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Capture the Flag

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Well over a century after the Civil War and Reconstruction, three decades since the height of the civil rights movement, and 15 years since *The Dukes of Hazzard* was on primetime, Southerners are still obsessed with their most recognizable symbol. The furor over the Confederate banner flying over South Carolina's statehouse was still flapping when Mississippi legislators proposed a redesign of their own state flag. My state flag. Although I am working and living elsewhere, I consider myself a temporarily dislocated Mississippian and maintain a healthy interest in affairs down home. So when news came to me of an upcoming vote to do away with the old state flag-featuring since its 1894 adoption an inset of the Confederate battle emblem-in favor of a new, more inclusive design, I formed an immediate opinion. And then I caught immediate flack for not toeing the expected line.

My crime? Being an African American who favored preserving the current design of the flag. As I tried to explain to my family members, black acquaintances, and white "new South" liberal Christian friends who voted for the redesign, I believe that a symbol belongs to the people who interpret it. They are the ones who give it its power, and they can also give it new meaning. The Southern Cross may represent Dixie's long-lost and longed-for heritage of white power to some, but to others, including me, it's a reminder of a past that's been overcome.

Born in 1967 and raised and educated in rural Mississippi, I am well aware of the state's past and present problems. I do understand the arguments for change, and I applaud the spirit of reconciliation and progress behind them. But my initial reaction when I heard about the imminent referendum was a cynical wink: "Get them to do away with the beloved stars and bars of Ole Miss? Yeah, good luck!" I know my Southern brethren too well. I knew it wouldn't pass. Not this millennium. In the end, Mississippians who went to the polls this past April voted 65 percent in favor of keeping the 1894 design.

And I was glad of it-that was my second reaction, the one that surprised a lot of people. I don't want to see the "union square" (also known as the Southern Cross) removed from the design of my home state's flag. And as for incorporating symbolism that includes me … personally, I already feel represented. The bars of the flag are red, white, and blue, our union's national colors, and the thirteen stars on the bars of the diagonal cross may be interpreted ingenuously or subversively as representing the original American colonies or the confederated Southern states. It hardly matters which.

A symbol can belong to whoever chooses to appropriate it, and I'm here to stake my personal claim. The Mississippi flag, stars and bars and all, is mine. It belongs just as

much to me and other black Southerners as it does to all the genteel belles and beaus, good ol' boys and bubbas, self-proclaimed rednecks, and righteous rebels who ever walked a country mile. Some do wave that flag proudly or sport it on their caps and T-shirts, while others only quietly defend its honor and their right to love it over cocktails. But I defend their right to love it, too. Whenever I'm driving and see a rebel flag sticker adorning a muddy bumper or a colorful translucent decal obscuring my view of a gun-rack in the rear window of a pickup truck, I experience a strange mixture of defiant pride and kinship. Maybe those rebel day-and-night riders don't know or care, but I'm a Southerner, too, and proud to be one.

Any assessment of the reasons for Southern cultural pride-the economic and social attainments of the South, the richness of its culture, its fascinating history-by all rights ought to include the contributions of the African American people, past and present (not to mention the part that Native American and other minority populations have played). Progressive Southerners may acknowledge black gifts in the areas of arts, crafts, and entertainment; they may even express appreciation for African American music, dancing, cuisine, and humor. But precious few will admit the obvious truth that the social, economic, and political development of the antebellum South was only possible because of forced black labor.

While some may be aware of the legacy of folk art, crafts, music, storytelling, and poetry left by countless unnamed slave artists, few white Southerners will recall the intellectual contributions of former slave writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. And almost none will be aware of inventors like Benjamin Montgomery, a slave-owned by the brother of Jefferson Davis-who invented a propeller to replace steamboat paddle wheels. Montgomery's creation, like those of other slave inventors, could not be patented because slaves were not citizens, and the U.S. government refused to grant masters the patents for their slaves' ingenuity. Of course, Jefferson Davis, as president of the Confederacy, made sure that Confederate patent law granted this protection to the white men who were already reaping the financial benefit of their slaves' creative innovations. Culturally and economically, blacks helped to build the South in which white Southerners take such pride.

