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# Heritage or Hate?: An Examination of Americans' Popular Memory of the Confederate States of America and Its Icons

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Heritage or Hate?: An Examination of Americans' Popular Memory of the Confederate States of America and Its Icons

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for Graduation in the Honors College

By  
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## Abstract

During the American Civil War, the southern states declared themselves an independent nation called the Confederate States of America. After the Civil War ended, the Confederacy was reabsorbed into the United States. However, its memory and icons continued to be perceived separately. The current debate over whether Confederate icons, such as the so-called "Confederate Flag," Robert E. Lee, and Nathan Bedford Forrest, should be considered symbols of heritage or of hate reflects the controversial nature of Confederate Memory. However, the true history of these Confederate icons is lost in the modern debate, especially among those espousing the heritage position. If one examines the history behind these icons, one will find that they are truly symbols of racism hiding under a thin veneer of "heritage."

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## Introduction

On June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Dylann Roof walked into the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and killed nine people. The victims were African American, and Roof was a white supremacist. And like many white supremacists, Roof venerated the flag colloquially referred to as the “Confederate Flag.” Following the attack, protesters launched a renewed campaign to have the flag removed from the grounds of South Carolina’s statehouse. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, they succeeded. The flag was lowered from statehouse grounds for the last time. The protesters cheered and many public officials, from state governor Nikki Haley to President Obama proclaimed that doing so was the right decision and would be an important step in healing the state’s racial divides.<sup>1</sup> Not everyone was happy. For instance, a man named Charles Jones, whose great-grandfather had fought for the Confederacy, called the day a sad one.<sup>2</sup> He was one of several people who showed up to protest the state’s decision to remove the flag from South Carolina’s statehouse grounds.<sup>3</sup>

Jones and those like him argue that the “Confederate Flag” is not a racist symbol and that those who use it as such are misrepresenting the flag’s true meaning. In their understanding, the flag represents heritage, the fight between a large Federal government and States’ rights, standing up for personal liberties, or some combination of the three. They deny that race was an important factor in the South’s decision to secede from the Union and that the American Civil War was even about slavery at all. The flag is not the only Confederate icon to receive this treatment. For instance, people have viewed Robert E. Lee as the symbol of the perfect general

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie McCrummen and Elahe Izadi, “Confederate Flag Comes Down on South Carolina’s Statehouse Grounds,” *Washington Post*, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Cary, “South Carolina Takes Down Confederate Flag,” *USA Today*, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> McCrummen and Izadi, “Confederate Flag Comes Down,” July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

and the perfect Southern gentleman. His cult “transformed Lee into a virtual demigod.”<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, “Nathan Bedford Forrest stands as the paramount hero on the Tennessee landscape.”<sup>5</sup> Forrest alone has “thirty-two different state historical markers, far more than any other person in any other state in America.”<sup>6</sup> As with the flag and with the Civil War in general, supporters of these men consistently downplay the racially charged aspects of their lives.

A non-racial reading of the Civil War is a popular idea to many white Americans, and popular histories of the Civil War usually downplay or outright ignore the role race and racism played in the war. A prime example of this trend is Ken Burns’s 1990 documentary, *The Civil War*. “Conceiving of the war solely as a military struggle between whites while emphasizing national unity and southern bravery, the Burns series became the most popular PBS documentary in history.”<sup>7</sup> Ken Burns’s documentary drew heavily on Shelby Foote’s perspective of the Civil War. “Foote downplayed the significance of slavery and wrote as if the war were a massive fistfight or duel – an affair of honor – devoid of any larger ideological meaning.”<sup>8</sup> And white Americans appreciated this reading of the war. “[By] emphasizing military conflict over political debate, by privileging valor over ideology, and by accentuating white heroism over black activism, the Foote-Burns interpretation of the Civil War gave PBS’s mainstream American audience something to feel good about.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, if white Americans accept the Civil War was about slavery and racism, not only would they be forced to confront the role racism plays in modern society, but also the role racism played in the lives of men like Lee and Forrest and on

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Connelly, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1977), 91.

<sup>5</sup> James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 237.

<sup>6</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 237.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Huebner and Madeleine McGrady, “Shelby Foote, Memphis, and the Civil War in American Memory,” *Southern Cultures* (Winter 2015), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Huebner and McGrady, “Shelby Foote, Memphis, and the Civil War,” 18.

<sup>9</sup> Huebner and McGrady, “Shelby Foote, Memphis, and the Civil War,” 23.

the “Confederate Flag” itself. A non-racial reading of the Civil War allowed mainstream white Americans, north and south, to feel good about the war and the honor of their ancestors.

Yet not only was slavery the cause of the Civil War, but Robert E. Lee, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and the “Confederate Flag” all have racially charged histories. My goal is to point out the errors in the ways in which (white) Americans popularly remember all three of these Confederate icons, with a particular emphasis on the role race played in the life of Robert E. Lee, the life of Nathan Bedford Forrest, and the history of the “Confederate Flag.” While this paper will focus primarily on the racial aspect of each of these icons’ history, I will also examine errors in the ways Americans remember Robert E. Lee’s and Nathan Bedford Forrest’s military careers and the misconception that the flag most people call the “Confederate Flag” was the national flag of the Confederacy.

This paper could not have been possible without the fantastic research other scholars have undertaken into the Civil War, popular memory, and each of these icons individually. Thomas Connelly’s book, *The Marble Man*, was an indispensable resource for my understanding of Robert E. Lee and the ways Americans have remembered him over the last one hundred and fifty or so years. Similarly, Emory Thomas’s biography, *Robert E. Lee*, proved instrumental to my research. James Loewen’s *Lies Across America* provided fantastic insight into the ways (white) America misremembers Nathan Bedford Forrest. *Lies Across America* covers historic sites throughout the nation, not just those surrounding Civil War icons, and would be an excellent tool to anyone attempting to discover more about the history behind our historic sites. Finally, John Coski’s *The Confederate Battle Flag* provided me with an in depth and nuanced understanding of both the well-known flag’s history, but also the ways different groups of people have viewed and used the flag in different time periods. Anyone seeking a better understanding

of the background, origins, and viewpoints of the modern flag debate would do well to read Coski's book. My paper synthesizes and builds upon these and other authors' research to conclude that many white Americans fundamentally misremember these three Confederate icons.

Finally, a note on some of the terms I will be using. In many places throughout my paper, I will simply use "the war" to refer to the American Civil War. I alternately refer to those who praise Robert E. Lee's legacy as Lee's supporters and Lee's fans. Similarly, I use Forrest's supporters and Forrest's fans. These terms do not refer exclusively to those who supported Lee's or Forrest's legacies during their lifetimes or shortly thereafter but rather to any individual or organization that has done or currently does so, often by downplaying the role race and racism played in these individuals' lives. By the same token, I refer to those individuals and organizations who proclaim that the "Confederate Flag" was not and is not supposed to be a symbol of racial oppression as flag wavers, regardless of whether or not they have ever actively waved the "Confederate Flag." Generally speaking, the viewpoints offered by Lee's fans and Forrest's fans are the viewpoints accepted by mainstream white American culture. The "Confederate Flag" is more contested amongst even mainstream white American culture, largely because of the attention the flag has recently received from the mainstream news media. Lastly, throughout the section in which I discuss the flag Americans commonly call the "Confederate Flag," I use the name "St. Andrew's cross flag," for reasons I will discuss in that section.

Americans commonly misremember these three Confederate icons – Robert E. Lee, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and the "Confederate Flag." The ways in which Americans misremember these icons is indicative of the ways in which Americans misremember the Civil War and the Confederate States of America generally. By deemphasizing or outright denying the role that race and racism played on these icons, on the war, and on the Confederacy, popular

histories, Lee's fans, Forrest's fans, and flag wavers give white Americans a version of history they can feel good about. However, by accepting such a reading of the Civil War and these icons white Americans implicitly endorsing racism and white supremacy. Those that praise Lee, Forrest, and the "Confederate Flag" are praising icons whose histories are steeped in racial oppression. By embracing these icons as part of one's heritage, one is also embracing racism and white supremacy.

### **Robert E. Lee**

For the better part of the twentieth century, Robert E. Lee was the most influential Southern leader in the Civil War on popular memory. In recent years, emphasis has shifted to Nathan Bedford Forrest instead, but Robert E. Lee still occupies an important place in Americans' popular memory of the Civil War. Lee's proponents describe him as the perfect Southern gentleman. He was stoic, thoughtful, pious, and educated. The mythos surrounding Lee's personality elevated him to a Christ-like position: "His life was frequently described as 'spotless.' Some saw Lee's postwar conduct as resembling Christ's walk to Calvary. Here was the man without blemish, bearing without a murmur the punishment for his people, and advising them to love their enemy."<sup>10</sup> Lee's supporters also highlight Lee's supposed military genius. Lee's supporters always make the same argument for why he lost the war: "Lee was not defeated; he was outnumbered and overwhelmed."<sup>11</sup> However, such a reading of both Lee's personality and his military prowess overlook important aspects of the man Lee was. It is true that Lee was a prime example of the Antebellum "Southern gentleman." Yet, one important aspect of Lee's status often remains unstated – slave ownership. As a Southern gentleman, Lee

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<sup>10</sup> Connelly, *The Marble Man*, 95.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Glaze, "Saint and Sinner: Robert E. Lee, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and the Ambiguity of Southern Identity," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 69, 2 (Summer 2010), 173.



owned slaves, despite the fact that he apparently abhorred the institution. Here lies the problem with popular conceptions of Lee as an example of the Southern gentleman – the notion of the Southern gentleman is inexorably tied to racism. Surely, though, one cannot call Lee’s military prowess into question. In truth, doing so is all too easy. Lee’s success for most of the war is due more to ineffective generalship of the Army of the Potomac than his own brilliance. And while Lee was far from the worst general or most morally reprehensible figure from the Civil War era, he was not as perfect as his fans claim he was.

Of Lee, Robert Glaze writes, “The aristocratic, educated Robert E. Lee seems the very embodiment of the Southern gentleman.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Lee’s fans often point to the general as having been the perfect Southern gentleman. Of course, this begs the question of what exactly constitutes the Southern gentleman archetype. There is no single definition. However, there are many reoccurring elements to the archetype, all of which, at least according to his fans, Lee fits. One of the key features of the Southern gentleman ideal is education. The proper Southern gentleman is well-educated. Robert E. Lee certainly fits this bill. He attended West Point for college, which, incidentally, is a factor that ties together Lee the gentleman and Lee the general. “Whatever his motives were for enrolling, his accomplishments at West Point set him apart from his peers. During his four years at that institution he accumulated zero demerits and graduated second in his class.”<sup>13</sup> Lee was a very successful student at West Point, then. In fact, he was so successful that the school asked him to return only ten years after he graduated. “As early as 1839 Lee had had the opportunity to return to West Point as an instructor.”<sup>14</sup> Though he declined the job offer, Lee was such a successful student that he was asked to return very shortly after his graduation. Not only was he educated, then, but he was intelligent. Intelligence is another piece

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<sup>12</sup> Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 167.

<sup>13</sup> Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 168-9.

<sup>14</sup> Emory Thomas, *Robert E. Lee*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 102.

of the Southern gentleman ideal that goes hand in hand with education. And indeed, Lee's fans often refer to him as a genius. Just as with his education, Lee's genius is tied with his military career. Lee's fans say that "[he] became the strategic and tactical genius of the war."<sup>15</sup> Lee was not only well-educated, then, but he put his education to good use and proved his vast intellect in the Civil War. Education and intelligence are closely linked with the ideal of the Southern gentleman, and Lee exemplifies both of these traits.

