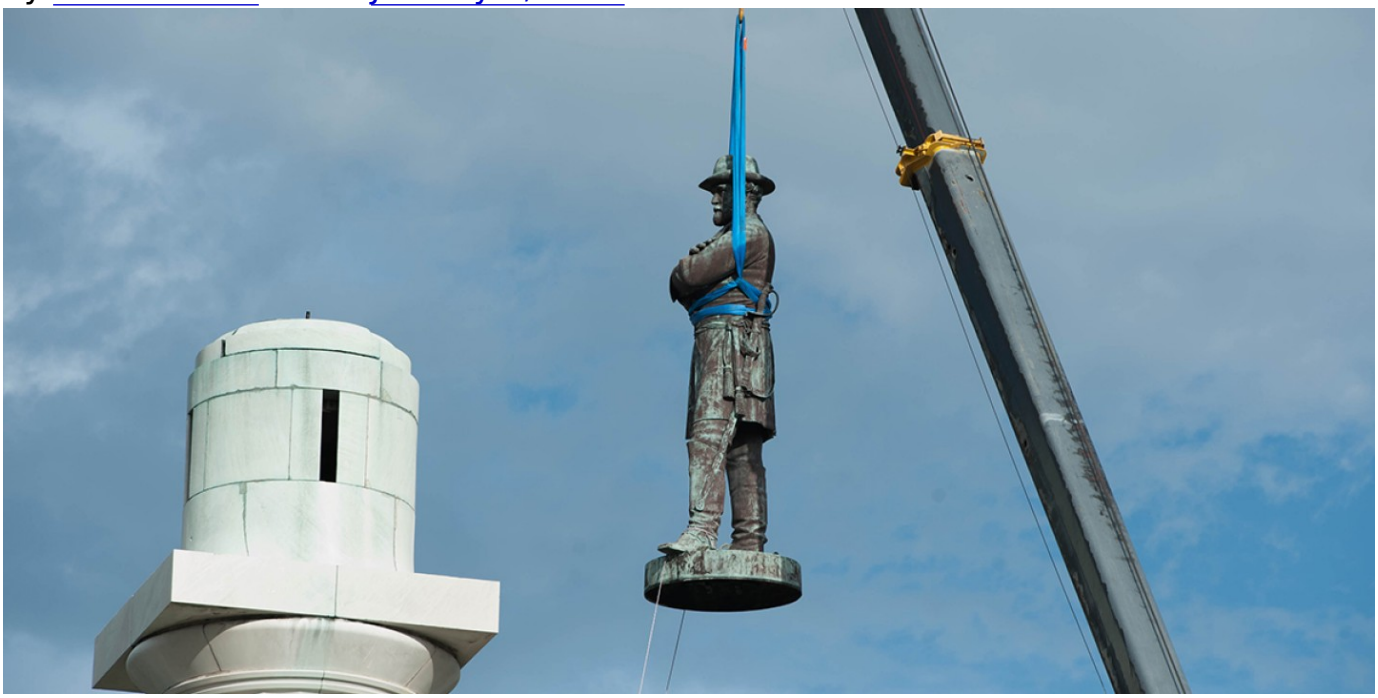
The Sons of Confederate Veterans want their due

They’re wrong.

by Pete Candler in the January 1, 2020 issue



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Don’t look away: this is about as beautiful as America looks from the interstate. Don’t look away, because the sight won’t last long.

Just past the Dysartsville Road overpass at Exit 94 on westbound Interstate 40 near Morganton, North Carolina, the Blue Ridge Mountains arise quickly—a massive hulking wall of tree-tufted granite, sedimentary limestone, and volcanic rock. The range ambles north like the shadow trail of some hunch-backed giant. If you stare at it the way you want to, you risk veering off the winding road and ending up in the eastbound lane. From the crest of the hill, you get a sense of the size of these mountains—the tallest ones east of the Rockies, a majestic and ancient ecosystem of extraordinary biodiversity. You can get lost in the spectacle—so long as you are not distracted by the gigantic 20-foot-by-30-foot Confederate flag.

The flag is a new feature of the landscape. It was put up a few years ago at a time when a lot of Confederate flags started flying. In the summer of 2016, at a QuikTrip in north Georgia, I saw some men in a beat-up Datsun truck circle the parking lot, an oversized rebel flag jury-rigged to a length of wind-bowed PVC pipe affixed to the trailer hitch. The flag puffed out like a mainsail and seemed destined to take control of the direction of the craft. This makeshift mast did not look like it would stay up for long, the laws of aerodynamics being what they are, but it held up long enough to make its presence known.

Confederate flags seemed to crop up everywhere that summer and fall, a year before Charlottesville. Now there are at least three gigantic Confederate flags alongside I-40 and US 321 between Asheville and Charlotte. They are the work of the North Carolina Sons of Confederate Veterans, who have vowed to put up a Confederate “mega-flag” along a very visible roadside in retaliation for each removal of a Confederate monument

Once a relatively subdued historical preservation society, the Sons of Confederate Veterans have become a full-scale combatant in the culture wars, waging tactical strikes against perceived “heritage violations” across the Southeast.

