

# The American civil war battles go on

150 years after the US conflict started, history still divides those who would commemorate it



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In 1961 an official US [commission oversaw thousands of events](#) to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the American civil war. All 50 states joined in, but not surprisingly the biggest events took place in the 11 southern states that made up the defeated Confederacy. Citizens in Alabama celebrated with a full-scale re-enactment of the swearing in of the Confederate president, [Jefferson Davis](#), in front of 50,000 spectators, followed by an inauguration ball attended by 5,000 guests. In [South Carolina](#), where the first shots of the four-year war were fired, Confederate flags were flown from every building. There was a Miss Confederate beauty pageant, parades, and even a re-enactment of South Carolina's declaration of secession.

By contrast the 150th anniversary of the civil war, which starts on 12 April, has been marked by boycotts, protests, and an embarrassed silence from the politicians in Washington DC.

All nations struggle in the aftermath of civil war. More than 100 years after the English civil war, for instance, any prelate who was "enthusiastic" about religion attracted censure and suspicion. The American war of 1861-65 is recent enough to be embedded still in cultural memory. But that isn't why it weighs so heavily on the American conscience. The ghastly statistics are one reason: out of four million combatants more than 620,000 died and a further million were maimed or injured. The same proportion of the US population now would be six million deaths. The south was devastated – one in five white males died and 90% of the region's railroads and factories were destroyed.

The other reason is the explosive debate on the war's causes and the role played by slavery. Although all schoolchildren learn Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, what they learn about what happened after that depends on whether they live in the north or the south. To this day there is an argument raging between the two areas over whether the south seceded to maintain slavery or to protect states' rights, and the idea of free trade. Many in the south don't even accept the term "civil war" but refer to it as "the war of northern aggression" or "the war between the states".

The nature of the debate means the White House has yet to answer a request

from history groups to create a presidential commission on the 150th anniversary. So far only 19 states have bothered to set up their own civil war committees. Virginia, where most of the fighting took place, is pumping \$2m into the project in the hope of seeing a return in the form of tourism. But most have been less willing to invest. Congress has also failed to agree on a bill that would allocate \$6m to a national civil war commission. The main sponsor, Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr of Illinois, set off a firestorm last month with the remark: "It's important for the country to have an open, honest discussion about the war, including the reason it occurred." One angry letter writer to a Louisiana newspaper complained, "What these Democratic congressmen want is a federally sponsored committee that will broadcast nationwide that the only 'reason' for the war between the states was slavery. Their 'open, honest' discussion will probably end up being a four-year-long national harangue about slavery being the sole cause and how we need to repudiate our 'racist' attitudes."

Southern politicians who have tried to rise above the passionate rhetoric surrounding the civil war have frequently found themselves dragged back into the mire. Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell, a Republican, was forced to apologise when his proclamation declaring April Confederate History Month failed to make any reference to slavery. McDonnell then rewrote the proclamation, adding a clause that "slavery led to the war", but the damage to his national standing was profound.

Fifty years ago, when the civil rights movement was in its infancy, the prospect of black protests was considered more a public order issue than a political problem. But now just the threat of protests meant not a single Alabaman politician showed up for this year's re-enactment of Jefferson Davis's swearing-in. In Charleston, South Carolina, organisers of a "secession ball" continued despite a barrage of media criticism, and having to run the gauntlet of protesters on the night.

In an attempt to forestall similar trouble this week the body that looks after Charleston's battle sites is adopting a deliberately sombre approach. Instead of fireworks, a single beam of light will emanate from Fort Sumter up to the sky before splitting into two, symbolising the division of the nation.

Yet despite the fury and anguish swirling around the 150th anniversary, the claim that it has pitted whites against blacks and southerners against northerners is overblown. The cultural legacy is far more complicated than either side of the "meaning of the war" debate will allow.

The Detroit chapter of the NAACP, the largest in the US, is now itself being boycotted by other chapters because of its decision to honour the popstar Kid Rock, despite his propensity to wave the Confederate flag during concerts. "Sure, it's definitely got some scars," the singer admitted in 2008. "But I've never had an issue with it. To me it just represents pride in Southern rock'n'roll music, plus it just looks cool."

