

Southern pride and racism: the Confederate flag

To what degree has the flag gone from being a national symbol to a symbol of racism?



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Abstract

The subject of this thesis is the changing symbolism of the Confederate flag. The main question is “To what degree has the flag gone from being a national symbol to a symbol of racism?” The Confederate flag, first used as the battle flag of the Confederate states in 1861, has a variety of connotations and is perceived mostly as a symbol of Southern pride and of racism. This research centers on three timeframes, namely the 1860-1870, 1940-1965 and 2000-2015 periods, because symbolism of the flag underwent significant changes during these periods. In order to analyze the Confederate flag and its meaning, a theoretical model developed by DeZalia and Moeschberger about divisive symbols and the functions they serve was used. It was found that due to the use of the Confederate flag by groups linked to racism, it has been transformed into a symbol of radical racism.

Introduction

After gunman Dylann Roof killed nine people in an African-American church in Charleston on June 17, 2015, South Carolina was left in a state of sorrow. As many suspected, the motive for the killing was racism and this was verified when Roof's manifesto was discovered. It was accompanied by photographs in which he was standing with a gun in one hand and the Confederate flag in the other. While people were grieving the victims, the Confederate flag was still flying high in the grounds of South Carolina's capitol. This prompted the governor of South Carolina, Nikki Haley, to make a statement in which she said: "It's time to move the flag from the capitol grounds."¹

What makes the Confederate flag so significant that it should be moved from the grounds of South Carolina's capitol? Going back in history, we find that the Confederate flag originates in the 1860s, when the Southern states decided to secede from the Union and form the Confederate States. They did not agree with President Lincoln, whose plan was to abolish slavery, a system on which the Southern States were economically dependent. As every country with newfound independency, the leaders of the Confederate States designed their own national symbols to distinguish themselves from the Union, and this is when the Confederate flag was "born". This flag was used during the Civil War (1861-1865) to represent the Confederacy.

However, nowadays the Confederate flag represents racism and white supremacy in the minds of most American people, because of its use by racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). This is why the governor called to remove the flag out of respect for the victims of the Charleston shooting. This paper will center on the question: "To what degree has the flag gone from being national symbol to a symbol of racism?" The use of the Confederate flag during three specific periods was researched in order answer this question, namely 1860-1865, 1940-1965 and 2000-2015. This means that the focus will be on the origins of the Confederate Flag during the Civil War, the revival of the use of the flag during the Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement, and the controversy that the flag has caused in the 21st century. These periods were chosen because the flag was widely used during these times. Even more important is that the meaning with which the Confederate flag was imbued changed significantly during these periods. This change of meaning during each period will be described over three chapters. In the first chapter the focus will be on the

¹ Philips, A., 'The 5 most important quotes from Nikki Haley's Confederate flag speech' (version 10-03-2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/06/22/the-5-most-important-quotes-from-nikki-haleys-confederate-flag-speech/?utm_term=.12ee24748cf5 (22-06-2015).

origins of the Confederate flag in an attempt to answer the question: “What was the symbolic meaning of the Confederate flag during and in the years just after the Civil War?” In the second chapter the use of the flag in an entirely different context, namely during World War II and the Civil Rights Movement, will be examined with a view to answering the question: “How did the symbolism of the Confederate flag change into a racist one during 1940-1965?” In the third chapter the focus will be on the flag as controversial symbol in the 21st century and the change of use of the flag. To understand these topics, this chapter will be centered on the question: “How has the use of the Confederate flag changed since 2000?”

To understand the use and meaning of the flag, a theoretic model developed by Rebekah Dezalia and Scott Moeschberger in the book *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide; Semiotics of Peace and Conflict* will be consulted. This model of divisive symbols will be explained and applied to the history of the symbolism of the Confederate flag in the first subchapter about theory surrounding national symbols. This theory is relevant to this research because it will facilitate an understanding of the various functions that a symbol such as the Confederate flag can serve, and these functions can help one to comprehend the progression of the flag’s meaning in the three different timeframes that are discussed in this thesis. Although the Confederate flag has been researched by many academics, the recent events in Charleston make this paper relevant. Historians such as John Coski have conducted research on the meaning of the flag, but most of their research dealt with only the 19th and 20th centuries and thus missed the discussion about last period from 2000 to 2015 that this thesis will explore. Scholars have advocated positively and negatively for the Confederate flag, but the developments in Charleston have not yet been included in most of the academic works. The shooting in Charleston and the role of the flag in this event have given the opportunity to focus on the transformation that it has undergone, which makes this thesis specifically relevant.

