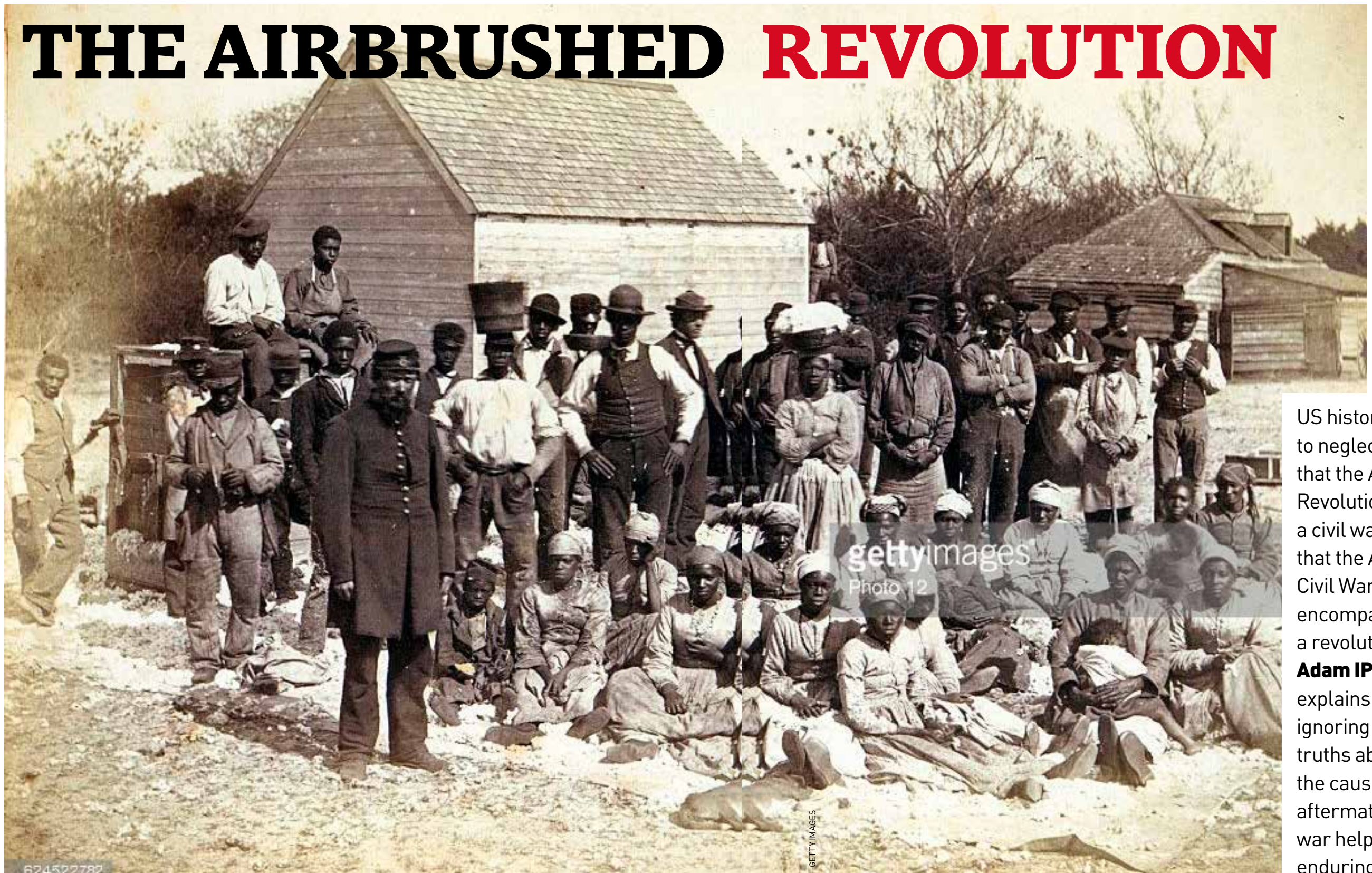


THE AIRBRUSHED REVOLUTION



Slaves of Confederate Brigadier-General Thomas F Drayton at his Magnolia Plantation, South Carolina, during the American Civil War. Contrary to later romanticisation of the Southern cause, the Confederacy was designed with slavery as its "cornerstone"

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

1 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-rule achieved after British troops left in 1783.

