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**The Confederate Flag: All About Racism?**

**Introduction**

The Confederate flag is a symbol of hatred, racism and betrayal in the eyes of most Americans today. It is seen as a flag that supported slavery and the racist nation that fought to separate itself from the rest of the country. It is associated with and used by various hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. The first misconception surrounding the flag is that the “flag” everyone is upset with is not actually the Confederate States of America flag. It is a battle flag, originally thought to have come from the Army of Northern Virginia, which would end up being carried into battle by many different southern armies during the Civil War. The original basis for the battle flag was to show separation from the ideals of the North in a symbolic way. The thought that the flag was based on, and represents slavery is untrue. The true meaning of the flag has been destroyed because of the increasing use of it in the KKK and other hate groups, as well as the use and support of it by known racists.

**Misconceptions of “The Flag”**

The true meaning of the Confederate battle flag, which was taken from the main part of the actual Confederate flag, is simple. When people look at the flag, they THINK of racism, hatred, white supremacy, and other terrible things. But what do you SEE when you look at the flag? You see the red, white and blue colors, along with 13 stars spanning the blue sideways X. The 13 stars represented the 13 original colonies, all of which enjoyed their own, separate self-governing bodies. When the Northern Aggression started, it was the first time the north had tried to overtake force their power onto the South. With Southern states seceding and creating the Confederate States of America, the blue X on the flag was symbolized as being laid over the 13 stars, allowing them to shine brightly through. The X stood for the South’s stance of basically saying “we want out.” This last part put into an easier context by TrainWeb.org states:

Do you remember from your grade-school years how the teachers would sometimes ask you to circle the right answers or picture on a work page, or to put an X on a picture or word or other item that didn't belong in a group? That is the same concept this flag is designed around; the stars are laid out in the pattern of an X, and the blue bands are put on the thirteen stars to show that the southern states no longer wanted to be a part of the union with the northern states. In simpler terms, the message of flag's design is simply this... CROSS US OUT of your Union! (Train Web, 2013)

The South was “crossing” themselves off what America (red, white, blue, plus 13 stars), and then did so by seceding from the Union, and thus starting the Civil War.

The next reason the flag is associated with racism and hatred is the overwhelming historical views that say the Civil War was fought solely over slavery. When someone in today’s society thinks of the Confederate battle flag, they think only of slavery. Now, clearly there was slavery in the South, there is no disputing that. But there was also slavery in the North. When Abraham Lincoln initially came into politics, he mentioned ideas of ending slavery. This did not sit well with Southerners, who immediately disapproved of this thought. When Lincoln would later be elected president, it sparked the secession of 11 states. Now, the general Union public saw Lincoln as the peacemaker who was just trying to make America an equal nation. This in fact was not the case, as Lincoln did not support equality of whites and blacks. He in fact wanted only to send the African American population to the jungles of Central America, where he believed they could live and be fine. Lincoln’s colonization beliefs were thought of years before, as can be seen in this quote,” His two great political heroes, Henry Clay and Thomas Jefferson, had both favored colonization; both were slave owners who took issue with aspects of slavery but saw no way that blacks and whites could live together peaceably.” (Pruit, 2012) Lincoln did not believe in emancipation for equality, he believed the only way America would prosper was to turn it into a white nation. The only reason his plan didn’t get any further was because of his assassination.

Now examining the battle flag, the 13 stars represented the 13 original colonies, and the Constitution set by the nation’s forefathers. The blue X symbolizes the Confederate states’ beliefs that the Union was going against the Constitution, which protected the ability to own slaves. They believed in the original Constitution and thus, crossed themselves off what the Union set to achieve. In summary, yes slavery was not the way of the future. We know now that equality is how our country was built, but at the time, the Confederate belief was to support the history of the US Constitution. Furthermore, the original start to the Civil War was not based on the North being mad at the South for supporting slavery. When the Southern states seceded and tried to set up their own nation, it put the North at a terrible economic disadvantage. The majority of the nation’s income at the time came from cotton and tobacco, which grew mostly in the South and was done using slaves. Lincoln’s initial cause for action was set on the economic problems that would come from losing the Southern states, not solely on the issue of slavery. To combat the slavery issue further, when Lincoln did issue the Emancipation Proclamation, it did not free all the slaves. Any parts of the South who did agree to the Union’s demands were exempt. Also, the four bordering states, Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland and Missouri, did not have to end slavery. So, when looking at all the information surrounding the time period, the North and Lincoln were more racist than the South. In theory, it could be said that the United States of America flag stands for more racism than the Confederate battle flag.

