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. [Music]

Michael Paul Williams: Myth is the soap that societies use to cleanse themselves of sin. After the Civil War, the former Confederate states of America fashioned the myth of the lost cause, and Germany had their own after World War II. It's called the myth of the clean Wehrmacht, the Wehrmacht being Hitler's army. The myth went something like this. The Wehrmacht were mere soldiers, not actual Nazis. But can any part of a killing machine be untainted? And who, if anyone, gets to claim innocence after an atrocity? Who should bear the weight of history's darkest moments, the individual participant or the society? I'm Michael Paul Williams.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And I'm Mallory Noe-Payne. And this is Memory Wars.

Michael Paul Williams: A podcast exploring how society confronts sin. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: The photograph is about the size of a postcard, black and white. I expect there to be a note written on the back in slanted cursive handwriting. A date perhaps because that's what my grandmother would've done. But there's nothing, no indication of the year or the people. It's a picture of a man and a woman. Their faces in profile as they gaze at one another on their wedding day. And then what's this other one?

Charlotte Lerg: So this is the church wedding with the white dress, and then this is the --

Mallory Noe-Payne: When Charlotte Lerg was a teenager, there was a wall of framed family photos above the stairs. This image among them, it's of her grandmother and grandfather on her mother's side.

Charlotte Lerg: And then this is the -- you can see the Standesamt and these are the two great-grandfathers.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Their grandfathers.

Charlotte Lerg: Yes, so.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So this is the church wedding, and this is the city hall.

Charlotte Lerg: City hall, yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Charlotte never met her grandfather. He died before she was born. So this photo was one of the only ways she knew him. The bride wears white gloves and a high-necked dress with a broach at her collar. Her new husband, though, isn't in a suit or a tuxedo. He's in a military uniform, the uniform of the Wehrmacht, Hitler's army. [Music]

Charlotte Lerg: So you can see he's wearing his Wehrmacht uniform. And you can just about make out, you can't actually see any swastikas in the image, but you can make up the eagle on the lapel.

Mallory Noe-Payne: In the mid-1990s, Charlotte had spent some time as a teenager studying abroad in England. A couple of years later and some of those British friends were visiting her in Germany when one of them noticed this photo on the wall.

Charlotte Lerg: And I had friends visiting, and they would look at the pictures and one of them turned to me and said, "Was your grandfather a Nazi?" And I was like, "I don't know." I've never asked that. I've never thought about that in that way because I never met him.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Charlotte loved history. The fact that you could learn about people and places that seemed worlds away but really weren't. Maybe that's why when she learned about the Holocaust and the history of Nazis in school, it hadn't occurred to her to connect that history to her own family story. Charlotte had learned that horrific things had happened and that Germans were responsible for them. And yet it took her visiting friend asking, "Was your grandfather a Nazi?" to make herself wonder. So she took the question straight to her mother.

Charlotte Lerg: Yeah, that was my first go-to. So what about my grandfather? Yeah, I think one of the first questions was so quite plainly, what did he do? I have no ideas about uniforms. So what is that uniform? What I didn't even know was he in the Wehrmacht. Was he anything worse? So what exactly did he do? And that's the famous question. What did you do during the war?

Mallory Noe-Payne: It's the question an entire generation of Germans asked of their fathers and mothers following World War II. Charlotte's mother had asked her father, but he hadn't always given her direct answers. He talked more about life stationed abroad, about making friends with the locals or taking care of his men as an officer. So when Charlotte came asking her mother could only say where he had been stationed, not what he had done there.

Charlotte Lerg: But what we do know is that he must have experienced horrific events, possibly even participating in them. We don't know. Because my grandmother told us that he would wake up at night and scream. But when she asked him about it, he would say, "The less you know, the safer you are." [Music] So that is an interesting reply, but that's all we know about that. So

there definitely was witnessing, we don't know if there was participating. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: "Witnessing, participating" vague words. They could encompass any number of meanings. Charlotte's grandfather had been with the first troops entering Poland. He spoke Polish, so maybe he had been there to help translate. But Poland. Poland was a place where mass murder didn't just take place in extermination and concentration camps behind walls and barbed wire. Jews were murdered in the open, in towns, and villages. Had he shot someone? Had he raided houses, herded families together, sent them off to the ghetto? Or had he seen someone else do those things, watching, not saying a word? So Charlotte asked her mother, what her friend had asked her, "Was my grandfather a Nazi?" And her mother said, "No." She told Charlotte what her father had told her, that he was not a card-carrying member of the National Socialist Party. Charlotte's mother said her father and mother had both raised her in a strictly anti-military upbringing, instilling in her an open attitude towards Jews and Israel, and to all people in exile. "He had not been a Nazi," Charlotte's mother told her. "He had been a soldier."

