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Book Review: The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem

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BOOK REVIEW

The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem

John M. Coski

401 pages, 6 X 9

ISBN: 0-674-01722-6 \$29.95 (hardcover)

Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA; London, England

March 2005

The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem, will interest general readers and scholars for its in-depth examination of the flag's singular power in Southern politics and culture. In a deceptively brief 380 pages, Coski, the director of the Museum of the Confederacy, illuminates a controversial and violent history with the sensibility and objectivity of historian, anthropologist, and legal scholar. The subtlety of his analysis will both stimulate and bemuse readers across a wide political spectrum, and disappoint those who prefer tidy polemics.

The book contains twelve chapters separated into three sections. The opening section, "Confederate Flag", is the most viscerally appealing, because Coski performs an excellent job in narrating the mythopoetic accounts of Confederate soldiers dying for their beloved flag in battle. Beyond the obvious dramatic elements, chapter two provides the rich historical and cultural context for the use of the Confederate flag as the everlasting symbol of a vanquished army and its slave-holding empire. Chapters three and four recount the grim years of Reconstruction, and the attempt by the South to re-establish itself as a nation whose allegiance was divided between the stars and stripes and its own battle flag. From rebellion to foiled reconstruction, from Jim Crow to the gleaming Klan knights of *Birth of a Nation*, the Confederate flag was unfurled as a provocative reminder of its original use as a battle standard. Memorial organizations such as the United Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy defined the symbolism of the battle flag as one of ancestral remembrance, martial valor (or memories thereof), and the persistently sectionalist incarnation of southern patriotism.

In the second section, "Rebel Flag", the author elucidates the bellicose and bloody history of the postwar Civil Rights era. Coski points out that African-Americans had entirely different perceptions of the grandeur of those sweet, bygone days of white supremacy. As African-Americans have increasingly organized and advocated for equality, the Confederate battle flag became the loathsome symbol of a social and economic order that exploited their fellow citizens in the disguise of paternalism. After World War II, and the assassinations of Medgar Evers and MLK, the battle flag became synonymous with murder rather than moonlight and magnolias. The cumulative effect of such burdensome history and racial struggle was continuously exacerbated as cultural, demographic, and political powers changed during the pre-war and Civil Rights eras. Gradually, the flag was transfigured from the noble symbol of the Lost Cause to the despotic banner of an *apartheid* culture.

The third section, "Flag Wars", describes the recent controversies that have erupted over the visibility of the flag in public and private institutions. After gaining remarkable political strength, African Americans began to compete with whites in defining the particular meaning and nature of the battle flag. In political moves that were condemned as "revisionist" by traditionally minded southerners,

African-Americans challenged the placement of the flag in a variety of locations, especially those which represent state and local government. Epic protests as those on the capitol steps of Columbia, South Carolina and Montgomery, Alabama forced many whites to reconsider the role of the flag as a racist emblem. Prior to the civil rights era and the bussing crises of the 1970's, whites lived in a cultural surround which was pleasantly bereft of any objections to the ubiquitous and often kitschy use of the Confederate battle flag. Once African Americans were able to assert themselves as a political power, the campaign for flag removal began in earnest.

In the concluding chapter, "The Second American Flag", Coski maintains that the Confederate battle flag has become an ineradicable part of American history, and attempts to erase or deny its deep significance are essentially doomed to fail. The shameful and regrettable use of the flag by the post-war Klan, Ole Miss students, or George Wallace need not distort its original, and historically based meaning as the standard by which brave men died to defend a civilization founded on a reprehensible ideal.

Like any cultural artifact, the flag accumulates meaning through the contexts in which is displayed by its supporters or challenged by its detractors. Therefore, its history is perpetually open-ended and its nature fundamentally protean. Indeed, the battle flag is a supreme artifact of American culture, and evokes the same atavistic passions as religious iconography. Coski recommends saving the battle flag from future misuse by restricting its display to museums and memorial events. By placing the flag solely within the context of cultural memory, it is spared the multitudinous abuses of our consumer society, as well as the political machinations of those who wish to resurrect dear, dead Dixie from its unquiet grave.

This scholarly and highly precise volume is the first and best treatment of the Confederate battle flag as a cultural symbol, one freighted with multiple meanings and interpretations. An essential purchase for all academic libraries, public libraries, and students of American history.

Michael E. Matthews
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PEOPLE NEWS

ARKANSAS

The Arkansas State Library Board has named **Carolyn Ashcraft** as State Librarian. As State Librarian, Ashcraft will also serve as the director of the Arkansas State Library. She replaces **Jack Mulkey**, who retired in the fall. Ashcraft formerly served as the State Library's associate director for library development and services.

FLORIDA

John Abresch has been hired as a new research librarian at the Tampa Library. John worked as a

Henrietta Smith Resident and a Tampa Library staff member where he served as a paraprofessional in both the public and technical services. John holds masters degrees from USF in both library science and geography. John offers a strong social sciences background with his education in human geography and his study of sociology, psychology, and anthropology, as well as geography. He will be providing leadership to coordinate the library's social sciences research collection needs.

Maryellen Allen has been appointed to the executive board of the Florida chapter of the Association of College and Research Libraries. Ms. Allen co-authored an article with Dr. Cheryl Dee from the School of Library and Information Science entitled, "A Survey of the Usability of