of this sentiment, though, he focuses exclusively on the history of the Civil War and how Americans have engaged with this event in particular in recent years. He writes, “Americans are devouring huge amounts of history books. They flock to movies such as *Glory* and *Gettysburg*. By the millions they tune in to such television series as *Roots* and *The Civil War*. They visit historical sites in record-breaking numbers, often watching citizen ‘reenactors’ make scenes from the past come alive” (9). The fact that Nash references only contemporary media which represent the Civil War, the fact that he so explicitly connects the Civil War to the American culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s—especially when his work is by no means exclusively concerned with the 1860s or the conflicts of that time—suggests a significant and important connection to investigate.

The legacy of the Civil War, then, cannot be fully separated from the various battles and debates which characterized the late-twentieth-century ‘culture wars.’ These battles were fought over issues as wide-ranging as race, politics, gender, sexuality, religion, and education, and were often contended with alongside and within the shadow of Civil War memory. Each chapter in this thesis explains the connections between these various debates and Civil War memory in different but important ways. Chapter 1 provides a framework in which to understand the proceeding two chapters. It considers how various ‘culture war’ issues were contested with alongside discussions situated to Civil War legacy, including displaying the Confederate flag and embracing Confederate symbols and statues across the South. It also examines political rhetoric
of the era to assert that politicians and commentators often ‘looked back’ to the Civil War to help navigate the social and cultural complexities of a changing nation. The rise of neoconservatism characteristic of Ronald Reagan and George Bush’s governmental policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s are seen as reactions to the changing social and demographic makeups of the nation, and these politicians and others often invoked images and rhetoric related to the Civil War to combat the national identity crises which consequently arose. These ideas owe much to Stuart Hall’s arguments concerning what he terms ‘the crisis of the humanities.’ Hall associates the conservative policies of Margaret Thatcher with both the changing social makeup of post-war Britain and the Eurocentric way subjects like the humanities were taught in British schools. Teaching English and history in ways which deliberately exclude both non-white and non-European perspectives was one way the national culture attempted to subvert these felt or perceived identity crises. When applied to an American perspective, the same modes of instruction and schooling become apparent. The ways the Civil War and other historical events are taught and consequently understood in American imaginations become important ideological constructs to both American and southern culture and identity.

Chapter 2 examines ideology in the American South, arguing for ways of understanding the formation and constitution of both American and Confederate ideologies through various material practices and performativity in everyday life. It begins with a discussion of Marx’s initial view of ideology before turning to later materialist understandings developed by Louis Althusser and Slavoj Žižek. Hall’s emphasis on the school as an important space for the manufacture of certain conceptions of national history and identity are again brought to bear on American culture, as practices native to the public school environment like the Pledge of Allegiance become significant performative actions toward the development of national identity.
Embracing alternative flags from American history, like the Confederate flag, therefore becomes an important feature of ideology formation by the late twentieth century. Additional acts of performativity like Civil War reenactments, which grew to new levels of popularity by the 1990s, are understood as further material practices that serve to illuminate how ideology calls out to and interpellates individuals as Americans, which is to say, how Americans conceive themselves to be Americans, and what exactly this means. Reenactments become historical fetishes that people might embrace in an effort to stabilize these ideological formations at times of perceived national identity crisis.

Chapter 3 turns to representations of the Civil War in the popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout these decades there was a noticeable preoccupation with stories set during the 1860s which depicted Civil War conflict. Some of these examples include the films Glory (1989), Dances with Wolves (1990), and Gettysburg (1993); the novels Cold Mountain (1997) and The Guns of the South (1992); and the television show South Park. This chapter considers how race and social conflict related to racial equality and inclusion are allegorically ‘played out’ in these textual and media productions. Representations of the Civil War are often created and produced along clichéd, nostalgic, and de-historicized lines. Fredric Jameson’s ideas regarding what he calls the ‘nostalgia mode’ explain how these ahistorical representations of the past constitute the ways people engage with and understand their national histories. These examples must be understood as products of their times, situated to the final decades of the twentieth century. When they are, they cast the memory of the Civil War and its era as important frameworks in which the social and cultural issues of the late twentieth century might be played out, negotiated, and contended with in American cultural life, and also where cultural hegemony might be battled out and secured (Hall “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’” 239).
The Conclusion briefly examines the ways the Civil War is remembered and engaged with a few decades into the twenty-first century. Especially throughout the four years Donald Trump was president, depictions and representations of the Civil War in both popular culture and lived experience once more become noticeable features of the national culture. The 2016 novel *The Underground Railroad* and the 2020 film *Antebellum* bookend an era of dramatic social, cultural, and political change during which many of the issues which had been debated throughout the 1980s and 1990s became urgently felt again. New attention was paid to the display of symbols like the Confederate flag, the removal of Confederate monuments from public spaces, and the renaming of public schools bearing the names of Confederate generals across the South. Events like the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 and the United States Capitol Riot in January 2021, where Civil War symbols like the Confederate flag were displayed, raised questions about what exactly the flag meant in American culture and society. In the face of racial violence and police brutality on non-white bodies, race and racial equality became increasingly felt issues across the country. These issues and events had real impacts in the national culture. Products like Land O’Lakes removed the image of a Native American woman from their packaging in 2020, Aunt Jemima rebranded to Pearl Milling Company and removed the image of the ‘Black Mammy’ stereotype from its packaging in 2021, and Uncle Ben’s was renamed to Ben’s Original the same year. In 2019, the Washington Redskins of the National Football League dropped their team name and mascot depicting a Native American. Just as in the 1980s and 1990s, the associations throughout the ‘Trump years’ between Civil War imagery and representations in both everyday life and in the national culture, and various social and political issues and debates cannot be fully separated. They are not exactly the same, as many more tangible changes have occurred over the past few years than
ever occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. But understanding these last decades of the twentieth
century as important initial moments of negotiation and debate regarding these various social and
cultural issues allows us new ways in which to view the various perspectives struggling for
cultural legitimacy at our current moment. The memory of the Civil War continues to bear on
our conceptions of American identity and helps inform what kind of nation we will become.

In his book Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory, Blight argues that
“for Americans broadly, the Civil War has been a defining event upon which we have often
imposed unity and continuity; as a culture, we have often preferred its music and pathos to its
enduring challenges, the theme of reconciled conflict to resurgent, unresolved legacies” (4). This
claim gets at the root of why Civil War memory and legacy reemerges and becomes such a
significant feature of culture and society at times of intense ideological conflict and national
identity crisis. The war remains an important part of our collective history, a history that
includes the perspectives of many different social and political groups, though the numerous
voices of these perspectives haven’t always been allowed to speak clearly. In many ways the
causes and outcomes of the Civil War are still being debated and decided across the South and
across the nation. Unresolved legacies are still battling out their places in our conceptions of
American society and history. Understanding the deep ideological and cultural connections that
Civil War memory has with the ways we navigate American life is vital to understanding the
complexities of this nation as a whole. There is no better place to begin an analysis of these
connections than with the crucial and fraught decades of the 1980s and 1990s.

Notes on the Text

Some brief explanations are required regarding the ways certain terms and ideas are used
throughout this project. The noun ‘America’ and the adjective ‘American,’ for example, are
used throughout the text to refer to the United States of America and to denote certain features of
its people, society, and culture. ‘American history,’ ‘American culture,’ ‘American national
identity,’ etc.—these are ideological constructs that don’t semantically describe the United States
alone, but are often understood as doing so, especially to people in the United States. We are, for
instance, much more likely to not only refer to ourselves as ‘Americans’ in everyday speech, but
also to think of ourselves as such, at least over alternative terms like ‘United States citizens.’
The ideological significance of using such a term is important to note, as it highlights several
contradictions regarding what exactly it means to be an ‘American.’ There are, for instance,
additional countries which make up the Americas across two separate continents. If we, from a
United States perspective, are less likely to think of Mexicans or Brazilians, for instance, as
‘Americans’ in the same way we would think of ourselves, then what does it truly mean to be an
‘American?’ Referring to the United States exclusively as ‘America,’ then, must be largely
ideological. What one means when they refer to such notions as ‘American history’ or
‘American identity’ is likewise a complicated matter. In her recent book about American and
southern identity, South to America: A Journey below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul
of a Nation, Imani Perry argues for a way of comprehending American identity as created and
informed by a multitude of perspectives and historical events. She claims that there are “so
States is, formally speaking, the child of Great Britain. And we teachers, historians, and patriots
all have inherited a British inclination to tell history in a linear forward sequence. But that just
won’t work for the story of the South. Or the nation” (3).

The implications in all of these dates suggest deeper truths about what American identity
actually means. Even our officially recognized date of independence is a tricky one considering
The American War for Independence did not conclude for another seven years after 1776. But the year the first Europeans arrived on the continent in 1492, the year the first Africans were brought to the British colonies as enslaved people in 1619, the year Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana territory from France in 1804, the year the Supreme Court finally delivered a constitutional challenge to the system of segregation in 1954, even the year the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished in 1865 all suggest that American identity is composed of various historical and ideological constructs. It is not one universal ideal. Terms like ‘American history,’ ‘American culture,’ and ‘American national identity’ are therefore used throughout this thesis with these various ideological connotations in mind. In fact, a major aim of this project is to highlight how Americans view themselves, their cultures, and their histories at times when such constructs are illuminated as ideological.

The idea of the ‘South’ should be understood in a similar way. ‘Southern history,’ ‘southern culture,’ and ‘southern identity’ are themselves ideological constructs that cannot be informed by any single perspective or set of events. This is why so many different and various social, political, and popular examples can be analyzed as part of the ‘South’ throughout this thesis, even when they don’t necessarily characterize the specific geographical region. Instances like displaying the Confederate flag atop the South Carolina State Capitol dome or the removal of Confederate statues in Virginia do characterize tangible happenings across the region of the American South, but performances like Civil War reenactments at Gettysburg and nationally and internationally distributed texts like novels and films situated to Civil War memory cannot be said to remain contained in the region of the ‘South.’ The fact that Civil War and Confederate memory are nevertheless represented in these instances suggests that the idea of the ‘South’ is also ideological. True, what exactly do we mean when we talk about concepts like ‘southern
hospitality’ or ‘southern heritage’ or ‘southern pride,’ as if these ideas were exclusive to one particular region? And what does it mean when certain racial and social identities are excluded from imaginations of ‘southern history’ despite their actual lived experiences in it? The South is a geographical region of the United States, sure, but where does the ‘South’ actually exist if not in our cultural and ideological imaginations? This term is therefore also used throughout this project in a multitude of ways in an effort to provoke readings of ‘American’ and ‘southern’ history and culture as encompassing more than one single and universal ideal.

Understanding the similar ideological natures of both ‘American’ and ‘southern’ culture highlights the reciprocal influence these two constructs have often had on conceptions of national and regional identity throughout the decades following the Civil War. The title of John Egerton’s 1974 work *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*, for example, suggests how by the latter half of the twentieth century some had begun to view these two ideological formations (‘American’ and ‘southern’) as both informing and being informed by the other. Frye Gaillard and Cynthia Tucker’s 2022 book *The Southernization of America: A Story of Democracy in the Balance*, which presents itself as a contemporary response to Egerton’s work, claims that its major aim is to explore “the undeniable southern influence—for better or worse—on the life and political climate of America” (1). Similar sentiments are displayed in a 2015 article published in *The New Yorker*, by Nicholas Lemann, in which the author argues that by the turn of the new millennium “the nation [had] become southerned just as much as the South [had] became nationalized. Political conservatism, the traditional creed of the white South, went from being presumed dead in 1964 to being a powerful force in national politics. During the past half century, the country has had more Presidents from the former Confederacy than the former Union. Racial prejudice and conflict have been understood as
American, not southern, problems” (“The Price of Union”). Determining where ‘American’
identity and culture end and where ‘southern’ identity and culture begin has remained a difficult
task in more recent years.

Lemann claims that the ‘white South’s’ unique brand of ‘political conservatism,’ which
had supposedly been ‘presumed dead’ in the face of national Civil Rights legislation in 1964,
seemed actually to take on a greater countrywide significance and influence throughout the
succeeding decades. This is true, in a sense, though we need not move out of the Civil Rights era
to see it. During his campaign for governor of California in 1966, for instance, Ronald Reagan
repeatedly vowed that he would “send the welfare bums back to work,” often employing this
rhetoric while speaking about what he called “the mess at Berkeley,” supposedly referring to the
growing number of student demonstrations at the university throughout the late 1960s (Kahn).
One would have to be quite stubborn, however, to overlook the racist implications in such a
phrase as ‘welfare bums,’ spoken as it was during the Civil Rights era and at a moment when
universities across the South were still far from fully integrated. Reagan’s subsequent policies
and actions as president in the 1980s, many of which deliberately dismantled Civil Rights
legislation, further informs his past rhetoric as engaging with a kind of ‘southernization’ of
American culture even before the final decades of the twentieth century. In this way we can see
how since the Civil Rights era the social and cultural sentiments of the old ‘white South’ have
expanded outward from the openly and explicitly racist attitudes of ‘southerners’ like George
Wallace, for instance, to the often coded and implicitly—though still wholly—racist attitudes of
an ‘American’ like Ronald Reagan. The fact that Wallace, who himself ran for president on
several occasions, is still more likely to be thought of as a ‘southerner,’ while Reagan is more
likely to be thought of as an ‘American’ highlights the ideologies beneath such notions. The
landslide political victories Reagan won in both the 1980 and 1984 elections, during which he used much of the same rhetoric, illuminate deeper claims about the ‘southernization’ of American culture by the end of the millennium, especially since Reagan was not himself a southerner but nevertheless spoke about these traditionally ‘southern’ ideals on a national platform. These felt cultural changes and the ways politicians talked about and navigated them at the end of the twentieth century form the primary concerns of this thesis.

Finally, the term ‘performativity’ as it is used throughout this project requires further explanation. ‘Performativity’ refers to material practices that serve to create and reinforce certain ideologies and ideological formations in American individuals. These material practices include performances like the Pledge of Allegiance as it is performed in U.S. public schools, and to material practices directly related to Civil War memory like Civil War reenactments. The performative natures of these practices are understood in the ways they are both ‘acted out’ by the individuals who participate in them and in the ways these actions are viewed by other individuals. It is through the performativity of these and other material practices that individuals are interpellated as subjects into ideological formations situated to concepts like ‘American patriotism’ and ‘national identity.’ That is to say, it is in the ways that Americans perform certain material practices that they consequently see themselves as embodying the ideals that inform their identities as Americans. This concept is explained thoroughly in Chapter 2, but the term ‘performativity’ still necessitates explanation here. All of these notes serve to illuminate the ideological natures of how Americans understand themselves and others in their social, cultural, historical, and political imaginations. A primary aim of this project is to better understand how conceptions of ‘America’ came to be by challenging their supposed truths, and in the process to comprehend how these conceptions are challenged and changed through time.
CHAPTER 1:  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CIVIL WAR IMAGERY, RHETORIC, AND REPRESENTATIONS TO THE AMERICAN CULTURE WARS OF THE 1980s AND 1990s

Connecting Civil War Memory to the Culture Wars: An Initial Example

In April 1961, as part of the commemorations held to mark the centennial of the start of the Civil War, members of the South Carolina legislature raised the Confederate battle flag over the state capitol building. Though ostensibly raised only for the centennial, the Confederate flag would remain on the capitol’s land for the next fifty-four years. In 2000, after a decade of fierce debate over its public display atop the capitol dome, the state legislature voted to move the flag to a Confederate soldier memorial monument which already stood on capitol grounds. The flag remained there until the Summer of 2015, when it was finally removed following a racially motivated mass shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston.1 Although the scope of this project extends beyond displays of the Confederate flag in South Carolina, this brief history on the topic provides a useful introduction to the essence of the American culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, and especially to how symbols, imagery, and representations related to the Civil War prove so imbedded within these late-twentieth-century cultural conflicts.

The culture wars, as the term is used in this chapter, refer to the widespread ideological disagreements between various political, social, and religious groups in the United States near the turn of the twenty-first century. Determining the complete scope that these conflicts were

fought within proves a difficult task, with some scholars identifying such disparate issues as “abortion, affirmative action, art, censorship, evolution, family values, feminism, homosexuality, intelligence testing, media, multiculturalism, national history standards, pornography, school prayer, sex education, [and] the Western canon” as particularly contentious spaces for debate (Hartman 1). Even the title of one of the earliest studies on the topic as it existed in the late twentieth century, James Davison Hunter’s 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law and Politics in America*, indicates just how broad an area the cultural battlegrounds covered. In an effort to lend the many sites of contention in which the culture wars raged some coherence, however, Hunter argues that “what [often] seems to be a myriad of self-contained cultural disputes actually amounts to a fairly comprehensive and momentous struggle to define the meaning of America” (51). The biggest issue at stake in the culture wars should be identified as ‘defining the meaning of America’ at a time when previous conceptualizations of national identity became fractured.

The proliferation of symbols, imagery, rhetoric, and representations concerning the Civil War in American cultural life throughout the 1980s and 1990s constituted one way people in the South negotiated attempts to ‘define the meaning of America’ within the many contexts and battlegrounds of the culture wars. Some scholars have argued that while these many debates flourished in the United States, “for contemporary southerners, perhaps the most hotly contested battleground of the culture wars [remained] how to deal with the region’s Confederate past” (Manis 179). This argument, while rightly claiming that the South’s navigations around the memory of its controversial past did comprise a significant space of conflict within culture war debates, nevertheless fails to understand how bound up the legacy and memory of the Civil War was to the numerous and seemingly disparate cultural talking points of the time. We must
instead come to realize that the overarching cultural conflicts themselves cannot be separated from the legacy and memory of the Civil War. It is not, in other words, that culture war issues like multicultural education, family values, and national history standards, for instance, were debated alongside the additional issue of reconciling the memory of the Civil War with the present moment, but rather that the memory of the Civil War shaded the ways people understood these various cultural issues and debates to begin with. We should therefore understand conflicts related to Civil War memory as intimately related to and intertwined with the larger cultural conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s. The American culture wars, while wide ranging and inclusive of many different issues, were fought and negotiated across the South in ways which proved inescapable from the specter of the Civil War.

The initial example regarding the Confederate flag and the South Carolina capitol building illuminates this recurring centrality of the Civil War to late-twentieth-century culture war debates. It represents one instance in which the battles fought to ‘define the meaning of America,’ to again borrow Hunter’s terminology, were contained within larger questions about how the Civil War should be remembered in the southern United States. The issue of displaying the Confederate battle flag on state capitol grounds consumed social and political debate through the 1990s in South Carolina. In a televised address in 1996, then-governor David Beasley, a Republican who had campaigned as a flag supporter, officially called for the removal of the flag from the capitol dome (Webster and Leib 33). As part of his rationale for the decision, he argued that 1996 was “[the right time to] compromise on the Confederate flag and teach our children that we can live together” (Bragg 1996). The call prompted four years of debate around this issue, and ultimately resulted in the flag remaining on the capitol grounds, and Beasley losing his position as governor to a Democratic challenger during the next election cycle.
The Confederate battle flag is itself a symbol of the Civil War. Specifically, it is a symbol of the South’s participation in that war. Importantly, the flag did not always fly over the South Carolina state capitol dome, but was raised in 1961 to commemorate the war’s centennial anniversary. Centennials of significant national events are important to solidifying a stable sense of national identity, as they continually reproduce and ‘make material’ our general conceptions of national history. We should therefore understand arguments either for or against removing the flag as firmly tied to the issue of remembering American history a certain way, or, again, as an attempt toward ‘defining the meaning of America’—the primary issue at stake in the culture wars. For some in the South, then, important culture war debates around issues like national history standards were intimately linked to the embrace or rejection of Civil War-related symbols like the Confederate flag.

