

The Battle flag of the Confederacy, the Rebel Flag, as it is nicknamed by many, has a history which is as fascinating as many things are about the War between the States. While it is the flag most associated with the South, it was not one of the National flags of the Confederate States. When the Confederacy was first established in December 1860, a Flag and Seal committee was organized to create and establish symbols for the new country. They wanted a National flag to be flying over their "new Country" before Lincoln took office on March 4th, 1861. Numerous entries were quickly sent in. The flag which was chosen, the original Stars and Bars, had a circle of seven stars to represent the first seven states which made up the Confederacy. Stars would be added as other Southern states seceded. The two red horizontal bars with a white bar sandwiched between them was not too distinct from the American flag. This flag, formally adopted in February, was flying over all Southern forts, except for Sumter, by April 1st, 1861, (Civil War Times, 35).

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The more interesting, and quite comical^y history, told to me by John Coski, a Civil War historian at the Museum of the Confederacy, is that what is now referred to as the Stars and Bars, the Battle Flag, was rejected by the committee because they thought it resembled suspenders! William Porter Miles, head of the flag committee, and a South Carolina representative to the Confederate States, presented the now famous pattern to the committee himself. It had been designed by his friend, a prominent citizen of Charleston, Conner Harrison, who had originally intended the flag to display the

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Southern cross. He opted for the St. Andrew's Cross after his acquaintances in the Jewish community of Charleston expressed feelings of exclusion from the cause by the Christian symbol. The St. Andrew's Cross, which also has Christian origins, though less universally so, stems from Scottish heritage, and represents strength and chivalry of great warriors from ancient battles. The square flag, much like a naval jack, had 13 stars decorating the cross, each one symbolizing a state which Harrison, as well as many others, thought would leave the Union (John Coski, Museum of the Confederacy). Of course, only 11 did, as Missouri and Kentucky were forced to stay neutral.

The National flag of the Confederacy, known as the Stars and Bars, was the flag General Beauregard, hero of Sumter, and General Joseph Johnston, flew when they went into the Battle of Bull Run, (McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 342). The flag only added to the confusion at Manassas. No one could tell the Stars and Bars apart from the Stars and Stripes! Miles, head of the flag committee, who was now an aid to Beauregard, gave him the rejected banner. Beauregard, with his Napoleonic qualities, quickly adopted, and arrogantly proclaimed, the jack to be the official Battle flag of the Confederacy, (John Coski). Throughout the war, Southern troops flew this flag alongside their state flags. Some modified the emblems to give it more personal meaning.

It took the Confederate States two years to incorporate the design into their second national flag: the Stainless Banner. This white flag with the jack decorating the upper left corner was often mistaken as a surrender flag by Union soldiers. A red bar was added to help correct this problem. The third national flag of the confederacy was adopted in March, 1865, one month before the war ended, (Confederate Flag Display, Civil War Medical Museum, Frederick). The Battle Flag was not given the look of a

national flag, a rectangular dimension, until General Joseph Johnston had it fashioned that way for the Army of Tennessee. It was the only unit flying the rebel battle flag with that shape, and it was not seen again, until the twentieth century! (Cannon, Devereaux, The Flags of the Confederacy, 203-204).

This is, of course, the way the flag is seen today; and this is what leads one to believe that it was the national flag of the Confederate States. Despite any ^(many) misconceptions, the battle flag was the most recognized symbol of the Confederate States, and it continues to be so. "It became the ^l "national flag,"[?] according to Coski, "because it appeared to be the equivalent to the Stars and Stripes, something familiar that Southern "Americans" could identify with. At the same time it portrayed to Southerners nationalism, separatism, and a symbol of independence from the North (John Coski, Museum of the Confederacy). It was a popular and meaningful flag! As one confederate soldier, Major Randolph Smith, who served under General Sydney Johnston, stated,

A soldier's flag is his inspiration. It stands for home, kindred, and country, More than a piece of bunting or blending of bright colors," (Civil War Times, 36).

The battle flag of the Confederacy was obviously not only Major Smith's inspiration, but thousands of others, who fought for all it stood for, so much so, that they laid down their lives in the most gruesome war in United States' history. It is not a question of whether we should honor those men, but how we choose to do so. They should be allowed to rest in peace with dignity for, although we may not agree with why they went to war, we need to understand that they died for what they believed in, and if only for that very basic concept should we pay them our respects. It should be done quietly though, not with reenactments, license plates, and commercialized products which are tacky and meaningless.