Another important aspect of the Southern gentleman is a sense of duty. And according to his fans, Lee's sense of duty was outstanding. Lee's fans often use one event in particular to illustrate his sense of duty: Lee's decision between the Union and his home state of Virginia. Lee loved his nation, but he also loved his home state of Virginia. Lee wrote, "As an American citizen, I prize the Union very highly [and] know of no personal sacrifice that I would not make to preserve it, save that of honour."<sup>16</sup> However, in another letter Lee wrote that "[if] the Union is dissolved, I shall return to Virginia [and] share the fortune of my people."<sup>17</sup> Lee believed in his nation, then, and he was against secession. But if he had to choose between the Union and his home state of Virginia, he felt duty-bound to share the fate of Virginia. And choose he did. One of the most famous stories about Lee is that Winfield Scott, the supreme commander of Union forces at the time, asked Lee to take over as the "principle Union field commander."<sup>18</sup> According to Lee's fans, the choice between the Union and Virginia was a difficult one.

When the war came in 1861, Lee was faced with an agony endured by no other Southerner. He hated both slavery and secession, and loved the Union more deeply than most. Yet his sense of duty to Virginia prevailed. He shunned potential military eminence in the Federal army, gave up his beloved Arlington, and chose to fight for Virginia.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Robert E. Lee, letter to Rooney Lee, December 3, 1860.

<sup>17</sup> Robert E. Lee, letter to Annette Carter, January 16, 1861.

<sup>18</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 194.

<sup>19</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 90.

As much as Lee loved the Union, he felt an overwhelming sense of duty to his home state, just as any Southern gentleman should. Lee's sense of duty to his home state is linked with conceptions of honor. After all, Lee did write that the only sacrifice he would not make to preserve the Union was his honor. Not only was he duty bound to protect his home state, but if he did not fulfill said duty, his honor would be irrevocably tarnished. Lee's conviction about the importance of honor remained for the rest of his life, even after the Civil War had ended. As the president of Washington College, he attempted to instill in his students a sense of just how important honor was.

Lee's one-rule standard produced the honor system, which soon became the practical definition of a gentleman at Washington College. A gentleman does not lie, cheat, or steal; nor does a gentleman tolerate lying, cheating, or dishonesty in those claiming to be gentlemen. The honor system assumes that students enter a form of social contract among themselves and resolve that they will uphold the system.<sup>20</sup>

Lee saw honor as key to being a gentleman and thus he tried to instill honor in the students he taught during his tenure at Washington College. Honor and duty, then, are also important to understanding Lee as the ideal Southern gentleman.

Honor and duty are part of a broader term that applies to both Robert E. Lee and, more generally, the Southern gentleman archetype: chivalry. The Southern gentleman was chivalrous, and Lee's fans certainly indicate that he was chivalrous. "For [ex-Confederates], battles became less matters of winner and loser and more a case of heroic deeds by men such as Lee.... This romantic outlook blended well with the Southern notion of chivalry."<sup>21</sup> Chivalry, then, was clearly an important aspect in how Lee's fans remembered him. Aside from duty and honor, though, what else makes up the notion of chivalry? One characteristic often tied with chivalry is wealth or aristocracy. Lee fits the bill here, too. He "was born into an established family in

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *Robert E. Lee*, 397.

<sup>21</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 101.

Virginia,” and although his family’s wealth had diminished, his status as a member of the aristocracy allowed him to marry into the more wealthy Custis family.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of his family’s financial stability, he had been born into a family of noble heritage. “Lee was born of a family steeped in both English nobility and a Revolutionary heritage.”<sup>23</sup> Lee’s ancestry alone was enough to guarantee him a spot in the Southern aristocracy. Additionally, restraint and self-control were important to the idea of chivalry and Lee’s fans associate both qualities with him. “Lee’s strong inner disposition was hidden beneath the serene pose so often described by his biographers.”<sup>24</sup> Lee had mastery over his emotions and, reportedly, he encouraged physical restraint amongst the soldiers in his army. “Lee forbade pillaging of private property in Pennsylvania, to show the world that southern soldiers were superior to the Yankee vandals who had ravaged the South.”<sup>25</sup> Not only does this passage demonstrate Lee’s restraint, but also demonstrates respect, another important aspect of chivalry. Despite the fact that Pennsylvania was Union territory, Lee supposedly ordered his soldiers to respect their land and their property. This idea also ties into the notion of Lee as an aristocrat. He wanted to show that he and his army were better than the Yankees, particularly Grant and Sherman. Along with duty and honor, restraint, respect, and aristocracy form the notion of chivalry. Society expected the proper Southern gentleman to be chivalrous, and Lee, as the ideal Southern gentleman, certainly exhibited chivalrous behavior.

A last element of the Southern gentleman archetype that Lee’s fans so often attribute to him is piety. The ideal Southern gentleman is a pious Christian, and Lee’s fans definitely draw attention to his piety. “Lee was undoubtedly a religious leader during and after the war. His piety

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<sup>22</sup> Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 168-9.

<sup>23</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 90.

<sup>24</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 204.

<sup>25</sup> James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 649.

and temperance were praised by Southern society, and all of his biographers and storytellers stress his spirituality.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Lee’s fans all make a point of how religious he was. However, Lee’s fans take his piety a step further than is typically considered part of the Southern gentleman archetype. Whereas the ideal Southern gentleman is simply pious, some of Lee’s fans cast Lee as a Christ figure. “Robert E. Lee practiced Christianity nearly his entire life, at times even being seen as a Christ-like figure in the South.”<sup>27</sup> And Lee’s fans do not see him as mirroring Christ in piety alone. They compare many of the events in Lee’s life to stories from the Bible. For instance, “Lee’s decision at Arlington in 1861 was often compared to Christ’s three temptations in the wilderness.”<sup>28</sup> Lee faced the same challenges that Jesus did, at least according to his fans. Furthermore, he served as the South’s redeemer after their loss in the war. “Here was the man without blemish, bearing without a murmur the punishment for his people, and advising them to love their enemy.”<sup>29</sup> Lee redeemed the South just as Christ redeemed all humankind. And the image of Lee as a savior was not confined to his actions after the Civil War. Lee’s fans claim that during the war he was “the central figure of the Rebel populace, the man to whom all looked for salvation.”<sup>30</sup> Lee’s fans compare him to Jesus in order to further elevate Lee’s status as not only a Southern gentleman but as a great man. However, there is one element of the Southern gentleman archetype that Lee’s fans consistently attempt to decouple from Lee: slave ownership and the belief in whites’ racial superiority that accompanied Antebellum slavery.

Because the Southern gentleman archetype included being a part of the aristocracy, that meant that part of being a Southern gentleman was owning slaves and espousing the racial ideas that went along with owning slaves. However, Lee’s fans, in order to bolster the idea that Lee

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<sup>26</sup> Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 180.

<sup>27</sup> Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 180.

<sup>28</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 95.

<sup>29</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 16.

was perfect in the post-emancipation world, have made a concentrated effort to detach Lee from the “peculiar institution.” Lee’s fans argue that he was against slavery and in favor of emancipation. For instance, in a letter to Mary Lee, he wrote, “In this enlightened age, there are few I believe, but what will acknowledge, that slavery as an institution, is a moral and political evil in any Country.”<sup>31</sup> There it was, in Lee’s own words: he believed that slavery was evil. Furthermore, Lee freed his slaves – more evidence of his apparent hatred for slavery. However, Lee’s fans fail to relay the whole story. In the same letter where he proclaimed slavery a “moral and political evil,” he went on to say,

I think it however a greater evil to the white man than to the black race, [and] while my feelings are strongly enlisted in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more strong for the former. The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, socially [and] physically. The painful discipline they are undergoing, is necessary for their instruction as a race, [and] I hope will prepare [and] lead them to better things.<sup>32</sup>

Lee did think slavery was bad, but not for the slaves themselves. No, he believed that slavery was wrong for the white masters. He felt that slavery was necessary for the betterment of the “black race.” And while it is true that Lee freed his own slaves, he was also the master of his late father-in-law’s slaves. Lee didn’t free his father-in-law’s slaves until 1863, and then it was because his father-in-law had stipulated, in his will, that Lee was to free his slaves five years after his death.<sup>33</sup> And regardless of whether Lee hated slavery, he still strongly believed that black people were worse than white people. “Crucial to his views was his perception of racial hierarchy. Africans and African Americans Lee considered below white people on his evolutionary scale....”<sup>34</sup> Lee believed that black people were inherently worse than white people. Additionally, he believed that blacks brought ruin upon whites. After the Civil War, he wrote to

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<sup>31</sup> Robert E. Lee, letter to Mary Lee, December 27, 1856.

<sup>32</sup> Lee, letter to Mary Lee, 1856.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, *Robert E. Lee*, 175, 273.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas, *Robert E. Lee*, 173.

his son, “You will never prosper with the blacks, and it is abhorrent to a reflecting mind to be supporting and cherishing those who are plotting and working for your injury...”<sup>35</sup> Lee was of the opinion that association between whites and blacks would destroy the whites. Furthermore, the very fact that Lee fought for the Confederacy, which existed to safeguard the institution of slavery, calls into question the notion that Lee hated slavery. Even if one accepts the notion that Lee loved his home state more than he hated slavery as the reason why he fought for the Confederacy, that doesn’t change his actions during the war. When Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia marched into Union territory, they “seized scores of black people in Pennsylvania and sent them south into slavery.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the aforementioned restraint that Lee showed towards the people of the North applied only to whites.<sup>37</sup> If Lee hated slavery, his actions did nothing to show it. Not only was Lee a slave owner and a believer in whites’ racial superiority, but as a general, he acted to perpetuate slavery. If one is to accept the notion that Lee was the perfect Southern gentleman, one must recognize that being a Southern gentleman came with a set of racist beliefs and practices which Lee espoused.

Although Lee’s status as the ideal Southern gentleman is problematic, one can, at the very least, feel confident in believing that he was a superb general, right? After all, Lee held off the “larger and better equipped Union Army of the Potomac....”<sup>38</sup> In fact, Lee’s fans repeat the same idea over and over: Lee was unmatched on the battlefield.

Lee’s spectacular victories against foes such as Generals George McClellan, John Pope, Ambrose Burnside, and Joseph Hooker were a matter of both pride and solace to the Confederacy. While the war went badly on other fronts in Mississippi and Tennessee, Lee’s apparently indomitable generalship in Virginia was a crucial morale factor. By

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<sup>35</sup> Robert E. Lee, letter to Robert Lee, Jr., March 12, 1868.

<sup>36</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 649.

<sup>37</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 650.

<sup>38</sup> Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 170.

