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Dispelling the Mythos Surrounding a Civil War Icon

Confederate symbols have evoked both pride and prejudice since their inception, and since the conclusion of the war, few have stirred emotions like the Confederate battle flag. John Coski's *The Confederate Battle Flag* traces this symbol's evolution of meaning, an icon that has arguably become "a second American flag" (p. 241). Coski, historian and library director at Richmond's Museum of the Confederacy, claims to be a dispassionate Confederate vexillologist with no particular interest in the emotionally charged "flag flaps" that have always surrounded the Confederate battle flag's display (p. 183). Although such a claim will draw skepticism from some sides of the issue, he has produced a thoroughly researched, focused, and balanced account that brilliantly integrates Civil War history and memory.

The Confederacy's quixotic quest for nationalism provided the impetus for the battle flag design and its integration into Confederate culture. South Carolinian William Miles lobbied incessantly for adoption of a Confederate standard that would distinguish it from the old American flag. Unhappy with the "Stars and Bars" design approved by the Provisional Confederate Congress as the "First National Flag," Miles searched for another more distinctive emblem. His initial submissions offended both southern Christians and Jews by offering variations of a standard cross or the inclusion of a crescent. Miles's submission of the now familiar St. Andrew's cross pattern also drew skepticism from the southern legislators, and Miles as chair of the Committee for Flag and Seal failed to win approval from his own com-

mittee for the design. The flag debate within the nascent Confederate Congress was a harbinger of the "flag flaps" that would follow.

With the outbreak of war, Confederates reemphasized the importance of having their own national symbols, especially on the battlefield. Confederates at Manassas had carried with them into combat individual state flags or the "Stars and Bars," a flag with a blue canton with a circle of stars and a red and white striped field. The absence of uniformity to these state designs and the official Confederate flag's similarity to the "Stars and Stripes" made it impossible to recognize friend from foe in combat. Confederate commanders subsequently clamored for a distinctive battle flag. General P. G. T. Beauregard, a friend of Miles, along with General Joseph Johnston, championed Miles's St. Andrews cross pattern as a means to improve battlefield command and control. The Confederates in Virginia (later to become the Army of Northern Virginia) adopted Miles's design as a "battle flag" and mandated it be a square of varying sizes depending on the type of unit.

The attempt to standardize the battle flag in the Rebel military met with resistance and confusion that appeared to embody the Confederate experience. As Beauregard and Johnston migrated west, they attempted to impose the battle flag widely used in Virginia upon their new western commands. Leonidas Polk's, Earl Van Dorn's, and William Hardee's commands in particular were unimpressed with the Miles (frequently dubbed

“Beauregard”) standard and subordinated it to their own unique flag patterns. In 1863, the Confederate Congress adopted a new national flag incorporating the St. Andrews Cross design as the canton on a solid white field. The “Stainless Banner” or “Second National Flag,” combined with a renewed emphasis on its use by subsequent Army of Tennessee commanders Joseph Johnston and John Bell Hood, did increase the battle flag’s visibility among western units, but many of them still insisted on carrying their old standards alongside it. Thus, by the end of the war, the battle flag’s dissemination was nearly complete among southern forces, and it had become synonymous with the Confederate cause. As Coski points out, the “cause” was the preservation of slavery, and the battle flag symbolized the defense of that institution. Confederate citizens, however, had imbued the battle flag with “additional layers of meaning related to duty, soldierly valor, ancestry, heritage, and tradition” (p. 27). To understand the controversy surrounding the battle flag’s use today, Coski argues that we must be able to appreciate “how a flag so closely associated with the defense of slavery could also be, for many people past and present, a symbol of liberty, courage, and commitment” (p. 27).

In the years immediately following the war, the battle flag remained largely absent from the southern political and physical landscape. The military governments and Radical administrations presiding over the South deemed it a flag of treason, and many northerners remained hostile toward it. Even southern politicians and resistance groups, most notably the Ku Klux Klan, intentionally decided against employing the battle flag in their Reconstruction-era campaigns. Southerners did begin to unfurl the battle flags as memorials to the valor of the former Confederate soldiers as Radical Reconstruction waned. Between the 1870s and 1930s, various Confederate memorial organizations, like the United Confederate Veterans (later the Sons of Confederate Veterans) and the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) institutionalized and ritualized the “Confederately correct” use of the battle flag (p. 26). These organizations were unanimous in their opinion that trivial use of the flag be discouraged, if not outlawed, and in many respects, their attempts to regulate flag design and usage were more successful than those of Confederate leaders. Their crusade mirrored the Union veteran organizations campaign to bring renewed respect to the “Stars and Stripes,” and led to a *quid pro quo* among North and South. In return for southerners’ assimilation back into the national culture, Coski argues Northerners abandoned their demand for