Raising the flag over the capitol dome in 1961 also points to highly racialized motives for doing so. Scholars have noted that capitols across the South “reintroduced [the flag] at a period of state opposition to the black equality movement,” which serves to illuminate that deeper cultural conflicts related to race and racism existed beneath the reasons often argued for keeping the flag flying, like ‘national memory’ or ‘history’ (Forman 525). The early sixties were the height of the Civil Rights Movement, and the Confederate flag symbolized both an era and an ideology which stood in direct opposition to the goal of killing Jim Crow.\(^2\) Debates around matters like race, multiculturalism, and diversity have been identified as particularly hot-button

\(^2\) The association between race and Civil War symbols like the Confederate flag have been examined in great detail by many scholars. For a more thorough analysis regarding the link between debates to remove Confederate flags from state capitols and race within the context of the late-twentieth-century culture wars see Forman, James Jr. “Driving Dixie Down: Removing the Confederate Flag from Southern State Capitols,” *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 101, no. 505, 1991, pp. 505-526.
topics within the context of the culture wars. The widespread interest in reexamining Civil War-related symbols and imagery throughout the 1980s and 1990s indicates a strong connection to these larger cultural debates regarding race, and so should prompt us to understand arguments related to Civil War memory as intimately tied to the deeper cultural struggles of the time.

The South Carolina example also highlights the relationship between these negotiations surrounding Civil War imagery and broader concerns about the state of the American family. The ambition to ‘define the meaning of America’ throughout the 1980s and 1990s was deeply rooted to questions about what the twenty-first-century American family should look like and value. Many of the arguments native to the culture wars, including the issues of abortion, homosexuality, and religious values, brought with them anxieties concerning the continued relevance of the ‘traditional’ family to American life. Though speaking about the Confederate flag, Governor Beasley invoked these anxieties when he argued for the removal of the flag from the South Carolina state capitol dome in 1996. To Beasley, the flag should be removed so that South Carolina’s ‘children’ might learn to ‘live together’ with people who are different than them. Here again we see a debate regarding how the Civil War should be remembered and understood—via the embrace or rejection of the Confederate flag—played out alongside more obvious culture war debates centered to concerns over the American family, especially regarding the popular appeal to ‘help the children.’

For an overview of debates surrounding ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘diversity’ as they relate to culture war debates, especially those arguments pushed by the political Right concerning the need to move toward a ‘colorblind’ or ‘post-racial’ American society see Mitchell, Carolyn. “‘Multiculturalism:’ The Coded Reinscription of Race in Contemporary Educational Discourse,” The Black Scholar, vol. 23, no. 3, 1993, pp. 71-4.

Though it should be noted here that the concept of the ‘traditional’ or ‘nuclear’ family is itself ideological. The idea that a family ‘should’ or ‘ought to’ look or function a certain way is one that is informed by various social, political, religious, and cultural institutions and formations. Deconstructing and challenging the myth that any notion of a ‘traditional’ family might exist outside of ideology in the first place was a defining feature of the culture war debates.
The point here is to argue that cultural conflicts across the American South were continually fought within and around the shadow of the Civil War. Issues as varied as race, politics, and the family, to name only a few, were also debated within the context of the 1860’s conflict. Symbols, imagery, and representations of the Civil War throughout the 1980s and 1990s—a time of especially tense cultural strife—both came under harsher scrutiny and were looked to for a sense of cultural stability precisely because the conflict of the Civil War represented both a parallel to many of these cultural battles, and a remedy to the anxieties they produced. Although many writers have examined the causes, outcomes, and legacy of the late-century culture wars, as well as the extent to which the South’s relationship with its Confederate past constituted one significant space for debate, there is a noticeable gap in scholarship that considers just how crucial Civil War memory was to the ways people across the South responded to the many social and political confrontations of the time. These cultural conflicts of the era essentially constituted a crisis of national identity, as previously conceived notions regarding the social and demographic makeup of the United States, and of the South in particular, began to change. This project argues that these cultural conflicts can be better understood and explained by centering ideas related to the Civil War to the time and place they were especially strong—the American South at the end of the twentieth century. Its major claim is that examining the proliferation of Civil War representations in cultural spaces can help us comprehend both the causes and outcomes of national identity crises more clearly.

Now that we have established a clear link between the general cultural contention in the American South and the widespread preoccupation with remembering the Civil War during this timeframe, we must now consider why and how the 1980s and 1990s presented so many sites for cultural conflict in the first place. Understanding this will allow us to examine how and why the
Civil War proved so significant to comprehending the changing social, political, and cultural environments for so many.

‘The Crisis of the Humanities’ and an Unstable National Identity

When in 1990 Stuart Hall identified a “crisis of the system of higher education” in Britain, he cleared a space for deeper cultural analysis regarding the role of the school in the late-twentieth-century culture war debates in both the United Kingdom, of which he was specifically writing about, but also in the United States, where parallel debates over similar crises emerged (18). The school represents an important site of contention within the context of the culture wars because its function and purpose in society readily allows such battles to take place within its halls. It is the place where students are exposed not only to knowledge on various topics, but are also subject to the ways that knowledge is taught. Debates surrounding issues like school prayer, the teaching of evolution, and sex education naturally place the school at the center of cultural conflict because the ways these issues are communicated (or sometimes not communicated) have real impacts on how students understand their country, their society, and themselves. But other issues central to the school environment, including the ways specific subjects like the humanities are taught, serve the same purpose of shading the ways in which national identity is understood. Hall calls attention to this reality when he argues that conflicts related to the school have as their “central focus the question of what is being taught in two areas: literature and history” (19).

The significance of Hall’s claims regarding what he calls ‘the crisis of the humanities’ is in his ability both to connect the cultural function of the school with the larger social and political discussions of the late twentieth century, and also to identify this era as especially concerned with how certain subjects were taught in the school, therefore tying issues related to the late-century culture wars to academic spaces. Important national historical events as well as
canonical writers and their works all contribute to the formation of a strong and stable national identity. Because of this, political and social groups of the time often turned to the humanities as “the last bastion in a primarily defensive operation” against identity crises prompted by the cultural reexaminations of these historical and literary touchstones (Hall 21). Britain’s conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher through the 1980s, for example, aimed their political policies specifically at the school when it implemented a national curriculum across the country. The 1988 Education Reform Act standardized school curriculums and intended that students all over Britain would learn from the same lesson plans and according to the same criteria, which mostly favored British and European history and literature (Hall 18). Policies like these are indicative of the crisis Hall identifies as affecting social and cultural life by 1990, as they feed into the larger culture war debates of the time, debates which were themselves centered around the battle to define how the country should see itself. “The standards debate” in Britain occupied a major space of conflict in the late-twentieth-century culture wars because it tapped into the implicit reality that the ways subjects—and especially subjects like the humanities—are taught in schools have real impacts on the formation and reproduction of national identity and national culture (Hall 20-23).

The purpose for beginning this section concerning the school and national identity crisis with an examination of British rather than American culture is to provide a framework to bring Hall’s work into an American context. One issue with writing a project situated to cultural studies is that much of the scholarship exists within a British context. Writers like Denise Albanese, for instance, have noted that American cultural studies no doubt had to take “its agenda from the distinctively British class context out of which the Birmingham project emerged” (57). The cultural studies model, however, and especially the ideas laid out by Stuart
Hall and the Birmingham Centre, open up new possibilities for analysis when applied to an American perspective. For Hall, “cultural studies really begins with the debate about the nature of social and cultural change in postwar Britain” (12). These changes were grounded in issues like racism, the decay of empire, the rise of conservative politics, and a perceived loss of European hegemony concerning history and literary culture, many of which may also be applied to the United States in similar ways (Hall 12-14). The embrace of conservative ideologies and policies associated with Thatcher’s government in the United Kingdom, for instance, were paralleled by a similar embrace of neoconservative political and cultural policies associated with Ronald Reagan’s in the United States. Such connections lend this project a firmer ground upon which to examine the social, political, and cultural conflicts situated to the same era.

Scholars like Susan Giroux have further claimed that “the decades of the 1980s and 1990s have generally been associated with the ascendency of multicultural education in American [academic spaces],” as well as the cultural controversy and backlash which followed it (315). For example, foreign language requirements for both public school and higher education trace their roots to this era (Dutcher 12). Giroux’s arguments, while falling short of citing Hall, do provide a useful connection to his work by claiming that many of the ideas associated with ‘the crisis of the humanities’ also existed within an American context. Although Hall’s work around this topic has greatly influenced the ways we comprehend the social, political, and cultural strife which affected the United Kingdom throughout the 1980s and 1990s, few scholars have applied his ideas to the culture and society of the southern United States during the same decades, despite its applicability. This limited scholarship has left a space for research concerning how a similar “crisis of national identity [and] national culture” in the United States
contributed to the widespread embrace of Civil War-related imagery and representations in late-twentieth-century American life (Hall 21).

Returning again to issues related to the school, we can see similar trends in the ways the humanities were and still are taught in U.S. academic spaces. Subjects like history and literature, while not officially standardized in this country as they were in Britain, were nevertheless traditionally focused to particular national historical events and texts that likewise served to solidify American self-identity. These subjects were traditionally taught—and in fact often still are taught—in ways that perpetuate a sense of imagined ‘Americanness’ based on white, Euro-American identity. For example, U.S. history is often dated as beginning in 1492, when the Europeans first landed; despite the fact that the United States wouldn’t exist for another century-and-a-half, the Pilgrims’ arrival in 1620 is considered a formative moment to establishing an ‘American’ population on this continent, but the arrival of enslaved people from Africa a year earlier is not; and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains required reading on many high school syllabi, while other texts which center race and racism written by one of America’s many talented black writers are often overlooked. Understanding the American school system in this way should, as Hall puts it, “[demystify and] bring into the open the regulative nature and role the humanities [play] in relation to the national culture” (15).

The ways in which we understand these events and texts as comprising United States history and culture in the first place, however, requires deeper examination. It is for many no difficult task to imagine the Pilgrims’ trip to New England on the Mayflower as one of the earliest events in American history. Despite the fact that surely no conception of the United States of America could have existed in 1620, we in the twenty-first century are still tempted to think of the landing at Plymouth Rock as an integral part of the American story, perhaps even the
initial event of that story. Hayden White has offered a lens through which to view these issues via his argument that narrative, rather than facts or raw data, exists at the heart of historical comprehension (1463-80). Examined from a New Historian perspective, the ways we view and understand history are apt to shift according to the cultural vantage points we examine it from, largely because the cultural vantage points change as well. Historical narrative—the ways a nation understands and engages with its historical past—and national culture are therefore always deeply intertwined. For White, “to raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself” (“Hayden White” 1461). He continues, “so natural is the impulse to narrative, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report on the way things really happened, that narrative could appear problematical only in a culture in which it was absent” (“Hayden White” 1461).

The absence of a stable sense of historical narrative certainly would amount to a sense of national identity crisis, as events and texts which had previously been accepted as integral to the creation and structuring of American identity—or, the American story—no longer amounted to as much. Understanding the 1980s and 1990s as one such moment when these previously-told narratives came under new criticisms by various social, political, and cultural groups helps illuminate the central issues at stake in the American culture wars, and especially the impact these battles had on American cultural identity. Both Hall and Giroux have argued that the inclusion of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘diversity’ within academic spaces and lesson plans both started in the last decades of the twentieth century and resulted in backlash from conservative outlets. This was because the altering of the traditional ways in which the humanities were taught had significant impacts on how Americans understood themselves within the context of their historical pasts. Widening school curricula to include a broader array of social, cultural,
and racial perspectives in the latter decades of the twentieth century presented real challenges to the older modes of historical and cultural self-reflection. These trends certainly contextualize the reasons why the conservative government in power in Britain took such a drastic step as to standardize their public school curricula to exclude many non-British historical and literary sources. Historians in the United States have pointed out similar reactions for the same reasons. For example, as part of his 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan called for “severe curtailment of bilingual education,” seemingly, if not explicitly, because such modes of teaching challenged the narrative that the United States traced its identity back to a largely Anglo-speaking tradition (Clabaugh 257).

Hayden White claims that “the ‘overall coherence’ of any given ‘series’ of historical facts is the coherence of story” (1472). The Pilgrims’ arrival in 1620, and Columbus’ in 1492, are only two such historical facts. But each make up—in fact each begin—a thread of narrative that feeds into the American story as a whole. For instance, many of the defining features of American identity, or at least the defining features we have come to associate ‘Americanness’ with—like individualism, religious and economic freedom, perseverance against supposed tyranny, and strength in the face of adversity—find roots in the story of the Pilgrims. Because of their deep connections to historically-based formations of national identity and culture, these

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5 Reagan’s ideology in this matter fits into the larger ‘English First’ movement spearheaded by people like John Tanton throughout the 1980s. Tanton Founded the Federation for American Immigration Reform in 1979, and the U.S. English organization in 1983, the latter of which advocated for the exclusive use of the English language in American public life, including in spaces like the public school. The ways in which subjects like the humanities are taught also extends to the languages they are taught in, since languages are strongly intertwined with the cultures they come from. Tanton’s association with anti-immigration sentiments also highlights the connections between language and immigration and illuminates the reality that calls for the exclusive adoption of English as an official language in the United States often have as their motives deep anxieties regarding the changing demographic makeup of the country and concerns over the historical narrative that that makeup supposedly tells. For more on the history of the ‘English First’ movement within the context of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as its connection to the reproduction of national identity see Ramos, Leo Johnathan. “English First Legislation: Potential National Origin Discrimination,” Chicana/o Latina/o Law Review, vol. 11, no. 1, 1991, pp. 77-99.
same defining features of supposed ‘Americanness’ also constituted the major ideological stakes of the culture wars. By the 1980s and 1990s, questions over the validity of claiming a narrative line all the way back to 1620 as distinctly ‘American’ inevitably also prompted reexaminations of how valid our defining features were in the first place.

This idea also extends to our continued reverence for Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and why it remains required reading on many high school syllabi. The novel also incorporates the themes of staunch individualism, strength in the face of adversity, and—perhaps most importantly since it is largely informed by both of these themes—the idea that it is noble and honorable to believe and to do what one sees is ‘right.’ All of these themes can be seen in Atticus Finch’s resolve to defend a black man in court that most people in Maycomb, Alabama would rather see unjustly killed. Atticus’s determination in this matter serves to associate characteristics like individualism and strength in the face of adversity—which themselves are historically-based, defining characteristics of the United States—with the ideas of honor and moral righteousness.⁶ These ideas were, significantly, also the same reasons many southerners gave for Civil War conflict. It was ‘honorable’ and ‘right’ to stand strong in the face of an adversary like ‘the tyrannical North,’ and to fight for one’s individual liberty and freedom, two ideas which essentially constituted the motives for southern secession.

Lee’s novel, while engaging with more obvious modes of Civil War legacy like racism and segregation in the deep South, is therefore also bound up with Civil War memory in deeper

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⁶ The themes of racism and pre-thought judgement are also major themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and while it surely is honorable and morally right to not engage with racist or judgmental thinking or behavior, these themes are not particularly important to this chapter’s arguments. Any discussion of the moral character of Atticus Finch also brings up the notion of the ‘White Savior’ archetype, which has often been applied to the character of Atticus. This idea, however, extends beyond the scope of this thesis, and may be overlooked here except to say that the themes of race, racism, judgement, and the ‘White Savior’ myth are themselves continuously bound up with the larger themes of individualism, strength against adversity, and moral ‘rightness’ which historically defined American national identity and patriotism.
ways, including a shared preoccupation with the ideals that define both American national identity and the causes for Civil War conflict. These recognizable ideals make *To Kill a Mockingbird* an important text to teach in the school, as the novel not only instructs American students about the importance of individualism, honor, etc., but also reproduces strong sentiments of American patriotism, since American patriotism is itself informed and structured according to these ideals. Lee’s novel, then, has significant social, cultural, and political influence in American life because the ideals the story maintains have impacts on the reproduction of patriotic identity, and the reproduction of patriotic identity is intimately connected to the ways Americans engage with their everyday lives. The contradictions which arose in the 1980s and 1990s between the reproduction of these ideals in the school and questions about how valid the historical and narrative lines which informed these ideals were in the first place were connected to the social, political, cultural, and economic changes which affected late-twentieth-century American life. The Civil War represents a unique event in American history that forever embodies these ideals, and so its legacy may be employed to subvert the anxieties prompted by these contradictions.

Since ideals related to political, religious, social, and economic freedom were so vital to the founding myth of the United States, these issues also had deep connections to matters like the state of the American economy at the dawn of the twenty-first century, and especially to anxieties concerning what role the American economy would play on a global scale in the future. The rhetoric of the Reagan administration often targeted the school with these economic concerns in mind. In his 1983 State of the Union Address, for example, Reagan lamented that “Japan, with a population only about half the size of [the United States,] graduates from its universities more engineers than we do. If a child doesn’t receive adequate math and science
education by the age of sixteen, he or she has lost the chance to be a scientist or engineer” (1983 State of the Union). Math and science, of course, do not themselves fall within the realm of the humanities, but the motives for Reagan’s direct plea to the ways they were taught do point to the same underlying concerns regarding the continued reproduction of a stable sense of national identity. Reagan’s real concern is the preservation of the United States as a global economic superpower in the closing years of the twentieth century. Anxieties over where the nation would stand in the new millennium presented more crises to previously conceived notions of national identity. In the 1980s and 1990s, the United States faced important questions over how a country historically defined by identity traits like ‘individualism’ and ‘personal liberty’ would exist in an increasingly globalizing world.