Established in 1896, the SCV is ostensibly committed to preserving the memory of Confederate soldiers and their sacrifices. Today the organization is dedicated not to preserving history but to defending it. Behind the counteroffensive is the belief that—despite having been the dominant theme in southern life for a century and a half—their version of history is not being given its due.

The SCV treats history much the way it is handled at a Medieval Times dinner theater or Renaissance fair—historical accuracy is a secondary matter at best, lacking even the attention to minutiae displayed by Civil War reenactors. The organization is divided into military-style “armies,” with “heritage chairmen” in 23 states. It is animated by this principle: “The citizen-soldiers who fought for the Confederacy personified the best qualities of America. The preservation of liberty and freedom was the motivating factor in the South’s decision to fight the Second American Revolution.”

You won’t find many historians who could read those two sentences with a straight face. But the identification of the Confederate war effort with the American Revolution was not an uncommon sentiment among southern soldiers—at least until

the conscription act in 1862—and it remains a staple belief among Lost Cause sympathizers.

The SCV is out to show that the Lost Cause isn't just for old-timers. The group runs a summer camp at which children can take such courses as Biographical Information on Historical Figures Rarely Taught in Public Schools, Free Markets vs. Marxism, and God's Plan of Salvation. The camp, held annually at Sam Davis Christian Youth Camp sites in Texas and South Carolina, was established to address what it calls "the need to restore America's morals and her history." A video on the camp's website features scenes of merrymaking set to music and a gratuitous deployment of gunpowder:

> We learned to fire the cannons at the heathen Yankee horde.
> We learned of ol' Sam Davis, and we never did get bored.
> We learned how to cast bullets and we learned the Rebel Yell.
> Our honored flag flies high and proud, we'll never let it fail.
> All around us is such a sight to see,
> We're here at the Sam Davis Camp to learn our history.

The SCV version of history is decidedly one-sided, and even the side they tell is filled with untruths and a distinctive alliance of organizational purpose with divine mission. The choice of Confederate soldier Sam Davis as a Lost Cause hero is apt. Hung for espionage by Union troops in 1863, his death was later likened to Christ's crucifixion.

One of the camp's big boosters, and the brains behind the assault on "heritage violations," is Kirk Lyons, a Texas-born lawyer who lives in Black Mountain, North Carolina. He built his career defending white supremacists, including Louis Beam, a former Grand Dragon of the Texas Knights of the Ku Klux Klan indicted in 1987 for conspiracy to overthrow the government. In 1996 Lyons and his brother-in-law, Neill Payne, started the Southern Legal Resource Center in Black Mountain, a legal defense agency born out of the belief that "there is no more persecuted or marginalized group than southern Americans."

Lyons is a veteran at appropriating culturally trending terms for his "counteroffensive to preserve Southern Heritage." In 1996, during ethnic cleansing in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lyons began complaining about the "ethnic cleansing of Dixie." During the Obama presidency, he lobbied to allow his fellow

Confederate sympathizers to identify themselves as “Confed Southern Am” on US Census forms. He has poached the language and imagery of the civil rights movement and repurposed it for his pro-white crusade: after two plaques containing Confederate symbols were removed from the Texas state house in Austin in 2000, he said, “They’re going to get the Confederacy in their face. We’re not going to take the back seat of the bus anymore.” The title of the SLRC is a deliberate mimicry of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups and threats to civil liberties. The SPLC has repaid Lyons for the flattering imitation by giving him his own page on a section of its website dedicated to tracking extremists.

The SCV insists that racism is not a part of its platform, and its members often exploit the myth of voluntary black Confederate soldiers to bolster the Lost Cause claim that the war wasn’t really about slavery. The group claims that Confederates were fighting for a form of society that blacks were prepared to die for as much as their white masters. But there is no evidence that any enslaved person ever willingly fought for the Confederate cause, and even the SCV admits that the admission of blacks to the SCV is largely pragmatic. In 2002, Ben C. Sewell III, then commander in chief of the Sons, said that “the fact that we have minorities and welcome them deflects some of the criticism we seem to get, primarily because of the battle flag.”

There is at least one black neo-Confederate who is quite willing to serve as proof of the SVC’s professed nonracial position. H. K. Edgerton ran two unsuccessful campaigns for mayor of Asheville and as president of the local chapter of the NAACP was viewed as a radical who campaigned for better opportunities for African Americans and poor whites, protesting racist policies in local government. But then he met Kirk Lyons. Within two years, Edgerton was lugging a rebel flag on a 1,500-mile walk from Asheville to Austin to raise money for the Sons of Confederate Veterans. The SVC cannot accept him as a member but is apparently perfectly willing to accept his voluntary labor.