Charlotte Lerg: So she very much makes that distinction. Like for him being a soldier was very much connected to certain, I guess, soldiery values. And she knows that for him, those were very important throughout the war, but even after the war. But there is a difference between so let's say military ideas and national socialism. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: But that wasn't enough for Charlotte. And ultimately, it wasn't enough for her mother anymore either. Together they decided to try to find out more. Over the next decade, they would go on to request military records, read old files, all to try to answer that question about Charlotte's grandfather. What have you done? [Music] How does one person change the way they look at family stories? [Music] How does an entire country shift a collective perspective? [Music] How do we rewrite the story of our history? [Music] This distinction between being a soldier and being a Nazi was an important one to many German families. The German army, the Wehrmacht consisted of 18 million men. At the time it was almost a quarter of the entire population of Germany. And the vast majority of those soldiers were drafted, sworn to serve Adolf Hitler. Were they victims too? Misled into a war or were they perpetrators of war crimes? For years, there was this idea in German society that foot soldiers and even army officers weren't involved in the atrocities of the Nazi regime. The myth of the clean Wehrmacht.

Magnus Brechtken: Yeah, yeah, Mythos der sauberen Wehrmacht. It's more or less the direct translation, yeah. Mythos der sauberen Wehrmacht.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Magnus Brechtken is a historian at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich.

Magnus Brechtken: The belief was that you have the National Socialists on the one hand with the National Socialist institutions and their personnel, be it in the SS and the Waffen-SS, and you have on the other side that's the myth that unconnected, unattached Wehrmacht who just, "who just did the war and who just fought as soldiers had always done, and who were not linked in any way to national socialism."

Mallory Noe-Payne: In academic circles, this idea was clearly discredited in the decades after World War II. For example, research brought disturbing facts to light, like the fact that military leadership had deliberately let 3 million Soviet prisoners of war starve to death. Or that regular soldiers were witnesses to mass murder, photographers even. And sometimes yes, participants, murderers themselves. But that information hadn't become part of public consciousness. Instead, the myth of the clean Wehrmacht was an easy narrative for Germans who had either served themselves or had fathers and brothers who had.

Magnus Brechtken: They wanted to believe it because it was a rationalization of their own past in a way that they could live with this past. And so, they developed the narrative that this past, this National Socialist past was something different, something which is not really ingrained in their own activities, but was something which they had to obey, they said, they were not part of the National Socialist system.

Mallory Noe-Payne: But then something happened in the mid-1990s that shattered the myth. The Wehrmachtsausstellung or Wehrmacht exhibit opened in 1995 and contained nearly 1,500 shocking images, grainy black and white photos of mass graves and hangings of Wehrmacht soldiers. Their guns pulled, pointing at bodies lined down a street. Photos taken by soldiers, and kept as souvenirs. The exhibit toured more than 30 cities in Germany and Austria. It's estimated more than 800,000 people saw it face to face with evidence directly contradicting the idea that German soldiers and officers had been innocent bystanders. It spurred a transition in the wider public eye. It was no longer the clean Wehrmacht. It was the myth of the clean Wehrmacht.

Magnus Brechtken: The point is that the Wehrmacht was not clean. The Wehrmacht was part and parcel of National Socialist rule and warfare, and therefore it has its huge share in responsibility for everything that happened between 1939 and 1945 in war crimes, in death, and so on. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: This was in the late '90s right around the same time Charlotte was finishing high school and starting to ask her own questions. She and her mom went to visit the exhibit when it came to their town, Munster. You said you can still remember some photographs. What do you remember?

