"I wish I was in the land of cotton, old times there are not forgotten..." — lyric from Dixie.

Actually, old times there are forgotten quite a bit.

For 145 years, ever since a grim-faced Robert E. Lee rode away from Wilmer McLean’s house in Appomattox, Va., where he had surrendered his army, apologists for the South have been trying to induce the rest of us to forget the causes of the Civil War, to imbue an act of treachery and treason with a nobility of purpose it did not, in fact, possess.


It is the social and political equivalent of an extreme makeover. The thinking seems to be: when history collides with cherished self image, change history.

Something very similar seems to be afoot with regard to a related event much closer to us in time: the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s.

Just a few months ago, we saw conservative activist Glenn Beck claim ownership of that movement, in defiance of historical memory. "...[W]e were the people that did it in the first place!" he cried.

Last week, in an essay in the Washington Post, University of Virginia Professor Gerard Alexander analyzed voting trends from the civil rights era to bolster his thesis that social conservatism is not intolerant. Somehow, he never got around to explaining how it is, then, that social conservatives were always the ones standing in schoolhouse doors, blockading polling places, burning buses, and cracking skulls.

And now, here's Haley Barbour. The governor of Mississippi raised eyebrows and blood pressures a few weeks ago when, in an interview with Human Events, a conservative website and magazine, he credited his generation of white Southerners with leading the South into a new era of integration. It was, he said, "my generation, who went to integrated schools. I went to integrated college -- never thought twice about it."
Barber is 62. In the Mississippi of his youth, he legally could not have gone to integrated schools. As for college: he attended Ole Miss in 1965; three years before, the attempt by a single black man, James Meredith, to enroll there required negotiations between the attorney general and the governor and ultimately, the intercession of U.S. marshals; a riot ensued in which over 100 marshals were injured and two people killed.

Pressed on this in a later interview, Barbour doubled down. Those years of forced integration were, he said, "a very pleasant experience." He singled out a black classmate, Verna Bailey, with whom he said he developed a friendly rapport. They sat next to each other, she let him copy her notes. "I still love her," he said.

So Margaret Talev of McClatchy Newspapers called Bailey, now an educator in Oregon. "I don't remember him at all, no," said Bailey, "because during that time that certainly wasn't a pleasant experience for me. My interactions with white people were very, very limited. Very, very few reached out at all."

While she didn't remember Barbour, Bailey did remember days when "I thought my life was going to end." She did remember being pelted with coins and beer. She did remember "this mass of anger and hostility." Bailey completed four years of course work in three -- not because she was a great student, she said, but because she couldn't wait to get out of there.

Memory is a funny thing, isn't it?

It softens rough places.

It absolves our sins.

Memory forgives us.

But sometimes, it is morally necessary to forgo that salve, to embrace the rough places and lack of absolution, for the lessons they have to teach.

Apparently, some conservatives still can't bring themselves to do that, even now.

That's truly sad. When history collides with self-image, it is not history a principled person seeks to change.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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