



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“War of Southern Symbols”

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Centering Thoughts

We failed, but in the good providence of God apparent failure often proves a blessing.

Robert E. Lee

The flags of the Confederate States of America were very important and a matter of great pride to those citizens living in the Confederacy. They are also a matter of great pride for their descendants as part of their heritage and history. Winston Churchill

For black folks, the Confederate flag represents the same thing that the Nazi flag represents to the Jews... Now, white folks try to explain it away like, ‘Oh, it’s okay.’ But when you’re black, it is not okay. It represents oppression and murder. Ken Page

Sermon

By alternating lyrics from the Union and Confederate standpoint in the song our BLUUgrass Folks band just played, “Battle Cry for Freedom,” they showed that both sides thought they were fighting for freedom. This is just one of many paradoxes we’ll explore this morning. Another is that I’m probably both incredibly stupid and enormously brave to take on this topic. Regardless, I had several reasons for addressing the controversy over how we think and feel about symbolic legacies of the Civil War.

My first reason – we observe Veteran’s Day this week, a time to honor those who served in U.S. wars. More than 3 million Americans fought in the Civil War and about 620,000 soldiers died during it, more than in all other wars since combined. Even as we honor living veterans of war this Tuesday, we can remember those who fought in this bloodiest of wars on home soil.

Secondly, the Governor of Georgia declared a state holiday to observe Robert E. Lee’s birthday on November 28 this month. Georgia’s government agencies and state Capitol will be closed that day. Lee was born on January 19th, but since Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday is January 15th and it’s a federal holiday, Lee’s state birthday observance occurs in November. Georgia also observes Confederate Memorial Day as a state holiday in April.

Thirdly, this year marks the 150th anniversary of Union General William T. Sherman’s campaign in Georgia. Beginning in April 1864, Sherman entered north Georgia with his army, battled his way to Atlanta, then marched across the state to Savannah, which surrendered on

December 22nd. Although 2014 marks neither the beginning nor the end of the war between the north and south, Georgia suffered its worst war devastation in 1864.

The great southern novelist, William Faulkner said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Today’s headlines prove this. As we did in the 19th century, we’re fighting about states’ rights versus federalism, constitutional interpretation, racism, human rights, and economic justice. Civil War symbols remain hotly contested, too.

I started thinking about Confederate symbols in July after reading an article describing how Washington & Lee University, in Lexington, Virginia, removed its Confederate Battle Flags from the main chamber of its Lee Chapel. General Robert E. Lee served as the school’s president after the war and his crypt lies beneath the chapel. In response to objections raised by black law students, the university publicly apologized for not welcoming minority students better and for having profited from the possession and sale of slaves in its past. In its apology, the university claimed they simply tried to acknowledge history rather than push a symbol of slavery and hate. But good intentions cannot erase how the university’s black students felt about sitting in full view of the flags they associated with enslavement and racism.

During the last ten years, several colleges and universities have offered similar apologies for past involvement with slavery. In 2005, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill installed an Unsung Founders Memorial to recognize people of color, both free and enslaved, who helped build the university. I briefly searched for information about our local university to learn if it had made any acknowledgement or apology for its own probable connection to slavery before the Civil War. I found nothing, so please tell me if you know of something.

When I visited Charleston, South Carolina, in September for my son’s wedding, I visited the oldest Unitarian Church in the south. It began construction in 1772. Last year church members built a memorial to the enslaved workers who built the church using clay bricks they made. The memorial, made from some of the building’s original clay bricks, features a wrought-iron bird looking over its back. This *sankofa* bird symbolizes ‘looking back in order to move forward’ in Ghanaian tradition. Today, I’d like to look back so that we, too, might move forward.

What we think of as the iconic Confederate Flag was not the national flag of the Confederate States of America. That flag, not coincidentally, looks very much like our current Georgia flag. Both have stars and bars but where the current Georgia flag has a golden arch and motto on a blue field, the national Confederate flag had a circle of 13 stars on a blue field.

The Confederate Battle Flag with its blue St. Andrew’s cross filled with stars atop a red background was first carried by the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Other flags were carried into battle by other units from other states, but variations on Virginia’s flag became prevalent because it best served to identify a Confederate army and its location. Well before field radios and GPS devices, commanders depended on sight to track their soldiers. But in the melee of fighting amidst horses and smoking firearms, they could lose their troops’ positions. Adding to these difficulties, Northern blue and Southern gray uniforms were easily confused. If a Confederate flag appeared too similar to the Union stars and stripes flag, matters could be made worse. Flags, therefore, were essential tools of the war, but they were not only tools. A unit’s fighting men rallied around their flags, defending them as if they were defending their actual hearth and home.

After the war ended, battle flags were placed on memorials and graves to honor the fallen and were carried in memorial parades. But in the process of honoring the dead, the flags returned some glory to the Confederate cause. In the years after the war many southern towns raised monuments to hometown heroes on town squares and public buildings. Despite having lost the war, the Confederate cause was never fully laid to rest. Families whose members died in the war needed to feel they had not died in vain.

