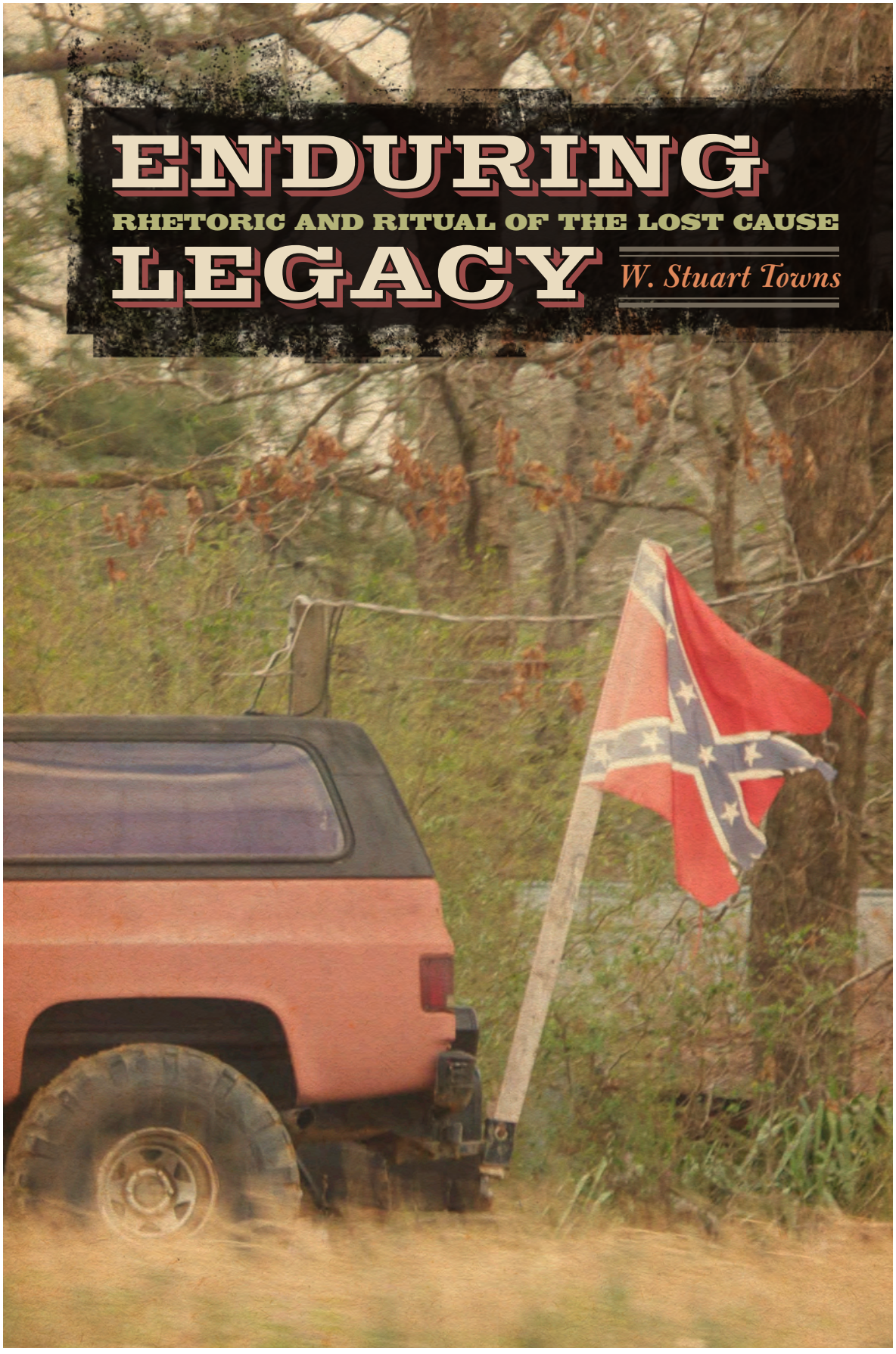
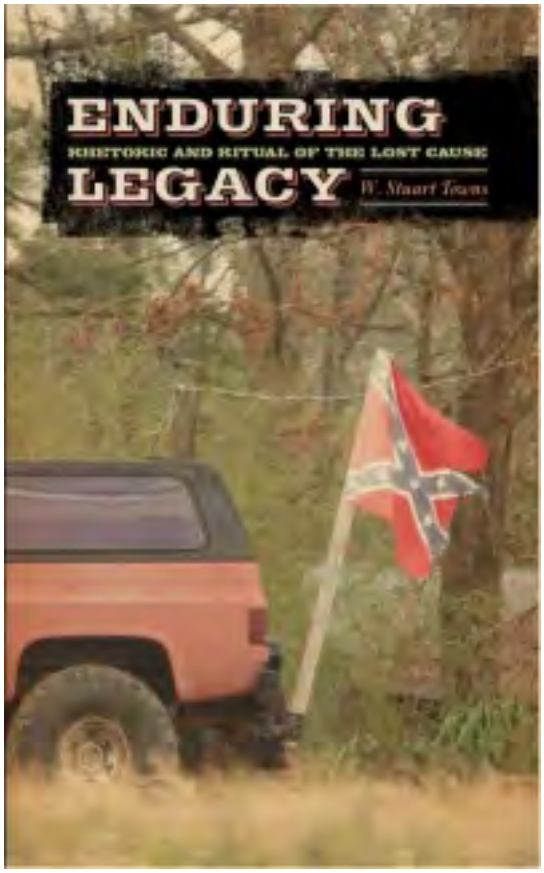