1865, at least to the men of his own army, Lee was revered for both his brilliant generalship and lofty character.<sup>39</sup>

And indeed, Lee's fans claim that Lee was a nearly flawless general. "Lee rarely – if ever – made a command error. Defeats were due to the sins of his subordinates."<sup>40</sup> Even when Lee lost, he did not truly lose. When he was defeated, it was not Lee's fault. Rather, the Army of Northern Virginia only lost when one of Lee's subordinates failed. The most famous example of this idea is the Battle of Gettysburg. Lee's fans claim that the Confederate loss at Gettysburg was due to James Longstreet. The version of events at Gettysburg "which would be accepted as gospel in Civil War writing, would blame the Confederate loss on the supposed tardiness of General James Longstreet in attacking Meade's position on July 2."<sup>41</sup> Lee was not defeated at Gettysburg, then, but rather Longstreet bungled his job and thus cost the Confederacy an important victory. When the Army of Northern Virginia finally did lose and Lee was forced to surrender to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, it was not because Lee had been defeated, but rather Grant had worn him down with his greater numbers and resources. "When Lee was finally forced to abandon his fortifications and surrender his army, the general consensus among Southerners and many historians, past and present, was that Lee was not defeated; he was outnumbered and overwhelmed."<sup>42</sup> Grant did not truly beat Lee, for Lee was unbeatable. Instead, the Union's greater numbers and resources eventually wore down the Army of Northern Virginia, and Lee was forced to surrender. This is the picture Lee's fans paint of his time as general.

However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that Lee was not the flawless commander that his fans would have everyone believe. Lee's fans defeat their own argument that he was great because he beat the larger and better equipped Union army, since they also argue

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<sup>39</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 54.

<sup>42</sup> Glaze, "Saint and Sinner," 173.



that Lee lost because he was outnumbered. Why then, did it take so long for the Army of the Potomac to subdue the Army of Northern Virginia? If Lee would lose the war because he was outnumbered, then why did he not lose sooner? In truth, Lee's success against the larger and better equipped Union army was less due to his own skills than the inept leadership of many of the Union's generals. General George McClellan is the most well-known example of the Army of the Potomac's poor leadership. "Military success could be achieved only by taking risks; McClellan seemed to shrink from the prospect."<sup>43</sup> McClellan was constantly overestimating the enemy's strength. "McClellan's... actions were marked by a caution and fear of failure that have become legendary."<sup>44</sup> McClellan was afraid to act, which meant he was afraid to engage the enemy. Lee's success against an opponent like McClellan does not actually prove much about Lee's skill. And Lee was not even always successful against McClellan. McClellan defeated Lee's invasion of Maryland at the Battle of Antietam. And indeed, a more competent general may have been able to utterly destroy Lee's army. McClellan demonstrated his usual inability to engage the opponent "when one last surge might well have shattered Lee's lines."<sup>45</sup> McClellan was unable to defeat Lee because of his own ineptitude. It was not until Grant that the Army of the Potomac finally found a leader who pressed his advantage. Lee's fans will argue that Grant was not a better general, he simply had more men. Yet Grant's predecessors had more men than Lee and they were unable to defeat Lee. Unlike the previous generals in charge of the Army of the Potomac, Grant brought his full force to bear against Lee because he understood what it would take to win. "Grant was Lee's superior because he possessed a broad strategic grasp of the war in contrast to Lee's parochial outlook."<sup>46</sup> Grant fought the Civil War in a more modern way.

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<sup>43</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 365.

<sup>44</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 206.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *Robert E. Lee*, 262.

<sup>46</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 154.

He had a broad strategic plan, and he was prepared to do what was necessary to win, as opposed to Lee's concept of the war. "Lee... clung instead to the 'old tournament notion of war.'"<sup>47</sup> Lee fought the war in an old fashioned way, and his strategy was limited to the Virginian Theater.

Furthermore, Lee's supposed brilliance only holds up when one focuses on defense. Lee was not successful when he went on the offensive. One early writer "considered Lee a mediocre offensive tactician...."<sup>48</sup> And indeed, the results of Lee's two major offensives in the war support this assessment. The first was Lee's failed invasion of Maryland, which McClellan defeated at the Battle of Antietam. And as previously mentioned, McClellan very well could have destroyed Lee's army altogether had he been more decisive. Lee's other major invasion of Northern territory ended at Gettysburg. Lee's fans blame the Confederates' loss on James Longstreet, but in reality, this was not the case. The first accounts following the war did not place the blame on Longstreet, but rather on Lee. Indeed, many of the early writers argue that Lee's mistake was failing to heed Longstreet's advice. "He disregarded Longstreet's wiser counsel to force Meade to retreat into Maryland by a flanking maneuver...."<sup>49</sup> According to the earliest writers, Lee lost at Gettysburg because he failed to listen to Longstreet's sound advice, not because Longstreet failed to follow Lee's orders. Not even "the earliest and most prominent Confederate historians defend[ed] Lee on the Gettysburg issue."<sup>50</sup> It was not until 1872 that Longstreet first took the blame for the Confederate loss at Gettysburg. One of Lee's division commanders, Early, was the first one to blame Longstreet for the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg. In part, Early did so to save his own reputation. The first accounts blamed Early alongside Lee and corps leader Ewell for losing the Battle of Gettysburg. However, "[Early's] version would be accepted as gospel in

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<sup>47</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 155.

<sup>48</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 59.

<sup>49</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 57.

Civil War writing....”<sup>51</sup> The idea that Lee lost at Gettysburg because of Longstreet spread quickly. Not only was this part of the effort to bolster Lee’s reputation, but it was also part of an effort to discredit Longstreet, who, after the war, joined Lincoln’s party: the Republicans.<sup>52</sup> In summation, while Lee enjoyed a modicum of success fighting defensively against inept generals, he was a poor offensive general and was defeated defensively once a capable general took over the Army of the Potomac.

Lee’s fans always describe the general as if he were perfect, but Lee falls short of the mark. Perhaps it is unfair to judge Lee too harshly for his imperfections. After all, no individual has ever been perfect. However, the problem is not that Lee was imperfect. Rather, the problem is that popular memory glorifies as perfect a man who was not only a slave owner, but actively fought for a cause which sought to perpetuate slavery. When one glorifies Lee, one, by extension, glorifies the Confederacy and thus implicitly glorifies slavery. That is not to say that Lee was without his redeeming qualities. In particular, his actions following his defeat were admirable. “Robert E. Lee served the post-war South by stressing reunion....”<sup>53</sup> Lee advocated healing and spoke out against the violent attempts by some Southerners, such as Nathan Bedford Forrest, to overturn the results of the Civil War. In part, however, this is why Robert E. Lee has lost some of his former popularity amongst those who glorify Confederate icons. In the words of one t-shirt vendor, “Southerners are getting tired of taking it on the chin. They’re getting more aggressive. Lee’s the Southern gentleman who represents reconciliation with the Union.”<sup>54</sup> Lee’s greatest redeeming element, then, is also the reason his popularity is declining amongst neo-

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<sup>51</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 54.

<sup>52</sup> Connelly, *Marble Man*, 85.

<sup>53</sup> Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 183.

<sup>54</sup> Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*, (New York: Random House, 1998), 294.

Confederates. They want a figure who continued to fight back even after losing, like Nathan Bedford Forrest.

### **Nathan Bedford Forrest**

Among the military leaders on the Southern side of the Civil War, perhaps none stand as large in the public memory as Nathan Bedford Forrest. While those proclaiming their “Southern heritage” have traditionally turned to Robert E. Lee as their primary hero, in recent years Nathan Bedford Forrest has overtaken Lee. Or, at least, the merchandise suggests this. “Neo-Confederates once bought more T-shirts of Robert E. Lee than any other Confederate hero; now one manufacturer sells five Forrest T-shirts to every Lee.”<sup>55</sup> So who was Nathan Bedford Forrest and why are so many white Southerners drawn to the mythos surrounding him? Many of Forrest’s admirers will say that he was a military genius. In Ken Burns’s *The Civil War*, Shelby Foote relates, “I think that the [Civil War] produced two authentic geniuses. One of them was [Forrest] and the other was Abraham Lincoln.”<sup>56</sup> Forrest’s fans also hail Forrest as the epitome of manliness, particularly Southern manliness. He was self-sufficient, virile, brave, and physically strong. Again, to use the words of Shelby Foote, Forrest’s fans consider him to be the “most man in the world.”<sup>57</sup> However, there is another side of Forrest that his fans will often attempt to ignore or downplay, at least publicly, and that his detractors highlight: Forrest’s racism. Prior to the Civil War, Forrest was a slave trader. During the Civil War, Forrest and his men went out of their way to brutally murder black Union soldiers, even after they had surrendered, most infamously at Fort Pillow. After the Civil War, Forrest became the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. These actions are more indicative of who Forrest was than his military record or his

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<sup>55</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 236.

<sup>56</sup> Ken Burns, *The Civil War*, ep. 7, (PBS, 1990).

<sup>57</sup> Shelby Foote, *Shiloh: A Novel*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 150.

status as the “most man in the world.” In short, the way the Forrest’s fans choose to remember him at best ignores his racist actions and attitudes and, at worst, praises him for said actions and attitudes.

Forrest’s fans will most often point to his military record and his status as an exemplar of manliness in their praise. On his military record, Forrest’s fans love to tout his supposed military genius. According to Richard Tillinghast, “Forrest was the only man North or South to enter the war as a private soldier and rise to the rank of lieutenant general.”<sup>58</sup> Jac Weller wrote of Forrest, “[He] was almost always victorious, whether he was in overall command or only a sector commander.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Forrest was able to achieve his incredible military success with hardly any formal education and certain no formal military education. Just what were Forrest’s military accomplishments, then? What did he do to earn such praise for his military genius? Forrest was a cavalry officer and, shortly after enlisting, was given orders to raise his own mounted battalion. “A few days after he enlisted, he was authorized by the governor of Tennessee to raise a battalion of mounted rangers.”<sup>60</sup> As the war went on, both the size of Forrest’s cavalry and his rank increased. Forrest’s oft-quoted philosophy of war was “I get there first with the most men.”<sup>61</sup> When Forrest did not have the numerical advantage, he would use trickery to fool his opponent into believing he did. For instance, he would use kettle drums to make the opponent believe his force was much larger than it actually was. During Forrest’s campaign against Union Colonel Abel Streight, he employed various forms of trickery to fool Streight into surrendering his much larger army.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Forrest preferred to attack his

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<sup>58</sup> Richard Tillinghast, “Nathan Bedford Forrest: Born to Fight,” *Sewanee Review* 123, 4 (Fall 2015), 606.

<sup>59</sup> Jac Weller, “Nathan Bedford Forrest: An Analysis of Untutored Military Genius,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 18, 3 (September 1959), 214.

<sup>60</sup> Weller, “Untutored Military Genius,” 217.

<sup>61</sup> Weller, “Untutored Military Genius,” 226.

<sup>62</sup> Tillinghast, “Born to Fight,” 612.

opponents in multiple places along their lines. He understood the value of attacking the enemy on their flank. According to Weller, “The multiple nature and the unexpected angles of Forrest’s attacks upset the enemy; concentration was difficult.”<sup>63</sup> In short, Forrest, despite his lack of education, was often able to successfully outthink his opponents.

Forrest’s cavalry fought, and won, many small battles. Forrest and his men were also involved in several major battles, although Forrest did not command the entire Confederate force in these cases. According to Tillinghast, had Forrest been in command during several of these battles, the results would have been different. “Forrest took part in many crucial battles lost in the western theater, and it is clear in retrospect that had his views prevailed, some of these battles might have been won.”<sup>64</sup> Tillinghast believed that Forrest’s military genius was not properly utilized, a sentiment more generally held by some of Forrest’s fans. Had Jefferson Davis given Forrest more power or command over the entire western theater, Forrest’s fans believe that he might have won the war for the South.<sup>65</sup> However, most of Forrest’s military accomplishments did not come from major battles but in the way he and his troops operated. Forrest was most well-known for his “deep penetrations.” Essentially, Forrest and his men would infiltrate Union territory in Kentucky and West Tennessee and set about disrupting the Union’s war effort. He would isolate and even capture Union posts, strike larger Union forces from behind, and destroy rail lines.<sup>66</sup> William Tecumseh Sherman, the Union general who had the most direct conflict with Forrest, “called him ‘that devil Forest’ and declared that he needed to be ‘hunted down and killed if it costs 10,000 lives and bankrupts the treasury.’”<sup>67</sup> Sherman clearly considered Forrest a threat

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<sup>63</sup> Weller, “Untutored Military Genius,” 228.

