

The Black Confederate: Strange Pawn of the Culture War

黒人の南部連邦支持者：「文化戦争」の不思議な歩兵

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「南北戦争」という130年前の悲劇が今だに政治家に利用されている。移民の増加や差別撤廃措置などに反対する「文化戦争」の前線に構えて立っている「戦士」は古き良きを惜しみ、より保守的なアメリカを追求している。崩壊した南部連合国の「軍旗」、それはある南部のアメリカ人にとって、失われた美徳や先祖の名誉を象徴し、公式な使用も認めている。その「軍旗」はジョージア州の州旗の三分の二を占めているが、差別の歴史を覚えている黒人に非難されても、南部連合国に加盟したジョージア州のために戦った黒人や黒人奴隷が大勢ではないかと保守派は反論する。果たして、そうなのであろうか。そうであれば、何故その歴史がよく知られていないのであろうか。

キーワード：Confederacy, Civil War, African American, Culture War, political correctness

For better or for worse, the world has again turned its attention to the American South. The city of Atlanta has just recently finished hosting the modern world's Centennial Olympic Games. Although not without incident, the event nevertheless succeeded in haphazard fashion to lighten what historian C. Vann Woodward calls "the burden of Southern history" by projecting to the world an image of social harmony and racial tolerance (while at the same time greatly enhancing Atlanta's infrastructure). However, in the 18 months prior to this superlatively billed festival of international sports and fellowship, a familiar specter of fear and hatred manifested itself in approx-

imately forty incidents of arson attacks on 'predominantly black' churches mainly across the South. While there is little evidence linking all cases to a nationwide conspiracy, the burnings have compelled Americans to reconsider the current state of race relations in the context of an ugly and tumultuous past.

Why, in the 1990s, would someone want to torch a black church? Reasons are startlingly varied, ranging from insurance fraud to the usual suspects, pyromaniacal white supremacists. Despite gubernatorial summits and sharp presidential condemnations, some pundits bemoan a quiet mainstream political trend that encourages such attacks. Militias, advocates of 'family values' and other 'ordinary citizens' visibly display right-wing paranoid beliefs about big government, immigration, affirmative action, gay rights, abortion, gun control, the separation of church and state and other perceived threats to the conservative interpretation of the American way. Pat Buchanan, the pugilistic television commentator-cum-presidential candidate, has spearheaded the "cultural war" against those who continue to uphold the principles of The Great Society and its so-called culture of rights that seem to empower minorities at the expense of 'the majority.' The rhetoric behind this new form of populism is framed in the raw anger of a genuine war, producing a meanness that facilitates acts of violence.¹

One thread in the complex fabric of populist rage is the public remembrance of history. Buchanan exhorts Americans, particularly Southerners, "to defend the honor and integrity of America's Confederate heritage." The officially-sanctioned use of the Confederate battle emblem in Southern states, for example, is attacked by the proponents of 'political correctness' as an endorsement of a "Southern swastika," while the emblem's defenders recognize it as heraldry re-

miniscent of ancestral valor and glory displayed in defense of secession and the 'Southern way of life.'

Consisting of a 13 star-studded blue St. Andrew's Cross emblazoned on a red field, the emblem is two-thirds of the current Georgia state flag. Critics of the flag see it as a symbol of a 'Confederate' mentality which longs for restoration of lost power over the black minority through discontinuation of affirmative action and maintenance of electoral districts favoring white interests. Efforts to abolish the state flag have failed, though the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games did ban it from Olympic venues, much to the ire of the flag's activist supporters. These crusaders for 'Southern heritage' not only do not want the flag changed, but want it recognized as an inclusive symbol that also honors those black Georgians who fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War.³

This paper will deal with the historical basis to the extraordinary assertion that the Confederacy had black supporters, both slave and free, who willingly participated in the peculiar institution and the war to defend it. What advantages were there to rallying around a cause that so unambiguously oppressed them and their kin? Why has it taken so long for their story to be told? And just how 'inclusive' was the Confederacy itself in recognizing the participation of its black population as a genuine act of patriotism?