ENDURING
RHETORIC AND RITUAL OF THE LOST CAUSE
LEGACY
W. Stuart Towns

SYNOPSIS – *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause*



W. Stuart Towns, *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause*.

Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause (W. Stuart Towns, 2012) explores the crucial role of the spoken word in creating and propagating a "Lost Cause" public memory of the American South, and explores the vital place of ceremonial oratory in oral tradition in the South.



Towns studies, in detail, post-Civil war southern speeches and how they laid the groundwork for future generations, the southern responses to the Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary debates over the public use of Confederate flags, monuments, and other Confederate memorabilia.

The Lost Cause orators who led the South after the Civil War, Towns argues, helped to shape a lasting mythology of the Confederate martyrs and the southern attitudes regarding the Reconstruction era. Innumerable words were spent – at Confederate Memorial Day celebrations, Confederate veterans' reunions, and Confederate monument dedications – condemning the evils of Reconstruction, redemption for the South, reconciliation with the North, and praising the new and future South.

Towns concludes with an analysis of how Lost Cause memory still influences southern and national perceptions of the region today, as demonstrated in debates and discussion over the continued deployment of the Confederate flag and the popularity of Civil War reenactments.

Charles Reagan Wilson: Director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi
"By careful attention to the ceremonial settings and the persistence of the speech-making themes over several generations, the author shows how the status of the orators, the pervasiveness of the rituals, and the repetition of themes for so long created a new white-dominated southern public identity out of the social chaos, uncertainty, and despair at the end of the Civil War in the South."

Q & A – *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause*

Q: Why did you write *Enduring Legacy*?

A: I have long believed that historical study of public speaking and an understanding of what speakers were communicating to their audiences in years gone by can help us better understand much about the present. My belief in the importance of the study of public communication was reinforced when I began teaching a seminar on rhetoric in the Civil Rights Movement and my students asked, after reading some of the speeches by Governors Orval Faubus and Ross Barnett, and U.S. Senator James Eastland, why intelligent white southerners continued to oppose racial justice and the movement and to defend segregation and racial discrimination. Part, at least, of the answer I gave them lies in the enduring legacy left by the rhetoric of the Lost Cause. The proverbial light bulb went on over their heads as they read some of the Lost Cause speeches I examine in ***Enduring Legacy***. I was intrigued by their responses and wanted to get further into this connection between Lost Cause oratory and those who fought so hard to maintain segregation in the 50s and 60s and those southerners who defend the public use of Confederate flags and other memorabilia in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Of course, there were strong connections, as I quickly found out, so I wrote ***Enduring Legacy***.

