

# The Real Meaning of the Confederate Flag

Submitted by Scott D. Myers

## Stars and Bars Forever: The Real Meaning of the Confederate Flag

Posted by Greg Caggiano on May 5, 2010

There are various symbols and emblems from around the world that evoke a certain emotion from people. If one looks at the American Flag, one cannot help but feel a sense of pride and patriotism. The opposite occurs for when one looks at the Nazi Swastika, as deep feelings of hatred can be felt. The Confederate Flag is somewhere in the middle of these two, as it stirs up pride from one group and hatred from another.

What is unfair, though, is that most people in the United States view the Confederate Flag as a symbol of racism, when in reality, that could not be farther from the truth. The flag represents a war against tyranny, it stands as a symbol of independence and rebellion in today's society and to the actual soldiers who fought for it, the flag represents their heritage. The flag is also one of the most misunderstood symbols in the world today.

To begin with, when historians talk about the great tyrants in history, they always include the likes of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Joseph Stalin, but who they always seem to forget is the sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. The great emancipator himself once said, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it." This president, under the pressure of an oncoming civil war outbreak, raised an army of 75,000 troops to invade his own country.



It was in the southern response to this that the first Confederate Flag was stitched, something that bears hardly any resemblance to the flag people recognize today. It was three horizontal stripes, with red at the top and bottom and white in the middle. On the upper left hand corner was a blue box, with seven stars, the initial seven states that seceded from the Union. It would come to be known as the "Stars and Bars".

It was only after more states were not able to bear with this tyrannical oppression that more stars were added, the design was changed, and the flag people recognize today was born. This was not a symbol of hatred and slavery, but one of an underdog standing up against the mighty northern aggression. It was not until the war ended that racists would go on to use the flag because they were not content with the result.

No matter what, though, the issue of slavery will always be raised in dealing with the flag. Historians will argue that the south seceded purely because of slavery. In a *New York Times* article titled, "The Past is Never Dead. It's Not Even Past.", by John Meacham, he features several letters to the editor, including one that states, "As an African-American from the South, I ask: If, from the Confederate

states' viewpoint, the Civil War mainly was about states' rights, not slavery, why did Virginia, Alabama and Texas explicitly use the term 'slaveholding states' in their ordinances of secession?". Although this argument does not directly address the Confederate Flag, it is still a very important part in understanding the general attitude when dealing with the flag.

The author makes a good point, and the answer to his question is simple, and that is, because those aforementioned states did support the institution of slavery, of course they were going to label themselves as such. There was no way around that. Although the use of slaves is a moral evil, it was legalized by the very same government who now wanted to take it away. This was an encroachment on states' rights, and it was because of this principle, not the actual slaves themselves, that states such as Virginia, Alabama, and Texas left the Union and were labeled as slaveholding states.

To move on to a more positive note, in today's society, the Confederate Flag has a prominent place as a symbol rebellion and independence. Over a hundred and forty years ago, the flag stood for rebelling against tyranny, but now it stands for rebelling against societal norms. This can clearly be seen by the use of the flag by various motorcycle gangs. Since they are going against mainstream society by riding around the country on the back of a motorcycle, they use the flag as a way of showing it. Does that mean all motorcyclists are racist?

This is further reinforced, albeit in a much different matter, in Tony Horwitz's non-fiction bestseller, *Confederates in the Attic*. He noted one night during the late 1980's when he was watching a news program on television about an uprising in one of the Baltic states of Europe, he noticed a man waving a Confederate Flag, in amongst the thousands of people at the rally they were at. This man probably did not know one iota of American history, let alone the Civil War, but one thing is for sure, he knows that the flag stands for rebelling, which was why he was waving it. It is doubtful that racism and slavery even entered into his mind during the course of that rally. This shows just how far the power of this flag has reached, and how it can be interpreted by certain groups.

In regards to this interpretation, people are also always mistaking the Confederate Flag for a symbol of the Ku Klux Klan. This is absolutely false, as the Klan have their own separate insignia, although they do use the flag in various marches. Even as recent as April 20, 2010, this mistake is being made. In an *Associated Press* article titled, "Judge Issues Stay in DNR's Decision Against Klan", author Maria Fisher writes about how the Klan was denied permission to fly the Confederate Flag at the historic Fort Davidson in Missouri, because one had flown there prior, and it was now missing. She writes, "When the [Department of Natural Resources] originally denied the Klan group's permit request March 23, [they] cited the group's desire to have a Confederate Flag flying at the historic site and to present information claiming the Confederate Flag had been removed from the state historic site."

