

CASE STUDY

THE SOUTH CAROLINA STATE HOUSE AND THE CONFEDERATE FLAG

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On July 1, 2000, the Confederate flag was lowered from its position atop the State House in Columbia, South Carolina, and a similar Confederate flag was raised as part of the South Carolina Confederate Soldier Monument on the State House grounds. Historically speaking, there were actually several different Confederate flags, but the flag that flew atop the State House in South Carolina—which might more properly be called the Confederate Battle Flag—is by far the best-known and most readily recognizable. It contains two blue stripes with thirteen white stars, diagonally crossing to form a large “X,” against a bright red background. This action was portrayed as a “compromise” between those who wish to relegate the flag to a museum, and those who wish to keep it flying above the State House. This compromise however, seems to have satisfied neither side.

The history of the State House Confederate flag, and the controversy that it generated, is complex. Note that this flag is a third one, a flag that flew immediately below both the American flag and the state flag of South Carolina. While some southern states have the Confederate flag—or at least some elements of the flag—incorporated into the state flag, South Carolina does not. The Confederate flag first flew over the State House dome in 1962. The official rationale for its being raised over the State House is that it was part of a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Civil War or the War Between the States, which began in South Carolina. Opponents argue, however, that it was raised “as a gesture of hostility and resistance by the all-white legislature to the ongoing civil rights struggle” of the times.¹ The state chapter of the NAACP holds that the recent use of the flag has, in fact, both of these roots.² As times changed, and as the centennial passed, other states no longer flew the Confederate flag—or saw it permanently incorporated into their state flag. In 2000, when the flag controversy in South Carolina was at its height, South

Carolina was the last state to fly the Confederate flag above its State House.

Coincidentally—perhaps, or perhaps not—South Carolina was also the only state not to recognize Martin Luther King’s birthday as a mandatory holiday. Since that time, South Carolina, again in a sort of compromise that managed to displease many people, has recognized Martin Luther King Day as well as Confederate Memorial Day as two new official state holidays.

On July 12, 1999, the NAACP called for what became known as a “boycott” according to which organizations, churches, businesses, and cultural groups were called upon to consider locations outside the state of South Carolina for meetings, conferences, etc. The boycott was to begin January 1, 2000, and continue “until such time as the Confederate Battle Flag is no longer displayed in positions of sovereignty in the state of South Carolina.” The NAACP adopted a resolution that stated that “the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ... reaffirms its condemnation of the Confederate Battle Flag being flown over the South Carolina State Capitol and displayed within the South Carolina House and Senate Chambers, and renews its call for the removal and relocation of the Confederate Battle Flag to a place of historical rather than sovereign content.”³

The state was sharply divided. As one contemporary news report put it: “Opponents of the flag say it is a symbol of slavery, while defenders say it is a symbol of southern heritage, honoring those who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War.”⁴ NAACP President Kweisi Mfume stated that the flag “represents one of the most reprehensible aspects of American history.”⁵ Supporters of the flag, on the other hand, used the slogan “heritage, not hate.” They admitted that the flag had been hijacked and used by extremist white-supremacist groups, but they argued that they themselves wished to maintain the flag as a symbol of honor and southern heritage. They rejected both the white supremacist use of the flag and the idea that it stands for slavery. And, anyway, they argued, the idea of making an issue out of the flying of the Confederate flag over the State House was a “phony, politically-correct feel-good issue that smacks of historical revisionism.”⁶ The Confederate flag, it was argued, “does not symbolize a struggle to preserve slavery, because the Civil War was not about slavery. It was caused by economic differences between the industrialized North and the agrarian South. The South exported cotton to England’s Lancashire mills, and wanted to import manufactured products from English factories. Northern factory owners

supported, and got, protectionist tariffs on English goods. The South saw these tariffs (taxes) as ruinous, and there were still living Americans who could remember another war that had started partly because of taxes.”⁷ Flag opponents argued that the flag should be relocated to a museum; and there it would stand as a part of South Carolina’s history or heritage.

The boycott was begun. Meanwhile, both flag supporters and flag opponents held forceful and sometimes heated rallies. There was a rally of over 6000 people who came out to the State House on January 8, 2000, in support of the flag. Many of these people (sometimes called Southerners, but sometimes called Confederates) waved flags of their own, and dressed in period costumes.⁸ At the rally, which was organized by a variety of groups in support of southern heritage, the NAACP and its supporters were denounced as “outsiders and agitators.”⁹ State Senator Arthur Ravenel, told the Southerners (or Confederates) that South Carolina legislators should not bow to “that organization known as the National Association for Retarded People.”¹⁰ Later, he issued an apology to retarded people for “lumping them in with the NAACP.”¹¹ Called “Heritage Celebration 2000,” the rally was considered a huge success by the South Carolina Heritage Coalition, which remarked: “On January 8, 2000, history was once again made in South Carolina. On that day, Southerners and others of good faith began the reversal of the ethnic cleansing process being waged against our proud heritage by the forces of political correctness.”¹²

When Martin Luther King Day did arrive, there was another rally at the State House. This time it was flag opponents who gathered. Called “King Day at the Dome: A Rally for Unity,” this rally was larger. There were about 50,000 people. The crowd chanted “Take it down!” and “Hey, Hey! Ho, Ho! The racist flag has got to go!”¹³

In South Carolina, opinions about the flag were not only divided but also complex, both among ordinary residents and among state legislators. There was talk of flying the flag only one day per year—on Confederate Memorial Day. And when the state legislature discussed moving the flag to the memorial on the State House grounds, there were debates about how high the flagpole would be, whether the flag would be illuminated at night, etc. There were, as is often the case in politics, some strange bed-fellows: Southern heritage supporters, who wanted to keep the flag flying over the State House, and Black groups, who wanted it removed from the State House grounds entirely, joined forces in opposing the compromise.