Q. Why do you believe it is important to write about the enduring legacy of the Civil War?

A: We have not reached a common ground on the topic of race in America and the South. I believe that a better understanding of how cultural attitudes and public memory on both sides—white and black—were created, would go a long way toward bridging this chasm that still faces us a century and a half after the Civil War. Of course, race is not the only issue facing the South and the nation, but it is a major one.

Q: Why did you focus on the speeches at the three events: Confederate Memorial Day, Confederate veterans reunions, and Confederate monument dedications?

A: These three events were ubiquitous around the South for decades after the war; they all featured an "orator of the day" who created and perpetuated the themes of the Lost Cause. This long-continued repetition imprinted these ideas and perceptions into their audiences across the region and became the foundation of 20th century southern culture and values. This culture of honoring the heritage of the South and its role in the Civil War continues today as demonstrated by the popularity of reenactments and the debates over Confederate monuments and flags.

Q. You focus on the role of public speaking in these events and how it shaped the culture of an entire region. Why?

A. I have a deep respect for the power of the spoken word in American history. We could write a history of the United States as told through its speakers and their public communication. Public speaking from the pulpit, the stump, the bar, the halls of Congress, the city council chambers, and the county commissioner meetings around the country are part and parcel of our heritage and culture. Think about, for example, Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death;" George Washington's "Farewell Address;" Abraham Lincoln's debates with Stephen A. Douglas or his "Gettysburg Address;" Frederick Douglass' "What is the Fourth of July to Me?," Booker T. Washington's, "Atlanta Exposition Address."

We easily and often recall FDR telling the nation, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," and declaring war on Japan because of the "day that will live in infamy" or JFK urging Americans from the steps of the nation's capital, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Who can forget Ronald Reagan's eulogy to the Challenger astronauts or George Bush paying tribute to the victims of 9/11? The list is endless. Few of these speeches we look at in ***Enduring Legacy*** will individually match up in fame with any of those I mentioned, but collectively this body of work shaped an entire region and what is seen today as its heritage.

Q: Where did you find these speeches, some of which are obscure, at best?
A: I searched in major university libraries, state archives and history commissions and departments, public libraries, as well as the Library of Congress and the National Archives. Over time I collected copies of hundreds of southern speeches, most of which were from the post-Civil War era and from the Civil Rights Movement. The obscurity of some speeches doesn't bother me, as I contend that a speech on the county courthouse lawn is as important to its audience as a speech in the halls of Congress—maybe just not as famous.

Q: Many books have been written about the Civil War. What new information does *Enduring Legacy* bring to your readers?
A: There are many excellent books and articles on the post-bellum South, but none of them thoroughly discuss the critical role of rhetoric and oratory in the process of creating the public memory of the Lost Cause. ***Enduring Legacy*** emphasizes and focuses on what I contend is the major force shaping the post-war history and heritage of the South: the oratory of many hundreds of southern speakers. I want all Americans to better understand that history and heritage; ***Enduring Legacy*** tells that story. I'd love to see bi-racial book clubs and groups across the South read and discuss ***Enduring Legacy***, as I believe that both white and black southerners can come a little closer to the tolerance and unity so often called for today across our nation.

Q. What do you want readers to remember about *Enduring Legacy*?
A: Around the South, the past is alive and vivid to many contemporary southerners, black and white. It intrudes upon our lives, infiltrates the present, and attempts to shape, influence, and persuade the future. The Lost Cause orators and orations, the monuments, the reunions, and the celebration of Confederate Memorial Day or Robert E. Lee's birthday attest to our heritage as a region, just as do the marks and remnants of slavery, segregation, discrimination, and racial injustice. All this and more is part of our life story of the South, and this narrative should be—must be—shared, protected, and understood by all Americans who care about our nation. Understanding more about how we got this way, and by reading and understanding the rhetoric of the Lost Cause, we will go a long way toward creating the spirit of unity and tolerance we need throughout our nation in 2012 and beyond.

Bottom line: the rhetoric and ritual of the Lost Cause tells the story of the South.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH – *W. STUART TOWNS*



W. Stuart Towns, Ph.D., has spent more than 40 years following his passion for history. His educational pursuits in his undergraduate and graduate studies developed a love for public speaking and the impact words have had on history, especially Southern history.