These examples further connect political rhetoric and policy of the 1980s and 1990s to the larger cultural debates of the time. The ways the culture wars were discussed and imagined were uncannily similar to the ways Americans have historically discussed and imagined themselves. This is especially true when examining other American conflicts that presented major possibilities for national change, like the Civil War. It is no coincidence that the reasons for the breakout of Civil War in 1861 were deeply tied to the supposed ‘defining American features’ mentioned earlier, nor that these reasons were embraced and maintained most forcefully by the southern states, who, as some scholars have claimed, similarly felt that their ideals and identities as Americans were under attack.\(^7\) The reasons the Confederate States gave

\(^7\) The Confederacy traced their national narrative along the same lines as the Union, likewise looking to events like the American Revolution and to foundational texts like the Declaration of Independence as important to constructing a stable sense of national identity. Confederate money, for instance, was printed with the faces of the ‘founding fathers,’ which further suggests its tendency to see itself as a continuation of ‘the American story.’ In some ways the Confederacy, which only existed for four years and so had little of its own history to look back on, proves a perfect example regarding the necessity of selectively looking back to certain aspects of historical narrative for the purpose of creating national identity. For more on the ways the Confederate States understood themselves as
for seceding from the Union find parallels in the very traits which historically define American identity, an identity which itself was made more stable by negotiating a narrative line all the way back to the story of the Pilgrims, and perhaps even earlier. The Confederacy was established precisely because of an illogically perceived assault by the ‘tyrannical’ North on the South’s ‘freedom’ to maintain an agrarian, slave-based economy despite the global industrial revolution taking place by the mid-nineteenth century. The ways southerners of the late twentieth century remembered the South of the past shines a light on the ways they confronted and navigated the economic anxieties prompted by a changing world. The memory of the Confederacy, which is itself an ideological formation, provides a comforting fiction in the face of domestic and world changes, where issues like industrialization, multiculturalism, and globalization exist outside of southern society. By the turn of the new millennium, however, the South no longer had a choice but to face these many changes.

The Civil War fits into the larger narrative arc which comprises ‘the American story.’ At a time of national identity crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, the ways the Civil War was understood to have played out came under harsher scrutiny by the country as a whole because the features by which many Americans had previously defined themselves came under harsher scrutiny as well. The grounds on which these issues were negotiated were wide ranging, but the cultural tensions at the centers of these battles began in the school. A nation’s identity is created and reproduced every generation through the ways subjects like history and literature are taught and the modes by which these subjects are discussed in society. When new, more diverse perspectives were introduced to the ways students and, by extension, adults comprehended their nation’s history,

cultural crises emerged within the context of the culture wars. The Civil War, being an important national historical event as well as representing a real instance of historical cultural battle, became centrally important to navigating the battles and negotiations of the culture wars and therefore to the ways Americans would understand their nation.

The Politicization of the Civil War in the 1980s and 1990s

Areas related to the school and schooling represent important initial spaces for the formation of national identity, but the connections between the school and the ways Americans understand and engage with their national history and culture certainly do not end within academic spaces. Political rhetoric and policy of the 1980s and 1990s often extended outward from the school to cover larger sites of cultural contention. Cultural, societal, and political issues of the era were often discussed by politicians and commentators in ways that proved starkly shaded by Civil War memory and legacy. Pat Buchanan’s speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention, for example, outlined the ideological stakes in the presidential election of that year when he claimed it represented “a war. . . for the soul of America” (39). The Civil War was, of course, political in nature, and as a historical event cannot be totally separated from the many complicated areas of nineteenth-century American politics it was fought within. But the ways rhetoric highly reminiscent of the Civil War were invoked in the final decades of the twentieth century suggest deeper connections between the ways people understood their contemporary cultural battlegrounds and those battlegrounds of the past. Comprehending the Civil War as inhabiting both real (historical) and symbolic (ideological) spaces of conflict within the hegemonic American cultural imagination helps illuminate the sometimes-complicated nature of the late-century culture wars.
Buchanan went on in his 1992 Republican National Convention speech to claim that “this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe, and what we stand for as Americans” (39). Although such sensationalized rhetoric is common in political speeches, Buchanan’s claim that such vital ideals tied to the future of American national identity were up for debate in the 1992 presidential election nevertheless draws associations between the ways Americans conceptualized the culture wars of the time and the ways they understood a previously fought cultural and political conflict in United States history—the Civil War.

The Civil War, both historically and ideologically, effectively embodies what Buchanan calls ‘a war for the soul of America.’ It is nearly impossible to engage with such language and not find yourself trapped within Civil War memory. This rhetoric, in fact, uncannily parallels the reasons politicians in the 1860s gave for going to war. Throughout the 1860s, battles were fought across the country for the often-stated purpose of finally defining the core beliefs of the United States. These beliefs would, in the eyes of many, characterize the kind of nation we would be moving forward. For instance, in a speech given at Richmond, Virginia two months after the war began, Confederate President Jefferson Davis argued that upon the newly founded Confederate States “is devolved the high and holy responsibility of preserving the Constitutional liberty of a free government” (Jefferson Davis’ Speech at Richmond). Free government—the guarantee of which is laid out in our founding document of the Constitution—is understood to be a crucial part of American national and political identity. Whether or not the Union also expressly argued for the importance of democratic institutions, which surely they did, is not the point here. The point is that free government is once more cast as a defining characteristic of American national identity, and constitutes an ideal which can, again, through a New Historicist
framework, be constituted as a defining national characteristic in the first place by tracing a
distinctively American culture all the way back to the taught and told story of the Pilgrims and
their pursuit on this continent to freely govern themselves.

The similarly fought battles over cultural hegemony which defined both the Civil War
and the late-twentieth-century culture wars further associates the two. Jefferson Davis’s rhetoric,
for example, is just as sensational as Buchanan’s. It invokes the notion that the Confederacy had
a collective ‘responsibility’ toward ‘preserving’ such a ‘high and holy’ ideal as free government,
and in so doing provides a new light under which to view Buchanan’s words at a similar time of
cultural upheaval some one-hundred-and-thirty years later. Buchanan’s rhetoric should be seen
as directly engaging with Civil War legacy for the purpose of legitimizing the high stakes he is
attempting to set concerning the future of American national identity. The battles over these
stakes are what defined cultural conflict in the 1980s and 1990s.

These rhetorical connections extend as far back as the beginning years of the Reagan
administration. This points to just how crucial the associations are to better understanding the
nature of late-twentieth-century cultural conflict within the context of Civil War memory. In his
First Inaugural Address in 1981, Reagan outlined his political ideology, which was overtly
critical of his predecessor Jimmy Carter’s administration, when he stated his goal “to make
[government] work—work with us, not over us; to stand by our side, not ride on our back” (First
Inaugural Address of Ronald Reagan). The tendency to blame an encroachment of ‘the other
side’s’ governmental policies for cultural conflict has deep roots in American history. There is
no denying that the arguments around what extent government should play in American life has
characterized much of the ideological battles throughout the nation’s history. The conflict of the
Civil War, however, embodies these arguments in particularly forceful and violent ways. As a
result, political rhetoric targeted to questions regarding the role of government has since the 1860s always existed within the shadow of the Civil War. At moments of particularly strong cultural crisis, like at the end of the twentieth century, the influence of Civil War memory and legacy on social and political ideologies becomes more apparent.

Reagan’s speech about the role of government in his administration at his first State of the Union Address creates notable parallels to the rhetoric of Confederate leaders on the same topic. In 1861, Jefferson Davis claimed that the major reason for the southern states’ exit from the Union was because “[the Union had] allowed an ignorant usurper [Abraham Lincoln] to trample upon all the prerogatives of citizenship, and to exercise power never delegated to him” (Jefferson Davis’ Speech at Richmond). In Davis’s mind, the birth of the Confederacy—and by extension the start of the Civil War—was intimately connected to the issues of government overreach, personal freedom, and individualism, issues which themselves are deeply embedded in historically-based conceptions of national identity. The history and legacy of the Civil War constantly reproduce and shade our understandings of these conceptions.

It is significant that Reagan and Davis utilize similar language to criticize the same political concerns regarding perceived government overreach. Reagan is almost ‘looking back’ at Davis for the purpose of creating a supposedly stronger and more legitimate line of thought. It is through our conceptions of history that we understand our identities as Americans. The Civil War is a significant event in our nation’s history, and does itself—through the lasting legacies of regional politics and our often tumultuous two-party system, for example—inform the many political ideologies debated every election cycle. Even Buchanan, again in his 1992 speech, raises the same issue of government overreach, and also seems to ‘look back’ to the past, when he claims that the Republican Party’s strength in the upcoming election is largely because of its
stance “in favor of federal judges who interpret the laws as written, and against would-be Supreme Court justices. . . who think they have a mandate to rewrite the Constitution” (38). This rhetoric, which again foregrounds anxieties centered to the issues of government overreach and the integrity of our democratic institutions, is highly reminiscent of Jefferson Davis’s words concerning the election of Abraham Lincoln. The Civil War is remembered and its legacy is deployed at times of especially intense cultural conflict in ways that lend a sense of historical legitimacy to the major societal arguments of those times. This is because appealing to history, regardless of whether that appeal is consciously or unconsciously invoked, serves to solidify and stabilize national identity at a time of identity crisis. These rhetorical associations centered to Civil War-related ideologies offer further ways of conceptualizing the late-twentieth-century culture wars.

There are also regional and economic associations worth examining within this context. In his Inaugural Address in 1861, Jefferson Davis referred to the people of the Confederacy as “an agricultural people,” and southern society through both the second half of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth remained largely defined in these terms (Jefferson Davis’ Inaugural Address). Scholars have examined the numerous reasons why industrialization lagged in the South both before and after the Civil War. One reason is the notion of the “Agrarian Ideal,” which refers to the highly romanticized view held by some southerners of a region defined by a plantation-based, aristocratic, and mainly conservative society, and which traces its roots to the antebellum era but persisted for many decades after the Civil War (Preyer 382). This ideal had come to characterize many southerners’ perceptions of their society in the century following the Civil War, but it was, even by the late twentieth century, still very much tied to the memory of that war, which was fought in large part to maintain an agrarian culture and economy.
across the region. By the 1980s and 1990s, industrial development had noticeably spread throughout the South. In 2000, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that employment in manufacturing sectors like the automotive industry had increased nearly thirty-four percent between the years 1989 and 1999, even despite the fact that manufacturing jobs had actually decreased by over four percent across the country as a whole in the same period (Hatch and Clinton 5-6). This development ushered in significant change to southern society and explains another reason why national identity crisis characterized the era so strongly.

Questions over the impacts that economic reality and industrial transformation have on shaping the ways people imagine their social and cultural existences comprised some of the initial examinations which led to the development of the cultural studies model. Raymond Williams argues that the “new kinds of personal and social relationships” which emerge out of the widespread adoption of “industry” and “democracy” explain the reasons for the materialization of “culture,” or, in the South’s case, cultural change (7). The emergence of new economic modes situated to industrialization across the South do partly explain the identity crises which affected the region at the end of the twentieth century, but the widening spread of democracy throughout the South during the same time is also worth noting. The major aim of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was to extend the benefits of democracy to the groups who had been disenfranchised and denied them since the Civil War. By the 1980s, the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement was itself under political and cultural attack. With reference to the school, for example, the Reagan administration “called on Congress to outlaw ‘forced busing’” in favor of desegregation methods which emphasized more “freedom of choice in educational matters” (Nessen 1). Since the 1964 Civil Rights Act, federally funded busing of black students to public schools had been a critical measure toward integration. But these
attempts to democratize educational access had by the 1980s presented similar crises to national identity and culture via the transformation of classroom demographics. Reagan’s rhetoric in this matter, too, appeals to the defining American characteristic of ‘freedom’ over government overreach, which recalls the similar sentiments articulated by Confederate leaders regarding the reasons for Civil War conflict. This further explains why the embrace of imagery, rhetoric, and representations centered to the Civil War were ways of stabilizing national identity for some across the American South. Issues related to industrial and demographic change contributed to the larger cultural conflicts of both the Civil War era and the late twentieth century. Looking back to the Civil War era, a time of similar identity crisis, represented an important way people in the late-twentieth century could conceptualize their own moment of national change.

The tension between change and continuity, the future and the past, was articulated and epitomized by political leaders of the late twentieth century. Bill Clinton, for example, began his first Inaugural Address in 1993 by claiming that his election represented a celebration of “the mystery of American renewal” (First Inaugural Address of William J. Clinton). George Bush began his Inaugural Address in 1989 by first remembering the past eight years of the Reagan administration in fond terms, and then creating an extended reference to George Washington’s presidency two centuries earlier (Inaugural Address of George Bush). These differences between each president’s philosophy regarding the trajectory of the nation—should it move forward or look back—create interesting parallels to the larger ideological differences which contributed to the late-century culture wars, especially as they related to the South.

In some ways the 1992 presidential election between Bush and Clinton seemed a referendum on the continuing negotiations between the Old and the New South. Each of the candidates came from states that in 1861 had both seceded from the Union during the Civil War
and had legally held enslaved people in bondage, but while Clinton was significantly younger and newer to national politics, Bush was not. Clinton also hailed from Arkansas, a state which by the 1990s suggested the possibility of a New and globally involved South as the home of the tremendously successful and worldwide company Walmart. Bush’s family history in the Texas oil business, on the other hand, represented to some an old mode of economic progress. The nature of political battle between the two therefore illuminates deeper associations to cultural conflict across the South throughout the final decades of the century. The decision between a new, industrialized, and globally participatory South versus an old, deindustrialized, and globally isolated one was embodied by the two candidates, and helped inform the late-twentieth-century culture wars that were largely situated to these issues.

Clinton makes light of the cultural battles of the era by directly invoking the legacy of the Civil War. He reinforces the unique possibility the Civil War presents toward stabilizing national identity at a time of crisis by claiming, “from our Revolution [to] the Civil War. . . our people have always mustered the determination to construct from these crises the pillars of our history” (First Inaugural Address of William J. Clinton). His implication here is that out of the cultural and identity crises of the 1980s and 1990s, Americans will similarly construct a more stable and solid historical narrative. Clinton can only make this argument, though, by referencing the Civil War and bringing its legacy to bear on the crises and conflicts of his own time. The cultural wars of the late twentieth century cannot be fully understood without realizing that the ways people in the United States, and especially those in the American South, conceptualized these spaces of conflict were deeply informed by Civil War memory. Politicians and commentators of the era often ‘looked back’ to rhetoric of the 1860s to situate their arguments within the larger American historical narrative which seemed liable to change by the
1980s. Recalling the Civil War at a time of economic, social, and demographic transformation constituted one way people navigated these various crises characteristic of the culture wars.

While speaking about the legacy of the Vietnam War in his 1989 Inaugural Address, George Bush remarked that “no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory” (Inaugural Address of George Bush). Though speaking about a foreign and much more recent conflict, Bush’s words could be applied to our remembrances of the Civil War. If they are, we should understand them as illuminating the real ideological stakes of these late-twentieth-century cultural battles.

Civil War Memory in American Life: A Closing Example

This chapter has explained how Civil War memory informs the larger cultural debates of the 1980s and 1990s. It began by examining how contemporary issues related to remembering the Civil War, like controversies surrounding the display of the Confederate flag across southern state capitols, played out alongside the various ideological battles of the late-twentieth-century culture wars. These issues over how the Civil War should or should not be remembered were often negotiated in spaces related to other cultural conflicts of the time, including debates over race, the family, and historical narrative. National identity is created and reproduced through institutions like the school. Schools teach subjects like literature and history in ways which highlight the ‘defining characteristics’ of a country’s identity and reinforce the underlying cultural hegemony that these characteristics produce. Applying a New Historicist lens to United States history and literature illuminates how the country can trace its cultural roots back to the early seventeenth century before any concept of the United States existed, as well as how and why certain American literary touchstones contribute to the reproduction of national identity. The late twentieth century constituted a moment of intense cultural conflict during which these
historical tracings and traits came under harsher criticisms as various social and political groups questioned the validity of the previously told national narrative in the face of demographic, global, and economic change. These questions led to a sense of national identity crisis for many, and are what lent the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s such intensity.

Because of both its ideological connections to the wider cultural battles of the time, as well as its position as a national historical event which presented real cultural and social change in the United States, the embrace of Civil War-related imagery, rhetoric, and representations across the American South helps explain the sometimes confusing nature of the late-century culture wars. Turning toward reinterpretations and historical or linguistic symbols related to the Civil War in the face of social and political change should be seen as attempts to subvert the national identity crises prompted by such change. The Civil War is, in the diverse ‘American mind,’ a uniquely American event that may be employed and used as a backdrop in various ways for its very Amerianness. Of course, any idea of a singular and monolithic ‘American mind’ brings up more questions than answers within the context of this project. Many different racial, ethnic, social, and political groups constantly struggle for cultural legitimacy in this country, and the battles fought over claiming this legitimacy were especially fervent throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century. The Civil War is a shared historical event that many such groups must negotiate in their own ways, as it is an event that, by its very nature, incorporates real and symbolic conflicts that are either steadfastly ‘American’ (like the stated goal of preserving the Union), as well as those which, at least politically, are not (like questions over the legitimacy of secession and the Confederacy). This chapter has maintained that the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s cannot be fully understood without realizing the ways Civil War memory bears on the ways Americans view their national history and narrative. It has argued for new
ways of understanding how Civil War themes, imagery, and reinterpretations are created, negotiated, and comprehended by the diverse ‘American mind,’ and how, despite this diversity, the idea of the Civil War stands as an important event to conceptions of national identity.

Returning to the 1980s, we can examine one last instance which highlights the important ways Civil War legacy shades our understanding of national history and narrative at a time of national identity crisis. In his farewell address to the nation in 1989, Ronald Reagan offered a final sentimental thought about his closing presidential term and situated it to the Civil War. Speaking about living in the White House over the past eight years, he says:

The view [from the president’s window] is over the grounds here to the Washington Monument, and then the Mall and the Jefferson Memorial. But on mornings when the humidity is low, you can see past the Jefferson to the river, the Potomac, and the Virginia shore. Someone said that’s the view Lincoln had when he saw the smoke rising from the Battle of Bull Run. (Farewell Address to the Nation)

The language Reagan uses in this final address is steeped in a nostalgia that takes most of its emotional and sentimental weight from the collective and readymade memory of the Civil War. In only a few sentences Reagan invokes images of important national markers like the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial, both of which commemorate significant figures in United States history, and associates them with the image of Civil War battle. He speaks of the land and geographical features of the United States in an overly romantic way, prompting us to recall that we are closer to history than we think, that it happened right outside
the president’s window. Reagan’s speech reminds us that we look back to and revere not only the ‘founding fathers’ and geographical landmarks of America to conceptualize and solidify our understandings of national identity and history, but that we also nostalgically look back to the event of the Civil War because it is so intertwined with our understandings of each.

Reagan is conjuring the ghosts of American history through his rhetoric. His nostalgic view across the capitol suggests much deeper appeals to the social and cultural changes which had taken root in American life by the end of his second term, and how crucial the memory of the Civil War proves to fully understanding reactions to these changes. The final image of smoke rising from the Battle of Bull Run and rolling through modern-day Washington D.C. as ‘humidity’ speaks to the continuing hold the Civil War has on us. Smoke becomes fog, but the legacy which the haze represents is still there. At times of intense cultural strife, like those of the 1980s and 1990s, these connections prove vitally important to realizing who we are, where we have been, and where we are going, questions which themselves defined the issues at stake in the late-century culture wars.
CHAPTER 2:
IDEOLOGY IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH—SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERFORMATIVITY

Lewis Powell and the Question of Ideology

The story of Lewis Powell’s burial in 1994, referenced in the introduction, highlights the complicated yet intriguing question of ideology in the American South. There is perhaps no better example that so completely illuminates and simultaneously obscures the ways people across the region view both their history and their everyday lived experiences. In 1865, Powell was convicted of treason for attempting to murder Secretary of State William Seward, and he was hanged in July of that year. When on Veterans Day weekend his remains were draped with a Confederate flag and reinterred in Geneva, Florida over a century later, a speaker at the burial ceremony, Rev. Daryl Permenter, Sr., pastor of the First Baptist Church of Oviedo, was quoted as saying, “Had I lived when [Powell] did, I probably would have done the same thing. War is war, and I believe he did what he did believing he was right” (Robison).

