

# A Lineage of White Insurgency: US Capitol Attack and the Lost Cause

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## A Lineage of White Insurgency: US Capitol Attack and the Lost Cause

<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/06/23/a-lineage-of-white-insurgency-us-capitol-attack-and-the-lost-cause/>

RILEY MARTINEZ, JUN 23 2023

I was a teenager on a tour of the house and enslaved persons' quarters of Confederate General Robert E. Lee with my family. I remember being emotionally overcome as I walked through the inhumane quarters where enslaved families lived, six people in a "house" smaller than my childhood bedroom. As I left the quarters, engulfed in sobriety and sorrow, having witnessed the relics of my country's horrific past and national shame, I approached a conversation between a visitor and a tour guide at the estate. To my horror, the visitor attempted to convince the tour guide that American chattel slavery had not been "that bad." This man believed that the Confederacy was noble in their fight for secession, that the Union Army were the aggressor, that most enslaved people were treated well, and that the image of violent, torturous enslavers was largely a myth. As I would learn, this pseudohistorical narrative, still prevalent in the Southern United States, is known as "The Lost Cause of the Confederacy," its impact on the modern American political theatre cannot be understated.

It has been said that "history is past politics", and while this may be true, this dissertation will demonstrate that history is present politics as well (Fielding 2003). The insurrection attempt on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, was perhaps the greatest threat to American democracy in history. The implications of a sitting US president, in a desperate bid to hold onto power, inciting a violent mob of his supporters to attempt to kill the Vice President and prevent Congress from certifying the election results cannot be overstated (Select Committee to Investigate January 6, Congressional Hearing #1, 2022).

Since the insurrection attempt on the United States Capitol, those in positions of power have sought to find causes and explanations for the attack. Difficult economic conditions, rightwing populism, and general political malcontent have all been considered catalysts for this event. The event has been investigated as domestic terrorism, rightwing extremism, and something "new," seemingly resulting from the Trump era of far-right politics. This dissertation takes the position that while it is not possible to draw a monocausal relationship between the insurrection attempt and any one issue in civil society, there is an explanation that has not yet been academically explored — the legacy of the Confederate States of America and the Lost Cause pseudohistorical narrative that developed after the Civil War. To explain this relationship, this dissertation will ask the following question: how can the insurrection on the United States Capitol be situated and understood within the historical framework and racial context of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy? This dissertation will centre the January 6 insurrection within the historical framework of the Southern Confederacy and the desperate lengths it went to absolve itself from blame and rewrite the historical narrative after the Civil War. This calculated attempt at propagating a false understanding of the Civil War, known as the Lost Cause, was predicated on White supremacy and systemic racism disguised as "American patriotism." As I researched, in the aftermath of January 6, it became evident that the attack on the US Capitol was not an isolated event but deeply connected to history – solidly entrenched in America's vastly different memories of the Civil War.

The scope of this study will be limited to the historical connections between the Lost Cause of the Confederacy and the January 6 insurrection, and those links will be primarily focused on the racial implications of the narrative. Therefore, this dissertation posits that the insurrection attempt on the US Capitol cannot be appropriately understood apart from an understanding of America's history of White supremacy, protected and perpetuated by the Lost Cause of the Confederacy narrative, which emerged after the Civil War. Collective, intentional amnesia can be used to

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describe Southerners after the defeat of the Confederacy. This calculated forgetfulness gave way to the Lost Cause, a pseudohistorical narrative that gave the South a supposed way to “save face” following rampant crimes against humanity and a brutal, humiliating defeat. Frederick Douglass, seeing the early signs of this amnesia and understanding the catastrophic problems that would be created were this narrative to proliferate, said, “I am not indifferent to the claims of a generous forgetfulness, but whatever else I may forget, I shall never forget the difference between those who fought for liberty and those who fought for slavery; between those who fought to save the Republic and those who fought to destroy it” (Douglass 1894, cited in loc.org). This dissertation will explain how the South’s refusal to accept defeat (a smokescreen for its desire to uphold slavery and racial hierarchy) still plagues America today.

Under the guise of American patriotism, the legacy of the Confederacy represents a commitment to hatred and bigotry that views racial equality as an attack on White people and Southern heritage. From the current prevalence of Confederate flags and symbols to the fight to uphold and protect statues that immortalize slaveholders to the ways that Trump and his followers refused to accept defeat and instead violently endangered American democracy – the legacy of the Confederate States of America is alive and well. This study will highlight Lost Cause prevalence in American society to analyze the Confederate icons, themes, and Lost Cause ideology present and influential at the US Capitol on January 6. The leading academic on the implications of Lost Cause ideology on modern American political ideas is Pulitzer prize-winning historian David Blight. Blight is a professor at Yale and wrote the book *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, which won the Fredrick Douglass Prize in 2001. Building on the historical framework Blight created by centering contemporary issues within Civil War memory, my research will extend his historical framework regarding the modern implications of the Lost Cause, including the insurrection attempt on the US Capitol.

## **Key Terms: Insurgency, Pseudohistory, White Supremacy**

In beginning this study, it is essential to define several key terms. This dissertation focuses on two insurgencies in American history — the insurgency of the Southern Confederacy during the Civil War and the rightwing insurgency that attempted to overtake the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. Therefore, it is helpful to provide this dissertation’s understanding of ‘insurgency,’ which takes its definition from US law. The Marshall Project described the US code, title 18, as “to incite, assist in or engage in a full-on rebellion against the government: a step beyond just conspiring against it, and requiring that significant violence be involved” (Hager et al. 2021). With this definition, one can confidently call both the Confederacy and the events of January 6 an insurrection against the US government.

This study is also about one of American history’s most blatant examples of pseudohistory — the Lost Cause of the Confederacy narrative. Pseudohistory is defined as a version of historical storytelling whose accounts fabricate or selectively elevate certain aspects of the story or event to produce a narrative that is wildly different from reality. In their article *Pseudohistory/Weird History: Nationalism and the Internet*, Stephen Brown, Greg Melleuish, and Konstantin Sheiko from the University of Wollongong write:

One of the most important developments in the production of history in the early twenty-first century has been the capacity of ‘weird history’ or ‘pseudo history’ to have a large impact on the public sphere. Pseudo history mimics professional history in the way that it presents itself to the public but its arguments defy any reasonable assessment of the evidence.