2 Founding Fathers

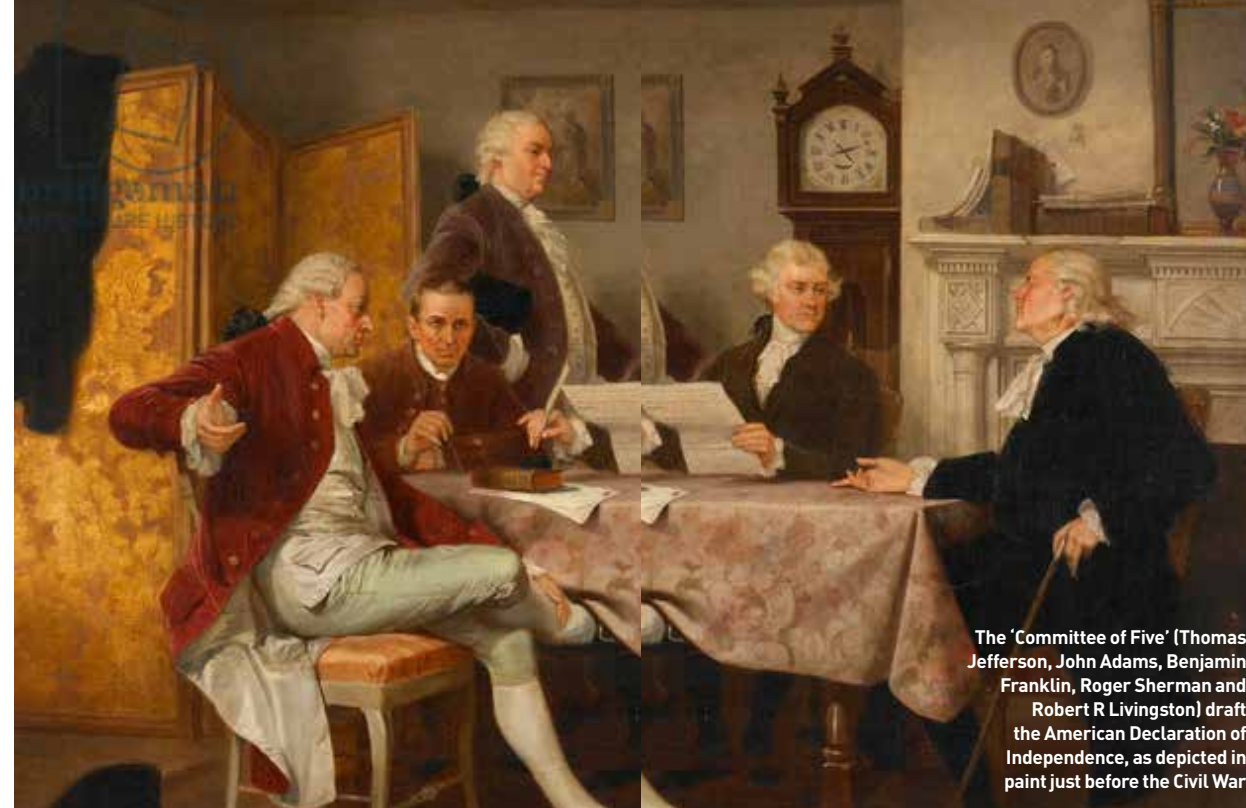
The men who wrote the US Constitution in 1787, plus a few others – such as Thomas Jefferson – who played a key role in the nation's creation. They aimed to create a confederation strong enough to withstand external pressure but which acknowledged the rights of individual states. Leading figures included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

It is insufficiently appreciated that there has been not one American Revolution ❶ 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 ❷ still near-sanctified figures in US public culture – bewigged 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 in which an unresolved past can haunt the present. Tensions that have long lain below the surface have been exposed by the emotionally wrenching transition from an African-American president to one endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan. We see them in the battle between those who would remove statues to the leaders of the slaveholders' rebellion and those who would celebrate them; in the incomprehension of so many white people in the face of African-American protests about police brutality; and in the judicial struggles over voting rights. At stake is the total failure of American society as a whole to reach consensus over the meaning of the Civil War. This failure stands in stark contrast to the privileged status of the 'first' revolution in public culture.