In October 1994 the National Center for History in the Schools released a volume of voluntary guidelines for teaching grades 5 through 12 entitled *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience*. They called for an emphasis on narrative of the common man and woman over debate on abstract

and elusive concepts as articulated by educated elites who, for most of the republic's history, have been white males. The eagerness to coax the weak and downtrodden into the historical spotlight meant nudging out a Southern hero of no less stature than Robert E. Lee (who gets no reference) in favor of Underground Railroad 'conductor' Harriet Tubman (who gets six references). The apparent revisionist purge of dead white males in favor of such obscure personalities as Prudence Crandall, Prince Hall and Speckled Snake was predictably met with outrage from conservatives, approval from leftists and understanding from historians who regard such revisionism as an inevitable and natural feature of the historiographic process.⁴

If the point of the Center's reassessment of history was to call attention to former unknown people of color such as Prince Hall (who, in 1775, was one of fifteen black men to become initiated into the Masons), then, it would be argued by defenders of Southern heritage, why not introduce such obscure Negroes as William Johnson or Andrew Durnford? They were free Negroes who were themselves slaveholders, the former having written an engaging journal which was discovered in 1938 and offers in narrative form a fascinating account of slavery's quirkiest irony.⁵

The population of free Southern Negroes was well over 250,000 in 1860, about 6.2 percent of the total black population. There is disagreement as to the actual number of slaveholders among free blacks, with Eugene Genovese on the left claiming it "was never large" (although "yet to be tabulated properly") and Ludwell Johnson on the right asserting "there were not a few." Loren Schwenger estimates that in 1830 25 percent of free blacks owned slaves, with 7,188 slaves in the possession of 1,556 black slave owners in the deep

South.⁶

Free blacks as slave owners are ignored entirely by Eric Foner in his 20-page pamphlet entitled *Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction*, an American Historical Association pamphlet capsulizing for high school teachers recent and noteworthy scholarship. Foner uses the phenomenon of free black Southerners to illustrate regional diversity, emphasizing that their lives were "closely intertwined" with the slave community of the upper South, yet free blacks in Charleston and New Orleans were an elite who "created a flourishing network of schools, churches, and other institutions and had little in common with the slaves around them." He ends this single paragraph on free blacks by characterizing the latter group as having had "a major role" to play in Civil War and Reconstruction politics, largely in order to preserve social status after emancipation.⁷

In contrast to Foner, Ludwell Johnson appears to adhere to an historical equivalent of the "culture of poverty" theory that blames African Americans themselves for their social problems. In the conservative *Southern Partisan* (First Quarter 1992) Johnson points out the fallacy of only making whites into villains where slavery in North America was concerned : "Only ... native Africans made possible the enormous volume of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, probably the most gigantic forced migration in all of history. Africans sold, Europeans bought : How are we to settle the proportion of iniquity between them ? " ⁸

Once evolved into the biracial caste system, the South both permitted and discouraged the lower caste black to rise above his lowly station. What motivated free blacks of substance to cooperate with the social dictates of white society and possess their own kind as

slaves? The answer is double-edged, working both for and against the view that such behavior was contrary to the Negro spirit which presumably longed for freedom and equality.

Both William Johnson of Natchez and Andrew Durnford of Louisiana were from the deep South where wealthier free Negroes were most numerous and free Negroes in general were lighter-skinned due to intermarriage with the French. This continental influence also allowed for a modicum of flexibility through which a third caste of people neither wholly black nor white could evolve. Johnson mimicked the Southern aristocratic ideal to the best of his ability, both flattering and alarming his white neighbors by endorsing the slave system and yet downplaying its blatant racial elements. Johnson shunned poor free Negroes whose moral weaknesses were habitually displayed in nightly womanizing and made certain his slaves and those free Negroes who worked for him displayed exemplary self-control. Andrew Durnford also saw himself as a Southern aristocrat of the finest tradition. With 75 slaves working his Louisiana plantation, Durnford enthusiastically embraced the system despite resentful feelings harbored toward him by white masters and their slaves. Johnson (who was murdered in an ambush by a white man in 1851) and Durnford were among those black slaveholders who sought personal fulfillment through the wholesale acceptance and practice of the paternalistic attitudes that defined the white elite around them, viewing themselves naturally as being far more 'white' than black. The obvious longing for a colorblind world was shared by all Negroes, slave and free, but for black slaveholders of relative wealth the impediment of racism took on a significance of an entirely different dimension.⁹

