

Mallory Noe-Payne: The last ride. A deep dive into a shocking unsolved mystery.

Male 1: These two young men disappear off the face of the Earth and the last person to see them alive was this sheriff's deputy. His stories were so unbelievable.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Listen to the last ride podcast, part of the NPR network. January 6, 2021 was the day a mob stormed the U.S capital. But it was also the day I left for Germany. I was in a near empty airport outside D.C waiting for my flight when CNN live coverage started. I sat next to my husband and the handful of other travelers in the airport. It was near empty. Not many international travelers in the middle of a pandemic. But I remember a janitor who stopped his sweeping and stared at the television. We all watched together speechless as the crowds broke down barricades a few miles away from where we were. They climbed walls cloaked in confederate flags. Entitlement. Rage. I knew it because I recognized it. I'm a reporter and I cover politics and policy in my hometown, Richmond, Virginia. The former capital of the confederacy. As I watched the insurrection unfold on TV, I had flashbacks. Flashbacks to covering the aftermath of the white supremacist unite the right rally in Charlottesville. I wrote an obituary for Heather Heyer, the young woman killed by a man who drove his car into the crowd. Flashbacks to the years of covering protests and hostile meetings about what to do with confederate monuments. Flashbacks to a pro gun rights rally in Richmond when thousands converged at the state house carrying giant guns and waving don't tread on me flags. I could see a straight line between the capital insurrection and the rising tensions I had covered for years in Virginia. Tension rooted in a twisted pride of heritage. Tensions that were not new. When my hometown of Richmond appears in the news, it's often followed by the words "former capital of the confederacy." It's a place where the losers of the Civil War won the memory battle, where white supremacists rewrote history to cast themselves as martyrs placing their slave holding heroes on pedestals literally. I've been watching my community suffocate under the weight of a past we haven't dealt with. And as a reporter covering these issues, I increasingly felt less hopeful about something changing. I needed to do something different, to approach it all from a different vantage point. And that's how I came to be in the airport boarding a flight to Munich, Germany. Setting out on a year long journey to try to get perspective. Many countries harbor shameful pasts, but none quite as infamous as Germany. The country has built a reputation of confronting the horror of that past, of the Holocaust, of Nazi fascism. What has it taken for this society to face up to guilt and sin? How have they pushed aside pride and instead reached towards atonement? And is it possible for us to do the same? I spent a year in Germany. I traveled the memorial sites and museums, read more than a dozen books, and recorded countless hours of conversations with activists, historians, families, descendants of victims, descendants of perpetrators. This is the result of that work. The stories I heard. The lessons I learned. And my attempts to process how any of it might apply to

my community.

Michael Paul Williams: My community two. I'm Michael Paul Williams, columnist with the "Richmond Times Dispatch." And I'll be joining Mallory as we take this journey, this journey through memory looking for lessons we can apply not just to Richmond, but to the nation as we face our unresolved past.

Mallory Noe-Payne: I'm Mallory Noe-Payne.

Michael Paul Williams: And I'm Michael Paul Williams.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And this is "Memory Wars," a podcast exploring how society confronts sin. Mike is a columnist for the "Richmond Times Dispatch" and for 30 years he's been writing about the city and the state's racist past and present constantly calling on his community, our community, to do better. That work recently won him a Pulitzer prize. In fact, Mike, on your Pulitzer biography page it says you've both won the prestigious Nieman fellowship and the honorific from a local magazine of a reporter who, quote, "makes you want to tear up the newspaper." And that you're equally proud of both.

Michael Paul Williams: I'm sure there are bits of the "Times Dispatch" still floating around nowadays with my column face on it.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Have you gotten a lot of responses like that to your writing over the years?

Michael Paul Williams: Yes. Back when that piece was written I would routinely get cut outs of my column with BS spelled out. Not the abbreviation. Written down the rail of the column. And I thought that was a thing of the past and then about a couple of months ago I got one of those. It was like --

Mallory Noe-Payne: Like someone had cut out your column, written bullshit on it, and then mailed it to you.

Michael Paul Williams: And a bunch of other stuff. I mean it was a critique. I appreciate constructive criticism.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Okay. I'm curious. How do you see this project, our project, fitting into that work that you've already been doing for decades?

