

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG AND CONFEDERATE

Jeremy Collins

*As long as we have a politics of race in America,
we will have a politics of Civil War memory.*

—David Blight

Facts are stupid things.

—Ronald Reagan

1 My earliest memory is of a black man and a Confederate Flag. The man was very black and beautiful. The flag waved in celebration of his flight. The moment still sticks to my lungs. Like any four-year-old, I wanted to fly. Like many in Reagan's America, I saw this on TV.

Start with his name. Say it out loud: *Herschel Junior Walker*. He sounds out of central casting for a Southern Legend. By January 1, 1981, he was a legend. On that New Year's Day, I huddled with my parents around our TV to watch Herschel, a freshman Georgia Bulldog running back, take on Notre Dame in the Sugar Bowl. Like many Atlantans, my parents were northern transplants, but they were hypnotized, along with the rest of South, by Herschel.

Standing six-two, two-twenty, slabbed in muscle, and quick with a disarming grin, Herschel could fly. Raised in a farmhouse in Wrightsville, Georgia, he wore overalls to college classes. On Saturdays, he hurdled tacklers and cracked linebacker's ribs. During the week, he wrote poetry and danced ballet. He spoke in a soft, country whisper. A reporter once asked if he got tired carrying the ball so much. "No," Herschel said with a smile, "the ball isn't that heavy."

Early in the Sugar Bowl, with Georgia marching on the Notre Dame two-yard line, Herschel (playing with a separated shoulder) took the ball from quarterback Buck Belue and leapt toward the goal line. My family rose as he rocketed over a sea of gold helmets. Herschel kept rising, soaring with the football, as if he wanted to pierce the ceiling of the New Orleans Superdome.

A football weighs about fourteen ounces but ours is heavier in the South. College football is our civil religion with roots knotted to the Lost

Cause. At the dawn of the game, teams like VMI wore gray uniforms while fans waved Confederate flags and the band played Dixie. Before facing Yale or Michigan, coaches like Vanderbilt's Dan McGugin encouraged teams to remember their forefather's slaughter. Sportswriters, in purple prose, compared Southern running backs to Stuart's Calvary. At mid-century, stadiums across the South were filled with white crowds cheering white teams led by coaches named *General* and *Bear* and *Bobby Lee*. In those hours, it was easy to forget that white Southern manhood ever surrendered at Appomattox.

To keep the illusion alive, in September 1962, the eve of James Meredith's enrollment at Ole Miss, Mississippi Governor Russ Barnett defended segregation at halftime of the Kentucky game. The Ole Miss crowd roared and waved a sea of Confederate flags. Curtis Wilkie, a student in the stands, recalls in his memoir *Dixie*, "I knew I was witnessing the final convulsions of the Civil War. All the crowd lacked were pitchforks and rifles. That would come the next night." The convulsions and violence spread across the South along with the contradictions.

In September 1970, Southern Cal running back Sam Cunningham steamrolled the all-white Alabama Crimson Tide in Birmingham. An Alabama coach said Cunningham did more to integrate the South in sixty minutes than Dr. King did in twenty years. The black running back touched a Southern nerve—*winnin'*—that was perhaps greater than the myth of white supremacy. Soon, running backs like Earl Campbell, Bo Jackson, and Marcus Dupree raced across southern gridirons with power and grace. But none were as beautiful as Herschel. After a 1981 summer-sault touchdown at Ole Miss, Rebel students and fans chanted *Herschel's* name.

When Herschel landed in New Orleans—*touchdown*—my father picked me up and tossed me into the air. On TV, an ABC camera caught a jubilant Georgia fan waving a huge Confederate Flag back and forth. My dad spun me around the room and lobbed me, gently, toward the sofa where I landed and tried to catch my breath for joy.

II.

I WAS BORN AND RAISED in Georgia, spent half my life there, and still

think of it as home. In August 2009, my wife and I moved to New Albany, Indiana, a small town across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. Refilling our U-Haul in the Hoosier state, I saw a Confederate flag bumper sticker on the back of a Camaro. Amazed, I pointed this out to Alice, who shrugged.

Indiana has been our home for a year, and I've seen Confederate Air-Fresheners, Confederate mud flaps, Confederate license plates, and Confederate window decals in the shapes of buck antlers and bikini tops. I shouldn't be startled by the flag. I grew up with it. Before moving, we lived in East Tennessee, where I saw it everyday. Maybe I'm noticing it more as the 150th anniversary of the Civil War approaches. Maybe I'm just surprised to see so many in Indiana, a state that sent over 25,000 sons south to fight and die in places like Manassas, Shiloh, Chickamauga, and Peachtree Creek. Or maybe it's my own past I don't want to think about.

I grew up near Peachtree Creek in Decatur, Georgia—its muddy banks and thick pinewoods bordered my backyard. Deep in the woods, I was a boy soldier on an ever-changing battlefield. Sometimes the pines were the lush Hollywood jungles of Vietnam where I rescued POWs from unshaven Soviets. Sometimes I was a Rebel scout in the Battle of Atlanta, braving the July heat and Sherman's big guns. Mine wasn't the hardscrabble South. My South was the suburbs of Metro Atlanta.

In my South, it's always 1987. Herschel is in Dallas playing with the Cowboys. I'm in the fifth-grade at DeKalb Christian Academy (*The Crusaders*), a white private school. Before each lunch, our teachers pray for General Oliver North and the hungry children in Africa (it's always Africa, it's always the children, they're always hungry). At home, tacked to my bedroom wall, above my seventeen-inch color TV, between a glossy photo of President Reagan and a motivational Mr. T poster (*Be Somebody!*), there hangs a 3x5 foot Confederate Flag.