The other side of the story does not bear out Ludwell Johnson's

contention that black slaveholders were necessarily driven by economic interests in no way different from the rest of the slaveholding South. The purchase by free Negroes of family members in slavery was a formal means of evading the effects of anti-manumission laws which grew stricter as the Civil War approached. Slaves that were released into freedom were often forced to leave the state. Such evidence of family cohesiveness is supported by Herbert G. Gutman's research which reveals how, contrary to what might be expected, slave families managed to survive as double-parent households. Less noble motives for keeping families together through slave purchases by free Negroes have also been observed, such as where wives were bought by their husbands for the sole purpose of keeping them obedient.¹⁰

The stories of free Negroes and Negro elites who emulated white upper class ways clearly do not translate well into the language of political correctness and 'feel-good' history. If the purpose of history education is to foster self-esteem rather than critical thinking about past events, then such historical personalities as William Johnson and Andrew Durnford are aberrations who parody the conventional wisdom that defines the history of African America. Yet the aberrations do not stop here. Black men of far simpler means actually fought for the Confederacy at risk of life and limb, defying all but the most cynical viewpoint of what the Civil War represents to today's multicultural United States.

A continuing debate in the reader's column of *The Civil War News* addresses the topic of black Confederates. The center of the debate is a collection of essays entitled *Black Southerners in Gray*

which the reviewer, Gregory J. W. Urwin, praises for its “commendable” objectivity in discussing how individual blacks did bear arms for the Confederacy. His praise is tempered with cautious observation of agenda-driven modern-day Confederacy supporters who might read more into the book than is actually there, citing the extreme and “unsubstantiated” claim that more blacks were loyal to the Confederacy than to the Union. An indignant reader responds that Confederate veterans’ reunions were well attended by blacks who even acted as official representatives of their local United Confederate Veterans chapters. He accuses Urwin of selling short the innumerable black veterans who willingly served to protect their Southern homeland from Yankee invaders.¹¹

For professional and amateur historians, the black Confederate raises a series of engaging questions regarding perceptions of the war in Southern culture and the means in which the war was actually executed. How devoted, in fact, were these black Southerners to the Confederate cause? Were they really overwhelming in number? Did the war alter the way whites saw them? Richard Rollins, editor of *Black Southerners in Gray*, calls it “a story waiting to be told,” thus raising the most intriguing question of all: Why has the story been so long ignored?¹²

It is not for want of pictorial evidence that the black Confederate has been nearly forgotten. The cover of Richard Rollins’s book features a photograph where a sixteen-year-old white master, Andrew Martin Chandler of the 44th Mississippi, and Silas Chandler, his body servant of roughly the same age, together strike a defiant pose with their knives and guns. A woodcut reproduced in the November 1995 edition of *America’s Civil War* depicts, as the caption indicates,

“two black Confederate soldiers on picket duty outside Fredericksburg in January 1863, based on the testimony of a Union officer who claimed to have seen them through his field glass.” Such images contradict our expectations born of an understanding of history forged by educators and the media. We cannot conceive of a movie such as *Glory* lionizing the black men who fell for the Confederacy and not for the Union and Negro freedom.¹³

Part of the answer to why the black Confederate experience has occupied an exceedingly minor or non-existent niche in Civil War scholarship lies in its potential for political embarrassment to those who support ‘liberal’ social reforms. Not wanting to appear to be condoning the South’s peculiar institution and its distasteful legacy, some historians have preferred not to call the world’s attention to what seems an unlikely fable about ‘loyal’ slaves and ‘kind’ masters. The black Confederate indeed existed, they admit, but as an unwilling dupe in a scheme to preserve a society founded on racial inequality of a most cruel and deliberate form. Especially for black historians, the anomalous existence of ‘black Southerners in gray’ is immediately overshadowed by the heady drama of emancipation and the century-long saga of struggle that ensued—from Reconstruction to Jim Crow to bus boycotts.

As Rollins states in his preface, there is plenty of information to be found if one knows where to look. Looking through immediately available sources offers only a minimum of clues. For example, *Blacks in the Armed Forces, 1776-1983*, a bibliography compiled by Lenwood G. Davis and George Hill, reveals that out of 258 entries under “Blacks in the Civil War,” less than ten have titles specifically relating to Negro participation in the Confederate war effort.

Still, the subject has had its experts.¹⁴

In his essay "Clio's Forgotten Son: James H. Brewer and *The Confederate Negro*," Ervin L. Jordan, Jr. suggests reasons for the unpopularity of uncovering and publicizing information about African American contributions to the Confederacy. Brewer was a black historian of considerable skill and reputation whose study of pro-Confederate Negroes in Virginia took place during the waning of Jim Crowism. Published in 1969 and now out-of-print, *The Confederate Negro* sought to illustrate with copious amounts of official Confederate and state documents, records, registers, newspaper articles and journals how Negroes contributed dramatically to the economic activity that fed the Confederate war machine, adding that free blacks were a welcome and vital supplement to a military starving for manpower. *The Confederate Negro* was not even reviewed by *The Journal of Negro History* or the *The Negro History Bulletin*. Brewer focused his research on how the Afro-Virginian "was used to close a huge gap in Virginia's technical needs," yet Brewer was accused of ignoring the already familiar litany of slavery's evils and the heroics that vanquished them. For many African Americans fully engaged in the struggle for civil rights, Brewer's exercise in historical objectivity yielded no new icons to rally around. To black nationalists, Brewer was a traitor. To critics of a different persuasion, it was the distinguished Bell I. Wiley who really 'wrote the book' on the subject of Negro contributions to the Confederacy. Written in the 1930s, *Southern Negroes, 1861-1865* approached its title subject with a paternalistic detachment and patronizing attitude toward blacks which was typical of white Southerners at that time.¹⁵

Brewer, significantly, was a black historian seeking the historical

truth to what proved an extremely enigmatic and controversial subject. Hoping to affirm the 'Southernness' of Afro-Virginians by describing through scholarship their actions on behalf of the Confederacy, Brewer instead found himself mired in undeserved obscurity. Critics charged that much of what he contended was empty and simplistic. Blacks could not fight for the Confederacy out of a genuine conviction, nor could their efforts be fully appreciated by the white race that kept them in real or virtual bondage. Regardless of whether slave or free, black men and women naturally rallied to the trumpets of the abolitionists, the Union and Father Abraham. How could it be otherwise?

Putting aside the political bonds between academics and social engineers, the black Confederate poses to the historian an incredible story. Who would believe it? Yet is it really so unusual that Negroes would have fought to defend the Confederacy? Similar minorities have served their oppressors in ways contrary to expectation: Native American scouts for the U. S. Army in the Far West, *tejanos* for Texan-Americans in the War for Texan Independence and most recently second-generation Japanese Americans for the U. S. military in World War II. In these cases the minorities involved served an oppressor who was also a victor. In his review of *Black Southerners in Gray* for *The Civil War News*, Gregory J. W. Urwin suggests yet another comparison: "Exhibiting enthusiasm for the Confederacy was the safest way for a black man to save his own neck and protect his loved ones. Thus, many blacks who donned gray uniforms may have been no more fond of the 'Lost Cause' than the Jewish trustees in the death camps who collaborated in the Nazi Holocaust." If such a resigned and defeatist effort at survival was the key ingredient to

black Confederate “enthusiasm,” its luster as a subject of intensive research would dull considerably compared with the 180,000 Negroes who served as Federal soldiers in moral opposition to the Confederacy, about 12 percent of all Federal forces.¹⁶

By contrast, it has been estimated that by war's end somewhere near 93,000 blacks ‘served’ in the Confederate Army, with the South having a total population of 9 million compared to 22 million in the North. How many of those blacks gladly served cannot be accurately known, but one estimate for Virginia suggests that 15 percent of the state's 490,865 slaves actively supported the Confederacy, as did 25 percent of its free black population.¹⁷

Rollins's title essay outlines various observed instances of blacks seen supporting secession and vowing to help “kill Yankees.” All across the Confederacy it was reported that Negroes volunteered their services “for their masters and their homes.” In South Carolina a group contacted public officials to express their support, hinting it was their “white blood” that filled them with patriotic emotions. In Tennessee the governor is called upon to admit free Negroes into public service. In Virginia a mass rally is held in which black volunteers are officially presented with a Confederate flag. Their spokesman pledges “to aid Virginia's cause to the utmost of our ability,” stating it would not be right “for us to remain here idle, when white gentlemen are engaged in the performance of work at Norfolk that is more suitable for our hands and of which it is our duty to relieve them.”¹⁸

No place in the South had free blacks more vociferously pro-Confederacy than New Orleans. An entire essay in *Black Southerners in Gray* by Arthur W. Bergeron is devoted to this subject, en-

titled "Louisiana's Free Men of Color in Gray." Here a well-established community of blacks, many of light skin, celebrated their acculturation into European ways. War was not only an opportunity to prove themselves worthy, but to prove themselves better than their white counterparts as the war's first commissioned Negro officers. One black man is reported to have said to a commanding General of the State Militia : "Pardon me, General, but the only cowardly blood we have got in our veins is the white blood." Many free blacks were bitter at the suspicion in which they were viewed. Were they not more 'Southern' than the conspicuously alien community of Northerners and Europeans in the city who made no offer of help? They were also proud of their social status as community leaders, counting among their ranks a number of doctors, businessmen and other professionals of education and talent. Most importantly, they were property owners who in many cases held slaves, and as such had nothing but contempt and loathing for the abolitionists.¹⁹

As expressed in newspaper editorials, New Orleans's white citizens were cheered by the free black community's willingness to make a mockery of abolitionism by takings up arms against Lincoln's volunteers. In the end, the "Native Guards" were not allowed to match their propaganda value with warrior prowess. The Confederate government refused to employ them as combat forces.²⁰

Bergeron insists that only a few free blacks may have been pressured into pledging a highly demonstrative allegiance to their country. "If coercion forced these men to enlist," he asks, "why didn't many more free blacks face the same pressure?" One of the current leading historians of the Civil War period claims that there was indeed coercion. James M. McPherson explains in *The Negro's Civil War*

how during the capture of New Orleans in the spring of 1862 the free black regiment remained behind when the rest of the Confederate Army fled. He describes how they almost instantly offered their services to General Benjamin Butler, explaining their pro-Confederacy behavior as an act of fear. The blacks of New Orleans had felt a need to impress their white neighbors with a feigned patriotism lest any glimmer of hope for equality with them be extinguished forever. It was with the Union, they explained, that their true sympathies lay.²¹

Irrespective of these black 'volunteers,' the significance of 3.4 million black 'draftees' for Confederate service should not be overlooked, especially when the South was at a considerable handicap in manpower on the home front. They were employed in demanding tasks that made white males available for fighting: roadbuilding, digging trenches, constructing fortifications and laying railroad ties. Free blacks were recruited by the Confederate government and paid fifteen dollars per month as cooks. (Slaves were used with their master's permission.) Blacks accompanied Confederate troops as handymen—cleaning laundry, repairing shoes, mending clothes, attending to wounded and other tedious tasks. Others marched along as manservants or musicians.²²

It was often in the capacity of 'fighting cook' that blacks found themselves wielding guns against the Union to the chagrin of both sides in the war. One Englishman serving with the South puzzled over the difficulty of actually keeping blacks away from the fighting. "Go in, Massa!" he reported his slave to have admonished him at First Manassas, "Now you've got 'm, and give 'em Hell!" A British observer with the Army of Northern Virginia at Gettysburg, Lt. Col.

Arthur J. Fremantle of the Coldstream Guards, noted in his journal how an armed black guard was leading about a captured Union prisoner to keep him from escaping since the two regulars entrusted with the task had gotten drunk. Fremantle could not resist the irony: "This little episode of a Southern slave leading a white Yankee through a Northern village alone and of his own accord, would not have been gratifying to an abolitionist." One Virginia slave who was captured with this master was shocked that the master submitted to taking a loyalty oath to the United States. The slave himself refused it, sighing later, "Massa had no principles."²³

In such factories as the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, Brewer estimates as many as 1,200 free Negroes and slaves were employed, making it possible for the plant to satisfy War Department orders for munitions. Their importance only increased as the war dragged on. No one was more mindful of this than the blacks themselves, and not a few slave owners were anxious that their 'people' not become too uppity, particularly when they were breathing the freedom of 'city air.' Given that it was the Union's policy to turn Southern Negro manpower against the Confederacy, white Southerners recognized the engagement of their slaves in urban war production as the lesser of two evils.²⁴

Another 'necessary evil' that grew in inevitability for both sides was the arming of Negroes. Early in the war when North and South were fired with the optimism of an easy victory, the very suggestion of putting guns in the hands of Negroes and placing them in real combat situations was regarded with doubt and derision, especially when the Negro was a freed slave. Had the war ended quickly, it is questionable whether black regiments would have been raised at

all. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by a desperate Lincoln as a military necessity, launched a concentrated effort to make the South's greatest asset into its greatest liability. This effort, contrary to the highly romanticized heroism that captivated popular imagination, was at times executed by Northern recruiters in a manner that matched the caricatures of Southern slavemasters for brutality.²⁵

The generally held conception of the freed slave pledged to take up arms against his master for Lincoln is negated by various accounts of Union recruiters who quite literally hunted for Negro enlistments in return for monetary rewards. A far cry from the abolitionists and their rhapsodies of liberty and equality, some recruiters even resorted to torture and kidnapping, barbarities that took presidential interference to end. Cases of church services being interrupted are recorded in which black parishioners were seen leaping from the windows. In South Carolina Brig. Gen. Rufus Saxon observed an instance where great numbers of Negroes were forced to sign up in the Union Army against their will: "They were hunted to their hiding places by armed parties of their own people, and if found, compelled to enlist." One black who refused was summarily shot.²⁶

Fortunately, accounts of racism and discrimination against black recruits in the Union Army have not met with the kind of indifference that has kept the black Confederate story from coming to light. Northern prejudice lends a powerful touch of drama to the story of the Union Army Negro who had to prove his ferocity and élan to his white officers on the battlefield. It is common knowledge that Negro regiments in the North were segregated and that they did not enjoy the same benefits as white soldiers. Viewed as a resource to

be exploited, Negroes did not receive equal pay with whites until late in the war. Many never saw their enlistment bonuses. Not surprisingly, morale tended to flag because of the abuse. Yet for all its hypocrisy, the North's promise of emancipation was a revolutionary ploy to guarantee the support of Southern blacks whose numbers ranged far above that of the black Confederate sympathizer. Union armies on the march invariably inspired thousands upon thousands of Negroes to desert their masters and any notion that the Southern Confederacy held a future for them. Black soldiers fighting for the Union would reach a point where they outnumbered all the able-bodied men who comprised the combat strength of the Confederacy.²⁷

The advantages to emancipating slaves in return for military servitude were not lost on the Confederacy's more pragmatic and visionary leaders. This would enable the South to couple the Negro's fighting spirit with his will to defend the South as his homeland. Major Gen. Patrick Cleburne was one such leader who exuded confidence that slaves would fight as fellow Southerners for Confederate independence. He made his proposal in January 1864 when it was abundantly clear that the Confederacy was desperately lacking soldiers and matériel. Slavery, lamented Cleburne to fellow officers of the Army of Tennessee, "has now become, in a military point of view, one of our chief sources of weakness." In Cleburne's mind the labor of slaves was "valueless." As spies, they offered the enemy crucial information concerning supplies and positions. By freeing the slaves, Cleburne believed the black Southerners in blue would readily defect; furthermore, the North would be deprived of support and assistance from abroad. As it turned out, the suggestion was so scandalous that Cleburne felt compelled to retract it, though the damage had

already been done to his reputation and career. President Davis was informed of the infamous “Cleburne Memorial,” but chose not to act on it.²⁸

Cleburne was killed in the Battle of Franklin eleven months after his proposal, but that was not the end of the scheme to free and arm slaves on behalf of the Confederacy. In a letter to Fred A. Porcher of Charleston in December 1864, the Confederate Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin wrote: “I agree that if [the Negroes] are to fight for our freedom they are entitled to their own.” Increasingly, top Confederate leaders became acutely aware of what Cléburne had been talking about.²⁹

Gen. Robert E. Lee held great sway with the Confederate Congress which in February 1865 had a bill before it that would make official fighters out of the South’s black men. Lee wrote that the black man would make an “efficient” soldier and that he would be of more use to the Confederacy as a free man than a slave. Resistance to such an unholy proposal was slow in abating. The secessionist Georgian Gen. Howell Cobb’s often quoted remark on recruiting slaves into the military expresses the dismay of many: “The day you make soldiers of [Negroes] is the beginning of the end of the revolution. If slaves make good soldiers, our whole theory of slavery is wrong.”³⁰

One of the most divisive issues within the Confederacy itself was settled in March 1865 when President Davis signed General Order Number Fourteen which accepted slaves into the military with permission from their masters. They were given instant freedom upon enlistment and promised treatment with “kindness, forbearance and indulgence” equal with white soldiers in regard to their “health, com-

fort, instruction, and discipline." With less than a month remaining in the war, what black troops were mustered under this new law managed to display an impressive compatibility with military life, due in no small part to a lifetime of taking orders.⁸¹

The question then remains: Is there an historical basis for the claim that the Confederate battle emblem is genuinely 'inclusive' and justifiably represents the ancestral heritages of black as well as white Southerners?

