

Ghosts under Fire : 'Southern Heritage' in the Age of Political Correctness

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When tuned in to the Far East Network, the information and entertainment radio for American defense personnel, a listener will likely hear a 30-second spot that salutes a particular personality or virtue worthy of celebration as a part of the American 'heritage.' It is a word that Americans love to savor in both serious and whimsical moods, from calls to war to summer theme parades where participants glory in a romanticized past. The tone of these highly self-congratulatory and patriotic salutes indicates how the Defense Department recognizes the power of common heritage and its mythology as a cohesive agent for sustaining morale in the ethnically diverse armed services.

But the word is also perceived to have a divisive edge. Such is the case of 'Southern heritage,' a concept that polarizes the multi-racial South of today and, in the eyes of many Americans, betrays the hard-won advances of the 1960s civil rights movement. Appearing insensitive to the brutalities of both enslavement of the Negro and racial segregation, the advocates of Southern heritage wish to openly and unapologetically observe Southern history just as members of any ethnic group would celebrate their own ethnicity and past. Indeed, if given an ethnic classification, what might be called a 'heritage Southerner' shares an ironic legacy with the once captive African as

an involuntary citizen of the United States. Similarly, he has been confronted with the humiliation of condescending love-hate stereotypes.¹ Yet the gentle hand of political correctness (p.c.) has not been extended to this unlikely minority as it has been to a host of other historically misunderstood and abused groups of Americans. On the contrary, the interests of p.c. are diametrically at odds with those of Southern heritage.

In the 1990s the p.c. attacks have been against official use of Confederate symbols and the naming of public facilities after those who served the Confederate cause. The battle flag of the Confederacy, for example, has been categorized as a sinister symbol of white supremacy. Heritage Southerners are quick to disassociate themselves from the hatemongers, seeing the battle flag rather as a tribute to the bravery and sacrifice made in the 'Great Rebellion'. It also represents familial ties to the Old South - a love of history steeped more in sentiment than scholarship. Those defending heritage perceive their attackers as merciless and uncompromising, seeking to destroy not only the battle flag but any relic that conjures up unpleasant associations, however tenuous, with the 'peculiar institution' and its defense.

This collision of interests, exploited in part by the media, has helped to keep the 'irrepressible conflict' in the headlines of today's newspapers.

The general public's attitude toward the South and the Civil War has been a fickle one punctuated by highly acclaimed media events that have manipulated sympathies toward both the vanquished South (*Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*) and the Negro (*Roots* and

Glory). Only the extremely naive would consider any of these entertainment spectacles to be reliable tools in teaching history, yet their successes are modest testimony to how receptive the public is at a given time to a particular issue. The heavy-handed symbolism of sheet-clad heroes on horseback or “bullwhips cracking” on screen is far more likely to elicit emotions that no amount of sober historical writing could achieve.

Up until the America of D.W. Griffith and a generation later to Margaret Mitchell, the image of the postbellum South in the minds of many Americans had enjoyed a captivating and exotic romanticism that sweetened the bitter harshness of war and race. The seductive allure of the moonlight-and-magnolias myth had mass appeal across all regions of the nation. Apologists for this perplexing lack of interest in the South’s social reforms cite shifts in national priorities such as westward expansion and imperialist ambitions.² Even into the age of television, nearly a century after Appomattox, popular fantasies about the South were fed by the charms of folk philosopher Sheriff Andy Taylor whose North Carolina domain was mysteriously devoid of black-skinned citizens.

Juxtaposed with the bucolic fiction of Mayberry were shocking revelations from Alabama where authorities resolutely opposed civil rights marchers. Instead of folk philosophizing, racial epithets uttered unabashedly by defiant lawmen confirmed the worst of Southern stereotypes in living rooms from coast to coast. Thanks to such indelicate public behavior and Lyndon Johnson’s effective legislating, African-American grievances received a wider and more sympathetic audience. No longer just sportsmen or entertainers, black Americans received a certain degree of mainstream acceptance as a

people with a compelling tragedy to be acknowledged and studied. The hit TV mini-series *Roots*, based on Alex Haley's bestseller, was the embodiment of this growing awareness.

But the hit parade of media events about the South contains nothing so phenomenal as Ken Burns's 1990 PBS documentary *The Civil War*. America's public television had never had so many viewers for such a feature - an estimated 14 million viewers watched the nine-episode, eleven-hour series. It was both an apparently credible historical account and a stirring saga. Avoiding corny re-enactments, Burns demonstrated his gifts as a storyteller with a gripping narration, poignant soundtrack and effective use of polished actors who read diary excerpts from actual participants; but *The Civil War* was far from groundbreaking in the treatment of its subject. It was, rather, a means to manipulate viewers' emotions as a reaffirmation of the correctness of conventional wisdom: that the South fought to defend slavery while the North fought to abolish it. He could not possibly please everyone, yet Burns skillfully played up to the largest possible audience with brilliant success. Viewers tended to be satisfied with the film's preoccupation with slavery and its victims. Nor did they mind the insertion of an upbeat North-South reconciliation without significant mention of the tumultuous Reconstruction period. *The Civil War* had grabbed far greater attention than any academic work of new research could possibly reach. The whole nation was talking about it. With poetry and grace, the p.c. message had been electrified as never before. The mournful whipped slaves. The cruel masters. Inevitable, righteous war. Happy ending.³

Given this particular selective bias and the more explosive Hollywood indictments such as *Mississippi Burning* that link

Confederate symbolism inextricably with crazed Klansmen, the mild-mannered proponent of Southern heritage is left with a great deal of defending to do.

What, then, is political correctness and what are its specific targets? Where the scope of this discussion is concerned, political correctness is an attitude that supports the view that African-Americans are victims of history and that the elimination of specific vestiges of the past will in effect promote African-American welfare for the future.

Translated into action, this means registering protest against things ranging from apparently innocent school 'rebel' mascots (Fairfax, Virginia) to the flying of the Confederate battle flag over the South Carolina state house (which, with Alabama, is the last of the CSA to do so). Other typical cases of confrontation over symbols include campaigns to eliminate Confederate memorial statuary in such cities as Alexandria, Virginia and Greensboro, North Carolina (where university students seek removal of all statues and markers). In Tennessee the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People desires disinterment of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest and his wife from their namesake park and the renaming thereof. Southern colleges and universities have banned Old South themes from campus (e.g., Randolph-Macon College, Virginia) or altogether (e.g., Vanderbilt University, Tennessee). Finding it "creates problems," the University of Mississippi disallows display of the Confederate battle flag at school sporting events. At Harvard University far to the North a woman student successfully won a heated debate over her right to hang the battle flag out her dormitory window. In Georgia an Allied-Signal Bendix manager found his job in jeopardy

when angry citizens demanded his dismissal for awarding a retiring employee a Confederate flag at a company ceremony. In Florida a school board successfully sued a schoolboy for wearing a Confederate belt buckle to class. Protesters in Texas demanded Jefferson Davis Middle School in San Antonio be renamed Abraham Lincoln Middle School because Lincoln was friendly to blacks whereas Davis was not. Requests to omit the battle flag have even been put to Civil War re-enactments themselves, as was the case at the Stonewall Jackson tribute in Lexington, Virginia.⁴

The debate over the legitimacy or morality of giving official sanction to Confederate symbols is hardly restricted to localities or states. No less than the floor of the United States Senate has been the scene of heated discussion on just such a subject as late as the summer of 1993. National attention on the Super Bowl this year in Atlanta - as well as international focus on the upcoming 1996 Atlanta Olympics - has given opponents of the heritage argument the opportunity to showcase their cause against the Georgia state flag with maximum media effect.

In July 1993, Carol Moseley-Braun, freshman senator from Illinois, attracted media attention with an impassioned plea to rescind Senate approval of the insignia for the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Describing the question as an issue "about race," Moseley-Braun threatened filibuster and even succeeded in reducing a fellow senator to tears as she described the symbol as a bitter reminder of "the single most painful episode in American history." The centerpiece of the UDC insignia is the Stars and Bars, first flag of the Confederate States of America, which through raised dust so resembled the Union flag at First Bull Run that General P.G.T. Beauregard had a more distinctive

battle flag commissioned for the Army of Northern Virginia - the flag most commonly associated with the Rebel cause. Moseley-Braun's widely reported efforts to defeat the application proved victorious. The UDC would no longer enjoy special congressional protection of their insignia patent, a privilege that had been renewed every fourteen years since 1898.⁵

