

The Confederate Statue Debate: Helping Pupils take a Historical Perspective on Contemporary Questions

Connor McCrone is a Teacher of History at Dunblane High School

In recent years, conflict over statues has been commonplace on television and in newspapers. In August 2017, riots erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia over attempts to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. These riots resulted in dozens of people getting injured and a woman killed. This became the starting point for a legal battle to have the statue removed that involved changing state laws that protected such monuments, a move that was strongly opposed. Although the statue was removed in July 2021, the controversy itself remained.

In the context of such violence, I found myself asking a question which many schoolchildren are also asking themselves- 'Why do Americans feel so strongly about confederate statues'? The American Civil War is a popular topic in SQA syllabuses, but for young people to understand what was happening in America it would not be enough for them to know about the events of the American Civil War, they needed to understand how a particular view of the war, the lost cause interpretation, gained so much credibility in the South and how this led to division that resulted in violence. To do this, I had to explore the question of historical interpretations.

It became apparent that the difference between the pro and anti-statue protestors came down to the way in which they interpreted and narrated the American Civil war and its legacy. One side saw the war as a 'Lost Cause', a time when Southern identity was threatened by an overreaching federal government and so fought to become independent from it. Whereas the other side (and almost all historians) saw the American Civil War as a battle for the destruction of the institution of slavery in America. Although the Lost cause view has no credibility among respectable historians, what matters is that large numbers of people *believe* it to be true. In other words, this is an issue of historical interpretations: the statue conflict emerges because history exists in multiple different versions depending on the way groups and societies make sense of time and change (Chapman 2011).

As teachers we are confronted with the reality that our pupils will experience history out with our classroom: through film, television, and social media. We cannot limit children's exposure to faulty history, but neither should we ignore it. Our task instead is to help our pupils navigate the battlefield of differing historical opinions and recreations and to make them aware that one event in history can have many stories retold as time goes on and societies change. This does not mean telling children that all interpretations of the past are equally *valid*, it simply means accepting that these interpretations *exist*. Again, my own experience of this was instructive. When the last remaining Robert E. Lee statue was removed from Virginia on 9th September 2021, there was little comment on the television news, but debate raged on social media. On my Facebook feed, a news article about the

removal of the statue was accompanied by hundreds of ahistorical and ill-informed comments sympathetic to the confederacy and offering arguments about southern identity. As a historian, my initial reaction was to reply to every person and hit them with evidence about the statues that was contradictory to their beliefs however, this would have been futile: shouting evidence at people doesn't get anyone anywhere, the key instead is to explore how these narratives are put together so that they can be unpicked. As teachers, we must accept that our students' worldviews are informed by what they read on social media, and so our duty is to support them in navigating this world.

It is important, for example, to view the General Lee statue, itself, as an *interpretation*. The statue was not – as many assumed – constructed immediately after the Civil War, but in 1924. This context is important: the 1920s were a period of profound racial inequality when the racist Jim Crow Laws were being challenged both through civil disobedience and in the courts. Had these legal challenges succeeded, aspects of disenfranchisement and segregation based on colour would have been made illegal. These steps towards equality were viewed across the south as a challenge to a putative 'southern identity' which had maintained segregation in law, even after defeat in the civil war. Consequently, the erection of the statue of Lee should be seen as an affirmation of 'southern identity' as one based in notions of racial inequality and discrimination.

This sense of putative 'Southern identity' was reaffirmed and almost cemented by the release of a film called 'Birth of a Nation' which helped kick start the reestablishment of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The movie portrayed a patriotic romanticisation of the KKK as protectors of Southern white society which they show as being under threat from Black people. The movie became extremely popular and told the story that many white people in the South wanted to hear- it erased the defeat from the American Civil War and redefined the image of the African American as a criminal. Such was the importance of the film that it became the first movie to be shown in the Whitehouse to Woodrow Wilson who labelled it "History written with lightning". However, a more factual analysis of the movie would instead be to label it a distorted historical account which suited a particular group and society- the South. The fact the movie has no historical credibility is important but what is more important is that many people believed that it did. The impacts of the movie brought with it a new wave of attacks on African Americans.