III.

FOR MOST OF MY ADOLESCENCE, the flag was nothing more than my calling card as a Civil War Nerd and *Dukes of Hazard* enthusiast, but that all changed one winter night in 1992. I was walking home after freshman basketball practice at Shamrock High (*The Dragons*) in Decatur, Georgia,

when I noticed two older black guys walking up the suburban sidewalk toward me. It was my first year of public school. I didn't recognize them. One young man was taller, in a Georgetown Starter jacket. His companion wore a hooded sweatshirt. Both wore baggy jeans. The young man in the Georgetown jacket breathed into his hands as he passed Hardcourt Drive.

As the young men approached, I wanted to move to the other side of the road. But to move would show weakness. To move would be racist, and I liked to think of myself as tough. Tough and open-minded. When they were within arm's reach, I lifted my chin and said, "What's up?" They nodded and passed. Behind me, I heard, "Hey man."

I turned around and the young man with the Georgetown jacket pointed a 9mm handgun at my chest. His mouth was moving, but I couldn't hear a word. Staring at the gun, I tried to recall what TV show the scene reminded me of. *Smack!* The young man hit me upside the head with the butt of the gun. He did it again. Hard. An encouragement—*pay attention*. On the corner of Mt. Olive and Hardcourt, alone in the dark, with no dogs barking, attention was paid.

"Your shoes," the young man said.

He pointed the gun at my black Air Jordans and then back to my chest. I took off my book-bag and sat on the hard sidewalk. Unlacing my shoes, I tried to make out their faces. The shorter guy had a lighter complexion and acne scars and a whisper of a mustache. He bounced on the balls of his feet, glancing up and down the street. I tried to see the face of the kid with the gun, but I couldn't get past the mouth of the barrel.

I handed over my Air Jordans. My beautiful Air Jordans. My mom worked three overtime shifts so I could have them. The young man with the hoody reached into my backpack and rifled through my gym clothes and an Algebra textbook until he found my wallet. He opened the Velcro strap, counted my three dollars, and flipped through pictures of my girlfriend Kristen, my three kid sisters, and an Atlanta Braves ticket stub. He stuck my wallet into his back pocket.

"Fucking niggers," I said.

The young man bent over and pressed the tip of the gun against my forehead, like a kiss.

“What’d you say?” he asked.

“You heard me.”

With the steel against my skin, I closed my eyes. I’d never used the word in my life. In those seconds, I didn’t recall shooting hoops in my backyard or slow skating with Kristen. I didn’t see Herschel leap or Sid Bream slide safely home. I didn’t think how this was all going to end. The world slipped into a silence until the pressure against my head disappeared. The young men darted across the street and behind the school as a parade of headlights crested the hill—a cruising Chevy Astro minivan followed by a station wagon and then a caravan of yellow school buses lurching down the road with their gears grinding and brakes screeching.

I gathered my book bag and headed down the sidewalk. I’d walked the neighborhood sidewalk countless times, never in my socks, and never before noticing the symmetry of the front yards outside the ranch houses. The brick homes and yards were suddenly vivid, almost beautiful. In the windows, figures moved in silhouette against flickering blue television light. I thought of the heroes from the Thanksgiving Clint Eastwood Movie Marathons I watched each year with my dad on TBS. *Dirty Harry*. *Josey Wales*. *High Plains Drifter*. Hard cut men bent on revenge. Curling my lips into a snarl, my chin trembled. I tried to squint my eyes in contempt, but the corners kept leaking. I was scared and cold. Practically freezing.

IV.

ON AUGUST 3, 1980, thirty-three days before Herschel made his freshman debut against Tennessee, Ronald Reagan debuted as the Republican Presidential nominee at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi. The fairgrounds are located miles from where the bodies of three Civil Rights workers were unearthed on August 4, 1964, beside a cow pond. The Neshoba County murders, perpetrated by the Klan and Mississippi law enforcement, made news worldwide.

The fair was a strategic choice for launching Reagan’s campaign. Historian Joseph Crespino notes that Republican Mississippi officials suggested the site in 1979 for targeting “George Wallace inclined voters.” Reagan already had an ear with such an audience, having opposed the

1964 Civil Rights Act and having once referred to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as “humiliating to the South.” The politics of racial resentment intensified days before the speech when the Ku Klux Klan officially endorsed Reagan.

Reagan gave his strongest speeches when he was faced with subject matter similar to his acting roles. The Neshoba County stage has a parallel in Reagan’s 1951 film *Storm Warning*. Reagan plays Burt Rainey, District Attorney of Rock Point (a small Southern town, somewhere west of Atlanta, somewhere with palm trees) who investigates a Klan murder. The city fathers tell him to back off. News coverage will hurt local business and slow Christmas shopping. If he pursues the Klan, they warn he “won’t have enough votes to run for dogcatcher.” Reagan refuses the men and chooses to expose the Klan. “I’ve got to do it,” he says firmly.

Reagan’s speech at the Neshoba County Fair begins with him recalling his attendance at a recent Ole-Miss/Tennessee football game. Ole Miss, the underdog, crushed the Volunteers. Reagan shares how a Rebel fan in the stands said, *Man, if they do this for him*[Reagan], *what would they have done if John Wayne was here*. The Neshoba County crowd roars. It’s pitch perfect. Reagan credits himself (humbly) with inspiring the Rebels to victory and aligns himself (modestly) with John Wayne. He’s part-coach, part-cowboy, all-actor, All-American.