The 1950s and 1960s led Dr. Towns to the University of Arkansas on a track and cross-country scholarship; he continued his education at the University of Florida where he received his masters and doctoral degrees in Speech (1962 and 1972 respectively). Through his career he served as chair of the Communication departments at The University of West Florida, Appalachian State University, and Southeast Missouri State University. He retired in 2011.

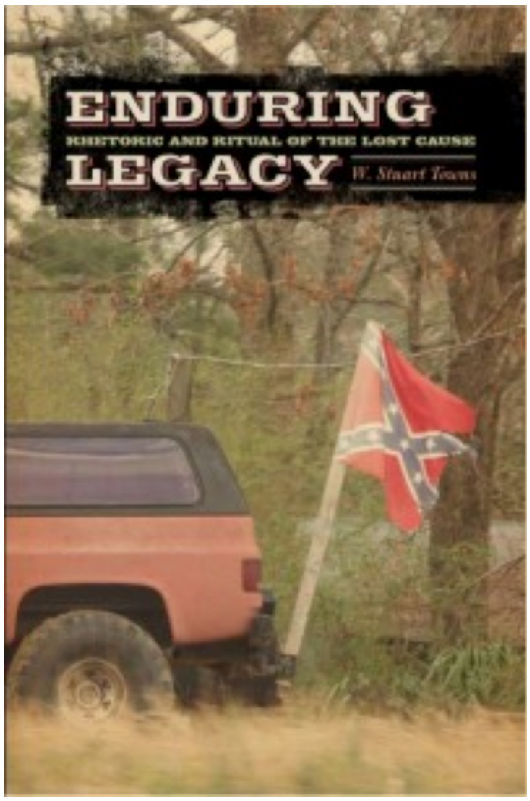
Dr. Towns had a parallel second career in the U.S. Army, which began when he enrolled in R.O.T.C. at the University of Arkansas. He earned a spot on the United States Modern Pentathlon team; he competed in the 1964 Olympic Trials in modern pentathlon, marathon, and fencing. After completing his active duty, Dr. Towns served the rest of his military career in the Active Army Reserves in the Civil Affairs branch, mostly with the 361st CA Brigade in Pensacola, FL. He took an opportunity to become a member of the Consulting Faculty Program at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in 1973 and served in that role until 1996. Dr. Towns retired as a Colonel in the Active Army Reserves in 1996.

Dr. Towns' most recent publication, ***Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause*** (University of Alabama Press, 2012), demonstrates Towns' interest in examining the history of southern rhetoric and oratory. He was working on an anthology of southern speeches and saw that some of the segregationist speakers in the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s were expressing some of the same points and using many of the same words as southern orators from the 1880s and 1890s.
He soon discovered that debates of the 1990s and on into the 21st century over Confederate flags, Confederate monuments, and other memorabilia were still repeating some of the same 19th century messages. The Civil War was alive and well in southern public memory. As a result of seeing that connection, Towns wrote ***Enduring Legacy***.

Enduring Legacy examines the crucial role of rhetoric and ritual in creating and propagating a "Lost Cause" public memory in the South, while exploring the vital place of ceremonial oratory in the regional oral tradition. Towns argues that the Lost Cause orators who led the South in the decades after the Civil War laid much of the foundation for the post-Civil War culture of the South—a foundation which still undergirds much southern memory well into the 21st century.

SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS and Book Orders – *W. STUART TOWNS*

Speaking Engagements



October, 2012
12 - 5:00 PM Forrest City High School Class Reunion, Forrest City Country Club, Forrest City, AR
17 - 6:00 PM Family Night Dinner, First United Methodist Church, Forrest City, AR

November, 2012
15 - 5:00 PM Sons of Confederate Veterans, Franco's Italian Restaurant, Pensacola, FL
26 - 7:00 PM White County Historical Society, Harding Place, Searcy, AR

December, 2012
1- All-day Reenactment of Battle of Prairie Grove, Prairie Grove Battlefield State Historical Park, Prairie Grove, AR

