US history tends to neglect the fact that the American Revolution was also a civil war – and that the American Civil War also encompassed a revolution. Adam IP Smith explains why ignoring difficult truths about the causes and aftermath of that war helps to fuel enduring tensions.
Quick context: glossary of terms

American Revolution
Tensions over the relationship between the leaders of British North America’s colonial society and the imperial government in London led to armed confrontations, which escalated into full-scale rebellion in 1775. In 1781, with French military support, rebel colonists forced the British to accept defeat. The independence of the United States of America was declared on 4 July 1776, and self-government was established. The Declaration of Independence, as depicted in paint just prior to the Civil War

Founding Fathers
The men who wrote the US Constitution in 1787, plus a few others – such as Thomas Jefferson – who played a key role in the nation’s creation. They aimed to create a confederation strong enough to withstand external pressure but which acknowledged the rights of individual states. Leading figures included George Washington, elected the republic’s first president a year later.

It is insufficiently appreciated that there has been not one American Revolution but two. The first was the one about which we all know: the successful rebellion against the British empire in the 1770s and 80s that resulted in the creation of a new republic. The second was the revolutionary refounding of the republic in the 1860s in the wake of a failed rebellion led by Southern slaveholders. That rebellion caused the deaths of up to three quarters of a million people and destroyed slavery, hitherto an institution sewn into the cultural and political fabric of the republic. It also led to a new constitutional settlement in which everyone born in the United States (except Native Americans, but including former slaves) was, for the first time, guaranteed citizenship and, in theory, equal rights.

Unlike the first revolution, however, the second was incomplete, its meaning ambiguous – so much so that most Americans don’t recognise it as a truly revolutionary moment at all. The first revolution remains America’s defining moment, the Founding Fathers still nailing secular public culture – bewiged Enlightenment gentlemen who bequeathed to future generations a nation conceived in liberty. To most Americans today, as in the past, the Civil War is remembered not so much as ushering in a new beginning for the country as reaffirming the meaning of the first revolution.

Since Donald Trump became president, we have been forcibly reminded of the ways Southern men of military age, by the eve of the Civil War, enabled the American South to buy and selling human beings – to the cheap slaveholders lost millions of dollars of ‘property’. However, to an even greater extent than we have forsi...
however, black people were given citizenship, which was (in theory, at least) protected by the federal government. Yet, for all that, Southern white people did not behave like a defeated population – nor did Northerners treat them that way. Unlike the loyalists of the 1780s, white Southerners were still very much around to tell their side of the story.

And this is where we come to the core problem with the place of history in American culture and memory. For though the first revolution has a more-or-less-agreed narrative in public life, the second – the Civil War and its aftermath – does not. Not only did the defeated rebels of the 1860s, unlike the loyalists of the 1770s, remain present in American life, but they were able to shape the way in which the war was remembered. They did this with the willing collusion of white Americans but at the expense of Africans-Americans. A war that had come about because of slavery, and which resulted in its abolition, was reframed as a noble struggle among white Americans over the perpetuity of the Union – a far less unsettling story. And the ultimate evidence of how effectively the losers have shaped the memory of the second American revolution is that it is not remembered as a revolution at all.

But it should be. Not because the attempt to break up the Union succeeded – obviously it did not – but because the slaveholders’ revolt of 1861 triggered waves of revolutionary change that fundamentally, if incompletely, reshaped the American constitutional order. Each political convulsion in France since 1789 has resulted in a formal re-naming; the current French state is the Fifth Republic. In contrast, America appears to have been blessed, if that is right word, by constitutional continuity.

The first revolution is the touchstone, and the supposed views of the Founding Fathers are repeatedly sought on every constitutional question. But three amendments to the United States Constitution passed as a result of the Civil War – the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments – amount to such a profound reconfiguration of the political order that they deserve to be thought of as the practical equivalent of a new, second founding.

The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. The Fifteenth tried to ensure that race could not be used to deny any man the vote. The Fourteenth Amendment, sitting between the two and ratified in 1868, was the keystone of the edifice. It defined a national community for the first time, and did so in a deliberately inclusive way by saying that if you’re born in America, you’re an American:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.

The ambition of those who framed this amendment was astonishing, given the prevailing racist views of the time. Black people – most of whom had, just three years earlier, been legally recognised as ‘property’ – were given equal political status with the white people who claimed to own them. And the amendment then did something equally dramatic in the context of US history up to that point: it gave Congress in Washington the responsibility for ensuring that state governments did not undermine citizens’ rights (or, in the language of the amendment, “abridge the privileges and immunities”). For the first time, citizenship was not just defined in an inclusive way – it was nationalised.

White southerners denounced the Fourteenth Amendment as a power grab by the federal government, and on this point they were right. The first American Revolution had created a constitutional order in which the states had effective sovereignty, even to the point where national publicans in Washington, however much some of them despised slavery, had no power to prevent state law from recognising it. With the second American revolution, that changed.

