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Controversy binds anniversaries

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By Bill Torpy
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The fire that long ago consumed Atlanta was commemorated last week with a new historical marker.

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But instead of promoting discussion on one of the pivotal events of the Civil War, it became more of a flash point in the South's ongoing dialogue about race and perspective.

The state installed the plaque on a stretch of road that once went through the heart of Atlanta's business district, but is now [Martin Luther King Jr. Drive](#).

The NAACP requested the marker be moved, with the organization's state leader calling the thoroughfare "sacred

ground."

"We don't think the Civil War should be celebrated or commemorated," said Edward DuBose, Georgia's NAACP chapter president. "It should be a time the nation should repent. We see it as a group of people wanting to preserve slavery."

Former state Labor Commissioner Michael Thurmond, a black historian who spoke at the marker's unveiling, rejected that argument and said in an interview, "It's historically accurate where it is placed. The burning of Atlanta was one of the significant victories of the Civil War. It was a death blow to the Confederacy. The burning of Atlanta, in effect, helped spur the civil rights movement."

He understands that many African-Americans have problems with Civil War remembrances. Too often, he said, the war has been mythologized as the noble "Lost Cause," with black involvement trivialized. But he encourages people to talk and even argue.

"It's good to know people are interested," he said. "Competing theories are good. Conflict and debate are important. That's what makes history exciting."

If so, history should be very exciting over the next four years.

Parallel anniversaries

Commemorations of the Civil War began in earnest last week with the sesquicentennial of the April 12, 1861, attack on Fort Sumter. The ceremonies and remembrances revolving around the war will parallel a parade of 50th anniversaries marking events of the civil rights movement. Next up, the Freedom Rides, which started May 4, 1961.

The Civil War and civil rights movement are two seismic American events, rooted in the South and still very much alive. They foster ancestral pride and are touch points for political argument — states' rights, for instance. During this year's remembrances, Southern states are hoping to lure legions of Civil War buffs and civil rights supporters to events scattered throughout the year.

The tourism opportunities are not lost on the state, said Kevin Langston, deputy commissioner at the Georgia Department of Economic development.

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He said the state has spent \$380,000 this year setting up a website, publishing books and buying ads to market Civil War events and sites. A similar campaign will start in the next two years for civil rights sites and events, especially in conjunction with the civil rights museum which he expects to open in Atlanta in 2013.

"It's a terrific opportunity for tours that combine the Civil War and civil rights," Langston said.

Meanwhile, the Georgia Historical Society, with state funding, has over the last year been erecting a series of 13 new Civil War markers (the one on MLK Drive is the latest), said president Todd Groce.

Such memorials and happenings can raise interest not only in those particular events but in groups like the NAACP or the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Members of both those groups say they will use the opportunity of the anniversaries to get across their talking points and bring in new members.

"Every time we get heavy criticism, we get a lot more recruits," said Jeff Davis, a retired TV journalist from Gainesville who is a longtime SCV member and chairman of the Georgia Heritage Council, a group born when controversy swirled a decade ago around the changing of the Georgia state flag.

"The history (of the war) has been turned into a one-issue event," said Davis, who is happy to carry the name of the Confederate president. "I'm not saying slavery was not an issue. It was. But there were so many other issues."

Civil War and civil rights events will both compete for attention and complement each other, say historians and members of heritage and civil rights groups.

"I don't think they'll crowd each other out," said Clifford Kuhn, a Georgia State University history professor.

'Old South or New?'

Still, Atlanta long has been awkward at dealing with such issues, said Kuhn.

"Are we the Old South or the New South? They are wrestling with the story, or stories, they want to tell about the Civil War. It's a charged event," he said. "We're dealing with race and slavery. Those are charged issues. They aren't neat and clean and pleasant."

Even the civil rights movement, almost universally hailed as a force for good, generates controversy.

"There has been a backlash to the movement," Kuhn said. Debate has erupted over minority hiring, acceptance in schools or contract set-asides. And even renaming streets, often changing the names of Confederate icons to civil rights heroes, brings a feeling of resentment to some whites, he said, as it represents a transfer of political power.

Kuhn said marker dispute probably won't be isolated.

"I think we'll see more of these types of encounters," Kuhn said.

Dan Coleman, an attorney from Douglas County and spokesman for the state chapter of the SCV, said this round of Civil War commemorations (he calls it the War Between the States) will be sanitized compared to those 50 years ago, when Southerners unabashedly celebrated their heritage.

The plaques erected today tend to say Southerners were fighting a war that was only about slavery, said Coleman, whose group is now in demand for comment from the media and civic groups. "I'm opposed to people revising history and those who tell others what they can honor and respect."

Davis, the Georgia Heritage Council chief, wrote in an essay that his and other such organizations are engaged "in a real war to capture the minds" against academics, media and "dedicated groups of certified left-wingers with goals of destroying the Constitution for fun and profit."

Americans are still divided on their observations of the war. Last week, CNN released a poll showing 42 percent of Americans say slavery was not the main reason for the war, compared to 54 percent who say it was.

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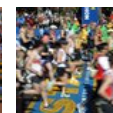
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Thurmond said he welcomes alternate arguments to his but is adamant on one thing: "I think it's significant to recognize African-Americans' roles — on both sides. Their contributions have long been minimized or misinterpreted."

Many of the struggles about race and equality harken back to before the time of the Civil War, evolved during the civil rights movement and continue even now. "The question is what phase we are in," Thurmond said. He hopes those questions continue during the next four years and beyond.

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