Brown, Melleuish and Sheiko 2009, p. 2

The Lost Cause narrative highlights the severe dangers of pseudohistory, as this dissertation will demonstrate. While there may be thin, interwoven strands of truth throughout the narrative in pseudohistory, these are always shrouded in a blanket of myth and dishonesty. The believability of pseudohistories such as the Lost Cause demonstrates the very real threat they pose to civil and political society. This dissertation will explain how the pseudohistory of the Lost Cause was created, the people and groups responsible for its proliferation, and its impact on American politics, particularly the January 6 attack.

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White supremacy is foundational to both of these insurrections. Therefore, it is crucial to define White supremacy as it will be used in this dissertation. According to Elizabeth Martinez, “White supremacy is a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of colour by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege” (Martinez no date).

## **Theoretical Approach and Methodology**

When I initially discussed my intentions for this dissertation with my colleagues, many had never heard of the Lost Cause or wondered how such a random, obscure piece of American historiography could have significant modern political consequences. However, as I watched the events of January 6, 2021, unfold, it was evident that the memory of the Civil War and the Lost Cause narrative was certainly not “a thing of the past” but rather an ingrained and present part of the national psyche. This reveals a dire truth about modern Americans – they have strikingly different ways of remembering the Civil War. This disparity has catastrophic implications. Historian David Blight wrote for the *New Yorker*:

As so many now understand [...] slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and segregation are never purely historical. They still haunt the air we breathe, or cannot breathe [...] They are a history never of being erased [...] The Lost Cause is one of the most deeply ingrained mythologies in American history.

Blight 2020

The Lost Cause was created and maintained by a commitment to a certain racist nostalgia for “the Old South” (Blight 2003, p. 4). The desire to maintain a racial hierarchy, embedded with a commitment to an old Southern way of life, was staunchly preserved and protected by generations of American families. This dissertation will situate the January 6 insurrection on the U.S. Capitol within the Confederate, White supremacist narrative of the Lost Cause. This historical, theoretical approach will allow the reader to understand the racial elements and threads of White supremacy that created the ideological environment for January 6. This means that the January 6 insurrection attempt will be investigated within the framework of America’s racially motivated collective amnesia, dating back to the Civil War. This study does not dismiss the reality that Trump’s populism and political radicalization are undoubtedly significant factors when searching for causes for January 6. It is important to note that the insurrection was not a monocausal event. Instead, it represents a complex web comprised of modern political divisions, historic pseudonarratives, rampant misinformation, and White supremacy.

The scope of this dissertation will be narrow, and the research will focus primarily on the implications of the Lost Cause and its role in the events of January 6 by highlighting the Confederate themes found at the Capitol. The theoretical approach used in this dissertation will demonstrate that Lost Cause ideology is one of many important factors that impacted the insurrection and one that has yet to be academically explored.

The methodology used in this study consisted of consulting primary and secondary literature which detailed the creation and propagation of the Lost Cause. Once it had been established that this pseudo-narrative had played a significant role in American Civil War memory and that the proliferation of this narrative persists today, I turned my attention to the Confederate themes present on January 6. I drew racial and historical conclusions predicated on a deep-rooted lineage of White supremacy and found mobilization in the Lost Cause.

The primary sources used in this study, many written by historical White supremacist groups, highlight the beginnings of a narrative that attempted to absolve the South from any blame concerning their perpetration and protection of chattel slavery. Furthermore, this research will focus on the threads of Lost Cause ideology found in the events leading up to and on January 6, such as the Unite the Right Rally in 2017 that had direct ties to Confederate preservation. The first part of this dissertation will focus on the creation of the Lost Cause and how it was protected, upheld, and propagated in the 20th century. The latter part of this study will draw the connections between these two insurgencies and make the case that White supremacy harkening back to the Confederacy is undoubtedly an important factor to consider when investigating the causes of January 6. Many connections within the Lost Cause’s

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historical framework will likely be immediately evident because the racial dimension of this narrative is significant.

## Literature Review

The insurrection on the U.S. Capitol is a recent event; therefore, the academic literature available on it is limited. Much of the existing literature and research centre on the insurrection within populist theories of extremism. However, far less literature focuses on the racial dimension of this event and its broader historical context. This dissertation will address both the racial and historical context of this event in a way that has been neglected by academic literature. This research will address a gap within the literature, focusing on the fact that this insurrection could not have happened as it did, apart from the deep-rooted White supremacy preserved by the Lost Cause.

As previously mentioned, this study will draw from the work of historian David Blight. Professor Blight has devoted his academic career to understanding how the Civil War memory and Lost Cause narrative impact modern American life and politics. His book is one of the most comprehensive accounts of the Civil War, titled *Race and Reunion* (Blight 2003). Blight's work centres the Civil War narrative within historiography and displays how this war is remembered (Ibid.). His research highlights the importance of historiography and how the ways that history is written greatly impact future generations. Blights' research will benefit this dissertation, as his work demonstrates that the legacy of the Confederacy is alive and well in rightwing politics. David Blight has yet to discuss the January 6 insurrection within the framework of Confederate memory and the Lost Cause, and this is the gap this dissertation seeks to close.

Andrea Hawkman and Sarah Diem have demonstrated a strong link between White supremacy and the January 6th attack on the US Capitol. In their article, *The Big Lie(s): Situating the January 6 Coup Attempt Within White Supremacist Lies*, they highlight the role that racism in education and mainstream media played in the January 6 insurrection (Diem and Hawkman 2022, p. 1). Building upon the work they and others have done in linking the insurrection to White supremacy, this study posits that much of the White supremacy at the Capitol can be traced back to the Lost Cause.

Furthermore, I would like to highlight the contributions of Deon Hawkins and Sharifa Simon-Roberts in analyzing the January 6 attack through the lens of Critical Race Theory. While this dissertation will not specifically be using Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework, the contributions of this theory in understanding systemic racism, White supremacy, and White privilege in America make it almost impossible and academically irresponsible to ignore. In their article, *Privilege and the Legacy of an Insurrection: Critical Race Theory, January 6, and Preserving Black Resistance*, Hawkins and Simon-Roberts highlight the vast disparity between the ways law enforcement treated insurrectionists and the ways the Black Lives Matter protestors were treated (Hawkins and Simon-Roberts 2022, p. 1). They write, "[t]he crux of this article is simple. We argue the insurrection on January 6, 2021 was an incident steeped in privilege and white supremacy" (Ibid., p. 3). My research is congruent with this conclusion and builds on this premise by linking the White supremacy at the Capitol back to the Confederacy.

