IS THIS A FLAG OF HATE?

The racist murder of nine blacks in South Carolina has reignited a debate about the symbols of the Confederacy—and what they stand for

BY BRYAN BROWN

EVERYONE THERE KNEW they were witnessing history. One morning in July, a South Carolina Highway Patrol honor guard marched up to a flagpole on the grounds of the State House in Columbia, the capital. Before a crowd of about 10,000 people, they ceremoniously lowered the battle flag of the Confederacy. Then they folded it and took it away.

It was a moment packed with emotion. Some people chanted “U.S.A.!” in celebration. “I didn’t think I’d live to see this,” said James Johnson, who witnessed the event.

For him, the flag represented slavery, the main cause of the Civil War (1861–1865). It also represented the oppression of blacks like himself in the South for more than a century after the war.

Others in the crowd weren’t so happy. Robert Hines, who is white, stood quietly holding small Confederate flags. “We had 22,000 South Carolinians die under the flag,” he told a reporter. For him and many others, the banner remains a symbol of pride and heritage.

The flag at the State House
Inspiring years of protests, the Confederate battle flag flew in front of the South Carolina State House until July 10, 2015.
had been dividing South Carolinians since it was first flown there in 1961. Over the years, people tried many times to have it removed. Demonstrators by the thousands marched for or against it. In 2000, lawmakers compromised by having the flag moved from the State House dome to a flagpole in front of the building. Opponents of the flag remained frustrated.

Then came Dylann Roof. On June 17, 2015, the 21-year-old white man opened fire at a service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Nine people were killed, all of them black. After Roof was arrested, authorities discovered his website. Along with racist rants against blacks, it showed Roof posing with symbols of the Confederacy, including the flag. The shootings shocked the nation. Americans again debated an old question: Are symbols of the Confederacy displays of Southern pride, or are they racist?

Many South Carolinians again called for taking down the State House flag. Governor Nikki Haley agreed. “One hundred and fifty years after the end of the Civil War, the time has come,” she said.

While the State Senate debated the matter, senators mourned one of their own, Clementa Pinckney. He was also pastor of the church in Charleston and one of the dead. Despite resistance from some legislators, a majority agreed to remove the flag. A day later, it was gone. Yet the debate over the symbols of the Confederacy and where they fit in America today continues.

Symbols Have Power

The Confederate flag is deeply ingrained in Southern life. It is flown proudly from houses, from vehicles, and by fans at events with Southern roots, such as NASCAR races. References to the Confederacy are also included in seven state flags. (See “Rebel Flags,” p. 14.)

Many people in the South continue to defend the flag. “It’s not about slavery,” wrote Ron Springer in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. Springer is a descendant of American Revolution and Civil War veterans. “It’s about my ancestors fighting for their freedom.”

To Southerners, the flag stands for many things, says Charles Zelden, a political science professor at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. One is the memory of those who fought for the Confederacy. The flag also indicates a defiance against control by the federal government. Most important, he says, it symbolizes that the South, in its history and culture, is different from the North.
“Symbols have the power to represent so much in a quick visual flash,” Zelden tells JS. “The flag is shorthand for: This is who I am, this is what I believe.”

A Reminder of the Past
Yet for most African-Americans, the Confederate flag remains a reminder of a horrible past. After the Civil War, the U.S. adopted three amendments to the Constitution. They were meant to change the lives of blacks. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery. The 14th Amendment afforded all citizens equal protection of the laws, regardless of race. The 15th Amendment guaranteed all male citizens the right to vote.

Still, Southern states continued to deny equal rights to blacks through Jim Crow laws. For almost a century, blacks were often subjected to violence, including lynching.

During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ‘60s, blacks finally began winning some battles. Federal courts forced integration in schools, in public places, and on buses and trains. For white Southerners who resented such federal “interference,” the Confederate battle flag took on an added meaning.

In 1961, the South Carolina legislature ordered that the flag be flown from the State House dome. Officially, the flag was there to mark the start of the Civil War 100 years earlier. But many people understood it to be a symbol of resistance to civil rights.

“The more the white South lost on this issue, the more important that flag came to be,” Zelden says.

James Johnson, who grew up in North Charleston in the civil rights era, understood that meaning of the flag. When he was a boy, the Ku Klux Klan, a racist group that terrorized blacks, would march through town, always waving the Confederate flag. “That’s how they showed that they disliked you,” he tells JS. “There’s nothing good about that flag, as far as black folks are concerned.”
Zelden says the shootings in Charleston finally made that clear to many whites. “It took something that shocked the conscience of the legislature and of the state as a whole,” he says. “They couldn’t ignore the message of hate that so many associate with that flag.”

**Changing History?**

Since the Charleston shootings, some Southern states have been rethinking their relationship to the Confederate flag. Alabama quietly took down flags on its state capitol grounds. Other states are making efforts to remove it from license plates. Meanwhile, retailers such as Walmart have stopped selling items with the flag on them.