Today, the battle flag continues to be a popular and meaningful banner. The question now is, is it racist? To many, especially African-Americans, it is. History is incredibly complex, and we must be careful not to confuse the facts about the war with the myths, which came afterwards. Despite all the rationale given for the causes of the war, such as civil liberties, tariffs, and roads, Southern succession was over slavery. Slavery is at the center of every other explanation given. The South cannot admit that now. It is difficult to justify approximately 620,000 deaths over such an immoral institution. When groups such as The Sons of Confederate Veterans speak out about honoring bravery and valor of their ancestors, they cannot come to terms with the reasons they were fighting in the first place.

The South left the Union. It established its own government; a separate country. Although the majority of the men fighting the Rebel cause were not the white aristocracy, not slave holders themselves, they did fight for "Southern ideals," a way of life, and an economic system which, while many were not a part of, they believed in. Slavery was a large part of that world! Alexander Steven's, Vice-president of the Confederacy, stated in his inaugural speech,

Our new government's foundation rests upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man, and that slavery, subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. (Eaton, 54-55).

This sentiment was repeated at the time. In Maryland, Confederate soldiers on their way to Antietam and Gettysburg furthered their cause by capturing free blacks and sending them South into slavery, (Korr, "Offensive Censorship" Washington Post, February 1, 1997).

My interview with Lt. Rick Griffiths, second in command of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, was most enlightening because, not only is it his organization that has caused all the controversy about the license plates, but it helped to see the issue

from another point of view. The following is a summed up version of our conversation.

Lt. Griffiths:

The South had no other choice but to fight for slavery. They were stuck in an economical system, which, while it was losing ground, they could not totally abandon. It would ruin their economy for the South had a limited cash flow and could not pay for laborers. The laborers they already had (slaves) were mortgaged so they were, in a sense, already paying for workers. Besides, what were they going to do with four million blacks-just let them go?

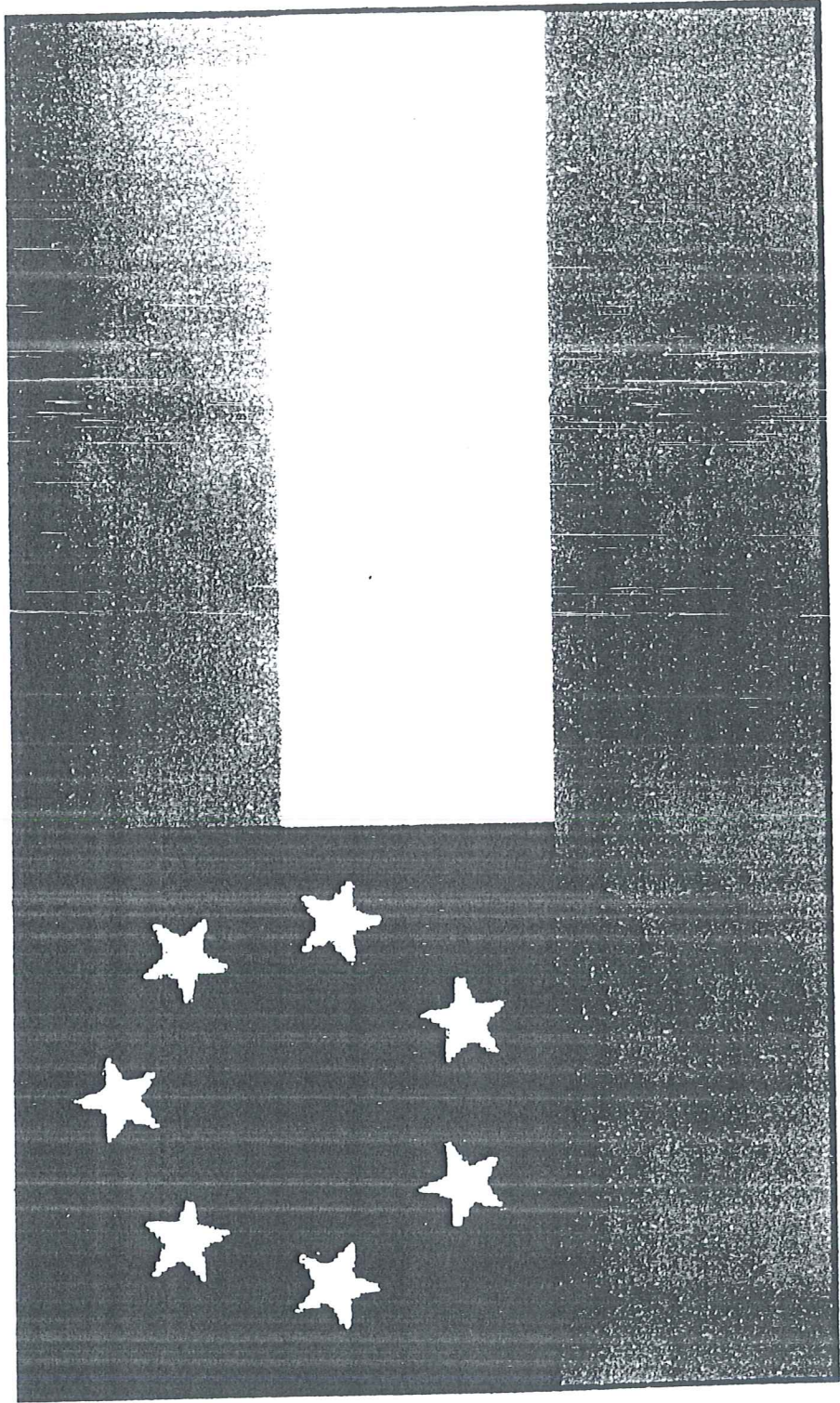
While I agreed with the obvious dilemma, I thought it was ironic that after making this statement, he than said,

