



The Confederate Flag: History -v- Hysteria By Steve Quick

For the average non-Southerner the continued affection residents of Dixie display toward the controversial Battle Flag can be baffling. If African-Americans are so incensed by the banner, why not just fold it up and put it away? Greta Van Susteren of Fox News called for just that and defined the issue a "no-brainer". Why indeed? The war has been over for 137 years. Certain unsavory groups of a racist stripe seem unduly attached to the symbol as well. No one in the print or electronic media seems willing to come forward and offer a counterpoint. Is there another point of view after all?

Newspapers however, have developed the habit of concluding all flag related stories the same way. The throwaway line for the other point of view is usually something like "flag defenders say the banner stands for heritage". But what does that mean? If such an understanding can be developed is it still not overshadowed by prevailing negative opinions? Can a symbol so emotionally charged ever be mutually understood?

Therein lies the problem. The very same symbol means completely different things to different people. Perhaps the best place to start is there. Many hate groups have gravitated toward the historical flag. But it is also true these very same groups also use other symbols that are loved and cherished by millions of people. The pinnacle of the Ku Klux Klan was in the 1920s. They boasted over a million members with national leadership in Ohio and Illinois. Yet the most careful photographic scrutiny of the era will fail to reveal a single Confederate flag. One will however find the American flag and the Christian cross in profusion. These symbols are mainstays even today for hate groups. The difference is that patriotic Americans and Christians already have a context for these symbols. The icons cannot be co-opted because they already mean something else. This is also precisely why Southerners continue to love the Battle flag in the face of so much bad publicity. The flag already has meaning and context.

In fact, what the shamrock is to the Irish or the Star of David is to Jews, the Battle Flag is to most Southerners. There is enough historical baggage to encumber any of these symbols, but there is more to admire. The Confederate flag embodies religion, ethnic heritage, early-American revolutionary ideology and ultimately familial sacrifice on the battlefield. The circumstances that gave it birth are the touchstone of the regions identity, no different than the potato famine for the Irish or the holocaust for the Jew. To examine the flag, in historical and ethnic context should permit all but the most rabid flag-haters an opportunity to understand what is behind the vague explanation of "heritage".

While the Battle flag did not make its appearance in its recognizable form until 1862, some of the design elements date to antiquity. The "X" is the cross of St. Andrew. It was the fisherman Andrew who introduced his brother Simon Peter to Jesus in Galilee 2000 years ago. When the disciple Andrew was himself martyred years later he asked not to be crucified on the same type of cross Christ died upon. His last request was honored and he was put to death on a cross on the shape of the "X". Andrew later became the patron saint of Scotland and the Scottish flag today is the white St. Andrews cross on a blue field. When Scottish immigrants settled in Northern Ireland in the 1600s the cross was retained on their new flag, albeit a red St. Andrews cross on a white field. When the New World opened up landless Scots and Ulster-Scots lefts their homes and most of them settled in the South, preserving their old culture in the isolated rural and frontier environment

Grady McWhiney explains in his book Cracker Culture, that fully 75% of the early South was populated by these Celts. Most sold themselves into indentured servitude (the earliest form of American slavery) because they could not afford the cost of passage. This explains why only 6% of the African slaves brought to the New World ended up in the American colonies. The lowland English of Saxon descent by

contrast settled the Northeastern colonies. This imbued those colonies with such an English character they are still known as New England. Urban, commercial and materialistic by nature these Yankee descendants could not have been more different than their Southern countrymen. Many historians believe the longstanding historical animosities between Saxon and Celt did not bode well for the new country. With this historical perspective the St. Andrews cross seems almost destined to be raised again as ancient rivals clashed on new battlefields.

From this Celtic stock, the ingredients that made the unique Southern stew were gradually introduced. The American Revolution unleashed Celtic hatred of the redcoat. Southerners penned the Declaration of Independence, chased the British through the Carolina's and defeated them at Yorktown. But they were dismayed when New England immediately sought renewed trade with England and failed to support the French in their own revolution. Another Virginian later crafted the Constitution, a document as sacred to Southerners as their Bibles. Law, they believed finally checkmated tyranny. The red, white and blue 13-starred banner was their new cherished flag. These same features would later become a permanent part of the Battle flag.

