



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 4, 2017

HBO's "Confederate" Series Creating Controversy From Two Directions

"This is white nonsense," said *Daily Beast* writer Ira Madison II, in a blistering reaction to the upcoming HBO series *Confederate*.

"We finally had an Oscars ceremony where a black film won Best Picture [*Moonlight*] without slaves or servants in it. But I guess HBO's eyes are still fixated on *12 Years a Slave*."

Madison makes a valid point. It seems every movie spotlighting Black Americans is either about slavery, race riots, mistreatment of African-American servants, or the like. All of that is an important part of the historical black experience in America, but why can't more movies be produced heralding achievements of individual Black Americans?

Yet, here we are again. In the proposed *Confederate* series, not only is the ugly institution of slavery resurrected, it still exists today, in this "alternate" history universe. In *Confederate*, the southern states won their independence back in the 1860s, and slavery is still legal in the present-day Confederacy, although it has evolved into a "modern" institution. (Plantation slavery would not be profitable today, so the storyline is that for slavery to still be in existence, slaves would have to be used in different ways from picking cotton, for example).

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Two white men, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, the creators of the successful HBO series *Game of Thrones*, are the originators of the series, but they are working with a black couple, Nichelle Tramble Spellman and Malcolm Spellman, which will perhaps deflect some of the criticism.

Matt Goldberg, writing at Collider.com, questioned the idea of the series. "When you look at all the other great ideas for TV shows out there, and this is what HBO wants to pay for, it seems deeply misguided to create an alternate history where slavery exists rather than just confronting the real issues with race we face today."

Goldberg, however, thinks this series and the 2004 "mockumentary" *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* can "provide a rebuke to everyone who flies a confederate flag and drones on about 'states rights' and 'heritage.'"

Tramble Spellman defended the project, declaring, "This is present day, or close to present day, and how the world would have evolved if the South had been successful seceding from the Union."

Actually, the premise of *Confederate*, as proposed by the comments of Goldberg and Tramble, is very unlikely. While some allowance can be made that it is "just a fictional TV series," the reality is that it only perpetuates prevailing myths about the Civil War. Goldberg's slurs against "heritage" and "states'





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rights” are two examples of why the promotion of such myths matter, and should be challenged.

By mixing the unfortunate history of slavery with the concept of “states’ rights,” such supposedly escapist dramas can adversely affect life in America today. Any opposition to the centralizing of power in the hands of the federal government is regularly dismissed by those wanting to grow federal power as a thinly disguised defense of oppression of black people. Of course, nationalization of power, as was done when Adolf Hitler nationalized the German police force (the Gestapo,) is not part of any HBO series on why we need more local control of police.

The series assumes certain things about the Civil War and slavery, and can be expected to perpetuate those assumptions to its audience. First, most Americans today wrongly believe that the Civil War was fought by the northern states against the southern states so as to abolish slavery. While slavery was certainly a source of friction between the sections in the years leading up to the Civil War, the war itself was precipitated by the secession of seven southern states, in 1860 and 1861, and the response of President Lincoln.

Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to invade those southern states and force them to follow federal laws, principally the collection of the tariff, which was the main source of revenue for the federal government at that time. Lincoln did not mention slavery in this call, but the call for an invasion led four more states to leave the Union, rather than take up arms against fellow states.

Still, even after the secession of 11 total states, four states where slavery was still legal remained in the Union. Had the war really been fought to abolish slavery, federal troops would have been sent into those states, as well, in a crusade against the institution of slavery.

But this series perpetuates a second myth about the war and slavery, which is that without the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans, and the crippling of hundreds of thousands more, slavery would still exist today. Slavery, however, had once existed in every state, dating back to colonial times. At the time of the adoption of the Constitution, only two states had no slaves at all.

What happened to them? Was there a bloody civil war in those northern states where slavery died out over the next seven decades?

Of course not. Slavery had ceased to exist in states such as New York largely because of economic conditions brought on by the Industrial Revolution. Slavery could be abolished there without any significant economic disadvantage. In fact, slavery had grown economically counterproductive in those states.

Slavery was in decline even in some slave states such as Virginia. Why would this situation in which slavery died a natural death because it was no longer economically feasible not repeat itself in the remaining southern states? They did not utilize slaves in northern factories, so why would they have done so in the South as it industrialized?

Today, it is commonly believed that the Civil War was fought to abolish slavery, and had it not been for that war, it would still exist today, with chattel slaves picking cotton on southern plantations, or perhaps making manufactured goods in southern factories. This is ludicrous, but unfortunately, this series, which will likely be artistically well-done, will only give that false picture new life.



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