

OUR FLAG IS STILL THERE COMMENTARY ON THE CASE STUDY: THE SOUTH CAROLINA STATE HOUSE

Lisa Newton
Fairfield University

The case is a magnificent discussion-starter and unmatched object lesson, in its overwhelming triviality, its explosive potential, and its supremely American conclusion. Let us take these elements one at a time:

A FIGHT TO THE END OVER ABSOLUTELY NOTHING

In the end—for that matter, at the beginning—what did it matter? A flag that had once graced a proud army, an army soundly defeated a century and a half ago, now flies over a state house in a southern state, starting point for the war they fought. It's been flying there for years, as the proud state of South Carolina has become interstated, internetted, mallified, and otherwise homogenized into the post-industrial post-modern civilization we call our own. The army is now wholly gone, as are all of the generation that supported that army, as are its children. The flag flies there as a token tribute to something that once meant something, we can't remember quite what, to the people of that state. Many sons of its soil died for that flag, with its stars and bars before their eyes. So what? They're dead, they'd all be dead now anyway, and the flag surely does not mean now what it meant then. As an historical tribute, it's sort of silly. Certainly not worth fighting about.

As a matter of fact, if it means anything serious, it's worth *not* fighting about. If a symbol disturbs you, the last thing you want to do is bring it front and center, splay it all over the front pages of the tabloids, call it to everyone's mind. But of course, that is exactly what this fight did. Taking the flag from its place of ritual invisibility, the third flag from the top on a very high flagpole on a tall building that no one ever looked at, into the front pages and thence to a memorial garden (by now a *very well publicized* memorial garden) hardly seems to have been the objective of the

folks who started this fight. But that's what they did. Why? Was it worth it?

ONE OF THOSE CASUAL POWDER KEGS

On the other hand, consider the power of the symbol. When the country was in an enormous flap about Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ," an *object d'art* consisting of a crucifix in a container of urine (I think; accounts differ), most of us dismissed the flap as so much philistine posturing for the sake of the folks in Peoria, but one of my colleagues of the historian persuasion reminded me that very bloody wars had been fought over just such imagined slights to God. It doesn't take much to get the tanks rolling (your latest visit to Jerusalem may have confirmed that one). We are a race that lives on symbols. When we fight for God, king, country, flag, duty, honor, note that we fight for nothing tangible. That is why they are so important; no concrete person can ever give us permission to abandon the fight.

What was the Civil War fought about? It is for sure that many of the ideologues who pushed us into war, the John Browns of this world, were in it to abolish slavery, and were convinced that we would never get rid of slavery without war. Therefore they were for war. For others, motives differed. If we trust the literature of the day, many of the Southern cavaliers were in it for a lark, sure of swift and glorious victory, totally unaware of the damage the new guns could do with their explosive shells. Many of the Northern troops (I have this on family authority) were in it to get off those damn Massachusetts farms. The South was fighting for its way of life (gracious cotillions with belles and smiling slaves) and its present and future prosperity (free trade with England). The North was fighting to keep control of all that land—the Balkanization of Europe had taught good lessons on the danger of secessionism—and to ensure, through that political control, its present and future prosperity.

In all of this, what did the flag stand for? First, it stood for the Confederacy, which was a pretender government over an illegal secession, hence it stood for rebellion against (legitimate) authority; second, in the eyes of its most ardent wavers, it stood for some medieval ideal of honor, with galloping horses and knights laying down their lives for their ladies and liege lords. These two abstractions are not as far apart as they appear; they fuse tightly, and indeed had so fused, very noisily, by the 1950s, into a symbol of rebellion and freedom and youthful daring. Johnny Reb flags flew on every teenage convertible when I was in high school, symbolizing

good natured rebellion against parental authority by flapping in the breeze as the convertible was driven much too fast and beer bottles waved in the air.

Then came the Civil Rights Movement, and MADD, and everyone lost her or his (note politically correct order of pronouns) sense of humor overnight. No longer was waving beer bottles while driving OK, and for sure no longer was the Confederate Flag OK. It was only a matter of time before we got the confrontation that opens the case study. In the confrontation of the two voluntary organizations (or non-governmental organizations, NGOs), explosive values and interests (not the same thing) are stacked on both sides.

1. On the side of the NAACP are the values of racial equality and its entailment, rejection of all positive connotations with slaveholding. Nothing must be left that celebrates a lifestyle based on oppression. In addition to those values, there are the interests in retaining and demonstrating the power of the organized African American community to bring about results in fields central to its values; the NAACP, like all NGOs, must maintain an image of power to get things done. A park dedicated to a local black hero would be nice; getting rid of the Confederate flag was a must. It should have been automatic: once the flag was officially seen and disapproved, it should have been taken down that day. There may have been a choice, whether or not to see it officially; once seen, they had no choice. The flag came down or the NAACP would have been exposed as a spent force, a paper tiger.

2. On the side of the South Carolina Heritage Coalition (which may stand for all the opposition to the flag's removal) there are the values of identity and its entailment, independence to make identity-related decisions. There are those who do not like the Mallification of America, who find it stifling to regional (and hence personal) identity, and will cling with desperate determination to any symbol that says, I am me, we are us, we are not like you, or homogenized in with you. Associated with those values are the interests of regional and local self-determination, "states' rights," in the older terminology, the power to say what will be what in one's own bailiwick. Again, a quiet decision somewhere along the line to take down the third flag that was cluttering up the state house flagpole might have been acceptable to South Carolina. But once the NAACP had made of the flag a symbol of a new War, a war for power over the symbolic conduct of state affairs, the Coalition and its supporters could

not meekly back down, or they would lose all purchase on future effectiveness. They had no choice but to fight.

What was at stake, then? Nothing less than freedom, identity, and power. People have gone to war, or at least rioted, for lots less than those. The battle predictably turned ugly very soon. People who were not racists were told that they were. All African Americans were labeled as retarded. And the fight rapidly became a zero sum game—each win was the other's loss—and the potential for real destruction, real loss of property and life, was appalling. That was quite a chance to take.

THE AMERICAN WAY OF RESOLUTION

In the end, no one was happy. Part of the politics of the United States is that no non-governmental group can dictate terms, so the unhappiness was a good sign that an acceptable compromise had been reached. The NAACP wanted the flag out of sight, and it didn't get it; the Coalition wanted the flag left alone, and it didn't get that. On the other hand, no one was defeated. Part of the necessary dynamic of any NGO is the projection of success, of progress, movement toward some ultimate victory. Defeat is not acceptable; the NGO will starve if defeated. So they become masterful spin artists, and part of the skill of dealing with NGOs (a bit like dealing with Asian or Middle Eastern shame societies) is to leave them a face-saving partial victory. In this case the NAACP succeeded in removing the flag from its "sovereign" perch on the state house, while the Coalition could claim that the "flag was still flying," in its Memorial Garden. A good job all around, I'd say.