Rest Under the Shade of the Trees:’ Fourth Level Agenda Setting and Framing the Civil War and the Lost Cause through Obituaries of Union and Confederate Generals, 1863-1904

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Professor Tom Terry shared his latest scholarship at the Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga in early November. Dr. Terry’s research paper, “Rest Under the Shade of the Trees:’Fourth Level Agenda Setting and Framing the Civil War and the Lost Cause through Obituaries of Union and Confederate Generals, 1863-1904,” was co-authored with Dr. Donald L. Shaw, Kenan Professor Emeritus from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The work merged historical research and social science theory.

The Lost Cause captured the imaginations and romance of southerners in the wake of the former Confederacy’s overwhelming Civil War defeat. It was equal parts ideology, justification, romance, and nostalgia. Modern remnants remain in the deeply divisive controversies over the Confederate battle flag and reenactments of Civil War battles. This Terry-Shaw study employed the theoretical techniques of their new and innovative fourth level of agenda setting, focusing on the micro affects of individual word choices by journalists. They investigated whether the Lost Cause could be discerned in the obituaries of 16 great Civil War generals.

“Rest Under the Trees” develops themes explored in an earlier research paper by the two long-time colleagues, entitled “Rebel Yells and Idle Vaporings: The Lost Cause Rises and Dissipates in the Chicago Tribune, Atlanta Constitution, and New York Times, 1860-1914.” Over roughly the same 40-year period as the present research, Dr. Shaw and Dr. Terry discovered a dramatic rise and then significant fall in mentions of the Lost Cause in newspapers representing the three important regions of the Civil War (North, the then-West, South). However, in the current study there were only two oblique allusions to the Lost Cause in the reports of the deaths of the most prominent Confederate and Union generals.

Shaw and Terry contend that the controversies and the bitterness – at least for individuals – over the Civil War waned far faster than most historians have previously believed, though they caution far more research and evaluation is necessary before anything definitive can be claimed. “The wounds seemed to have healed faster,” Dr. Terry indicated, “at least judging from the newspaper coverage in our two studies.” He added, “That is the value of analyzing contemporary newspaper coverage, to read what people believed and felt and wrote at the time. Journalism has been often referred to as the first draft of history because it represents immediate and unvarnished perspectives.

“It’s hard to construct an elaborate and false or misleading narrative in the frantic pace of putting out a newspaper on a daily or even weekly basis,” Terry continued.

Dr. Shaw is an eminent social scientist, one of the co-founders of the agenda setting theory of the media and arguably the leading American media historian in the world. He pioneered the use of newspaper content analysis as a powerful primary source for scholars. “The content of newspapers reflects the day-to-day judgments of the press at one level,” according to Dr. Shaw, along with “the intrinsic values of a social system and culture at other levels.”
Shaw and Terry also suspect the flowery and often extravagantly complimentary style of obituaries in the 19th Century might have ignored or masked festering political differences. "That possibility clearly argues for considerably more research in other primary sources, such as letters and memoirs," Dr. Terry noted.

The title of the current study came from the last words of Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, mortally wounded at the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863: "Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees."