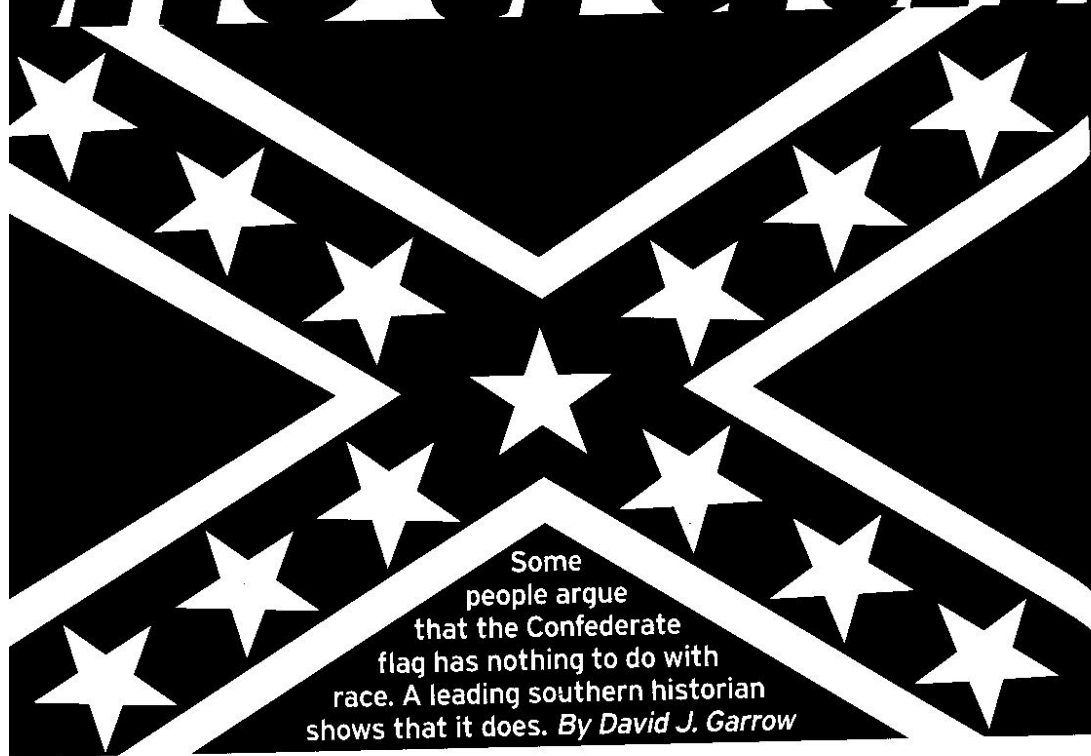


# *the truth*



Some people argue that the Confederate flag has nothing to do with race. A leading southern historian shows that it does. *By David J. Garrow*



Intense controversy over public display of the Confederate army's 1860s battle flag boils up again and again in today's South. All four major presidential contenders confronted the issue this year in South Carolina, where Republican candidates George W. Bush and John McCain refused to endorse the flag's removal, while Democrats Al Gore and Bill Bradley both called for its banishment.

The use of the Confederate emblem in the state flags of Georgia and Mississippi, as well as the flying of the flag over government buildings, produces nothing less than an uproar. The turmoil is, in one respect, surprising, since from the end of the Civil War in 1865 right up until World War II, the old Confederate flag was

*Garrow, presidential distinguished professor at Emory University School of Law, is the author of Bearing the Cross, a biography of Martin Luther King Jr., which won a 1987 Pulitzer Prize.*

rarely displayed anywhere in the South, not even in museums. That began to change during the 1940s, when southerners serving in the U.S. military, and college fraternity boys immediately after World War II, sometimes brandished it in a show of regional pride.

In 1948, the first explicitly political use of the flag since the 1860s occurred when it was adopted as an emblem by the breakaway Dixiecrat party. Southern white segregationists, unhappy with the pro-civil rights policies of Democratic president Harry Truman, saw only more of the same in Republican presidential nominee Thomas E. Dewey and the left-wing, third-party Progressive candidate, Henry Wallace. So the southerners walked out of the 1948 Democratic party convention and nominated a fourth-party ticket. They put up South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond for president—yes, the very same Strom Thurmond who is still a senator today at age 97—and Mississippi governor Fielding Wright for vice president. The Dixiecrat candidates carried four states in the fall—

Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina—as the underdog Truman scored a stunning upset over Dewey. The other winner was the Confederate flag.

Six years later, in 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark school-desegregation ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, southern opponents of racial equality reacted with fury in ways both tangible and symbolic. Hard-core racists in Mississippi took the lead by creating the White Citizens' Council, an upper-class anti-integration group that used economic retaliation to punish both blacks and whites who opposed the segregated status quo. And the old flag took on a new resonance for southern whites who wanted to advertise their defiant attitude toward the Supreme Court.

Mississippi had included the Confederate emblem, a blue cross containing 13 white stars on a red background, in its state flag since 1894. Around the same time, Alabama and Florida had adopted another version of a Confederate cross as the centerpiece of their state flags. Almost simultaneously, new discriminatory laws imposing Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchising black voters had swept the South.

Sixty years later, in the wake of *Brown*, some of Georgia's most conservative Democrats began advocating the addition of the Confederate emblem to Georgia's state flag. In early 1956—just as Alabama's Montgomery bus boycott and the attempted desegregation of the University of Alabama were becoming front-page news—the Georgia legislature adopted the Confederate symbol. Denmark Groover Jr. of Macon told his colleagues, "This will show that we in Georgia intend to uphold what we stood for, will stand for, and will fight for."

Repeatedly in recent years, defenders of the Confederate flag have claimed that its newfound popularity after 1954 reflected only a desire to commemorate Civil War valor, not champion racial segregation. But an examination of the 1956 news clippings detailing Georgia's adoption of the flag reveals that the two leading Confederate-remembrance groups—the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV)—both opposed the move. One UDC leader presciently warned that making the change will "cause strife." Additionally—as John Walker Davis has assiduously detailed in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly*—in the very week that the Georgia legislature voted to adopt the new flag, a newspaper essay cataloging all the actions the state should take to memorialize the sacrifices of Confederate soldiers made no mention whatsoever of the flag.

Just two days before Georgia's vituperatively segregationist governor, Marvin Griffin, signed the new flag bill into law, one of the state's largest newspapers, the *Macon Telegraph*, published a letter to the editor heralding the change. Adopting the Confederate flag, reader William Henry Gilbert declared, "is one way of telling our government and the world that we will never surrender our sovereignty and principles of life to any Supreme Court."

In contrast to that letter, Georgia's premier black newspaper, the *Atlanta Daily World*, editorialized against the new flag, decrying the racial hostility the change symbolized. Several years later, when civil rights protests heated up further, both Alabama and South Carolina began flying the actual battle flag itself from prominent positions on their respective state capitols.

Indeed, Alabama first flew the old flag above its capitol on the very morning that U.S. attorney general Robert F. Kennedy came to the capitol to ask Governor George C. Wallace to cooperate with at least token desegregation of the University of Alabama. Wallace's—and Alabama's—reply was unmistakable even before Kennedy entered the building.

Following the peak years of the civil rights movement, controversy over the Confederate flag receded until the late 1980s, when black legislators in Georgia and Alabama challenged their states' use of the emblem. Their efforts received a major boost in 1992, when Georgia governor Zell Miller, a moderate Democrat, endorsed them. "The Georgia flag is a last remaining vestige of days that are not only gone, but also days that we have no right to be proud of," Miller declared. "We need to lay the days of segregation to rest [and] do what is right."

But what was right and what was politically popular diverged widely. A 1991 poll showed that while more than 50 percent of black southerners viewed the Confederate flag as a racist symbol, more than 75 percent of whites saw it as a badge of southern pride. Governor Miller found himself debating an issue he could not win politically. On *Larry King Live*, a dumbfounded Miller—paired off against a Sons of Confederate Veterans leader who now embraced the state flag that his organization had originally opposed—discovered that his opponent actually regretted the outcome of the Civil War. "Do you really think that we would be better off if the South had won that war?" Miller asked in astonishment. "Yes," the flag champion replied.

Georgia's flag was not changed. Two separate 1994 studies of white sentiment regarding the flag found stark evidence that racial attitudes were the uppermost determinant of support for the flag, and that there was a remarkable polarization of views. When one survey asked people to locate their position concerning the flag on a seven-point scale, more than 60 percent of the respondents selected either one

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### Jesse Jackson on the Flap over the Flag

One afternoon in Greenville, South Carolina, when I was nine years old, my father was raking leaves. A man came outside to offer us a drink of water, and when he left, I asked, "Why does that man speak differently from us?" "He's German," said my father, stopping to lean on his rake. "I fought in Europe so they could have freedom [from the Nazis], but when I came back, I was treated like a second-class citizen. I'm proud to be a veteran of that war, but now he's here and he can vote—and I cannot."

As a southerner, I consider the Confederate flag an insult to people who care about preserving a united and free America. The flag is the symbol of a secessionist government that conspired with the foreign nations of France and England to declare war on the United States and to preserve, among other things, the institution of slavery.

The American flag under which my father fought in World War II was accompanied by the Confederate flag back home in South Carolina. As I grew older and learned of the Civil War, I wondered how the flag of another nation could fly with the American flag. Somehow, in my youth, I sensed that one nation should have one flag.

## VIETNAM WAR

initiate contact, strike quickly in superior numbers, and then disappear. They built a massive, brilliantly engineered maze of tunnels to protect them from American bombers. They could move through the countryside more readily than we—it was their land, after all—and they would mine the trails so that a very high percentage of our combat deaths came from detonated traps.