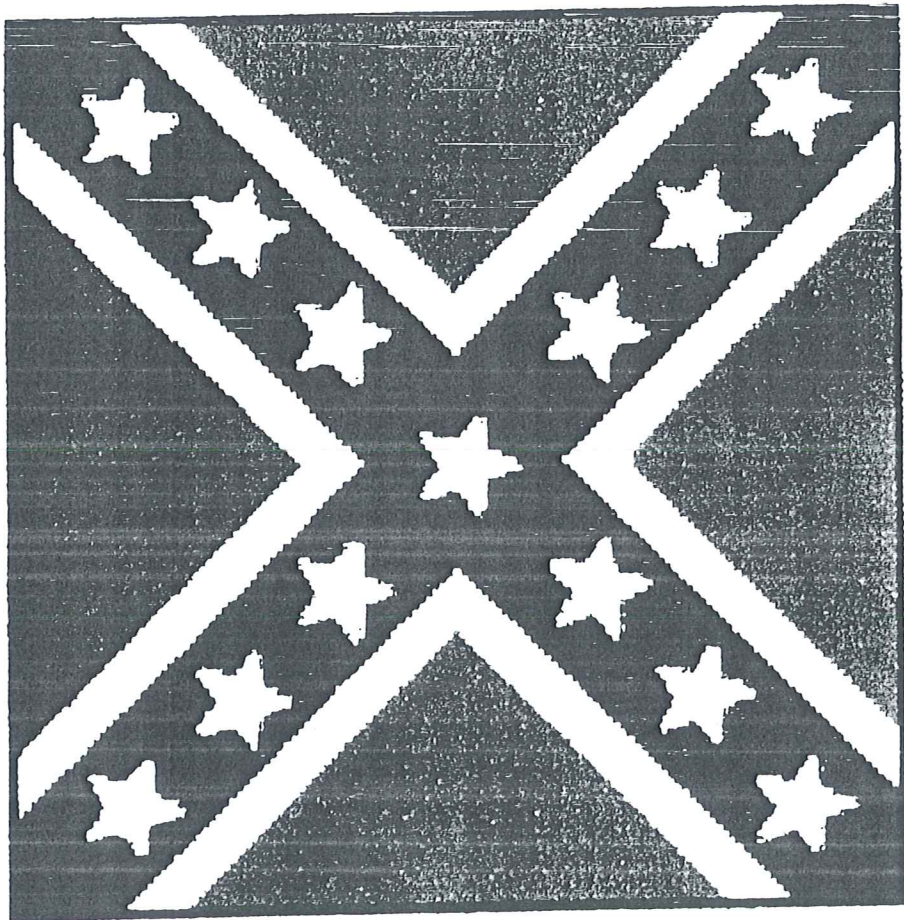
The battle flag is not a symbol of slavery or racism. It's a symbol of our heritage and pride in our ancestors who fought bravely to secure their beliefs and values.

