



## **Anatomy of a belief: The collective memory of African American Confederate soldiers**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the belief that African Americans fought for the Confederacy as well as the Union during the U.S. Civil War. Collective memory among university students is examined for evidence of the belief, and the narrative elements included are analyzed. Data come from a survey sample of undergraduate and graduate students (N=1,305) at a large public university in a former Confederate state. The survey included an open-ended question asking respondents to describe African American participation in the Civil War. Although the belief has little basis in historical fact, 16% of respondents volunteered the belief that African Americans fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, and an additional 4% made a similar but more qualified statement. The distribution of responses was analyzed in terms of respondents' social background characteristics, showing that having an ancestor who fought in the Civil War (for either side) was associated with the belief that African Americans fought for the Confederacy. Qualitative analysis explored narrative strategies employed by respondents, including efforts to explain (or explain away) the contradiction of believing that African Americans fought to preserve the system that enslaved them.

**KEYWORDS:** Collective memory; history education; university students; race.

### **Introduction**

In the fall of 2010, fourth graders in some Virginia school districts opened their history textbooks (Masoff, 2010) to learn about the U.S. Civil War (1861-65) and read that “[t]housands of Southern Blacks fought in the Confederate ranks, including two Black battalions under the command of Stonewall Jackson” (cited in Coates, 2010). That statement is unsubstantiated by the historical record. Moreover, it is controversial because, if it were true, it would change the moral implications of the U.S. Civil War, by lending credence to the claim that the war was *not* about freedom and political equality for enslaved African Americans, but rather about freedom and equality of Southern states vis à vis the federal government.

Civil War historian Carol Sheriff led a public outcry after discovering the passage in her child’s textbook (Sieff, 2010). In the course of the subsequent investigation, it emerged that the textbook author’s information source was a website maintained by the Sons of

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Confederate Veterans (McNeil, 2004), a political group that promotes ‘Lost Cause’ narratives of the Civil War that exonerate the Southern cause in that conflict (Sieff, 2010). Since the end of the U.S. Civil War over 150 years ago, memory agents have attempted to cast the war in ways that support the moral argument made by their own side, and public controversies about their claims have emerged periodically (Blight, 2001). This article examines the recent history of claims about Black Confederate soldiers and explores university students’ beliefs related to those claims.

For years prior to the textbook debacle, neo-Confederate groups had spun a handful of isolated incidents and misinterpretations of historical traces into an argument that the Confederate cause could not have been racist because African Americans willingly and enthusiastically fought for the Confederacy in great numbers (McNeil, 2004). This claim received some mainstream media attention, but is rejected by serious scholars who argue that there is little evidence to support the claim and that it is a false equivalency motivated by a desire to justify the Southern cause (Carmichael, 2008; Coates, 2010; Levin, 2010; 2011; Levine, 2010). The starting point for our study was our own unanticipated finding that between 16-20% of students surveyed in 2012-2013 at a large, diverse research university in Virginia believed that African-Americans fought for the Confederacy during the American Civil War. (Our data collection took place in two separate samples from the same population six months apart, and since the same result is replicated in both samples, we have some confidence that our finding is reliable.) The results of our survey suggest that despite its historical inaccuracy, the belief that African Americans fought for the Confederacy has begun to enter the collective memory.

Collective memory “refers to the distribution throughout society of beliefs, feelings, moral judgments, and knowledge about the past” (Schwartz, 2007, p. 588). Our data provide insight into the ways in which such beliefs are shared by social groups, helping to ensure cohesion and sustain identity over time (Durkheim, 1968/1915). Beliefs about the past can be deeply held and emotionally charged (Booth, 2008; Zanzanian, 2012) and, like other beliefs, may be difficult to change once they take hold (Nelson, Adams, Branscombe & Schmitt, 2010; Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012). Our findings suggest that the study of collective memory is a useful tool for history education scholars seeking to understand the ways in which historical narratives circulating in the culture are received by students (VanSledright, 2008; Reich 2011; Wertsch, 2002; Wertsch & O’Connor, 1994; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat & Duncan, 2007).

## **Historical Context: The U.S. Civil War in History and Media Discourse**

### ***Overview***

The Civil War was fought in the United States from 1861 to 1865, after 11 Southern states declared independence from the nation (we use the terms ‘U.S.A.’, ‘the Union,’ or ‘the North’ interchangeably) and formed the Confederate States of America (‘the Confederacy’ or ‘the South’) after the election of Abraham Lincoln as president. The Southern slave-holding class precipitated this move in order to preserve its right to extend African American enslavement to new territories in the American West (McPherson, 2003/1988). The Civil War was the bloodiest conflict in American history, with over 1,000,000 casualties, more than 620,000 deaths, and with entire swaths of the American South left devastated and impoverished (McPherson, 2003/1988). The Confederate capital, Richmond, was located in the state of Virginia. Many of the largest and bloodiest battles were fought there, and it is the state in which the Confederacy met its final defeat on the battlefield.