February, 2013
7 - 7:00 PM White Country Civil War Round Table, Harding Place, Searcy, AR
22 - 12:00 noon Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA
26 - 7:00 PM Little Rock Civil War Round Table, Second Presbyterian Church, Little Rock

*Please contact Dr. Towns **stowns@semo.edu** to schedule a speaking engagement.*

Book Orders

*Questions on ordering? Please contact Dr. Towns **stowns@semo.edu***

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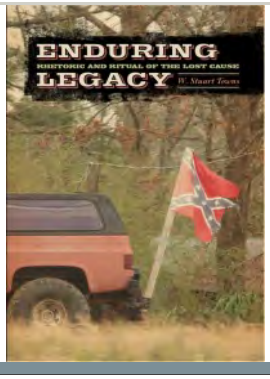
A. The University of Alabama Press, Chicago Distribution Center, 11030 S. Langley, Chicago, IL 60628, OR call 800-621-2736
B. Amazon.com AND BarnesandNoble.com, search *W. Stuart Towns, Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause*

573 – 803 - 7571 *www.WStuartTowns.com* *Forrest City, AR 72335*



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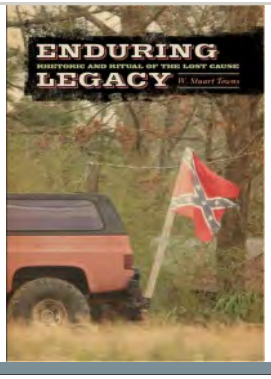

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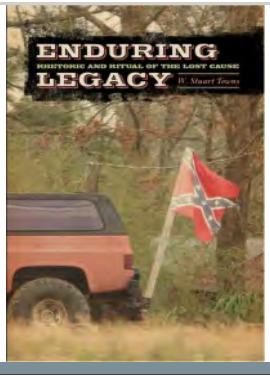

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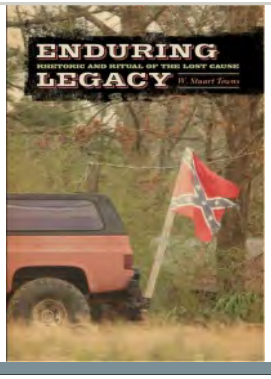

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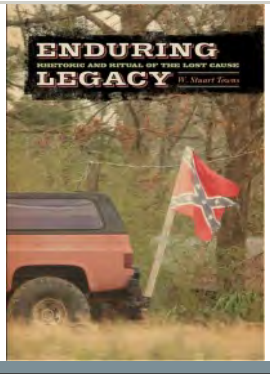

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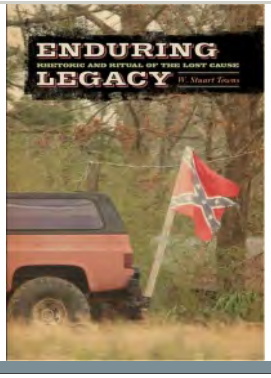

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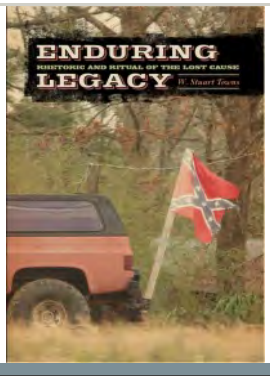

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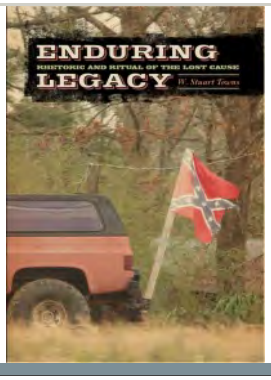

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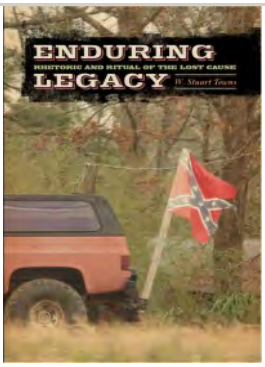

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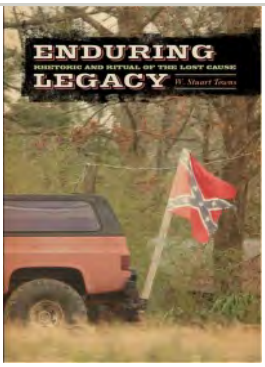

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Review of Enduring Legacy

By **Edward Bonekemper** on the Civil War News Website, August 23, 2012

This thought-provoking book provides insight into why the Civil War continues to stir strong emotions, especially in the South. In the words of the book's dust jacket, W. Stuart Towns, a retired communications studies professor, "explores the crucial role of rhetoric and oratory in creating and propagating a 'Lost Cause' public memory [in] the American South."