North Carolina Republican Senator Jesse Helms, representing the viewpoint of Southern heritage, stressed in his rebuttal that the UDC was a non-racist benevolent organization, and that the 24,000 mostly elderly women who comprised it were genuinely interested in benefiting their communities across thirty-one states with various fund-raising programs that included establishing food banks and homeless shelters. Originally formed to "preserve the memory of courageous men who fought and died for the case[sic] they believed in," the sisterhood had received the blessings of four presidents, two of whom had themselves been Union soldiers. To suddenly turn off support and recognition of their work, Helms indicated, was to unfairly and cruelly rebuke them. Even the liberal Senator Howard Metzenbaum of Ohio had voted three times in the past for continued patent protection of the UDC emblem.⁶

Appealing to what Lincoln would call "the better angels of our nature," Moseley-Braun, being both new to the job and the first black woman to be elected to the U.S. Senate, wowed the media with the thrill of something different and sensational. On the verge of tears herself, Moseley-Braun declared that the issue was "whether Americans such as myself who believe in the promise of this country ... will have to suffer the indignity of being reminded ... that at one point in this country's history we were human chattel."

Conservatives were appalled by what seemed a self-conscious grandstanding to the media's eager expectations. Unsurprised by media praise for Moseley-Braun's "bravery," die hard supporters of the patent lamented that little note was made of what they considered to be an outright exploitation of the race issue, a tactic they themselves had long been accused of. Conservatives further claimed that Moseley-Braun had whipped up a sense of guilt with her own blackness, thus intimidating 75 nonplussed senators into voting against a patent they would otherwise have approved of gladly. Still, the *New York Times* characterized the vote as a "majestic moment."⁷

But that had not been all. Earlier in the day during confirmation hearings for Supreme Court nominee Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Utah Republican Senator Orrin Hatch had drawn a vague analogy between *Roe v. Wade* and the 1857 *Dred Scott* Decision, which he referred to as "the all-time worst" ruling of the court. Moseley-Braun rose to express her offense, claiming that "as the only descendant of a slave" on the committee, she found it very "difficult" to accept Hatch's line of questioning. It was, in *Washington Times* columnist Suzanne Fields's mind, as if a Jew had raised objections to the mention of Hitler as an anti-Semite because it reminded him of the Holocaust. Hatch was reported to have been "dumbfounded" by Moseley-Braun's remark.⁸

Even the super-conservative Pat Buchanan was careful to point out in his scathing critique of Moseley-Braun "that slavery was an evil ... permanent stain on this Republic." The problem was that it no longer seemed possible to talk about it anymore, especially in the presence of a black American at a forum as public as that of the U.S. Senate.⁹ And whereas slavery was an undeniable factor in the economy of the

Old South, did that therefore justify the sudden rejection of a sizeable portion of the nation's ancestry by withdrawing official recognition of the UDC insignia patent? How could the descendants of the Confederacy approach a semblance of public respect for their ancestry without having to share in a shower of endless contempt with skinheads, neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klansmen?

For Georgia officials the state flag harbors high potential for embarrassment on a global scale. A movement is now afoot to have the Confederate battle emblem removed from the flag's design before the 1996 Olympic Games scheduled for Atlanta. The Olympic Committee itself has pledged to stay out of the fight. At worst, the issue unresolved could invite violence and a plague of angry demonstrations that could disrupt the world's most closely watched sporting event and sully the image of the entire American South - eager to prove it is not dirt poor and overrun with racists and hillbillies.

The Public Broadcasting System's Betty Ann Basil filed a report that revealed public support for changing the Georgia flag was overwhelmingly negative, while at the same time a number of people interviewed expressed the desire to "do the right thing." That meant if the flag made African-Americans angry, some other should be decided upon in which all parties could agree. The arguments for preserving the current flag in the name of heritage tend to overlook the fact that the flag now used is relatively new. The battle flag design was adopted as an act of defiance to school integration in 1956, meaning that a substantial number of older Georgians remember the previous flag that was without the disputed symbol. The Atlanta City Council had no qualms about removing the battle flag itself from the council

chambers due to its 'offensiveness.' Democratic Governor Zell Miller declared in a February 1993 interview that the time had come "to remove the [battle] symbol on the [state] flag that for all practical purposes says: 'For white only.' It has become the symbol of white supremacy." Black state senator Ralph Abernathy III agreed, labeling the design a "Confederate swastika."