During his sixteen-minute speech, Reagan doesn’t mention the Civil Rights murders. He does however, toss in a line that sustained segregationists from Jefferson Davis to George Wallace: “*I believe in state’s rights . . . I believe that we’ve distorted the balance of our government today by giving powers that were never intended in the constitution to that federal establishment.*” Lee Atwater, who ran Reagan’s 1980 campaign in South Carolina before becoming head of the Republican National Committee, described the origin of the line in blunt terms: “You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger.’ By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger’—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights and all that stuff.”

In Atwater’s strategy, we see the eyes of Willie Horton staring into American living rooms in the long summer of 1988; we hear George W. Bush’s 2000 South Carolina Republican Primary campaign whispers that

John McCain had “fathered a black child.” In 1980, Reagan not only spoke Confederate code, he traveled in-state with ex-governor John Bell Williams, an arch-segregationist. His states’ rights comments lead the *Clarion-Ledger* the next day. And while Reagan later rejected the Klan endorsement, he did so from Detroit. In the end, Reagan won Mississippi’s six electoral votes, 50.7 to 49.3, due to a reenergized white vote.

A photograph from the fair shows Reagan on a rocking chair with Nancy on his lap. They’re smiling to the white crowd below; the white crowd beams back. It’s hard to believe anything but goodness rests in their hearts. Locked inside a vault, miles from the fair, the autopsies of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner gather dust. Their autopsies aren’t released until June 2000. Goodman and Schwerner had been shot in the heart. Chaney, the lone black male, suffered two broken arms, a broken jaw, a smashed right shoulder, and rapid decomposition (likely trauma) to the groin. Chaney was shot three times.

Reagan’s words at Neshoba, at best, muddied the waters. At worst, they played on the South’s most primitive instincts. The problem is complex. Reagan understood this in *Storm Warning*. After the Klan murder, his deputy says, “I don’t know who’s guiltier—the one who commits the crime or the one who just stands by and refuses to do anything about it.” Reagan nods wearily and says, “Sometimes I sit around for hours trying to figure that one out.”

V.

THE VOICE WAS A LIQUID BRONZE CONFIDENCE that oozed out of my headphones like a baritone honey. Previously, I worshipped the confidence of athletes. This man was no athlete. He weighed nearly three hundred pounds. No scholar, he’d failed out of Southeast Missouri State and worked as a FM drive-time DJ and a PR rep in Kansas City under the names of Rusty Sharpe and Jeff Christie. I didn’t know any of that. I was sixteen. What I knew was what I felt. And what I felt was a Rush. *Welfare Queens. Femi-Nazis. Environmental Wackos. Race Hustlers.*

Almost daily, I skipped Algebra and walked to North DeKalb Mall with my Sony Walkman locked on 640 WGST. I roared as Limbaugh

poked holes in blacks, immigrants, and women. My noisy classrooms were overflowing with blacks and immigrants and taught by nervous women. Hungry for the high, I lapped it up. All of it. Initiation as a Confederate Republican was easy. There were no meetings to attend, no dues to pay. I met my fellow members in the air and we rode the great wave. I just turned on, tuned in, and dropped out.

VI.

DURING MY JUNIOR YEAR at Shamrock, I won the Black History Month essay contest in English class. My paper on Jackie Robinson emphasized his status as a Republican and ignored his denouncement of the party in 1964. I recast Robinson and slid in calls for eliminating affirmative action and welfare. *Jackie didn’t need a handout. He had something called courage.* My classmates, black and white, cheered. My teacher’s touch was deft. *What a paper!* I’d earned a front row seat at the Black History Month Celebration. Jesse Jackson was our guest speaker.

That winter, before my award-winning essay, I couldn’t stop thinking of race. It began when I was cut from the basketball team. After a preseason scrimmage, my black coach put his arm around my shoulder and said he needed more quickness from his guards. He said I had a good jump shot. I worked hard. I was a team player. But he was sorry. He needed more speed. I nodded and cleaned out my locker. Never before did I feel more *white*.

Deep down, I knew he was right, but my thoughts began to move in another direction. Everywhere I looked, no matter my mood, I saw fucking niggers. I couldn’t shake the N-word. It was never used in my home. My mother had been a sociology major whose idea of bedtime stories was *Let Justice Roll Down*, the biography of John Perkins, a black sharecropper’s son and Civil Rights preacher in Mississippi. The N-word didn’t apply to my friends Lenard from football or Tony with whom I shelved frozen foods. It didn’t stick to Kim who let me hold her hand at North DeKalb Mall or the numerous moments of kindness, friendship. Still, I noted skinny fucking niggers at lunch, pants around their ankles, bitching about their shitty free lunches. In history, I heard loud fucking niggers eating

barbeque Fritos, guzzling Fanta. In PE, I couldn't help noticing older fucking niggers, macking on chubby white girls. Fuck them, I thought. Fuck their gold and their impossible names and their precious fucking shoes.

All of this I wore on the inside. On the outside, I was all confidence.

So confident that when the Shamrock gym roared *Down with dope! Up with hope!* I chanted too. The swaying man on stage bowed his head into his chest and reached into his coat. He pulled out a piece of paper and punched it into the air. "Ain't *nothing* gonna *change* till you register to *vote!*" The gym erupted. The man sweated, pleaded, and compared the African-American journey to the Children of Israel. *Thirty years and we're still wandering the desert.*

Jesse Jackson stepped off the stage and invited us to the gym floor where volunteers with forms waited. Some of us would be eighteen in 1994. *Register, register, register to vote!* We cheered and rose and the surge from the stands pushed me to the crowd below the stage. In slow-mo, the crowd parted, not unlike the sea for those ancient Hebrews, and there was Jesse Jackson walking toward me, smiling. TV made him seem taller. I stepped forward and smiled. We commenced shaking. Vigorous. Manly. His hand was smooth and his eyelids drooped. Thin wiry hair of his mustache went this way and that. He leaned close and asked my name. I answered, pulled closer, and said, "How does it feel to be the most racist man in all of America?"