Edgerton is nobody’s stooge. He signs his frequent letters to local papers with a list of his neo-Confederate bona fides: “Chairman, Board of Advisors Emeritus, Southern Legal Resource Center; Member, Save Southern Heritage Florida; Recipient, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis Medal; Honorary Life Member, Judah P. Benjamin Sons of Confederate Veterans Camp 2210; Honorary Life Member, Augusta Jane Evans Chapter, United Daughters of the Confederacy; Honorary Life Member, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia Orders of the Confederate Rose; President, Southern Heritage 411.” Edgerton is the anti-Marx: whereas Groucho

famously protested that he didn't want to belong to any group that would have him as a member, Edgerton is an honorary member of three groups that won't admit him. He's more than happy to appear at SCV events to defend the SCV's vision of "the Southland," but he cannot be a member of the SCV, since he can claim no Confederate ancestry. Edgerton's frequent appearances at SCV events are a bizarre but classically American spectacle: a white group that is never interested in what a black man has to say until he says something just white enough to be listened to.

But no one is forcing the trophy role on Edgerton. He makes his own pilgrimages, in full Confederate uniform, to the Vance Memorial in downtown Asheville, a 75-foot-tall obelisk honoring Confederate officer and North Carolina governor Zebulon Vance. He will tell anyone with ears to hear about how the Confederate flag represents the cross of Jesus Christ, and how the Illuminati conspiracy runs the World Bank. Apparently you don't have to be white to believe white bullshit.

The whiteness of the bait-and-switch gesture is clear: blacks talk about reparations, so why can't whites talk about reparations for the property stolen from southerners by the federal government? Black people are oppressed? What about the oppression of white people? In the logic of contemporary right-wing suffering, the oppression of nonwhite people will always be relativized and subordinated to the ever-greater oppression of whites. And in suffering the whites will always win, because—in the words of the motto of the Confederate States of America and, ipso facto, of the SCV—*Deo vindice*, "God is our vindicator."

As eye-catching as Lost Cause mouthpieces like Kirk Lyons and H. K. Edgerton may be, they are too-easy targets for those who remain vexed by the enduring forces of white supremacy. They are useful means of redirecting attention away from the exponentially larger and more influential mass of white Americans who may not buy H. K. Edgerton's T-shirts or seek Kirk Lyons's legal counsel or erect a massive Confederate mega-flag on their bit of interstate frontage but who tacitly benefit from such individuals for making their own brand of white resentment seem a little less nutty. Lyons and Edgerton may represent the Westboro Baptist Church of the Lost Cause, but their narrative remains a powerful force in white America. Call it the "yes, but" school of popular history.

This past summer, when the *New York Times* published its landmark 1619 Project special issue on the 400th anniversary of the introduction of chattel slavery into the colonies, many conservatives reacted with a collective "yes, but." A response by

Rich Lowry, editor in chief of *National Review*, purported to offer “Five Things They Don’t Tell You about Slavery.” Lots of people had slaves, he argued, not just Americans; Africans enslaved their own people and sold them to Americans to enrich themselves; Christians learned racism from Muslims; and yeah, American slavery was bad, but what about slavery in Brazil?

There is often some historical truth buried deep beneath such self-serving sound bites, but there is also a lot of untruth. Lowry writes that “the United States ended slavery too late (again, Britain is a better model). But let’s not forget how long the slave trade, ended in 1808 in the United States, lasted elsewhere.” It is true that the transatlantic slave trade was officially abolished by the US government in 1808. But the domestic trade remained legal until the 1860s—a fact that does not serve the “yes, but” stance of contemporary conservatives.

In an appearance on a prominent lifestyle network masquerading as an organ of journalism, Newt Gingrich said that “if you’re an African American, slavery is at the center of what you see as the American experience. But for most Americans most of the time, there were a lot of other things going on.” This might be a jarring remark, were it not simply one more instance of what James Baldwin called “a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications, which system is about to destroy [white men’s] grasp of reality, which is another way of saying their moral sense.”

The 1619 Project simply asks that we look closely at the underside of the American experiment, consider what the myths of American innocence and original righteousness cost African Americans, and ask what price we are collectively willing to pay to maintain those myths. The project is not a wholesale revision of American history, as some conservatives have suggested, nor is it a counternarrative to what we were all taught in school. It represents *the* central narrative of American history that “we” simply chose to suppress.

“Old times” cannot be forgotten that never were. Written in Ohio for blackface minstrel groups as a sentimental evocation of a southern paradise that never existed, “Dixie” is a fitting anthem for the Lost Cause and the flag that goes with it. It might as well be the theme song for white America as a whole, which built and still strives to maintain its domination of national life through its uncanny ability, when faced with its own heritage of exploitation, enslavement, and violence, to

Look away,
Look away,
Look away.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Confederate delusions.”