The Civil War era was revolutionary because of the previously unimaginable scale of destruction in a war that had no parallel in the western world until 1914 – a war that finally brought to an end, as Abraham Lincoln put it, “two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil” by enslaved black people. But it was also revolutionary because of the attempt to build a new kind of nation in the wake of that conflict.

In the end, the revolutionary intent behind the Civil War amendments was thwarted. Black people in the South did exercise the vote for a few years after 1868, and hundreds served in elective office, including in the House and Senate of the United States. But the mass of white Southerners who had been defeated on the battlefield fought tenaciously to deny freed slaves the political rights they had so recently gained. Between 1868 and the late 1870s, former Confederate army officers formed paramilitary white supremacist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, that used violence and terrorism to regain political control. At the time – and, astonishing as it may seem, in history books still published today – this counter-revolution was referred to as the ‘redemption’ of the South.

Within a decade of the defeat of their attempt to create a separate nation, white Southerners were back in positions of national power in Washington. The Supreme Court effectively nullified the Fourteenth Amendment, allowing southern states to disenfranchise black people and build the Jim Crow system of racial segregation. At the same time, the myth of the ‘lost cause’ took hold. Nurtured especially by women’s organisations – especially the Daughters of the Confederacy – this was a comforting narrative in which slavery had been an essentially benevolent institution, a burden for white men that at least ‘civilised’ and Christianised Africans.

The war, then, was a noble struggle to preserve the self-rule of a traditional Christian society,
American Civil War

and brave Southerners lost only because they were confronted by overwhelming numbers. This compelling but entirely dishonest story was sufficiently attractive to white Northerners that by the 1930s it formed the predominant public memory of the war on a national level. ‘Stonewall!’ Jackson and, especially, the supposedly saintly Robert E Lee were bizarrely elevated to the pantheon of national heroes alongside Washington. Such was the romantic appeal of this myth that statues to these rebel leaders were commissioned in public spaces even in states where there had never been slavery.

The Southern ‘lost cause’ is far from the only instance in history of a failed rebellion being retrospectively glamorised. A strikingly similar example is the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, which posed for a whole generation of warfare as a romantic and bloody farce, being deposed had Bonnie Prince Charlie succeeded. Such was the romantic appeal of this myth that statues to these rebel leaders were commissioned in public spaces even in states where there had never been slavery.

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However, similar as it was in impetus and aesthetics, the romanticisation of the slaveholders’ rebellion had more pernicious consequences than latter-day Jacobitism. It validated the counter-revolution, obliterating in public memory the postwar effort to incorporate black people into the American polity as equals. As a result, American memory of the Civil War remained stunted. The heroes of the soldiers was lauded, but the political meaning of the overthrow of slavery was downplayed. When President Woodrow Wilson spoke at the Gettysburg battlefield in 1913, on the 50th anniversary of that clash, he said it would be “an impiety” in front of veterans of both sides to speak about what the battle “signified”. Better instead simply to honour their struggle.

Beginning in the 1950s, as the civil rights movement gathered force, the compliant white consensus about the Civil War was challenged. For decades now, school textbooks, films and TV documentaries have tried to convince Americans that slavery was at the root of the war. But so long as there is racial inequality in America, the memory of the Civil War will matter. A majority of white Americans tell pollsters that they do not think the war was about slavery. And the romanticisation of rebel leaders has, until very recently, scarcely been challenged.

The first American revolution, meanwhile, has retained its status as the foundational moment. The hit Broadway musical Hamilton, for example, tells a tale of a united people rising up for freedom – one to which George Bancroft would have nodded along.

So long as everything about American politics can be traced back to the 18th century, the rupture of the 1860s can be glossed over. Conservative lawyers who insist that the Constitution should always be interpreted with reference to the (imagined) “original intent” of its framers seldom pay much attention to the intentions of the radical Republicans who framed the post-Civil War amendments as they do the gentlemen at Philadelphia in 1787. This is in spite of the fact that the Fourteenth Amendment, in particular, is at stake in multiple battles in American political life today, from immigration and gay rights to violations of the right to vote.

If America has had just one revolution, it follows that the past 254 years have been marked largely by a comforting and virtuous continuity. Such a narrative is only possible because the upheaval of the 1860s was domesticated and drained of its disruptive meaning. The Southern ‘lost cause’ is far from the only instance in history of a failed rebellion being retrospectively glamorised. A strikingly similar example is the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, which posed for a whole generation of warfare as a romantic and bloody farce, being deposed had Bonnie Prince Charlie succeeded. Such was the romantic appeal of this myth that statues to these rebel leaders were commissioned in public spaces even in states where there had never been slavery.

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