### ***African American Participation***

African Americans transformed the war and profoundly impacted its outcome in two principal ways. In the North, political activists agitated against slavery, and argued that the U.S. military should recruit and train African Americans to fight (Foner, 2005). In 1863, after the reversal of early Confederate victories, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing enslaved people in captured territory and admitting African American men into the Union Army. By the war's end, African Americans comprised 10% of the Union military (Foner, 2005). These men, despite lower pay and segregated service under White officers, were unequivocally soldiers by choice, training, and combat experience (Du Bois, 2013/1935; Foner, 2005; McPherson, 2003/1998).

In the South, enslaved men and women were used extensively by the Confederate States of America and its armies to support the war effort — though not as soldiers. The enslaved labored as cooks, built fortifications, and tended to their enslavers, the wounded, and the sick (Carmichael, 2008; Du Bois, 2013/1935; Foner, 2005; Jordan, 1995; McPherson, 2003/1998). Many enslaved and free African Americans in the South deserted or gave aid to the Union side (Foner, 2005), or participated in what W.E.B. DuBois (2013/1935) called a *general strike* in which work was stopped or reduced. There may be some isolated examples of enslaved African Americans in Confederate Army camps who took up arms in the chaos of battle (Jordan, 1995), but these incidents cannot be considered “patriotic expressions of Confederate loyalty” (Carmichael, 2008, para. 4).

Some Confederate political leaders recognized the potential value of African Americans to the military, and called for a policy in which some form of freedom would be exchanged for military service (Levine, 2006). That proposal met with fierce opposition from Confederate politicians, citizens and soldiers who argued that it was inconsistent with the defense of slavery, and that arming African Americans was foolhardy and dangerous (Levine, 2006). At the very end of the war, in 1865, the Confederate government did adopt a policy that allowed enslavers to volunteer their slaves for military training and eventual field deployment. To ensure loyalty, Black Confederate soldiers would be offered limited freedom, akin to peonage. That plan was an unmitigated failure (Levine, 2006), however. Few enslavers offered their chattel to the Confederate Army, fewer than 100 men received military training as a result of this policy, and there is little evidence that they were ever deployed outside limited defensive roles in the city of Richmond, Virginia (Levine, 2006).

In sum, the evidence that enslaved African Americans voted with their feet, often at great personal risk, to join the Union army is overwhelming. The Confederate cause was the cause of slavery, and the greatest fear among White Southerners was an armed African American soldiery. African Americans were present among Confederate Army troops, but were not trained or recognized as soldiers. As such, they may have fought, but only in extenuating circumstances, and the handful of Blacks who were trained to be soldiers never saw action (Levine, 2006).

### **Media attention**

Levine (2010) dates the appearance of the Black Confederate narrative to the 1970s or 1980s. We searched two national newspapers (the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*), for which data from the 1980s are available in LexisNexis, and found that, prior to 1989, there were no references to “Black Confederates” or related terms in either paper.<sup>1</sup> The historical account may not have come to the attention of the general public until the 1990s, perhaps in part as a reaction to the film *Glory*'s emphasis on Blacks' military service in the Union army (Levin, 2010). By the mid-1990s, however, both national newspapers included some

references, and two Southern newspapers, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, included even more articles mentioning the topic (see Reich & Corning, 2015).

Our analysis of newspaper article content indicates that the increase in the mid-1990s was mainly due to coverage of the book *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*, published in 1995, in which historian Ervin Jordan, himself an African American, discussed evidence that Blacks fought on the Confederate side. The book is one of the only works on the topic published by an academic press (Levin, 2011). Although Jordan's work is frequently invoked by neo-Confederate adherents, the book does little to document the existence of Black Confederate soldiers, instead focusing on the different paths that led some Blacks to support the Confederacy (Levin, 2011). A further increase in references to Black Confederates during 2009-2013 resulted from reporting on the textbook mistake. Although reports emphasized the error, such coverage may have unintentionally contributed to belief in Black Confederates by less-than-careful readers.

### ***School curricula***

Given the outcry over the textbook mistake, it seemed unlikely that students in Virginia or other states would have been systematically exposed in school to accounts of Black Confederates, but we reviewed the curriculum standards for four states where large proportions of our sample had attended high school: Virginia (roughly three-quarters of the sample), Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, and New Jersey. We found no references to Black Confederates in any state-mandated high school curriculum (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2015; Maryland State Department of Education, 2014; New York State Education Department, 1999; State of NJ Department of Education, 2014; Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2008a; 2008b). Thus, exposure to the idea most probably resulted from the recent media coverage, and/or from discussions within families or among friends. With this in mind, we developed several hypotheses about social background factors that might influence which of our survey respondents were most likely to be exposed to the belief about Black Confederates and to recall it.