He raised his eyebrows and turned his head to the side.

Cameras flashed. We kept shaking. Jackson didn't speak. Maybe it was our proximity. Maybe he was just being kind. It wasn't his first handshake rodeo. My question—part-recycled Rush, part-teenaged prank—stopped him cold. In my brief time as a Confederate Republican, I hadn't developed a gunslinger's snarl, but I could smirk. Jackson let go and faded into a sea of hands and hugs. Walking away, I could hear his voice—Register! Register! Register to vote!

VII.

"THE SOUTH WILL RISE AGAIN!" President Reagan declared in Macon, Georgia on October 15, 1984. During Reagan's first term, the Old South was

rising. Despite having signed legislation for a national King Holiday, the President concurred with Senator Jessie Helms that King was likely an un-American socialist. He later called Coretta Scott King to apologize, but the comments echoed similar statements he had made hours after King's murder in 1968. In 1981, as part of a favor to Congressman Trent Lott, who ran his campaign in Mississippi, the President sought to grant tax-exempt status to private schools that excluded minorities in admissions. Overturned by the Supreme Court, the motion nevertheless bolstered Reagan's Southern support.

By 1984, the President's subtle Dixie whistle had become a full-throated Rebel Yell. In Macon, he argued for the line-item veto by saying, "*Do you know that was favored by a leader named Jefferson Davis?*" The President didn't name *what* Davis led, but his audience knew. Just as they knew raising Jeff Davis' ghost near the banks of the Ocmulgee River, a few blocks from the ruins of a Confederate armory and war laboratory, had little to do with the line item veto.

President Reagan appealed to our Confederate past and Georgia Bulldog pride. Herschel left for professional ball in 1983, but we still loved our Dawgs. Near the end of the speech, he says only one country can claim that jobs, investment, and productivity are up. Only one country can claim new frontiers in technology and space. "*Its initials are U.S.A. And as you all might say, how 'bout them Dawgs? But let me just add one thing. You ain't seen nothin' yet.*"

Confederate reveries, college football slogans, Bachmann Turner Overdrive—it didn't make sense, but it didn't have to. The President's campaign manager, Roger Ailes, captured the paradox by noting that the truth didn't matter if we liked him. And as Southerners, we loved him. He forgave us our sins. Jeff Davis *was* a good leader. The South *would* rise again. Washington was the *enemy*. We hadn't seen nothing yet. Indeed. Who was paying attention?

VIII.

STANDING ON THE CHILLY TOP of Stone Mountain, I watched the rush hour smog and haze hang over Atlanta like artillery smoke. The city choked as

I breathed deep. I'd just finished running at Stone Mountain Park—five miles around the granite hill and then a mile straight up.

After school my junior year, I'd drive to Stone Mountain, a theme park devoted to Confederate memory. On the mountain's face, there's a carving relief of General Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis. The mountain was once headquarters for the Klan, but generations of Atlanta families have visited the park for its petting zoo, Putt-Putt courses, wooded trails, laser show, and water parks. For Atlanta teens, the Lost Cause theme park is a great place to get lost.

I had my own Lost Cause at Stone Mountain. I was trying to get faster, quicker. Determined not to get cut next year from another basketball team, I ran around the mountain and then sprinted over exposed roots and jagged rocks to the top. I tried not to wonder why I, a five-eleven white boy, had fallen in love with basketball. I knew white men couldn't jump, but I still imagined transforming into a lightning quick shooter, transferring, and lighting up Shamrock.

Stone Mountain was a big enough backdrop for my teenage angst. Off the mountain, I rechanneled my resentment into a search for historical identity. Mistakes were made. At school, I began wearing a Confederate flag t-shirt to class. On the front left chest was the flag. On the back, in red letters, a message read: HERITAGE NOT HATE. When I walked into classes, my teachers, black and white, shifted their eyes and used only my last name when calling on me. The truth was making them uncomfortable, I told myself.

My Confederate heritage extended to my Great-Great-Grandfather Curry, who fought for the Confederacy at the age of fourteen, in the battle of Bentonville. I honored his service by reading books like *The South Was Right* and *America's Cesar*. I read turgid excerpts of Jefferson Davis memoirs arguing the war was never about slavery. I was also reading the fiction of Ayn Rand espousing the virtues of unrestrained capitalism, radical individualism, and the moral force of the free market. You might imagine what easy company I made at family gatherings and holidays.

These books confirmed what I already knew about myself and my country. We once lived in a heroic land, but liberal historians and educa-

tors had softened America. Bloodshed in the South had sanctified a past where men had fought simply to defend their homes from invasion. Their deaths, and by default my heritage, were dishonored daily.

While my classmates headed to Stone Mountain Park to smoke pot and screw around in the bushes, I ascended the granite mountaintop with sure steps and shin splints. The pain didn't matter. Pain was mental, I told myself. An obstacle. Standing above Atlanta, exhausted, I stirred mighty visions of myself—*defeated yet unconquered*—as the hero of some unwritten epic facing an enemy who was everywhere at once and nowhere at all.

IX.

"I LOVE DRAMA, sports, and politics. Not always in that order," Ronald Reagan explains in his 1965 memoir *Where's the Rest of Me?* Of the sports Reagan loved, college football and its myths shaped the course of his life the most. Reagan played as an unspectacular lineman at Eureka College (*The Golden Tornadoes*) and landed his first job at the radio station WOC in Davenport, Iowa as a college football broadcaster for the Iowa Hawkeyes.

