

Reconciliation Narratives: *The Birth of a Nation* after the US Civil War[†]

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*We study how the spread of the Lost Cause narrative—a revisionist and racist retelling of the US Civil War—shifted opinions and behaviors toward national reunification and racial discrimination against African Americans. Looking at screenings of *The Birth of a Nation*, a blockbuster movie that greatly popularized the Lost Cause after 1915, we find that the film shifted the public discourse toward a more patriotic and less divisive language, increased military enlistment, and fostered cultural convergence between former enemies. We document how the racist content of the narrative connects to reconciliation through a “common-enemy” type of argument. (JEL J15, L82, N31, N32, N41, Z13)*

History is a set of lies agreed upon.

—Napoleon Bonaparte

Although recurrent wars and persistent hatred are common throughout history, former enemies have also been known to reconcile, sometimes quite suddenly.¹ One such famous reconciliation was between France and Germany, which fought three wars in less than a century but went on to become founding nations of the European Union. What are the cultural drivers of these reversals of distrust and animosity?

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[†]Go to <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20210413> to visit the article page for additional materials and author disclosure statements.

¹Collier and Hoeffler (2005) find that more than two-thirds of conflict outbreaks take place in countries where multiple conflicts have been recorded. DeRouen and Bercovitch (2008) document that a large majority of civil wars stem from enduring rivalries. More broadly, Voigtländer and Voth (2012) and Voth (2020) discuss the persistence of hatred and hostile attitudes.