Charlotte Lerg: I remember a couple of, one I remember quite vividly is where they had hanged a number of people and then photographed that. And I think

something people often underestimate because we are a lot more used to these images now. They've been used all over the place. They are available online. That is something that was also different then, is that you could not just Google stuff. And these images, there's the one with those hanged people and one of a mass grave. Those were the ones that I really remember. [Music] I can now, in retrospect, I can say that definitely was this narrative of the clean Wehrmacht that I had somehow grown up with, but I'd never sort of really taken it as something I needed. So for me, it wasn't something that destroyed anything. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: But for many others, it did destroy something. It destroyed a narrative that many Germans had held close. A narrative of German soldiers as honorable explains Magnus Brechtken.

Magnus Brechtken: They want the Wehrmacht to be remembered as in a war, just soldiers who fought for their country, for their fatherland, and they died for their fatherland. And that was it. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: News reports and interviews from the time period show visitors arguing fiercely over what they saw inside. One news report describes a woman breaking out in hysterics after recognizing her father in a photo of soldiers hanging a woman in Russia. The exhibit didn't accuse every soldier of a war crime. It pointed out that members of the Army who actively participated in atrocities were a small minority. But it also showed how many soldiers would have known about those atrocities and been witnesses to violence carried out by others and by the paramilitary SS troops. Veterans' groups and right-wing politicians were outraged. There were protests and then counter-protests. [Crowd Chanting]

Magnus Brechtken: Yeah, that's Neo-Nazis, yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah, those are the Neo-Nazis.

Magnus Brechtken: Yeah, National --

Mallory Noe-Payne: Brechtken was a young history professor at the time. He remembers visiting the exhibit in Munich where there was a huge backlash, and here they were protesting the exhibit in the city. Yeah. Together in his office in Munich, the two of us watched old news reports from the time.

Magnus Brechtken: And this is the left, you see, you hear them claiming Nazis laws. [Foreign Language]

Mallory Noe-Payne: Nazis get out. In one of the stories, you can see the exhibit, a simple show with what looks like poster boards plastered with words and images. Can you help me understand why two rooms that you remember as being fairly simple can produce this kind of reaction?

Magnus Brechtken: Yeah, because of the myth. It's not about the rooms, it's about the message, what these rooms, and particularly the images, If you see the images of how German soldiers either photograph or kill people, that is something very disturbing for people who live in the belief of the clean Wehrmacht. And they don't want these kind of photos either to be true, not to be shown, not to be representative of the present society in which they live.

Mallory Noe-Payne: It wasn't just veterans' groups that criticized the exhibit. Academics scrutinized every word and image calling out the exhibit's creator for mislabeling some of the photos. The show was even canceled, all the information reviewed. And a report concluded that of the approximately 1,400 photos, fewer than 20 had been mislabeled. The errors were corrected, and the exhibit relaunched in the early 2000s. Both iterations say Brechtken did something vital in bringing what a handful of interested academics had long known into the public sphere. And do you think that it helped shatter the myth?

Magnus Brechtken: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, no. Everyone who argued in favor of the myth could immediately was confronted with the historical facts. And then, you either understand the historical facts or you stay in a state of denial. And if you're in a state of denial, you can't be taken seriously anymore.

Mallory Noe-Payne: The point Brechtken says is not that the Wehrmacht soldiers were or were not Nazis, it's that the soldiers, regardless of their personal beliefs, were part of an empire driven by racist ideology that killed millions.

Magnus Brechtken: And one has to understand that this is something which belongs together, and you cannot say, "Well, they were just soldiers." They were soldiers for a purpose. And this purpose has to be understood.

Mallory Noe-Payne: It was an important and difficult narrative shift in German society with violent backlash. The exhibit was bombed, allegedly by Neo-Nazis at one point. And today, pockets of right-wing ideology certainly still glorify Wehrmacht soldiers. But the shift did happen. And the Wehrmacht exhibit was one element initiated by the bold interest of a single man and his private historical institute. It was part of a wave of new thought in the '80s and '90s as a generation of Germans came into power who were slightly more removed from the war. They created artwork, books, and plays. Teachers began to change their curriculum and government leaders, they played a part as well. [Foreign Language] Like in 1985, when the West German President, Richard von Weizsacker gave a speech commemorating May 8th, the day Germany surrendered to the Allies. [Foreign Language] For the first time, a German government official referred to that day, not as a day of defeat, but a day of liberation. [Foreign Language] One word, signaling a massive shift in narrative. Weizsacker himself had been a soldier in the Wehrmacht during World War II. So the statement was all the more powerful coming from him. In the same speech, he also said, -- [Foreign language followed by English

interpreter] -- the greater honesty we show, -- [Foreign language] -- in commemorating this day, -- [Foreign language] -- the fear we are, -- [Foreign language] -- to face the consequences with due responsibility. [Music] What is the narrative norm in German society about this history at its basic core? What's the story that Germans tell themselves?