## **Potential Sources of Students' Beliefs about Black Confederates**

### ***School***

In Virginia and other states, K-12 history curricula tend to frame the Civil War as a conflict between Whites over the issues of slavery, freedom, and federalism (Anderson & Metzger, 2011), often neglecting the important role African Americans played. A review of Virginia's K-12 history standards (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2008a; 2008b) indicated that there was no mention of African American soldiers fighting. However, statements in the elementary and middle school curricula (VDOE, 2008a; 2008b) are ambiguous, and can easily be interpreted as supporting the idea that Blacks fought for the Confederacy. For example, the elementary standard (VDOE, 2008a) reads:

The Confederacy relied on enslaved African Americans to raise crops and provide labor for the army. Many enslaved African Americans fled to the Union army as it approached and some fought for the Union. Some free African Americans felt their limited rights could best be protected by supporting the Confederacy. (p. 29)

All students in our sample had at least a high school education, so we cannot test directly for effects of the elementary or high school standards. But we can examine whether different

levels of *higher* education affect beliefs, which may indicate whether years of education beyond K-12 serve to correct misinformation or extend knowledge about African Americans' participation in the Civil War.

### ***Race***

Race and racial identity remain salient social factors in U.S. society and culture, and the existence of a race-based social hierarchy is a recurring theme in American social history (Blight, 2001; DuBois, 2013/1935). Even today, racial identity might be an important influence on beliefs about the past, especially about the Civil War. Wineburg and Monte Sano (2008) asked a nationally representative sample of 17-year olds to name the “most famous Americans in history” (p. 1188) and found significant differences between the figures White and Black respondents named. Epstein (2009) found that African American and White students differed not only in their assessments of the significance of actors and events in American history, but also in their interpretations of them. In 2011, the Pew Research Center conducted a study of Americans' attitudes about the Civil War. One question asked about a symbol, the Confederate battle flag, that has been politically divisive, particularly in the South, for generations. The Pew study showed that 41% of Blacks but just 29% of Whites reacted to it negatively (Pew, 2011). Given the emphasis on Black Confederates by proponents of a ‘Lost Cause’ narrative, we expected that African Americans would be the least likely to express a belief in it, with other non-Whites (e.g. Latino/as, Asians) also less likely to do so, and Whites the most likely. Whites might be more likely to have been exposed to the belief, or less critical of its assumption that Blacks were willing to support the system that enslaved them.

### ***Region***

We anticipated some regional variation in respondents' exposure to and acceptance of different Civil War narratives. In the Pew survey, self-identified White Southerners were more likely to have a positive reaction to the Confederate flag, and to accept politicians' praise of Confederate leaders as appropriate (Pew, 2011). Respondents in former Confederate and border-states might have been especially likely to have been exposed to a ‘Lost Cause’ collective memory (see Blight, 2001) and other elements of a neo-Confederate narrative—including a narrative of Black Confederates.

### ***Family***

Family can be an important avenue for socializing individuals into mnemonic communities (Cappelletto, 2003); family history and memories connect individuals to the past and cement family ties (Booth, 2008; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). Some beliefs are sustained for generations within families even when they are not part of the dominant culture's collective memory (Epstein, 2009; Schuman & Corning, 2011). Family military involvement in the Civil War creates a personal connection to that war, and may foster both knowledge of and attachment to related beliefs (Hall, 1998). Respondents whose ancestors fought in support of the Confederacy may have been more likely to hear about Black Confederates, whether from heritage groups or from family members. Moreover, the belief may hold psychological appeal if it helps individuals to recast Confederate ancestors as supporters of states' rights rather than supporters of slavery. For example, Welzer (2008; see also Gross, 2014) reveals the distortions that arose in conversations and the retelling of stories when the children and grandchildren of Germans who lived during the Nazi period attempted to “reconcile the

crimes of ‘the Nazis’ or ‘the Germans’ and the moral integrity of parents or grandparents” (p. 298). Descendants tended to reconstruct past events in ways that exaggerated parents’ or grandparents’ heroism. Similarly, respondents who count Civil War veterans among their relatives might be motivated to recall a more flattering version of past events by remembering a convenient piece of misinformation. At the same time, intimate knowledge of narratives passed down through families can lead some individuals to distance themselves from, challenge, or even reject those narratives (Hall, 1998; Popov & Deák, 2015). Thus, it is not only whether individuals hold a belief that is important, but also how they use those beliefs to make sense of the past — an issue we are able to explore through qualitative analysis of responses.

## **Methods**

We administered an online survey to two probability samples of Virginia Commonwealth University undergraduate and graduate students, one in November-December 2012 (N=480) and one to a second sample in April-May 2013 (N=825). Response rates were 16% in 2012 and 11% in 2013—rates that are at least as high as those obtained by good national telephone surveys at the time (Pew, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

Our data on beliefs about African American involvement in the Civil War come from a set of two questions. Respondents were first asked, “As far as you know, did African Americans directly participate in any way in the American Civil War?” Those who answered “yes” were then invited to respond in their own words to an open-ended question: “In what way did African Americans participate in the American Civil War?” No limit was placed on what respondents could write in response, and answers varied in length from a single word (e.g., “Soldiers”) to a full paragraph or two, though most consisted of a few words or one sentence. We thus avoided imposing our own preconceptions on respondents, and our assumption is that the aspects of African American participation they noted were those most salient to them. The questions appeared near the beginning of the survey; they followed several general questions about the Civil War, none of which related to African American participation.<sup>3</sup>

Each response was coded in terms of two types of content: mentions of fighting, and mentions of other forms of assistance or support. The two content coding schemes were not mutually exclusive. Responses mentioning military action were then further coded according to which side (if any) African Americans were said to have fought on. Coding was carried out by two independent coders; agreement between the coders was 93% for the “fighting” codes and 92% for the “other participation” codes.

Ordinarily, we might assume that chance sampling error was the best explanation for a finding as surprising as the relatively large percentage of respondents who expressed a belief that African Americans fought for the Confederacy – or at least, we would not treat such a result seriously without successfully replicating it. In fact, because our survey was conducted at two different time points six months apart, with two separate samples drawn from the same population, we have just such a replication. Distributions on our dependent variables differed by no more than 2 percentage points between the two samples, and there were only minor differences in the samples’ demographic distributions. A comparison of mentions of African Americans fighting for the Confederacy in the two samples shows that there is no significant difference between the two ( $\chi^2 = .099$ ,  $df = 1$ , n.s.); comparisons of mentions of African Americans fighting for the Union or for both sides also yielded non-significant differences. Therefore, we treat the finding as reliable, and we combine the two samples for our analysis of social background factors related to the belief in Black Confederates (N=1,305).

To gain an in-depth understanding of the specific narrative elements salient to respondents, we performed a qualitative analysis for a sub-sample (N=101) of responses mentioning Black Confederates. Codes are grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and code development used abductive reasoning through a constant comparison of the responses (Dey, 2007; cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Most responses did not recognize or otherwise comment on the anomaly inherent in the claim that African Americans fought for the Confederacy, but those that did were coded according to the type of justification employed. The goals of quantitative and qualitative analyses, and the grain size of the data that each examines, are different (Greene, 2001; Roth, 2009). In a design such as ours, the conclusions of each analysis can be in tension with the other. Greene (2001) explains that “it is precisely in these tensions and points of conflict that mixed-method inquiry offers its greatest potential for better understanding” (p. 251). Through the constant comparative method, 100% inter-rater agreement on the coding was achieved. Quotes presented below are usually reproduced in their entirety (with occasional excerpts indicated by ellipses) and grammatical and factual errors left intact.

### ***Limitations of the study***

Our survey sample was restricted to students at a single university in Virginia. Thus, a major limitation of our study is its lack of generalizability: we do not know how typical the university we studied is compared to other universities in the American South. In the qualitative section, we analyzed a subset of the available data, and in some cases, we discuss groups of responses that only contain two participants. The qualitative analysis should be understood as presenting a range of possible beliefs, on the assumption that it is plausible that others might respond similarly, but without indicating what proportion might do so in a larger population or sample (Roth, 2009).

A second concern is how representative the sample is of the university’s student population, and in particular, whether students who responded to our survey are different from those who did not respond in systematic ways that may affect our results. Survey response rates have fallen dramatically over the past several decades, and non-response bias has increasingly become a concern. However, recent work on non-response indicates that there is no necessary connection between response rates and bias, particularly when relationships rather than point estimates are at issue, as is the case for most results we present, and when the beliefs or attitudes studied are unrelated to the decision to participate in a survey (Abraham, Helms, & Presser 2009; Groves, & Peytcheva 2008). In addition, Druckman and Kam (2011) argue that limited samples often yield generalizable results.

In light of both the general decline in response rates and the fact that our sample represents a limited population, we are sensitive to the need for caution when interpreting univariate estimates from our survey. Although the starting point for our study was the surprisingly large percentage of respondents claiming that African-Americans fought on the Confederate side, our main focus is not the point estimate itself, but rather the relationships of social background variables to the belief in Black Confederates.

## **Results**

### ***Military participation by African Americans***

In answer to our initial closed question asking whether African Americans participated directly in the Civil War, 87% of respondents said “yes,” and nearly all responded to the

follow-up question asking about the nature of participation. Table 1 shows the different types of participation mentioned by respondents. Thirty-six percent mentioned fighting without specifying a side, but among those who did note a side, the largest group identified African Americans as fighting for the Union only (24%), while just 1% indicated that African Americans fought for the Confederacy only. Strikingly, however, 15% said they believed that African Americans had fought on *both* sides. For example, “They fought as soldiers in both the Union and Confederate Armies”; “They fought on both sides and there were black spies from the North.”

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGES MENTIONING TYPES OF PARTICIPATION BY AFRICAN AMERICANS DURING THE CIVIL WAR

	% (N=1,305)
Fought, but side not specified	36
Fought for Union only	24
Fought for Confederacy only	1
Fought for both sides	15
Fought for both sides, with qualification	4
Only non-military participation mentioned	4
Did not participate or don't know	16
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 1 also shows that a further 4% said that Blacks had fought for both sides, but qualified their statement in some way. This group included respondents who said that Blacks had fought mainly for the Union, but in a few instances for the Confederacy; who stressed that Blacks served in support roles, were not fully recognized as soldiers, or were vague about the precise nature of Blacks' roles within the Confederate Army; or who used phrases like “I think,” “I've heard,” or otherwise expressed uncertainty about Blacks fighting to support the South. For instance: “They volunteered and fought on the side of the Union forces. Some few actually fought on the Confederate side as well”; “As soldiers - I think for both sides, as well as in many kinds of support roles.”