In this event, the DNR automatically assumed that the Klan had some hidden agenda in placing a flag at the site. But if they did a background check, they would have realized that Fort Davidson was a historic Confederate site during the Civil War, and that flag flew there. The flag they wanted to fly, as the author noted, was not even the flag people recognize today, but the original Stars and Bars design. It would only be proper to recreate history and let the flag fly there now, but it still carries a lot of negative weight.

To make clear the Klan's intentions, people always seem to confuse the original Klan with that of what is seen today. Jeff Huber, a history professor at Brookdale Community College, said in a personal interview, "The KKK was not even created as a racist organization, but to target rich

Northern land buyers, known as carpetbaggers, after the war ended. It was only after the Klan's actions grew so extreme in the 1870's, that their creator, General Nathan Forrest, disbanded the organization." It was not until 1915, after D.W Griffith directed and released the now infamous film, *The Birth of a Nation*, that glorified violence and racial hatred, did a new Klan form into what they are today, a strictly hate-based organization.

Getting back to the negative weight that flag carries, as mentioned previously, is dramatically, and passionately echoed in an article titled, "The Confederate Flag is the Symbol of Racists!", found on the website, *Another Perspective*. In this, the author writes, "Since [people who support the flag] think their claim that the flag is some sort of symbol of anything but racism and hatred, perhaps other symbols of hatred and repression should be flown from the same pole with "Southern Pride". The state government could begin flying the swastika up there, as there are many people around the world and in America who believe that old Adolph was "misunderstood" and a "great leader".

Although the author makes a semi-good point in bringing up the Swastika, being that it is a world renowned symbol of hatred, once again, he or she swings and misses on the real truth behind the flag. The Swastika was the emblem of a government who rounded up and systematically murdered more than six million Jews and others around Europe during the 1930's and 40's. There was nothing political about it, other than to rid the world of what the Nazis thought were inferior people, which in their sick and twisted minds would contribute to the rise of the perfect Aryan race. It is for that reason that it is ridiculous to place both symbols on the same level. No one was murdered under the Confederate Flag. As previously established, since the flag was not a symbol of slavery, then it stood for one thing which was rebellion. Not in a million years will the Swastika and Confederate Flag be equal in any stretch of the imagination.

That sense of rebellion that the Confederate Flag stands for can clearly be seen all around. In an article by Syracuse professor Bruce Hare, titled, "Confederate Flag Represents Rebellion", he states, "The Confederate flag and the Confederacy itself represent rebellion against the United States of America, not just some anti-black sentiment. Millions of Union Army members from across the North including approximately 186,000 African-American soldiers fought and died in combat against rebels flying this Confederate battle flag." This is yet another example of how misinformed most Americans are, as the flag was not created to stand as a symbol of black hatred.

What is really sad, though, is the propaganda children are being taught, about how evil the Confederates were because they owned slaves, but no one ever mentions the actual black people themselves that owned slaves. In an article for the website *American Civil War*, titled, "Dixie's Censored Subject: Black Slave Owners", author Robert Grooms writes:

"In the rare instances when the ownership of slaves by free Negroes is acknowledged in the history books, justification centers on the claim that black slave masters were simply individuals who purchased the freedom of a spouse or child from a white slaveholder and had been unable to legally manumit them. Although this did indeed happen at times, it is a misrepresentation of the majority of instances, one which is debunked by records of the period on blacks who owned slaves. These include individuals such as Justus Angel and Mistress L. Horry, of Colleton District, South Carolina, who each owned 84 slaves in 1830. In fact, in 1830 a fourth of the free Negro slave masters in South Carolina owned 10 or more slaves; eight owning 30 or more. According to federal census reports, on June 1, 1860 there were nearly 4.5 million Negroes in the United States, with fewer than four million of them living in the southern slaveholding states. Of the blacks residing in the South, 261,988 were

not slaves. Of this number, 10,689 lived in New Orleans. The country's leading African American historian, Duke University professor John Hope Franklin, records that in New Orleans over 3,000 free Negroes owned slaves, or 28 percent of the free Negroes in that city."