One of the most vocal supporters of changing the flag is NAACP Southeastern regional director Earl Shinhoster whose argument denied there was any attempt to wipe out all images of the Confederacy or the Old South. "But the battle flag is the symbol that has now become the embodiment of the ideal [of white supremacy], and I don't think that as a matter of public policy we need to force that on a vast number of citizens in this country." Petition drives on both sides of the issue, with Shinhoster leading the offense, forced a reluctant legislature to consider the issue. Zell Miller's attempt to persuade them to change the flag ended in failure.

The vicious circle of the flag debate shows no sign of abating. Ignoring the problem does not make it go away, yet discussion is so emotional that officials want desperately to avoid it. As Basil's report noted, the real question involved may be far less about symbols and racism than simple economics. Atlanta stands to gain a great deal by hosting the Olympics, and as a city with reasonably harmonious race relations it is, state flag notwithstanding, a progressive and modern city.

Billy Payne, president of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, rejects a role for the games in the debate over the flag. "It's a matter for the Legislature to decide." Still, Payne admits that his task is to promote a positive - and accurate - image of the South to the world.

"I had several folks, members of the International Olympic Committee who, as they visited, literally expected when they got off the airplane to see people picking cotton out in the fields." De-emphasizing the powerful and enormously attractive *Gone with the Wind* image, Payne expressed the desire to show the world "not only how proud we are of our traditions, [but also] to demonstrate to them in a very decisive manner how far we have come." If "Izzie" the Olympic mascot is any indication of the change, the South has evolved into a science fiction that shows no trace of tradition or historical fact. Izzie is more space alien than symbol of the South, thus making it, if anything, race neutral and refreshingly uncontroversial. (Its original name was the "Whatizit.") By caricaturing the South's future, the Olympic Committee has effectively escaped the heat of the South's hellish past.¹⁰

An 'Izzie solution' to yet another aspect in this clash of eras would be a mutually acceptable musical theme to evoke Southern charms and traditions, i.e., a replacement for controversial state songs and the ever-popular "Dixie."

"Carry Me Back to Old Virginia" is at best a laughable anachronism, romancing a freed slave's nostalgia for his days of bondage and the old "massa." Although actually written by a black man, it takes little imagination to appreciate the embarrassment this must cause blacks as well as whites in light of the efforts that have been made, however unsuccessfully, to mend race relations in the South. Opponents of revising Virginia's official state song again claim Southern heritage is at stake, though those who seek to revise what's offensive claim a proud ancestry themselves. Some things, they say, must change.

More in the public eye - or ear, rather - is "Dixie," which is frequently silenced by the forces of p.c. because of its potential to evoke unpleasant images of African-American suffering. Such was the case at the Democratic National Convention in 1988 when the convention director silenced the familiar refrain from the public address system out of fear it would make someone angry. When Miss Georgia Sweet Potato sang "American Trilogy" on the Georgia senate floor, angry black senators walked out because it included "Dixie." (It also includes "The Battle Hymn of the Republic.") Virtually a Confederate battle flag etched in sound, "Dixie" has been dumped from acceptability in college activities across the South. In a tense last-minute gesture the staff of the newly elected governor of South Carolina bowed to Black Caucus pressure and had "Dixie" replaced with "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" on the 1987 inauguration music program.¹¹

Mindful of sensitive nerves, we can only guess how the Olympic planners in Atlanta must dread the inevitable controversy that will accompany performance of "Dixie" in opening and closing ceremonies - and how its deliberate omission will not only invite the wrath of heritage Southerners, but confuse an entire world that, blissfully ignorant of any offensiveness, expects to hear it.

The p.c. agenda enjoys a distinct media advantage in waging its campaign against the ghosts of the Confederacy still so dear to the hearts of the heritage Southerners. The nation at large sees on their televisions scenes of Confederate regalia being paraded next to Nazi symbols at hate rallies. By association, the uncritical mind will leap to the conclusion that Confederates and Nazis were indeed the same, an issue that only the boldest partisan, sure of his constituency's

support, would dare challenge in a public forum.

