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One Hundred Years Later: The Failure of the Civil War Centennial

By viewing the Civil War through the lens of its centennial celebration, historians can better understand the war's legacy. A hundred years after the Civil War, the nation was preoccupied with the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement was at its height. A dedicated group of historians, businessmen, and politicians nevertheless insisted that the hundredth anniversary of America's most influential conflict be commemorated. They lobbied for the creation of the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, which planned a myriad of centennial observances between 1961 and 1965. With a goal of unifying and inspiring Americans during the Cold War, the architects of the centennial envisioned a nationwide series of memorials, parades, battle reenactments, and special ceremonies.¹ Though the centennial was initially met with public enthusiasm, it eventually became ensnared in controversy and never recovered its initial momentum. By its conclusion in 1965, the centennial was widely regarded as unsuccessful.² One of the centennial's most enduring impacts, the resurgence of the Confederate flag as an inflammatory political symbol, exacerbated racial tensions rather than strengthening national unity. Ever since the Civil War, many politicians and historians have framed the war as an event that unified the nation. However, the failure of the Civil War Centennial raises doubts about the extent of the unifying, reconciliatory legacy of the Civil War. In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and Cold War, the flawed planning and goals of the Civil War Centennial led to its ultimate failure. Furthermore, this unsuccessful attempt to rally the nation behind the Civil War reveals that the legacy of the war is more divisive than unifying.

¹ Ulysses S. Grant, III, "Here comes the greatest centennial in U.S. history!," *This Week Magazine*, October 16, 1960, 8, 9, 11.

² Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961--1965*, Making the Modern South (n.p.: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 2.

In September 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law a congressional joint resolution that established the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission (CWCC). The idea for the celebration originated with interested historians and private American citizens in Civil War round tables, but politicians viewed the commemoration as a potential weapon in the cultural cold war.³ When Wyoming Senator Joseph O'Mahoney advocated for the joint resolution, he described the commemoration as an opportunity to reaffirm that which unites Americans, namely, "the basic desire for unity, liberty, freedom, and self-government." The CWCC should be established, claimed O'Mahoney, to remind Americans how out of the crisis of the Civil War was "forged the unity of this country which is so much the envy and, it is hoped, the ideal of the rest of the world."⁴ By honoring the fighting men on both sides of the Civil War, centennial organizers hoped the commemoration would help Americans understand the sacrifice through which the nation had been formed and thereby intensify their commitment to defeating communism.⁵ As celebrations began, the CWCC's plans reflected the goals of strengthening patriotic feelings and displaying American exceptionalism in the Cold War era. The CWCC's *Guide for the Observance of the Centennial of the Civil War* clearly stated that the purpose of the centennial was "to bring home to the citizens of our country the great lessons in Americanism learned from the Civil War."⁶ The use of the centennial as a weapon in the Cold War extended to the presidency; *Facts About the Civil War*, an informational pamphlet released by the CWCC, begins with President Eisenhower employing the legacy of the Civil War to advocate for civic activism. According to Eisenhower, Americans should view the deeds of both Northern and Southern citizens as inspiration for renewed dedication to the task confronting Americans in the

³ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 15.

⁴ *Civil War Centennial Commission*, 85th Cong., 1st Sess. (1957) (statement of Joseph O'Mahoney, Senator).

⁵ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 40-41.

⁶ *Guide for the Observance of the Centennial of the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Civil War Centennial Commission, 1958), 1, accessed January 3, 2018, <https://archive.org/details/guideforobservan00unit>.

Cold War era: “the furtherance, together with other free nations of the world, of the freedom and dignity of man and the building of a just and lasting peace.”⁷

In order to accomplish their goal of bringing the country together, centennial organizers worked hard to ensure the commemoration would occur nationwide. As noted in the *Guide for the Observance of the Centennial of the Civil War*, “the Civil War Centennial movement must of necessity function on a national basis.”⁸ Limited funding, however, caused the majority of actual planning of centennial observances to be carried out at the grass-roots level.⁹ The CWCC advocated for the creation of state centennial commissions throughout the country and wanted “each locality to plan and commemorate the chief events of its history during the great national crisis.”¹⁰ By 1961, forty-four states had established centennial commissions.¹¹ The necessity of both a nationwide commemoration and decentralized organizational approach posed several problems. First, it would soon become apparent that the national focus required the CWCC to embrace consensus-building historical myths to secure the participation of the South, which was wary of a negative portrayal of the Confederacy. Chairman Allan Nevins reported that the CWCC went to great lengths to ensure that “no ceremonies were used in a contentious way that would hurt the feelings of conservatives in the uneasy readjustments that were taking place.”¹² This desire to avoid controversy took precedence over meaningful historical analysis and, at times, the truth. Meanwhile, as the Civil Rights Movement divided the nation, the decentralized planning made it easier for citizens to politicize local centennial observances.