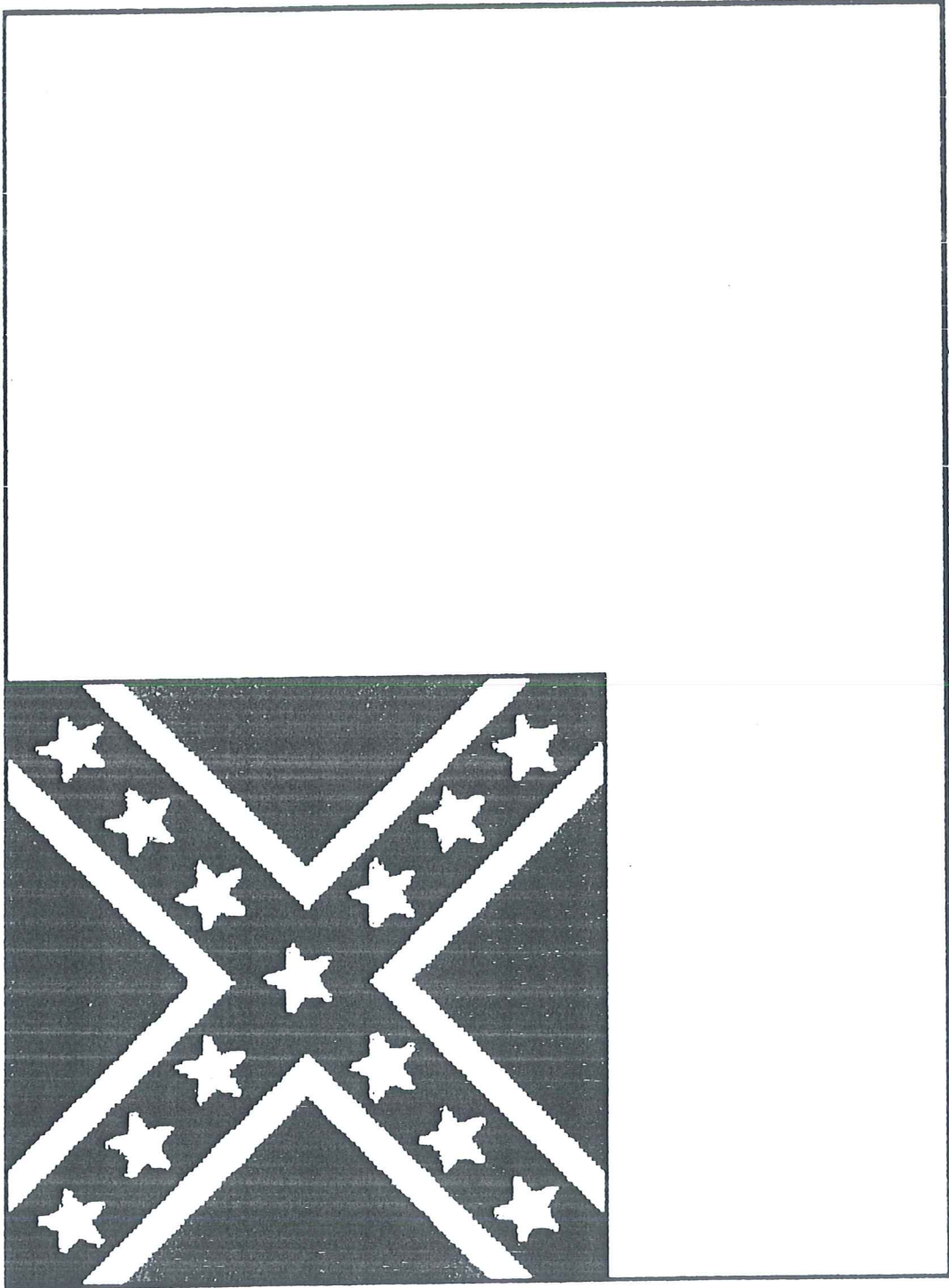
He could not see that the Southern heritage he speaks of includes racism, starting with slavery.

