



## The Significance of the Civil War in the U.S. Presidential Campaign

Paweł Markiewicz

Protests against racial discrimination in the U.S. have returned the issue of the southern Confederate States' cultural legacy to the American political debate. This has become one of the main themes of the presidential campaign ahead of the November elections. Divisions in American voters' evaluation of these historical events split partially along political lines; however, Donald Trump and Joe Biden share the same goal of exploiting the discussion about this difficult historical period to increase their electorates in key southern states.

**Historical Memory.** The process of politically and culturally reconciling the legacy of the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the 11 states that seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America (CSA or the Confederacy) continues in the U.S. Three differing interpretations of CSA history exist in the modern American national memory. The bipartisan rhetoric of the federal authorities concentrates on the reunion of the North and South as instrumental in maintaining the nation while avoiding blaming the former Confederate states for inciting the war. The memory of many, such as Black Americans or those identifying as progressives, is built around the tradition of the emancipation movement. They emphasize the abolition of slavery, as well as the success of the 1960s Civil Rights movements in eliminating formal racial segregation (Jim Crow laws), introduced after the Civil War in the former Confederate states. Juneteenth (19 June), the anniversary of the abolition of slavery throughout the U.S., is not a federal holiday, although it is celebrated at the local level in 46 states. Reparations, mainly compensation to the descendants of former slaves, is also a hot topic.

In turn, the historical memory of the former CSA for some is based on the experience of a lost cause through a war that not only killed the most Americans in U.S. history (about 630,000) and resulted in immense destruction but also unconditional capitulation to the North and destruction of a way of life (though sustained by slavery). Terms for returning to the Union after the war included ratifying

amendments to state constitutions conferring certain civil rights on Black Americans (for example, the right to vote). In the former CSA states, secession continues to be justified while moral arguments against racism are rejected. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a process of publicly commemorating the Confederacy began. Monuments were erected—about 1,700 in total—throughout the former CSA. Counties, cities (80) and army bases (10) were named after former Confederate politicians or military leaders. Current supporters of this tradition cultivate a regional nationalism by, for example, displaying the Confederate battle flag, which is now seen by many Americans as a traitorous symbol of racism.

**Significance in the 2020 Campaign.** Evaluating Confederate historical memory in social debates has gained significance following recent racial incidents in the South. The 2015 attack by a right-wing extremist on Black Americans in a church in North Carolina and the riots and death of one protestor following demonstrations by extremist organisations in Virginia in 2017 highlight the issue. This debate transcended to the federal level in May 2020 following the [outbreak of protests](#) caused by the murder of Black American George Floyd during a police arrest. Voicing their dissatisfaction toward racial discrimination, protesters have torn down 23 Confederate monuments (among others in Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia) seen as symbols of “systemic” racism.

# PISM BULLETIN

Influenced by the public debate over Confederate historical memory, the Democrats assumed a firm position by calling on the public removal of all forms of CSA symbols. Biden, the presumptive Democratic candidate in the upcoming November presidential elections, supports a ban on displaying the Confederate flag. Democrats, who control the House of Representatives, and some Republicans passed legislation directing the removal of 11 Confederate monuments from the Capitol. Meanwhile Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren introduced a provision to rename military bases and installations named after Confederate commanders in the 2021 Senate defense appropriations bill.

Of special interest to Biden and [the progressive wing of the party](#) is the idea of creating a specific commission for discussing reparations. Initial estimates by experts indicate that the cost of such payments to about 30 million Black American descendants of slaves could range from \$1.6 trillion to \$2.6 trillion (about 75% of U.S. GDP). However, polls indicate that the majority of Americans (76%) and a large portion of the Democratic electorate (45%) are against the idea. For this reason, instead of direct compensation, Democratic senators have proposed investment projects worth \$350 million addressed to the Black American community.

President Trump's views on the Confederate matter are differing. The president considers CSA symbols to be an integral part of American history. Despite the wave of protests, he signed an executive order protecting federal monuments, including several associated with the CSA (for example, some in Arlington National Cemetery), from vandalism and destruction. In opposing renaming military bases, Trump intends to veto Warren's Senate budget project. Recent polls show as much as 86% of Republican Party voters are opposed to changing military base names.

Public statements about defending monuments and the Confederate flag are a way for Trump to try to distract attention from the rising criticism over his ineffectiveness in countering the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences. Although his views contribute to deepening the American socio-cultural conflict, Trump's position aims to mobilise his hard electorate before the upcoming elections, for example, 80% of those sympathising with the pro-Confederate historical interpretation assess him positively. During the 2016 elections, Trump won in 10 former CSA states. However, the latest polls indicate a significant increase for Democrats nationwide (50%). Support for Biden also rose in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas, so-called "swing" states that can tilt the election results in his favour. Concurrently, although the majority of Americans overall supports removing Confederate monuments (52%), divisions run along party

lines, with 80% of Republican voters support maintaining them while 85% of Democrats approve of removing them.

Nonetheless, there is growing concern in the Republican Party about the president's position toward the Confederacy, and some GOP politicians (especially those from southern states) are distancing themselves from Trump's views. They support demands associated with revising CSA historical memory by, for example, renaming military bases. Similar support has come from leaders of the U.S. armed forces. In this context, Defense Secretary Mark Esper has banned displaying the Confederate battle flag on American bases and installations. Additionally, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff publicly supports creating a commission to research the question of renaming bases.

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** The conflicting approaches toward the Confederate legacy will continue to raise political or racial tensions and cause divisions in the U.S. Politicising the current efforts to reconcile the history of CSA symbols by both parties will strongly influence the election campaign. Trump's aim is to maintain the same amount of electoral support in the South as he had during the 2016 election. A majority of residents there support maintaining Confederate symbols. However, the president's views on CSA memory may eventually harm his support, making it more difficult to obtain the support of an additional electorate in the more liberal parts of the country, reluctant toward any views that can be described as bordering on racism. The latest polls indicate that general support for Trump is falling (from 41% in June to 37% in July) while it is increasing for Biden (from 49% in June to 52%). Furthermore, Trump's views are contributing to an increasing split within the Republican Party itself. Several prominent politicians (for example, Sen. Mitt Romney) have publicly supported Biden. Additionally, Secretary Esper and the military's contradictory reaction to Trump's hard position over Confederate symbols illustrates possible divisions within the administration.

The Democrats' far-reaching positions are helping Biden's candidacy and can contribute to his victory in November by attracting an electorate that previously supported progressive politicians like Bernie Sanders. A large majority (79%) of those protesting in May supported the Democrats' position. The increasing influence of progressives on the Democratic Party may affect the future Biden administration to place greater consideration on socio-cultural issues, thereby focusing its attention on internal U.S. problems. Even though the question of reparations for slavery is not generally popular in the U.S., it should be expected that the Democrats will expand federal projects aimed at improving the quality of life among Black Americans.