This creation of a confederate southern identity based on the notions of racial inequality coincided and conflicted with the rise of a Black consciousness movement which saw among groups of African Americans a realisation of their identity. Movements such as 'The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People' (NAACP) founded, primarily, by W.E.B Du Bois were fighting to make African Americans aware of their civil rights as American citizens and the 'Universal Negro Improvement Association' (UNIA) led by Marcus Garvey wanted to increase pride among African Americans in their colour, culture, and History. Both organisations were prominent prior to and during the 1920's and had substantial membership stretching across 38 states. This consciousness movement was perceived in the South as a threat to the Southern identity that was being moulded based on the principles of confederacy.

It is in this 1920s culture conflict that we begin to see the construction of confederate statues across Southern states, not primarily as a tribute to past

confederate soldiers, but as a response to the Black consciousness movement that sought to threaten their identity and a commitment to a white supremacist future. The construction of confederate statues saw its biggest spike in the period of 1900-1920 which coincides with Jim Crow law segregation, mass incarceration of African Americans and a black consciousness movement. For example, in South Carolina alone there were 30 confederate statues erected between 1900-1919, some 35 years after the conclusion of the American Civil War and during a culture battle that was raging in the United States of America. For pupils to understand the interpretive nature of the confederate statue debate in contemporary society they would have to have a profound understanding of the context outlined above.

The next challenge is to ask how to provide our pupils with a framework which will help them to understand Historical Interpretations. The body of lessons below will explore this highly contentious issue through an historical lens. This unit is aimed at students who are in the Broad General Education phase of secondary school. At this level of study pupils should be able to draw on their knowledge of a historical period to interpret evidence and present an informed view (Scottish Education 2017). Through engaging with the lessons below pupils will be exploring the complexities surrounding contemporary issues and offering a reasoned conclusion to the enquiry question based on a foundation of historical knowledge.

To conclude, the fundamental objective of this article and the sequence of lessons above is to develop pupils' historical consciousness. This means engaging with, and attaining, an understanding of the present due to an interpretation of the past, which better allows them to consider the future (Duquette, 2015, cited in Seixas, 2017, p. 63). This is achieved through historically contextualising a contemporary problem by analysing different interpretations of it. The issue of confederate statues contributes to larger social issues including race and identity. Therefore, through careful selection of activities and resources, pupils can gain a framework for understanding that can be applied when dealing with societal issues. However, careful consideration is needed when teaching the content material to ensure a safe and comfortable learning environment for all pupils. The content can be distressing; but ultimately, it is important not to erase these elements of history, but to teach them in a way that creates responsible contributors in a democratic society.

Enquiry Question: Why do Americans feel so strongly about confederate statues?

Lesson Focus	Objective	Possible Activities
<p>1. What are the conflicting opinions about confederate statues in the United States?</p>	<p>To understand why there are conflicting views over statues in America and what those views are.</p>	<p>Initial stimulus material (ISM) depicting a confederate statue being pulled down. https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/news/1024/cpsprodpb/C565/production/97333505_p05cfs5z.jpg</p> <p>This will be followed by an activity where half of the pupils are given pro-statue arguments and the other half given anti-statue arguments. The pupils can then write about why someone may feel so strongly about their position over statues.</p> <p>The pupils will then be paired off (also works with 3's or groups of 4's) to discuss their ideas before returning to a class wide discussion on the main reasons people feel so strongly.</p>
<p>2. How and why were the North and South different in 1860?</p>	<p>To identify the main differences between the Northern and Southern States in regards to industry, politics and society in the pre- American civil war period.</p>	<p>The lesson will begin with a picture of the 2020 election map of America following the election. 2020-Electoral-Interactive-Map.jpg (1280x720) (ecwauusa.com)</p> <p>This will highlight the 'red' and 'blue states'- the purpose being to show division. Followed by a map of America in the 1860's- the aim is to look for similarities and differences in division.</p> <p>slavemap.jpg (600x350) (haygenealogy.com)-</p> <p>Pupils will engage in pair work to create a series of T-diagrams to illustrate key themes that highlight the differences between the North and South. These themes are Industry, Politics, and society.</p> <p>A T-diagram is a form of graph that allows pupils to visually compare competing/opposing ideas by having them side-by-side. It is created using a vertical and horizontal line and resembles the letter T. This is a low-resource and low-cost learning material that is extremely useful for engaging in comparisons.</p>
<p>3. How did enslaved people in the Southern USA experience slavery?</p>	<p>Looking in-depth at the conditions of slavery in the Southern states through analysis of different Historians</p>	<p>The lesson will begin with an Initial stimulus material on the board. The picture will depict a working plantation. This image will be used as a gateway for pupils to gain a brief understanding of life on a cotton plantation in the South.</p> <p>A great website to use when teaching about slavery is the Understanding Slavery Initiative. This website can be used</p>