It is important to note that our “military participation” code was used only for responses that explicitly mentioned fighting, military service, or “being a soldier.” Thirty-five percent of respondents mentioned non-military forms of support provided by African Americans to the war effort (North, South, or both), including assistance on the battlefield, such as medical support, trench-digging, enslaved camp servants, etc. However, nearly all of these respondents *also* explicitly mentioned fighting; as the table shows, just 4% of respondents noted other forms of support *without* mentioning military involvement.

The small number who said “no, African Americans did not participate directly in the Civil War” (3%) or “don't know” (10%), plus a further 3% who said that African Americans had participated, but did not give any codable response to the follow-up open-ended question, are combined in the “Did not participate or don't know” category shown in Table 1.

It was conceivable that respondents who claimed African Americans fought for the Confederacy meant to note an oddity rather than a widespread phenomenon. Therefore, we examined the words respondents chose to describe numbers of soldiers who fought for the Confederacy. Of those who wrote about Black Confederates, most (64%) did not give any indication of the number of soldiers involved, simply referring to “they” or “African



Americans.” Of those who did indicate a number in some way, however, nearly one-third referred to “many” (e.g., “Many fought on both sides”) and almost two-thirds referred to “some” (e.g., “Some African Americans fought as soldiers on both sides of the war”), while just 7% indicated that only a “few” had fought. It thus seems likely that most respondents believed Black Confederates to have fought in historically significant numbers.

In sum, it is *military* involvement that came to mind most strongly for our respondents when asked about Blacks’ participation in the Civil War: altogether, 80% of respondents mentioned fighting, while just one-third of the sample noted any *other* forms of participation. Moreover, although serious historians generally agree that fewer than 100 enslaved men were employed as Confederate soldiers at the very end of the war (Carmichael, 2008; Levine, 2006), a total of 16% volunteered that Blacks fought for the Confederacy alone or for the Confederacy and the Union both, with no attempt to contrast the scale of their participation on the Union side with their Confederate role or to indicate that fighting for the Confederate cause was a rare exception rather than the rule.

### Effects of Social Background Characteristics

In our logistic regression models, we focus on the 16% of respondents who mentioned a belief in Black Confederates *without* qualifying their statement – a conservative coding that excludes those who conveyed any uncertainty about the claim or any sense at all that African Americans fought on behalf of the Confederacy only in small numbers. Our main dependent variable is coded “1” for any mention of African Americans fighting on the Confederate side, and “0” for any other response, including no mention of African Americans fighting in the war and “don’t know.”<sup>4</sup>

We examine the effects of four social background variables that might be related to beliefs about Black Confederates: education, race, region, and family Civil War veteran ancestry. Educational attainment is represented using dichotomous variables for high school degree only, some college in addition to a high school degree, and college degree, with graduate school as the reference category. Dichotomous variables represent each racial group (African American, Other non-White, White, and No answer), with White the reference category. To examine effects of region, we distinguished between respondents who attended high school in former Confederate or border-states (‘South’) and others (‘non-South’), with non-South the reference category. Finally, we used a question about whether respondents had an ancestor who fought in the Civil War, and if so, on which side, to create a set of dichotomous variables for family military ancestry: Confederate ancestor, Union ancestor, ancestors on both sides, ancestor but don’t know on which side, and no ancestor (the reference category). In addition, our models controlled for gender and age. Gender might affect the degree to which respondents were interested in the Civil War or followed news related to it, but there was no gender difference in mentions of fighting for the Confederacy. Age is related to mentions of fighting for both sides, but our age distribution is too restricted to fully explore its effects.

#### *Education, race, and region*

We found no main effect of higher education on beliefs about Black Confederates. In a separate regression, we tested the effect of higher education on mentions of African American participation as soldiers for the Union, but also found no effect. Thus, educational attainment beyond high school neither corrected misapprehensions nor contributed to knowledge about African Americans’ participation in the Civil War.

For race, the direction of the effect shown in Table 2 is as expected, with Blacks and other respondents of color less likely than Whites to mention Black Confederates, but the differences are not significant. Region of high school attendance also showed no effect, perhaps because the specific Civil War narratives to which respondents are exposed vary greatly within such broad regional categories.<sup>5</sup>

TABLE 2. LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF MENTIONS OF BLACK CONFEDERATES ON SOCIAL BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS (N=1,286)