But all was not well with the new republic. Mistrust between the regions manifested even before the revolution was over. The unwieldy Articles of Confederation preceded the constitution. Two of the former colonies (N.C and R.I.) had to be coerced into approving the latter document after wrangling that included northern insistence they be allowed to continue the slave trade another 20 years. Virginia and Kentucky passed resolutions in 1796 asserting their belief that political divorce was an explicit right. Massachusetts threatened on three separate occasions to secede, a right affirmed by all the New England states at the 1818 Hartford convention. The abolitionists were champions of secession and would burn copies of the constitution at their rallies. Their vicious attacks upon all things Southern occurring as it did in the midst of Northern political and economic ascendancy animated Southern secessionists years before the average Southerner could consider such a possibility.

Meanwhile Low Church Protestantism had taken root in the South in the early 1800's and like kudzu has flourished until the present day. Sociological studies conducted by John Shelton Reed of the University of North Carolina scientifically prove that the South is still the nations most religious region. Southerners are more likely to belong, attend and contribute to their churches than Americans from any other section. Calvinism is the main strain of religious thought and this connection to Scotland and the St. Andrews cross is no coincidence. The religious revivals that swept the Confederate armies during the war further ingrained faith as a fixture of Southern character. During the same era north of the Mason-Dixon transcendentalism, as expounded by Thoreau and Emerson, the taproot of modern secular humanism, was displacing puritanical religion as the dominant philosophical belief. The nation was also fracturing along spiritual lines.

By 1860 the United States was in reality two countries living miserably under one flag. When war broke out, Dixie's' original banner so resembled the old American forebear that a new flag was needed to prevent confusion on the field of battle. The blue St. Andrews cross, trimmed in white on a red field appeared above the defending Confederate army. Thirteen stars appeared on those bars representing the eleven seceding states and revolutionary precedent. These fighting units were all recruited from the same communities, with lifelong friends and close relatives among the casualties of every battle. As they buried their dead friends and relatives the names of those battles were painted or stitched on their flags. At Appomattox a Union observer wrote, they were stoic as they stacked their arms but wept bitterly when they had to furl their flags.

Then, as now the flag symbolizes for Southerners not hate but love; love of heritage, love of faith, love of constitutional protections, love of family and community. If the 1860 census is to be believed 95% of the slaves were owned by just 5% of the population. The modern insistence that the conflict was to resolve the issue of slavery is at best overstated and at worst revisionist. But the current argument does deserve one more look.

The vitriolic, almost irrational antipathy toward the flag is a recent phenomenon. Credible research reveals its origins to be in the 1980's revived by a financially strained and scandal plagued NAACP. Current President, Kwame Ninsin has turned the issue into a fundraising juggernaut. Egged on by a liberal media irritated at the lingering conservatism in the South, the flag fight has generated much heat but little light. South Carolina relocated the flag from its capital dome to a place of historical significance after they decided it flew in a position of false sovereignty. Governor Hodges became the second governor in a row whose broken promises to "leave the flag alone" scuttled their reelection bids. Former Governor Barnes of Georgia finessed a backroom flag deal that for now has changed the flag but sank his rising political star as outraged citizens sent him to retirement in the 2002 elections. In Mississippi, however, the thing was put to an old fashioned democratic vote. By a 2 to 1 margin and outspent 10 to 1 they voted to keep the state flag, which features the Battle flag. In fact, three times more African-Americans voted to keep the flag than voted for President Bush. Mississippians speak for all Southerners when they say "It's our symbol, its our heritage and therefore our choice".

In the end what people choose to believe about the flag is just that, a choice. One can accept the interpretation of entire states, Southern rock and country bands, NASCAR fans, Kappa Alpha fraternities, thousands of reenactors and a century of thoughtful historians. People can also embrace the interpretation of a few pathetic racists and an opportunistic civil rights organization well amplified by a sympathetic media. Like all choices its says less about the object than it does about the person Perhaps only the Irishman can define the shamrock, or a Jew explain the Star of David. Are not Southerners entitled to the same latitude?

Steve Quick

20 Charles Ct

Buffalo Grove, IL 60089

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