

[Capobianco Toy on Levin, 'Searching for Black Confederates: The Civil War's Most Persistent Myth'](#)

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Kevin M. Levin. *Searching for Black Confederates: The Civil War's Most Persistent Myth.* Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Illustrations. 240 pp. \$30.00

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Kevin Levin's *Searching for Black Confederates* demonstrates that modern-day evidence of formerly enslaved or enslaved people serving in the Confederate army during the American Civil War is based on misinterpretation of archival sources or misunderstandings of commemorative events. Enlisting black soldiers in the Confederate army at any moment prior to the desperate days of early 1865 would have been inconsistent with the Confederacy's foundation as a slaveholding nation. Yet, as Levin reveals, proponents of the myth of the black Confederate soldier have successfully disseminated it over the course of the twentieth century, producing misinformation that has infiltrated everything from textbooks and museum exhibits to Hollywood movies. *Searching for Black Confederates* maps the evolution of this myth from the American Civil War to the present, but it does not fully contend with the issues of race and politics at work in the history of the myth.

Levin charts the creation of this myth by starting with the war itself and illuminating the role of enslaved people, whom he terms "camp slaves" in order to indicate their specific status within the Confederate army (p. 4). He examines specific stories that have been used to prove the existence of black Confederate soldiers. For example, he explains that Andrew Chandler, a white Confederate soldier, brought Silas Chandler, an enslaved person, with him to war. However, Silas's enslaved status did not change as a result.

Levin further explains that the appearance of black Southerners at veterans' reunions and in Confederate pension records does not indicate that they served as soldiers. Though black men did attend reunions, Levin explains, audiences and participants always understood their role as that of camp slaves, not soldiers. When black men applied for pensions, they did so as camp slaves, a separate category for which certain southern state governments made allowances in their pension systems. Though modern proponents of the black Confederate myth often point to these photographs of black men in uniform at veterans' reunions and to pension applications as proof that black Confederate soldiers did exist, Levin demonstrates that in their immediate context, "no one was confused about the status of these men" (p. 70).

In recent decades, groups like the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) laid claim to the black

Confederate myth and disseminated these photographs and pension applications on the internet as proof that black Confederate soldiers had existed. According to Levin, the SCV and other memorial groups sought to utilize the black Confederate myth to counter historians' efforts to acknowledge the central role of slavery as a cause for the Civil War and the desire of the Confederate government to maintain a system of inequality. Levin does not explore in detail how the idea of black Confederate soldiers might have worked to defend the memory of the Confederacy. Instead, he concludes that by the time of the Civil War Sesquicentennial, 2011-15, the continued efforts of some memorial groups to promote the black Confederate myth had failed because most Americans now know that the narrative is false.

While *Searching for Black Confederates* discredits the myth and counters arguments that black Confederates existed in any significant numbers, it does not fulfill its additional introductory promise to broaden "our understanding of how the institution of slavery functioned in the army and how it unraveled over the course of the war" (p. 5). Debunking the myth requires Levin to trace specific stories through family oral histories, photographs, pension records, and muster rolls and then identify who promoted misinterpretations of those sources. It is a painstaking task to be sure, but it is only the beginning of the work left to be done to understand how slavery functioned within the Confederate army and what ends the myth of the black Confederate soldier served over time.

Levin states that his intention is not only to debunk the black Confederate myth but also to parse the nature of the relationship of black men to the Confederate army by "guiding readers through the complex relationships that evolved over the course of the war between masters and slaves in camp, on the march, and on the battlefield" (p. 4). However, slippages of language and framing throughout the book muddle the distinction between enslaved person and soldier, and further disguise the inherently coercive nature of slavery. In the early chapters of the book, Levin uses "servant" and "slave" interchangeably to describe enslaved people within the Confederate army. Elsewhere in the book he mistakenly refers to free people as "slaves" and "newly freed slaves." [1] As historian Barbara Fields reminds us, "loose thinking" on matters of race and ideology "leads to careless language, which in turn promotes misinformation." [2] Imprecise language lends itself to shoring up, rather than refuting, the racist ideologies that Levin says he seeks to tear down.