College football offered Reagan a crash course in race relations. Progressive Eureka College, in central Illinois, was far ahead of the curve. In 1928, Reagan played with black teammates like lineman Franklin 'Burky' Burkhardt and fullback Eudall 'Lump' Watts, who Reagan corresponded with until Watts' death in 1990. When the team was denied a hotel room in Dixon, Illinois, Reagan took his black teammates to his parents' home as guests.

During games, Burky was often the target of brutal, racist attacks. Once it got so bad Reagan wanted to help. But Burky said he'd handle it. By the fourth quarter, Reagan recalls, the opponent who'd called Burky "black bastard" is whipped. The racist opponent weeps and apologizes to Burky saying, "you're the whitest man I've ever known." Reagan and the unnamed opponent from the unnamed team apparently understood this as a compliment. Burky's response is unknown.

As an announcer of Iowa football in 1935, Reagan chronicled the breathtaking exploits of All-American running back Ozzie Simmons, one of college football's first black players. Integration, for Simmons, was

harrowing. A year earlier, Jack Trice, a black player at Iowa State, had been singled out during a game against Minnesota and literally beaten to death.

The stories of football and race make for compelling reading in Reagan's memoir, but it's his acting role as Notre Dame running back George Gipp in the 1940 film *Knute Rockne, All American* that steals the spotlight. Reagan came across the story of The Gipper while working at WHO. The facts of George's Gipp's demise are that shortly after his last collegiate game in 1920, he died of pneumonia. Legend holds that on his death bed, Gipp told Rockne that if the boys were ever down in a tough game, to encourage them "to win just one for the Gipper." Eight years later, at half-time of the Army game, Rockne did exactly that and Notre Dame won. News of Rockne's speech captured the imagination of America, especially one radio announcer with acting ambitions. In auditions, Warner Brothers gave Reagan a cold shoulder until he presented photos of his Eureka football days. He got the audition and the role of a lifetime.

In the movie, Reagan scores touchdowns and celebrates by spending Saturday nights chatting with the Rockne family in their living room next to the fire. After the Northwestern game, he tells Mrs. Rockne that Coach Rockne has given him "something they don't teach in schools. Something clean and strong inside. Not just courage, but a right way of living."

In real life, George Gipp drank, smoked, hustled pool, skipped practice, got expelled, played illegal professional ball, made large bets on Notre Dame games, and never called himself "The Gipper." It was a name, like the deathbed speech, Rockne likely invented. A name that sportswriter Grantland Rice made famous. A name that Reagan shined with stardust.

The Gipper was Reagan's big break. His success must have encouraged in him a mercurial sense of history—a fluidity of time and place, fact and fiction, that served him in politics. While campaigning, Reagan often recalled how segregation ended in the armed services when a "Negro-kitchen detail" (Dorrie Miller) manned a machine gun at Pearl Harbor. When reporters noted that Truman's Executive Order 9981 didn't end military segregation until 1948, Reagan disagreed. He told biographer Lou Cannon, "I remember the scene. It was very powerful." As Cannon

and Gary Wills note, Reagan couldn't have remembered the scene. He was anchored in the studios of Culver City, California, but a similar scene is found in the 1943 film *Air Force*. Reagan was also fond of telling the story of a B-17 pilot who rode his plane down with a wounded gunner. An incredible story of shared sacrifice—but who would've survived to tell it? And why does the exact scene appear in the 1944 film *A Wing and a Prayer*?

As President, when Reagan wasn't mistaking movies for history, he imagined making movies of history. In 1983, he told Yitzhak Shamir that he personally filmed the liberation of Nazi Death Camps for the signal corps. He repeated the claim to Simon Wiesenthal. It's an amazing account, namely because it didn't happen. When Hezbollah released the 39 TWA hostages, Reagan said, "Boy, after seeing *Rambo* last night, I know what to do the next time this happens." Someday, he told Ollie North after Iran-Contra, your story will make a great movie.

In his public and personal life, Reagan's optimism and faith in movie magic shielded him from complex problems. In explaining to James Baker why he hadn't opened his briefing book before an economic summit, Reagan said, "Well Jim, *The Sound of Music* was on last night." In his own memoir, Michael Reagan recalls telling his parents in 1987 about being molested as a boy at a summer camp and his father only being able to "gaze into the distance out the window."

As a young footballer at Eureka, Reagan gave shelter to black teammates spurned by a racist hotel owner. As Governor of California and President of the United States, he summoned his powers of persuasion to try and uphold the rights of the hotel owner. 'Burky' and 'Lump' and Ozzie Simmons never played much in Reagan's speeches. The Gipper was his role. And Reagan played it with aplomb. He was the only one who could. In his memoir—on the subject of The Gipper—Reagan cautions, "It's hard to tell where legend ends and reality begins."

x.

WE HAD ORDERS. Do not engage the enemy. Do not separate from the unit. Reporters and protestors would be waiting. We were marching at noon. We were marching on the capital. We were marching to save the flag. It

was 1994. Georgia's Governor Zell Miller and liberal scalawags wanted to rid Georgia's state flag of its Confederate battle emblem.

I picked up the cause from some Confederate re-enactors I met at Stone Mountain. They were drilling with plastic rifles on the front lawn and I stopped to watch. Surprisingly middle-aged and well-fed for war ravaged Confederates, they chatted with me after their maneuvers. We talked, not about the glorious past, but our current Age of Depravity—Hillary, the Coming Race War, Hillary's husband, a One-World UN Government, Hillary's Arkansas land deals, and our endangered state flag. They gave me the coordinates for the march.

