

The War, The Flag, and a Bumper Sticker

I've never been one to give the Confederate flag much thought. Recent events have brought the flag up in various arenas. The NAACP is boycotting South Carolina; yet another bill to have it removed from the Mississippi Flag has been filed; and political candidates have been quizzed when they visited states. The flag seems to stir emotions on both sides and I've, for the most part, found the reasoning to be silly—on both sides of the argument.

Surprisingly the flag issue has not risen to the level of serious discussion in Mississippi—yet. I'm certain that it will in the near future though. The Civil War, or the War Between the States, or simply **The War**, is taken seriously in this state. It took me a while to learn what was meant by The War here. Growing up, for the most part, outside of the state, I was used to The War being used to refer to the Revolutionary War, the War for Independence. My childhood was marked with sights of Revolutionary Battlefields and monuments the soldiers of that war. The Civil War was almost an afterthought in history classes.

Marrying a woman from Natchez I quickly learned that "The River" was the Mississippi River and "The War" was the Civil War. Time is marked by the years before the War and the years since the Damn Yankees and Carpetbaggers came South and ruined everything. However, recent debate makes me wonder if perhaps "The War" is not really the war fought in the legislatures and the courts in the 1950's and 1960's, the Civil Rights War. The Confederate Flag is either reminds one of his ancestors who fought and died in the Civil War, or reminds one of his ancestors in slavery.

Perhaps by growing up in a state in which the Civil War was not The War I got perhaps a more balanced view what it was all about. Unlike the history books used up North I know the war was not fought solely about slavery. I also learned that slavery was a part of the fight even though most educated in states in the Deep South are adamant that it was fought only over State's Rights. The truth lies somewhere between the two extremes.

On one hand I am glad that there is some flap about the flag; on the other hand I think it is a bit ridiculous. The African-Americans claim they are reminded about their suffering during slavery. Excuse me, just how many of those engaged in this debate were actually enslaved? We all have things in our past that are unpleasant and remind us of bad times. Should we ban potatoes to avoid offending our citizens of Irish ancestry of the potato famine? Slavery is a part of the past of most people in this country in some way or another. It should be accepted for what it is, history.

Now the pro flag group is just as much blame as the others. What is it with the fascination of a flag used during a war that we lost? That's right, the South lost

the war. We fought, we lost, Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox bringing an end to the war. We made amends and were once again a reunited as one nation. Granted those first years were a little difficult what with the carpetbaggers and all but it is all in the past now. Holding animosity to the north over the carpetbaggers is as bad as still being angry at the South over slavery.

We should all take pride in the fact that there is not debate over the Confederate Flag. Imagine how far we have come as a country so that we can now argue about symbols rather than who has to sit in the back of the bus. With the rare exception of a few backwards rednecks located in places that time has forgotten, there are no more lynchings, no more burning crosses, we no longer refer to dark-skinned people as, well, as the "N"-word. To be able to debate the Confederate Flag is a big step towards progress.

For me the flag has pretty much been a non-issue. I didn't really care which way it shook out. It is of historical significance, it was made part of the Mississippi Flag back in the late 1800's, long before the racial strife of the 1950's and -60's. That is I had no opinion until the other day.

I was on my way home from Mobile, Alabama and passing through one of those small Mississippi towns that time forgot. One of those places where Friday nights consist of the local teenagers, in their pick-up trucks and Jeeps start at the Wal-Mart parking lot, drive slowly down the US Highway clogging traffic until they reach the other end of town where they go through the McDonald's Drive-Thru, turn around and repeat the process going in the opposite direction. This is a little town that is full of all the South is trying to get away from. Backwards, provincial, people who are afraid of the real world. People who do not want technology in their homes, people who frown upon education, people who fear outsiders, people who are still holding on to their outdated racist opinions.

It was on this trip I got behind a pick-up truck full of fellows. One side of their big chrome bumper was decorated with the requisite Skoal bumper sticker, the other side was decorated with, well that is what I found disturbing, that is what made me change my opinion on the Confederate Flag issue. For on the other side of the bumper was picture of the Mississippi Capitol with the Mississippi State flag flying above it. Just the Mississippi Flag--the Stars and Stripes was nowhere to be found. Next to the flag was the inscription "*I have a dream...*".

I was disappointed, disappointed that in this day and age there were still people with those outdated, racist opinions. I was saddened further by the prospect that this truck-load of people was most likely on their way to a place of worship later that evening. In his famous speech given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial Martin Luther King, Jr. called those gathered to action. But his directions were very specific, he said "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must ever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline." If only the fellows in that truck had read

those words perhaps then they would be willing to put down the cup of bitterness and hatred.

Flags are symbols in which everyone should take pride. Flags should serve to unite people and be used to show a common bond, a common cause. From what I saw on the back of the pick-up truck, from what I see happening in South Carolina and Georgia, from what I see in Mississippi on the back of pick-up trucks, I am led to believe that the Confederate Flag no longer serves this purpose. White heritage will not be lost if it disappears from the state flag; nor will the suffering, and anguish and pain of the blacks be eliminated once the symbol is removed. No, removing the Confederate Flag will not accomplish any of those things. What it may accomplish though is to remove a bumper sticker that is an embarrassment to the State; an embarrassment to all people, black and white; a bumper sticker that reflects outdated thinking. It might just remove a barrier, a barrier to the owner of that pick-up truck that will allow him to move on with his life, to give up his hatred, and allow him to share in the dream; the dream "*that one day...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.*"