	<p>opinions and a case study.</p>	<p>for collecting information on what life was like on a plantation for enslaved people. URL: Plantation Conditions. Understanding Slavery Initiative</p> <p>This will be followed by a class presentation by the teacher on the conditions of the slavery. This will lead into a case study on Fredrick Douglass, formerly enslaved person and abolitionist. Pupils will explore conditions on the plantations through a series of photograph which highlight different aspects of an enslaved person's life such as working conditions, living conditions, food and clothing.</p> <p>The lesson will conclude with extracts from two historians, Phillips and Stamppp who disagree on the nature of slavery.</p> <p>Historian Ulrich B. Phillips writing in his <i>Life and Labor in the Old South</i>' noted that the plantation was –</p> <p>“The plantation was a school. The civilising of the enslaved was not merely a consequence of definite schooling but a fruit of plantation life itself. The plantation was a parish, or perhaps a chapel of ease. The plantation was a pageant and a variety show in alteration. The home of a planter or a well-to-do townsman was likely to be a magnificent Negro boarding house. The institution of slavery was unprofitable, and its main aim was not to make fortunes, but men.”</p> <p>(Within this there is the opportunity to expand on what Phillips may have meant, have the pupils analyse some of the metaphors he uses and try to analyse them)</p> <p>Historian Kenneth Stamppp's <i>'The Peculiar Institution'</i> (1956) noted that the plantation was –</p> <p>“Little by little, step by step. choice by choice, over a period of many years...not the enslaved but slavery was the old south greatest affliction – the root of its tragedy. Cruelty was endemic in all slave holding communities.</p> <p>“Slavery was an inherently inefficient system, not an unprofitable one. Its self-reproduction of a labour force which was compelled to work hard without being paid. Slave labour was cheap compared with free white labour, it depressed white wages in the South.</p>
<p>4. Why was Westward expansion such a problem for the union?</p>	<p>To explain what is meant by the term “Westward Expansion” and identify the</p>	<p>To start the lesson pupils will be asked to mind map/ bullet-point what they recall from the previous two lessons.</p> <p>A short video explaining the chronology of Westward Expansion. The pupils will be asked to fill in a pre-prepared timeline to record the events.</p>