## History of The Lost Cause: States' Rights or Slavery?

Frederick Douglass, abolitionist and one of the loudest critics of the Lost Cause, said, "[t]he nation may forget it may shut its eyes to the past, and frown upon any who may do otherwise, but the colored people of this country are bound to keep the past in lively memory till justice shall be done them" (Douglass 1888 cited in missoulacurrent.com). The Lost Cause began to take shape immediately after the Civil War ended in 1865. Confederate sympathizer Edward Pollard wrote a book titled *Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* in 1866, in which he argued for a different, alternative understanding of the Civil War and wrote a glowing review of Confederate General Robert E. Lee (Maddex 1974, p. 1). After Pollard's book, the South began ramping up its propagation attempts to uphold its honour. Controversy ensued surrounding the name of the war itself. Southerners started referring to it as "The War of Secession" and later as "The War of Northern Aggression" (Foster 2018, pp. 8-12). This highlights one of the key tenets of the Lost Cause myth – that the war was over states' rights and state autonomy from the federal government, not slavery. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, the group most responsible for spreading Lost Cause mythology, produced a catechism for children in 1904. In response to this question, "What causes led to the war between the States?" the UDC wrote: "The disregard, on the part of States of the North, for the rights of the

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Southern or slave-holding States” (U.D.C Catechism 1904 cited by Stone 2020).

This was in direct contrast to speeches and documents written by Confederate leaders who did say that the war was over slavery. *The Declaration of Causes of Seceding States*, a compilation of documents issued by the Confederate States explaining their reasons for leaving the Union, makes it very clear that slavery was the primary issue. The State of Georgia wrote:

The people of Georgia [...] present to their confederates and the world the causes which have led to the separation. For the last ten years we have had numerous and serious causes of complaint against our non-slave-holding confederate States with reference to the subject of African slavery [...] The prohibition of slavery in the Territories is the cardinal principle of this organization.

Declaration of Causes 1861 cited in battlefields.org

The State of Mississippi wrote, “[o]ur position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery– the greatest material interest of the world [...] There was no choice left us but submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the Union” (Declaration of Causes 1861 cited in battlefields.org). The other Confederate states also echoed these sentiments. Furthermore, the Vice-President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, made it abundantly clear in a speech weeks before the war began that secession was about slavery:

Our new government [the Confederacy] is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the [n-word] is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition.

Stephens 1861 cited in battlefields.org

The belief that the Civil War was about states’ rights and not race-based chattel slavery was widespread in the era following the Civil War and is still believed today. A Pew Research poll in 2011 found that 48% of Americans believed that the Civil War was about states’ rights, and only 38% thought that the principal cause of the war was slavery (pewresearch.org 2011).

## History of The Lost Cause: Southern Nostalgia

The Lost Cause was also defined by a strong sense of Southern nostalgia, a romanticization of heritage and tradition, and a commitment to some ideation of the old Southern way of life. Reconstruction threatened the antebellum plantation life and the racial hierarchy ingrained in White Southerners’ psyche. David Blight writes in his book *Race and Reunion*, which is about the Lost Cause and Civil War memory, “[t]his is a story of how in American culture, romance triumphed over reality, sentimental remembrance won over ideological memory” (Blight 2001, p. 4). A commitment to a false sense of virtue, dignity, and honour in defeat became the ideals that encompassed the Lost Cause and central to this narrative of glorification and innocence was the picture of the “loyal slave” (Ibid. p. 260). According to Blight, “[i]f Lost Cause ideology gained long-term strength from its success in controlling history books, and by banishing slavery from the war’s causation, it drew its staying power from the image of the faithful slave and the overall ideology of white supremacy” (Ibid. p. 284).

This image of a devoted and grateful enslaved person was perpetuated through the minstrel shows that became increasingly popular in the South after the Civil War and into the 20th century. White men would perform in blackface, portraying a version of happy, comedic, and loyal enslaved people and the name “Jim Crow” has its roots in a minstrel character (Lu and Zhang 2021, pp. 8-9). Additionally, the well-known song “Dixie’s Land” originated in minstrel shows and was adopted as the unofficial anthem of the Confederacy (Qureshi 2018). Its lyrics tell the story of a freed Black man longing to return to the plantation (South Dakota Public Broadcasting NPR no date). Historian Ed Ayers said, “Dixie’ is born nostalgic. If you think about what the lyrics say, it’s something that’s already been lost. So it’s sort of mingled with this political longing of losing the ill-fated rebellion against the United States” (Ayers quoted by Qureshi 2018). The song became the rallying cry for the segregationist movement during Jim Crow and

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was sung by pro-segregation politicians as well as people protesting the integration of public schools (Thurber 1993, pp. 230-231). This song is still widely-known and sung in the South, and until 2016, Dixie's Land was regularly played at University of Mississippi football games (Puglise 2016).

The Lost Cause narrative made its way into the 20th century and popular culture through song, film, and literature, and thus was further ingrained in Americans' hearts, minds, and emotions. Things like *The Klansman* (a novel written in 1905 which romanticized and heroized the KKK and portrayed the freed Black people as threats to public safety) and movies such as *The Birth of a Nation* (the film adaption of *The Klansman* which, in 1915, under the Woodrow Wilson Administration, became the first movie to be screened at the White House) painted the South in a way that absolved it of blame and turned it into a relic of an "old America" (Clark 2022). The intertwining of historical pseudo-facts with deep cultural emotion makes the Lost Cause, and all pseudo-narratives that prey on nostalgia, incredibly dangerous and difficult to deconstruct. Additionally, this Southern nostalgia and its false conceptualization of American patriotism were (and still are) deeply entangled with American White Evangelicalism (Blight 2001, p. 258). This dissertation will build upon the thoroughly-researched conclusion that Southern Evangelicals were the engine that powered the Lost Cause narrative and carried this ideology into the 21st century. America is still doing the messy work of loosening the grip the Lost Cause narrative holds on national pride and memory. One of the most significant ways Lost Cause nostalgia impacts modern American life is by memorializing Confederate leaders by building statues across the South and, eventually, the rest of the nation.