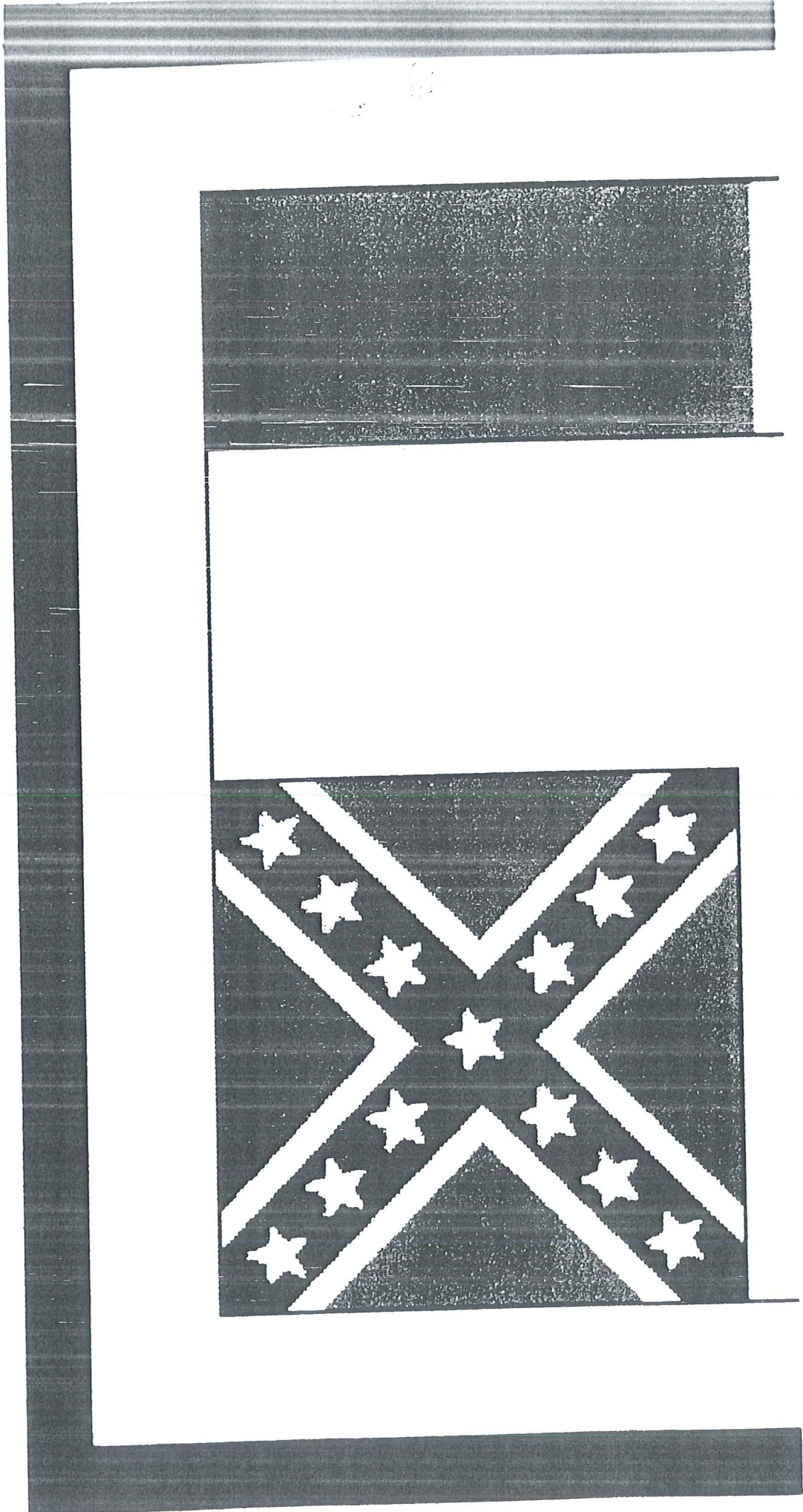
I am not making Lt. Griffiths out to be a bad guy. He was very courteous and pleasant to converse with. He only wanted to tell his side of the controversy. He also told me he opposes the KKK and all racist organizations;