Aleida Assmann: Okay, that's a very basic story, but it's a very important one.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Aleida Assmann is a German academic, activist, and expert in cultural memory. She has explored this narrative shift in depth, not just in terms of the Wehrmacht army, but in society as a whole how Germans slowly went from seeing themselves as the victims to acknowledging their status as perpetrators.

Aleida Assmann: This narrative establishes the fact that the Holocaust is the worst crime in history, and it was perpetrated by the German nation. Yeah.

Mallory Noe-Payne: I think people at least of my age and generation and especially Americans take for granted that that's a simple truth.

Aleida Assmann: Exactly. They take it so much for granted that they cannot think otherwise. But it is actually interesting to see, whenever you talk about the constructions of memory or the formation of narratives, that has always a process behind, and there are very many voices and perspectives. And also, for the German case, it took a long time and it was an achievement to gain this result in the terms of a consensus for the whole society.

Mallory Noe-Payne: I talk to people like Assmann and Brechtken and others who have been a part of this process in Germany. And they reiterated something to me again and again, that intense and controversial public debates are necessary.

Magnus Brechtken: You might argue that it is important to have these controversies at all to have them because if you don't have them people either live in the myth side or they live in the we don't talk it about side. And both is not a healthy condition for a civil society in the present. [Music]

Charlotte Lerg: Come on in, welcome.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Thank you. Hello.

Charlotte Lerg: This is my home.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Today, Charlotte Lerg is an assistant professor of history. Her mother still lives in the house she grew up in. May I see the folder of documents? [Foreign Language] It took years, but eventually Charlotte, with her mother's Sabina's help was able to get a hold of some of her grandfather's military history. Can I get you to walk with me through these a little bit?

Charlotte Lerg: So the thing is the personal file, the military file, which has all these details in there, including some of the -- he must have gotten some decorations for -- but we are not, it doesn't say for what?

Mallory Noe-Payne: When Charlotte and Sabina finally got to dig into these documents, there was no smoking gun. Nothing that unequivocally answers their question, did my ancestor commit war crimes? Instead, the file has descriptions of commendations without details of what for and reports of disobeying orders, but under mundane and unclear circumstances.

Charlotte Lerg: So one report he was driving through Berlin in a Jeep, and he gave a lift to a lady, that's what the report says, a lady, and asked who she was. He refused to say who she was and refused to give her name. And that was obviously he was ordered to give her name, and he refused to do that, and we don't know. We still don't know who she was but -- [Foreign Language] Oh, okay. So apparently, it says he evaded questioning, so he probably just put his foot down and drove off or something.

Mallory Noe-Payne: The report also includes a collection of vaguely worded evaluations with language, like he does his job well, but you also need to keep an eye on him.

Charlotte Lerg: And one thing that regularly they got evaluated, and in his evaluation, one thing that keeps coming back is that he was a good supervisor, but he also needed supervision.

Mallory Noe-Payne: There is a record of him disobeying orders another time in Poland. And then, being penalized by being transferred to Finland. But the file doesn't say what orders he disobeyed. Maybe he disobeyed orders to shoot someone, and that's why he was transferred. But also, maybe it was something frivolous again, like the lady in the Jeep. It makes it difficult to draw any kind of satisfying conclusion.

Charlotte Lerg: It's not like he's a -- like it's not objecting to the ideology so, and I'm not reading into that. But it kind of goes back to this story that we tell ourselves it's that sort of soldier mentality rather than an ideology-driven decision to behave in a certain way. But I guess the historian in me, of course, says, can you really differentiate? [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: As we talk, Charlotte and Sabina and I, well, we sort of dance around all these possibilities. There's a lot more unsaid than said.

Charlotte Lerg: To find out whether he was a perpetrator or whether he participated in anything, the personal file probably doesn't tell us very much what we would've to do, which we haven't done, is look at the broader military history. Look at his particular battalion. What did they do? What were they involved in?

