How I Learned About the “Cult of the Lost Cause”

The mayor of New Orleans offers his reading list for anyone looking to better understand the real history of Confederate monuments

By **Mitch Landrieu**

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The Cult of the Lost Cause. There it was in black and white, in a 1999 application to put the equestrian statue of General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 2015, after a year of closely guarded discussions about Confederate monuments in New Orleans, most particularly Robert E. Lee, I asked a few members of my staff to go down to the main branch of the public library to get relevant research documents from the city archives. I wanted to know how and why these statues were erected and if there were any legal protections that would prevent us from moving them.

It turns out that among news clippings, drawings and maps, they turned up applications to place the statues on the National Register of Historic Places. Preservationists and city and state officials petitioned the United States Department of the Interior, through the National Park Service, for three statues in Louisiana. As part of that application, extensive research was completed to make the historical case for acceptance. Included in the application was an acknowledgment that the reason for the statues’ very existence was the “Cult of the Lost Cause.”

I had some limited knowledge of the “Lost Cause,” but the word “cult” hit my ear in a different way. The narrative for the National Register of Historic Places application read:

*The Cult of the Lost Cause had its roots in the Southern search for justification and the need to find a substitute for victory in the Civil War. In attempting to deal with defeat, Southerners created an image of the war as a great heroic epic. A major theme of the Cult of the Lost Cause was the clash of two civilizations, one inferior to the other. The North, “invigorated by constant struggle with nature, had become materialistic, grasping for wealth and power.” The South had a “more generous climate” which had led to a finer society based upon “veracity and honor in man, chastity and fidelity in women.” Like tragic heroes, Southerners had waged a noble but doomed struggle to preserve their superior civilization. There was an element of chivalry in the way the South had fought, achieving noteworthy victories against staggering odds. This was the “Lost Cause” as the late nineteenth century saw it, and a whole generation of Southerners set about glorifying and celebrating it.*

The more I read, the more I learned that these statues were indeed propaganda put up years, and often decades, after the Union was preserved. During Reconstruction and the 1960s Civil Rights era, there were specific attempts to erect statues like those of Robert E. Lee or Beauregard not only across the South, but indeed, across the country.

Well into our journey, the Southern Poverty Law Center put out research showing there were some 700 Confederate memorial monuments and statues erected long after the Civil War.  According to their research, “two distinct periods saw a significant rise in the dedication of monuments and other symbols,” the first around 1900 through the 1920s and the second in the 1950s and 60s. They coincided with the 50th and 100th anniversaries of the Civil War as well as attempted advancements by African-Americans.

Some 20-plus years ago when these applications were written, officials understood the tremendous power of the Lost Cause. So why wasn’t this history better known? To the Lost Cause, rewriting the narrative of the war was as important as erecting monuments, and it largely worked. Still to this day, many I know in Louisiana believe the Civil War was more about states’ rights than preserving slavery. Even leaders at the highest levels of our national government try to dispute the cause of the Civil War.

To educate myself and make sure I had an accurate understanding of history before taking any action with the monuments, I reached out to some of the leading experts. I called Ken Burns, the great documentarian, who produced the compelling nine-part PBS docuseries on the Civil War in the ’90s that re-aired more recently. I talked to local historians who were part of New Orleans’ 300th anniversary commission. I reached out to American and Civil War historians at Harvard University, the University of Virginia, the United States Military Academy at West Point, Tulane University, Louisiana State University, Rice University and more. All confirmed my reading.

After we took the statues down, I began reading the most definitive and expansive work on the Lost Cause and the movement to whitewash history—books such as *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* and*Teaching What Really Happened* by James W. Loewen, a retired University of Vermont sociology professor. Loewen wrote that “the Confederates won with the pen (and the noose) what they could not win on the battlefield: the cause of white supremacy and the dominant understanding of what the war was all about.”

The propaganda the Lost Cause adherents were peddling was not only benign myth, it was a lie that distorted history, sought to rationalize lynching, and created a second class of citizenship for African-Americans. With every new piece of history, it became clearer that the symbols were intended to send a specific message to African-Americans. I firmly believe that they had a link to the systems and institutions that we are working to address today.

Most importantly, these particular statues do not represent history—they are an affront to it. I knew this sanitizing of history must end, and I did what I could, which was work with our City Council to remove them. We all have to keep pushing.

To do that will require us to stretch our minds, to go to places that we intellectually haven’t before. In addition to writings by Loewen, the works of Charles Blow, Michelle Alexander, Dr. Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, Orlando Patterson, Bryan Stevenson, and Ta-Nehisi Coates have broadened my view. I remain in awe of the award-winning work of Jesmyn Ward. The writings of friends and mentors Marian Wright Edelman and Henry Louis Gates have inspired me to keep pushing.

To chart a better path forward, we must have honest, truthful conversations about our shared history, how it shapes our world today, and what we all have to do to make the world a fairer, more just society. Only then will we truly win the war against the Cult of the Lost Cause.

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