While Powell’s reinternment is sometimes difficult to fully grasp given the reality of his life and crime, both Permenter Sr.’s statement and the performative nature of the burial ceremony itself do offer important insights into how ideologies informed by Civil War and Confederate memory and legacy were embraced and reproduced in late-twentieth-century American life. To begin, it is not that the dozens of people present at the burial ceremony did not understand or were not aware of Powell’s crime, as evidence of it could be seen at various places—the gravestone which marked his death in 1865, the Confederate flag left folded by the marker, Permenter Sr.’s use of the ambiguous word ‘probably,’ which at least attempts to acknowledge the doubtful morality of Powell’s actions, though nonetheless falls short of condemning them. In this way, Powell’s burial ceremony reflects many of the contradictions
which generally exist beneath ideologies defensive of Confederate symbols and representations. The public display of images like the Confederate flag and statues of Confederate generals, for example, have been identified as commemorating and glorifying racist and bigoted ideologies, though many across the South dodge race entirely and instead defend these images and objects as no more than reminders of the region’s historical past. The explanation as to how these symbols and representations can be viewed in differing ways lies in the modes by which people are interpellated or brought into ideology. To be clear, Confederate symbols like the flag and military statues do embody and perpetuate racist beliefs. The Civil War was largely fought over the issue of race. This chapter makes no defense of these symbols, representations, and images in southern society, but offers some explanation as to how and why ideologies situated to and informed by them became so central to the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s.

The sentiments expressed at Powell’s burial ceremony also mirror the defining national ideals explained in the previous chapter. Characteristics centered to ideals like fighting for what is ‘right’ or honorable, fighting against supposed tyranny, and maintaining personal liberty and freedom are reproduced in conceptions of American history, art, and culture. It is no coincidence that these ideals were the very same ones the Confederacy claimed to be preserving through the act of secession. While it is clearly not ‘right’ or honorable to attempt to murder another person, the political, historical, and social ramifications of committing such an act against the Secretary of State only days after the end of the Civil War could nevertheless be seen as reinforcing these ideologies which themselves reinforce American patriotic ideals. It is, in a way, honorable and ‘right’—and therefore American—to fight for and be willing to give your life for what you ‘believe’ in, as Rev. Permenter Sr. said. Understanding Powell’s burial ceremony in this way helps explain why few overt references to his crime or execution were immediately apparent at
the reinternment. The underlying ideologies situated to American patriotic ideals are reinforced through the performance of the burial, which includes actions like draping the Confederate flag over the remains, making speeches, and commemorating veterans on Veterans Day, not through the knowledge of Powell’s actions and death. In this way we can begin to understand how American patriotic ideology is materially reproduced through actions, behaviors, and performances, as well as how ideas connected to the memory of the Civil War fit into the formation of these ideologies by the late twentieth century.

Chapter 1 explained how and why ideals like economic, political, and social freedom prove significant to the formation of a stable sense of American national identity via historically-based conceptions of national narrative. It argued that throughout the 1980s and 1990s—a time of particularly felt social, cultural, and economic change across the country, and across the South especially—an event like the Civil War provided a comforting fiction and a subversion against the shifting social realities that such changes ushered in. It maintained that because Civil War memory and legacy are so strongly connected to historically-based characteristics that define American identity, the various sites of cultural battle that comprised the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s cannot be fully understood outside of the shadow of the Civil War. This chapter introduces the concept of ideology to bear on these ideas, providing an additional viewpoint from which to examine the widespread embrace of Civil War-related imagery, symbols, and representations in American life by the late twentieth century. It begins with a brief examination of Marx’s ‘false consciousness’ view of ideology before turning toward the more materialist views developed by Louis Althusser and Slavoj Žižek in more recent decades. Understanding that ideology has a material existence, that people are brought into ideology by the things that they do, not necessarily by the things that they think, provides a framework to
analyze the social and culture significance of Civil War-related performances and performativity in late-twentieth-century American life, including burial ceremonies for Confederate soldiers, the display of the Confederate flag, and the increased popularity of Civil War reenactments. This chapter builds off of the previous one by returning to institutions like the school and considering how performativity native to the American school environment reproduces ideologies situated to American patriotic belonging. In the 1980s and 1990s, these patriotic ideologies became complicated in the wake of significant social and economic change in American life. This explains one reason why issues related to the Civil War became so central to United States society and culture at this time.

**Beyond ‘False Consciousness’: The Materiality of Confederate Ideology**

Although considered rather static in the wake of developments made by theorists like Althusser and Žižek, the original Marxist view of ideology as a kind of ‘false consciousness’ nevertheless prompts us to understand certain universal ideological formations in important new ways. The ideal of freedom, for instance, which is in the United States intimately linked to historically-based conceptions of American patriotic ideology, has been analyzed and deconstructed within this context. Žižek explains how Marx saw an ideological construct like freedom as a product of ‘false consciousness’ as follows:

Every ideological Universal—for example freedom, equality—is ‘false’ in so far as it necessarily includes a specific case which breaks its unity, lays open its falsity. Freedom, for example: a universal notion comprising a number of species (freedom of speech and press, freedom of consciousness, freedom of commerce, political freedom, and so on), but also, by means of a structural necessity, a specific freedom (that of the worker to sell
freely his own labor on the market) which subverts the universal notion. That is to say, this freedom is the very opposite of effective freedom: by selling his labor ‘freely,’ the worker loses his freedom—the real content of this free act of sale is the worker’s enslavement to capital. (21-22)

Marx essentially sees a concept like freedom, as it exists in its various iterations in society, as purely ideological since the ideal of freedom is continuously bound up with the falsely-held belief that capitalism is itself a free and fair economic mode; or, in other words, workers to Marx are free only in the sense that they are free to sell themselves into wage slavery, and the ideological illusions which capitalism perpetuate obscure that such an exploitative contradiction is taking place. Hence Marx’s well-known claim, “they do not know it, but they do it” (Capital). According to this framework, capitalism and the ideological formations it produces cannot be understood, nor could they even exist, without this freedom/slavery opposition characteristic of the working class. Though Marx’s notion of ‘false consciousness’ leaves little room to explore the full nuance of ideology, in this way it does provide a compelling entry point to a study of American patriotic ideology in the American South, and especially to its relationship with Civil War memory and legacy in late-twentieth-century American life.

Since the notion of freedom is, in Marx’s mind, an ideological universal crucial to the reproduction of the capitalist status quo, it stands to reason that the historically-derived characteristics of American national identity and patriotism—which themselves incorporate many different freedoms (freedom to govern ourselves, freedom from tyranny, freedom of choice, etc.)—likewise serve to inform and reproduce the material conditions of our everyday lives. In the South, the memories of the Civil War and of the Confederacy provide a framework
within which people might ‘act out’ and reproduce these ideals, which proves especially important at times of cultural and social change. Understanding ideology as functioning in this way helps to explain how Confederate symbols, images, and representations became such a widespread feature of social and cultural life in late-twentieth century America.

The legacy of the Civil War is continuously associated with the idea of freedom. The reasons the Confederate States gave for secession always appealed to a supposed theft by the Union of the very freedoms that had come to define American national and patriotic identity. In his last speech to Congress before Mississippi’s secession and the start of war, for instance, then-Mississippi-senator Jefferson Davis claimed, “we are about to be deprived in the Union of the rights which our fathers bequeathed to us” (Jefferson Davis’s Farewell). These ‘rights’ of course referred to the ‘right’ to own enslaved people, the right to maintain an agrarian culture across the South, the right (generally speaking) to live as one sees fit, all of which at least broadly encompass important patriotic ideals related to economic, political, and social freedom. Davis’s claim that these rights to various freedoms were about to be deprived from the southern people highlights the important stakes the Civil War presented with relation to the preservation of some of the deepest held ideologies concerning American identity and patriotism. From this viewpoint, issues like race and racism remain enclosed within these larger universal ideological constructs centered to various freedoms, which at least begins to explain how the racial realities apparent in the embrace and display of images like the Confederate flag and statues of Confederate generals are sometimes consumed by the wider and much more palatable blanket of ‘Southern History’ or ‘Southern Culture,’ ideological formations which are themselves closely bound up with the historical struggle over the preservation of various social, political, and economic freedoms.
Ideologies related to and informed by Civil War memory are uniquely suited to Marxist criticisms. The freedom/slavery opposition that partly explains ideology as ‘false consciousness’ also illuminates the hidden contradictions of Confederate ideology. The dichotomy proves significant on a basic level given that the overarching reasons for Civil War conflict in the first place constituted these very questions: the battle over freedom vs. slavery, free state vs. slave state, etc. On a deeper, ideological level, the South was really and essentially fighting the war for the freedom to enslave a significant portion of their population, which interestingly mirrors the freedom/slavery opposition. The essence of Civil War conflict therefore illuminates a real and noticeable “falsity” that serves to “break open” the unity of such a universal ideology as freedom, as Žižek claims in his analysis of Marx’s ideas. In other words, if Marx’s notion of ideology as a ‘false consciousness’ serves to obscure the reality that deeply-held ideals like economic and social freedom actually perpetuate a symbolic enslavement to the exploitative status quo, then the idea of the Civil War itself makes this obscurity, in a sense, clear.

Of course in this way the notion of ‘false consciousness’ ceases to provide a completely developed construct within which ideology can be understood. It prompts questions about why people across the South would turn toward images, symbols, and representations of the Civil War to stabilize challenged ideologies given that the symbolic relationship of Civil War conflict to peoples’ ‘real conditions of existence’ actually serves to illuminate previously hidden realities concerning the exploitative nature of these conditions. Which is to say, at times like the late twentieth century, when our notions of patriotic ideology became complicated in the face of economic, social, and cultural change, the memory of an event like the Civil War would actually

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8 Here I’m relying on Althusser’s definition of ideology as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1284). The imagined memory of the Civil War presents several interesting relationships to the ways people across the South understand their social and cultural realities.
fail to mask the exploitations Marx believed were characteristic of class-based society, as its symbolic nature (in the form of the freedom/slavery opposition) serves to bring the reality of these exploitations into the open. Why, then, were Civil War symbols and representations so widely and strongly embraced across the southern United States in the 1980s and 1990s?

An answer exists in Žižek’s own analyses of ideology. Žižek builds off of Marx’s original thoughts but argues that rather than existing “on the side of knowledge,” (i.e., that ideology is produced through the ways we think about things, as the ‘false consciousness’ hypothesis assumes), ideology instead exists “in the reality of doing,” (i.e., following Althusser’s notion that ideology has a material existence) (30). Žižek adds to his own argument a sense of postmodern cynicism by reinterpreting Marx’s original ideological claim, ‘they do not know it, but they do it,’ instead to function more like, “they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it” (30). It is in this recognition of ideology as such that the embrace of Civil War symbols and themes becomes an interesting and significant feature of late-twentieth-century American life. Žižek’s ideas offer an explanation as to why and how people at Lewis Powell’s burial ceremony could consciously ignore Powell’s life and execution despite the evidence of each being clearly on display. They also offer an explanation as to why and how people across the South could embrace Confederate symbols and imageries as representations of nothing more than American and southern heritage, even in the face of the obvious racial and violent undertones such symbols embody. It is not that people are oblivious to—nor even that they are defensive of—the controversial and problematic natures of these symbols and imageries, but rather that the ideologies related to the embraces of them are created and reinforced through the material actions and performances people engage in, rather than through what they ‘know.’ This is why performative actions including burial ceremonies for Confederate veterans, the
display of the Confederate flag, and Civil War reenactments grew in popularity throughout the 1980s and 1990s. They represented ways of stabilizing ideologies related to American patriotism and national identity through the act of glimpsing and realizing our defining national characteristics (freedom, equality, individualism, etc.) as ideological in the first place.

The ways in which these various material actions are performed therefore prove important to fully understanding this seemingly contradictory reality. Similar to the ways in which Powell’s burial ceremony were understood by those who witnessed it, additional performative actions related to Civil War memory like battle reenactments are acted out with a sense of conscious ignorance regarding the underlying reasons for Civil War conflict. Reenactors, for instance, meticulously research facts concerning how battles unfolded, how uniforms were stitched together, and what soldiers actually ate and drank on the battlefields, but they intentionally ignore the social and political realities that led to war in the first place. It is the deliberate overlooking of these social and political realities, though, that illuminates the performative nature of these events. Realizing why and how Civil War and Confederate memory and legacy became so embedded within southern culture and society is therefore grounded in a combination of historical and ideological considerations. It is crucial to historicize this project to the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, as these cultural battles prompted serious questions regarding the continued relevance of previously conceived notions of American patriotic identity and ideology. But the embrace of Civil War-related symbols, imageries, and representations extends beyond simply a desire to subvert the social crises characteristic of these culture wars. The story of the Civil War, and especially the story of the Confederacy, actually serves to highlight and bring into the open the imaginary nature of American patriotic ideology. These material acts situated to the idea of the Civil War are in this way performed to reinforce and
maintain these imaginations. Within this context, it proves necessary to understand how patriotic ideologies are created, reproduced, and maintained in American society and culture in the first place. To this end, we must turn back to considerations of the school in American everyday life.

**Schooling and Patriotic Identity: An Analysis of School Performances**

If Chapter 1 examined how ideologies related to American identity and patriotism are informed by the ways subjects like American history and literature are taught in the school, then this chapter considers how those ideologies are reinforced and maintained by bringing material or performative existences to them. The significance of the school remains of critical importance in this matter. Althusser claims that the school represents “the dominant” Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) toward the “reproduction of the relations of production in a capitalist social formation” (1297). The school functions, according to Althusser, in ways which prepare or condition children for the capitalist workforce once they age out of the educational ISA. In the school, for example, the relationships between teacher and students, academic production and grades, the individual student and the class, are mirrored in the relationships between employer and employees, workplace production and pay incentives, and the individual worker and the company. The very nature of *doing* in the school therefore informs and maintains the systems and ideologies needed for the reproduction of capitalist relationships.

Additional ‘acts of doing’ situated to the American school environment become significant to the formation of American patriotic ideologies in this sense. Various universal ideologies like freedom, equality, individualism, etc. are themselves important to the reproduction of the capitalist status quo (as they serve to mask the actual contradictions of these ideals), and these same ideologies are also bound up with conceptions of American patriotic and national identity. If the function of the school contributes to the formation and reproduction of
these capitalist ideologies, then it must simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of patriotic ideologies, whether overtly or covertly. This concept was partly introduced in Chapter 1 via analyses of the modes by which subjects like history and literature are taught in the school. Tracing a narrative line back to the story of the Pilgrims or classifying a novel like *To Kill a Mockingbird* as distinctly ‘American,’ for instance, reproduces ideologies related to freedom, equality, and individualism because these historical and literary examples themselves contain and perpetuate these ideals. From an Althusserian view, though, it is in the concrete acts of instruction that these ideologies are maintained. The school not only teaches “‘know-how’” on these various subjects, but also teaches them “in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its practice,” i.e., in forms which constantly obscure the relationships between individuals and their real conditions of existence through the film of ideology (Althusser 1287).

Patriotic ideology is given a material existence in American schools in various ways, but one interesting example is the rather common practice in elementary schools of ‘putting on’ or ‘acting out’ a Thanksgiving play. The story of the First Thanksgiving is for most children their initial introduction to the story of the Pilgrims, and it proves significant that school plays centered to this historical event should be so widely performed. One school district explains on their website that “the Thanksgiving school play, which over the years has become a longstanding part of the holiday celebration in schools, offers learning opportunities about history, friendship, and gratefulness, as well as a chance for students to express themselves in front of an audience” (Laurel and Shepardson). Reenacting the First Thanksgiving therefore serves once more to create and reinforce ideologies central to American identity like freedom, individualism, equality, etc. The Thanksgiving story is itself a personification of these ideals
(albeit one that is mostly told according to overly romanticized notions) and parallels them via historical claims situated to concepts like freedom from England, individual liberty over religious persecution, equality between Europeans and Native Americans, etc. But it is, importantly, the performance itself—the way such a play is put into practice—that actually reinforces these ideologies. It is the fact that students are allowed to ‘express themselves in front of an audience’ that is of particular significance, as this reality serves to highlight the truly performative nature of the Thanksgiving play. Really what this statement means is that students are encouraged to put into practice their freedom to be an individual within the context of the Thanksgiving story, and to be seen by an audience while doing it.

The idea of being seen in this way is critical to Althusser’s notion of ideological recognition, and specifically to his claim that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (1306). His example of the handshake from the “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” essay usefully illuminates how ideology hails individuals and subsequently brings them into identity formations as self-conscious subjects. To Althusser, the handshake represents a material act of “recognition,” an embodiment of the sense that to shake someone’s hand is really to see one’s own individuality and subjective existence in the action, to recognize that the handshaker, by very nature of shaking hands, “has recognized us” (1305). Althusser’s argument owes much to Lacan’s conception of the mirror stage in childhood development, and in fact we can understand the idea more concretely by imagining the act of handshaking to function similarly to the act of looking into a mirror, that is, to unconsciously glimpsing the construction of one’s own unique subjective identity via the act of self-recognition. Thanksgiving plays function exactly the same way, as it is through the performative nature of the play that the student essentially and consequently glimpses themselves as a unique American, as
part of the American story, and therefore as an individual who believes in the primacy of all the ideals and ideologies that make up American patriotic identity. Understanding the relationship between ideology and the creation of these identity formations likewise allows us to imagine the ‘acting out’ of performances like Thanksgiving plays as mirrors into which a student might look and (unconsciously) recognize, ‘this is me, and I am here, because this is what I am doing, and therefore what I believe, and I am recognized as doing what I believe.’

The various social and political disputes that defined the late-twentieth-century culture wars had their own felt influences on these performances. The widespread cultural battles characteristic of the 1980s and 1990s inform and highlight the problematic nature of performances like the Thanksgiving play. In 1996, for example, the Washington Post documented the story of Susan Neely Waren’s third-grade class from Alexandria, Virginia in their first year opting out of performing a Thanksgiving play. The article claims that by the 1990s “teachers at many Washington area elementary schools [were] presenting the story of Thanksgiving in a new light, prompted by the changing ethnic makeup of their classroom and revised views of American history” (Mack). Most of the children in Waren’s classroom, for instance, were “first-or second-generation immigrants,” a reality which helped to drive reconsiderations of just how relevant ‘traditionally-told’ versions of a story like the first Thanksgiving were to contemporary formations of national identity (Mack). Interestingly, Waren and others did not completely eliminate Thanksgiving performativity from their classrooms, but rather they replaced these ‘traditionally-told’ versions with something else. Waren attempted to make the story of Thanksgiving more relatable for her many immigrant students by doing activities which emphasized that “anybody who tries to leave their land for a better life in another land” is a Pilgrim (Mack). For example, her class read and discussed the
1983 children’s book *Molly's Pilgrim*, which tells the story of a Russian Jewish immigrant who initially feels out of place in the United States, but who eventually realizes how her search for a better life in America mirrors the story of the Pilgrims (Mack). At a different elementary school in Northwest Washington, students participated in an “International Day” rather than reenact the first Thanksgiving, during which they “[arrived] at school dressed in clothes representing their native cultures and [visited]. . . stations where they [learned] about music, stories, and foods from around the world” (Mack).