<sup>64</sup> Tillinghast, “Born to Fight,” 608-9.

<sup>65</sup> Court Carney, “The Contested Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest,” *The Journal of Southern History* 67, 3 (August 2001), 619.

<sup>66</sup> Weller, “Untutored Military Genius,” 224-5.

<sup>67</sup> Tillinghast, “Born to Fight,” 606.

to the Union war effort. Weller quotes Sherman as writing, “We must destroy him.... If we do not... the whole effect of our past conquests will be lost.”<sup>68</sup> No doubt Sherman’s statements about Forrest are indicative of just how disruptive Forrest’s tactics, particularly his “deep penetrations,” were to Union forces.

In light of all of this evidence, Forrest’s military prowess, at the very least, seems unquestionable. Yet despite his military genius he had no real impact on the result of the war. As Charles Royster puts it, “He was a minor player in some major battles and a major player in some minor battles.”<sup>69</sup> Royster’s description of Forrest’s military record is apt. In the grand scheme of the Civil War, Forrest was a relatively minor figure. Additionally, James Loewen notes, “Forrest was a brilliant cavalry leader, but his career looks better on the landscape than it was in reality because his defeats get no attention or are marked so ambiguously that they look like victories.”<sup>70</sup> Forrest was, of course, not a perfect general. Contrary to what Forrest fans tend to say, he did lose battles. For instance, on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1862, Forrest and his cavalry attacked a Union force they vastly outnumbered. The battle should have been a perfect example of Forrest’s “I get there first with the most men.” Yet Forrest lost, despite the fact that his own forces outnumbered his opponent’s nine to one.<sup>71</sup> Having an imperfect record does not preclude Forrest’s genius, of course, but it does dismantle the idea that Forrest was invincible. And despite his genius, he was unable to affect the ultimate result of the war. Of course, as previously mentioned, some of Forrest’s supporters will argue that had he been given a larger command, then the Confederacy might have won. He was not given a larger command though and arguing that if he had the war would have ended differently is pointless conjecture. And even if one

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<sup>68</sup> Weller, “Untutored Military Genius,” 215.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Royster, “Slaver, General, Klansman,” *The Atlantic* 271, 5 (May 1993), 126.

<sup>70</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 238.

<sup>71</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 238.

entertains the notion of Jefferson Davis giving Forrest a larger command, a Southern victory in the war still would not have occurred. According to James McPherson, “Union states had eleven times as many ships and boats as the Confederacy and produced fifteen times as much iron, seventeen times as many textile goods, twenty-four times as many locomotives, and thirty-two times as many firearms.”<sup>72</sup> Or in the words of Shelby Foote, “I think that the North fought that war with one hand behind its back.... I think that if there had been more Southern successes, and a lot more, the North simply would have brought that other arm out from behind its back. I don't think the South ever had a chance to win that war.”<sup>73</sup> Regardless of who led the Confederate armies, the North's victory was inevitable. In the face of such overwhelming odds, the Confederacy never stood a chance at victory. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest, one way or the other, whether Forrest could have successfully commanded a larger force anyway. If there is any evidence to that idea, then it actually indicates that he would have been unable to command a larger force. “He could never have been an important theater commander. The picture of Forrest in command of a Confederate Army is about as plausible as a picture of Robert E. Lee beating his subordinates with his fists and threatening to kill Jefferson Davis.”<sup>74</sup> Forrest may have been suited to the type of cavalry warfare in which he engaged, but he would not have been well suited to commanding a larger army. He definitely would not have done well as a theater commander. In summation, Forrest was an excellent cavalry officer, but he was far from perfect. He lost battles. And he certainly could not have changed the outcome of the war even if he had commanded the entire Confederate Army.

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<sup>72</sup> James McPherson, *Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis and the Confederate Civil War*, (New York: Penguin, 2015), 20.

<sup>73</sup> Burns, *The Civil War*, ep. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Royster, “Slaver, General, Klansman,” 126.



Besides his military record, Forrest's fans also tout his manliness. Whereas other Confederate icons, such as General Lee, represent the ideal of the Southern gentleman, Forrest represents the ideal of the "rough-and-tumble" self-made man. And indeed, many of Forrest's fans identify with him for this very reason. "Organizers of newer Confederate memorial groups, notably the League of the South, see in Forrest the sort of rugged, self-made man with whom latter-day Confederates will identify."<sup>75</sup> Forrest's fans see themselves in the general. He started out with nothing and went on to become a (in)famous figure. Forrest's father died when he was very young and as such, Nathan became the head of the Forrest family. Over the course of his pre-war life, he went from utter poverty to becoming a millionaire.<sup>76</sup> Even so, he lacked a formal education, a fact which many of Forrest's fans found attractive following his death. "Memphians took great pride in Forrest's lack of formal military education but maintained that their hero, though untrained, instinctively knew the rules of battle."<sup>77</sup> Forrest's lack of education was, and is, attractive to many of his fans who also were born into poverty and thus lacked much formal education. Furthermore, his lack of training makes his military success all the more impressive to his fans. Besides his status as a self-made man, Forrest's fans also point to him as an example of bravery and physical strength. This particular aspect of Forrest's manliness is intertwined with his military prowess. Throughout his military career, Forrest would be the one leading charges.<sup>78</sup> He proved himself a fierce warrior on the battlefield.

One of Forrest's men described him in battle, "Mounted on his big sorrel horse, saber in hand, sleeves rolled up, his coat lying on the pommel of his saddle, looking the very God of War." Another of his men stated that Forrest "looked more like a devil incarnate than anything else." A chaplain who served under Forrest's command said of his appearance on the field, "His face flushed till it bore a striking resemblance to a painted Indian, and his eyes, usually mild in their expression, blazed with the intense glare of a panther about

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<sup>75</sup> Owen Dwyer, "Symbolic Accretion and Commemoration," *Social & Cultural Geography* 5, 3 (2004), 420.

<sup>76</sup> Weller, "Untutored Military Genius," 215-6; Tillinghast, "Born to Fight," 601-5.

<sup>77</sup> Carney, "The Contested Image," 604-5.

<sup>78</sup> Weller, "Untutored Military Genius," 250.

to spring upon its prey.” An officer serving in Forrest’s command stated in his memoirs, “His sword cleaved the skulls of eleven men... Wherever his avenging blade sought the enemy they gave way, dismayed at what they saw.” Richard Taylor said of Forrest’s brutality, “I doubt if any commander since the days of lion-hearted Richard has killed as many enemies with his own hand as Forrest.” Examples such as these litter the pages of any work focusing on Forrest.<sup>79</sup>

Forrest was therefore not only a brave warrior, but a fierce one, too. Additionally, Forrest’s life after the war became a symbol for civic responsibility and leadership during times of upheaval.<sup>80</sup> The upheaval, of course, was Reconstruction and the official end to slavery. Forrest’s leadership role during this period was as the Grand Wizard of the KKK. This fact demonstrates the biggest issue with Forrest as the exemplar of manliness and military genius. Forrest’s status as the “most man in the world” and a military genius are inexorably linked with his racism.

All three phases of Forrest’s life, before the war, during the war, and after the war, are connected to his racism. Before the Civil War, Forrest went from poverty to becoming incredibly wealthy, giving him the self-made man status that his fans so often tout. However, Forrest’s fans often deemphasize the way he earned his money. Forrest was a slave trader. “[B]lack Memphians recalled Forrest as the ‘self-made’ millionaire who owned slave pens in downtown Memphis.”<sup>81</sup> Forrest made a great deal of his money buying, selling, and transporting slaves. Not only were his actions deplorable, but his actions also undermine the very idea that he was a self-made man. All of his wealth was earned on the backs of other men. After retiring from the slave trade, he began “supervising cotton raising on his several plantations.”<sup>82</sup> Which means that he forced slaves to pick cotton and when they didn’t he would punish them. Of course, those that praise the general often downplay his role in the slave trade, make excuses for it, or omit it altogether.

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 176.

<sup>80</sup> Carney, “The Contested Image,” 614, 617, 619; Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 166; Weller, “Untutored Military Genius,” 250.

<sup>81</sup> Carney, “The Contested Image,” 605.

<sup>82</sup> Weller, “Untutored Military Genius,” 216.

Forrest's status as a slave trader is limited to a single sentence in Weller's study of the general.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, in Robert Glaze's article, "Saint and Sinner," Forrest's time as a slave trader is limited to a single sentence. This sentence is immediately followed by praise for Forrest's pragmatic mind.<sup>84</sup> Tillinghast is slightly more sympathetic to the men and women that Forrest bought and sold, but he makes excuses for why Forrest was involved in the slave-trade. Tillinghast says that Forrest's slave-trading business grew naturally out of his other business endeavors, that he treated the men and women he traded well, and that Forrest's views on race would change radically later in life.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, in Selma, a group called Friends of Forrest put up a monument to their hero. The monument focuses exclusively on Forrest's military record.

This narrow focus on Forrest's military exploits corresponds to the claim by neo-Confederates more generally that their cause is one of "heritage not hate." In keeping with this rhetorical position, Forrest was presented as a military hero who defended the Southland against invaders – a focus which sought to place his role in oppressing African Americans beyond consideration.<sup>86</sup>

Shelby Foote not only deemphasized the importance of race when examining Forrest's life but also downplayed the importance of race to the Civil War in general. "Foote downplayed the significance of slavery and wrote as if the war were a massive fistfight or duel – an affair of honor – devoid of any larger ideological meaning."<sup>87</sup> Thus, Foote could comfortably ignore the less pleasant aspects of Forrest's life. "Foote did not or would not see Forrest as a symbol of racial oppression."<sup>88</sup> Thus, one of the aspects of Forrest's personal life that is so often praised, his status as a "self-made man," became detached from his profession. Furthermore,

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<sup>83</sup> Weller, "Untutored Military Genius," 216.

<sup>84</sup> Glaze, "Saint and Sinner," 169.

<sup>85</sup> Tillinghast, "Born to Fight," 600, 604-5.

<sup>86</sup> Dwyer, "Symbolic Accretion and Commemoration," 430.

<sup>87</sup> Huebner and McGrady, "Shelby Foote, Memphis, and the Civil War," 18.

<sup>88</sup> Huebner and McGrady, "Shelby Foote, Memphis, and the Civil War," 21.

deemphasizing or ignoring Forrest's role in racial oppression before the war made it easier to ignore his crimes during the war.

Over the course of the war, Forrest's racial oppression took a darker edge. During the war, many slaves deserted their masters and ran to Union lines. Free black men in the North enlisted in the Union army in droves, once the Union government allowed black men to join. To Southern leaders, the presence of black soldiers was an inexcusable offense. Nathan Bedford Forrest, in particular, took issue with black soldiers. He brutally murdered African American soldiers even after they had surrendered. "Massacring surrendered black troops was consistent with Forrest's character."<sup>89</sup> To Forrest, and indeed, other Confederate leaders, African Americans were nothing but property. Joining the Union army was tantamount to a slave insurrection, which Confederate leaders would not tolerate. However, massacring surrendered soldiers flew in the face of the rules of war which both the North and the South subscribed to.

