

CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS: LESSON 7: HANDOUT 4**THE CONFEDERATE FLAG FINALLY FALLS IN MISSISSIPPI¹**

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Even after digging deep into my memory bank, I can't remember the team that played at my first home football game, in 1974, when I was a student at the University of Mississippi. What **reverberates** from that day into my consciousness is both a sound and a vision: the **abrupt** thud of a bundle of flags, bearing the bright and unmistakable pattern of the Confederate stars and bars, landing at my feet. Acting on impulse, I pushed this unwanted



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object down a row in the stadium with my foot. Confederate flags always looked and felt like a threat, whether on the back of a pickup truck on a lonely country road or in the hands of angry white men and women on the sidelines of a civil-rights march. Given their abrupt arrival near my body, and years of conditioning as a black Mississippian, I could not resist the urge to shove them away as if they were an intruder or a bully.

Later that sunny fall afternoon, after a more **amenable** recipient got hold of the bundle of flags, they were passed down the row where my date and I were sitting. Both of us were dressed according to game-day tradition, me in a blazer and she in a dress and heels. When the flags reached us again, we leaned back, our hands gripping the wooden bleachers, to keep from touching what we viewed as objects of intimidation. We didn't want to spread them. Soon, though, we were lost in a sea of the Confederate cantons that mirrored the image of the Mississippi state flag. In spite of how perfectly we conformed to the dress code, we felt as if we did not belong in the stadium. But we refused to leave—we wanted to prove that we had a right to be there.

The Confederate flag has historically been used as a means of demonstrating power and **dominance** over nearly half the citizens of Mississippi. For all practical purposes, the Confederate battle flag and the state flag were the same: everyone from night-riding Klansmen to various governors used either or both of the flags to send the message that the Magnolia State was a place where white men would always be dominant, one in which black men and women had no power, no role except subservience. Driving the point home was the

¹ W. Ralph Eubanks, "The Confederate Flag Finally Falls in Mississippi," *The New Yorker* (July 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-confederate-flag-finally-falls-in-mississippi>

prominence of the flag at the state capitol, the governor's mansion, and the county courthouse, often with the banner casting a shadow on a nearby Confederate memorial. Even after the civil-rights movement changed both Mississippi and America, the state held on to its flag, asserting that the **emblem** had everything to do with heritage and nothing to do with hate. (The state senator Chris McDaniel said that to change the flag would be to challenge the founding values of the country, and warned that the American Stars and Stripes would be next.) Finally, though, the Legislature approved a procedural measure on June 27th to consider a flag change, allowing for a successful vote, the next day, to replace it, placing a means of intimidation in the dustbin of history.

As Myrlie Evers, the widow of the slain civil-rights activist Medgar Evers, said, in 1963, "You can kill a man, but you can't kill an idea." Retiring the flag has been an idea that Mississippi has tried to kill for decades. What made the difference this time is that the voices involved were so loud and numerous that they could finally not be ignored. First, a multiracial gathering of thousands of Black Lives Matter protesters converged on the state capitol, in early June, to protest police violence against African-Americans. They chanted "Change the flag," as well as the names of those killed by police violence. This was the largest protest in Jackson since **Freedom Summer**, in 1964. The rallying cry grew louder once prominent business and religious organizations joined the opposition, along with Walmart and the powerful Southern Baptist Convention. Collegiate athletics was **pivotal**: the N.C.A.A. prohibited championship events from being held in states where the Confederate flag is flown. Football is a religion in Mississippi, so when coaches from all eight public universities began lobbying legislators, what once seemed impossible all at once seemed **inevitable**.

When Mississippi's now-discarded flag was adopted, in 1894, the Reconstruction era was over. The flag represented a reassertion of power by conservative Democrats, which also meant unifying the state's whites, who were divided politically, economically, and socially. The so-called Mississippi Plan disenfranchised most African-Americans, and Jim Crow laws followed. To shift attention from the flag's connection to Jim Crow, defenders always argued that the flag was meant solely to honor the memory of Confederate veterans. It was an odd defense, as secession had been intended to preserve the institution of slavery against the federal government. Mississippi's articles of secession include these words: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world." The flag's connection to slavery and **racial oppression** could never be denied.

After the **integration** of Mississippi's public-school system and intercollegiate athletics, students and activists began to question the prominence of the battle flag more vigorously. Black students at the University of Mississippi conducted public burnings of the Confederate flag throughout the nineteen-seventies. In 1982, John Hawkins, the first black cheerleader at Ole Miss, announced that he would not wave the Confederate flag or throw it up in the stands for students to wave at him. As Hawkins then told *the Times*, "While I'm an Ole Miss cheerleader, I'm still a black man. In my household, I wasn't told to hate the flag, but I did have history classes and know what my ancestors went through and what the Rebel flag represents. It is my choice that I prefer not to wave one."

As civil-rights activists like Aaron Henry became state legislators, they began to introduce bills to change the flag, in the nineteen-eighties and well into the nineties. The Mississippi N.A.A.C.P. even filed a lawsuit to this effect in 1993, arguing that the display of the flag violated African-Americans' "constitutional rights to free speech and expression, due process and equal protection as guaranteed by the Mississippi Constitution." Whether by lawsuits or through legislation, these efforts to change the flag were blocked and derided. Yet after Georgia changed its flag, in 2001, Mississippi decided to conduct a statewide referendum on the issue. As I travelled around Mississippi while conducting research for a book, as the referendum drew near, I sometimes listened to the town-hall debates on public radio about the flag. The argument I often heard in those meetings won the day: the efforts to change the flag were coming from outsiders. In the end, more than sixty per cent of Mississippi voters opted to keep the flag. The outside-agitator narrative lost its sheen five years ago, when state universities and towns from Tupelo to Biloxi opted to stop flying the state flag. When the University of Mississippi took it down, a large billboard was erected at the county line that read "Ole Miss: You take Our Money, You fly Our Flag." Groups such as Our State Flag Foundation assumed that their expensive marketing campaign of bumper stickers and billboards would carry the day, rather than a grassroots movement of people in their own communities.

The story of the Mississippi state flag provides a window into how false narratives about history—particularly in the American South—are sustained. It also presents an opportunity for the state to build and **promulgate** a new cultural narrative, one rooted in truth rather than deception about the past. Mississippi is a place that comes alive in its stories. This is one of Mississippi's great stories; within it exists a tension between the history of the place and the region's idea of itself. The Lost Cause was always wrapped up in Mississippi's historical deception about its flag, but the decision to take down the flag was about more than the rejection of a false ideology. This summer, Americans—particularly white Americans—started to listen to black folks and realize that to deny racism as part of this country's past and present only fuels more division. This movement echoed in Mississippi. For once, the forces at work for racial justice across this country made their way to Mississippi, and this time with all deliberate speed.