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Odds ratio	(sig.)	Odds ratio	(sig.)
Gender (male)	1.215	(.214)	1.124	(.469)
Age	1.026	(.011)	1.023	(.023)
Educational attainment (reference=graduate school)				
High school degree only	0.945	(.851)	0.982	(.952)
Some college	0.939	(.743)	0.928	(.702)
College degree	0.723	(.249)	0.676	(.171)
Race (reference=White)				
Black	0.827	(.441)	1.000	(.999)
Other non-White	0.743	(.142)	.959	(.989)
No answer on race	0.780	(.471)	.350	(.721)
Attended high school in South	1.273	(.285)	1.080	(.741)
Family Civil War military ancestry (reference=No Civil War ancestry)				
Confederate only			1.921	(.004)
Both Union and Confederate			2.094	(.011)
Union only			1.947	(.039)
Don't know on which side			1.717	(.156)
Constant	0.091		0.070	

### *The role of family*

We found a significant association between Civil War military ancestry and beliefs about Black Confederates. We anticipated that respondents who knew that an ancestor had fought in the Civil War, especially on the Confederate side, might be more likely to be familiar with the myth and to accept it as true, either because they had heard about it from their families or because, by seeming to support the claim that the Civil War was not primarily fought over slavery, it might help show their family's involvement in a more favorable light. About one-quarter of respondents had an ancestor who fought in the Civil War: 5% reported having an ancestor who had fought for the Union, 11% for the Confederacy, 6% had ancestors who had fought on both sides, and 4% had an ancestor who had fought, but the respondent did not

know on which side. We add the family ancestry variables as a separate step, in Model 2 in Table 2, because ancestry is correlated with both race and region of high school attendance. We found that having *any* family Civil War veteran—whether on the Northern, Southern, or both sides—was associated with greater likelihood of mentioning that African Americans fought for the Confederacy. Separately, we tested whether a similar effect occurred for mentions of African Americans fighting for the North, but in that case we found no effect of ancestry whatsoever.

We wondered whether the effect of Civil War veteran ancestry might have occurred because Black Confederates had featured in family stories that may have circulated. Another survey question asked respondents whether “any stories about the war had been handed down” in their families. Overall, 13% of respondents recalled such stories, but among those with an ancestor who had fought in the war, 43% did so. When that variable is added to the logistic regression model that includes the ancestry variables, however, it has no significant effect. Our results thus suggest that at least where the myth of Black Confederates is concerned, stories shared across generations are not an important source of information. Instead, family history may sensitize individuals to information about the Civil War with the possible effect of increasing the likelihood that they remember information they encounter.

### Qualitative Results

Our qualitative analysis focused on a sub-sample ( $n=101$ ) of responses from those who claimed that Blacks fought for both sides. Just over half of these responses went beyond the mere mention that “Blacks fought on both sides,” attempting to explain why African Americans would fight, as they believed, to defend the system that enslaved them, or explicitly denying that any such explanation was needed. We were particularly curious as to whether the additional content might shed light on how participants reconciled the knowledge that the Confederacy was a slave power with the belief that this slave power would arm the enslaved and that the enslaved would fight for their enslavers. We found that of the responses that recognized African Americans’ unique position, 43% attempted to reconcile belief in Black Confederates with historical knowledge about the racial aspect of the conflict. Overall, responses that attempted to explain why African Americans would fight for the Confederacy represented less than a quarter of the fought-for-both-sides responses. We cannot generalize from this small subset to the larger group of respondents who did not include much, if any, detail. Nevertheless, we argue that these particular responses complicate the quantitative findings because they indicate that respondents who claimed that African Americans fought for both sides are characterized by diverse ways of understanding the role that race and enslavement played in the Civil War (see Greene, 2001; Roth, 2009 for a methodological justification). We will take this issue up again in the discussion section below.

We discerned four different strategies for justifying the belief that African Americans fought for the Confederacy as well as for the Union: first, some respondents explained that, although Blacks *chose* to fight for the North, they were *forced* to fight for the South; a second group claimed that Blacks fought in exchange for freedom or for better treatment; and a third said that Blacks fought in place of Whites. A fourth group approached the paradox by denying it, arguing that Blacks who fought did so “just like” Whites and for the same reasons.

### ***Forced to fight***

Responses coded as “forced to fight” were the most numerous. The following response, from a White woman, is typical: “Many African Americans participated as soldiers on both sides, sometimes willingly and sometimes unwillingly.” Others, like the following from a White and an African American woman, respectively, added a little more detail:

African Americans were forced to participate in combat on behalf of the Confederacy, as slave owners were able to enlist their slaves. African Americans were also able to enlist in special regiments of the Union Army, as well as being important in war supplemental activity (producing food, etc.).

For those who were still in slavery, they were forced to fight for the confederate army. For those who lived in the free states, they volunteered. There were strict laws against African Americans in the south for joining the Union. If they were caught they were either killed or tortured. A lot of African Americans fought in the war to end slavery in the US.

Both of these responses contain elements that are historically accurate, particularly in regards to African American enlistment in the Union army. Both respondents claim that African Americans were forced to fight for the Confederacy. Although, as noted above, African Americans were forced to serve in non-combat positions in the Confederate Army, only a very small number were handed over by their enslavers for combat training, and only at the very end of the war (Levine, 2006). Yet the language used by these respondents does not indicate a difference in the scale or the nature of African American participation in the two armies.