We rendezvoused in downtown Atlanta under a mist and fog. Our ranks were small, like the original Confederates, maybe two dozen. Leading our unit, forming a phalanx of fake rifles and black umbrellas, were the chubby, bearded re-enactors and business professionals who wore Confederate flag lapel pins on three piece Italian suits. Behind them were the college kids in North Face rain gear, khakis, and ball-caps. Years later, I'd acquaint myself with their tribesman at the University of Georgia—brothers of Kappa Alpha, Finance majors, often with double first-names, *John Patrick, Thomas Jonathan, Joshua Wesley*. I fell in toward the rear alongside the men with mullets who carried homemade airbrushed Confederate flags they sold at flea markets. Complete with skulls, crossbones, and skeletons brandishing swords, the flags looked part of some lost Confederate pirate fleet. My wardrobe consisted of a Confederate private's cap.

We marched. Rain fell. Traffic slowed. Heads turned.

For all its pageantry, marching was dreary. I felt a cold coming. My breath was shallow, my nose running. I listened as a KA told a Confederate pirate, "You disgrace the sacred cross of St. Andrew's with such cartoon images." The pirate shrugged and said the flag was a top seller. Through the fog, blocks from the capital, we met a group of protestors—a few black women in raincoats. They stood quietly on the sidewalk holding homemade signs. Their presence didn't have the impact I'd anticipated. I swallowed hard as the rain beat against their unblinking faces.

We marched onto the capital grounds, past the statue of Confederate General John B. Gordon, and into the rotunda where we were greeted by news cameras. I was still blinking and blowing my nose as a leader from

the Sons of Confederate Veterans, flown in from Florida, gave a speech on heritage and the danger of tyranny. We gave a final Rebel Yell and called it good.

On the MARTA train home, whirring past Waffle Houses and bare dogwoods, I couldn't stop coughing. An older black man in the hard orange seat next to me offered me a cough drop. I tipped my cap. Turning the lemon lozenge over in my mouth, I didn't get feel-good-liberal-fuzzies, but I wondered—who, exactly, was taking my heritage? What was my heritage? So I had an ancestor who fought for the South. I had two more who fought for the North. Heritage was a choice, a matter of selection and emphasis. Or as Robert Penn Warren writes in *The Legacy of the Civil War*, "To be an American is not a matter of blood; it is a matter of an idea." I didn't have words for any of this yet. Those words and the dawning of awareness would come later in the solitude of a college dorm room, reading James Baldwin and Malcolm X. But my politics and historical stances were, like so much of adolescence, poses—a mixture of self-pity and nostalgia; a ready-made, passive-aggressive racism, dressed up as Heritage. I'd become a Confederate the way some in high school took to Vegetarianism or Kurt Cobain. Resting my head on my shoulder, I drifted as the train sped over the rain-slick streets of Decatur.

That night, I poked at my soup as my parents quizzed me about Algebra. It was our nightly dinner table routine. Since the ninth grade, I'd failed Algebra three times, each time, worse. After the last failure, my father put his arm around me and asked if I could at least try to fail better. As a junior, in a classroom of freshmen, I felt stuck in a not so distant past.

I told my parents I'd skipped Algebra and rode MARTA downtown to march on the state capital to save the flag from tyranny. My dad looked at me and then to my mom.

"What's tyranny?" my little sister Amy asked.

I tried to muster the energy to speak.

"Well," my dad said, "okay. When's your next Algebra test?"

I sighed, my perpetual response for all things Algebra. My parents would usually press more, but maybe they sensed some new weariness. I'm not sure they believed my virtual war story, but while we cleaned the

table, Channel 5 WAGA local news ran a story on the state flag controversy. My family froze slack jawed around our kitchen TV. There I was. The televised me, sending a Rebel Yell skyward. I looked pretty good for a red-nosed Confederate.

At my desk that night, my brain a swirl of Nyquil and quadratic equations, I felt a heat, like an electric blanket slowly warming. The day hadn't been a total loss. I'd accomplished something uniquely American, something no one could ever take from me. I'd been on TV.

XI.

"WHAT HAPPENS," Gary Wills asks at the end of *Reagan's America*, "when we look into our historical rearview mirror, all we can see is a movie?" Our national Civil War misremembering began with the film industry itself in 1915 and *Birth of a Nation*—a pastiche of historical distortion that reinforced the politics of Jim Crow. In 1939, the premiere of *Gone with the Wind* cast a century of silvery moonlight on Confederate honor. By 1951 and Ronald Reagan's *Cavalry Charge*, misremembering our Civil War had become an American pastime.

Set on the Santa Fe Trail in 1862, *Cavalry Charge* shows two brothers from Baltimore—Confederate Captain Vance Britton (Reagan) and Yankee Jeb Britton (Bruce Bennett)—waging war by hiding in trees and under wagons to surprise each other. Pistols are pulled, but conflict is calmed with a few words and ironic smiles. The bullets are saved for Apache—"the enemy of the white race," Reagan assures us. The plot thickens when Reagan's past flame, Jill (Rhonda Fleming) who he left at the altar, returns. Sparks don't fly and *Cavalry Charge* tries to be a love story without any love in the same way it's a Civil War movie without a Civil War.

We get a hint of the real Civil War when Jill confronts Reagan in a hotel room about why he jilted her back in Baltimore. Reagan, for once, is speechless and Jill turns away. Finally, Reagan says, "I was afraid you wouldn't understand my choosing the Confederacy." With the elephant now in the room, Jill says, "No, I wouldn't have understood, but I would have forgiven you." Reagan takes her into his arms. They kiss firmly and gaze at each other. They keep gazing.