	problems that it caused.	This will be followed by a class discussion on the potential problems of Westward expansion regarding slavery prompted by a famous photograph. manifest-destiny-john-gast.jpg (652x496) (destinyschildren.org)
5. What was the significance of the 1860 election?	To explain how the election of 1860 caused division in America and assess the overall impact this had on the union.	<p>The lesson will begin with a picture on the board of all past presidents of the United States. This image will be seen by the pupils with the question 'What do all these people have in common'.</p> <p>us-presidents.jpg (800x381) (lithub.com)- a picture of all past presidents.</p> <p>This will be followed by a mock election. The pupils will be given a case study on each of the candidates and split into states, they will be asked to vote on their preferred candidate from the perspective of the state they represent.</p> <p>The pupils will then analyze historical evidence to engage with the differing reactions to the election results and the significance it had.</p>
6. Why did the Southern states secede from the union?	To understand what is meant by the term secession and the rationale each Southern state gave for secession.	<p>The lesson will start with an ISM activity which will portray the confederate flag. This will lead into a teacher led discussion on the idea of secession.</p> <p>Pupils will examine declarations documents from 4 Southern states on why they seceded, the states are; South Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia and Texas. They will do this through a jigsaw activity. They will be split into groups of 4- the states will also be numbered 1-4 and the students in each group will be allocated a number. All those in the class with the same number form an expert group. The pupils become experts on their states and return to their home groups. When each group is back together- they will create a poster on the reasons the states seceded.</p>
7. How were Americans affected by the American Civil war?	To recognise the impact the American Civil war had on societies and soldiers on both sides of the conflict.	<p>The lesson will start with an ISM depicting a battlefield.</p> <p>This will be followed by a clip from the movie 'Gettysburg', which shows pickets charge.</p> <p>This is designed to visualize the horrors of war. However, it is important to explain that this is an interpretation of the battle (not factually accurate) and the purpose of the clip is not to show exactly what happened during the battle but to gain an understanding of battle-like situations.</p> <p>This will be followed by students working in pairs to read through soldier's accounts of the war, the accounts can be found at the bottom of this document.</p> <p>Pupils must then create a diary entry from the perspective of a soldier reflecting on the content they have learned from the videos and the source work.</p>

		<p>Extract 1</p> <p>My Dear Wife;</p> <p>I dressed the wounds of 64 different men- some having two or three each. Yesterday I was at work from daylight till dark- I am completely exhausted. The days after the battle are a thousand times worse than the day of the battle – the dead are sickening but they suffer no pain. But the poor wounded mutilated soldiers that yet have life make a most horrid picture. I pray God may stop such infernal work – though perhaps he has sent it upon us for our sins. Carrie I dreamed of home night before last. I love to dream of home it seems so much like really being there. I saw you in some place I cannot say where – you kissed me and told me you loved me – was not that quite a soldier dream?</p> <p>William Child, Major and Surgeon</p> <p>5th Regiment New Hampshire Volunteers (Union)</p> <p>Extract 2:</p> <p>We went hungry, for six days not a morsel of bread or meat had gone in our stomachs – and our menu consisted of apple; and corn. We toasted, we burned, we stewed, we boiled, we roasted these two together and there was not a man who had not a bad attack of diarrhoea. Our under clothes were foul and hanging in strips, our socks were worn out, and half of the men were bare-footed, many were lame and were sent to the rear; others, of sterner stuff, hobbled along and managed to keep up. Many became ill from exposure and starvation, and were left on the road. The ambulances were full, and the whole route was marked with sick, lame, limping lot, that straggled to the farm.</p> <p>Private Alexander Hunter</p> <p>17th Virginia Infantry (Confederate)</p> <p>Extract 3:</p> <p>The truth is, when bullets are whacking against tree trunks and solid shot are cracking skulls like eggshells, the consuming passion in the breast of the average man is to get out of the way.</p> <p>Private David L. Thompson</p> <p>9th New York Volunteers, Company G (Union)</p>
<p>8. How have revivalists' interpretations of the confederacy</p>	<p>To understand what revivalist interpretations of the confederacy are and how they have been</p>	<p>The first part of the lesson will be focused on looking at the ways in which revivalist theories have been progressed. This will include views from published historians and media portrayal (such as Birth of a Nation), through modern day interviews with pro-statue demonstrators.</p>

been advanced?	moulded and progressed through History. This will link the enquiry lesson to the original question as the differences in argument will be better understood.	The second part will be dedicated to students consolidating the last 7 sessions to create a piece of written work to answer the EQ.
9. Why might Americans feel so strongly about confederate statues?	Consolidating the content in the unit of work to create a written piece designed at answering the enquiry question.	Create a piece of written work to answer the EQ. There will be terminology prompts on the boards to help with the work as well as set expectations. The piece of work could be a news article summarizing the conflicts of the statues, making reference to the history of the conflict.

Correspondence: connormac2011@LIVE.CO.UK

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