## **Memorialization and Memory: Statues and Monuments**

In her famous book *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture*, Karen Cox said, "[i]t can be argued that women founded the Confederate tradition" (Cox 2019, p. 26). I previously discussed the role that the United Daughters of the Confederacy played in the proliferation of the Lost Cause, and perhaps their most significant and notable "accomplishment" was helping erect hundreds of Confederate statues across the South. The United Daughters of the Confederacy was formed after the end of the Civil War to keep the memory of the Confederacy alive. According to Caroline Janney, the UDC "directed most of their efforts toward raising funds for Confederate monuments, advancing a "correct" history of the Confederacy" (Janney 2020). Cox's book, originally published in 2003, was groundbreaking in highlighting Southern women's crucial role in propagating the Lost Cause. She argues that the UDC is to blame for the massive impact the Lost Cause narrative had on the 20th century (Cox 2019, p. 28).

Beginning shortly after the Civil War, the UDC began immortalizing Robert E Lee, Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson, and hundreds of other Confederate veterans in stone, elevating them to almost god-like status in the South and, as David Blight so accurately puts it, "forgetting while remembering" (Blight 2001, p. 271). This is where the ideological continuity between the Lost Cause and the insurrection on the US Capitol starts to become overwhelmingly evident.

President of the UDC, Rassie Hoskins White, once remarked that "hundred and hundred of [Confederate] monuments dot the entire South" (Cox 2019, p. 63). The UDC is credited with building around 450-700 Confederate monuments, markers, or buildings (Janney 2020). The UDC spared no expense when making the statues and, by today's standards, spent millions of dollars to glorify and enshrine enslavers (Cox 2019, p. 69). Their most notable monuments are the Jefferson Davis monument in Richmond, Virginia, the Robert E. Lee monument in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Stone Mountain in Georgia, the largest Confederate monument in America, carved literally into the side of a mountain and dedicated to Davis, Lee, and Stonewall Jackson (Janney 2020). Many of the memorials to the Confederacy can also be attributed to the Sons of Confederate Veterans (Stout 2021). The SCV is still active today, and at least one member of the White supremacist group was involved in the insurrection attempt on January 6 (Wilson 2021).

The South is still overrun with these symbols of White supremacy. The Southern Poverty Law Center recently reported that there are 2089 memorials to the Confederacy across the US today in the form of statues, buildings, holidays, as well as schools, parks, and roadways named after Confederates (splcenter.org 2022). Southern legislatures have passed laws making removing statues increasingly difficult, and the Washington Post reports that

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35 new Confederate monuments have been erected since 2000 (Berkowitz and Blanco 2021).

The Lost Cause was built on keeping the memory of White supremacists alive by memorializing and enshrining their legacy in stone. After watching the historic removal of a colossal statue of Robert E. Lee from downtown New Orleans, Mayor Mitch Landrieu said, “[t]hese statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for” (Landrieu 2017).

The Lost Cause was a desperate attempt to downplay some of history’s worst crimes against humanity. As evidenced at the Capitol on January 6, America still suffers from the consequences of this collective amnesia and clings to an intentional misunderstanding of its role in horrific human rights abuses. In their article situating the January 6th insurrection within lies propagated by White supremacy, Andrea Hawkman and Sarah Diem write, “the U.S. origin story is literally based on lies. Over time, individuals invest in these lies or myths rather than realities of the past” (Diem and Hawkman 2022, p. 3). Furthermore, Eddie Glaude, in his book, *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, said, “the lie is the mechanism that allows, and has always allowed, America to avoid facing the truth about its unjust treatment of black people and how it deforms the soul of the country” (Glaude 2020, pp. 8-9).

The glorification of men who fought and died to preserve institutional racial hierarchy and chattel slavery in America is one of the best examples of these lies that the American collective psyche is built upon. Therefore, when one calls out these lies and pseudohistories, many people view it as akin to attacking America itself.

## **Memorialization and Memory: The Confederate Flag**

When Richmond, Virginia, unveiled the Robert E. Lee statue in 1890, an audience of over 100,000 people stood by and cheered, waving countless Confederate flags overhead (Blight 2001, p. 267). On January 6, 2021, Confederate flags entered the US Capitol for the first time in American history (Bendix 2021). Highlighting the symbolism and significance of the Confederate flag is central to understanding the linkages between the Lost Cause and the January 6 insurrection attempt. The Confederate flag, also known as the “Southern Cross,” symbolizes White supremacy and racism and has a long and tumultuous history in America. The Confederate flag that people recognize today, although never the official battle flag of the Confederacy, was developed in the 1860s and became an incredibly popular symbol of Confederate patriotism (Blakemore 2021). After the Civil War and during Reconstruction, it came to represent resistance to racial equality and an enduring commitment to preserving the legacy of racism. In 1894, Mississippi adopted the Confederate flag as its official state flag (Marshall 2020).

In the 20th century, the Confederate flag was popularized even more by the Ku Klux Klan and the Dixiecrats’ (a political party whose platform protected racial segregation) use of the flag as their official party symbol (Blakemore 2021). In 1956, the State of Georgia adopted the Confederate symbol as their state flag (Jackson 2020). The Confederate flag was not only a homage to the Confederate states or a false understanding of Southern heritage. Instead, the flag was deliberately emblematic of hatred, racism and rebellion in the 20th century (Coski 1996). This legacy persists today, and the Confederate flag is not an uncommon symbol to see when driving through former-Confederate states or rural areas of the rest of the country. In 2001, Georgia replaced their state flag with one that did not have the Confederate symbol (Jackson 2020). The same year, Mississippi took to the ballot box to vote on changing its Confederate state flag, but the measure overwhelmingly failed and almost entirely along race lines (Pittman 2020). It took Mississippi until 2015 to change its Confederate state flag, and even that change was met with anger by many White Mississippians who viewed it as erasing their heritage (Ibid.). Historian Gordon Rhea said:

It is no accident that Confederate symbols have been the mainstay of white supremacist organizations [...] They picked it because it was the flag of a nation dedicated to their ideals: ‘that the [n-word] is not equal to the white man’. The Confederate flag, we are told, represents heritage, not hate. But why should we celebrate a heritage grounded in hate, a heritage whose self-avowed reason for existence was the exploitation and debasement of a sizeable segment of its population?