Mallory Noe-Payne: Those things are available now, although they weren't in the early two 2000s when Charlotte and Sabina initially requested the information. Finding more would require more intensive research. So I ask, would you want to know? For Sabina, the answer is evolving. [Foreign Language] Sabina says in these files, in the stories they tell, she recognizes her father, his pragmatism, his flexibility, his communication style. She used to say no, she wouldn't want to know more but lately, she's not so sure. Even without the clear answer, there is an acknowledgment that her father very well may have done something terrible or stood by and watched as someone else did. That possibility will always be there because he was part of a terrible army. [Foreign Language]

Charlotte Lerg: What my mother describes is, that is for her the more important part of engaging with this issue than actually knowing. And having that constant question is enough for her so she doesn't need to have the reply.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Charlotte says she may do that research down the road. I think for her, the entire thing is a bit easier to tackle. She never met her grandfather. She's that much farther removed.

Charlotte Lerg: I'd be interested, I guess, but I don't think it would change anything. Because I'm at a point where I say, well, this is part of the family history, and like finding out wouldn't change the family history. It wouldn't change who I am. I would say that I'm already very aware of the responsibility that I carry as a German.

Mallory Noe-Payne: It's almost like personal memory has become secondary to cultural memory. This larger societal narrative supersedes any individual story.

Charlotte Lerg: And maybe that's what makes it easier. It takes away this very personal dimension. But the possibility is always there, and it's not something I can change. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: For many of us, the specifics of what our ancestors did or didn't do, maybe lost to time. We could do all the digging in the world and still wind up with a big fat question mark. This formation of cultural memory and narrative. Well, it feels like a way to participate, to find and know your role, even in the absence of that concrete information. To know that no matter who you are, what your father or grandfather did, you don't get to opt out of the big story. You still carry the weight and responsibility of your cultural story. [Music] Okay. Mike, what do you think?

Michael Paul Williams: I like the idea, the concept of societal culpability, but I don't fully accept the idea that individual culpability shouldn't be interrogated. To me, it's like if we go the former route, okay, we've intellectualized what happened and we've accepted it and we've taken responsibility for it, but --

Mallory Noe-Payne: On a societal level.

Michael Paul Williams: -- on a societal scale, on a larger scale. But when we make it personal, we internalize the horror and it ratchets it up. I think we need that individual emotion and revulsion attached to the collective rejection and horror of what happened.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah.

Michael Paul Williams: To make it real, to make it more real, to make it something we never want to see happen again.

Mallory Noe-Payne: I have to be honest, I personally, I relate to Charlotte and to not necessarily be eager to very closely interrogate the past. I applaud Charlotte and her mother for the amount of digging that they did do. But the realization of Charlotte and her mother's approach that knowing more won't necessarily change their present or future, it appeals to me, right? If I can acknowledge the broad strokes of the terrible past and the fact that my ancestors were a part of it in generalities, but leave it there. That's appealing.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah. Just think about how we approach life and our job as journalists. There's power in the broad strokes of the story, but when we dig deeper into those details, that's when some of the real power emerges. Are we leaving stuff behind if we don't dig deeper into that level of detail? You know also fear. Both approaches have their flaws. If it's a societal, collective kind of thing, there are always going to be people who live that and accept that, embrace that more than others. It lets people off the hook.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah. The nation has accepted this, but individuals aren't really that engaged. But if we make it an individual thing, then people also get to say, well, that's not about me. So that's why I say we need both. We need individual and collective responsibility. But how can we even talk about collectivism in the United States when there is always been this historic push, this historic narrative that we are a nation of states with separate rights, which each state functioning with the level of autonomy free to create its own laws and its own education systems and its own narratives to a large extent. How do you reach any sort of common narrative in that sort of structure, in that sort of framework?

Mallory Noe-Payne: We heard briefly from Aleida Assmann, who's a philosopher and expert on this idea of like how a common societal narrative is formed. She broke down a shift in common narrative in steps for me. The first one, knowledge. Coming to terms with the facts and all agreeing on the facts of the history. One of the lessons in Germany for me is the state power in shaping and enforcing those facts, in distributing those facts. That's public education.