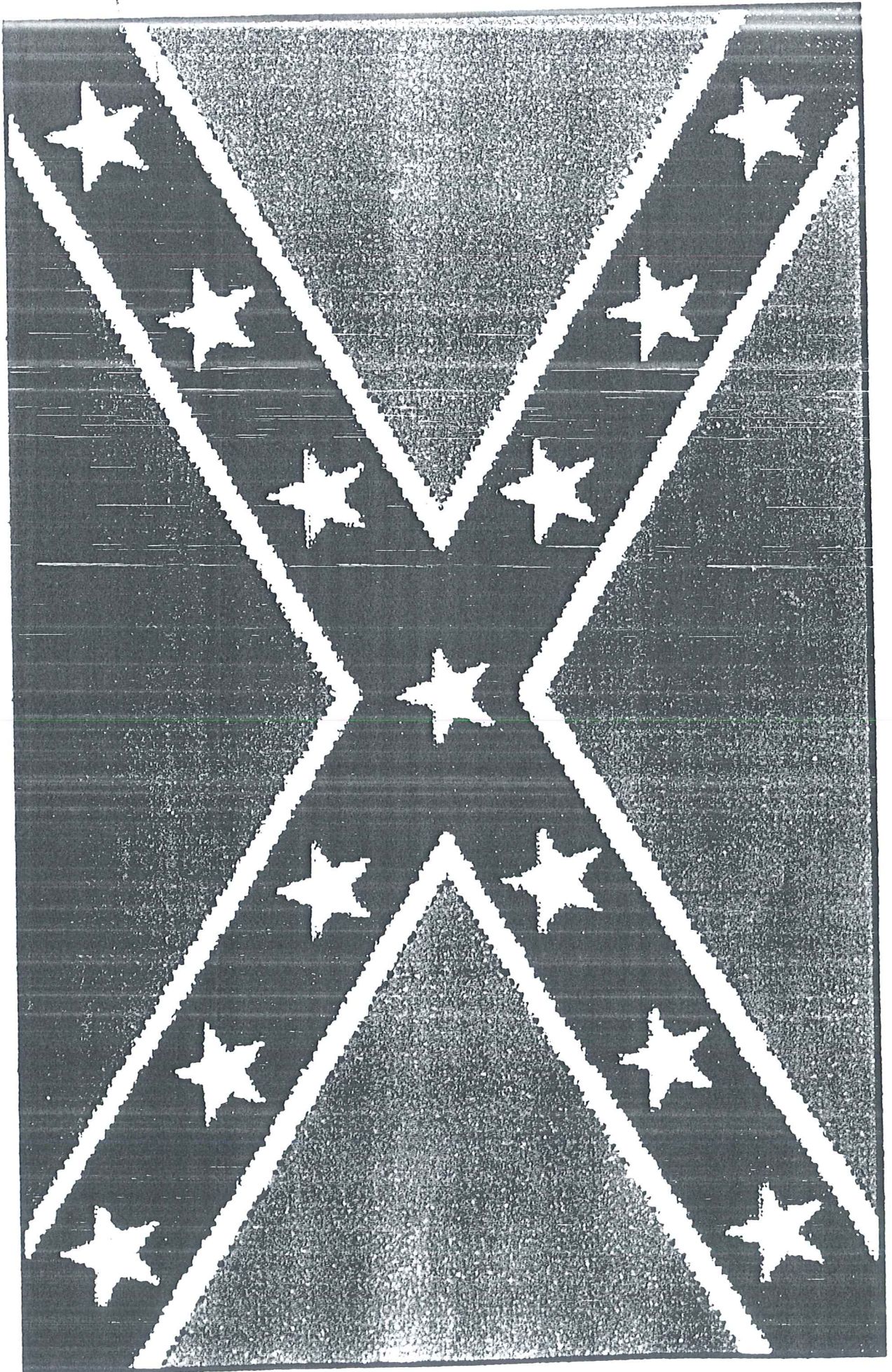
“the crazies” are not allowed to be in our organization. In fact, our group was formed in 1896. We adopted the battle flag as our logo 101 years ago, way before the Klan thought of it. It represents, for us, not pride in the Confederacy, but honor to the veterans of the war.











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