It’s not just the flag that people are reconsidering. Countless streets, parks, and public monuments honor heroes of the Confederacy. Some of those names and symbols have also come under attack. Recently, Memphis, Tennessee, decided to take down a statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest. He was a Confederate commander and the first leader of the Ku Klux Klan.

School names are also being looked at. According to one count, 188 public schools in the U.S. are named for Confederate figures.

At one, J.E.B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Virginia, students have circulated a petition to change the school’s name, which honors a famed Confederate cavalry officer. The petition states that Confederate “names and themes on government buildings” benefit only “21st century White Supremacists.” Matt Levi, a teacher at the school, says it was purposely named for Stuart in 1959 as part of Virginia’s so-called Massive Resistance to integration.

Afia Kwarteng, who recently graduated from Stuart High, signed the petition. “As a black student, I didn’t like attending a school named after someone who was for enslaving and oppressing my people,” she says.

But Tony Konjevoda thinks society needs to “move on” from trying to erase every trace of the Confederacy. Konjevoda, who is white, also attended Stuart High. Slavery was wrong, he says. But “changing the name will do nothing to change history or make amends.”

Many other Southerners agree that you can’t wipe the past clean. “George Washington owned slaves,” a great-great grandson of Nathan Bedford Forrest recently told a reporter. “Are you going to take him off the dollar bill?”

**REBEL FLAGS**

What we usually refer to as the Confederate flag (A) was not the official banner of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Sometimes referred to as the Rebel flag, this banner was adapted after the war from a square flag carried into battle by Confederate forces.

The Confederacy had three official flags. The first one (B) was so similar to the Union flag that it confused soldiers on smoke-filled battlefields. The flag was redesigned, placing the image of the battle flag in the corner of a large white field (C). A red bar was later added (D).

Today, seven Southern states have some symbolism of the Confederacy in their state flags. Mississippi uses the entire battle flag (E) in a corner of its flag.
Ben Jones, a former U.S. congressman from Georgia, calls the campaign of change a “feeding frenzy.” It “will not erase any scars nor heal any wounds,” he wrote in USA Today.

Other critics warn about endangering free speech. Experts say that an individual flying a Confederate flag on private property such as a lawn or a car antenna is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. But when is displaying the flag in public an act of free speech, and when can authorities ban it as offensive? That can be tricky.

Texas has been struggling with this issue. The state allows many different specialty license plates. But when it rejected a design with the Confederate flag, the Sons of Confederate Veterans sued. The case made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In June, the Court sided with Texas. The plates are government property, said the Court. Texas can reject any plate designs that feature the flag.

Free-speech supporters disagreed with the ruling. Even the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a liberal legal-rights group that supported taking down the South Carolina flag, was upset when a newly published novel by Lee revealed a different Finch. In Go Set a Watchman, which takes place 20 years after Mockingbird, Finch’s daughter, Jean Louise, returns home to find her father speaking like an angry Southern racist. “Do you want [blacks] in our world?” he demands of her.

But recently, readers were upset when a newly published novel by Lee revealed a different Finch. In Go Set a Watchman, which takes place 20 years after Mockingbird, Finch’s daughter, Jean Louise, returns home to find her father speaking like an angry Southern racist. “Do you want [blacks] in our world?” he demands of her.

Ferris supported taking down the State House flag. But he also believes the solution to fighting old ghosts is not in erasing history but in “broadening” it.

“Destroying a building or a monument is not necessarily a way to remedy the past,” Ferris says. Instead, he suggests, more monuments should be built to important black Americans. That is something cities like Key West, Florida, are already doing.

“The South has a long memory,” Ferris tells JS. “The full range of people who live in the South should have their history and memory recognized.”

◆

Rethinking Mockingbird

“The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow,” says Atticus Finch to his children. In Harper Lee’s classic novel To Kill a Mockingbird, Finch is a white Alabama lawyer defending an innocent black man in the face of racist opposition. Since its publication in 1960, Lee’s book has been cherished by millions of readers. (If you haven’t read it yet, you probably will in school.) The character of Atticus Finch, especially as played by Gregory Peck (top) in the 1962 movie, has been an icon to generations.

But recently, readers were upset when a newly published novel by Lee revealed a different Finch. In Go Set a Watchman, which takes place 20 years after Mockingbird, Finch’s daughter, Jean Louise, returns home to find her father speaking like an angry Southern racist. “Do you want [blacks] in our world?” he demands of her.

Mockingbird fans ask: Which is the real Atticus Finch? Both, say critics. Black historian Isabel Wilkerson, writing in The New York Times, says that the “unmasking” of Finch is a good thing. To Wilkerson, he embodies “the seeming contradiction that compassion and bigotry can not only reside in the same person but often do.”

YOUR TURN

What other symbols do some people find offensive? Should they be banned? Why or why not?

Watch a video about taking down the Confederate flag at scholastic.com/js.