According to the rules of war a nation goes to war with another nation (or would-be nation, in the case of the Confederacy), not a people. The point of war is not to eliminate the people – that is genocide, not war. This means that when an army has eliminated a person as an opponent – by death *or* capture – it has accomplished the aim of removing him as a fighting force. Therefore captured soldiers are not killed.<sup>90</sup>

Forrest did not care. Anytime he came up against black troops he became particularly violent. For instance, following a raid at Murfreesboro, one of Forrest's officers brought a mixed race man – half black, half white – before Forrest. The man, who had never been a slave, had been captured from the Union forces in the aftermath of the battle. "Forrest cursed him and asked him what he was doing there. The man replied that he was a free man, not a slave, and came out as the servant to an officer, whom he named. Forrest drew his pistol and blew the man's brains

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<sup>89</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 239.

<sup>90</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 232.

out.”<sup>91</sup> The man, who was being perfectly cooperative with Forrest, was killed in cold blood simply because he was black. Acts of violence against individual black soldiers was not the extent of Forrest’s racist actions during the war either. He was also responsible for mass executions of black soldiers, such as at Fort Pillow.

On April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1864, General Forrest led an attack on a Union garrison at Fort Pillow. A large number of the fort’s defenders were black soldiers. Forrest’s forces overwhelmed the fort. Confederate losses were minimal. By contrast, a disproportionately high number of Union troops were killed. And of that number, most of the dead soldiers were black.

The overall ratio of dead to wounded in the Civil War was 1 to 6. At Fort Pillow that ratio was almost inverted: 4.4 to 1. Moreover, there was a striking discrepancy by race: among whites at Fort Pillow the ratio of dead to wounded was high, 2 ¼ to 1, but among blacks it was an astounding 6 ½ to 1. In all, 64 percent of the black defenders and 33 percent of the whites died. Among the 1,500 attacking Confederates, just 14 died.<sup>92</sup>

With such a difference between Confederate and Union losses, and with a particularly high number of the Union losses being black, clearly something grave happened. “Forrest’s men overwhelmed the defenders in about twenty minutes. It was what happened *after* the battle that explains the casualty rates.”<sup>93</sup> The Union troops tried to surrender, but if they were black, Forrest and his men showed no mercy. Even the white soldiers only fared marginally better. Men were shot down. Killing continued on into the next day. “Soldiers testified before the Congressional inquiry that Confederates buried some wounded soldiers alive and crucified others by nailing them onto tent frames and then setting the tents affair.”<sup>94</sup> Even some of the Confederates were sickened by the affair. One sergeant wrote home to his sister:

The slaughter was awful – words cannot describe the scene. The poor deluded Negroes would run up to our men, fall upon their knees, and with uplifted hands scream for

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<sup>91</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 240.

<sup>92</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 230.

<sup>93</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 230.

<sup>94</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 230.

mercy, but they were ordered to their feet and then shot down. The white men fared but little better. Their fort turned out to be a great slaughter pen – blood, human blood stood about in pools and brains could have been gathered up in any quantity. I with several others tried to stop the butchery and at one time had partially succeeded, but Gen. Forrest ordered them shot down like dogs and the carnage continued. Finally our men became sick of blood and the firing ceased.<sup>95</sup>

Nathan Bedford Forrest oversaw a scene of incredible butchery. In fact, he ordered his men to continue even when some of them sought to end the violence. Worse still, he was praised by Confederates throughout the South. Only a few short weeks after Fort Pillow, the Confederate Congress passed a resolution commending Forrest for his actions on the very campaign of which Fort Pillow was a part.

That the thanks of Congress are eminently due, and are hereby cordially tendered, to Major General N. B. Forrest, and the officers and men of his command, for their late brilliant and successful campaign in Mississippi, West Tennessee, and Kentucky—a campaign which has conferred upon its authors fame as enduring as the records of the struggle which they have so brilliantly illustrated.<sup>96</sup>

While the Congressional resolution does not mention Fort Pillow specifically, the Confederate Congress was well-aware of the massacre. Confederates hoped that Forrest’s actions would put blacks back in “their place.” Northerners, on the other hand, were astounded and infuriated. The *New York Herald* reported “The news from Fort Pillow is of disastrous character, and, if fully true, represents the humanity of the rebel guerillas at a very low standard.”<sup>97</sup> The newspaper went on to report that “Upon taking possession of the fort... the guerillas commenced an indiscriminate butchery... killing in all some four hundred persons, mutilating the dead, cruelly bayonetting the wounded on the field, and shooting some of them in the hospitals.”<sup>98</sup> Northerners were astounded by the butchery and Union leaders were quick to respond. “Leaders of the United

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<sup>95</sup> Achilles Clark, letter to sister, April 14, 1864.

<sup>96</sup> Congress of the Confederate States of America, *JOINT RESOLUTION of thanks to Major General N. B. Forrest and the officers and men of his command, for their campaign in Mississippi, West Tennessee, and Kentucky*, (Richmond: 1864).

<sup>97</sup> James Gordon Bennett, “The Situation,” *New York Herald*, April 16, 1864.

<sup>98</sup> Bennett, “The Situation,” April 16, 1864.

States from Abraham Lincoln to local commanders were outraged and threatened to retaliate against surrendered Southern troops.”<sup>99</sup> Confederates quickly changed their tone in regards to Fort Pillow. They went from praising Forrest to pretending like the massacre never occurred. And thus began more than a century and a half worth of attempts to cover up the atrocities at Fort Pillow.

Just as Forrest’s profession as a slaver is downplayed by his fans, so too are the atrocities at Fort Pillow. For instance, Weller wrote, “Fort Pillow was captured and at comparatively small cost. The garrison, mostly Negro Union soldiers plentifully supplied with whiskey, sustained heavy casualties.... Some Negroes tried to surrender while others around them continued to fight. Heavy casualties were sustained.”<sup>100</sup> Later in the same article, Weller goes on to call the accusations against Forrest “unfair.”<sup>101</sup> Shelby Foote, of course, downplayed any racial themes in his writing, and thus Forrest’s atrocities at Fort Pillow are downplayed as well. Tillinghast’s article, “Nathan Bedford Forrest: Born to Fight,” fails to mention Fort Pillow at all. Even the historic site at Fort Pillow, the very place where the massacre occurred, completely denies what happened. The brochure makes no mention of the massacre and, in fact, claims that the Union troops were treated extremely well. The only indication of the massacre in the site is from a single label in the fort’s museum, which says “the North labeled it a massacre,” “The South claimed that [Union] panic and inexperience cause the huge loss of Union lives,” and “To this day, the controversy remains.”<sup>102</sup> There should not be a controversy, though. The facts about the Fort Pillow massacre are well known, at least by historians. However, by deemphasizing or outright omitting Forrest’s involvement in and the very occurrence of the Fort Pillow massacre,

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<sup>99</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 232.

<sup>100</sup> Weller, “Untutored Military Genius,” 230-1.

<sup>101</sup> Weller, “Untutored Military Genius,” 248.

<sup>102</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 235.

Forrest's fans and others who proclaim "heritage not hate" have ensured that most Americans do not know the horrible truth about Fort Pillow.<sup>103</sup> And just as Forrest's fans cover up Forrest's job as a slave trader before the war and his role in the Fort Pillow massacre and other atrocities against black soldiers during the war, so too do they downplay his position in the KKK.

Following the end of the Civil War, Forrest became the first national leader of the KKK. As with his slave trading and war time atrocities, many of Forrest's fans attempt to downplay his involvement in the Klan or else attempt to frame Forrest's involvement in a more positive light. For instance, Shelby Foote says that the Klan that formed immediately after the Civil War was not all that bad. "The Klan that people remember today is the Klan of the 1920s.... Anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-black. Forrest's Klan was anti-black but not opposed to all black people. It was trying to keep illiterate blacks from occupying positions like sheriff and judge."<sup>104</sup> Shelby Foote is correct in saying that the modern Klan is not the same one which Forrest was the leader of. However, his claim that Forrest's KKK was only trying to "keep illiterate blacks" from occupying positions of power is inaccurate. In actuality, the KKK and other such groups attacked any blacks attempting to exercise their new-found rights. "[Racial] terrorism became the hallmark of Klan activities."<sup>105</sup> Some authors write about Forrest's time in the KKK merely as him assuming an important leadership role during an unstable period in the South. Weller writes of Forrest's time in the KKK, "He was also the first leader of the New South, the head of the Ku Klux Klan when it was the last resort of the decent elements of a defeated people."<sup>106</sup> By "decent elements of a defeated people," he means Southern white supremacists. In addition to being racist, Weller's statement belies the truth about the Reconstruction era.

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<sup>103</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 235.

<sup>104</sup> Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic*, 153.

<sup>105</sup> Carney, "Contested Image," 603.

<sup>106</sup> Weller, "Untutored Military Genius," 250.



Jack Hurst begins his recent biography of Forrest, “A dozen years after the Civil War, the South overturned its outcome,” referring to the Klan and the larger class of violent actions it epitomized. Thus these markers and monuments pay tribute to Forrest *as a victor*, as markers and monuments usually do.<sup>107</sup>

During Reconstruction, Southern white supremacists did everything in their power to reestablish their dominance. In the end, they managed to reverse the outcome of the Civil War and Forrest’s KKK was an important part of that.

Another tactic Forrest’s fans use to explain away his time in the KKK is the fact that he left the KKK later on. Shelby Foote said that “he dissolved the Klan when it turned ugly.”<sup>108</sup> Tillinghast wrote that “Forrest’s views on race would change radically in the last few years of his life....”<sup>109</sup> “Most of Forrest’s biographers... stress the fact that he disbanded the Klan when it became too violent.”<sup>110</sup> All of these writers would have readers believe that Forrest dissolved the KKK out of the goodness in his heart upon realizing how violent they were. In actuality, his reasons for disassociating himself from the Klan were far less noble. Forrest left the Klan “in anticipation of a federal law making membership illegal.”<sup>111</sup> Forrest did not leave the Klan because he had a change of heart. He left the Klan because he did not want the federal government to take him to court. In addition, “Forrest... lost interest in the Klan once it outgrew his immediate authority.”<sup>112</sup> Not only was the federal government about to make membership illegal, but Forrest also lacked the sort of complete control over Klan activities that he desired. Forrest’s departure from the Klan was not because of a humanitarian impulse. In summation, just as with Forrest’s life before and during the war, Forrest’s fans downplay the less savory aspects of his life after the war.

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<sup>107</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 239.

<sup>108</sup> Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic*, 153.

<sup>109</sup> Tillinghast, “Born to Fight,” 605.

<sup>110</sup> Glaze, “Saint and Sinner,” 180.

<sup>111</sup> Dwyer, “Symbolic Accretion and Commemoration,” 430.

<sup>112</sup> Carney, “Contested Image,” 603.

A majority of Americans do not know about Forrest's horrible actions. This is because historic markers and popular histories of the Civil War, such as Ken Burns's documentary, downplay these aspects of Forrest's life. However, certain groups of people are attracted to Forrest *because* of his history of racial oppression. Horwitz notes that there is "a hardening ideological edge to Confederate remembrance."<sup>113</sup> And throughout the nation, there are certainly those that find Forrest's record of racism and violence attractive. At the unveiling of a monument to Forrest near Nashville, at least one such person was in attendance. He "noted that he had 'lived in an integrated neighborhood for 17 years, and that's where I've learned that the mixing of races doesn't work.'"<sup>114</sup> Carney goes on to say, "Once again, Forrest served as a powerful symbol of white supremacy. 'He's crying 'Follow me!' the artist said of Forrest, and the general 'will ride again. Don't doubt that.'"<sup>115</sup> So while many of Forrest's fans downplay racism as an important aspect of his character, there are those who embrace that aspect of the cavalry general and seek to reassert their dominance just as Forrest did after the Civil War.