This problem of language signals a need to place any discussion of slavery's unraveling in conversation with existing scholarship of enslaved people's resistance prior to the war, and their efforts at resistance on the home front during the war. To do so would enable Levin to avoid mistakes such as asserting that "the war undercut [masters'] relationship with their slaves or with beliefs that had never before been put to the test" (p. 53). A veritable mountain of literature exists demonstrating that enslaved people tested and broke the boundaries of slavery regularly prior to the war, forcing white owners to reckon with the fact that enslaved people were anything but accomplices in their own subjugation. Rather than a new phenomenon, as Thavolia Glymph has argued, the Civil War "made possible a sustained assault on the southern white planter 'home,'" amplifying the impact of strategies of resistance in which enslaved people had already been engaged. [3] This sustained assault had its roots in the antebellum period, as historians such as Saidiya Hartman, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Stephanie Camp, and others have shown. Thus, while owners may have had to confront resistance on a new scale during the war, it certainly was not the "first time" they had to acknowledge enslaved people's resistance.

Levin also brings to light interesting instances where enslaved people's choice of loyalty deserves greater analytical attention. For example, Levin discusses the case of the Louisiana Native Guard, a group of 1,500 free black men who offered their services to Louisiana's governor in May of 1861. "Never accepted into Confederate service, and by September 1862," Levin explains, "many of its former members were wearing blue uniforms" (p. 45). Though Levin does not analyze this example beyond explaining that the Louisiana Native Guard never served in the Confederate military, it indicates that framing the options available to enslaved men as a choice between "fidelity and betrayal" misrepresents the decisions all black Southerners had to make during the war (p. 53). The example of the Louisiana Native Guard suggests that both enslaved and free black Southerners weighed their options during the war and gauged their actions based on the perceived chance of success of one army or another. Thus, rather than hypothesizing about "bonds of affection" between master and enslaved person, attention to enslaved people's agency in their own freedom could lead to illuminating questions about how they navigated ever-changing life at war, outside the framework of loyalty that their masters sought to impose on them (p. 67).

A similar attention to language could further help Levin avoid suggesting that black men might in some way have been responsible for perpetuating the black Confederate myth. For example, in discussing Silas Chandler's decision to apply for a Confederate pension as a camp slave, Levin concludes that "by filling out the pension application, Silas ensured that for much of the twentieth century he would be remembered by the state of Mississippi as one of the countless former slaves who remained faithful to his master and the Confederate cause" (p. 122). This framing places responsibility for the distortion of his legacy on Chandler rather than on the white actors who chose to understand Chandler's pension application as something other than a request for compensation of forced labor. It stops short of questioning why Chandler might have benefited from a Confederate pension and chosen to apply despite the fact it required him to acknowledge his subjected position within the Confederate military. The choice of white heritage groups to interpret Chandler's application as evidence of faithful service or support of the Confederate cause was one of an array of interpretations. Read differently, Chandler's application could represent an assertion of citizenship by making a claim on the postwar state. Masking the parties responsible for the misrepresentation also inhibits the author's ability to specifically analyze how and why white supremacy has been constructed and reconstructed over time and ignores an opportunity to understand black Southerners as independent historical actors.

As an addition to literature on American Civil War memory, *Searching for Black Confederates* indicates that the black Confederate myth and its historical roots are ripe for further historical study. The persistence of the myth is symptomatic of Americans' inability to grapple with and acknowledge the complex realities of slavery and its coercive force. Moreover, memories are always constructed and deployed to achieve ends in the present, and simple explanations of racism do not suffice to explain the long-standing and evolving phenomenon of the black Confederate myth. Further work can explore the social and political work that the black Confederate myth has performed over time, and the ends white memorial groups hoped to achieve by promoting it.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, 26, 49, 54, 65, and 143, respectively.

[2]. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 118.

[3]. Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6.

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