⁷ *Facts About the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, 1960), 2, accessed January 8, 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d03592278v;view=1up;seq=1>.

⁸ *Guide for the Observance*, 3.

⁹ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 43.

¹⁰ *Guide for the Observance*, 3.

¹¹ “California,” *100 Years After*, February 1961, [Page #], digital file.

¹² *The Civil War Centennial: A Report to the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, 1968), 6, digital file.

The nationalist goals and national organization of the centennial resulted in an emphasis on consensus and a devaluation of the role of emancipation and slavery in the Civil War. CWCC leaders were cognizant of the fact that their commemoration could not succeed in unifying the nation without Southern support. As a result, they emphasized conservative messages about the Civil War meant to appease both the North and South.¹³ For example, the *Civil War Centennial Handbook* outlined an oversimplified version of the Civil War designed to fit the nationalist goals of the CWCC; according to the CWCC, the story of the Civil War, “though one of tragedy, is also one of triumph, for it united a nation that had been divided for over a quarter century.”¹⁴ To further appease Southerners, who needed more convincing to participate in a commemoration of their defeat, the CWCC’s informational pamphlets reflected the “Lost Cause” narrative popular in the South. For instance, a CWCC-issued book entitled *The Civil War* describes Confederate president Jefferson Davis in complimentary terms: “Davis was in a sense doomed to failure from the start, but his devotion to the South never wavered. In spite of many physical handicaps, he demonstrated throughout his life honesty, courage, fortitude, and a firmness in the right as *he* saw the right.”¹⁵

In addition to highlighting the unifying themes of the Civil War, the CWCC downplayed the role of slavery and emancipation. When asked whether the centennial commission or any other groups were planning an observance of Emancipation Day, CWCC Executive Director Karl Betts responded: “We’re not emphasizing Emancipation. You see there’s a bigger theme – the beginning of a new America.” Betts even downplayed the evils of slavery in the South,

¹³ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 5-7.

¹⁴ William H. Price, *The Civil War Centennial Handbook* (Arlington, VA: Prince Lithograph, 1961), 2, digital file.

¹⁵ James I. Robertson, Jr., *The Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, 1963), 53, digital file.

stating that “A lot of fine Negro people loved life as it was in the old South.”¹⁶ The downplaying of emancipation and slavery is especially evident in the informational pamphlets distributed by the CWCC. Neither *Facts About the Civil War* nor *The Civil War Centennial Handbook* mention slavery as a significant cause of the war or emancipation as an important result.¹⁷ Much of this bias is a result of the twenty-five member CWCC being entirely white and excluding African Americans from the planning of the centennial.¹⁸ The CWCC’s inability to recognize the groundbreaking impact of the war on African American rights further alienated a large segment of the population from the centennial and contributed to its ultimate failure.

The CWCC’s efforts to secure the participation of the South came at a heavy price. The first centennial observances began in 1961, during a period of fierce resistance to integration in the South. The U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) sparked a Southern backlash against federal authority. Segregationists in the South seized on the centennial as a tool to mobilize opposition to the Civil Rights Movement, drawing parallels between the Confederate past and the uncertain present.¹⁹ Executive Director Betts observed that the greatest enthusiasm for the centennial was in the South, noting that “The South may have lost the Civil War, but they’re sure going to win the centennial.”²⁰ During the early months of the centennial, white Southerners participated in festivities to commemorate secession and the genesis of the Confederacy. In Montgomery, Alabama—the first capital of the Confederacy—an estimated 50,000 people attended a pageant to celebrate the centenary of Jefferson Davis’ inauguration as Confederate president. The two-day event included a careful reenactment of the inauguration ceremony in which local segregationist politicians played their secessionist predecessors. Davis’

¹⁶ Dan Wakefield, “Civil War Centennial: Bull Run with Popcorn,” *The Nation*, January 30, 1959, accessed January 3, 2018, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b151-i372>.

¹⁷ *Facts About; Price, The Civil.*

¹⁸ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰ Wakefield, “Civil War Centennial.”

inaugural address trumpeting the cause of states' rights and the legitimacy of secession was read verbatim, and the pageant ended with a crashing fireworks display.²¹ Segregationists in Montgomery plainly saw the connection between their own situation and that of their forebears. As one local contributor noted in the *Montgomery Advertiser* during the festivities:

Today the South is facing many of the same problems it faced in 1861. Federal dictatorship is literally being stuffed down our throats. Integration is now a major issue, not just a rumor. [...] Then, it was the right of the people to withdraw from a partnership which had become unsatisfactory because one faction sought to impose beliefs upon the other. Today it is a matter of democracy versus autocracy, the majority versus nine Supreme Court Justices. [...] We the people of a democracy should stand up and fight as our forefathers did so we can lick this ever present battle with the federal government as it continues to usurp rights delegated to the states.²²