Those behind the original momentum of p.c. find media's emotive potential to be a vital ally in promoting the villification of the Southern heritage. How effective would Moseley-Braun's performance in the U.S. Senate have been without television cameras fixed on her and her colleagues? And while ideally the media does not take sides, it was impossible for them to ignore the historical significance of a black woman senator rising to a tailor-made occasion for denouncing slavery just one more time. Where p.c. commands the truth, it also makes for good theater. A little applause will drive away those lingering pangs of guilt that taunt the most progressive minds. Such was the feel-good effect of Ken Burns's documentary, a brilliantly conceived media monument to the p.c. point of view.

But beyond such cathartic devices lies the fundamental question: What kind of world made political correctness possible in the first place? Some will argue that the very ancestors that white Southerners take such pride and honor in had in reality betrayed their descendants by dragging their heels for generations on improving the Negro's lot. The bill for their social irresponsibility and racism is now being paid, and it is feared some collectors will not relent until the entire corpus of the Confederate legacy is left bankrupt.

But p.c.'s self-conscious variety of indignation is only one of its dangers. The selective loathing of the Confederacy baffles the student of history who knows well how many of the nation's Founding Fathers were themselves slaveholders. No one, for example, is campaigning for the renaming of Washington, D.C. or Washington state. More disturbing still is the African involvement in the slave trade and the Southern slaveholders who themselves were black.¹⁸ As for the cause

of the Civil War, slavery was an obvious factor, but as of 1860 three-fourths of the family heads in the South did not own slaves. The most common sight on the cutting room floor of p.c. propagandists are the numerous statements of Abraham Lincoln that are glaringly racist and bereft of the slightest animosity toward the South.¹² Withholding inconvenient facts is a typical ploy of those who are interested more in embellishing a bias than in establishing a balanced truth.

Still the popular imagination accepts slavery for the horrendous injustice and cruelty that it was. The omission of contrary truths may make poor historical scholarship, but the purpose of p.c. is to seek justice, not balance. In a free society it is a welcome and healthy sign for traditions to be called into serious question. Yet in their assault on the remnants of the Confederacy, advocates of the politically correct may take heed to strenuously avoid the lynch mob mentality that raged in the black man's nemesis of less enlightened times.

Notes

- 1 John Shelton Reed, "Southerners as an American Ethnic Group" in *My Tears Spoiled My Aim*, (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1993), p. 29.
- 2 For an excellent study of North-South reconciliation and popular culture, see Nina Gilber. *The Romance of Reunion*. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1993).
- 3 David J. Walkowitz, "Telling the Story: The Media, the Public, and American History," *Perspectives*, Vol. 31, No. 7, (1993), pp. 1, 6-9.
- 4 Ludwell Johnson, "Furl that Banner?," *Southern Partisan*, Vol. 12, (1992), pp. 20-27; Alan Wellikoff, "The Object at Hand," *Smithsonian*, Apr. 1994, pp. 22-24.

- 5 Wellikoff, p. 22; Jesse Helms, "In Defense of the United Daughters of the Confederacy," *Congressional Record*, 22 Jul. 1993, p. 1.
- 6 Helms, pp. 1-4.
- 7 Pat Buchanan, "Profiles in Timidity ... and Absurdity," Editorial, *The Washington Times*, 28 Jul. 1993, Sec. G, pp. 1, 4.
- 8 Suzanne Fields, "Whitewashing Racism," Editorial, *The Washington Times*, 29 Jul. 1993, Sec. G, pp. 1, 4.
- 9 Buchanan, Sec. G, p. 4.
- 10 "Raising Objections," writ. Betty Ann Basil, *MacNeil-Lehrer Report*, Public Broadcasting System, 31 Jan. 1994; "Atoranta Uocchingu," Amaya Yukiko, NHK / BS-2, 2 Jul. 1994.
- 11 Johnson, p. 23-25.
- 12 Johnson, p. 22; Buchanan, Sec. G, p. 4; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Anxiety of History: The Southern Confrontation with Modernity," *Southern Cultures*, Inaugural Issue, (1993), p. 78; Emory Thomas, *The Confederate Nation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p.6; Lincoln's insensitivity to the murder of Elijah Lovejoy, an abolitionist editor, is but one example of his total lack of commitment to racial equality. "I have heard you have abolitionists here," he told a Worcester, Massachusetts, audience in a speech. "We have a few in Illinois and we shot one the other day." See Richard Shenkman, *Legends, Lies, and Cherished Myths of American History*, (New York: Morrow, 1988), pp. 46-47.