

A Civil War Over Confederate Flag

South Carolina Split Over Symbol

By Alan Sverdlik
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ANDERSON, S.C.—Of all the Confederate flags in South Carolina, none is more unexpected than the miniature one that adorns Reuben Greenberg's wall. Greenberg, Charleston's black police chief, believes there is honor in the rebel banner, even if some misuse it as a symbol of racial hate.

The battle flag "means a great deal emotionally to many whites—and these people are not necessarily racists—who respect their ancestors and the sacrifices they made," said Greenberg, a history buff and Civil War reenactor whose office is decorated with flags from every continent.

After a brief truce, the war over the Confederate flag is flaring anew here in the only state where a full-fledged version still flies over the capitol.

Only a month ago, it looked as if an accord was near when Gov. David M. Beasley (R) proposed a compromise that would have moved the flag from atop the statehouse in Columbia to a Confederate memorial on the capitol grounds.

But the state House of Representatives, which was expected to follow the governor's lead, balked after heated debate and called for a statewide referendum in November.

The Senate may follow suit, allowing voters to decide the banner's fate.

That would guarantee eight more months of cam-



FILE PHOTO/BY LOU KRASKY—ASSOCIATED PRESS

**South Carolina is the only state where the
Confederate battle flag still flies over the capitol.**

paigning and argument over an issue that's become as much new South as old.

Nowadays, much of the passion incited by the flag debate springs directly from the "identity politics" that thrived during the 1980s, according to those who have followed the debate.

The Confederate flag became a more potent sym-

See FLAG, A14, Col. 1

FLAG, From A1

bol of white heritage after "the push for multiculturalism" had encouraged African Americans to express their own racial pride, said Dexter Wimbish, a staff attorney with the Center for Democratic Renewal, an organization that tracks hate groups. The center considers the Confederate flag offensive.

Those expressions, among them Malcolm X caps and T-shirts proclaiming "It's a Black Thing, You Wouldn't Understand," were "polarizing points" for whites, said Wimbish, who is African American. "Mainstream whites then adopted the flag as representative of their history," even though "it invoked a painful time when our forefathers were enslaved."

Take Gene Stephens, 47, a draftsman. "The Confederate flag is one of the few symbols we have left," Stephens said. "By we, I mean white southerners."

He was standing outside Anderson's county courthouse, in the shadow of the local monument to the Confederate dead. Etched into the stone foundation of the monument is a Confederate flag, which has faded with time, and an inscription, still legible: "Though conquered, we adore it. Love the cold, dead hands that bore it."

"Taking [the flag] away from us amounts to ethnic cleansing," Stephens said, "just like in Bosnia."

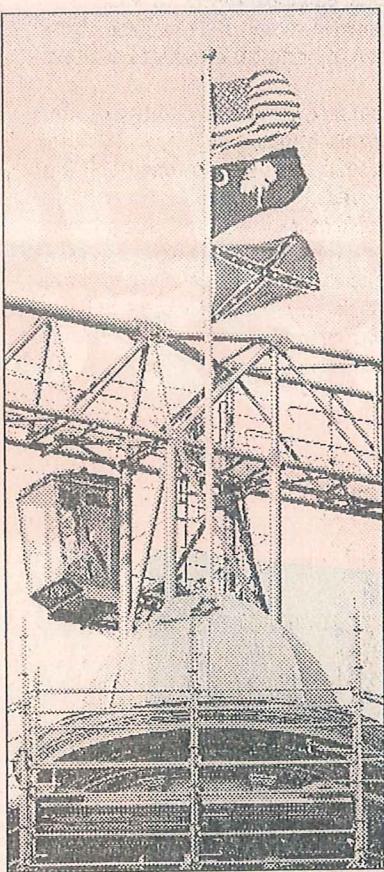
In January, Stephens and a dozen of his friends watched from the visitors' gallery as the House debated Beasley's compromise. They heckled legislators who favored it, branding them "traitors, sellouts and jellyfish."

Black activists have been equally vociferous, at one point threatening boycotts to force the flag down. They point out that the elevation of the flag across the South in the 1950s and '60s coincided with some of the uglier episodes of the civil rights struggle, and it is that association that gave the flag its racist connotations.

"When I see the Confederate flag, I don't think of young boys who fought and died in some long-ago war," said Walter Long, 60, a Greenville haberdasher. "I see grown men with bedsheets over their heads, spraying babies with water hoses."

While the question of racism hangs over the debate, whites respond fiercely that this is about regional pride, not color.