Forrest's fans are quick to defend the general. They indicate that he was a military genius and the pinnacle of Southern manliness. Simultaneously they deemphasize or altogether ignore his racist actions and attitudes. "The image advanced by Forrest apologists like Foote... seemed to constitute an implicit endorsement of white supremacist ideology."<sup>116</sup> And indeed, by deemphasizing Forrest's record of racial violence they are, unknowingly or knowingly, perpetuating white supremacy. Conversely, some of Forrest's fans follow him precisely because of his record of racial violence. Because of Forrest's history of racial hate, he also has many detractors, particularly African Americans and civil rights groups, who regularly protest

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<sup>113</sup> Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic*, 294.

<sup>114</sup> Carney, "The Contested Image," 629.

<sup>115</sup> Carney, "The Contested Image," 629-30.

<sup>116</sup> Carney, "The Contested Image," 626.

ceremonies and monuments that honor the general. One Forrest fan, who was the editor of a Civil War magazine, responded to protestors. He said that Forrest was not being commemorated for his record of racial hatred. “‘We can only say,’ he continued, ‘that [Forrest] was a product of his time and place and that... it is unfair to judge people of the past by the standards of the present.’”<sup>117</sup> There is some truth in what this editor said. Nathan Bedford Forrest was a product of his time. And while he may have taken a more active role in the oppression of African Americans than some of his contemporaries, he was in no way unique. However, the fact remains that he traded slaves before the war, brutally butchered black Union soldiers during the war, and led the KKK after the war. Continuing to honor a man responsible for so much racially motivated violence perpetuates racial divides in America. Was Forrest a product of his time? Of course he was – everyone is. But continuing to honor him only serves to insult African Americans and give white supremacists a figure to rally around. If people must have examples of military leaders as role models, there are much better candidates than Nathan Bedford Forrest.

### **The Confederate Battle Flag**

Of all the Confederate icons and symbols, the so-called Confederate Flag (which, in fact, was never the Confederacy’s national flag) is by far the most widely recognized and disseminated. Aside from the relatively recent attention the national media has paid to the flag, the flag also appears on a vast array of merchandise. One can find the flag emblazoned on “jackets, shirts, T-shirts, sweat shirts, skirts, neckties, aprons, hats, shorts, pajamas, golf socks, bikinis, belts, mittens, umbrellas, clocks, key rings, Frisbees, decals, patches, letter openers, pins,

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<sup>117</sup> Carney, “The Contested Image,” 624.

knives, lighters, tote bags, folding camp stools, golf balls, baby diapers, and dog collars....”<sup>118</sup>

Many of the people who purchase flag merchandise or wave the flag itself identify the flag with Southern heritage, the battle for States’ rights, or as a protest against a large Federal government. The media and general populace often associate “flag wavers” with the phrase “it’s about Heritage, not hate.” And indeed, many flag wavers argue that the St. Andrew’s cross flag is not, and never was, a symbol of racism. However, an examination of the flag’s history reveals that a non-racist reading of the flag ignores important aspects of the flag’s original conception and the causes by which it was used. The Confederacy and its armies fought to preserve the institution of slavery. Later, the Ku Klux Klan, whose existence was predicated on the idea of white supremacy, used the flag. Protesters against integration used the flag broadly during the civil rights movement. Additionally, African Americans strongly identify the flag with threats to their safety and well-being. In short, the so-called Confederate Flag represents racism by nature of its long history of use by groups whose existence was to perpetuate racial oppression.

The flag people commonly refer to as the Confederate Flag, the red flag with the blue St. Andrew’s cross and white stars, “was never the national flag of the Confederate States of America – it never flew over government buildings or other facilities.”<sup>119</sup> Instead, the original national flag of the Confederacy recalled elements of the Stars and Stripes. “The new flag consisted of three horizontal stripes, alternating red and white, with a union (or canton) of blue emblazoned with a circle of white stars corresponding to the number of states in the Confederacy.”<sup>120</sup> The national flag of the Confederacy at the start of the war did not resemble the flag that so many people recognize today. The flag was referred to as the “Stars and Bars,” a

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<sup>118</sup> John Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America’s Most Embattled Emblem*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 179-80.

<sup>119</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 1.

<sup>120</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 4.

term which later generations would mistakenly use to describe one of the rejected national flag proposals. A man named William Miles, a member of the committee that selected the Confederacy's flag, had proposed a flag that "featured a blue St. George's (or upright) cross on a red field. Emblazoned on the cross were fifteen white stars representing the slaveholding states, and on the red field were two symbols of South Carolina: the palmetto tree and the crescent."<sup>121</sup> However, Miles altered the design to take into account complaints from a Jewish Southerner, who protested the use of Christian symbolism.

In adapting his flag to take these criticisms into account, Miles removed the palmetto tree and crescent and substituted a diagonal cross for the St. George's cross. Recalling (and sketching) his proposal a few months later, Miles explained that the diagonal cross was preferable because "it avoided the *religious* objection about the cross (from the Jews [and] many Protestant sects), because it did not stand out so *conspicuously* as if the cross had been placed upright thus."<sup>122</sup>

The design Miles finally submitted to the committee was still religious, as the diagonal – or St. Andrew's – cross was a widely recognized Christian symbol. However, this was the design that Miles submitted. His design is the one that people widely recognize and mistakenly call the "Stars and Bars" today. Miles's design was rejected, though, in favor of the actual "Star and Bars" design. If the St. Andrew's cross flag was rejected so early, then why did it become the foremost symbol of the Confederacy? The answer lies in the Confederate military.

According to combat rules and traditions, every military unit carried a battle flag to identify them to others in the middle of a battle. It was important in the nineteenth century to do so in order to prevent friendly fire. The Confederacy was no exception to this tradition.

"Consistent with military tradition, Confederate regiments carried standard issue battle flags."<sup>123</sup>

At the beginning of the war, many Confederate regiments used the Confederacy's national flag.

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<sup>121</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 5.

<sup>122</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 5.

<sup>123</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 7.

However, this would prove problematic in the first major battle of the Civil War: the First Battle of Bull Run, otherwise known as First Manassas. As previously stated, the Confederacy's national flag resembled the Stars and Stripes of the Union. Furthermore, neither side's army had much experience fighting before Bull Run. Therefore, the similarity of the battle flags proved to be a real issue. "Adding a further complication [to the inexperience of the combatants] was the similarity of uniforms and battle flags. At least one Confederate regiment fired on another Confederate regiment, possibly because it was unable to distinguish between battle flags."<sup>124</sup> The Stars and Bars and Stars and Stripes were too similar. The Confederate generals Beauregard and Johnston decided they needed a new battle flag, which is where Miles's design came in. Following Bull Run, Beauregard turned to Miles for advice on a new battle flag. Miles shared his design. Beauregard liked the design, so Miles recommended his design to the flag committee again, and again they voted it down.<sup>125</sup> After the committee failed to approve the St. Andrew's cross flag as the national flag, Beauregard wrote to General Johnston with a different solution.

[We] should have *two* flags – a *peace* parade flag, and a *war* flag to be used only on the field of battle – but congress having adjourned no action will be taken on the matter – How would it do for us to address the War Dept. on the subject for a supply of Regimental or badge flags made of red with two blue bars crossing each other diagonally on which shall be introduced the stars, the edge of the flag to be trimmed all around with white, yellow or gold fringe? We would then on the field of battle know our friends from our enemies.<sup>126</sup>

General Johnston further suggested the battle flag be square. The St. Andrew's cross flag became the battle flag of the Virginia army. "While the name and *élan* of the Army of Northern Virginia awaited the command of Robert E. Lee in June 1862, by the end of 1861 the Confederate army in Virginia had the flag under which it would fight its greatest battles."<sup>127</sup> The flag that people

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<sup>124</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 8.

<sup>125</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 8.

<sup>126</sup> Pierre G. T. Beauregard, letter to Joseph Johnston, September 5, 1861.

<sup>127</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 11.

widely identify as the Confederate Flag today gained primacy because of the Army of Northern Virginia and Robert E. Lee's fame. However, the Army of Northern Virginia was not the only Confederate Army to use the St. Andrew's cross design as their battle flag. When Johnston and Beauregard moved to the Western theatre of the war, they brought the St. Andrew's cross design with them. Although western armies were more resistant in adopting the design, eventually Johnston succeeded in disseminating the St. Andrew's cross flag more widely, though the design changed somewhat. "[The] Army of Tennessee's flag was rectangular without a border, similar in appearance to the most popular twentieth-century reproduction flags."<sup>128</sup> The St. Andrew's cross flag grew in popularity until "Beauregard boasted [it was] clearly the most prolific and popular choice."<sup>129</sup> However, some units continued to use battle flags other than the St. Andrew's cross flag.<sup>130</sup> Referring to the St. Andrew's cross flag as the battle flag is a misnomer, then. Meanwhile, the national flag was declining in popularity amongst Southerners. In 1863, the Confederate government replaced the "Stars and Bars" with a design that incorporated the St. Andrew's cross design.<sup>131</sup> However, the St. Andrew's cross design was never flown on its own as the Confederacy's national flag. Yet, the battle flag was so popular then and with later generations that it "became in effect what it never technically was: *the* Confederate flag."<sup>132</sup> Despite the fact that for all intents and purposes, the battle flag became *the* symbol of the Confederacy, some flag wavers use the fact that the St. Andrew's cross flag was never the national flag of the Confederacy to defend their use of the flag and make the claim that the flag never has stood for and never will stand for racial oppression.

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<sup>128</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 13.

<sup>129</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 14.

<sup>130</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 14.

<sup>131</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 17.

<sup>132</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 1.

Those that proclaim the St. Andrew's cross flag stands for "heritage, not hate," have built up several defenses for the flag against those who claim the flag is a symbol of racial oppression. One such defense is the very idea that the St. Andrew's cross flag was a battle flag and was never the Confederacy's national flag. "In the decades immediately after the war and in the century since, former Confederates and their partisans have insisted that the battle flag is an apolitical symbol, distinct from the Confederacy's national flags, and therefore not objectionable to a reunited America."<sup>133</sup> Since the flag was not the symbol of the government, but rather of the army, and of the average soldier, the flag thusly did not stand for racism. After all, flag wavers argue, Confederate soldiers were not fighting to defend slavery but to defend their homeland.<sup>134</sup> Therefore, the St. Andrew's cross flag stands not for the Confederacy or for slavery, but rather for the valor and honor of their ancestors. In short, the flag is their heritage. This is why descendants of Confederate soldiers are offended when the flag's detractors speak out against the flag's usage and proclaim it racist.<sup>135</sup>

Simultaneously, flag wavers also argue that the Confederacy did not exist to perpetuate slavery. Instead, they argue that the Civil War was fought over States' Rights. In the eyes of flag wavers, the Confederacy was not formed to defend slavery but rather to stand up against a large Federal government that was abusing its power. "Modern neo-Confederate orthodoxy not only denies that slavery was the cause of the war but posits that the Confederacy's reason for being was the defense of constitutional liberty against Big Government."<sup>136</sup> Essentially, those who defend the flag argue that the Civil War occurred because Southern states were standing up for their rights and the individual rights of their citizenry. This reading of the causes of the Civil War

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<sup>133</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 19.