Towns shows how Southerners in the decades following the Civil War created and maintained the Myth of the Lost Cause through rhetoric, celebrations and rituals.

He quotes an early 20th-century veterans' reunion speaker in North Carolina who hoped that the reunion and his speech would "serve to demonstrate to you that your sons' sons have learned the lessons of history truly; that we shall teach our children, that they may transmit it to posterity to come."

Further, Towns contends that the Myth of the Lost Cause superseded the actual history of the Civil War and became the accepted version throughout the nation. He quotes speeches delivered throughout the South for decades after the war, all the way into the 1920s, to demonstrate the contents and tenacity of that myth.

Events that lent themselves to this remembrance were Confederate veterans' reunions, Confederate memorial day or decoration day ceremonies and Confederate monument cornerstone dedications and unveilings.

The monuments provided lasting tributes to Confederate heroes and the myth that accompanied the memories they stirred.

The themes that Towns discovered in Southerners' rhetoric included the legality of secession, constitutional liberty and rights, the legitimacy of the right of property in slaves, duty to fight for a just cause, and the holy cause for which Southerners fought.

Building upon these themes, Southern leaders and speakers developed the full-blown Myth of the Lost Cause. That development, says Towns, included deification of Robert E. Lee and near-deification of Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson and President Jefferson Davis. Southern women were idolized, and William T. Sherman was castigated.

War-related myths were followed by a mythical re-creation of Reconstruction: the story of how the Ku Klux Klan saved the South from the "Africanization" being promoted by those damn carpetbaggers and scalawags!

Towns concludes with a chapter on "The Persistence of a Myth," in which he explores the later use of states' rights terminology and Confederate flag symbolism to promote white supremacy and segregation. He concludes with a plea for openness, tolerance and an understanding of Southern history.

This is a must-read book for serious scholars of the Civil War and its historiography.

Book Review Editor and Civil War speaker Ed Bonekemper has written five Civil War books; the most recent is *Lincoln and Grant: The Westerners Who Won the Civil War*.

Review of Enduring Legacy

By Gordon Berg in *America's Civil War*, September 2012, page 69.

The Lost Cause, like William Faulkner's past, is not dead – and, according to W. Stuart Towns, it's not even past. In this deftly reasoned and cogently argued exploration of the rhetoric and ritual associated with the South's most enduring myth, Towns stresses that 20th-century white Southerners learned most of what they feel about race, the North, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and themselves from Lost Cause rhetoric.

A communications professor, Towns examines the public oratory that formed the bedrock of Southern ideology after the war ended. Speeches at Confederate Memorial Day ceremonies, regimental reunions and monument dedications extolled the valued heritage of a white society destroyed by the war. For the formerly ascendant class, Lost Cause ritual and oratory "created a sense of order and community out of the chaos, uncertainty, and despair of defeat."

Towns argues convincingly that Lost Cause orators spread their social vision so effectively and persuasively "that they are still alive today and will remain so well into the future." In the desegregation and civil rights decades of the 1950s and 1960s, he notes, Lost Cause rhetoric "justified, vindicated, defended, and explained states' rights and white supremacy as enduring and fundamental planks of the 'southern way of life.'" Towns finds a clear link between the "right of secession" and "sacred honor" rationales offered by Confederates icons John Bell Hood and John Brown Gordon in the 1870s and the code words "states' rights" and "constitutional liberty" that Governors Ross Barnett and George Wallace used in the 1960s.

Towns hopes the current sesquicentennial commemoration will be used by the North and South to more fully understand the rhetoric underlying what Robert Penn Warren called "the great single event of our history."