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Rhea 2011

Furthermore, other attempts at preserving Confederate ideology and culture persist strongly in the South today. There are still nine US military bases named after Confederate generals, one of which is Fort Bragg, the largest US military base (Mitchell 2022). Confederate Memorial Day is an official and celebrated state holiday in Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina, and in 2021, Mississippi declared the month of April to be Confederate Heritage Month (Strowzewski 2022). This demonstrates the tight grip that Confederate memory and ideology still have on the Southern United States. In concluding this chapter, it is essential to recognize that “American patriotism” and “American pride” have long been veils and smokescreens for rampant racism, hatred and bigotry. America’s history and heritage are deeply intertwined with its responsibility for perpetuating horrific crimes against humanity. Unfortunately, many Americans want to gloss over this fact and assume they solved the problem of racism with the creation of the 13th Amendment and the illegalization of slavery. The refusal of the United States to make actual amends for the brutal realities of its past helped create a hostile political and social environment for events like January 6 to occur. In short, the US still suffers greatly from the collective amnesia of the Lost Cause. This was evident in the South’s desperate attempts to preserve the legacy of the Confederacy throughout the 20th century, and it was evident on January 6 and the events that led up to that day.

## Analysis

The research and analysis in this chapter will demonstrate how the legacy of the Confederacy heavily influenced the events of January 6. The Lost Cause narrative has been referred to as the “foundational ethos of racism” in America, and the analysis in this section will demonstrate that much of the White supremacy found within the rightwing extremism at the Capitol can be traced back to the Confederacy (Truscott 2021). The legacy of the Confederacy is relatively straightforward: preserving a racial hierarchy in America by conflating American patriotism with White supremacy. This ideology can be seen in the icons and symbols found at the Capitol as well as in the language, discourse, and beliefs espoused by the people involved. The presence of Confederate ideology was overwhelmingly evident on January 6. This analysis will specifically highlight the Confederate symbols found at the Capitol, the White supremacist groups, and other actors that displayed neo-Confederate doctrine.

Furthermore, through this analysis, the research will demonstrate that Confederate ideology is evident even in the less overt elements of the insurrection, such as the themes of rebellion espoused by far-right rioters and the legacy of the White insurgent mob. Additionally, Lost Cause ideology is not resigned to far-right extremist groups. The age of Trump ushered in a “New Lost Cause,” emboldening the right and shedding light on the fact that the glorification of the Confederacy is not a fringe, radical concept after all — it is the continuation of generations of White supremacist ideology that disguised itself as American patriotism (Blight and Stanton 2021). It is mainstream, normalized through decades of collective, intentional forgetfulness and the perpetuation of pseudohistory. The vast disparity in the ways the Civil War is remembered in the national psyche has greatly contributed to the civil and political unrest in America, and it is within this context that this dissertation will analyze the events of January 6, 2021.

### *January 6, 2021, and the Events That Led to It*

In beginning this analysis, it is crucial to precisely lay out what occurred up to and on January 6, 2021. The threads of racial violence leading to the insurrection can be seen throughout American history. This section will begin by briefly examining the immediate racial tensions leading to the insurrection and then thoroughly analyze the events of January 6 itself.

To situate the insurrection within a contemporary racial context, examining the tumultuous summer that directly preceded the insurrection attempt is helpful. The rightwing backlash to Black Lives Matter protests resulting from the murder of George Floyd was rampant in the summer of 2020. President Trump called the Black Lives Matter slogan a “symbol of hate” and even attempted to deploy the US military on BLM protesters in a public park in DC through the Insurrection Act of 1807 (Cohen 2020; Haberman and Schmidt 2021). The Southern Poverty Law Center reported a bomb threat and an assassination threat toward a public official in Birmingham, Alabama, over plans to remove Confederate statues in response to the killing of George Floyd (Graves 2020). “The incident demonstrates



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how far some proponents of the Lost Cause narrative are willing to go to keep symbols of white supremacy in place” (Ibid.). Throughout the tumultuous summer, Black Lives Matter protestors were consistently met with White supremacist counter-protestors. This tension between anti-racist efforts and the legacy of White supremacy in American society aided in constructing the volatile landscape for January 6 to occur.

Racial tension and pseudo-narratives leading to the events of January 6 are especially evident a month before the insurrection on December 12, 2020. After election day on November 5, 2020, which had been preceded by a highly contentious election period, President Trump actively began spreading misinformation about rampant election fraud, coining the term “Stop the Steal” and, at one point, even attempting to use the US military to seize voting machines (Select Committee to Investigate January 6, Congressional Hearing #7, 2022). His rhetoric angered and emboldened his supporters, who held “Stop the Steal” protests in DC. During these rallies, the White supremacist group, Proud Boys (whose significant role on January 6 will be examined in the next section), stole two Black Lives Matter flags from a historic Black church and set one of the flags on fire (splc.org 2021). This act of racially-motivated violence demonstrates the interrelation between the events surrounding the insurrection regarding Trump’s violent rhetoric and stolen election narrative and America’s history of White supremacy.

On January 6, Trump’s supporters took to the Capitol in a desperate last attempt to halt the peaceful transfer of power by stopping the certification of the electoral votes in Congress (Select Committee to Investigate January 6, Congressional Hearing #7, 2022). Pictures and videos circulated of makeshift gallows outside the US Capitol, and the world watched in horror as the violent coup scaled the walls of the Capitol, searching for Vice President Pence and calling for him to be hanged. According to the Congressional Committee investigating January 6, when Trump heard that his supporters were calling for Vice President Pence to be hanged, he said, “maybe he deserves it” (Select Committee to Investigate January 6, Congressional Hearing #1, 2022). The insurgents gained access to the inside of the Capitol building and entered the Senate Chamber and the offices of several high-ranking members of Congress, such as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Footage of the day shows members of Congress hiding beneath their chairs and being given gas masks (Select Committee to Investigate January 6, Congressional Hearing #8, 2022). As the violence escalated, a woman was killed in a clash with Capitol Police as she and other insurrectionists forcibly attempted to enter the House Chamber, which was still occupied by members of Congress (Dewan and Goldman 2021). In the days and weeks following the attack, five Capitol Police officers died in connection with the events that day (Cameron 2022). January 6 represents one of the darkest days in American history. Many of us remember where we were as we watched this symbol of democracy — the United States Capitol — be desecrated and sieged.