These instances highlight two critical points related to the reproduction of ideology in the school: 1) Although these new ways of introducing students to the story of Thanksgiving initially seem like strategies toward greater inclusivity in the classroom, they actually serve to produce the same ideologies essential to conceptions of United States identity and patriotism through the deemphasis of the Native American story/perspective. In this way ideologies centered to American identity and belonging function according to Žižek’s cynical claim that it is in the act of recognizing that certain ideologies are in fact ideological that serves to blind us to their own “structuring power of. . . fantasy” (30). For example, the struggles related to incorporating diverse and varied racial and ethnic perspectives into the American story necessarily focused attention on school practices like constructing Native American headdresses out of paper and acting out the parts of Native Americans in stereotypical ways, but it is through the acts of recognizing these problematic school activities as such that similar ideologies are nevertheless performed. Appropriating Native American culture through reenactments of the First Thanksgiving is obviously recognized as perpetuating troubling ideologies, as the very action by

9 The Washington *Post* article actually refers to making these headdresses as a “traditional lesson” in the school (Mack).
some schools of opting out of performing such reenactments indicates; but focusing on and putting into practice notions like ‘any immigrant may think of themselves as a Pilgrim and therefore as a part of the American story,’ or that Thanksgiving may be seen as a larger multicultural holiday that incorporates world cultures alongside or even over Native American cultures, effectively reproduces the same ideologies situated to conceptions of United States national identity (equality between various cultures/races/ethnicities, individuality to embrace one’s own unique cultural heritage, freedom to express that cultural heritage, etc.) without fully grasping the actual racial or ethnic realities embodied in the story of the First Thanksgiving. It is in this way that we can understand Althusser’s claim that “there is no practice except by and in an ideology,” that there is no way out of ideology, since even recognizing certain problematic ideologies as ideological still prompts actions that serve to reproduce the same universal ideologies crucial to the reproduction of American identity (1304).

2) These examples again emphasize ideology’s material existence, that individuals are hailed by and brought into ideology through performativity. Creating and maintaining feelings of American identity and patriotism are important to stabilizing the national culture, so ideals centered to the formation of them still must be put into practice within the various institutions or State Apparatuses that Althusser identifies (the school, the church, the family, etc.), the school representing the most significant one within the context of this project. Even when certain practices performed in the school become complicated in the face of social and demographic change, and therefore seem to challenge the legitimacy of universal ideologies like freedom, individualism, equality, etc., these ideologies are performed and maintained in new ways. We should understand a cultural lesson like ‘International Day,’ for example, as a similar material practice that serves to take the place of the Thanksgiving Reenactment. Dressing up according to
various cultural styles and physically moving from one station to the next constitute these performative actions. The recognition of the students by an ‘audience’ then works in a similar way. The dressed-up students are seen by other individuals, who are all mingling about the stations, as their unique and distinct cultural selves, and as a result are incorporated into the larger ideology that American identity is founded upon the very ideals that are themselves informed by these actual performative displays.\textsuperscript{10}

Thanksgiving plays are limited to elementary school classrooms during one specific month of the school year, but additional acts of ideological performativity exist along the entire grade-level spectrum and on every day of the year. One overt example is the daily and ‘compulsory’ recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, though the word ‘compulsory’ in this sense requires explanation. It is not a compulsion by physical forces that a student is made to stand and say the Pledge, but rather a compulsion by social forces, at least in the sense that if a student chooses to refuse to participate in the Pledge, they risk social ostracization. Though, importantly, even if a student refuses to perform the Pledge with their classmates, they are still subjected to and caught up in the same ideological formations. If performing the Pledge serves to ‘make material’ certain features of American patriotism and identity (freedom, individualism, etc.), then refusing to say the Pledge puts those same features into practice anyway. The refusing student would be practicing or performing their own ‘freedom’ and ‘individuality’ by not reciting the Pledge. This reality highlights the truly ‘compulsory’ nature of such a practice, since

\textsuperscript{10} It should be noted here that none of this suggests that reexamining problematic features of school activities like Thanksgiving reenactments and making Native American headdresses out of paper do nothing to alter the ways we think about social progress and change. It is in our best interests to recognize these practices as troubling and to change the ways we engage with them. These points serve to claim that the underlying ideologies that such practices inform never really disappear when they are deemed socially or culturally problematic, but are rather put into practice in other ways, since those very ideologies remain critical to the reproduction of both American national identity and the maintenance of the capitalist status quo.
whether the Pledge is practiced or not the performance reproduces patriotic ideology. It is in this way that we should understand the true extent and influence of Althusser’s notion of the ISAs in a given society, as “they attain their power not by means of explicit coercion or force but through implicit consent realized in accepted ‘practices’” (“Louis Althusser” 1284).

The accepted practice of the Pledge of Allegiance, just like elementary school productions of Thanksgiving plays, also functions according to Althusser’s example of the handshake in that it, like the handshake, represents a “material ritual practice of ideological recognition in everyday life” (1305). That this practice is performed in the school additionally highlights the important role educational institutions have to ideological formation. The way the Pledge is ‘acted out’ by students also shines a light on its performative nature. Reciting the Pledge becomes a classroom ritual through the actions it calls on students to perform. For example, a student is called to stand up, place a hand over their heart, face the flag, and then to recite a memorized oath in unison. This oath is, importantly, never practiced alone, but rather as a class and before the school day has officially begun. In this sense reciting the Pledge reproduces ideologies centered to American identity and patriotism in the same way Thanksgiving plays do, as it gives students the opportunity to recognize themselves within the larger American group, which itself embodies and promotes ideologies situated to Patriotism and national identity. Through the performance students are called or hailed by ideologies like freedom, individualism, and equality both because those ideals are expressly articulated in the rhetoric of the Pledge itself, but also because the ‘compulsory’ nature of the practice serves to make those ideals material.11

11 The history of reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in American public schools also highlights interesting connections between the Pledge itself and narrative-based conception of United States history, which was discussed thoroughly in Chapter 1. The first performance of something resembling today’s Pledge was practiced in October,
The claims made in this section regarding the central importance of school performances to the reproduction of patriotic ideologies serve two critical purposes: 1) When placed within the context of the American culture wars, they illuminate new ways of understanding the resurgence of Civil War symbols, representations, and imageries in social and cultural life throughout the 1980s and 1990s by highlighting the performative contexts that many such symbols and representations appeared in, and 2) They necessarily bring issues related to social and economic existence across the South to bear on explanations for these resurgences. One practice which involves displaying Civil War and Confederate symbols—like the Confederate flag, for instance—are Civil War reenactments, which reached their peak of popularity in the 1990s. At a time when these symbols and representations took on more problematic or troubling tones, Civil War reenactments constituted one way these symbols could be incorporated into a material—and more palatable—practice that still informed various ideologies related to American patriotism and identity. It is worth noting, too, that by the 1990s economic change had also significantly altered social and cultural relations across the South. As industry finally came to the region in the decades following World War II, ideologies centered to American patriotic and national identity became complicated in the face of a ‘New South.’ Ideologies centered on freedom, individualism, equality, etc., which were initially formed and reinforced in the school, not only served to strengthen feelings of American patriotism and national identity, but simultaneously served to reproduce the social relations necessary to maintain the capitalist status quo. This connection helps explain the deep associations economic and social change have on conceptions

1892, in part to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s landing in the Americas (Schaefer-Jacobs). Conceiving the origin of the United States as early as 1492, when Europeans first landed on the continent, helps illuminate the ways that patriotic and national ideologies are formed by drawing narrative tracings back through history, and how bound up performances like the Pledge of Allegiance are with these narrative-based conceptions.
of national identity and belonging, and how these changes across the South could lead to a sense of national identity crisis by the late twentieth century. The reasons for the widespread embrace and popularity of Civil War symbols, representations, and performativity at this moment are therefore explained in ways related to social, economic, and cultural change.

**Reality and Performance: Civil War Reenactments and Social Change**

Renewed interest in Civil War reenactments is usually dated to 1986, when a record number of people participated in the 125th anniversary reenactment of the First Battle of Bull Run. Reenactments grew in popularity throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, culminating with the 135th anniversary reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1998, which saw an estimated 30,000 participants perform and another 50,000 spectators watch (Stole). This increased interest in Civil War reenactments fits into wider trends of the time situated to both embracing and reexamining Civil War memory and legacy. The central importance of performativity contained in the very nature of reenactments, however, offers a way to view these performances not only as ways of engaging with and remembering American history, but also as important material practices toward reproducing ideologies related to American identity and belonging. At times when conceptions of American identity and belonging become fractured in the face of social, cultural, and economic change, performances like Civil War reenactments take on new importance regarding the reproduction of American ideals and ideologies.

To understand this more thoroughly, we should think about Civil War reenactments as performances that are ‘acted out’ in similar ways as the elementary school Thanksgiving play. The spectators in war reenactments, for instance, essentially function like an audience that may recognize the individual reenactors as putting into practice American ideals and ideologies through their performance of historical battle. It remains important that spectators view and
distinguish the individual uniforms, the historical weapons, the flags, and the movements of the armies on the battlefield, as it is through the recognitions of these images as quintessentially American, as part of the American story, that reenactors may recognize themselves as practitioners of national and patriotic ideologies.

While important to emphasize, highlighting the primacy of ‘images’ in Civil War reenactments perhaps invites conflicting modes of examination to the practice. A brief discussion of these modes does, however, shine a light back on the critical importance of performativity to reenactments. Poststructuralists like Jean Baudrillard argue that in a culture overwhelmed with names and signs for any such thing, it becomes increasingly difficult—in fact, it becomes impossible—to glimpse the real and true origin of particular representations. It is rather a simulated hyperreality, “a real without origin or reality,” that takes the place of authentic representations (Baudrillard 1483). There are parallels between this idea and the widespread popularity and embrace of Civil War themes, symbols, and representations in American life by the late twentieth century. The ways politicians of the time invoked the memory of the Civil War, the deep connections its legacy had on informing cultural war battles, the significant number of films and television shows about the Civil War, from Glory (1989) to Dances with Wolves (1990) to Ken Burns’s documentary The Civil War (1990)—all of these signs and images that inform and make up the culture of the time would, to Baudrillard, contribute to our hyperreal conceptions of the original event of the Civil War. It is according to this idea that, when conceptions of the ‘real event’ prove impossible to grasp in the face of the hyperreal, that these cultural representations of the Civil War could be regarded as representations of history itself. It is perhaps true that all of these cultural images and ideas do blur the realities of Civil War conflict and muddy our notions of what the war actually meant and what it was fought over.
These images and ideas do, however, remain crucial to the formation of United States patriotic and national identity, especially at times of cultural crisis.

As Baudrillard himself claims, “Our entire linear and accumulative culture would collapse if we could not stockpile the past in plain view” (1489). He is speaking of the ways culturally-based names and signs are applied to various cultural objects, and the act of plainly viewing images related to the Civil War—including those displayed at Civil War reenactments—serve similar purposes toward stabilizing conceptions of culture and history. In this sense, too, reenactments become hyperreal simulations of our already hyperreal conceptions of the Civil War (made hyperreal by the resurgence of Civil War symbols, themes, and representations in the national cultural), or, as Gregory Hall puts it, reenactments essentially become “simulations of simulations” (419). Baudrillard’s ideas do not, however, account for the real and tangible ways Civil War reenactments are performed. Authenticity is impossible to reproduce in any conception of the hyperreal or simulation. Therefore while these ideas do offer additional insights into how reenactments might be understood, they overlook a critical feature of them—their authentic performativity. Of course it is the fact that this feature is overlooked within this theoretical framework that an emphasis is consequently reflected back on it.

Hall argues that authenticity in Civil War reenactments “is seen as a focus and orientation on objects and interactions with others,” rather than as, for example, a completely accurate representation of the political and social climate of the 1860s (414). Participants at the 155th anniversary reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg subsisted for days on period foods like hardtack and salt pork, and one participant was quoted in the New York Times as saying, “We try to be as authentic as we can without getting dysentery” (Stole). These examples constitute the ‘objects and interactions with others’ central to reenactment performativity. Eating period
foods serve to make material through objects ideals related to Civil War memory and legacy, and the humor understood in the claim that real authenticity might only be achieved by contracting a gastrointestinal disease highlights the sense of comradery and communion situated to the reenactment atmosphere.

The dysentery comment also highlights a deeper truth about Civil War reenactments. While material authenticity regarding the ways uniforms are stitched together, the foods participants eat, and the ways battles are depicted remain important to the ‘authentic’ performance of reenactments, there is among participants a noticeable lack of attention paid to the political and social issues which both led to the war in the first place, and persisted after the war. Hall claims that “not all Civil War reenactors utilize static historical event timelines or stick to firm factual scripts of past events. . . [nor are] all individual reenactors or groups of reenactors. . . interested in educating an audience or producing mirrors of history” (415).

Another participant at the 155th anniversary Gettysburg performance stated, “We don’t get tangled up in the messy bits, which are the causes and outcomes, which are complicated and uncomfortable” (Stole). The causes and outcomes referenced here, though, are all of those features of Civil War memory that continue to bear on conceptions of United States national identity and belonging, i.e., the legacy of slavery, racism, regional conflicts, political divisions, tensions between an ‘Old’ and a ‘New’ South, etc. Dodging these issues while re-presenting the material conditions of the Civil War suggests much deeper reasons for the continued felt need for such cultural performances throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The dysentery comment therefore implies that Civil War reenactors know that their performances are not, in a sense, truly nor merely authentic re-presentations of history, but that they rather serve to reproduce and reinforce certain deeply-held ideologies related to American identity and patriotism. ‘They know,’ as
Žižek reminds us, ‘that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it.’ These are the connections between Civil War reenactments and the formation and reinforcement of ideology.

In this sense the modes by which Civil War reenactments are performed mirror those of the elementary school Thanksgiving play. Both practices serve to create and maintain ideologies centered to American identity and patriotism by bringing a material existence to important American historical events that embody various American patriotic ideologies (though the dubious legitimacy of claiming the First Thanksgiving as an American event has already been discussed). By the final decades of the twentieth century, performances like the school Thanksgiving play took on problematic and troubling tones as people began to reexamine the underlying racial, ethnic, and cultural issues implicit in such acts. Some schools turned toward new, seemingly more inclusive ways of re-presenting the Thanksgiving story that would align more thoroughly with the changing classroom demographics of the time. Civil War reenactments existed long before the 1990s, but the increased attention they received in American social and cultural life remains an important feature of the late-century American climate. Civil War reenactments, too, take images or behaviors that have become problematic or troubling within the context of the culture wars—like displaying the Confederate flag or other representations reminiscent of Confederate identity—and place them within a context that proves much more palatable to the social, cultural, and demographic climate without completely destroying the underlying ideologies they reproduce. The Civil War then becomes an ahistorical event, detached from the actual ‘causes and outcomes’ which historically define it, and instead exists as a readymade context within which symbols and imageries related to Confederate memory can continue to exist in the American imagination. It is in this way that Confederate
symbols and representations take on meanings related to ‘southern heritage’ or ‘southern history,’ and can simultaneously reject meanings tied to racism and bigotry. That is not to say that racism and bigotry are not contained within images like the Confederate flag, which surely they are, but rather this attempts to explain how such meanings may be rejected by some through the performative acts of making material certain aspects of the lived experience of the Civil War. Acting out the social and cultural realities of the Civil War in this way then illuminates the deeper connections between the performance itself and the ways in which it reproduces universal ideologies like freedom, individualism, equality, etc. The Civil War, like the First Thanksgiving, once more becomes a quintessential ‘American’ event which likewise reinforces these ideologies crucial to American identity in ways that prove more attuned to the changing social and political climate of late twentieth-century America.

The felt need to perform and put into practice these ideologies are also tied to economic change in the United States, especially across the South. Industrial development situated to one sector specifically—the automotive industry—provides a brief but important example. Although manufacturing jobs across the United States generally decreased throughout the second half of the twentieth century, jobs in the automotive industry actually increased across the South. Lured by “lower costs and large incentive packages,” car manufacturing plants found southern states to be particularly suitable locations for assembly lines (Hill 2). These companies, importantly, were not always domestically owned, and in fact foreign (especially Asian) companies built factories across the South throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century. By 2001, for example, both Honda and Nissan had opened manufacturing plants in Alabama and Tennessee, respectively (Hill 2). These industrial developments centered to the automobile industry proved significant to southern culture because the South had, both before and for many decades after the
Civil War, been slow and even resistant to industrial change, and because the automotive industry had generally been particularly strong in the northern United States following World War II. As car manufacturing plants closed down across so-called ‘rust belt’ states in the North, though, southern workers found themselves working in foreign-owned plants in a sector that had mostly defined an earlier mode of American industrial performance and pride.

Performativity here, too, becomes a crucial aspect of the ways ideology is reproduced across the South. Workers perform their labor in ways that are not immediately understood as fully reproducing ideals situated to, for instance, American pride and exceptionalism, as American steel was no longer fashioned into American products to be sold to the American consumer. The popular motto of the late twentieth century, ‘Buy American,’ therefore became complicated in the face of such changes related to globalization and the development of a ‘New South.’ It is in this way that we can once again understand Žižek’s definition of ideology (‘they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it’) as a crucial aspect regarding how Americans across the South understood their social, cultural, and economic realities by the turn of the twenty-first century. A more complete analysis of these economic trends extends beyond the scope of this thesis, but they still constitute important reasons for the resurgence of Civil War-related symbols, representations, and performativity in late-twentieth-century American life. When individuals are no longer able to perform or ‘act out’ national and patriotic ideals like pride for their country and its history through their labor, additional acts of performativity take its place.

The performance of labor is itself tied to conceptions of national identity. Material practices and modes of instruction that are performed and taught in the school, and which themselves reinforce and maintain American national and patriotic ideologies, are mirrored and
reproduced in the workplace. The real lived experiences and economic realities of workers across the South therefore have impacts on the ideologies and practices they then embrace. In this sense the rise of a ‘New’ and industrialized South, exemplified by the introduction of foreign-owned automobile factories across the region, does help explain why and how Civil War performativity and representations became so important to southern life and culture by the late twentieth century. As patriotic ideologies like freedom, individualism, and equality—which necessarily must be taught in both the school and then the workplace to reproduce the relations of production in a capitalist system—became complicated in the face of these changes, performances like Civil War reenactments provided outlets to put these challenged ideologies into practice within the contexts of American and southern history.
CHAPTER 3: THE CIVIL WAR IN TEXTS AND MEDIA

The Civil War as Sociopolitical Framework

In 1975, Michael Shaara was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his historical novel *The Killer Angels*, which depicts the Battle of Gettysburg from the perspectives of the various generals and soldiers who fought there. Over the next two decades popular films, television, and literature became noticeably preoccupied both with retellings and with reinterpretations of the Civil War. This late-century preoccupation consisted of trends ranging from simple depictions in texts and media of Civil War-related imagery and themes, to largescale cinematic productions that attempt to re-present the history and trauma of the war, to various alternate histories that prompt us to consider how our nation’s history remains connected to the actual outcomes and consequences of Civil War conflict. Some of these many examples include James M. McPherson’s historical work *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), the films *Glory* (1989) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990), Ken Burns’s documentary miniseries *The Civil War* (1990), Harry Turtledove’s novel *The Guns of the South* (1992), George Saunders’s short story “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” (1996), Charles Frazier’s novel *Cold Mountain* (1997), the *South Park* episode “The Red Badge of Gayness” (1999), and the film *Gettysburg* (1993), which is an adaptation of Shaara’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.

