

2021

Heritage, Hatred, and the Confederate Battle Flag

Geortez Williams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Williams, Geortez (2021) "Heritage, Hatred, and the Confederate Battle Flag," *Vulcan Historical Review*. Vol. 25, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol25/iss2021/13>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

HERITAGE, HATRED, AND THE CONFEDERATE BATTLE FLAG

Geortez Williams



Confederate flag. By J. Stephen Conn, licensed under Creative Commons BY-NC 2.0.

Throughout history, mankind has flown flags to show commitment and solidarity for their leaders and country. Flags are used to represent what is present and very much alive. Over time, flags change and their meanings evolve. They are used to lead men into battle, to drape the coffins of the dead, but most of all to show that an idea or nation still lives on. Recently, flags have become the center of attention for social movements. What some see as a piece of fabric reflecting the dominance of the majority, others see as a symbol of heritage and patriotism. Debates over flags occur across the world, but there seems to be no other flag that is more heavily debated than the Confederate battle flag. In the 150-year existence of the Confederate battle flag, it has been the face of injustice and suffering on a grand scale. What started as just a battle flag for the Confederacy during the Civil War has ended up outlasting both the war and the new nation. What should be viewed as a blemish and insult to the American people is often seen as the beloved relic of a

defeated nation whose ideas still live on. Historical research reveals that the Confederate battle flag represents a threat to American principles as a symbol of slavery, treason, and white supremacy.

“ Historical research reveals that the Confederate battle flag represents a threat to American principles as a symbol of slavery, treason, and white supremacy. ”

Slavery and its implications are a reverberating scar on American history that still impact the lives of African Americans today. Slavery under the American regime transformed out of class systems into an institution defined by color. Southerners became more deeply entrenched in their views as time progressed, and northern states began to reject the system of slavery. The Civil War marks the culmination of a dispute that persisted for decades and if there is one thing that defined the Confederate agenda, it was the continuation of slavery. Although the defenders of the Confederate flag continue to claim that the main interest of the Confederacy was to protect states' rights, research reveals that states' rights in this context meant protecting the institution of slavery. In the case of the state of Mississippi, the first few lines of their declaration of secession made it clear that their cause was influenced directly by slavery: “In the momentous step which our State has taken of dissolving its connection with the government of which we so long formed a part, it is

but just that we should declare the prominent reasons which have induced our course. Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world.”¹ Mississippi’s cause was not an anomaly. While both Georgia and South Carolina took a lengthier route in declaring their causes for secession, they both made it clear that “the South with great unanimity declared her purpose to resist the principle of prohibition to the last extremity.”² Prohibition in this context referred to the outlawing of slavery.

The Southerners believed that President-elect Abraham Lincoln posed a threat to their way of life and that neither he nor the Republican party represented their views. They rejected Lincoln and instead chose a man that they felt shared the same interests as them. The man who they felt would best suit the Confederacy was a slave owner from Mississippi, Jefferson Davis. Historian John Coski said of Davis, “In his farewell speech to the U.S. Senate, Davis blamed *the crisis* on the Republican Party’s refusal ‘to recognize our domestic institutions [an acknowledged euphemism for slavery] which pre-existed the formation of the Union or property which was guarded by the Constitution.’”³ Even with such clear evidence, many defenders of the Confederate battle flag still argue that the common soldier had no interest in prolonging slavery. While it was true that most soldiers did not own slaves, the intentions for which they were fighting was inherently clear. A Confederate veteran named Ed Baxter had this to say in 1889: “In a word, the South determined to fight for her property rights in slaves; and in order to do so, it was necessary for her to resist the change which the Abolitionists proposed to make under the Constitution of the United States as construed by them... Upon this issue the South went to war...”⁴

The cause of the Confederacy lived on after the war. Future generations indoctrinated their youth on the Southern way

of life and how the North had attempted to destroy it. In 1904, the United Daughters of the Confederacy “published a ‘catechism’ for children. ... Consistent with the evolving Confederate orthodoxy, the catechism emphasized that the North, not the South, started the ‘War between the States’ by disregarding southern rights. ‘What were these rights?’ asked the catechism. ‘The right to regulate their own affairs and to hold slaves as property’ was the answer.”⁵ Only in recent years have flag defenders begun to deny the Confederacy’s cause for war and the flag’s connection to slavery. Trying to separate the flag from slavery is like trying to separate the Nazi flag from the Holocaust. The swastika in itself was seen as a peaceful symbol for hundreds of years, but when placed in a white circle on a red background, the connection becomes apparent. It no longer represents peace, but rather Nazi Germany and the crimes committed against the Jewish people. The same goes for the St. Andrews Cross. In its purest form it represents martyrdom and Christianity, but when colored blue, decorated with stars and placed on a red background, it then represents the Confederacy and commitment to slavery and white supremacy.