One of the most sobering elements revealed in pictures that day was the Confederate flags that littered the building and surrounding area. This prompted historians to note that never before in American history, not even during the Civil War, had the Confederate flag been allowed to enter the Capitol building, and the significance of this harrowing reality will be further analyzed in the following section (Cramer 2021).

## *The Actors Involved and Ties to Confederate and Lost Cause Ideology*

While the event was attended by many people who belonged to specific White nationalist groups, it is important to note that many people who espouse this neo-Confederate ideology do not belong to one particular hate group. The Anti-Defamation League wrote in a 2015 report about the state of White supremacy in America saying, “[m]ost white supremacists do not belong to organized hate groups, but rather participate in the white supremacist movement as unaffiliated individuals. Thus the size of the white supremacist movement is considerably greater than just the members of hate groups” (adl.org 2015, p. 3). David Blight wrote in an article titled, *Republicans: The New Confederacy*, “[t]oday’s Republican Party is best understood as a modern version of the Confederacy. They are secessionists without taking the revolutionary step of seceding” (Blight 2020). This section will demonstrate that this statement is true. To espouse Confederate ideology is to espouse White supremacy. Not everyone at the Capitol on January 6 had direct ties to neo-Confederate organizations. Confederate ideology is still prolific in American society and certainly not resigned only to alt-right domestic terror groups. Therefore, present at the Capitol were both neo-Confederate groups as well as people representing the mainstream political (and religious) right. This section will highlight the actors involved in the insurrection attempt and examine their ties to Confederate ideology, thus situating

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the insurrection within the historical context of the Lost Cause.

Central to the planning and execution of January 6 was the White supremacist group, the Proud Boys. The Proud Boys were mentioned in the previous section as they were the groups who stole and burned a BLM flag at a “Stop the Steal” rally the month before January 6 (splc.org 2021). Additionally, the Proud Boys and their ties to Confederate White supremacy cannot be fully understood without highlighting the events at the deadly Unite the Right Rally in 2017. The summer of 2017 was incredibly tumultuous in Charlottesville, Virginia and included a public Ku Klux Klan rally and other overt displays of hate speech, bigotry, and racism (Ellis 2017). Much of the conflict and unrest centred on plans from the city government to remove two Confederate statues; one of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson (Li 2021). Organized by the Proud Boys, Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the League of the South (a neo-Confederate group), Identity Dixie (a neo-Confederate group), and other hate groups, the Unite the Right Rally began on August 11, 2017, to protest the removal of Confederate statues and ended the following day (splc.org 2017; splc.org 2019). Confederate flags, neo-Nazi paraphernalia, and Trump/Pence signs littered the area as the hate groups clashed with anti-racist counterprotesters (Besley and Peters 2017). The New York Times reported, “[t]he city of Charlottesville was engulfed by violence on Saturday as white nationalists and counterprotesters clashed in one of the bloodiest fights to date over the removal of Confederate monuments across the South” (Rosenthal and Stolberg 2017).

The rally’s purpose — to preserve the legacy of men who fought for slavery — cannot be understated. White nationalism fuelled the Confederacy, and its legacy continues to proliferate in American society through the increasing radicalization of the far-right. In response to the violent rally, President Trump said there were “very fine people, on both sides” (Klein 2018). Furthermore, when asked by Joe Biden during the 2020 presidential debates to denounce the Proud Boys, President Trump said, “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by, but I’ll tell you what, somebody’s got to do something about Antifa and the left” (Collins and Zadrozny 2020). To the Proud Boys, this was seen as a statement of endorsement and validity, and they responded on social media with “Standing down and standing by sir” (Ibid.). The increasing radicalization of the Republican party and the refusal of this Republican president to denounce neo-Confederates highlights the importance of this historical framework for understanding the January 6 insurrection. New York Times opinion writer, Eric Foner, captured this reality perfectly when he said, “President Trump’s Thursday morning tweet lamenting that the removal of Confederate statues tears apart “the history and culture of our great country” raises numerous questions, among them: Who is encompassed in that “our”?” (Foner 2017)

The Proud Boys’ involvement on January 6 was overwhelming. Of the 800 people currently charged in connection with January 6, 40 of them have ties to the Proud Boy (Al Jazeera Staff 2022). Proud Boys leaders, Enrique Tarrio and Joe Biggs, along with other group leaders, have been charged with seditious conspiracy (Reilly 2022). This is the most serious charge being applied to those involved with January 6 and involves conspiring to overthrow or forcibly destroy the US government and carries a sentence of up to 20 years in prison (18 U.S. Code § 2384, law.cornell.edu, 2022; Tangalakis-Lippert 2022). “The indictment alleges that Tarrio was aware of discussions around a plan to storm the Capitol on January 6, and was involved in discussions about occupying buildings, including Capitol complex buildings” (Reilly 2022). In short, the US Department of Justice views the Proud Boys as having been integral to the planning of the insurrection. Interestingly, this particular charge, “seditious conspiracy,” has its roots in the Civil War and was created to be applied to those attempting to secede from the Union and has only been used a handful of times since then (Lucas 2022). The Proud Boys’ links to White supremacy and neo-Confederate ideology highlight the importance of understanding the January 6th event within the Lost Cause historical framework.

Another prominent actor involved in the insurrection is the White nationalist group, the Oath Keepers. Stewart Rhodes, who founded the far-right militia group, believed America was descending into civil war and wrote online, “[o]ur would-be slave masters [referring to the US government] are greatly underestimating the resolve and military capability of the people” (Giglio 2020). The Oathkeepers attended and patrolled the Unite the Right rally, which, as previously mentioned, was a violent White supremacist event to protest the removal of Confederate monuments (splc.org 2022). The Oathkeepers were instrumental in the planning and execution of January 6. In two open letters to President Trump, influenced by the election fraud narrative, they wrote, “millions of American military and law

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enforcement veterans, and many millions more loyal patriotic American gun owners stand ready to answer your call to arms, and to obey your orders to get this done” (Reilly 2022). And in a second letter said, “tens of thousands of patriotic Americans [...] will already be in Washington D.C. [...] and we will answer the call right then and there, if you call on us” (Ibid.).