Eventually however, by a 63-56 vote in the House, the compromise was adopted.¹⁴ Another close vote sent the bill back to the Senate, where certain details, such as the height of the flagpole, needed to be resolved.

Meanwhile, national attention was being focused on the issue, as presidential hopefuls addressed the matter. George Bush did not appear to want to take a specific stand on the issue, but said, "That's a decision for the people of South Carolina to make."¹⁵ Senator John McCain, then contesting Bush for the Republican nomination, said, "I believe it's a symbol of heritage. I also believe that it should be settled without interference from presidential candidates."¹⁶ Al Gore, on the Democratic side, stated that he thought the flag should be removed from the state Capitol.¹⁷ Pat Buchanan, of the Reform Party, was in support of flying the flag over the State House.¹⁸

In one sense, the compromise was masterful.¹⁹ It resulted in the removal of the flag from atop the State House—which is what the NAACP wanted—and placed a similar flag as part of the South Carolina Confederate Soldier Monument. This seemed to comply with the resolution of the NAACP that the flag be removed from the State House and relocated to a place of historical content. Of course, the NAACP was thinking primarily of a *museum*, but the monument is a place of historical content, although this one is outdoors—and on the State House grounds. In fact, the flag is more prominent now, and certainly more visible and more easily seen than when it was high above the State House dome.

But, the compromise was not a political success. James Gallman, president of the South Carolina chapter of the NAACP, stated: "It's really just an insult to us. Certainly this will not bring resolution to the issue."²⁰ The NAACP vowed to continue its economic boycott of South Carolina and even to expand it. The boycott takes aim at other southern states that use the Confederate flag (or recognizable elements of the flag) in their own state flag. In addition, in South Carolina, the NAACP has begun a "border patrol" program.²¹ This program, designed to discourage motorists from stopping and spending tourist dollars in South Carolina, utilizes rest stops and welcome centers on major interstates as locations where the border patrols operate.²² The border patrols appear at changing locations on selected weekends. The NAACP went ahead with their first border patrol on the weekend of March 2-3, 2002, at the welcome center on Interstate 77, near Fort Mill, South Carolina.²³ The following Saturday, the same welcome center was the site of a White Pride group welcoming tourists, expressing support for the flag, and encouraging the spending of

tourist dollars. This group, affiliated with David Duke, supports what it calls “white civil rights.”²⁴ The Attorney General has spoken out against *both* groups and has filed a suit against them for using such places for such activities. The NAACP has countered that what they are doing is perfectly legal and claims that the Attorney General is trying to make a name for himself in order to further his own political career. The White Pride group maintains that it is only offering Southern hospitality in order to make up for the misbehavior of the NAACP.

Many of the legislators and residents of South Carolina think that the NAACP has succeeded in getting the flag off the State House dome, which was the original purpose. A spokesperson for the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce—which had opposed the flag all along—says, “As far as we’re concerned, [the compromise] brings finality to the issue.”²⁵ But the NAACP is certainly not satisfied. And, at the other end of the spectrum, the South Carolina Heritage Coalition has stated that their “supporters favor *replacing* Our Flag on top of the state house dome.”²⁶ The situation is far from resolved.

NOTES

¹www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jan2000/conf-j26_prn.shtml

²www.sчнаacp.org/resolution.htm

³*Ibid.*

⁴cgi.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/01/17/sc.flag

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶www.stentorian.com/con_flag.html

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸See a picture of the crowd and the huge Confederate flag that covered the State House steps on that occasion: <http://www.georgiacsa.org/southron/Page1.htm>. Also visible in that picture, in the center, atop the State House steps, is a large sign reading “No King But Jesus.” This is evocative of traditional associations of the Confederate flag with Christianity, (see, for example, “The Moral Defense of the Confederate Flag,” online at the South Carolina Heritage Coalition website: www.scheritage.com/SouthernPartisan.htm) but also, of course, evocative of Martin Luther King and the holiday that the 49 other states would shortly be observing.

⁹www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jan2000/conf-j26_prn.shtml

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹www.themilitant.com/2000/6404/640401.html

¹²www.scheritage.com

¹³www.themilitant.com/2000/6404/640401.html

¹⁴<http://genealogy.about.com/library/weekly/aa051100a.htm>

¹⁵cgi.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/01/17/sc.flag/

¹⁶*Ibid.* Later, in what has been referred to as a “well-timed” statement, after the Southern primaries, McCain declared that the flag should be removed. See: *The Washington Times*, April 25, 2000.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*The Post and Courier*, Charleston, South Carolina, October 28, 1999.

¹⁹That is, it was masterful in the way that the phrase “separate but equal” was masterful.

²⁰www.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/05/11/sc.flag

²¹Associated Press, January 18, 2002.

²²*The Post and Courier*, Charleston, South Carolina, February 13, 2002.

²³*The Herald*, Rock Hill, South Carolina.

²⁴Associated Press, March 9, 2002.

²⁵www.cnn.com/2000/US/06/30/scflag.01

²⁶www.scheritage.com, January 16, 2002, emphasis added.