

# H-Net Reviews

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John M. Coski. *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005. xi + 401 pp. \$29.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-674-01722-6. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01983-6; \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01722-1.

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## One Man's Treason, Another Man's Heritage

A friend of mine, who is a published scholar on a number of Civil War topics, confesses irritation when a Confederate flag flap breaks out in the news, especially when its defenders proclaim it a symbol of honor, courage, and loyalty. "What it really stands for is simple-treason," he asserts.

One fact that non-specialists may find surprising is that what today is considered the "Confederate flag" was actually never the official flag of the Confederate States of America. Rather, today's Confederate flag is actually the most popular battle flag used by its troops, selected in large part because of its visibility on the battlefield.

Regardless of its purpose during the Civil War, the Confederate flag remains one of the most volatile symbols in U.S. public life, raising the ire of its detractors and the determined affection of its supporters. It represents a war that remains unsettled. According to Tony Horowitz, whose *Confederates in the Attic* explored in largely anecdotal and observational form the still rumbling tensions, "the issues at stake in the Civil War—race in particular—remained raw and unresolved, as did the broad question the conflict posed, 'Would America remain one nation.' "[1]

John M. Coski brings a different, more selective and thorough approach to that cultural divide in *The Confederate Battle Flag*. Utilizing contemporary sources through newspapers and magazine articles, as well as primary sources such as diaries, Coski has produced a fascinating work delivered with a remarkable absence of passion

involving a topic that generates seemingly little else.

Coski's absence of passion is worth explaining, especially as he is the historian and library director at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond. From one who works everyday in the heart of Confederate memory, he displays remarkable detachment. Coski makes clear his position on the flag controversy: "I do not share that emotional or ideological engagement [about the flag]. My reaction to the debates is amazement at others' strongly held and strongly expressed opinions.... I have concluded that this detachment from the emotions surrounding the issue is a virtue" (p. x). This detachment, however, does not prevent him from making judgments, some of which no doubt will raise disagreement from both flag supporters and opponents. For Coski, the argument between the two groups, which has played out in Congress and state legislatures, is "inherently flawed and unproductive" because each side creates "false dichotomies" and "distort[s] the historical record by trying to impose simplicity on an ambiguous past" (p. 27).

One of the book's strengths is the light it sheds on the transformation of the Confederate battle flag from a symbol of a nineteenth-century war into a rallying point for opponents of mid-twentieth-century desegregation. Beginning with Strom Thurmond's Dixiecrats in 1948 and continuing through the days of George Wallace, the flag was "endowed ... with a more specific connotation of resistance to the civil rights movement and to racial integration" (p. 124). On this point, Coski believes the flag's

defenders fail to realize the uses the flag has been put to, and how—with justification—it represents for many black Americans a symbol seeking restoration of Jim Crow and rolling back their gains.

The use of the Confederate battle flag either in state flags or flying above Southern state capitols, Coski points out, is not something that began after the Civil War or even in the days of the Redeemers. It is a mid-twentieth-century development and, as such, appears tied to the South's massive resistance response to integration. But other things have propelled the flag into public consciousness. A phenomenon of the late 1940s and early 1950s that he terms the "flag fad" found it enjoying "enormous, seemingly inexplicable, popularity in the North.... Confederate flags outsold U.S. flags in stores all over America" (p. 111).

Readers will also find useful Coski's examination of controversies over state use of the flag in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Attempting to remove it, as many Southern politicians have found to their dismay, is risky business and the flag "generates enormous grass-roots interest wherever it becomes an issue" (p. 188).

Yet despite its controversy at home, the Confederate battle flag is viewed differently by the world. In Europe, he writes, "the Confederate battle flag is associated typically with American values and American culture" (p. 293). In essence, he claims, the Confederate flag has become the "second American flag" (p. 294).

If there is a weakness, it may be that the reader will find herself or himself fatigued at points by the detail. Patience is rewarded because, like Horowitz's book, Coski's generates larger questions. His findings may serve to re-

inforce the notion of many that the United States has become two nations, the "red-and-blue" state dichotomy, if you will, marked by different ideas of culture and politics.

The flag continues to play a symbolic role. Conservative Southern Republicans have been open in using the Confederate flag for political purposes (p. 289). The Confederate states have "effectively 'won the peace,'" he writes, and part of this story is the "widespread *National* [emphasis added] acceptance" of the flag (p. 77). The points Coski makes about the Confederate battle flag—the inability of those on opposing sides to recognize the legitimate concerns of their opponents—seem to mirror our political environment. The flag debate, he notes is framed by "heritage" rather than "history," with the former "more akin to religion than history. It is a presentation of the past based not on critical evaluation of evidence but on faith and the acceptance of dogma" (p. 291).

Coski hopes that Americans can find a "middle ground" on the Confederate flag. Such a position would "recognize the flag as an American symbol," yet not as a "symbol of sovereignty" (p. 302). Flag defenders need to acknowledge the flag's association with "hostility to the rights and well-being" of black Americans (p. 301).

With both defenders and detractors seemingly more attuned to "heritage" than "history," is there any reason to expect Americans will find Coski's middle ground? Whatever the answer to that question may be, Coski has performed a valuable service in shining a dispassionate and informing light on the topic.

#### Notes

[1]. Tony Horowitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), p. 386.

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