Michael Paul Williams: Well, I think what we're trying to get at is the truth. And I think columns at their best are about truth telling. They're about delving into uncomfortable truths. Delving into past sins that really haven't atoned for and reached a point of comfort with. So it's about mining uncomfortable history.

Mallory Noe-Payne: I mean for me this is about helping people do something different, about helping people see things through a new lens. This whole series we're going to be talking about Germany a lot. That's what I've been

doing for the past year. But ultimately, right, it's not about Germany.

Michael Paul Williams: It is the greatest irony, a sad irony, in my view that in Richmond, Virginia we have a Holocaust museum, but in our own backyard there is no memorial to the slave trade that was the primary driver by far of the Richmond economy before the Civil War. And so we're much better at examining the Holocaust, it would seem, than we are our own history. At least the history of enslavement.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And I'm glad you brought that up because both the Holocaust, the transatlantic slave trade, both represent this systematic dehumanization. A society that not only looks the other way in the face of murder and slave labor, but creates systems that legalize and support it and justify it. And so both places are faced with the undoing of that after the fact. Right? What we're comparing is the response.

Michael Paul Williams: Yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: We decided on the name "Memory Wars" in part because you felt so strongly about how this battle over how Americans reflect on our past is actually just very central to people's lives today. I feel like that's what you write about. How do you see that unfold in our community, the implications on people's lived experiences?

Michael Paul Williams: We live lives produced by an unresolved past. The past just doesn't go away. The past informs everything that we live through including the failures of our public policy. The way that our public policies leave our most vulnerable citizens exposed in all sorts of ways determine our life outcomes, our life spans, our relative wealth or lack thereof, our encounters with the criminal justice system, and our relative chances of being incarcerated. It affects everything. There is no past as far as I'm concerned and especially in America where our past original sin of white supremacy and racism continues to inform everything that this nation is about today to the point that it threatens the American ideal. We are living both with sin of the past and sin of the present.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So do we think that re-remembering our past, facing up to America's original sin, can help solve those disparities, can do something about it today?

Michael Paul Williams: It's a start. I mean every journey begins with the first step. And in a myriad of ways we have not taken that first step and it's tragic.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah. So we're not going to necessarily solve it all, but maybe some.

Michael Paul Williams: We're not?

Mallory Noe-Payne: Is that --

Michael Paul Williams: Why am I here? I was sold a bill of goods.

Mallory Noe-Payne: We'll set a foundation.

Michael Paul Williams: Okay. I can live with that.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And the bottom line, though, is we have to set a foundation. Right? It's the only way forward.

Michael Paul Williams: Yes. Yes. I mean I was watching the January 6 insurrection probably with different thoughts than a lot of people. And the thoughts I'm sure of the masses were of horror. And I had all of that, but also part of my thinking was this is a natural culmination of all the delusion, all the myth, all the lies, all the hate, the white supremacy. This is what happens when a nation denies the history that has informed it. So I thought we don't know the danger as a nation. And if we don't do something different and something honest, and something real, we're going to lose it.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Doing something different. What could that look like? That's what we're going to try to find out in our first episode. We explore the occupation of west Germany and the worldview it set a foundation for. Are you proud to be German?

Female 1: In my generation, you aren't really proud of being German.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Where does that come from?

Female 1: Because we still feel all that guilt of the bad things that have happened.

Male 2: And the notion that telling the truth about slaves or telling the truth about Jim Crow somehow is humiliating or unpatriotic is just from the perspective of the Europeans, of the Germans, is stupid.

Mallory Noe-Payne: The two reconstructions. That's episode one of "Memory Wars" available in your podcast feed right now. "Memory Wars" is a production of Radio IQ distributed by PRS. This research and the resulting podcast were made possible in part by a grant from the German American Fulbright Commission. I'm Mallory Noe-Payne and you also heard from Michael Paul Williams. Oluwakemi Aladesuyi is our story editor. Additional editing from Caitlin Pierce. Our music is by Sun Rain with sound design and mixing by Chad Skinner and Dani Ramez of Half Moon Audio. Ruth Tam designed our logo and feature image on our website. And we recorded this episode at the studio of Virginia Video Network. You can find out more about the show and a link to suggested reading at radioiq.org. This podcast is supported by Radio IQ and the listeners who donate to that member station. If you appreciate innovative

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