Former slaves certainly cannot lay claim to the kind of war record earned by officially organized white units, and it is a moot point to speculate on what so obviously never happened. It is a well established fact of history that Negroes made far better soldiers than prejudiced whites had first imagined. The North was by no means quick to act upon employing Negroes militarily, but the South was far slower in extending its official blessing to black fighting units, much less emancipation. While it can be argued that this reluctance to free and arm slaves was one more fatal error that led to the Confederacy's demise, it must not be forgotten that the South would have fared far worse against the North without slave labor providing vital momentum to the war effort.

The argument that some individual blacks were in fact 'Confederates' cannot be denied. Their reasons for fighting were varied, ranging from a close personal loyalty to their masters to a desire to prove themselves worthy of white respect. Some slaves simply believed the propaganda they were fed about the invasion of the crass materialist Yankees and the invincibility of the South. Other slaves had evolved their own economies through opportunities outside of

servitude which they wished to preserve. Nevertheless, the number of black Southerners who did not 'wear gray' is overwhelming—and this statistic is verifiably larger than the number who volunteered verifiably larger their services to the South.

The connection between the black Confederate legacy and the perceived legitimacy of the "embattled emblem" as a symbol for the modern South is a tenuous one at best. Rather than turning to history, apologists for official use of Confederate symbols need only point out that slavery was protected under the flag of the United States for generations, as was segregation in the generations following the Civil War. (The flags of the People's Republic of China, Cuba, Japan and other nations with abysmal human rights records past and present flew proudly at Olympic venues. What sense is there, the apologists ask, in singling out the state of Georgia's flag as 'unacceptable' by officially banning it?)

The current Georgia state flag was adopted as a symbol of defiance against Federal pressures to desegregate in the mid-1950s. The bitterness and anger Georgia's black residents feel for it is rooted in modern memory of the struggle for civil rights in the South. The borrowed symbol from the Civil War era has been plucked from its original context, conveying the unsettling impression that Georgia's whites are longing for a golden age of racial subjugation. A return to the pre-1956 state flag seems like an obvious face-saving compromise, but it was also a product of 'Confederate thinking,' employing a 'Stars and Bars' design which commemorated the Southern dead and the end of Reconstruction. If any mutually agreeable symbol for racial solidarity and Southern community exists, it has yet to be discovered. Izzy, the Atlanta Olympic mascot, is so far the best any-

one can find.³²

Symbols are far more powerful than reason. How many war veterans have grown misty-eyed with pride for their 'flag,' not necessarily ever having read the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution? A symbol such as the Confederate battle emblem is not only powerful, but dangerously divisive. One gaping contradiction of its proponents' contentions is that it is a banner for everyone. While claiming that it memorializes and dignifies the heritage of African Americans as well as whites, they also ignore what little semblance of genuine dignity African Americans have enjoyed throughout most of Southern history. This tragic oversight continues to mitigate against any real progress toward understanding or tolerance between two very different yet valid viewpoints.

It is also unfortunate that objective scholarship applied toward deepening understanding of the black Confederate invariably collides with political wishful thinkers who stretch history to suit their respective agendas. Significantly, James H. Brewer's work was lauded by John Hope Franklin and Eugene Genovese, both leading experts in black Southern history. However, as long as the contributions of historians such as Brewer are ignored outside the circle of committed scholars, misinterpretation and abuse of black Confederate history will continue to spill into the angry currents of racial polarity which erode hope of a true and singular Southern identity.³³

Notes

- 1 Kevin Alexander Gray, "Politics Lit the Fires," *Washington Post* (carried by *The Yomiuri Shimbun*), 28 June 1996, Sec. A, p. 9, col. 2.
- 2 Pat Buchanan, Letter to Members of Heritage Preservation Association (HPA), quoted in HPA newsletter by R. Lee Collins, postmarked 1 May

1996.

- 3 Kevin Sack, "Symbol of the Old South Divides the New South," *The New York Times*, 21 Jan. 1996, Sec. E, p. 5, col. 2; Lyle V. Harris, "State flagwaving will be prohibited in Olympic venues," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 18 June 1996, Sec. B, p. 10, col. 3; John E. Farley, *Majority-Minority Relations*, Second Edition, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), pp. 66-67.
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