And they would fight at close range, limiting the American advantage in airpower and artillery. Traditionally, infantrymen fight one another at distances of 100 or 200 yards. But the North Vietnam Army regulars would close to within 30 yards to fight us. If the Americans wanted to use their vaunted airpower and artillery, let them virtually call it in on themselves. What's more, the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong controlled the pace of the war. They could turn it up or down, depending on their needs or their desire to affect American public opinion.

Above all, they never had to win the war. All they had to do was stalemate us and make the price too high for us to pay. If we killed 1,000 NVA and lost 100 of our own men, it was, ironically enough, an acceptable ratio for them but not for us. They knew we would tire, as the French had, of such a bloodletting in a distant place. If we lost, no Vietcong would occupy Los Angeles. While we had absolute military superiority, they still had a dynamic that worked: absolute political superiority. There would always be more young men coming down the trails.

We were essentially fighting the birthrate of the country. We could tax them and tax them heavily, but they would keep coming. This was the final step in a multigenerational struggle to have their own freedom. "And how long do you Americans want to fight?" Pham Van Dong asked Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times* back in 1967, when the war had eight years to go. "One year, two years, three years, five years, 10 years, 20 years...? We will be glad to accommodate you."

In time, we found the burden of the war unbearable. It had begun to tear us apart at home, and it was clear that there was no such concept as victory. So we began, under Richard Nixon, a long, painful process of disengagement, turning the war over to the South Vietnamese to fight for themselves. It was in effect where I had come in, back in 1962, our proxies doing the fighting for us. But the ARVN, which was already a defeated army, had no chance. And of course the other side won.

A few months ago, I was back in Vietnam, the cold war over for 10 years, the bitter arguments of the early '60s—the domino theory, helping a country to help itself—very distant. The Hanoi government, whose leaders were brilliant at fighting a war, does not seem to be very gifted at running a domestic economy. It is a country now run by aging octogenarian bureaucrats. The population is young and getting younger by the minute. The older men who are veterans of one or both wars complain bitterly that the young people today do not know anything about the sacrifices made for them by their elders in those two great wars. All the young people want, it is said, is their music from the West and their Honda motorcycles. The complaints seem an odd footnote to history.

I had always wanted to visit Dien Bien Phu, to see where the Vietminh had destroyed the French forces with finality in the spring of 1954. I had been a junior in college then, 19 years old and worried about draft calls, and now all these years later, at the age of 65, there I was. For two days I walked the battlefield, and I kept wondering, again and again, how could the French have done it, how could they have staked out a position that was so doomed, particularly after fighting the Vietminh for seven years and knowing how talented they were? And then, of course, the thought struck me, how could we have done it as well, not learned the French lessons and come here, with such high hopes, to stand in their footsteps? We, all of us, I fear, are doomed to learn certain history lessons the hard way. ☐

### THE GIVING GAME

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## CONFEDERATE FLAG

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 75 extreme or the other.

Given those politics, black activists took their fight to the federal courts in an effort to have state use of the emblem declared unconstitutional. In Georgia, federal district judge Orinda Evans weighed the historical evidence and concluded that "the legislators who voted for the 1956 bill knew that the new flag would be interpreted as a statement of defiance against federal desegregation mandates and an expression of anti-black feeling." Thus she found that "discriminatory purpose was a motivating factor in the legislature's passage" of the Confederate flag bill. However, she concluded that there was not enough tangible evidence of present-day ill effects to allow her to ban the flag.

On appeal, Evans's ruling was affirmed by a similarly reluctant three-judge panel. Acknowledging that the flag was "an emblem that historically had been associated with white supremacy and resistance to federal authority," the appeals panel volunteered its opinion that "because the Confederate battle flag emblem offends many Georgians, it has, in our view, no place in the official state flag." Nonetheless, the panel also agreed that a state's use of the emblem was not a violation of the Constitution.

In 1996-97, when South Carolina's Republican governor, David Beasley, tried to persuade his state's legislature to remove the Confederate banner from atop the capitol, he met a political reception much like the one Zell Miller encountered four years earlier in Georgia. And even in 2000, threats of black-supported economic boycotts targeted against South Carolina and Georgia appear to have zero chance of persuading white state legislators to take down the flag.

Race, or racial animus, continues to underlie support for the Confederate flag in 2000, just as it did in 1956. Witness a recent letter to the editor of Atlanta's weekly gay and lesbian newspaper, the *Southern Voice*, protesting a change-the-flag editorial. "I am a white, gay male," wrote Joe R. Clark of Augusta, Georgia, "but I will die and go to hell before I change my mind about that flag." For those who view the flag as an offensive hate symbol, Clark had strong, old-fashioned advice: "I suggest that you and anyone else who can't deal with looking at it just move the hell out of the state of Georgia." Emphasizing that "I proudly display" it at home, Clark revealingly proclaimed, "I will continue to do so forever. I will not be one who gives in to whatever the blacks want."

As William Faulkner rightly noted in *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." ☐