Understanding these various texts and media as ‘popular,’ as embodying what might be termed ‘popular culture,’ is itself a difficult task. Stuart Hall argues for a way of viewing ‘popular culture’ as a central space in which is played out the “[relations] between culture and hegemony,” as creating in its forms a “continuing tension... to the dominant culture” (235). In one sense, many of these examples already straddle this definition of ‘popular culture,’ as they blur the line between what is ‘popular’ and what is ‘serious’ art. *Cold Mountain*, for instance,
won the 1997 U.S. National Book award for fiction and was also a bestseller. *Glory* and *Dances with Wolves* were both box office successes and each received several academy awards. And *South Park*, since its beginnings in the late 1990s, has been both a ‘popular’ and critically successful show. These examples also, however, engage with important social, political, and cultural issues of the times in ways which challenge American cultural hegemony in significant ways, namely over issues situated to racial inclusion and equality in conceptions of American history and identity. This was, after all, a major stake in the larger American culture wars of the era, especially regarding goals centered to ‘defining the meaning’ of the nation moving forward into the twenty-first century.

This chapter is therefore concerned with two primary questions: how were these many depictions of the Civil War in late-twentieth-century American culture produced and presented to the people who engaged with them, and what did they mean? The question as to *why* there were so many films, television shows, and books depicting the Civil War produced at this time remains an important issue, though it has largely been answered through the previous two chapters. The various social, political, economic, and demographic changes which affected American society by the late twentieth century prompted renewed interest in Civil War-related activities and representations in American social and cultural life. The many battles and debates that characterized the late-century culture wars, which were themselves instigated by the same social and cultural changes, became closely bound up with Civil War memory and legacy as a result. It will serve enough to say that the popularity of the Civil War in film, television, and literature stands as yet another example that proves the national culture’s preoccupation with the conflict by the final decades of the twentieth century. The ways these various texts and media were created and presented to audiences, then, is the primary interest of this chapter, as this
question helps illuminate how people of the era engaged both with their cultural imaginations of the Civil War, and consequently with the realities of a changing nation.

Fredric Jameson’s reminder to “always historicize,” from the opening line of his 1981 text *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, highlights the importance of situating these various textual and media examples to their historical moments of production in the 1980s and 1990s (1734). Jameson argues for a method of literary and cultural analysis “in which our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the present,” an idea which in 1981 anticipates New Historicism, a critical mode which has been referenced throughout the previous two chapters (*The Political Unconscious* 1736). Controversies surrounding historically-based performances like the elementary school Thanksgiving play, for instance, were largely due to the shifting racial and ethnic makeups of American classrooms in the late twentieth century, and to issues related to incorporating these new perspectives into the larger American story. Media and literary depictions of the Civil War during the same period exist in similar contexts where contemporary issues like race and cultural identity become embedded in the depicted performances of historical events. Saunders’s short story “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline,” for example, follows employees as they reenact life during the 1860s at a failing Civil War-themed amusement park. Despite the historical backdrop of the story, though, contemporary issues related to racial inclusion and identity are brought to the center of the narrative. When guests arrive at the theme park, for instance, they are given various period ‘identities’ they will inhabit during their stay. Saunders writes, “We try not to offend anyone, liability law being what it is. We distribute the slave and Native American roles equitably among racial groups. Anyone is free to request a different identity at any time” (10).
Saunders’s tone throughout the story is ironic and absurd. For example, the politics of this scene can be partly understood as poking fun at relatively recent implementations to the American workplace environment like diversity training and multiracial inclusion, as it becomes more important to promote ‘equality’ over discontinuing an offensive practice like casting guests in roles as various racial and ethnic characters. The immediate and simple significance of this scene, though, is merely that these tongue-in-cheek comments situated to racial and ethnic identity are included within the context of a story preoccupied with the idea of the Civil War. When this story was published in 1996, the changing demographics of the country cast these social issues as particularly important to the ways Americans understood their national identity and history at the present moment. This thesis has already argued that social and cultural change contributed to the proliferation of Civil War symbols and representations in late-twentieth-century American life. It is therefore noteworthy that Saunders references these issues in a text that was both published in the 1990s and is at least implicitly about how the Civil War is imagined in contemporary American society. In this way we can begin to understand the importance of Jameson’s claim to recognize ‘our readings of the past as vitally dependent on our experience of the present.’ In Saunders’s story, then, is the initial hint that the sociopolitical issues of the time informed how Americans negotiated Civil War legacy, and Civil War legacy likewise informed how Americans understood the sociopolitical issues of the time.

Deeper analysis of Saunders’s story can explain this idea further. This scene also illuminates two important implications regarding the changing attitudes aimed at racial and ethnic groups in the country, and especially how these changing attitudes affected notions of American history and identity by the late twentieth century. The first implication is that there should be defined roles in ‘the American story’ for groups like Native Americans and enslaved
people at all, that these racial and ethnic groups did in fact inhabit important and essential spaces in the progression of American history and to the development of American identity. By the 1990s, writers like Saunders were engaging with the idea that non-whites played their own significant parts in the historical event of the Civil War. Although their true places in that conflict—and in American history generally—were mostly overlooked through the century-and-a-half following the 1860s, the cultural and demographic realities of the late twentieth century were prompting new considerations of American and Civil War history.

The second implication relates to the first by suggesting questions about the legacies of race and of racial exclusion from ‘the American story’ throughout the nation’s history. We can imagine the offense and controversy that might ensue after the part of an enslaved person, for instance, is ‘equitably’ given to a black guest at Saunders’s theme park. These roles might be distributed randomly, but they are still distributed forcibly, and this reality continuously reflects issues like the memories of racial discrimination and the violence of slavery back onto the practice itself. For example, the nature of the practice prompts questions like, can a black person, when placed into the historical contexts of the 1860s, ever exist outside of the shadow of slavery? One might be tempted to answer yes, since Saunders claims that ‘anyone is free to request a different identity at any time.’ But the very ‘freedom’ that such a statement supposedly offers again reflects an emphasis back on the offensive nature of the practice, as it self-consciously illuminates the truth that someone might actually feel offended enough to request a different identity when confronted with such an issue.12

12 And here again is the freedom/slavery opposition which informs the closed loop of ideology, as explained in Chapter 2.
This ideological contradiction is the crucial point, though, because it shows a historicized attempt in a textual artifact at an important negotiation between previously conceived notions of American history and the acknowledged place of racial and ethnic minorities in that history by the 1980s and 1990s. These issues were themselves major points of discussion for the culture war debates of the time. Saunders is proposing deep questions about how race existed for Americans in the late twentieth century, but his lack of sincerity in the matter is still only indicative of a negotiation of the various sides of the problem, rather than a complete and developed reconciliation of them. But negotiation, determining where our country would go and what values it would embody, characterized the late-twentieth-century culture wars. The fact that Saunders’s story also engages with the idea of the Civil War adds another important feature to these social and cultural negotiations, as it means the idea of this uniquely American and historically defining event becomes an important space within which to act out these negotiations in the popular texts and media of the time.

By the end of the twentieth century the idea of the Civil War becomes a framework within which contemporary sociopolitical and cultural debates concerning racial and ethnic identity are played out, discussed, and contended with in familiar and recognizable ways. This sociopolitical framework is created through clichéd depictions of the past and of Civil War history within the media and texts themselves, and also by certain tropes that appear across many of these same examples, including what I call the letter writing trope, the violence trope, and the death trope. These tropes are crucially important to understanding how Civil War memory relates to and bears on the cultural climate of the 1980s and 1990s as they create deep connections to the social and political issues of the times, especially those centered to racial violence and struggle.
The framework of the Civil War, then, is not merely created as a space to ‘display’ the social struggles of the era, but is rather created to engage with them at a moment when such engagement became necessary to defining American cultural hegemony moving forward. Once these tropes are understood as important to the ways the Civil War is nostalgically represented in various cultural texts, they also take on new importance as reflections of the ways Americans grappled with racial, ethnic, and demographic contention and change. These are the major reasons as to how films, television shows, and literature situated to Civil War memory and legacy became such a noticeable feature of late-twentieth-century American cultural production, and also as to what these productions meant to Americans of the era.

**The Civil War as Nostalgic Representation of History**

Saunders’s story, historicized and read alongside Jameson’s theoretical ideas, provides a decent entry point to this argument. But to truly understand how the multitudes of Civil War-related texts and media of the era serve the same purposes, we must first consider how the idea of the Civil War is presented across these various popular modes. The historical decade of the 1860s is remembered in highly sentimentalized and nostalgic ways across media and textual examples, and the ways the war itself is remembered are drawn along similar lines. Saunders’s theme park, for instance, culturally functions in much the same way as Baudrillard’s conception of Disneyland in that it represents an “old imaginary made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms” which serves to constantly obscure any connection we might have to a ‘real’ or ‘true’ sense of the world or of history (1492). Baudrillard’s idea of Disneyland contains a certain tinge of nostalgia to it since it is the nostalgic yearning to, in a sense, return to the simpler times of childhood that makes Disneyland such a popular destination even for adults, who need the idea of the park to solidify their own made-up identities as adults in the ‘real world,’ which is
itself always becoming ever more childish and absurd. It is likewise the heavy nostalgia inherent in countless representations of the Civil War in texts and media that similarly serves to obscure any ‘real’ sense of history we might have of the period. It is this obscurity of the ‘real’ conditions of history, though, that consequently makes the Civil War a readymade space within which to play out and comprehend various contemporary social and cultural debates.

Saunders’s theme park is not a true representation of history. He makes this clear through the story by constantly reminding us that the theme park is failing precisely because it does not seem to represent an authentic 1860s experience. But even despite this, Saunders brings us into the time period, into the supposed feeling of the Civil War era, by replacing real depictions of history with, as Jameson argues, “pop images and stereotypes about the past” (“Fredric Jameson” 1733). He writes, for instance, about actors who are hired for the park merely because they seem “to have a passable knowledge of how to pretend to churn butter,” because the image of someone churning butter by hand gives the impression of a past time that might by the Civil War era (14). He initially describes the owner of the theme park, Mr. A, as a man who “started out [CivilWarLand] with just a settler’s shack and one Union costume,” because merely the images of the Union’s blue uniform and of a shack reminiscent of perhaps the log cabin Lincoln was born in simulate the feeling of ‘Civil War-ness’ (4). He writes sentences in ways which predate the Civil War era, including, “[Mr. A once] gave an Old Tyme Skills Seminar. . . in the Blacksmith Shoppe,” because just the image of these word on the page, spelled out in this way, gives the impression of time past, of something resembling history even if not entirely historically accurate (5).

All of these examples culminate in a line near the end of the story in which Saunders introduces a character described as “looking so completely Civil War [that the theme park]
immediately [hires] him” (14). What exactly ‘so completely Civil War’ is meant to look like isn’t explicitly given, but this doesn’t mean we can’t put together a mental picture of this character anyway. He is the man who can churn butter, wear a blue Union uniform, live in a log cabin, work in a blacksmith ‘shoppe,’ etc. The phrase therefore does conjure up certain images of Civil War-ness that aren’t entirely based in the reality of history itself, but are rather informed by nostalgic imaginings of this past era of the American experience. Saunders’s tone, especially in these early stories, is often scathingly and self-consciously ironic. But just because he is knowingly playing with the superficial ways we remember and engage with Civil War history in American contemporary life doesn’t mean his work is any less bound to the historical moment it was produced in, nor does it mean that we should understand his story as somehow producing any more than merely a sense of Civil War-ness. Saunders’s story still relates to Jameson’s arguments regarding what the latter terms the ‘nostalgia mode,’ an idea which claims that by the late twentieth century “cultural production [had] been driven back inside the mind, within the nomadic subject: it [could] no longer look directly out of its eyes at the real world for the referent but [had to], as in Plato’s cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls” (Postmodernism 1764).

“CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” is not the only late-twentieth-century text that depicts the Civil War in this clichéd, mostly de-historicized way. Shaara’s The Killer Angels, for example, contains numerous maps from the 1860s that show army movements across Virginia and Pennsylvania and also in and around Gettysburg. That these maps are drawn according to mid-nineteenth-century conventions, that they depict land and topography in a way that a Civil War soldier would have understood them (at least in our contemporary imaginations), brings us into the Civil War-ness of it all. The novel’s 1993 film adaptation, Gettysburg, similarly begins with
the image of one of these maps with lines showing the movements of the Union and Confederate armies as they converge on that battlefield. Most revealing in this film, though, is the extended main title sequence which occurs just before this initial scene. In it, the film’s cast of actors are introduced alongside the historical figures they each play, although it might actually be more appropriate to say that these actors are not so much introduced alongside the historical figures they play so much as they become them. With the illusory magic of movie making real sepia-toned images of Union and Confederate soldiers morph into sepia-toned images of the performers who play them. A photograph of the actual Robert E. Lee, for instance, transforms into an image of Martin Sheen made to look like Robert E. Lee, a photograph of the actual Joshua Chamberlain transforms into an image of Jeff Daniels made to look like Joshua Chamberlain, etc. By making these performers look, we might say, ‘so completely Civil War,’ the past and the present take on eerily similar forms. Any connection to the ‘real’ history of the war, then, becomes blurred and disappears in the process, replaced, in the most literal way, with mere representations of what might be the impression of the era.

Jameson argues that the reason for this “disappearance of a sense of history” in contemporary culture is largely due to the rise of consumer capitalism through the last few decades of the twentieth century (Postmodernism 1771). The speed at which cultural features as wide-ranging as fashion, television, media, and advertised products change and become obsolete in one sense or another has, to Jameson, altered the ways these products are consumed in the first place, as there is always now an anxiety to ‘move on to the next thing.’ A result of this new mode of consumption is that the past changes so fast we eventually retain no access to its reality except through forms like pastiche and cliché, which do not give us the whole pictures of the past or of history, but instead give us the feeling or sense of them (Postmodernism 1762-63).
A further example of this is the tendency for many fictionalized texts about the Civil War to end by breaking from the fictionalized account of the narrative and providing a set of short historical facts about the events that have just transpired. For example, *Gettysburg* concludes by depicting images on the screen of the various historical figures from the war with excerpts written below them that explain what ‘really’ happened to them after 1863. Shaara’s novel ends in the same way. As does *Glory*, which concludes with a black frame with words that tell what happened to the all-black regiment depicted in the film. *Dances with Wolves* does the same thing, ending with a frame that explains what became of the last free Sioux that Dunbar had lived with. Even Frazier’s novel *Cold Mountain* finishes with an epilogue which describes how the characters have lived in the ten years since the events of the story. In these examples we again fail to access the ‘reality’ of the Civil War itself, but rather only sense the feeling of it. These snippets of ‘facts’ don’t actually mean anything, but instead serve to recreate nostalgic memories of the event as they exist within American cultural imaginations. They cannot be called true history, as they don’t engage with the many difficulties and contradictions that true history necessarily is, but rather they create the illusion of history by presenting the audience with the nostalgic and familiar impression of it, even to the point where the fictionalized movies and texts which precede these stylistic methods are themselves thought of as real representations of history.13

When read alongside Baudrillard’s work, then, we can understand how certain clichéd, nostalgic features of Civil War-related texts and media situated to late-twentieth-century

13 New Historicism would, however, push back against any notion of ‘true’ history, and instead argue that all history must be interpreted or reinterpreted from various historicized moments. By ‘true’ history, then, I mean the general outline of the historical record of the Civil War, determined mostly by historians, and separate from the causes and outcomes of the Civil War, which are always up for debate.
American popular cultural production serve to obscure our actual relations to any ‘real’ event of
the Civil War. But just as Baudrillard’s Disneyland is, in a sense, needed to hide or obscure the
social and cultural contradictions of the ‘real world,’ so too are these stereotypical
representations of the Civil War ‘needed’ to create a space in the national culture to negotiate
and comprehend the many difficult and sometimes violent contradictions centered to racial and
ethnic equality and inclusion in contemporary American life. The many media and textual
examples preoccupied with the Civil War, then, are not actual representations of the war itself;
they are representations of our cultural imaginations of the Civil War, which, by their very
natures of being imaginary and also by obscuring any real sense of the actual lived experience of
the war, are largely ideological. It is the ideological nature of Civil War memory, though, that
allows such an event to become a backdrop in front of which the various social and cultural
struggles of the time might be battled out.

An Examination of Civil War Tropes as They
Relate to Late-Twentieth-Century Culture

But we still have to get to the point, so to speak, as to how this framework functions in
the first place. There are several clichéd tropes that appear in many of the Civil War texts and
media of the time. One example might be called ‘the letter writing trope.’ There is a tendency,
especially at the very beginnings of particular works, to depict a Civil War soldier, away from
home and in a foreign land that is still somehow their country, writing and so documenting their
experiences on paper. In film these moments are usually portrayed as a voiceover, in which an
actor reads their character’s written words aloud as various expository scenes are shown on
screen. The opening scene of the 1989 film Glory, for example, depicts groups of soldiers
marching to battle as Matthew Broderick reads one of Robert Gould Shaw’s letters home over
the images. The letter reads, in part: “Dear Mother, I hope you are keeping well and not worrying too much about me. . . . How grand it is to meet the men from all the states, east and west, ready to fight for their country as the old fellows did in the Revolution. But this time we must make it a whole country for all who live here, so that all can speak” (Glory 00:01:32). 

Issues like racial equality and inclusivity were important features of the American culture war debates of the 1980s and 1990s, and the content of Shaw’s letter, although written in the 1860s (but nevertheless depicted in the film), does show how national perceptions of the Civil War had embraced the primacy of race to the conflict by the 1980s. It’s important to realize that late-century texts which view the Civil War as a racially motivated conflict are, from a New Historical perspective, understood to be influenced by the social and cultural climate of late-twentieth-century America, which was itself in the midst of racial and demographic transformation and contention. Moreover, the connection Shaw makes between Civil War conflict and the American Revolution casts the idea of the Civil War as a defining American event, and so suggests that Civil War conflict should be regarded as giving birth to certain ideals crucial to American national identity just as the idea of the Revolution does. While the connections between the content of this letter and the social, cultural, and political issues of the late twentieth century are important to consider in this regard, the deeper significance of this scene is that it constitutes the letter writing trope so common in late-century productions about the Civil War. This is the cliché that, from the very beginning of the film, brings us into the world of the Civil War not through any real or actual historical representation of the era, but through the pastiche of the trope.