### ***Fighting in place of Whites***

Some responses reconciled fighting for the Confederacy with slavery by mentioning a policy allowing African Americans to fight in place of their White owners. (No such policy ever existed, however.) For example, a White woman explained that “... African Americans also fought on the Confederate side, having been used to buy their owners out of military service—for 20 slaves ...” A multi-racial man explained that “... slave owners were allowed to send their slaves into battle instead of them going themselves.” This sort of exploitation is certainly imaginable in an epoch that sanctioned chattel slavery, and in which wealthy families in the North could buy their sons out of military service for \$300 (McPherson, 2003/1998). These respondents make use of partial information about the past to construct narratives that explain phenomena in ways that are plausible for their authors, despite inaccuracies.

### ***Fighting in exchange***

Respondents who claimed that African Americans fought for the South in exchange for freedom also attempted to reconcile their belief that Blacks fought for the Confederacy with their knowledge of enslavement. These explanations tended to be more thorough, despite historical inaccuracies. A White woman explained that “... some African Americans fought in the war for freedom that their 'masters' had offered and some for money or their right to be free.” A White man explained that “... some southern slaves and freedmen actually volunteered to fight in the Confederate Army—in exchange for their freedom or to keep the lands they already held.” In both of these responses there is a clear social contract in which army service is exchanged for freedom, money, and/or the right to keep property.

One response, by an African American woman, handles the contradiction of slavery with Confederate military service as an opportunity, rather than a renegotiation of the social contract:

... slaves in the south fought with the expectation that they would be looked upon favorably for helping their masters, and some were unaware of what the north had in store for them so they fought.

The respondent's empathy draws on contextual knowledge of the conditions of enslavement to imagine that, with few chances for improvement, it is plausible that enslaved men seized upon an opportunity that presented itself (see Carmichael, 2008; Jordan, 1995).

### ***Fighting just like Whites***

Finally, two responses explicitly stated that African Americans performed the same roles as Whites in the Civil War. One, by a White woman, explained that "They were soldiers and fought in the war like everyone else. African Americans fought for both Union and Confederate troops." A mixed-race man who is descended from a Confederate soldier explained that:

Not only were black Americans part of Union forces, but they were part of Confederate forces as well. Alabama had the first black regiment made of free and slave alike in 1862. Many fought for the same reason whites, Irish, and Jewish Confederates fought, for their homes. Less than 10% of the entire South owned slaves. And some Union soldiers from Kentucky and Missouri owned slaves as well, so how come nobody mentions that? Also, the Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves in Confederate territory, not Union, where slavery was still legal in Kentucky and Missouri until 1865. At the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, the CSA was its own sovereign territory, therefore, nothing happened at all. But many black Americans participated in the fight to DEFEND the South as well. I wish this history were more well known.

The response appears to be part of a conversation with an imaginary interlocutor in which the respondent seeks to refute points in an argument, mixing fact with fiction to support a neo-Confederate narrative. Both of these respondents attempted to remove race as a salient factor from the Civil War, denying the paradox of slaves fighting to preserve slavery. Thus, among the small number of respondents who attempted to explain why, as they believed, African Americans fought for the Confederacy, only two constructed responses that were consistent with the neo-Confederate beliefs of those who actively promote this idea.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The finding that a sizable percentage of our respondents believed that African Americans fought for both the Union and Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War offers a glimpse of the process in which ideas about the past that circulate through society have been adopted by some of its members. This particular idea was initially promoted by fringe political groups based largely in the South, with little support from either the historical literature or the high school curricula of the states in which our respondents received their secondary education. The lack of a statistically significant association between the belief and the race or state of origin of our respondents, however, suggests that it is being taken up by people beyond the narrow, racially and geographically homogeneous groups with whom it originated.

It is tempting to infer that the expression of this belief reflects the mobilization of a particular set of ideas and identities. Yet we showed that most respondents did *not* employ the belief in Black Confederates to justify a neo-Confederate narrative that identifies the Southern cause with support for states' rights and patriotism rather than slavery. Fewer than half of our respondents provided information beyond the statement that African Americans fought on

both sides. Among those who did, most sought to explain why Blacks might have fought for the Confederacy in terms of their knowledge of the slave system and its coercive power and limited opportunities for the enslaved. Only two out of 101 gave answers—we called them “fighting just like Whites”—that employed the belief in Black Confederates to justify the Southern cause. In other words, our respondents did not simply accept ideas about the past. Instead, they used the belief in Black Confederates in a variety of ways, including in arguments that run counter to the intentions of the memory agents who promoted the narrative.

As some scholars of collective memory have urged, it is important to examine the degree to which beliefs about the past introduced or encouraged by memory agents are actually accepted by members of the broader public (see Confino, 1997; Kansteiner, 2002; Wertsch, 2002; 1998). The mixed-method design of this study allowed us to do so in unique ways. Had we relied only on quantitative findings we might have been tempted to conclude that the narrative of Black Confederates promoted by neo-Confederate groups had been adopted whole-cloth by 16% of our respondents. The qualitative findings allow us to examine *how* beliefs promoted by memory agents are used, and repurposed, by individuals (Wertsch, 1998). We do not wish to minimize the potential of political groups to promote gross distortions of the historical record in order to influence the political economy in troubling ways, but rather to emphasize the importance of investigating how such myths, once taken up, are used to make sense of the past.