Without African Americans, there would have been no Dixie. But is that reason enough for blacks to fly the colors of Southern heritage? After all, the storied glory of the "Old South" is based on the exaltation of Southern whiteness and the subjugation or denial of its antithesis-blackness. Many whites suppress or trivialize the legacy of the African American generations that came, albeit by force in the beginning, to add their spirit and beauty to the Southern scene. Under the banner of the Confederacy, even long after the "War of Northern Aggression" ended, the war to uphold Southern pride and dignity raged on in its wounded way, with many white Southerners turning angry teeth against the bound hands that had fed and served them for so long. It's no wonder that many African Americans, the progeny of those early black Southerners, have learned to hate the flag that represents the historic oppression of those who in fact deserved gratitude and honor for their contributions-contributions that for the most part have yet even to be acknowledged.

Nevertheless, despite oppression and exploitation, the black people of the South survived, their gracious and forgiving spirit largely intact. Against incredible opposition they managed not only to survive but to advance themselves and to bless their environment. In spite of the white majority's individual brutalities, and in spite of the institutional forces used to dehumanize and disenfranchise their slaves and slave-descended counterparts, to destroy blacks' family and community structures and dignity-in spite of everything, black Southerners have for the most part held on. They've held onto enough faith, unity, personal dignity, courage, and character to outlast slavery, Jim Crow, lynch mob justice, segregation, the 1960s civil rights struggles, and the ongoing battle for true justice and equality of opportunity. And they did it all in the shadow of Dixie, right under the noses of the Klan.

By the grace of God working in and through African American character, black Southerners have come a long way. For me, both historical and personal evidence bear this out. In the presence of the Stars and Bars of Dixie, both of my grandfathers survived and thrived, each acquiring through hard work and personal sacrifice many acres of good Southern land on which to raise crops, livestock, and families. On their own property they raised their children-my parents-to have faith, self-respect, and initiative, to value education and hard work, and to make every effort to reap the benefits of their own labor for their families and their communities. For me, a Generation X daughter of the South with a Harvard degree, a good job, and several publications under my belt, the flag that represented the Old South's oppression has become a symbol of our people's triumph-and that beaten regime's failure.

The Old South, for all the positive heritage it may represent to the children of the Confederacy, is a failure because it has failed to destroy my ancestors' spirit, to prevent their personal achievement, or to erase the mark they have made on the history and culture of America. Yes, the Stars and Bars signifies the glory of the Old South, but not without also signifying its shame. And the Stars and Bars signifies to me its biggest failure of all. For the Old South has not managed to make me hate its white sons and daughters, or to begrudge them any of the gifts my forebears gave them, or to despise the heritage that it has given me. It has not made me ashamed to call myself a Southerner. My ancestors reached for the stars in spite of the bars, and now those stars are jingling in my pocket. Wherever I go, people will know I come from Dixie, and that my people are still there.

To the Romans the cross of crucifixion may have represented the force and glory of empire, and the heavy upper hand with which their culture had conquered most of the known world. But in putting Jesus Christ to death on a cross, even in the act of executing an enemy of the state, the Romans facilitated the re-appropriation of the cross-to them a symbol of oppression, but to the fledgling Christian church, a symbol of victory and redemption. After Christ's death and resurrection, no matter what the church suffered at the hand of Rome or other persecutors, the cross could never be taken away from her. And now that symbol means more and belongs more to the people who survived the oppression it once represented than it does to the former oppressors.

For the ancient Hebrews, recalling God's faithfulness meant remembering both the victories and the defeats of the past. Maintaining the symbols of the past was an essential part of pressing forward. The opening lines of Psalm Sixty underscore the importance of keeping even the not-so-pleasant symbols alive and visible:

O God, thou hast cast us off, thou hast scattered us, thou hast been displeased; O turn thyself to us again. Thou hast made the earth to tremble; thou hast broken it: heal the breaches thereof; for it shaketh. Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment. Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth.

We too have been given banners. The cross, the Confederate flag, and symbols like them belong to all of us. I don't salute what they meant to those who have carried them in hatred and chauvinism, but I do celebrate what such symbols have come to mean to those who have overcome them. I love my Southern brothers and sisters-white, black, and other. And I applaud and encourage the reconciling efforts of those who understand that racism is an archaic tool of a defeated foe-a common enemy that still wreaks havoc among us because his time is short.

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