A year later in 1990, Ken Burns used this method extensively in his miniseries The Civil War. Certain features of this style consequently became known as ‘The Ken Burns Effect,’ in
which images from the Civil War era are shown on screen while a voiceover reads excerpts from period letters or journal entries to the audience. One must consider how effective of a stylistic device this is if even a production that labels itself a ‘history’ of the Civil War must bring its audience into the era with such a cliché. But from a Jamesonian perspective, the imaginative limits placed upon any artist by the historical moment in which they work necessarily bears on the texts they produce. Despite being a history, then, Burns’s miniseries is first and foremost a product of its time, which means the tropes it deploys serve the same purpose of obscuring the real experience of the Civil War and instead makes the event an imaginary framework which exists in the allusive American past but is ultimately still detached from actual history itself. The 1999 South Park episode “The Red Badge of Gayness” parodies Burns’s effect, but it’s still worth highlighting here as a further example of the letter writing trope in contemporary media. As Cartman leads his own simulated Confederate army around the South, he writes letters back to his friends in South Park and reads them in voiceover as a sepia-toned image of himself dressed as Robert E. Lee shows on screen.

Further historicized examples do similar things. In Dances with Wolves, from 1990, Dunbar, played by Kevin Costner, periodically records his thoughts in a journal he brings with him to the frontier and reads the words he’s written as a voiceover. This is partly a plot device, as he is initially the only person who speaks English once he travels west, and the journal is a way of progressing the narrative on his own. But the cliché is still there, existing, much like it does in Glory, as a point of exposition. In the first voiceover of the film, for instance, after he attempts to commit suicide by riding a horse alongside a line of Confederate soldiers, Dunbar reads an excerpt in voiceover that says, “The strangeness of this life cannot be measured. In trying to produce my own death, I was elevated to the status of a living hero” (Dances with
Wolves 00:11:42). His stunt had actually acted as a diversion so that the Union troops could advance on the Confederate line. But this is the event that starts the narrative of the film, as Dunbar is given the opportunity to transfer to any military base he chooses, and he chooses to go west. The reading of his journal in voiceover therefore takes on new significance, as it once again brings the audience, from the very beginning of the film’s narrative, into the idea of the Civil War without presenting any actual historical reality of the era aside from the journal entry itself.

There are several examples of this trope in literature also. Turtledove’s 1992 novel The Guns of the South begins with the text of a letter that Robert E. Lee is writing to Jefferson Davis. The first line of the book directly after the text of this letter, in which Lee “[pauses] to dip his pen once more in the inkwell,” similarly conjures up stereotypical images of the Civil War and its era: the lone soldier writing over a folding table in camp, the pen which must be dipped into a jar of ink to write with, these are descriptions that represent clichéd and de-historicized Civil War-ness in its simplest forms (Turtledove 1). Frazier’s 1997 novel Cold Mountain also deploys this trope. The protagonist of the story, Inman, is a Confederate soldier recovering from a wound in a military hospital when he decides to desert the battlefield and return home. Here begins the narrative of the book, as Inman realizes risking his life for an ill-defined cause isn’t worth it, and sets off on his odyssey across the South, but not before penning a letter which he hopes to send off to the woman he loves who is waiting back at Cold Mountain, North Carolina. Inman attempts to describe the horrors he has seen in the letter, writing in part, “The ground was awash with blood and we could see where the blood had flown onto the rocks and the marks of bloody hands on tree trunks” (Frazier 24). Violence and trauma, too, are important parts of Inman’s struggle, as well the struggles of the other characters in these various examples.
Violence and trauma are, of course, notable historical features of both Civil War conflict and of the institution of slavery which was central to the cause of that conflict, and depictions of these features—where exactly in the narrative they show up and in what ways—are significant aspects of how Civil War-related texts and media are created and produced. The brutal violence of war is repeatedly portrayed in similar ways to and often in conjunction with the letter writing trope, as it serves the same primary function of bringing the audience into the idea of Civil War-ness early in the story. Violence naturally must be a feature of any depiction of the Civil War, as this was a gruesome and bloody period. In perhaps the most famous and revered novel about the Civil War, Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, violence is a central feature of the depiction of the conflict. Near the beginning of the novel’s action, for instance, after the story’s protagonist Henry Fleming, much like *Cold Mountain*’s Inman, deserts the battlefield, he comes across a dead body slumped against a tree. Crane writes of the violent and traumatic imagery with a chilling banality: “The mouth [of the dead man] was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the grey skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some little bundle along the upper lip” (47). Even the poetic image of the red badge of courage acts as a euphemism for a traumatic wound (Crane 54). But all of this is only to suggest that violence on its own is not an original nor a significant feature of contemporary conceptions of the Civil War. It is not so much that the violence is there, which after all is expected, as it is that it nearly always happens within close proximity to the letter writing trope. These tropes are associated to a degree worth noting.

In *Glory*, for example, Shaw, played by Broderick, and his army march into the Battle of Antietam directly after his letter writing voiceover ends. This march quickly devolves into, inarguably, the most explicitly violent battle scene of the film, after which Shaw is shown
looking out across a smoky field strewn with dead and wounded bodies, dumbfounded. The opening scene of *Dances with Wolves* is similarly jarring in its traumatic violence. The film begins with the image of two field surgeons, white aprons soaked in blood, preparing to amputate Dunbar’s wounded leg. When the two surgeons leave the tent, Dunbar sits up and, similar to Shaw’s reaction after battle, looks out at all the wounded soldiers who are themselves missing legs and arms and feet. But this moment is, at least narratively speaking, why Dunbar writes his first journal entry and then reads it as a voiceover. His wound and subsequent examination of all the mutilated bodies convinces him that he would rather die on the battlefield, shot alongside the Confederate line, than become a mutilated body himself. So here again the explicit violence and trauma of the film become directly associated with the documentation of the characters’ thoughts.

In *The Guns of the South*, only paragraphs after writing the letter that began the novel, Lee hears from his campsite the crack of a gunshot ring out “again and again and again. . . each report [coming] closer to the one before than two heartbeats were to each other” (Turtledove 2). The threat of violence is hardly far off in the distance. And in *Cold Mountain* the violence of war is understood in the very words of the letter Inman writes, depicting as they do the gruesome imagery of bloody handprints on a tree trunk, the traces of a wounded and dying man. These two tropes, then—the letter writing trope and the violence trope—although functioning individually in key ways, mostly exist together as important means for creating a clichéd and de-historicized sense of Civil War-ness in many of the popular films and books of the late twentieth century.

These clichés are in one sense, as Jameson would say, natural reflections of the modes of cultural production of the time, but these tropes also serve to make our ideological conceptions of the Civil War a readymade space within which to play out the various social, cultural, and
political struggles of the era. For instance, it is no coincidence that films like *Glory* and *Dances with Wolves*, although both manufacturing nostalgic feelings of Civil War-ness from their very beginnings, each nevertheless subvert the historical and military conflict of North vs. South, Union vs. Confederacy, and instead, as in the case of *Glory*, presents the tensions between the Union army and an all-black regiment that hopes to contribute to the war effort, and, in the case of *Dances with Wolves*, presents the tensions between the Union army and several Native American tribes struggling to retain their ancestral lands and cultures in the face of U.S. expansion west. By the late twentieth century, particularly felt demographic and social changes prompted stark reevaluations regarding the places that both the black and Native American experiences had in American history and in conceptions of American identity. It is only through glimpsing the Civil War through the lenses of nostalgia and clichéd stereotypes that the event can be removed from its actual historical contexts of the 1860s and placed within a late-twentieth-century context, which is to say, understood from a late-twentieth-century perspective. The Civil War remains a quintessential American event, and in this way it persists as such by reinventing itself as an important sociopolitical backdrop in front of which the various debates and negotiations of the late-century cultural wars might be played out and so incorporated into the larger American story.

There is one additional trope worth examining in this regard: the death trope. As was the case with the violence trope, one might be tempted to think of the death trope as a natural feature of any depiction of the Civil War. However, both the occasionally sacrificial essence of death in these examples as well as the widespread tendency of writers and filmmakers to kill off the main protagonists in them means this trope is worth examining in a deeper way. It’s important now, then, to briefly call attention to the problematic relationship between a character’s death in some
of these texts and media and the sacrificial nature of that death, as these depictions are bound up with and complicated by issues like the White Savior myth. To be clear, this chapter is not suggesting that certain white characters in films about the Civil War should be seen as dying and so ‘sacrificing’ themselves for the greater good of racial and ethnic equality on the behalf of non-white people. The death trope in a film like *Glory*, for instance, straddles this complicated line when Shaw dies in the final battle and his body is buried in a mass grave along with the rest of his regiment. The emphasis placed on his death, the fact that his body in the grave is the final image we see on screen, tends to overshadow the similar sacrifices made by the many black soldiers throughout the film. It suggests that we, as the audience, might not have realized the important contributions this regiment made to the war effort if Shaw had not been there the whole way to, in a sense, ‘show’ us this to be true.

The same can be said of Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves*. Dunbar ‘sacrifices’ himself several times throughout the story. The scene near the beginning of the film when he rides along the Confederate line and allows himself to be shot at, for instance, a sacrifice. This is made more apparent by the fact that as he’s riding along the line he releases the reins of his horse and outstretches his arms in a Christ-like pose, figuratively sacrificing himself to the Confederate bullets, and it’s from this early scene on that we view Dunbar as a sacrificial figure in some way or another. This manifests most clearly at the end of the film, as Dunbar is given the Siouan name Dances with Wolves, and then is subsequently called out to with this new name by Wind in His Hair. Being called out to (or hailed) in this way is crucial to the point that by the end of the film, Dunbar is seen by the Lakota as one of them, and so conversely he might see himself as a Lakota, therefore symbolically bringing about the death of his old western (and even—if we consider race itself as socially constructed—white) identity. Dunbar does embody parts of the
White Savior myth in the film, since it is through him, much as it is through Shaw in *Glory*, that we are ‘shown’ the Lakota. But still the important point here is that his symbolic death at the end of the film nevertheless constitutes the death trope.

The death trope also appears in several literary examples. In “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline,” for instance, the protagonist and narrator of the story is violently (and in typical Saunders fashion rather surprisingly) stabbed to death by the man described as ‘looking so completely Civil War.’ And in the final scene of *Cold Mountain* the protagonist Inman is shot and killed shortly after returning home by a Confederate militia tasked with tracking down deserters. These tropes therefore appear with great consistency across the many late-century texts and media situated to Civil War themes and memory. The intriguing question remains, though, why these tropes in particular? On one level they do represent the clichéd ways by which we might access the feeling or sense of the era without glimpsing the actual or real history of it, which Jameson explains is an artistic method of late-twentieth-century cultural production generally. But once we understand these clichéd and stereotypical tropes as products, so to speak, of the 1980s and 1990s, then they take on new significance when viewed alongside the major social and cultural issues of the time. It is the de-historicization of the Civil War in this way that subsequently allows conceptions of the event to be brought into late-twentieth-century American imaginations as a social and cultural framework within which to not merely depict these various issues, but to actively negotiate and comprehend them.

The main negotiation relevant here is the issue of race in America. Films about the Civil War which center race to their narrative conflicts, like *Glory* and *Dances with Wolves*, are clear examples of the primacy of race to both the war and to 1980s and 1990s society. Other texts and media that have been referenced throughout this chapter, including *Gettysburg, Cold Mountain,*
and “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline,” don’t immediately make race a central feature of their storylines. In fact the supposed absence of race from these textual and media examples helps explain how some people make the case that remembering the Civil War at the end of the twentieth century—an era that is still looked to as one of social progress and multicultural equality—‘doesn’t have’ to be about race at all. But of course it is and of course it does. These tropes, historicized as they are to the 1980s and 1990s, use the memory of the Civil War to reflect on and comprehend the many battles, tensions, and incidents situated to race and racial equality that constituted significant struggle in late-century American life.

In 1991, for instance, Rodney King was brutally beaten by four LAPD officers and a recording of the violence done on him was widely seen across the country. A year later, after the officers involved were acquitted on charges related to using excessive force, videos of violence and rioting in and around Los Angeles were similarly broadcast across the nation. Police brutality and violence on non-white Americans led to numerous additional riots and protests around the country, and many of them were documented on film and distributed for the public to see. The cause of the 1980 Miami riots eerily mirrors King’s case, as violent demonstrations broke out after four policemen accused of beating a black man, Arthur McDuffie, to death at a traffic stop were all acquitted in court. The 1989 Miami riots occurred after a police officer shot and killed a black man on a motorcycle. The 1990 Wynwood riot occurred in Wynwood, Florida after an officer beat a Puerto Rican man to death. In 1996, riots broke out in St. Petersburg, Florida after an officer shot and killed a black teen in his car.\(^{14}\) The images of these events and

\(^{14}\) Referring to these events as ‘riots’ is normally justified, as they did devolve into violence, property damage, and in many cases death. Because of the important social causes for these events, though, they are sometimes referred to by alternative terms. The 1992 Los Angeles riots, for instance, are sometimes called the Los Angeles Uprising in order to maintain that these demonstrations were the result of both police brutality against Black bodies and the
others, recorded and disseminated as they were, became both fixed images in Americans’ minds and lasting reminders of late-twentieth-century social and cultural violence and conflict.

The tropes found in the many examples of Civil War-related texts and media not only reflect these images of racial and cultural struggle, but also serve to play them out in the popular culture of the time. The violence trope, for example, finds reference in the images of racial and community violence, both violence perpetrated by police on non-white men and the violent nature of the numerous riots and demonstrations that often followed. The letter writing trope constitutes the documentation of the violence itself. In texts and media about the Civil War, these two tropes often appear together, or at least in close proximity to one another. The soldiers in these examples are documenting the violence around them in an attempt to better comprehend it, even if such a task always proves impossible once confronted with such horror. In the 1980s and 1990s, social violence and the documentation of it similarly appear side by side and in association with each other, whether it is the video evidence of Rodney King’s beating or the videos spread of the various riots of the era.

Reflections of the death trope are also apparent in these contemporary cultural and social battles. Death is obviously a significant feature of both police brutality and the violence of riots. But deeper connections between Civil War texts and films and the actual experience of the 1980s and 1990s exist in how these deaths are portrayed. Across these textual and media examples the character who dies at the end is typically the protagonist, which creates a greater sense of loss than what might otherwise be felt. Inman, for instance, is shot and killed after he arrives at Cold Mountain despite four hundred previous pages depicting his dangerous desertion from the army unjust nature of the criminal justice system which failed to carry down sentences for such brutality. I have retained the term ‘riot’ in referring to these events, but it’s important to note the complicated nature of deploying such a term.
and difficult journey home. Dunbar is symbolically killed in *Dances with Wolves* even though it is made clear that he would rather live with the Lakota, and the Lakota would allow him to live with them, if it weren’t for the United States military. Shaw is killed in the final scene of *Glory* after he proves to be one of the only men in the film who view the all-black regiment under his command as important to the war effort.\(^{15}\) As the narrator of “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” is stabbed to death, he has a moment of deep spiritual and moral understanding in which he thinks, “I see the pain I’ve caused. I see the man I could have been, and the man I was, and then everything is bright and new and keen with love” (Saunders 26). In a way it doesn’t make sense that characters like these are made to die in such painfully reasonless and hard-to-grasp ways. The same is true of death associated with police brutality and racial violence.

The specific tropes which appear in numerous films and literature preoccupied with Civil War memory are therefore not deployed coincidentally. The texts they appear in must be historicized to their time of production, and in so doing the tropes become ways that Americans might negotiate the complexities of racial and cultural struggle and attempt to understand both the why and the how of it. The Civil War is made into a nostalgic memory through these clichés and others, but once it is de-historicized in this way it becomes an important space to work these issues out, issues which by the late-twentieth-century had become notably seen and felt features of American social and cultural life.

\(^{15}\) Robert Gould Shaw did actually die at the Battle of Fort Wagner in 1863, but both the fictionalization of the film and the socially conscious way the character is portrayed nevertheless makes this conclusion emotionally surprising to watch.
Alternate Histories as Looking to the Past to Glimpse the Future

The popularity of alternate histories that attempt to imagine the course of American history as if the Confederate States had won the Civil War constitute one additional feature of 1980s and 1990s popular culture. The main plot of the South Park episode “The Red Badge of Gayness” is that Cartman decides to lead a simulated Confederate army around the country, capturing cities across the South, in an effort to rewrite history so that he can make Stan and Kyle his slaves. On the one hand South Park does engage, at least obliquely, with the idea that slavery and its legacy is a central feature of Civil War memory, but it also presents some real problematic issues by suggesting that slavery can somehow exist outside of its own reality as a horrific, violent, and race-based institution. Surely slavery cannot, as the show indicates, be viewed simply as something ‘lame’ that one may punish their friends with. Not only that, but by suggesting that Stan and Kyle might be made into slaves themselves the show problematically removes race from the issue entirely. This also proves troublesome because many of the texts that reimagine American history as if the Confederacy had won the Civil War are concerned with questions about how race and racial equality would function in such an altered country.

Near the end of the South Park episode, after Stan laments that Cartman and his simulated army might actually succeed at officially altering United States history, and that he and Kyle will have to be Cartman’s slaves, Stan’s grandpa says, “this isn’t about you having to be slaves, this is about history. We can’t let them change it” (“The Red Badge” 00:19:71). But the issue of slavery is so bound up with the history and memory of the Civil War that a line like

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16 Of course South Park notoriously lacks any sense of racial diversity, which the show self-consciously realizes and ironically addresses by naming the only black student at the boys’ elementary school ‘Token Black.’ This certainly doesn’t justify this lack of diversity, but it does nonetheless reflect issues centered to race and racial inclusion back onto the show and its era.
this prompts questions about what features of history are in danger of being changed in the first place? History of what, and for whom? Not only that, but it also engages with questions about whether history can in fact be changed at all. These are the central questions that alternate histories concerned with the Civil War tackle and attempt to work out. They are mostly about what America would look like not so much politically, but socially and culturally, if the Confederacy had won the war. This is surely because the legacy of slavery and the issue of race in this country are so intimately connected to Civil War memory. But, interestingly, these texts never really suggest realities all that different from our own lived ones. Whether or not the Confederacy wins the war is hardly a significant feature in these examples. Rather, it must be the ways that we, from our present vantage points, view the central causes and outcomes of that war that must be the primary issue in these texts, since if it is not an explicit it is at least a latent truth that while history cannot be changed, our conceptions of it from various historicized periods surely can.

In the South Park episode, for example, Cartman and his army end their journey across the country at Fort Sumter, and they eventually claim it for themselves in an attempt to reenact the actual events of the Civil War. When the National Guard arrives and threatens to arrest them all, “the entire state of South Carolina [shows] up” in support, to which Cartman replies, “I knew they would” (“The Red Badge” 00:18:52). Here a text concerned with changing or altering history so that the Confederacy wins the war prompts questions about what such an alteration of historical facts would actually entail. This example humorously illuminates the extent to which Confederate memory and identity still exists in the South. If we are to assume that a Confederate victory in 1865 would have made this memory powerfully endure over a century on, or that it would have made Confederate identity more tangible even by the dawn of the twenty-first
century, then what does it say about American society that these legacies persist even in our actual historical realities? In this way, Cartman highlights the sense that alternative conceptions of the outcomes of the Civil War don’t actually reimagine history as all that different from the truth. The world remains, as it turns out, eerily similar.