The Oathkeepers brought explosives to the Capitol, spent more than 20,000 USD on guns, and carried a “death list” with the names of elected officials (Morgan 2022; Olmos 2022). As reported by the Guardian, they “marched in formation wearing tactical gear including protective vests, helmets and eye goggles as they carried radios, chemical sprays and hard-knuckle gloves [...] Jessica Watkins texted in one of the Oath Keepers group chats: “We are in the main dome right now... They are throwing grenades, they are freaking shooting people with paint balls.” [...] Another member replied with enthusiastic expletives that this is what they “trained for”” (Olmos 2022).

Unsurprisingly, many members of the Oathkeepers, like the Proud Boys, are facing the very serious Civil War-era charge of seditious conspiracy (Lucas 2022). It is crucial to this study to highlight the heavy involvement of the Oathkeepers and Proud Boys in orchestrating and executing the insurrection on the US Capitol and their blatant ties to White supremacy and neo-Confederacy.

The Oathkeepers were aided by the smaller rightwing group (and designated an “extremist militia” by the FBI), the Texas Freedom Force, who espoused overt neo-Confederate ideology (Flahive 2021). Blatantly defending the Confederacy, the mission of the Texas Freedom Force is almost entirely centred on Lost Cause ideology and their website states:

We are committed to protecting and preserving Texas History [...] Whether it be standing firm with Texas Monuments, honoring and maintaining our Texas history [...] Texas’s historical monuments belong to all Texans and are not to be torn down or vandalized by rampaging mobs and power hungry bureaucrats. Texans must demand that our elected officials protect our monuments. To that, This Is Texas Freedom Force educates and mobilizes Texans to both protect Texas monuments and pressure public officials to protect our historical monuments from leftist criminals and vandals who seek to erase our Texas history.

texasfreedomforce.org 2021

Additionally, journalist Gus Bova wrote an article with the title question, “Who’s Defending Texas’ Confederate Monuments” and the answer being — “the Texas Freedom Force” (Bova 2017). He describes them as favouring “the Dixie flag and revisionist histories of the Civil War” (Ibid.). Photos of any one of their protests or events will depict an endless sea of Confederate flags. The Texas Freedom Force has guarded a Proud Boys rally, counter-protested at Black Lives Matter events, and consistently showed up to protect Confederate memorials (Bova 2017; Flahive 2021). Gus Bova writes, “The group gravitates toward the “Lost Cause” theory of the Confederacy, which erroneously holds that slavery was a minor factor in the Civil War” (Bova 2017). Guy Refitt, from the Texas Freedom Force and notorious for carrying a gun to the Capitol on January 6 and threatening to injure House Speaker Nancy Pelosi brutally, received the harshest sentence yet given to a January 6 insurrectionist (Kwong 2022). On August 1, 2022, Refitt was sentenced to more than seven years in prison for his role in attempting to obstruct and overthrow the US government (Montague 2022). According to the New York Times, even at his sentencing Refitt still considered himself and the other insurrectionists as patriots (Ibid.).

Lindsay Schuber, a researcher on White nationalism from the Western States Center, described how militia-type groups would often draw from regional historical symbolism (Walsh 2021). She said, “It’s not surprising that a paramilitary group in Texas would rely on neo-Confederate symbols [...] We’ve seen modern-day white nationalists and far-right adherents use ‘Lost Cause’ symbolism and Confederate symbols, and Confederate monuments to ground their racist and antidemocratic activities in a whitewashed version of American history” (Ibid.).

The Texas Freedom Force, the Oathkeepers and the Proud Boys all had overt connections to White supremacy and neo-Confederate ideology. As demonstrated, these groups have a history of violently protecting Confederate monuments and Lost Cause history. These groups were certainly not the only ones present on January 6 who held to

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Confederate ideology, and there were countless others, not part of organized groups, who paraded Confederate themes and paraphernalia at the Capitol. It is important to highlight the increasing radicalization of the mainstream right. This is demonstrated by a poll conducted in July 2022 showing that 61% of Republicans support the January 6th insurrection (Monmouth University 2022). Many Confederate themes at the Capitol were not paraded by Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, or other organized extremists but by people within the mainstream Republican party. Republican Congressman Josh Hawley is one of the people investigated by the January 6th Congressional Committee for his role in riling up the crowd of insurgents and raising his fist in solidarity with them (Richards 2022). Hawley has also vocally and legislatively opposed Congress' efforts to rename Confederate military bases calling it an attack on "our cultural institutions" (Hawley 2020). Additionally, Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, who was investigated for her role in the January 6th attack, also espouses Lost Cause ideology, saying she thinks Black people ought to feel "proud" when they look at Confederate monuments (Weisman and Vigdor 2022; Cohen 2020).

A Google search of photos from January 6 will show countless Confederate flags, hats and helmets displaying the Southern Cross symbol, as well as other historical White supremacist imagery. The lawn in front of the Capitol Building was a sea of Confederate paraphernalia. One particular image widely circulated on the internet and came to represent the racial dimension of the horrors of that day. This viral photo depicts a man, Kevin Seefreid, proudly holding a large Confederate flag inside the US Capitol in front of a picture of abolitionist Charles Sumner. As previously mentioned, this image marked the first time in American history that the Confederate flag had entered the US Capitol Building (Cramer 2021). Seefreid and his adult son encountered Capitol Police Officer Eugene Goodman, a Black man, and cursed at him while jabbing him three or four times with the Confederate flag he held (Kunzelman 2022). Harry Dunn, another Black Capitol Police officer, described to the New York Times the horrific racism he encountered at the hands of the insurrectionists that day, "They're saying, "Trump is our rightful president. Nobody voted for Joe Biden." [...] So I said, "I voted for Joe Biden" A woman responded, "This [n-word] voted for Joe Biden!" Everybody that was there started joining in. "Hey, [n.word]!" It was over 20 people who said it" (Broadwater 2021). Officer Dunn also described being told, "Put your gun down, and we'll show you what kind of [N-word] you really are!" (Wright 2022)

The insurrection attempt on the US Capitol must be understood within the racial context of the Confederacy. Ignoring this dimension is ignorant of what kind of America these insurrectionists fought for. The Confederate flag has been used as a symbol of hateful and violent resistance to racial progress for generations. This flag represents the fight to preserve slavery, the campaign against Reconstruction, the battle for Jim Crow segregation, and the fight for a White America. Gaines Foster says, "For traditional supporters of a white America, the Confederate flag has become a symbol of their defiance and their vision of not the Civil War, but of America" (Foster cited by Anderson 2021). Thus, to examine the January 6th insurrection apart from the racial dimension is to not understand the event at all.