This is 1862. It's a time to make war. Not love. Apache are on the move. We don't get insight into Reagan's hard decision to join the Confederacy or what Jill will forgive. Townsfolk grab rifles. Women and children bolt doors. The Apache attack. Things look bleak until Reagan rallies the Confederate cavalry to team up with the Yanks. Together, they blast the Apache warriors who die with great nobility—looking skyward, clutching their hands to their hearts.

After the Apache are vanquished, Reagan mounts his horse and leads the Rebels down Main Street to the warm looks of Yankee soldiers and citizens. Confederate forces have done it again. The South will rise again, a good thing because if American history has taught us anything it's that Apache can shape-shift easily, every four years, into Commies, Blacks, Gays, Mexicans, and Muslims. As the gray riders gallop into the desert, Reagan lets out a Rebel Yell. His smile and saber dazzle in the sun. We forgive him for choosing the Confederacy and declaring war on the federal government. He had to destroy it so he could save it. Like Jill, we don't understand, but we forgive. How could we not? We've been forgiving him for so long now.

XII.

THE SUMMER BEFORE my wife and I moved to Indiana, a man named Jim David Adkisson walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, a church that we sometimes visited. We weren't there when Adkisson entered the sanctuary carrying a guitar case while the congregation watched a children's musical. I don't remember where we were. In the guitar case, Adkisson had stashed a Remington Model 48 12-gauge shotgun.

The first shot that rang out was mistaken by many as a sound effect from the stage. The second and third shots left two dead and seven injured. Adkisson was wrestled to the ground, arrested, and faces a life sentence without parole. Before the murders, he wrote a four-page letter stating his wish to stop liberals and Democrats from "destroying America." The church is known for welcoming gays and its strong stances on tolerance, Civil Rights, and social justice. At Adkisson's home, officials

found the literature of Bill O'Reilly, Michael Savage (*Liberalism is a Mental Disorder*), and Sean Hannity (*Let Freedom Ring*).

Like millions of Americans, Jim David Adkisson was unemployed and afraid. In his letter, he expresses fear of poverty and the gnawing emptiness of days without work. A Vietnam vet, he felt he'd cheated death before, but now feared the threat of terrorism. He decided to act. "Lately," he writes, "I've been feeling helpless about our war on terrorism. But I realized I could engage the terrorist's allies here in America. The best allies they've got. The Democrats! [sic]"

During his period of sporadic employment, Adkisson had plenty of time to follow the news. Perhaps he saw Sean Hannity on Fox News on July 15, 2005 say, "I'll tell you who should be tortured and killed at Guantanamo—every filthy Democrat in the U.S. Congress." Maybe he heard Michael Savage's July 6, 2006 radio broadcast that compared Liberalism to "the HIV virus . . . it weakens the defense cells of a nation." Or maybe he tuned into Savage's April 3rd 2008 broadcast and heard: "Now we have an unknown stealth candidate who went to a madrassa in Indonesia and, in fact, was a Muslim." "It makes me so angry!" Adkisson writes, regarding liberal Democrats wanting America to lose the war on terror, "I can't live with it anymore!" The might not be exact, but the logic is clear: if liberals are America's enemies, extremism and violence are not vices.

It's hard to picture Ronald Reagan—with his affable charm and essential humanity—as the hero to this generation of conservative leaders and followers. Reagan seems more like your favorite uncle or kindly neighbor. He loved macaroni and cheese and jelly beans. He believed in the existence of space aliens. He sent the Iranian mullahs a decorative cake and Bible verses when he sold them tow missiles. After an assassin's bullet barely missed his heart, he told Nancy, "Honey, I forgot to duck." Regardless, with the abolition of the fairness doctrine and his mantra of the federal government as 'the problem, not the solution,' Reagan launched countless careers in the entertainment industry of hate who continue, daily, to feed the fantasies of the next Tim McVeigh, Eric Rudolph, and Jim David Adkisson.

For Confederate Republicans, Reagan's greatest gift is a sentimental permissiveness with the past, an ignorance reaching for innocence. Last

year, Republican Governor Bob McDonnell of Virginia followed the lead of Republican Governors Haley Barbour of Mississippi and Sonny Perdue of Georgia, by declaring April Confederate History Month. Critics railed against the observance's failure to mention slavery. In Georgia, we yawned. Our observance, like Virginia's, holds no mention of slavery, but has plenty to say about tourism. In defense of the omission, Governor Barbour said, "It's trying to make a big deal out of something that doesn't matter for diddly." To walk 'diddly' across the language bridge—we Southerners use 'diddly' to suggest 'insignificant' or 'small' and often use its extended forms of *diddly-squat* or *diddly-shit*.

Of course, for actual Confederate leaders like Jefferson Davis, and like former Georgia governor and Confederate Vice-President Alexander H. Stevens, slavery was the Cornerstone of the Confederacy. In 1861 Stevens said that the Confederacy was founded on the "great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition. "While slavery may not have been the single cause of the war, it was the cause of the Confederacy. You see it in each state's declaration of secession. Historian David Blight notes that by 1860 slaves were the largest financial asset of property in the US, with an estimated worth near three and a half-billion dollars. Adjusted for inflation, that's seventy-five billion dollars. Not diddly.