<sup>134</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 21.

<sup>135</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, vii.

<sup>136</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 22.



could explain why so many Northerners, who presumably did not have ancestors that fought for the Confederacy, have begun flying and defending the flag. “Undeniably, distrust, in principle, of a powerful central government is a strong and consistent motif in American history and was an intellectual foundation for the Confederacy.”<sup>137</sup> Many Americans, past and present, have expressed distrust in a large central government. Indeed, the modern Republican party is built around this idea. However, upon closer inspection, flag wavers’ defenses of the flag are easily countered.

The battle flag’s association with the military rather than the Confederate government does not preclude the possibility of the military engaging in racist actions. Flag wavers would have everyone believe that few, if any, of the individual soldiers were fighting to protect slavery. However, “[whether] or not they owned slaves, white southerners had a stake in slavery as a system of racial control and a source of identity.”<sup>138</sup> Many Southerners who were not slaveholders still had a stake in the “peculiar institution.” No matter how poor one was, if one was white, he or she had automatic superiority over someone who was black. “Southern whites defined their ‘liberty’ in terms of their rights to own slaves, take them into western territories, and reclaim them if they ran away to the free states.”<sup>139</sup> Even if they couldn’t afford slaves, Southerners understood slavery as a liberty to which they were entitled. It was not so much about actually owning slaves, but about the idea that they could, in principle, own one. And Confederate soldiers’ actions in the war certainly indicate that they were interested in preserve the racial order. As previously discussed, Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia sent black people south into slavery. Nathan Bedford Forrest’s battalion was responsible for one of the most widely publicized instances of racial violence over the course of the war. While Lee and Forrest

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<sup>137</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 22.

<sup>138</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 25.

<sup>139</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 25.

likely had more of an economic stake in the continuation of slavery than did many of their men, enough of their men believed in the “peculiar institution” to allow these incidents and many other to occur. And while claiming all Confederate soldiers fought explicitly to perpetuate slavery would be a gross oversimplification, the fact remains that they fought for a cause whose existence was built upon slavery. “Even if the vast majority of Confederate soldiers were not slave owners, their service helped establish and perpetuate a nation founded to protect slavery from a hostile federal government.”<sup>140</sup> The St. Andrew’s cross flag as a symbol exclusively for the Confederate military was still a symbol of racism because of what said military was fighting to defend. Since the battle flag was “the paramount symbol of the Confederate nation and as the flag of the armies that kept that nation alive, the St. Andrew’s cross is inherently associated with slavery.”<sup>141</sup>

Except, flag wavers argue, the Confederacy did not exist to safeguard slavery. However, this is simply inaccurate. The founders of the Confederacy acknowledged from the very beginning that they were fighting to defend slavery. “Mosby, Rhett, Davis, Stephens, and other Confederates had no difficulty conceding what their descendants go to enormous lengths to deny: that the *raison d’être* of the Confederacy was the defense of slavery.”<sup>142</sup> At the start of the war, and throughout the length of the war, Southerners were well aware that their nation existed to defend slavery. One Richmond newspaper wrote, “WE ARE FIGHTING FOR INDEPENDENCE THAT OUR GREAT AND NECESSARY DOMESTIC INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY SHALL BE PRESERVED, and for the preservation of other institutions of which slavery is the groundwork.”<sup>143</sup> After writing that distrust of a strong central government was the

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<sup>140</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 25.

<sup>141</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 26.

<sup>142</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 26.

<sup>143</sup> “The New Heresy,” *Southern Punch*, September 19, 1864.

“intellectual foundation for the Confederacy,” John Coski goes on to say, “Equally undeniable is the fact that the South’s theoretical distrust of a powerful central government was related directly to its real fear of what that would mean for the institution of slavery.”<sup>144</sup> Flag wavers’ argument that the Confederacy existed to safeguard States’ Rights and personal liberties is accurate insofar as those rights and liberties are the ability to own slaves. Confederate leaders made no attempt to deny this fact when they seceded from the Union. South Carolina’s secession ordinance, *Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union*, begins with a long discussion of the many wrongs South Carolinians felt the Federal government had perpetrated against them and the other slaveholding states. All of these wrongs are directly tied to the institution of slavery, whether it be laws passed by the Federal government or Northern states to subvert the fugitive slave provision in the United States Constitution or the very fact that several states had outlawed slavery. Finally, the *Declaration of the Immediate Causes* says

A geographical line has been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery. He is to be entrusted with the administration of the common Government, because he has declared that that “Government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free,” and that the public mind must rest in the belief that slavery is in the course of ultimate extinction. This sectional combination for the submersion of the Constitution, has been aided in some of the States by elevating to citizenship, persons who, by the supreme law of the land, are incapable of becoming citizens; and their votes have been used to inaugurate a new policy, hostile to the South, and destructive of its beliefs and safety.<sup>145</sup>

South Carolina seceded from the Union specifically because they felt that Lincoln threatened the institution of slavery. And South Carolina was not alone. The other Southern states’ secession ordinances name slavery as the cause of secession. Alabama names “the election of Abraham

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<sup>144</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 23.

<sup>145</sup> South Carolina, *Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union*, (Columbia: 1860).

Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin to the offices of president and vice-president of the United States of America, by a sectional party, avowedly hostile to the domestic institutions and to the peace and security of the people of the State of Alabama” as their reason for seceding.<sup>146</sup> The “domestic institutions” this document refers to is slavery. Mississippi’s secession ordinance reads, “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery-- the greatest material interest of the world.”<sup>147</sup> Georgia’s states that “[for] the last ten years we have had numerous and serious causes of complaint against our non-slave-holding confederate States with reference to the subject of African slavery.”<sup>148</sup> All of the states which seceded to form the Confederacy did so because they felt that the Northern states and the Lincoln administration were a threat to the institution of slavery. The Confederacy existed to defend slavery and thus the flag most closely associated with it and its military is inextricably tied to racial oppression.

Had the end of Civil War marked the end of the St. Andrew’s cross flag, the flag still would be a symbol of racial oppression. However, various groups and individuals used the flag as part of a broader effort to oppress African Americans in the twentieth century. The most notable group to use the flag was the Ku Klux Klan. To be clear, the Klan has not existed contiguously from the first Klan’s founding following the Civil War to the present day. “Popular readings tend to blur together the massive movement of the 1920s, the earlier post-Civil War Klan that challenged radical Reconstruction, and the later multitude of splinter groups that appropriated the Klan name in vicious endeavors to undermine the civil rights movement of the 1960s and to vilify a broad array of minority groups.”<sup>149</sup> The Klan founded in the Reconstruction

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<sup>146</sup> Alabama, *An Ordinance to dissolve the union between the State of Alabama and the other States united under the compact styled "The Constitution of the United States of America,"* (Montgomery: 1861).

<sup>147</sup> Mississippi, *A Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of the State of Mississippi from the Federal Union,* (1861).

<sup>148</sup> Georgia, [Ordinance of Secession], (1861).

<sup>149</sup> Allen Safianow, ““You Can’t Burn History”: Getting Right with the Klan in Noblesville, Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 100, 2 (June 2004), 112.

era is not the same Klan as the 1920s Klan. And the 1920s Klan is not the same Klan that was born in the 1930s and 40s and fought the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s. The first Klan, however, did not use the St. Andrew's cross flag, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the first Klan "had strong Confederate roots."<sup>150</sup> Some claim that the Klan used the St. Andrew's cross flag from its earliest iteration, or in its second iteration in the 1920s, but John Coski argues that flag did not enter widespread usage amongst the Klan until the 1930s and 40s.<sup>151</sup> Regardless of when the Klan first started using the St. Andrew's cross flag or which iteration of the Klan was the first to do so, the fact remains that the flag has become one of the Klan's foremost symbols. The Klan's use of the flag became so widespread that "no organization has had a greater role in shaping the media's perception and presentation of the Confederate flag than the KKK."<sup>152</sup> Not even the Confederacy itself shaped the way in which the public perceives St. Andrew's cross flag as much as the Klan. And all three versions of the Klan have shared essentially the same goal: the perpetuation of white supremacy. The first Klan used violence to overturn the outcome of the Civil War and take away the rights former slaves had earned under the Federal government.<sup>153</sup> And "[although] Forrest and other later insisted that the Klan functioned only as a political organization, racial terrorism became the hallmark of Klan activities."<sup>154</sup> The second Klan "terrorized African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants with sporadic incidents of physical violence and with unrelenting intimidation, boycotts, and efforts to terminate from employment, evict from housing, and expel from the community all those it deemed to be an obstacle of white Protestant supremacy."<sup>155</sup> The third Klan continued

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<sup>150</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 49.

<sup>151</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 84.

<sup>152</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 84.

<sup>153</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 239.

<sup>154</sup> Carney, "The Contested Image," 603.

<sup>155</sup> Kathleen Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," *The Journal of American History* 80, 2 (September 1993), 597.

this tradition of racially motivated violence. “A wave of Klan bombings gave ‘Bombingham’ its unwanted nickname years before the infamous 1963 church bombing that killed four schoolgirls.”<sup>156</sup> The Klan stood for white supremacy, and perhaps the second, but certainly the third Klan used the St. Andrew’s cross flag to convey their white supremacist message. “Klan leaders... insisted that the flag stood for racial purity and that Confederate heritage leaders who denied this were evading the truth.”<sup>157</sup> Not only did the Klan stand for white supremacy, but they explicitly used the flag to symbolize said supremacy. And certainly there were flag wavers that decried the Klan’s use of the flag. “[White] southern opinion makers and lawmakers did protest the flag’s use by the Ku Klux Klan and other racists during the height of the civil rights era.”<sup>158</sup> The fact that the Klan was using the flag in such an overtly racist way undermined their argument that the flag was not an emblem of racism. But the fact remains that the Klan did use the St. Andrew’s cross flag to the extent that the flag became closely associated with them. Even had the flag’s origin not been racist, its use by racially motivated terrorists certainly does make the flag a symbol of racial oppression.

In summation, despite the claims made by flag wavers, the St. Andrew’s cross flag has a long history of symbolizing causes whose goal was the perpetuation of white supremacy. The flag is not the exclusive property of the Ku Klux Klan or the Confederacy, though. After all, even beyond formal organizations’ racist uses of the flag, individuals have used the flag more broadly in support of white supremacy. In particular, this was popular amongst segregationists during the Civil Rights Movement, many of whom were not members of the Klan but nonetheless believed in white supremacy.<sup>159</sup> The case of James Meredith, Ole Miss’s first black

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<sup>156</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 141.

<sup>157</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 142.

<sup>158</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 158.

<sup>159</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 137-43.

student, is a prime example of this. Segregationist rioters used the flag to protest Meredith's entry into the college.<sup>160</sup> Or take, for example, Dylann Roof's actions on Jun 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Obviously not everyone who supports use of the flag outwardly supports white supremacy or acts in overtly racist ways. But just as with Lee and Forrest, whether or not one is using the flag for explicitly racist purposes, veneration of the flag constitutes implicit endorsement of the causes for which the flag once stood and still stands for. Claiming the flag is not a symbol of racism because it was the symbol of the Confederate military ignores the role that soldiers directly played in defending slavery. Claiming the flag is not a symbol of racism because the Confederacy fought for states' rights and personal liberties not only misrepresents the cause of the Civil War but also ignores the horror that was Antebellum slavery. Claiming that hate groups' use of the flag misrepresents the flag's meaning not only denies the truth behind the flag's origins but also invalidates the legitimate complaints and concerns that victims of white supremacy raise about the flag's use. Furthermore, individuals' use of the flag as a symbol of personal freedom and liberties is not only ironic – as the flag has repeated been used by those attempting to deny freedoms and liberties to others – but is also an insult to all those whose lives were affected by white supremacy. The fact is the flag's long history of use by individuals and organizations defending and espousing white supremacy precludes the possibility of the flag ever *not* being a racially charged symbol.

