**How Newt's New Novel Plays Politics with the Past**

Eager to court black voters while retaining southern conservatives, Gingrich writes a notorious massacre out of his book

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Newt Gingrich's recent rise in Republican primary polls has occurred in tandem with the release of his historical novel set in the Civil War, which positions him as a champion of the African-American community and at the same time attempts to placate his conservative southern base, whose agenda is interwoven with a traditional narrative of the Civil War that avoids the tough questions surrounding slavery and race. The result is a narrative that grossly distorts our understanding of the war and the important role of black Union soldiers.

In the course of two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have divided Americans and raised questions about this nation's own moral standing on the world stage, Newt Gingrich has released a steady stream of historical novels that hearken back to those moments in the past that showcase "American Exceptionalism." Historical events that have preoccupied Gingrich, along with co-author William R. Forstchen, revolve around the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Second World War, including the larger than life personalities such as George Washington, Generals Ulysses S. Grant, and Robert E. Lee, and Admiral William Halsey. Many of these books utilize counterfactuals to pinpoint decisive moments in a history that is on the march toward realizing the nation's founding ideals.

The latest release and the third in their Civil War series is [*The Battle of the Crater*](http://www.amazon.com/Battle-Crater-Novel-Newt-Gingrich/dp/0312607105), which tells the story of one of the bloodiest encounters of the Petersburg Campaign of 1864-65. The battle, which was fought on July 30, 1864 and popularized in the recent movie [*Cold Mountain*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0159365/), is best remembered for the early morning detonation of 8,000 pounds of explosives under a Confederate salient by the Army of the Potomac's Ninth Corps in an attempt to break the siege and perhaps end the war. The subsequent attack quickly bogged down, as many of the men were caught in the entangled web of earthworks as well as the large crater caused by the explosion. A quick Confederate response by units in the immediate vicinity of the explosion, as well as a mid-morning counterattack, saved Lee's army and resulted in what would be the Army of Northern Virginia's last decisive victory.

Gingrich and Fortschen tell their story by focusing on the 28th United States Colored Troops and the rest of the black soldiers of the Fourth Division. The unit suffered horrendous casualties and evidence indicates that large numbers were executed both during and after the battle. Those who survived ended up in southern prison camps or, worse, were enslaved.

The authors rightly emphasize that this is an aspect of the story that for far too long has been ignored. They self-consciously set out to resurrect "the role of the USCTs (United States Colored Troops) in winning the Civil War and preserving the Union." Their interest in black Union soldiers falls neatly into a broader shift in our popular memory of the war that now finds the subject of slavery and race easier to address. This can be attributed, in part, to the success of the movie [*Glory*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097441/), Ken Burns' popular documentary [*The Civil War*](http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/), and a growing list of scholarly and popular accounts of the Civil War that have introduced a new generation of Americans to this important history.

A host of historical characters keeps this story moving at a brisk pace, including Colonel Henry Pleasants of the 48th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, who oversaw the digging of the mine, and Generals Ambrose Burnside and George Gordon Meade, as well as a fictitious sketch artist by the name of James Reilly. The main character and hero of this story is Sergeant Garland White, who was born a slave, served as the personal servant of Senator Robert Toombs of Georgia, and, after escaping, helped to organize the earliest "colored" regiments in 1863.

Very little of this story is told from the perspective of Lee and his men. In fact, readers familiar with *Glory* will find much in common between these two stories. The men of the 28th USCT follow the same path as the more popular 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, even down to their training at the hands of an overly aggressive and racist Irish drill sergeant. Soldiers of both units battle against discrimination from within the ranks, even as they struggle to maintain focus on proving their manliness and worth as citizens on the battlefield. In the end, they earn their glory through assaults that end in defeat and a horrendous body count.

While in one respect the desire to introduce a long-neglected story to the general public is laudable, the particular shape of this narrative raises questions related to Newt Gingrich's current run for the presidency, as well as the increased influence that black Americans now wield on all levels of political life. It is impossible to imagine a presidential candidate writing such a book 50 years ago, during the Civil War Centennial, not simply because the stories were unknown, but because African Americans did not form a crucial political constituency. However, increased access to voting booths following the civil rights movement not only led to broader representation in state and national government, but made it possible for African Americans to advocate more directly for a more inclusive history. This is not to suggest that the authors' stated goal for this book is disingenuous, but that the choice of subject and perspective, as well as the timing of its publication, ought not to be viewed as an accident.

But if the choice of story is intended to position Gingrich more closely to the African American community (or to the sort of white moderate who'd be more likely to vote for a Republican candidate seen as reaching out to black voters), the authors also strive not to alienate a constituency that continues to hold tight to a traditional narrative of the Civil War rooted in the Lost Cause. This emerges clearly in the chapters devoted to the battle itself. The authors accurately describe the men of the 28th USCT as crying "No Quarter!" during the assault, but what they conveniently ignore is that their cry also included, "Remember [Fort Pillow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Fort_Pillow)!" -- a reference to the massacre of black soldiers carried out by Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest in April 1864 in Tennessee.