"There are still people who honestly believe that the Civil War was



FILE PHOTO/BY LOU KRASKY—ASSOCIATED PRESS
In Columbia, U.S. and state banners fly atop symbol of confederacy.

fought over states' rights, not slavery, and they see the flag as a symbol of heritage and valor," said David Moltke-Hansen, director of the University of North Carolina's Center for the Study of the American South.

At the same time, there is a distinctly modern subtext to the debate, one that conjures up the racial anxieties that lurk just below the surface of American life.

For some, defending the flag is a "covert way of expressing distress with a number of related issues," among them affirmative action, crime and welfare, Moltke-Hansen said.

In South Carolina, the Confederate banner, which flies below the U.S. and state flags, went up in 1962 during a centennial remembrance of the Civil War. It was raised as a temporary measure, but public pressure kept it aloft, showing how potent South Carolina's history remains.

Even more than in other southern states, the passions of the distant past hold sway here, Moltke-Hansen said. "For a lot of people, South Carolina is a symbolic place for a last stand."

It was the first state to secede from the Union. At the capitol,

bronze stars still mark scars left by Union shells in 1865, near the end of what people here call "the war of northern aggression."

According to Harry Watson, co-editor of the quarterly magazine Southern Cultures, the Confederate flag first reemerged in the South in 1948, when the Dixiecrat Party nominated Strom Thurmond, then a South Carolina Democrat, for president.

"His supporters were waving miniature flags on the convention floor," Watson said.

In Alabama, the flag was hoisted in the mid-1950s, after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawed segregation in public schools. Georgia and Mississippi incorporated the Confederate emblem—a blue X and white stars against a red background—into their state flags about the same time.

But public opposition has been building. In 1993, an Alabama judge

ruled that the flag flying over the capitol dome in Montgomery was in violation of state law. Then-Gov. Jim Folsom (D) decided not to appeal the ruling, directing that the flag be flown instead at a Confederate monument on the capitol's grounds.

In Maryland, state officials recently decided to confiscate commemorative license plates that feature the Confederate flag, but the move has been challenged in court.

Dan T. Carter, an Emory University professor and native South Carolinian, said flag boosters may be more guilty of "boorish, unsouthern behavior" than of racism. "Willful cruelty and disregard of others' feelings is a violation of southern notions of civility and manners," he said.

Some surprisingly strong anti-flag sentiment here has come from business leaders, who fear the flag flap could damage South Carolina's image among foreign investors. The controversy "will hurt economic development," said Charles Way, chairman of the Palmetto Business Forum, adding that "someone from Germany will not understand this."

A group of mostly white businessmen was among the most fervent backers of the last attempt at compromise, in 1995. The state Senate voted to relocate the flag to a nearby Confederate memorial and erect a monument honoring the contributions of South Carolina's blacks. But

the measure died in the House.

Throughout the fracas, one thing has been clear: There are no strict party lines. In fact, the flag dispute has produced some unlikely alliances and rifts.

Beasley, who pledged to keep the flag flying during his campaign, switched sides as governor. He said the change of heart came after a string of arsons at black churches and an escalation of race baiting.

"After witnessing the inflamed rhetoric, the venom, the demagoguery," he said, "it is clear that we as a people must find common ground, and quickly, lest we lapse ever deeper into the quagmire of suspicion and division."

Flag supporters get a more sympathetic ear from Greenberg, whose city has seen its share of Ku Klux Klan parades.

If the flag comes down, "who is going to benefit?" he asked. "Is anybody going to get a better job for it? Is it going to enhance race relations? Will Black History Month suddenly become more relevant?"

Greenberg paused and added: "I can't get worked up about it."

Still another wrinkle in the debate comes from the spread of T-shirts, license plates and decals bearing the

Confederate emblem, but with a hitch: Instead of red, white and blue, the hues are red, green and black, which represent black liberation. It all started when a Charleston rap group, Da Phlayva, put the tricolored banner on an album cover. Now, a company in the same city is making vanity plates that display the irreverent, Africanized version of the flag with the words "New South" just below it.

An even more curious figure is Mendel Rivers Jr., son of the long-time Democratic congressman who made his reputation in Washington as a hawk and segregationist. Rivers, an attorney who practices outside Charleston, contends that flag boosters are practicing the same victimology they deplore in some African Americans and feminists.

Those who "endlessly wave the Confederate flag and cheer," he said, are no different than "blacks who endlessly rebroadcast the crossing of the Selma, Alabama, bridge" or "feminists who endlessly hold weepy support sessions to remind us how unfair it all is."

"It's time to let go," Rivers said. "The Confederacy, like the Soviet Union, the British Empire and the Third Reich, is dead."