While slavery was the foundation of the Confederacy, white supremacy was the ideological cornerstone. Since the Civil War, the Confederate flag has been used by hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan as they terrorized African Americans and other minorities. A group that was known for its secrecy and late-night terroristic attacks, the Ku Klux Klan had no problem being seen in public with the Confederate flag. Coski explains, “One hundred years to the day after Lee’s surrender, Time magazine carried a feature article on Ku Klux Klan violence and a photograph of Imperial Wizard Robert Shelton of Tuscaloosa, with his favorite totem: a Confederate battle flag.”⁶ Many have tried to disassociate the flag from the Klan, but every effort to do so has been in vain due to the actions of white southerners which mirrored those of the Klan. The most

compelling of these were acts of open defiance to integration in the late 1950s:

Southern history becomes murky during this period because Klansmen and non-Klansmen who were angry at the federal government's integration efforts displayed Confederate symbols to show their defiance to integration. One commentator explained, 'Within the context of the Civil Rights Movement and Southern defiance, the raising of the battle flag was a deliberate, overt expression of segregationists' resentment.'⁷

Those who were covered with white cloaks and those who stood in ordinary apparel found that the Confederate battle flag expressed their ideals better than any garment or group affiliation.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, protests swept across the South to end segregation. Those protests were met with opposition from white citizens on every level who were armed with Confederate flags and hateful words. Schoolyards and public streets became battlegrounds as white supremacists carrying Confederate flags clashed with nonviolent protesters: "After the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision on May 7, 1954, outlawing public school segregation, Confederate battle flags began appearing more frequently throughout Georgia and the South. This time, display of the emblem was openly acknowledged as support for segregation and opposition to the *Brown* decision."⁸ The point that they were making was clear, and no other emblem portrayed that point better than the Confederate battle flag.

A number of college campuses across the South found their way onto the international stage during this time. Both the University of Alabama and the University of Mississippi made the bold and vile stands against integration. At the University of Alabama, a mob estimated in between five hundred and twelve hundred gathered to protest the admission of a black

student named Autherine Lucy and "marched behind a group of students carrying a Confederate flag from campus to a flagpole in downtown Tuscaloosa, singing 'Dixie' and 'Keep Bama white' and 'To hell with Autherine.'"⁹ The University of Mississippi students acted in the same manner when news that a black student named James Meredith was admitted: "Rioting resulted in two deaths and the prolonged presence of federalized National Guard troops on campus. For the two years that Meredith remained on campus, he was escorted from class to class by armed guards."¹⁰ The students were making a bold statement and clearly they relied on the flag to make their intentions clear. They wanted to ensure that their schools remained segregated, just as their neighborhoods and churches had been for generations.

“Defenders of the flag argue that the flag represents chivalry, honor, and tradition, but the only tradition that seems to be apparent is the oppression of African Americans.”

Allowing African American students to mingle with their white peers and receive the same quality of education defeated the Confederate theory that the white race was superior, and that the negro was inferior and incapable of learning. Integration was an extension of Reconstruction and a reminder that the Confederacy had indeed lost the war. Again, white southerners felt that the northern aggressors were meddling in their affairs. Defenders of the flag argue that the flag represents chivalry, honor, and tradition, but



General Robert E. Lee. By Marion Doss, licensed under Creative Commons BY-SA 2.0.

the only tradition that seems to be apparent is the oppression of African Americans. Surely there is no honor in terrorizing children and denying them the right to an education.

