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A Case Study in Academic Politicization: Confederate African-Americans in the American Civil War

The presentation will deal with a disputed phenomenon in American history: that of the role of African-Americans who fought for the Confederacy during the American Civil War. Perhaps one of the most silenced topics today in American history, and politically among the most delicate, the issue had by mid-1990s seen only a handful of studies (Barrow et al. 1995:2). During the decade since then, a study by Segars and Barrow (eds., 2001) may stand as the most definitive account of the subject.

The presentation will aim to criticise politicisation of historical issues as a process and further to argue that an equally open-minded attitude towards African-Americans acting for both Union and Confederate causes would be something to be greatly desired. While the movie *Glory* (1989), the birth of new (cultural) history and wave of post-modernism from the 1960s and 1970s onward did excellent service in recognising the importance of certain minority groups in history, in the case of Confederate African-Americans this historical “emancipation” has yet to see the full light of day. The trouble at the heart of the discussion seems to be in the polarising attitude permeating much of American (political) discourse that sharpens opinions and allows politicisation to enter, at least among certain groups with Northern or Southern tendencies, history writing. Thus, it is hoped that, if possible, the attitudes dealing with the subject of Southern African-Americans in the Civil War would become less passionate, less ultraistic and less ideologically-burdened than now is the case in some quarters.

References:

- *Barrow, Charles Kelly, J. H. Segars and R. B. Rosenberg 1995. Black Confederates. Gretna: Pelican.*
- *Segars, J. H. and Charles Kelly Barrow 2001. Black Southerners in Confederate armies – a collection of historical accounts. Madison: Southern Lion Books.*