civil rights, accepted segregation, and afforded respect to southerners’ “dual loyalty” to both region and country by tolerating the battle flag’s public reemergence (p. 82). Yet, while the battle flag seemingly reinvented itself from a symbol for the slave-holding Confederate states to a symbol for the bravery of Confederate soldiers, it reminded African Americans that racism was still a national problem and that Reconstruction’s promises remained unfulfilled.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the battle flag generated fresh debates among a new generation. Southern college students, either naively or ignorantly, broadened the battle flag’s appeal as campus chic. The Kappa Alpha college fraternity incorporated the battle flag into its ceremonies corresponding to the popular success of *Gone with the Wind*. College football, whose popularity was an outgrowth of the southern martial tradition, also inspired students and fans at the University of Virginia and later the University of Mississippi to wave the battle flag and adopt other Confederate symbolism in the name of “competitive sectionalism” (p. 93). Protests and complaints from northerners or Civil Rights groups only served to rally the South behind its embattled emblem. The battle flag’s increased visibility also provoked significant controversy as demonstrated by the military’s attempts to restrict its usage by southern soldiers. According to Coski, Southerners serving overseas during World War II displayed the flag for a variety of purposes: as a “talisman,” to establish “a sense of regional identity,” to reemphasize their martial traditions, or engage in “competitive sectionalism” (pp. 91, 93). However “humorous or harmless” southern students and soldiers intended these flag displays to be, they coincided with renewed attempts by the Federal government to integrate the country (p. 93). Southerners took exception to these integration efforts, and a faction broke away from the Democratic Party to form the Dixiecrats. The Dixiecrats adopted the battle flag as their party symbol, despite strong objections from the UDC, and the battle flag once again came to symbolize white supremacy during the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s.

Emboldened with an almost unprecedented ambiguity, the Confederate battle flag spread both nationally and internationally. Various groups continued to fight over the battle flag’s meaning, and increased its visibility as the Civil War Centennial approached. “Flag fads” swept the nation in the early 1950s, and again in the mid-sixties spurred on by increasingly proficient southern merchandisers (p. 79). Efforts by the UDC and several state legislatures to mandate the battle flag’s “Confederately cor-

rect" use backfired. They quickly lost the power of moral suasion over the battle flag's use, and it began appearing on nearly every tacky trinket, novelty item, or article of clothing. Outside Dixie, the battle flag morphed into a pop culture icon for "independence" or "rebelliousness," and as Coski describes, became "shorthand for 'redneck' or 'good ol' boy'" (p. 174). The battle flag even adorned the bug screens of tractor trailer trucks and dominated prime-time television on the 1969 Dodge Charger, the "General Lee," arguably the star of the *Dukes of Hazzard* television show in the early eighties. Coski notes that this lack of reverence and respect for the Confederate battle flag is similar to the trend regarding the American flag's use. Americans today, he says, "regard every space as a potential billboard.... Over time, people became accustomed to and comfortable with the inconceivable, blurring the distinctions among expressions of reverence, desecration, and belligerence, and this blurring has serious consequences for the flag's image and meaning" (pp. 180-81). As African Americans lent their voice to the battle flag debates, "flag flaps" began to erupt on campuses, in communities, and in state capitals. To counter perceived "heritage violations" by groups trying to mute or remove the battle flag's display, those who had once decried the proliferation of the battle flag outside of memorial festivities moved to defend it (p. 227). The Sons of Confederate Veterans and neo-Confederate

groups such as the Southern League, rallied around even the most gratuitous battle flag displays, usually doing so as a means to recruit new members rather than preserve history.

The ambidextrous quality of the meanings given to the Confederate battle flag makes it both revered and reviled. Recent efforts to compromise or ban the display of the Confederate battle flag on student clothing, in residence halls, in athletic events, on state property, and even on official state flags have polarized the country. Tragically, one recent battle flag display directly led to the murder of a Kentucky teenager. Progress toward returning the Confederate battle flag to the status of an historic artifact however continues today as a part of the debate over the Confederacy's place in American history. Some efforts to remove Confederate symbols, like those creatively employed at the University of Mississippi, have proven largely successful. Others, specifically the South Carolina and Georgia State Flag controversies, began with potential but succeeded only in further muddling the debate. In his thought-provoking and incisive final chapters, Coski chronicles these contemporary "flag flaps" and explains why understanding the difference between history and heritage is essential not only to the way Americans understand the Civil War, but their entire history as well. Perhaps in doing so, we might better understand and respect each other.

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