Defenders of the flag, both then and now, often turn to Christian doctrine to justify their actions. To them, segregation was not only the patriotic thing

to do, it was the proper religious thing to do. For that reason, the flag is not only the symbol of a nation but also a holy relic. Citizens of the Confederacy felt as if they were being persecuted for their beliefs and their ways of life. For this reason, many Confederate symbols were wrapped in religious significance: "For example, the Second National Flag of the Confederacy or 'Stainless Banner,' is an entirely white flag with the exception of a canton including the battle emblem. In 1863, the Savannah Morning News stated that the flag's white field underscored that 'we are fighting to maintain the Heaven ordained supremacy of the white man over the inferior colored race.'"¹¹ This idea, that the Confederate cause and its symbols were aligned with Christian doctrine, did not die in the nineteenth century. Similar actions and rhetoric were present in Arkansas in 1959 when more schools began to integrate, and "protesters carried Confederate flags and signs that proclaimed 'STOP the Race Mixing March of the Anti-Christ' and 'Race Mixing is Communism.'"¹² In this case the Confederate flag was seen as being Christ-like and patriotic, while at the same time oppressing people and denying them

equal status.

While Southern states actually left the Union to protect the institution of slavery, the public, political, and official offense to the Union was the offense of treason. Citizens in the South had turned their backs on the federal government and attempted to form their own nation. The United States Constitution outlines treason as, "Treason against the United States shall consist only in levying war against them, or in adhering to their enemies, giving them aid and comfort."¹³ The Confederate states committed the grave offense of treason when they fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina. It was then made clear that the Confederacy had no intention to rejoin the Union or call for peaceful negotiations.

Defenders of the flag often rally and cry out that the flag represents love for heritage and country, but historical research reveals that neither are valid points. The very heritage that they celebrate was even denounced by Robert E. Lee. After the war, and during the later years of his life, Lee took notable stands against Confederate memorabilia. While he was the president of Washington College, Lee did not allow the Confederate flag to fly on the campus. When asked about erecting Confederate monuments, Lee stated, "I think it wiser moreover not to keep open the sores of war, but to follow the examples of those nations who endeavored to obliterate the marks of civil strife and to commit to oblivion the feelings it engendered."¹⁴ Even at his funeral there was not a Confederate flag in sight nor did Confederate veterans wear their uniforms. Lee's daughter had this to say: "His Confederate uniform would have been 'treason' perhaps!"¹⁵

Claiming that the flag represents love for their country also poses a problem. The Confederacy no longer exists, and the Confederate flag does not represent the United States. Confederate soldiers and citizens made it clear that they wanted nothing to do with the Union and even went so far as

to denounce its history. Southerners stopped celebrating the Fourth of July from the beginning of the Civil War until World War I. Just as the first shots were fired in South Carolina, they also took the first steps in outlawing the celebration of Independence Day: A five-member committee chosen for the task recommended that ‘the usual celebration of the day ... by public procession, solemn oration, and political banquet ought to be omitted on the present occasion.’ The Fourth was too closely associated when the nowdisavowed Union. And besides, at a time when soldiers from South Carolina and the other southern states had already begun to face off with northern foes, it did not seem appropriate to hold the customary public revelry. The associate as a whole concurred with the committee’s recommendation and resolved to bypass the usual festivities, holding only a brief business meeting on the evening of the Fourth.¹⁶ The Confederacy made it clear on every front that they were a separate nation that was not subject to U.S. law, customs or traditions.

If secession and war were not enough to commit treason, surely the promotion of the Confederate flag in government buildings across the south after the war would be seen as such. Beginning in the mid 1950s, it became clear that segregation and the Jim Crow era were about to come to an end. Once again, southerners felt as if their way of life was being threatened. Supreme Court decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* began to dismantle the old regime that mirrored slavery and its oppressive ideology. Klan members worked during the night to terrorize Black citizens, while government officials labored in plain sight to show their opposition to new laws and rulings. Not only was the Confederate flag raised on capitol buildings, state flags were also altered so that they would feature the Confederate flag: “In February 1956, Georgia’s General Assembly passed and Governor Marvin Martin Griffin and signed into law a bill to create a new Georgia state flag, which replaced the

scarlet, white and scarlet bars on the right two-thirds of the flag with the Confederate battle emblem.”¹⁷ Replacing the



Confederate flag in Columbia, South Carolina. By jasonpink, licensed under Creative Commons BY 2.0.

flag meant that all schools had to purchase the new flag with the Confederate emblem, which posed new problems for students and faculty of those schools. While Georgia legislator Denmark Groover claimed that the new flag “would have deep meaning in the heart of every Georgia child,” the *Atlanta Daily World* argued that “it’s obviously unfair to require any Negro school to fly the battle flag of the Confederacy nor its students to repeat its pledge or salute it.”¹⁸ This was not only an insult to African Americans, but also to the United States. Pledging to the Confederate flag meant celebrating a country that had waged war against and killed thousands of U.S. soldiers.