Michael Paul Williams: It sounds kind of creepy to think of it that way, the state imposing a set of facts. The facts should speak for themselves. The history

should be the history. You shouldn't need the state to tell you that certain things happened that we know happened. Yet what I'm seeing here in our state is a level of heavy-handedness about what cannot be taught. And we are actively in Virginia attempting to sanitize the curriculum so that real history is not taught. We're at a point where we all get to have our own facts in America.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah. But that's the first one coming to terms with the facts. I'm not sure we're there yet.

Michael Paul Williams: No, no, nowhere near. Nowhere close.

Mallory Noe-Payne: The second is values, agreeing on what's right and wrong.

Michael Paul Williams: I don't think we're there. Come on. We had an insurrection. There are things happening in this country I never would've imagined, and I'm pretty cynical. No, we don't share remotely common values right now.

Mallory Noe-Payne: The third is empathy. Helping people feel and connect to one another once we've agreed on those values. And then the fourth is language and symbols. Switching from the idea of saying, we're liberated, not defeated, or having a -- in Germany, there's a liberation day, a holiday. And then, the final step Assmann says is politics. The official acts that acknowledge all these things, creating the national holiday, creating the public curriculum, taking down monuments. All of those things are the end step of creating a collective narrative. And if you don't lay all the groundwork, then you are left with two completely incompatible worlds, two warring notions. And it feels a little bit like that's where we are. Like we haven't laid any of this groundwork.

Michael Paul Williams: At a time when the nation can hardly be more divided, we have Juneteenth, the acknowledgment of Juneteenth as a holiday. So there's some of that happening, but it's happening in the context of a nation so utterly divided that you wonder if we'll have separate and equal holidays like we so often do. We create two different nations, two different sets of values, two different sets of heroes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: For most of my childhood, Martin Luther King Day in Virginia was Martin Luther King/Stonewall Jackson Day.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah --

Mallory Noe-Payne: Oh, no, Jackson Lee Day.

Michael Paul Williams: -- Lee-Jackson --

Mallory Noe-Payne: Lee-Jackson.

Michael Paul Williams: Lee-Jackson King Day.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Lee-Jackson King Day. If there isn't anything that speaks to it more than that.

Michael Paul Williams: It was a hideous juxtaposition. Yeah. This is how we do in America. We can't acknowledge villains, historical villains. So we've got to attempt to make Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson and what they stood for and all of that. We got to place on the same level as Martin Luther King when --

Mallory Noe-Payne: Why do we have to do that? Why can't we say these were the bad guys unequivocally?

Michael Paul Williams: No. Because that would require us to acknowledge that there are bad guys and that bad guys walk among us and bad guys look like us. And bad guys might even be related to us. They might be in the family. And that's not how America is built. America is the shining city on the hill. America is an exceptional place with liberty and justice for all. The platitude we've acknowledged or we have mouthed for so long despite the fact that it's not remotely true.

Mallory Noe-Payne: One of the things that surprised me when I first started doing the research in Germany was that there were many Germans who saw themselves as victims of the war.

Michael Paul Williams: That sounds familiar.

Mallory Noe-Payne: It does.

Michael Paul Williams: I think we've talked about this. Mythology is a common tool employed to evade sin, to dismiss sin, to pretend sin did not happen. But victimhood is another tool. We do it all the time. We turn the tables when we know we've messed up big time. Oh, I'm the real victim here. And we saw it. We've seen it here. It's still very much a part of our culture in the United States. At the end of the Civil War, the former Confederate states assumed the posture of victim. And that culture persists to this day. In part, because we never had that moment where someone with credibility said, "None of us will be free until all of us are free." We must be liberated from the sin of White supremacy, or it will drag us all down. The closest we got was Martin Luther King's free at last, free at last. That was aspirational. It hasn't happened yet. We are clearly in this moment, not free. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: It's uncomfortable to face down your past. We followed as Haley has done it, and Charlotte has done it. Maybe now it's my turn.

Male 2: It gives a little background information enlisted April 21st, 1861 in Richmond. It shows him for the period, July and August 61 present.

Mallory Noe-Payne: What does accountability look like individually, collectively? Does justice have an expiration date? Coming up on the next episode of

Memory Wars. [Music] Memory Wars is a production of RADIO IQ distributed by PRX. 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. Original music is by Sun Rain & Spookyfish, 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 reporting like this, you can join those listeners by going to radioiq.org, and there's a donate button in the upper right-hand corner. Thanks for listening, and we'll be back in 2 weeks with the next episode. [Music]

Female 1: PRX.