## **Conclusion**

Why does this matter? Why does it matter how Confederate icons such as Robert E. Lee, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and the St. Andrew's cross flag exist in (white) Americans' popular

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<sup>160</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 149-51; Lawrence Feinberg, "Ole Miss Student Drops Charges Against Anti-Segregationist Artist," *The Harvard Crimson*, April 23, 1963.

memory? First, these symbols – particularly the St. Andrew’s cross flag – are painful ones to many members of American society, especially African Americans.

Confederate flags displayed on or in public buildings imply reverence for a time when African Americans were second-class citizens – when they were denied fundamental rights and suffered intimidation and physical harm if they tried to claim those rights. Because this is precisely what some people intend the flag to communicate, many modern African Americans understandably view the battle flag as an implied threat.<sup>161</sup>

Many African Americans feel that flying the St. Andrew’s cross flag and the placing of individuals such as Robert E. Lee and Nathan Bedford Forrest on literal pedestals constitutes an implied threat to not only their rights as human beings, but their physical safety. Continuing to venerate Confederate icons and downplay the racial elements of these figures only serves to perpetuate racial divides in the United States.

The second reason why popular memory of Confederate icons matters is because venerating these icons implicitly endorses racism. Regardless of whether or not one is trying to use one of these Confederate icons in a racist way, by doing so one is essentially endorsing the racist actions associated with said icons. Despite Lee and Forrest fans’ attempts, despite flag wavers’ attempts, and despite popular Civil War histories’ attempts to downplay the importance of race on these icons and the war in general, race is inexorably linked with all of these things. White Americans must acknowledge the fact that the Civil War was about slavery, that Robert E. Lee and Nathan Bedford Forrest were fighting to defend slavery, and that the St. Andrew’s cross flag has been hoisted up time and again for racist causes. Denying these truths not only ignores history, but impedes white Americans’ ability to understand the oppression black Americans have been facing for centuries and are continuing to face today.

Finally, the way these Confederate icons are remembered is important because of their place in Southern heritage. Despite (or perhaps because of) these icons’ racially charged

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<sup>161</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 157.



histories, many individuals and organizations still feel that they are an important part of Southern heritage. However, these icons are truly part of *Confederate* heritage. Southern heritage need not be limited to Confederate heritage. For most of the American South's history, the Confederacy did not even exist. And while racism has been and continues to be part of the history of both the former slaveholding states and the nation as a whole, there are elements of Southern heritage that do not constitute implicit endorsement of racism. In fact, there are elements of Southern heritage that endorse the opposite. Take, for example, the biracial coalitions that formed throughout the South during the Reconstruction era who fought to preserve former slaves' newfound rights. Or take, perhaps, the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s, when white and black Southerners stood up against racism and segregation. But those espousing Lee, Forrest, the St. Andrew's cross flag, and other Confederate icons as their heritage are celebrating Confederate heritage rather than Southern heritage. And Confederate heritage is a heritage *of* hate.

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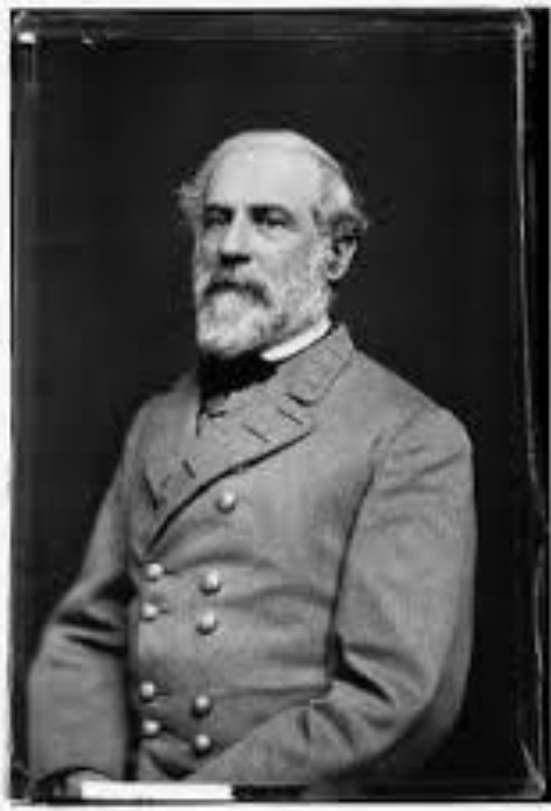
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Appendix



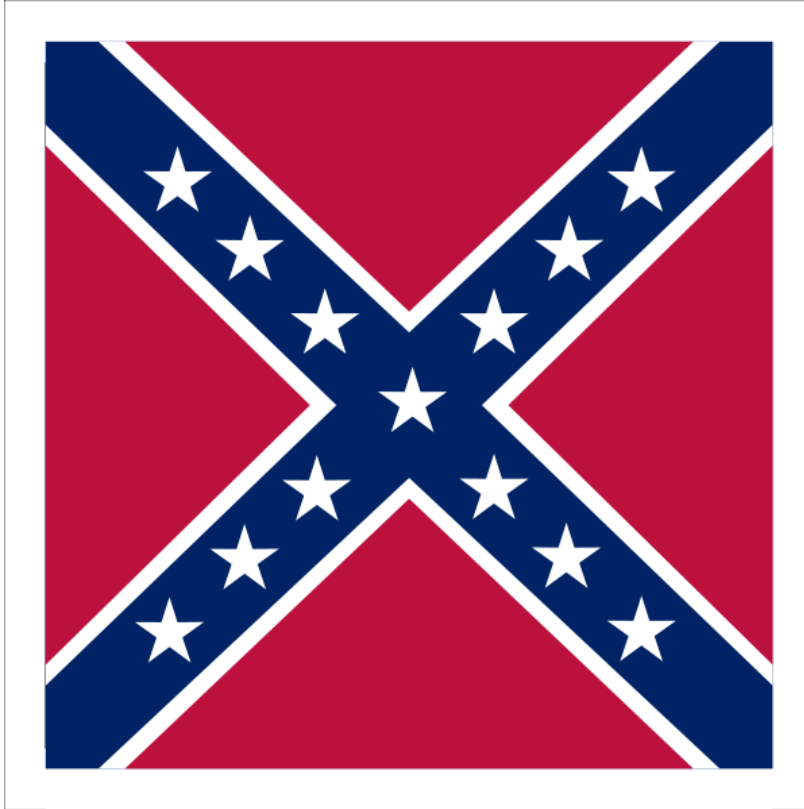
Julian Vannerson, *Portrait of Gen. Robert E. Lee, officer of the Confederate Army*, March 1, 1864.

Photograph of Robert E. Lee as he appeared during the American Civil War.



Unknown photographer, [Nathan Bedford Forrest], ca. 1860s.

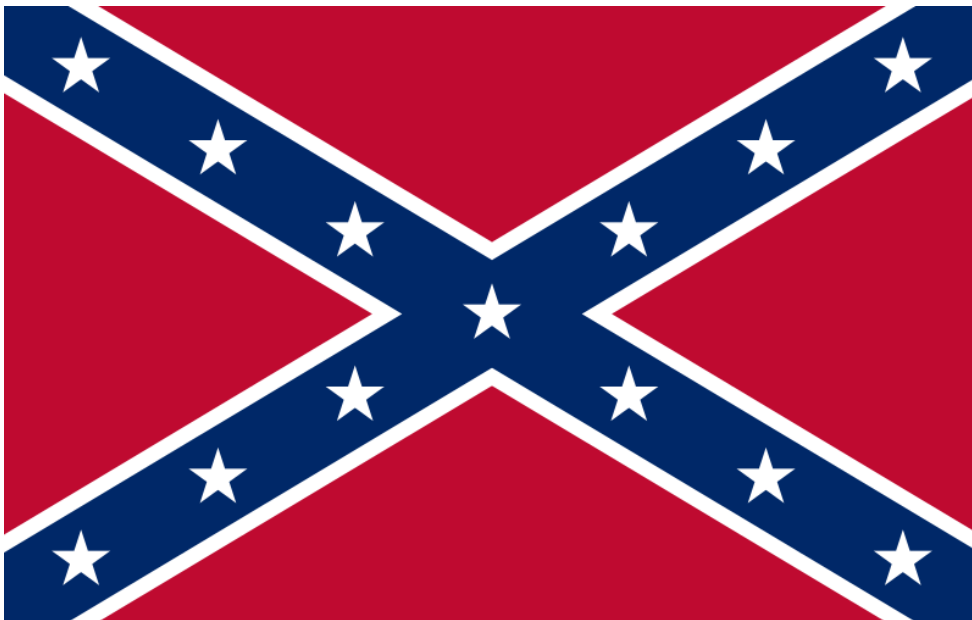
Photograph of Nathan Bedford Forrest as he would have appeared during the American Civil War.



Unknown creator, [Battle Flag North Virginia (Third Bunting)], March 13, 2006.

Computer rendering of the St. Andrew's cross flag as used by the Army of Northern Virginia.

Also the version flown on South Carolina's Statehouse grounds.



Crotalus horridus, [The rectangular battle flag of the Army of Tennessee, Confederate States of America], January 11, 2006

Computer rendering of the St. Andrew's cross flag as used by the

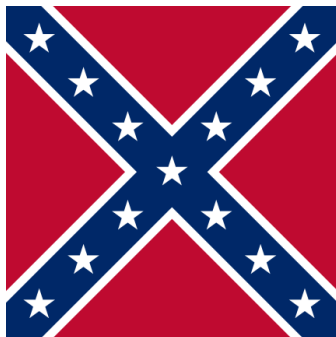
Army of Tennessee. Also the version commonly used by "flag wavers" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.



Ariane Schmidt, [Flag of the Confederate States of America (November 28, 1861 – May 1, 1863)], December 31, 2005.

Computer rendering of the Confederate

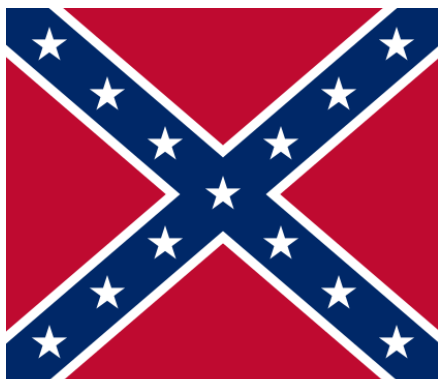
national flag in use from 1861 to 1863.



Fornax, [Flag of the Confederate States of America (May 1, 1863 – March 4, 1865)], March 8, 2006.

Computer rendering of the Confederate

national flag in use from 1863 to 1865.



Unknown creator, [Flag of the Confederate States of America (March 4, 1865)], March 7, 2006.

Computer rendering of the final Confederate national flag in use



from 1865 until complete dismemberment of the Confederacy. This flag was introduced so late that it remained mostly unused.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 19.