Alabama officials took bold steps to display the flag and show allegiance to the Confederacy. At the center of these actions was the infamous Governor George C. Wallace: “The most conspicuous and controversial of Wallace’s many Confederate flag gestures was to fly it on the dome of the state capitol building. Soon after Wallace took office, Alabamians and citizens of other states noticed that the

Confederate flag flew below the state flag on the capitol dome and that the U.S. flag was conspicuously missing.”¹⁹ Wallace’s actions sent a message that was in many ways parallel to secession: only the state of Alabama and the Confederacy were being recognized. Wallace also took his support of the Confederate flag with him outside of the state of Alabama. In 1964, while campaigning for president, the battle flag was painted on his plane and was seen on the front license plates of the state patrol vehicles that escorted him. His public support for the flag won him approval from citizens across the South who viewed the Confederate ideology as more important to the nation than the Constitution and its amendments.

In all of its ugliness, the evidence is overwhelming that the Confederate battle flag not only represents slavery, white supremacy, and treason, it also promotes them. It is hard to imagine how a country could allow allegiance to a flag that represents a threat to its very existence. While it is clear that the flag was used by terrorist groups such as the Klan and far right citizens whose actions mirrored the Klan, those groups are still often seen as Americans who simply want to preserve

nationalism. The debate over the flag is wrapped in hypocrisy and white privilege. Since Reconstruction, flag defenders have been protected and granted immunity even though they advocate for a cause that led to secession. Their immunity was not due to their citizenship, but the color of their skin and their beliefs. Men such as Nat Turner and Malcom X who took far less violent steps and caused less damage, were marked as traitors and anti-American. Even men such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who peacefully protested under the U.S. flag, were under the watch of the federal government and labeled as troublemakers. In the past ten years protests have sparked on both sides, with white nationalist flag defenders being categorized as peaceful and often given police protection, while groups such as Black Lives Matter are seen as destructive and divisive. Progress has been made as several states have made steps to remove the Confederate emblem from their state flags. However, there has yet to be an effort on the federal level to outlaw the flag. The progress that has been made was in some ways hindered by the remarks made and beliefs promoted by the previous presidential administration.

ENDNOTES

- 1 “The Declaration of Causes of Seceding States,” *American Battlefield Trust*, December 18, 2019, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/declaration-causes-seceding-states>.
- 2 “The Declaration of Causes of Seceding States,” *American Battlefield Trust*.
- 3 John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America’s Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), 23.
- 4 Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 26.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 134.
- 7 Michael J. Martinez, William D. Richardson, and Ron McNinch-Su, *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 265.
- 8 John Walker Davis, “An Air of Defiance: Georgia’s State Flag Change of 1956,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (1998): 314.
- 9 Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 146.
- 10 “Chasing the Confederate Battle Flag off the Ole Miss Campus,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no.38 (2002): 13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3134170>.

- 11 Gerald R. Webster and Jonathan I. Leib, “Religion, Murder, and the Confederate Battle Flag in South Carolina,” *Southeastern Geographer* 56, no. 1 (2016): 31.
- 12 Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 147.
- 13 “Article III of the Constitution of the United States” *Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School*, accessed August 9, 2020, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/articleiii>.
- 14 Jonathan Horn, “Even Robert E. Lee Wanted the Confederate Flag Gone,” *The Daily Beast*, last modified April 14, 2017, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/even-robert-e-lee-wanted-the-confederate-flaggone>.
- 15 Horn, “Even Robert E. Lee Wanted the Confederate Flag Gone.”
- 16 Paul Quigley, “Independence Day Dilemmas in the American South, 1848–1865,” *The Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 2 (2009): 235-236.
- 1717 Jonathan I. Leib, “Heritage versus Hate: A Geographical Analysis of Georgia’s Confederate Battle Flag Debate,” *Southeastern Geographer* 35, no. 1 (1995): 37.
- 18 John Walker Davis, “An Air of Defiance: Georgia’s State Flag Change of 1956,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (1998): 326.
- 19 Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 152.