The historical record clearly points to vastly different levels of African American military and moral support for the Union and Confederate sides in the Civil War. This support can be measured in terms of the numbers of people working for each side and the nature of that labor (Foner, 2005; Levine, 2006). African American activists, such as Frederick Douglass lobbied the Lincoln administration for the chance to prove their patriotism as soldiers in the Union Army. When that wish was granted in 1863, African American men enthusiastically joined the Union military as soldiers. Confederates forced African Americans to perform menial tasks and were loath to allow them access to weapons, let alone train them as soldiers. “Soldier” itself is an ambiguous concept. Not all soldiers fight by choice, and many people who are called soldiers in fact do no fighting at all but tend to the infrastructure needed to facilitate fighting. This ambiguity complicates the case of defining the identity of enslaved African Americans who were laboring for the Confederate Army, and may have made acceptance of the belief that African Americans fought easier. The ambiguity over who is considered a soldier has certainly been exploited by neo-Confederate groups whose aim is to remove slavery and race from the moral calculus of the U.S. Civil War by claiming that African Americans enthusiastically supported the Confederacy. Historians and memory agents employ different epistemologies and the use of historical information in different ways. For historians, interest often turns to sites of ambiguity, the particular events that challenge what is essentialized in collective memory (Wineburg, 2001). Memory agents engaged in the politics of memory can exploit ambiguity in the historical record to support the plausibility of a narrative in the public sphere, where it can be repeated often enough to become a collective memory.

If memory agents are engaged in politics of memory that distorts an ambiguous historical record, what are history educators to do? 1) We should conduct basic research to study the beliefs young people hold about the past; 2) We should draw on that research in constructing curricula in order to take those beliefs into account; 3) Our pedagogy should recognize the existence of a politics of memory.

Recent conceptual scholarship in history education has suggested that K-12 curricula should be designed to occupy a space between academic history and collective memory

(Seixas, 2016). Nordgren and Johannsson (2015) have argued that K-12 curricula should include explicit instruction on how history is used in contemporary political discourses. This goes beyond fact-checking and myth-busting (see Nelson et al., 2010; Lewandowsky, et al. 2012 for the difficulty of this task) to a broader understanding of the rhetoric of history and how historical representations are mobilized to produce identities and affect political choices. An approach that includes the politics of memory as integral to the subject of history seeks to provide students with tools that give them greater agency in how they orient themselves in time and space (Rüsen, 2005). To do so effectively, however, we need an ongoing program of basic research on collective memory that informs curriculum developers about the specific beliefs that students bring to the classroom, and how those beliefs are used by youth to construct a historical consciousness. As a scholarly community we have taken seriously the modes in which historical knowledge is built and how to recontextualize the work of historians for primary and secondary education classrooms. Helping students understand how memory agents attempt to influence their own historical consciousness can support the larger aims of the historical-thinking project – a more informed and active citizenry.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We searched the LexisNexis database for the years 1980-2013 to identify articles that included "Black Confederates" or related terms (e.g., "African American Confederates," "Confederate Slaves"), and found a total of 61 articles that included such references (often only a passing mention). Our starting point was 1980 because that is the first year articles from both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are available. Only articles from 1991 on are available for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and from 1995 on for the *Richmond Times Dispatch*.

<sup>2</sup> Response rates are calculated according to AAPOR RR3. Survey respondents were offered the opportunity to participate in a lottery to win one of several incentives.

<sup>3</sup> Our larger study was designed in part to examine the effect of visual images on characterizations of African American participation in the war, with respondents randomly assigned to each of three conditions: no image, an image of Lincoln with a freed slave, and an image of an African American Union soldier. Only samples from the first two conditions are used here. In the fall 2012 survey, respondents viewed no image, and in spring 2013, a split ballot was used to randomly assign respondents to either the Lincoln image or the soldier image condition. In terms of the distribution of beliefs about whether and on which side African Americans fought, there was no significant difference between seeing no image and seeing the Lincoln image. However, the image of the African American Union soldier had a small but significant effect on response distributions, so we exclude the sample assigned to that condition from our analyses here. Including a control for Lincoln image exposure in all regression models did not affect any of the results we report here, so it is omitted from the models in Table 2.

<sup>4</sup> Our dependent variable counts only unqualified responses as "1," but including qualified mentions, or restricting to those who said that Blacks fought for *both* sides, does not affect conclusions.

<sup>5</sup> A significant interaction indicated that the effect of race differed depending on region. Blacks who had attended high school outside the South were much *more* likely to mention Black Confederates, while Blacks who attended school in the South

were *less* likely to do so. In light of the very small number of Blacks in our sample who attended high school outside the South, however, we treat this result as uncertain.

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