The so-called patriots at the Capitol insurrection believed they were the true Americans working in a last-ditch effort to save the nation. The irony of the White insurgent legacy, as described by Meredith Warden, is that they often don't view themselves as criminals but rather as operating as an extension of the law (Warden n.d.). Warden describes how the lynching mobs of the Jim Crow era believed they were upholding the law and did not feel the need to be discreet about their violent actions (Ibid.). "Members of white mobs do not have to mask their faces" because "being part of a white mob has rarely been a crime" even if lynching someone — or breaking into the U.S. Capitol — was technically illegal" (Warden n.d. quoting Mogelson 2021).

A counter-argument to the premise of this study could be raised that since many of these White supremacist groups did not originate or have genealogical ties to the South (for example, Enrique Tarrío, leader of the Proud Boys, is Cuban-American), therefore they cannot have explicitly Confederate connections (Varela 2022). However, in reality, this argument only seeks to strengthen the Lost Cause framework of this dissertation because it demonstrates that Confederate and Lost Cause ideology is much more widespread in 2022 than can be confined geographically to the former Confederate States. One does not have to be physically and genealogically from the South to have been influenced by the ideology and lineage of the Confederacy. This is further evidenced by the fact that many extremist groups at the Capitol also espouse Nazi ideology, even though they most likely do not have genealogical ties to the Third Reich. Rather, they identify and resonate with the White supremacist message of Nazism. Thus, while the South may still be the hotspot and origin place for Confederate ideology, its reach is significant, catastrophic, and

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certainly not confined to the former Confederate States.

Furthermore, children, especially in the South, are still taught elements of the Lost Cause (commonly referred to in this context as 'revisionist history') in public schools. A 2017 article regarding history books in Texas public schools described how in 2010, the school system implemented more conservative perspectives of the Civil War, such as dismissing and downplaying the violence of chattel slavery and describing Confederate General Stonewall Jackson as an effective leader (Batlanki 2017; Associated Press eu.jacksonville.com 2017). Because it is still not uncommon for children in the South to be taught revisionist history, it is no surprise that Lost Cause mythology has geographically proliferated in the seismic way it has.

Ben Jealous, president of the thinktank People for the American Way, said:

The people spreading lies about the Capitol insurrection are the spiritual heirs to the Daughters of the Confederacy. They are the ideological descendants of those who spent decades lying to the American public about slavery and the Civil War [...] Republicans who deny or downplay the insurrectionists' attempt to overturn the presidential election are creating their own Lost Cause ideology.

Jealous 2021

The Lost Cause was marked by a commitment to an old America built on racial hierarchy, and this nostalgia (a smokescreen for White supremacy) was a driving factor for the violence of January 6. The historical framework used in this study shows how the attack on US democracy is built on racist historiography that never died and continues to influence American politics and culture. This study has demonstrated that the consequences of selective historical forgetfulness are one of the greatest causes of conflict and unrest in American society. The vastly different ways America remembers its bloodiest war have resulted in a century and a half of racial hostilities and an ever-polarising political climate.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research**

The generational racism of the Confederacy still violently haunts the American political landscape, and future research regarding the January 6th attack and its relation to the Confederacy ought to address the ways that the far-right and the Lost Cause revisionist history movements are viciously attacking Critical Race Theory. Charles Blow, a New York Times opinion writer, called this current phenomenon a "Lost Cause redux" and said, "it is apparently part of a Republican political strategy to make race — or more precisely, the denial of American racism — a central (and winning) political issue for Republicans" (Blow 2021). The hysteria over CRT theoretically being taught in American public schools has links to the legacy of the Lost Cause. Because CRT critiques systemic inequalities in the American legal system, many Republicans view it as an erasure of history. Critical Race Theory critiques commonly accepted ideas of American history (which, as this study demonstrated, is often emotionally interlaced with a problematic understanding of American patriotism and nostalgia) and thus obviously threatens White comfort in ignoring racial disparities. Further research on the legacy of the Lost Cause in modern American politics ought to analyze the current frenzy over Critical Race Theory.

Additionally, this dissertation has briefly mentioned the relationship between Confederate ideology and American White Evangelicalism; however, much more could be said on this topic. In his book, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause*, Charles Reagan Wilson writes, "The religious culture in Dixie, including the confederate memory, promoted the self-image of virtue and holiness and thus helped maintain the cohesiveness of Southern society in a critical post-war period [...] Southern ministers tied the Lost Cause religion to the religion of the Southern churches — evangelical Christianity" (Wilson 1980, pp. 15-16). The crowd on January 6 was blanketed in Judeo-Christian paraphernalia. Thus, future research regarding January 6 and the Confederacy could benefit from utilizing religious framework by highlighting White Evangelicalism's prevalence at the Capitol and its ties to Lost Cause ideology.

This study has demonstrated that the Lost Cause has devastating and violent implications. Civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois said, "How the facts of American history have in the last half-century been falsified because the nation was

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ashamed" (Du Bois 1935, p. 635). January 6 could not have happened the way it did apart from a blatant, generational, and deep-rooted belief in White supremacy and the values the Confederate States of America fought for. The trajectory of the Republican party is deeply concerning, and events like January 6 may happen again if Confederate memorialization and Lost Cause narrative continue to proliferate, kept alive through generational racism, collective learned amnesia, and the glorification of a lineage built on the insurgency.

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