Both American revolutions were civil wars, but the first American revolution doesn't feel that



The 'Committee of Five' (Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert R Livingston) draft the American Declaration of Independence, as depicted in paint just before the Civil War

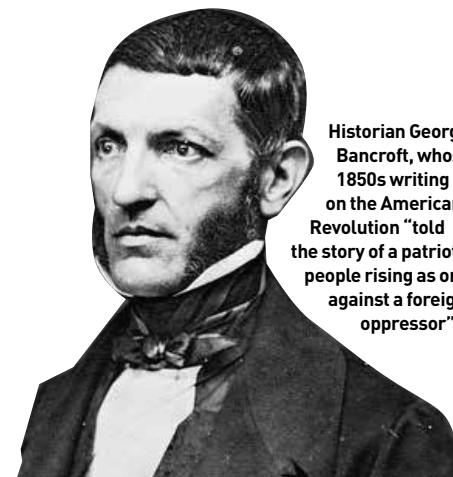
way. Nineteenth-century historians told the story of a patriotic people rising as one against a foreign oppressor. "The people of the continent obeyed one general impulse, as the earth in spring listens to the command of nature and without the appearance of effort bursts into life," George Bancroft wrote in his bestselling multi-volume history of the US, published in the 1850s.

In some ways, popular histories of the American Revolution are not so different today. The complex tug of loyalties and the internal divisions within colonial American society described by academic historians have no part in this story. For this was a revolution that was, and is, imagined to be a natural, divinely ordained flowering of a long-seeded passion for freedom. "The Americans," wrote Bancroft, "seized as their peculiar inheritance the traditions of liberty." And unlike in France, where liberty had led to anarchy and autocracy, in America liberty was accompanied by order and stability. No Reign of Terror came to America, because the Americans did not rush headlong, surging with emotion, into their revolution but embraced it in a spirit of maturity and moderation.

There was little resistance to this telling of the national origin story because the losers were not around to contest it. Tens of thousands of loyalists had fled to other parts of the British empire, especially to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The many more who stayed put

“Since Trump became president, we have been forcibly reminded of the ways in which an unresolved past can haunt the present”

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Historian George Bancroft, whose 1850s writing on the American Revolution "told the story of a patriotic people rising as one against a foreign oppressor"

pragmatically accepted the new dispensation, as did the even greater number of colonists who had weathered the storm of revolution with ambivalent feelings about which side was right.

In the second American revolution, the apparent losers were white Southerners. In 1861, 11 slave states launched a military rebellion against the United States in a self-conscious effort to re-enact the first American revolution. As with their forebears 80 years earlier, Southerners said that they were fighting for liberty against tyranny. As with George Washington, whose image adorned the symbols of the new Confederate States of America ❸, Southerners' definition of liberty was consistent with slavery for black people. However, to an even greater extent than was true for the Founding Fathers of the 1770s – who disagreed among themselves about the wisdom and ethics of enslaving black people – the protection of slavery was the singular aim of the rebels of 1861. As Confederate vice-president Alexander Stephens notoriously put it, the new Confederacy was designed with slavery as its "cornerstone". In the declaration of the causes of secession published by South Carolina's legislature, the central argument was the "increasing hostility on the part of the non-slaveholding States to the Institution of Slavery."

To the leaders of this revolt, it seemed a reasonable bet that they would be able to establish their independence, through force of arms if necessary. But it was a gamble that, after four years of war and the loss of more than one in five white Southern men of military age, spectacularly backfired. Had it not been for secession in 1861, there is plenty of reason to believe that some sort of system of legally sanctioned unfree labour would have continued for many decades. As it was, slaveholders provoked a backlash that destroyed their world.