Similar centennial observances occurred in other Southern communities, including Atlanta, Charleston, Raleigh, and Savannah, to commemorate secession and the beginnings of the Confederacy. Despite the national commission's emphasis on unity, many white Southerners treated the centennial as an opportunity to celebrate the Confederacy, rather than the reunification of the nation as a whole.²³ The South Carolina commission called themselves the South Carolina Confederate War Centennial Commission (SC), while the North Carolina commission staged a "Confederate Festival" in Raleigh.²⁴ The explosion of Confederate pageantry in the South alarmed many observers and inflamed both racial and sectional tensions. One U.S. soldier visiting the South wrote to President John F. Kennedy to express his concern about seeing "confederate flags flying from school flag poles" and "small children carr[y]ing confederate pennants dressed in full confederate uniforms." He worried that Southern enthusiasm

²¹ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 81.

²² *Montgomery Advertiser*. February 3, 1961, C3, quoted in Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 83.

²³ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 51-52.

²⁴ South Carolina Confederate War Centennial Commission, *The Confederate War Centennial: an opportunity for all South Carolinians* (Columbia, SC: South Carolina Confederate War Centennial Commission Columbia, 1961).; North Carolina Confederate Centennial Commission. 1961. *Program of the Confederate Festival, Raleigh, North Carolina, May 19-20, 1961*. (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Confederate Centennial Commission.)

for their Confederate past “might cause the fall of our great nation.”²⁵ In light of the escalating movement for African American equality, many Northerners began to view the centennial as a “hollow mockery.”²⁶

In March and April of 1961, the racial tensions exhibited by Southern celebrations of the Confederacy led to a political controversy that practically derailed the centennial. The controversy originated with the CWCC’s decision to hold its fourth national assembly in Charleston, South Carolina. Due to the lack of African American representation on the national CWCC and the racial conservatism of the CWCC’s leadership, none of the centennial organizers considered the racial issues that might arise from holding a national centennial convention in a segregated city.²⁷ Conflict ensued, however, over the issue of how Madaline Williams, an African American member of the New Jersey Civil War Centennial Commission, would be accommodated in Charleston. After being informed that Williams would not be allowed to attend the social functions of the convention or sleep in the hotel where other delegates were staying, the New Jersey Civil War Centennial Commission voted unanimously to boycott the convention.²⁸ Public outcry prompted President John F. Kennedy to express his view that the CWCC had an obligation to ensure all attendees were treated equally, but the CWCC maintained they had “no authority or jurisdiction by which it can dictate to the hotel keepers as to the management of their property.”²⁹ The NAACP publicly rebuked the CWCC’s response, and the

²⁵ Bill Wallace to John F. Kennedy, February 7, 1961, quoted in Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 86.

²⁶ Grant K. Goodman, "Commemorating the Civil War," *The New York Times*, January 25, 1961, Letters to the Times, accessed February 2, 2018, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1961/01/25/118016462.html?pageNumber=32>.

²⁷ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 90.

²⁸ "Jerseyans Spurn Civil War Parley," *The New York Times*, March 10, 1961, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1961/03/10/118028101.html?pageNumber=29>.

²⁹ W.H. Lawrence, "Kennedy Prods Civil War Unit On Housing Segregation Charge," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1961, accessed January 22, 2018, [https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1961/03/18/118903470.html?pageNumber=1](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1961/03/18/118903470.html?pageNumber=1;).; "Centennial Statement on Kennedy Plea," *The New York Times*, March 22, 1961, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1961/03/22/101452775.html?pageNumber=34>.

New York delegation subsequently chose not to attend the convention, citing their “firm convictions about what came out of the war.”³⁰ The Madaline Williams controversy brought national attention and negative publicity to the centennial, which was described by the media as “embroiled in a racial controversy.”³¹ The press in the North harshly criticized the CWCC’s stance on segregation, with a *New York Times* editorial asserting that the commemoration of the Civil War must be conducted “in harmony with the spirit of today, not that of a century ago.”³² The onslaught of negative press coverage after the controversy led to the resignation of the executive director, chairman, vice chairman of the CWCC. After the change in leadership, the centennial proceeded in a more subdued manner.³³ The Madaline Williams incident ended the high-profile public festivities and highlighted the riskiness of commemorating the Civil War amidst the mounting tension over civil rights.

Although most major battles fought between 1862 and 1865 received some form of recognition during the centennial, media and public interest waned dramatically after 1961. By April 1965, when the last major centennial observance took place at Appomattox Court House, the centennial had been largely forgotten by the American public.³⁴ When the CWCC submitted their final report to Congress in 1968, Chairman Nevins was candid about the failures of the centennial, admitting that the National Commission “must confess to its share of failures and shortcomings.” Roberts claimed that many of the shortcomings “proceeded from an excess of good intentions, from a zealous attempt to do too much with too little – too little in time, [...] too

³⁰ "Jerseyans Spurn," "N.A.A.C.P. Rebukes Centennial Group," *The New York Times*, March 23, 1961, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1961/03/23/118029325.html?pageNumber=26>.