More conspicuous in its absence, however, is any description of how Confederates felt at having to fight armed black men for the first time just outside of a large civilian population, as well as the accounts of their execution following the battle. The closest the authors come to acknowledging this is in a Confederate officer's conversation with Garland White following the battle, in which he shares that "after our boys retook the lip of the crater, the cry went up to kill all the colored." He is quick to point, however, his own position on slavery: "My family refused to own them. We hired free blacks to work the fields of our farm. So yes, I tried to stop it, so did most of the officers."Even a cursory glance at the available evidence points to the unlikelihood of such a scene. A small sample will suffice. Jerome B. Yates of the 16th Mississippi recalled, "Most of the Negroes were killed after the battle. Some was killed after they were taken to the rear."

"The only sounds which now broke the silence," according to Henry Van Lewvenigh Bird, "was some poor wounded wretch begging for water and quieted by a bayonet thrust which said unmistakably "Bois ton sang. Tu n'aurais de soif." [Drink your blood. You will have no more thirst]. James Verdery simply described it as "a truly Bloody Sight a perfect Massacre nearly a Black flag fight."

Colonel William Pegram spoke for many when he noted that "I had been hoping that the enemy would bring some negroes against this army." And now that they had, "I am convinced . . . that it has a splendid effect on our men." Pegram concluded that though, "It seems cruel to murder them in cold blood," the men who did it had "very good cause for doing so." The presence of black soldiers at the Crater confirmed for slaveowners and non-slaveowners in the ranks just what was at stake in the event of Confederate defeat. The massacre of black soldiers constituted a calculated response when viewed alongside the actions of white southerners throughout the antebellum period to slave rebellions both real and imagined.

The authors go out of their way to remove any sense of how Confederates responded to the presence of black soldiers, even going so far as to construct a fictional meeting in which Robert E. Lee encourages General William Mahone to take steps to ensure complete victory and prevent the mistreatment of captured black soldiers: "I want the full honor of war observed. Those who surrender are to be treated as proper prisoners, with respect, their wounded tended to, their officers shown the respect due their rank."

Suffice it to say that there is no evidence of such a meeting nor is there any evidence that Lee attempted to prevent the execution of black soldiers following the battle. The absence of any written correspondence from Lee on this matter suggests that he, in all likelihood, condoned it.

To whatever extent this story has the potential to situate Gingrich more comfortably within the African American community or among moderate white Republican voters during this election cycle the decisions made on how to handle the Confederate response at the Crater is clearly an acknowledgment of the close link that many white southerners continue to maintain between Civil War remembrance or "Southern Heritage" and Republican national politics. In 2000 John McCain angered Southern Heritage organizations by supporting a ban on the display of the Confederate flag on government buildings, a decision that cost him the South Carolina primary. In 2008 Fred Thompson's stance on the flag also cost him politically and finally Texas governor and presidential candidate Rick Perry provoked the anger of some following his decision not to support a request by the Texas chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans for license plates that include their logo.

Ironically, the decision to rescue Confederates from the historical record to mollify his own conservative base serves only to minimize the accomplishments of the very men that Gingrich set out to feature. The bravery and sacrifice of Sergeant Garland White, the men of the 28th USCT and the roughly 200,000 black men who volunteered to fight for the United States Army is only fully exposed when understood in light of the dangers they faced at the hands of men who refused to treat them as soldiers. That is the price one pays when using history as a political instrument.

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**The Declining Significance of the Lost Cause**

Despite its shortcomings, Gingrich's novel represents progress with its acknowledgement of black soldiers--not the ultimate solution, but progress

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Kevin Levin assesses Newt Gingrich's historical novel *The Battle of The Crater* which, at once, seeks to award manly honor to the black soldiers that fought there and avoid any slight toward the Confederates who massacred so many afterward.

This pattern of those sympathetic to the Confederacy acknowledging the sacrifice and honor of black soldiers is relatively new. Levin is right that it's often tied into a hesitancy to see the Confederacy as it really was. But to my mind, Gingrich's novel is progress--not the ultimate solution, but progress. For a century, the Lost Cause rendition of history meant writing black people, as agents, out of it. The newer Lost Cause histories actually work to integrate black people--if speciously--often as soldiers.

Indeed, one of the strongest pieces of evidence against the ‘black Confederate’ mythology is the fact that Lost Causers only discovered them in the 1960s and 1970s. Jubal Early would have laughed at the notion of a black Confederate soldier--indeed he likely would have considered such a claim an insult. But progress in history is a virus, and even those who would normally oppose that progress find themselves infected, altered, if not to the terms we would like, surely to something which could not have existed before. That's how progress work. It's the long war.

One other note: I've always had trouble making a morality play out of The Crater because it seems pretty clear that the black soldiers who fought there, themselves responding to the Fort Pillow massacre, were ready to exact revenge and ignore the laws of war and surrender. Indeed, there's quite a bit of anecdotal evidence from the commanders of black regiments that that's exactly what happened in some instances.

This is painful to write but it seems essential to ask--What do we make of men who were prepared to massacre, who were themselves massacred? Perhaps asking the question and thinking of them in that way restores some bit of humanity. I don't need the USCTs to have [conducted themselves} like the green berets. "Manly honor" isn't the point. Agency is.

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