Or did it? To be sure, those Southern slaveholders lost millions of dollars of 'property'. They no longer had such easy access – through buying and selling human beings – to the cheap and flexible labour force that had, by the eve of the Civil War, enabled the American South to become the world's near-monopoly supplier of cotton. The slave system had given white people near-total immunity from any legal or social constraints when it came to deciding what forms of brutality would best maintain the subjugation of black people. In the wake of emancipation,



3 Confederacy

The Confederate States of America was the name adopted by 11 slave states that signed an alternative constitution ratified in 1861. It represented an attempt by Southerners to secede from the Union and 'refound' the republic on explicitly pro-slavery grounds. The North's actions to thwart the bid, and the South's military responses, escalated into a four-year civil war that claimed the lives of more than 600,000.

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 Northerners but at the expense of African-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** ④. 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 reverently 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.



Union Lieutenant George Custer (right) with a captured Confederate soldier and his slave. Surviving Southerners redefined the war's causes

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 politicians in Washington,

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④ France's Fifth Republic

The current system of French government, established by Charles de Gaulle (above) in 1958. The First Republic, founded in 1792 during the French Revolution, lasted just 12 years and was marred by the Reign of Terror – systematic government violence against perceived counter-revolutionaries.



An African-American man climbs to the ‘colored’ entrance of a cinema in Belzoni, Mississippi in 1939. Soon after the end of the Civil War, racially prejudicial laws in Southern states effectively nullified postwar constitutional amendments

“Within a decade of their defeat, white Southerners were back in positions of national power 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

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officers formed paramilitary white supremacist groups, such as the **Ku Klux Klan** ⑤, 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** ⑥ 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,



⑤ Ku Klux Klan

The most prominent white supremacist organisation in the US, founded in 1866. Local branches across the Southern states used violence to intimidate Republican leaders and damage black schools and churches. Membership peaked in the 1920s at around four million people, and enjoyed a resurgence in the 1950s in opposition to the civil rights movement.

⑥ Jim Crow laws

Legislation enacted in the late 19th century in Southern former slave states to enforce a purportedly ‘separate but equal’ system in schools, transport and other public facilities, in concert with suppression of black voting rights. This racial discrimination and disenfranchisement was challenged by the civil rights movement from the 1950s but not reversed until 1965.

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 ⑦, which posed for a while a serious military threat to the Hanoverian British state, but which within a few decades was the subject of countless romantic songs and stories. Queen Victoria – whose ancestor would have been deposed had Bonnie Prince Charlie succeeded – performed Jacobite tableaux with Prince Albert in the drawing room at Balmoral Castle. Rebellions that failed have, it seems, an unfailingly romantic allure.

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 heroism 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 impertinence” 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 complacent 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



⑦ **Jacobite rebellion of 1745**

Attempt by Charles Edward Stuart (‘Bonnie Prince Charlie’) to claim the thrones of Scotland and England lost by his grandfather, James II and VII, during the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688. After initial successes – taking Edinburgh and advancing far into England – his forces were finally defeated at Culloden in 1746.



African-American men who escaped slavery and joined the Union Army, shown in 1863. Though many former slaves sought sanctuary in Northern army camps, until 1862 it was illegal for black men to enlist

“So long as everything about American politics can be traced back to the 18th century, the rupture of the 1860s can be glossed over”

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A statue of General Robert E Lee in Washington DC in 1933. The romance of the ‘Lost Cause’ myth saw statues of Confederate heroes erected in non-slave states after the war

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* ⑧, 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 as 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 250 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 African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass saw this happening as early as 1871. “We are sometimes asked,” he said, “in the name of patriotism to forget the merits of this fearful conflict and to remember with equal admiration those who struck at the nation’s life and those who struck to save it – those who fought for slavery and those who fought for liberty and justice.” But Douglass was having none of it: “May my right hand forget its cunning, and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I forget the difference between the parties to that terrible, protracted, and bloody conflict.”

Despite decades of work by historians, many Americans remain determined to see the Civil War as a struggle among noble white folk with little or no implications for the state of race relations today. Like Queen Victoria dressing up in tartan, they have clothed themselves in rebel garb. As long as they continue to do so, American history will be inseparable from the politics of the present. ⑨



⑧ **Hamilton: An American Musical**

Hit show recounting the life and career of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, first performed in 2015. Its casting of black and Hispanic actors in lead roles, and use of song and rap to explain key issues, contributed to critical and commercial success. However, it has been criticised for its interpretation of Hamilton’s views.

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