This is probably the single most eye opening aspect of the pre-Civil War era, and that is free black people in the south owning slaves. What is even more shocking than that is the amount of blacks who fought under the same flag that they now condemn. In "On Black Confederates", an article by Scott Williams, for the website *37<sup>th</sup> Texas*, he states, "It has been estimated that over 65,000 Southern blacks were in the Confederate ranks. Over 13,000 of these "saw the elephant" also known as meeting the enemy in combat." That is a fairly large number, and deserves the recognition by historians that it does not get at this present time. Should more people learn about this hidden facet of American history, perhaps attitude would change.

But of all that the Confederate Flag represents, the most apparent is southern heritage. To understand this, it is important to understand the mindset of those actually doing the fighting for the south. A vast percentage of the soldiers themselves did not even own slaves because they could not afford it. In *HIST*, a textbook by Kevin Schultz, he informs the student that, "Of the eight million southern white people, only 338,000 owned slaves, meaning that a huge majority of southern white people had no direct connection to slavery". The wealthy plantation owners oblivious to the brutal fighting of the war had the money to buy their way out of fighting and did not see combat themselves.

The commander-in-chief of the army, Robert E. Lee, was a staunch opponent of slaves himself. Robert Grooms also states, "In an 1856 letter to his wife Mary Custis Lee, Robert E. Lee called slavery a 'moral and political evil'." This proves that Lee was leading his army for the love of his land, and state of Virginia. In the film, *Gettysburg*, directed by Ronald Maxwell, this is further shown when Union officer Thomas Chamberlain approaches a captured Confederate soldier and tells him that he is fighting to preserve the Union, and asks the prisoner why he is fighting for the south. The man responds, "I ain't fightin' to keep no [blacks] one way or the other. I'm fightin' for my rights."

These are words directly out of the mouth of the common man and show his reasoning for fighting. Each battle unit would also stitch onto the flag the names of all the battles they had fought and lost men in. This made the men proud to march into battle carrying the flag, because it showed how much experience they had and how much blood they had shed.

The pride they felt cannot be more clearly seen than after one looks at the painting, *The Confederate Standard Bearer*, by Don Troiani. This painting depicts a proud rebel soldier tightly holding the flag by his side as it flaps in the breeze. With a tattered uniform on, and surrounded by his fellow soldiers, who appear to be starving, the soldier looks dead ahead, not showing weakness, not letting the hunger and depravity of war get to him.

He is holding onto the flag for dear life, as if he holds the entire Confederacy in his hand. But even so, the sense of defeat can be seen as clearly this was supposed to be representative of the end of the war, when the south had been broken due to poor supplies, and a depleted number of soldiers able to fight. But nevertheless, this soldier pressed on, despite all his hardships, to fight for a cause that he believed in. Slavery and racial hatred were not on his mind, just the love of his land as his loved ones living on it.



This leads to another depiction of what the war was really about. In a 1969 film titled, *The Undefeated*, starring John Wayne and directed by Andrew McGlagon, it shows a battle at the beginning of the movie towards the end of the war. When the fighting stops and the Confederate unit surrenders, Wayne's character, a Union colonel, is informed that the war actually ended days ago, and they had not received word. They tell this to the rebel commander in charge, and he does not seem surprised. Wayne asks, "You mean, you knew? How could you continue this fighting then?" The rebel officer responds, "Because this is our land. And you're on it." He was a defiant soldier defending his home, to the very bitter end.

The Confederate Flag will always be seen to represent many things. People will always view it as a symbol of racism, hatred, and slavery. Unfortunately, people will continue to be ignorant. The fact of the matter is what it stands for is in the eye of the beholder. What the eye of many people sees, however, is a flag that stands for a ragtag group of poorly supplied soldiers standing up against the mighty army of the North. It also represents society's view on what a symbol of rebelling is. Finally, it represents the heritage of those living down South that had ancestors who fought and died for the Southern cause.

Either way one looks at it, the flying of the Confederate Flag is still freedom of speech, and in regards to that, the great poet Voltaire once wrote, "I do not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." This is one of the earliest defenses of that freedom, which every citizen of the United States is granted. It is the right of the people to be able to express their beliefs, even if misunderstood, as the Confederate Flag almost always is.

The American Flag also falls under this category, as this country, when represented by the stars and stripes, has fought numerous unpopular wars including one in Vietnam and one right now in the Middle East. But people do not look at the politics when patriotically flying the American flag, because it represents the thousands of soldiers who gave their lives to keep it. The same could be said of the Confederate flag. Why does it not deserve the same respect?

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