³¹ "Case Protests Segregation Rule In Sumter Civil War Centennial," *The New York Times*, March 15, 1961, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1961/03/15/101451600.html?pageNumber=1>.

³² "What Are We Celebrating?," *The New York Times*, March 19, 1961, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1961/03/19/118905356.html?pageNumber=198>

³³ Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 121.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

little in money, [...] too little in trained personnel, [...] and too little in thoughtful planning.”³⁵

Roberts also blamed the centennial’s failures on the impact of the historical context, citing the “friction over racial issues” that “sent a wave of resentful feeling” across the nation. In hindsight, Chairman Nevins made a crucial observation: “It had been impossible to dissociate the racial issue from the Civil War while it raged [...]; it was impossible now to dissociate it entirely from the Centennial commemoration.”³⁶ Had this been understood at the beginning of the centennial’s planning, the CWCC could have prevented many of the racial controversies that arose from its ignorance of the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, Nevins’ insight into the relevance of the racial issues of the Civil War demonstrates the war’s divisive legacy.

The failure of the centennial calls into question the extent of the legacy of the Civil War as a unifying and reconciliatory event. In his Gettysburg address, Abraham Lincoln expressed hope that the Civil War would usher in “a new birth of freedom” and increase the devotion of Americans to ensure that “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”³⁷ This perception of the Civil War’s unifying legacy is echoed by historian Shelby Foote, who promotes the popular view that the Civil War cemented the United States as a singular, permanent entity and resolved many sectional disputes of the past. Foote notes that after the Civil War, Americans began to use the phrase “the United States is,” instead of “the United States are.” The Civil War, claims Foote, “made us an ‘is.’”³⁸ However, the failure of the Civil War Centennial reveals that the legacy of the Civil War is not as unifying as many have hoped. The exploitation of Civil War memory by segregationists, as well as the bitter dispute over the discrimination against Madaline Williams, reveals the divisive nature of the

³⁵ *The Civil*, 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷ Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," speech, November 19, 1863, The Avalon Project, accessed February 20, 2018, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/gettyb.asp.

³⁸ Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War*. Directed by Ken Burns. PBS, 1990.

Civil War's legacy. Rather than unite the nation, as centennial organizers had hoped, the centennial widened divisions by inflaming racial tensions and allowing different groups to celebrate contrasting views of the Civil War's legacy.³⁹

The revival of the Confederate battle flag as a symbol of white resistance is one of the most enduring impacts of the centennial. The Confederate flag, which became a prominent segregationist symbol at the start of the Civil War Centennial, highlights the inflammatory legacy of the Civil War. The state legislatures of Alabama, South Carolina, and Mississippi first began flying Confederate flags over their state capitols in 1961, as part of centennial observances. When the centennial ended, however, none of the states removed the flags, provoking public outcry and legal battles with the NAACP. According to historian Jon Wiener, the popularization of the Confederate flag as a symbol of defiance of African American rights is the most significant legacy of the Civil War Centennial.⁴⁰ The rise of the Confederate flag as a symbol of white supremacy is emblematic of the divisive legacy of both the Civil War and the Civil War Centennial.

Rather than unite the nation and inspire patriotism during the Cold War, the Civil War Centennial inflamed racial and sectional tensions. The problematic organization of the Civil War Centennial, as well as the underlying divisiveness of the original conflict, is largely to blame for this failure. The CWCC's Cold War motivations caused them to emphasize consensus ideology and employ a decentralized design. Consequently, segregationists were able to exploit Civil War memory to mobilize against the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, the CWCC's ignorance of racial issues led to the Madaline Williams controversy, which erupted into fighting between

³⁹ David Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (n.p.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2-3, 21.

⁴⁰ Jon Wiener, "Civil War, Cold War, Civil Rights: The Civil War Centennial in Context, 1960-1965," in *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, ed. Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh (n.p.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 253.

Northern and Southern centennial commissions and essentially brought the public festivities to an end. Though the Civil War Centennial was largely forgotten by the American public, it is responsible for the resurgence of the Confederate flag as a symbol of white resistance, which continues to this day. The divisive impact of the Civil War Centennial reveals that the legacy of the Civil War has not been as unifying as many historians and politicians have proposed. The animosity generated by this attempt to unify the nation behind the Civil War challenges the popular view of the war's reconciliatory legacy. As long as the connections between the racial issues of the Civil War and the controversial racial issues of the present remain unresolved, the legacy of the Civil War will not unite the nation.

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