**Black Confederates**

Arguably one of the biggest reasons the Confederate battle flag should not be a symbol of racism is the fact that colored soldiers were plentiful in the Confederate Armies. When the Civil War started, there were over 250,000 free black men in the South. This had to do with the South slowly coming away from the idea of slavery. Confederate leaders saw Russia free their servant workers in 1859 and believed in their success. Confederate General Robert E. Lee freed his slaves, which he inherited and didn’t even purchase, in 1862. Both free and slave blacks fought in the war. Furthermore, Oriental, Mexican, Spanish and even Native Americans fought for the South in the war.

Today we see groups of African Americans standing by their Confederate histories. One man, Nelson W. Winbush, is a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, respectively. He is proud of his grandfather Luis Napoleon Nelson, a black soldier who fought in the Civil War. He says in a video interview,” My reason for joining the Sons of Confederacy Veterans, after the NAACP declared they would destroy and remove everything Confederate in 1990, I decided that I would do all I could to make sure that people understood what the Confederacy stood for.” (Nelson W. Winbush, 2013) He proudly flies the Confederate battle flag, as he believes in the true history of the Confederacy. Even re-enactors today realize that two sides were fighting for their own causes, and each respected and fought for their beliefs. “I fight for the Union as a re-enactor. I have as much respect and honor for the Rebels as I do for the Union. I think those people at that time were just as honorable as we are they were fighting for a cause just like we were. It might have been different causes but we were fighting for a just cause. And it wasn’t slavery,” exclaims Peter Gilbert, a Civil war re-enactor who believes in the true history of America. (Nelson W. Winbush, 2013)

**The Confederate Battle Flag and Racial Issues**

While reading *Confederates in the Attic* in class, a story is brought up showing how racial views spurred a group of blacks to kill a man with a battle flag flying from his vehicle. While the story says the man, Michael Westerman, provoked black men who approached him by yelling a racial slur, this was not proven. Either way, black men took offense to the flag by chasing Westerman down and shooting him, eventually killing him. (Horwitz, 1998) This type of violence has been seen increasingly over the years, as the flag is associated with racial issues to those brought up in present day society. This has a lot to do with hate groups, especially the KKK adopting the use of the Confederate battle flag. In the 1940’s, a revival of the battle flag came about. It was seen at sporting events in the South as a rally flag, and later as World War II came about, Southern soldiers used it to make them stand out from Northerners. In 1949, the KKK adopted the use of the flag in their racially charged rallies. As equal rights issues kept growing, the flag was seen more and more and became associated with crazy racial views. Confederate historians were upset by this as it was tarnishing the true heritage they believed in. This can be seen by Luke Trout’s explanation of the true meaning of the flag,” It cannot be argued that the flag was a symbol of racism for some people. However, that is and never was its primary meaning. Today, the flag remains a symbol of pride and rebellion, rebellion against the liberal progressive government destroying this nation.” (Reiner, 2011)

**Conclusion**

The true meaning of the Confederate battle flag has become misconstrued over time. The flag was a military flag. It was never flown over slave ships. It was never a flag of the Confederate States government. Over the last 150 years, the flag’s true meaning has shifted from that of an honorable heritage to that of racially charged hate. The flag stood for Southern beliefs, and led to fights between good men on both sides, fighting for what they thought was right. The racial issues in America stretch much further than the Confederate states. Abraham Lincolns own belief was to colonize the blacks in the jungle, because that’s where he thought they should be and that’s how he thought America would grow. Lincoln’s ideas of a fully white country show that the true racial issues lie on the union side, and the true meaning behind the flag should not be that of a racial basis. The true heritage of that flag was tarnished due to its use later by hate groups, namely the KKK. They changed the public’s perception, creating a problem for anyone truly supporting the heritage of the Confederacy. What changed to racist views was a large misunderstanding. When all the facts are taken into account, it makes you feel bad for true historians and Confederate successors who want to believe their ancestors fought for a just cause. While one may not believe with the ideals and beliefs of the Confederate South at the time, if they looked at the bigger picture and learned the true facts, this may change their mind. Now, it seems like it may just be a case of too little, too late.

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