The truth is that the human marketplace was the engine of the Southern economy. And while we can't know what was in each Confederate heart, we do know what was at the heart of the Confederacy. Historian Edward Ayers writes, "Southern white men did not fight for slavery; they fought for a new nation built on slavery." Perhaps then it's the business-savvy of these governors to whitewash slavery from Confederate memory. From a tourism promotion angle, slavery is a hard sell for the family getaway. "Visiting Reaganland," Gary Wills writes, "is very much like taking children to Disneyland . . . It is a safe past, with no sharp edges to stumble against." Protecting the illusion of such a past might be enough to drive a man to violence—with a little encouragement. So our days in Reaganland continue. We live in the blur between a present of carnival barkers selling doom and a past that's been permanently Cracker Barreled.



XIII.

CARS AND TRUCKS whiz by on Indiana's Paoli Pike, a winding, two lane road that cuts through the knobs of New Albany overlooking Louisville. I'm on the shoulder, walking through weeds, collecting trash, and thinking about Polly Campbell. She died long ago and is likely buried in one of the graves a few hundred yards downhill from where I'm picking up Klondike bar wrappers, shredded White Castle bags, and half-empty cans of Bud Light.

I used to drive by the sign for Freedom Land Cemetery without a clue of what it was. One day, I pulled over and started looking around. Freedom Land was once 'The Old Colored People's Cemetery' in New Albany. Most of the dead were buried between 1850 and 1910. Some, like Polly Campbell, were former slaves who'd made their way across the Ohio River. New Albany was often a bittersweet gateway for slaves escaping the South. While a crucial step closer to freedom, the highland knobs were patrolled by slave hunters on horseback, armed posses, who'd kidnap runaway slaves and freedmen for riches in Louisville.

In her book *The Underground Railroad in Floyd County*, Pamela Peters notes that Polly Campbell was born in Meader County, Virginia, 1813, sold several times—separated from her family—and became a house slave at a plantation near Vicksburg, Mississippi. When Grant captured the city, she fled to the 53rd regiment of Indiana Volunteers where she worked for General Walter Gresham of New Albany. She stayed on in the Union camp before traveling to New Albany on a steamboat loaded with the wounded and dying. In New Albany, she served as a nurse in a military hospital caring for waves of wounded, the amputees, the diseased, howling men, calling for water, screaming in pain. Late in the war, one of her patients was General Gresham, who'd been shot and wounded at the battle of Peachtree Creek in Decatur, Georgia.

In 1908, Polly Campbell, age 95, a long-time New Albany resident and house servant, died in the County Poor House. For her service to her country, she never received a dime. For her entire life others made selfish use of her. Now, as a character in an essay, perhaps I am too.

After bagging the trash and tossing it into the bed of my pickup, I walk down the winding trail toward the graves. Alone in the woods, it's hard

not to think of Georgia, the trails of my youth, and the heroes who've come and gone. Herschel Walker has remained fixed in my pantheon and on a summer evening in 1999, I bumped into him in Athens. I was a student at the university and rounded the corner of Jackson Street when I came face-to-face with the Apollo figure in a black t-shirt and tan slacks. At that instant, I didn't think of the other sidewalk in Decatur from years earlier or all the roads in between. I just smiled: that goofy celebrity-dazed smile. I want to say Herschel smiled too, but that might be a trick of memory.

While memory remains, so do spirits lingering back home. In February 2011, in that same college town, Georgia Republican Congressman Paul Broun held a town hall meeting where a constituent asked him when someone was finally going to shoot President Obama. The crowd responded with laughter. Representative Broun said he understood "frustrations" and expressed hope for future Republican victories. He didn't mention how he often stokes this rage by comparing the President to Hitler, Stalin, or the Affordable Health Care Act to "Yankee aggression." Instead, he let the threat of violence hang in the air. In January 2012 during the Republican Primary in South Carolina, Newt Gingrich repeatedly called President Obama, "the Food Stamp President," to a roaring crowd that propelled Gingrich to Republican victory.

"The past," Faulkner writes, "is never dead. It's not even past."

Faced with the past and these nameless graves, I try not to linger. This isn't my place of ancestral memory. I'm aware of the stereotypes I'm stepping into—Guilty White Guy, Drive-by-Do-Gooder—but I don't feel guilty or that I'm doing much good. Down here, I like how the pines bend the sunlight, casting shadows that suggest a past when Paoli Pike was a trail cut by herds of bison roaming from Illinois prairie to salt licks in Kentucky. Down here, a part of me is a kid, playing backyard Civil War. I also know I'm not the only tourist who comes down here.

On YouTube, *GhostlyEncounters101* has uploaded a video of his paranormal team investigation of Freedom Land last November. The ten-minute footage documents a three-man ghost search after reports of strange lights and sightings of apparitions at Freedom Land.

Watching the video, it's hard not to feel a sense of trespass. It's also

hard to detect any paranormal activity. There's a distant roar of a jet, the rustle of leaves, and the wind blowing through the trees. The afternoon gray sky blankets the earth as the men search behind fallen branches and sunken graves. Their work, in a sense, is almost admirable. Alert and calm, their faces suggest anticipation and patience. They're waiting for the dead, listening for what word, if any, the dead might bring.

That time we strolled
 through dense, old-growth forests
 in Western Pennsylvania,
 Sasha grabbed my arm
 his fingers jittery, pleaded
There's too much Nature.
 Dressed in his perpetual
 suit and tie, polished
 leather loafers, his incongruity
 designed, it seemed, for a joke,
 I laughed. He shook
 his cigarette in my face
*It's too much. No one
 can live with so much.
 It will make you crazy.*
 I turned forward, walked
 ahead through the forest,
 through my life.

Former intelligentsia,
 chess master, spy
 Sasha once carved the words
CIA martyr in his chest
 with a penknife, staggered
 to a plaza, open-armed
 demanding all to look—
 only the police admitted
 witness. Swaddled
 in a straightjacket, hustled