Kevin Levin investigates the history of the South's most persistent myth, that of black Confederates. The myth holds that black Confederates were African American slaves who proudly fought and died as soldiers alongside their white counterparts in integrated units during the American Civil War. This is a false narrative crafted in the 1970s as a response to the progress of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The black Confederate narrative in neo-Confederacy propaganda means to continue to justify the Southern cause as righteous and justified. Moreover, proponents of the war can now fondly remember the men who fought during that time as war heroes who answered their nation’s call to arms to protect “states’ rights,” which, rather than slavery, they consider the foremost issue of the war. He methodically explains each of the myth’s pillars of justification, to the point that the reader nearly believes them themself.

He then rapidly tears the myth apart and shows how the “black Confederate” logic behind each pillar fails to pass a legitimate historical litmus test. For example, one such litmus test is found in a diary entry of John B. Jones from March 20, 1863, in which he denies reports in Northern newspapers that the Confederacy has recruited black soldiers: “This is utterly untrue. We have no armed slaves to fight for us” (p. 46). I highly recommend that every American read this book as part of their personal continuing education. This well-researched book is important because it covers all of the bases of the black Confederate myth and slams the Lost Cause argument with contextual explanations that novice or nefarious historians have used to distort the facts of the American Civil War for their own gain.

The author posits that the motivation behind these neo-Confederacy narratives is directly targeted at the progress African Americans have made in the civil rights realm and beyond. Those who seek to distort the truth claim that black slaves fought in integrated units for the Confederacy. This downplays the brutal nature of slavery. It promotes the falsehood that African Americans are naturally subservient to whites and continues the Lost Cause narrative that the South’s motivations to secede from the Union were righteous. This allows key Confederate civilian and military leaders, as well as family members who fought and died for these men, to be remembered with dignity and pride. The factual information contained in this book is the firepower necessary to debunk the Lost Cause and black Confederate myths that continue to rot the American popula-
tion’s understanding of the Civil War and limit the progress of equal rights for all its citizens.

The most important element in every discussion in the book is context. It would be easy to manipulate someone who is not familiar with the thoughts and feelings of the time period from the end of the Civil War through the 1960s. For example, in chapter 1, the author describes the scene of a young white man by the name of Sergeant Andrew Chandler, accompanied by his slave, Silas Chandler. They are posing for a picture, each armed with weapons, before being sent off to fight for the Confederacy. The black Confederate myth holds that because they are both in uniform and holding weapons, they must have both been soldiers and fought alongside each other. The truth is, it was not uncommon for photos like this to be taken with props. Further, the African American in the photo was one of the many camp slaves who did participate in the war, but solely in the context of support roles at the camp. Cooking, cleaning, foraging, and other odd jobs were their primary roles. Proof of this can be found in the letters written back home by white soldiers described the great jobs their slaves were doing. None of the correspondence the author found mentioned any harrowing acts on the battlefield or used the term “soldier” to describe the slaves. It is well documented in the Confederate Congress, especially Howell Cobb’s perspective, that allowing slaves to fight as soldiers would undermine the Southern institution and prove their entire cause to be false. It would negate claims that the white man was superior to the black man because, “if slaves will make good soldiers our whole theory of slavery is wrong” (quoted, p. 63). Long after the war, those former camp slaves who did receive a pension from certain Southern states did so as “former slave[s],” not as “veteran[s]” (p. 108). Accounts from white veterans that refer to slaves as slaves and not veterans can be seen through the 1930s at numerous Confederate War gatherings. The most damning evidence supporting slaves being remembered as slaves is the Confederate War Memorial dedicated in 1914 by former president Woodrow Wilson. The author describes the monument and its placement at Arlington National Cemetery and the meaning behind the figures depicted in one of its friezes. The description in the monument’s official history of one of the figures as an unarmed “faithful negro body-servant,” rather than a soldier, speaks volumes (p. 99). The unapparent context the author provides to the reader is that such a description would have needed no explanation for the attendees of the monument’s dedication ceremony, as the frieze “fit neatly into the racial landscape of its immediate surroundings in 1914” (p. 99). There are many more examples within in the book up to the year 2015 that are not covered in this narrative due to space and scope limitations.

In conclusion, the discovery of the justification used to support the black Confederate narrative was the most eye-opening for me. I can understand why it is so widely believed and why people want to believe it. It is difficult for humans to admit mistakes, especially ones that cost the nation over six hundred thousand lives and ruined the lives of millions more. It is something that this nation needs to reconcile with itself and move on. I believe this book does a great job explaining the context behind the misinformation that is so widely available. I would definitely recommend this book to others and highly recommend at least a portion of this book be covered as baseline reading for a class.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


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