Their struggle feels similar to how more recently we responded to returning vets from another war we lost – in Vietnam. With more recent Gulf Wars, I think we've learned better how to separate the policies and politicians who put us in unpopular or unjust wars from the soldiers who fight them. We do want to honor their sacrifice even if we don't always agree with the reason for the fighting. But how we honor the Confederates among our ancestors continues to be a challenge for this country.

The controversy is fueled by revisionists, then and now, who claim the flag never stood for support of slavery but of state and constitutional rights. Nowadays, they claim the battle flag stands for southern pride and heritage, not hate. But that belief goes against first-hand historical record. Yes, secessionists chose to leave the Union out of a conviction that federal authorities were imposing policies against the wish of the states. And they believed the constitution gave them permission to rebel, to raise arms against an unjust government like earlier patriots had done against British troops.

But this obscures the fact that the policy they most objected to was abolition. Southern states wanted the freedom to maintain the institution of slavery. It's ironic that they were fighting for the freedom to deny freedom to others.

In 1864, the editors of the Richmond-based *Southern Punch* wrote:

“The people of the South,” says a contemporary, “are not fighting for slavery, but for independence.” Let us look into this matter. It is an easy task, we think, to show up this new-fangled heresy—a heresy calculated to do us no good, for it cannot deceive foreign statesmen nor peoples, nor mislead anyone here nor in Yankeeland...Our doctrine is this: WE ARE FIGHTING FOR INDEPENDENCE THAT OUR GREAT AND NECESSARY DOMESTIC INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY SHALL BE PRESERVED, and for the preservation of other institutions of which slavery is the groundwork. [*The Confederate Battle Flag*, by John M. Coski, page 25.]

Well after the war, in 1904, the United Daughters of the Confederacy published a tract for children to teach them the cause of the war. In it they claimed the North, not the South, started the “War Between the States” by disregarding southern rights. “What were those rights?” asked they asked. “The right to regulate their own affairs and hold slaves as property” was their correct answer. Additionally, Confederate Colonel John Mosby in 1894 wrote, “I've never heard of any other cause than slavery” for the war.

In the years following the war, the Battle flag rarely was used for any purpose beyond memorializing. It wasn't until after World War II and during the civil rights movement that the Confederate flag emerged as a symbol of hate and resistance to federal policies. Southern

politicians and civilians fighting integration in the 50s and 60s rebelliously raised the flag once more. The Ku Klux Klan, lynch mobs, and other white supremacists rallied around this flag. In 1956 the state of Georgia changed its flag, adding the battle flag's crossed bars to it. Although written records are sparse and what does exist points to this change as advance preparation for the hundredth anniversary celebration of the Civil War's end (nine years ahead of 1965), I think we can safely assume the change was not made for such an innocent motive.

It's no wonder Washington and Lee's students see the flag's 20th century use as a symbol of hate, even though its 19th century use was directed more towards federalist foes than blacks. It's no wonder many of us reject the Confederate Battle flag as a symbol of southern pride and honorable heritage.

Like the Nazi flag which appropriated the swastika symbol of peace, there may never be a time when we'll be able to see the battle flag without associating it with white supremacy, lynching, and general black disempowerment. People who place the battle flag on their cars and clothing or other trivial locations can't reduce the meaning of the flag to some generic 'southern pride' or heritage. Southerners deserve a better symbol.

None of us were around when the Civil War was fought. Some of us were actively engaged in the civil rights movement in the 50s and 60s. Unitarians Universalists answered Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call to join him in Selma to fight for equal rights. Now, this congregation is continuing that call for racial justice and human rights. Next March, we'll have a chance to show our values by returning to Selma to commemorate that brave moment when many black children and youth withstood the vicious dogs, the skin-tearing fire hose blasts, and the unholy rage of many white adults on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. I hope you'll join me there.

But that's one moment next year. We can continue the battle for racial equality and human rights here in Athens each and every day. Our Social Action Committee offers many ways to learn and get involved. Let us show love, not hate, is what makes Georgia great. We can make a heritage future generations will be proud of, one that doesn't involve the Confederate Battle flag. I hope it will be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How do you react to contemporary use of the Confederate Battle Flag? Does it make any difference how or where it's displayed (on a building, grave, clothing, car decal, etc.)?
2. Why do we commemorate wars? Does it conflict with anti-war stances, and why/why not?
3. How do we treat veterans of unpopular wars and can we separate the soldiers from the policies or politicians which lead us into wars? Explain.

Sources for Further Reading

Coski, John M., *The Confederate Battle Flag*

Martinez, J. Michael, ed., *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South*

Hamilton, Neil A., *Rebels and Renegades: A chronology of social and political dissent in the United States*

Inscoe, John, ed., *The Civil War in Georgia: A new Georgia encyclopedia*