Another good example of a Civil War alternate history is the 2004\textsuperscript{17} film \textit{CSA: The Confederate States of America}. Written and directed by Kevin Wilmott, and produced by Spike Lee, the film is presented as a mockumentary that explains the history of the United States since the Civil War as if the southern states had secured victory over the northern states and had incorporated the Union into the Confederate States of America. In this reality slavery is still legal and accepted in a matter-of-fact way, and historical roles are reversed as Abraham Lincoln is regarded as a national villain who died in exile in Canada and Jefferson Davis is elevated to a national hero. Most significant in this example, though, is the use of ‘commercial breaks’ throughout the piece which serve to create the feeling one is viewing a television show rather than a feature film. These ‘commercials’ are still contained within the fictional reality of the film, however, and mostly advertise for products that would supposedly exist in this alternate reality. All of these advertisements are from any viewpoint extremely racist (no doubt a reflection of what a Confederate States of America would possibly advertise to its citizens), and the absurd comedy that Wilmott adds to them makes these ‘fake’ commercials rather difficult to watch. There is, for example, an advertisement for ‘Darkie Toothpaste,’ the logo for which

\textsuperscript{17} Although this film was released a few years outside of the late-twentieth-century timeframe established throughout this thesis, this film is still close enough to the upper limit of that timeframe and displays many of the preoccupations that other late-century texts and media depict (including its subject matter centered to the Civil War) that it warrants inclusion in this chapter.
depicts a white man in black face. There is an advertisement for a chain of restaurants called Coon Chicken Inn, and another for a chain of restaurants called Sambo’s.

Within the contexts they appear these advertisements prove horrible but believable, playing as they do on our ideas about what such a country as the Confederate States of America would look like by the turn of the twenty-first century. It is not until the end of the film that Wilmott includes several frames of white text on a black background which claim that many of the products advertised in these ‘fake’ commercials actually existed in the United States in the decades following the Civil War. Both the toothpaste and the restaurant chains were advertised in this country well into the twentieth century. It is one thing, it turns out, to view these overly racist products and chains as if they existed in a racist alternate universe, but it is quite another to realize they are indigenous to reality. It is, however, only in viewing these commercials within their ‘fake’ contexts that they become so appalling once identified as ‘real.’ And here again, most explicitly, is presented the notion that what would change in American social relations if the South had won the Civil War isn’t immediately clear, because much of what we can imagine as happening—especially regarding race and racial equality and inclusion—can already be found in the historical and social conditions in which we actually live. It is in this way that texts and media which depict alternate realities of the Civil War are further made to inhabit spaces that challenge the cultural hegemony of the era, particularly as it relates to race in America.

The numerous examples which tackle this concept highlight the significance of such challenges within the larger cultural war debates of the time. There is an apparent yearning to look to the past, to re-imagine it as strangely familiar, in an effort to create a space to envision the future of the nation. These racist advertisements, we are tempted to think, surely existed ‘back then,’ but they couldn’t possibly define our current times. It is in casting the Civil War as
a popular framework to play out these ‘realities’ that, in turn, the issues embedded in the 
advertisements become urgently real, are understood as inhabiting critical spaces in our 
conceptions of American culture and society, and are consequently battled out to define the type 
of nation we would become. In many ways these battles over cultural hegemony are still 
occurring across the United States two decades into the twenty-first century, and they are still 
often positioned in relation to Civil War memory and representations of it. Novels like Colson 
Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz’s film 
*Antebellum* (2020) play with the history of the Civil War and of race in similar ways. And the 
ways these films are produced, presented, and understood have actual social and cultural 
impacts—it was not until the early 2020’s that the logos and names for products like Aunt 
Jemima and Uncle Ben’s, which each incorporate Civil War-era and racial imagery, were finally 
changed.

In his 1981 text “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” Stuart Hall argues for a way of 
understanding popular texts, media, and culture in much the same way that the Civil War is 
represented in popular texts and media of the same era. He writes:

> Popular culture is one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the 
> powerful is engaged: it is the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of 
> consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is 
> not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture—already fully formed—might be 
> simply “expressed.” But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted.
That is why “popular culture” matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it.\(^{18}\) (239)

By the final decades of the twentieth century various social, cultural, and political issues situated to race necessitated new kinds of engagement and contention with American culture and hegemony. Hall’s statement on the matter highlights the important negotiations and battles that continuously take place beneath the surfaces of these ‘popular’ examples. These modes of analysis illuminate new ways of viewing how Americans in the 1980s and 1990s understood the cultural conflicts and debates of their time, and how they would glimpse their future moving forward.

\(^{18}\) We can understand Hall’s use of the terms ‘socialism’ and ‘socialist’ as also existing outside of their political meanings, and to instead refer to societies that strive toward a greater and more complete sense of social equality and inclusion.
CONCLUSION

The Continued Significance of Civil War Themes and Rhetoric in the Twenty-First Century

On 16 September 2015, eleven Republican candidates for president gathered at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California to take part in a televised primary debate. The candidates stood on a stage in front of a Boeing 707 that had once been President Reagan’s Air Force One transport throughout the 1980s. Neither the location nor the massive presence of the plane behind the candidates can be overlooked. The irony of the spectacle was no doubt the point, as nearly a dozen Republicans—some voicing old conservative ideologies and some voicing seemingly radical new ones—all remained shadowed by the nostalgic memory of a man who by 2015 had ostensibly become a symbol for a unified Republican Party. Reagan carried all but one state and 525 electoral votes in the 1984 election and remained popular enough to pass political power on to his vice president, George Bush, in 1989. But the social and cultural strife of the late twentieth century are indicative of much deeper ideological disagreements and debates in everyday American life than the political trends of the era would suggest. Many of these debates were never wholly resolved, and in fact became apparent again in American society and politics over a decade into the new millennium. The location of the 2015 primary debate and the placement of Reagan’s plane in the background, then, are not only appealing to the nostalgic memory of an administration long past, but also to the era itself, as it resembles one of similar cultural battle and contention.

Just as in the 1980s and 1990s, the memory and legacy of the Civil War remains crucial to fully comprehending the continuing cultural struggles and debates of the twenty-first century. Politicians like Donald Trump often invoke themes and imagery related to the Civil War in an effort to navigate the complexities of social, demographic, and economic change. These changes
prompted significant questions over what the nation would look like and value in an ever more globalizing world, just as they did thirty and forty years ago. Trump’s emphasis on putting ‘America First,’ and his campaign slogan ‘Make America Great Again,’ not only yearn for the nostalgic comfort of an ideological past, but also directly engage with conceptions of where the nation is, where it is going, and what it will value in the coming years and decades. They are calls to ‘define the meaning of America’ at a time when a stable sense of identity becomes complicated in the face of various social and cultural changes. Centering Civil War memory to Trump’s rhetoric throughout his presidency therefore uncovers more complete ways of understanding American cultural struggle at this time.

Trump’s speech to his supporters on 6 January 2021, for instance, often appealed to contemporary ideas about Civil War conflict and its causes and outcomes. His claim that “if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore” is highly reminiscent of the tensions and struggles of the 1860s (“How Trump could Be Held” 00:01:12). One cause of the Civil War was the secession of the southern states and the goal of preserving the Union. Trump’s statement not only brings to mind the imagery of fighting and of battle inherent to the war’s legacy, but also provokes the memory of a conflict largely fought over what the United States would look like and value once the smoke of battle cleared.

Since the resulting riot on the United States Capitol, this quotation has become a primary talking point for various news programs and pundits regarding Trump’s role in inciting that riot. The rhetoric is powerful, but its important ideological connections are hardly contained in this single sentence alone. The rest of Trump’s speech is similarly suggestive of battle, conflict, and a nostalgic yearning for a time past, and nearly always reminiscent of the Civil War. Situating Civil War memory to Trump’s January 6 speech illuminates the centrality it still has to the ways
we comprehend and navigate the social, cultural, and political issues of today. For example, early in the speech he outlines his suspiciousness of the validity of the results of the 2020 election and claims that they should be “sent back to the states” to be “recertified” (“We Will Never Concede” 00:05:23). He continues that if the results remain as they are, the country will be “stuck with a president, who lost the election by a lot, and we have to live with that for four more years. We’re just not going to let that happen” (“We Will Never Concede” 00:05:45).

In December 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede, claiming as a major reason for doing so that “a geographical line [had] been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line [had] united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery,” which is to say, hostile to the South and its way of life (“South Carolina Secession”). The Republican Party in 1860 had, in fact, decided not to run Abraham Lincoln in ten of the southern states, knowing he would not be a popular candidate there. The fact that Lincoln nevertheless won the election without any votes from these states prompted questions about national political representation across the South. Even Jefferson Davis, in his 1861 Inaugural Address, claimed that through the act of secession the southern states had “merely asserted a right which the Declaration of Independence of 1776 had defined to be inalienable; of the time and occasion for its exercise, they, as sovereigns, were the final judges, each for itself” (“Jefferson Davis’s First Inaugural Address”).

These sentiments are the bases for the ‘states’ rights’ argument for the cause of the Civil War, but Trump expresses the same ideas with reference to the election of 2020. To him, electoral power should be given ‘back to the states’ for the implicit reason that the states themselves might then be ‘the final judges’ of the election, since Joe Biden, just like Lincoln, had supposedly been elected unfairly and not by the will of all of the people. Trump’s final
statement that ‘we’re just not going to let that happen’ directly engages with the same rhetoric Confederate leaders used to defend secession as a necessary action toward the preservation of free and fair national elections. War was, explicitly, one way to not let something happen.

Trump questioned the 2020 election results in several states, but his preoccupation with Georgia in particular also relates to this Civil War rhetoric. With the exception of Virginia, Georgia was the only state Trump lost which had also seceded from the Union in 1861. It is significant that Trump assumed Georgia would lean his way. The causes and outcomes of both secession and the war have left lasting consequences regarding the regional political makeup of the nation. We should understand Trump’s fixation on Georgia as also informed by the legacy and memory of Civil War conflict. It made more sense to Trump that the election in Georgia had been rigged rather than fair, just as it made more sense to South Carolina in 1860 that the northern states had ‘united’ against them in an effort to deliberately challenge the institution of slavery and change their way of life. And it is a similar anxiety over change that Trump continually taps into throughout his speech. Directly after he calls for the election results to be sent back to the states, he says, “then I become president, and you are the happiest people” (“We Will Never Concede” 00:05:27). The comfort of continuity, of four more years in the White House, no matter the cost, is preferred over change not only politically but ideologically as well.

But change always proves inevitable, and mixed up with all of the anxiety over it is a deep yearning for an imagined American past entirely free from change. Speaking about American society and what he terms the “corrupt” media’s reporting on it, Trump says, “I now realize how good it was [ten years ago], but we don’t have that anymore” (“We Will Never Concede” 00:26:00). What exactly he is referring to, what features of society or what notions about the United States and the media were better in the past, is never made clear. But this
ambiguity is the central point. The phrase ‘but we don’t have that anymore’ laments some vague loss in much the same way the Lost Cause ideology of the Confederacy does. It was a certain way in the past, this ideology claims, but that reality no longer exists. In this sense, then, it hardly matters what Trump refers to when he deploys phrases like these, because his engagement with Civil War imagery and rhetoric throughout the speech informs these phrases as more of the same. The same sentiment was on display at the 2015 Republican Primary debate, played out as it was in front of Reagan’s Air Force One plane, a relic from a different time, a time which proves not so different from our present moment but is nevertheless remembered as if it were. It is in this way that the legacy of the Civil War informs the rhetoric of Trump’s speech, and the rhetoric of Trump’s speech likewise informs the ways we think about Civil War legacy today.

Trump also references the removal of American and Confederate monuments, though he is not entirely truthful about the extent of these removals throughout his term as president. He says, “cancel culture. . . you know they wanted to get rid of the Jefferson Memorial. . . . I don’t think that’s going to happen, it damn well better not. . . . They’ll knock out Lincoln, too, by the way. . . . But then we signed a law, you hurt our monuments, you hurt our heroes, you go to jail for ten years, and everything stopped” (“We Will Never Concede” 00:07:04). Contrary to Trump’s statement, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported last year that ninety-four Confederate monuments across the country were removed in the second half of 2020 alone (“Nearly 100 Confederate Monuments”). Throughout Trump’s presidency, in fact, more statues and symbols depicting Confederate generals and soldiers were dismantled and removed than at any other time in United States history. The removals of these monuments parallel additional trends related to reexamining American social and cultural history over the past few years. Although Trump doesn’t specifically mention Confederate monuments in his speech, there is an
implicit suggestion in his words and examples that he is nevertheless appealing to issues related to the ways we view and understand American historical figures in the twenty-first century, especially with regard to Confederate and southern individuals. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, was a southerner who owned enslaved people throughout his life and was revered by the Confederacy, a reality that has cast him as a controversial figure in recent years.

In 2020, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary for her introductory essay on The 1619 Project. The Pulitzer Center describes the major aim of The 1619 Project as one which “challenges us to reframe U.S. history by marking the year when the first enslaved Africans arrived on Virginia soil as our nation’s foundational date” (“The 1619 Project Curriculum”). The project has proven controversial over the past few years and has become one of the primary targets for those politicians and commentators who take issue with larger modes of ideology critique like Critical Race Theory. But why should this be the case, and why should people like Trump appeal to and fan the anxieties related to ideas like The 1619 Project? The name of the project itself underscores the various social and cultural battles inherent to American society today. As the demographics of the country change, we are prompted to think about the history of our nation in new ways. In the 1980s and 1990s, school performances like the story of the First Thanksgiving illuminated how ideologies which informed American cultural hegemony remained situated to certain historically-based conceptions of national identity, including social, religious, and economic freedom. These ideologies are embedded into our understandings of the Pilgrims, and the story of the Pilgrims—who arrived in America in 1620, long before any idea of the ‘United States’ existed—is continuously incorporated into conceptions of ‘United States’ history through the performative
natures of activities like the Thanksgiving play and additional practices which also reinforce the same historically-based ideologies, like the Pledge of Allegiance.

It is therefore significant that The 1619 Project claims a historical line to a time earlier than when the Pilgrims arrived in America. By doing so, it suggests that the national history and culture of today is comprised of many more identities and stories than previously told ones could incorporate. The most important argument The 1619 Project makes, though, is an implied one. It’s aim highlights the fact that all of these dates and stories which add to and inform American national identity are ideological to begin with. There really is no historical difference between looking back to 1620 as the beginning of American history, or to 1619, or to 1776, or to 1865; there are only ways of understanding how such conceptions of history inform how we understand the present moment, and how the present moment likewise informs new ways of understanding the complexities of history. If we view American history from the year the first Africans were brought to the colonies as enslaved people, we create a national story which not only centers the black experience in America, but also begins with the painful reality that this nation was founded on the institution of slavery. Previous notions of American history and national identity, informed by stories like that of the Pilgrims, become complicated in the face of new ideologies like The 1619 Project. It is impossible, after all, to conceive America as founded on ideals like religious, economic, and social freedom if our history begins with their opposite, the story of slavery.

These ideas related to national identity remain crucial to the ways we continue to understand and engage with Civil War memory in contemporary American life. The issues of slavery and of race are central to Civil War conflict, which explains why the memory of this historical event remains a particularly felt one. Just as in the 1980s and 1990s, police brutality
and violence against non-white people have remained urgent social issues over the past few years. And just as it was thirty and forty years ago, much of this violence was recorded and seen by Americans across the nation. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent riots it initiated not only in Minneapolis but across the country represents just one of these recent instances. We should understand these examples of police brutality as informing popular culture in the same ways they did at the end of the twentieth century. The Civil War remains an important framework in cultural texts in which to navigate these issues. In the twenty-first century, though, these examples become much more explicitly preoccupied with both race and racial equality as they reflect the shifting social and demographic realities of America today.

For instance, Nate Parker’s 2016 film *The Birth of a Nation* dramatizes the life of Nat Turner, a man who led a rebellion of enslaved people in Virginia in 1831, cleverly reversing the racist imagery and themes of D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film of the same name. In fact, the relationship between *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) proves a good example regarding the shifting cultural attitudes over race in America and how these attitudes are played out and understood in texts historicized to their respective eras. Griffith’s film is filled with Lost Cause imagery and sentiments, while Parker’s attempts to see through the whitewashed screen of this ideology to illuminate a more violent and traumatic story. It is through the very different stories each of these films portray about American history at their respective moments—whether 1915 or 2016—that we glimpse the different ways the national culture engaged with and thought about Civil War memory. The 2016 film, for instance, anticipates the ideas developed by The 1619 Project a few years later. Not only does the film suggest a reading of Nat Turner’s Rebellion and even the year 1831 as related to the Civil War, but it also proposes an alternative foundational story regarding, as the title implies, ‘the birth of
our nation,’ one situated to the legacy of slavery rather than to the memory of the Confederacy and its ideological descendant, the Ku Klux Klan.

Donald Trump’s speech to his supporters on 6 January 2021 remains an important example regarding the numerous ways Civil War memory continues to bear on the politics, society, and culture of twenty-first-century America. Whether he means to or not, Trump brings up important topical issues related to reexamining historical figures, monuments, and national history, and does so with rhetoric highly evocative of Civil War conflict and its legacy. Viewing his speech through the lens of Civil War memory highlights the important ways war remembrances bear on the nation and its cultural issues, and vice versa. The riot on the United States Capitol which immediately followed his speech should also be seen through this lens. Not only were symbols like the Confederate flag on display during the riot, but the event itself is remembered in ways similar to the Civil War. For example, the Capitol Riot has been called by news programs and commentators a mob, a demonstration, a protest, an assault, an attack, and an insurrection. The Civil War has likewise been variously termed the War for States Rights, the War over Slavery, the War of Northern Aggression, the War of Southern Aggression, the War of the Rebellion, and the War for Southern Independence. It is only by situating Civil War memory to an event like the Capitol Riot that we can glimpse these ideological similarities.

Near the close of his speech, Trump speaks directly about the importance of memory and of remembrance. Referring to the senators then at the Capitol Building preparing to certify the electoral votes, Trump says, “we’re going to see whether or not we have great leaders, and courageous leaders, or whether or not we have leaders that should be ashamed of themselves throughout history, throughout eternity. . . . And you know what, if they do the wrong thing, we should never, ever forget” (“We Will Never Concede” 00:19:18). The ideological distinction
between ‘great’ leaders and leaders who should be ‘ashamed of themselves’ is one central to
questions over Civil War remembrances and to reexaminations over the place Confederate
history should have within the larger breadths of American culture and society. Trump suggests
something about the power of memory and of remembering, but he neglects that it is in the ways
we remember that we might comprehend who we are as a nation and as a people. The ways we
remember the Civil War at particular moments provoke new ways of understanding the
important contentions and negotiations we have had and continue to have over American identity
and culture.
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