The most complete work about the entire history of the Confederate flag is *The Confederate Battle Flag: America’s most embattled emblem*² by John Coski (2005). As library director at the Museum of the Confederacy, he traced the evolution of the meaning of the flag from its beginnings to recent days. Because he used many primary and secondary sources, his work has a broad scope and is recognized as the most comprehensive book on the Confederate flag. Coski argues that because of its significance in history, the symbol will not simply disappear and people will continue to appropriate it as a monumental symbol.³ He

² Coski, J., *The Confederate Battle Flag: America’s most embattled emblem* (Cambridge 2005).

³ Coski, J., *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 294.

acknowledges that the flag can barely be seen as a neutral political symbol but claims that people who truly see the flag as a memorial symbol should refrain from using it as a commercial one on shirts or tourist items. Furthermore he urges contestants of the flag to fight for the removal of the Confederate flag from state capitols and state flags since this blurs the distinction between the flag as a sovereign symbol and as a memorial symbol.⁴ He advocates for a ban of the Confederate flag as political icon but he does recognize the meaning of the flag as a memorial symbol.

Scott Moeschberger has a different view about the future of the Confederate flag in the chapter “Heritage or Hatred: The Confederate Battle Flag and Current Race Relations in the USA” from the 2014 book *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*.⁵ He claims that removing the Confederate flag as a symbol would be to disregard a significant part of American history. According to Moeschberger, the flag has become an iconic symbol in popular American culture. This makes Moeschberger no fan of banning the Confederate flag. He argues that forcibly removing the flag would only strengthen the flag supporters. In his opinion, “the future transformation of the meaning of the Confederate flag will depend on how American society embraces the conversation of race and history.”⁶

Both secondary sources and primary sources will be consulted for this research. However they will only be used to illustrate the meaning and use of the Confederate flag in the specified timeframes. For instance, in the first chapter the cornerstone speech of Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens will be cited to demonstrate the ideology of the Confederacy and thus the ideology that the Confederate flag symbolized. In the second chapter newspapers such as the *Charleston Post & Courier* will be quoted with respect to the use of the Confederate flag during the Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement. Polls and articles from newspapers will be also used in the last chapter to highlight the controversy surrounding the Confederate flag during the last 20 years.

Theoretical model of divisive symbols

A model developed by Dezalia and Moeschberger and presented in her book *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*⁷, was used for this study. This model facilitated an understanding of divisive symbols and was applied to the Confederate flag. According to the model, divisive symbols serve four interrelated functions: “(1) connection to past generations,

⁴ Ibidem, 303.

⁵ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide* (Bern 2014) 212-219. re

⁶ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, 222.

⁷ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*.

(2) elicit a strong emotional reaction, (3) express and maintain cultural narratives as they contribute to social representations, and (4) a perceptual filter to understand the self in relation to society.”⁸ This theoretical framework was chosen because this model is specifically about controversial symbols. The focus on the various functions that divisive symbols can serve in this model is useful because historians such as Coski examine the flag in a chronological manner. Using both a chronological and a theoretical lens in this thesis will facilitate a more in-depth understanding of the change of the meaning of the Confederate flag into a racist symbol than only using one of the two. The functions named above will be explained here and they will be applied to the Confederate flag over the three chapters and discussed in the conclusion.

Firstly, the symbol functions as a connection to past generations. Moeschberger and Dezalia argue: “The function of a symbol in a given society is largely related to the power of the symbol in preserving the past within the culture.”⁹ If the symbol was used during an important part of history, such as the forming of the nation, it can become part of the collective history of a community. This means that the symbol can function as a way to memorize the past and as an aid to forging a group bond because of the shared history.¹⁰

Secondly, the symbol evokes a strong emotional reaction. This is often because of the meanings that the symbol promotes and because of its connection to the past. This causes an attachment to the symbol, which is why people can feel personally attacked if the symbol is criticized.

Thirdly, a cultural narrative is expressed and maintained through the divisive symbol and this contributes to social representations. A cultural narrative can be understood as the story of a community, such as the people of the Southern states. Such a narrative is often formed through the collective history of a community, a story all of the people in a community can relate to. Symbols such as national anthems, statues or flags help to express this narrative and also maintain the narrative by reminding the community of their collective history, which contributes to social representations.

Lastly, the symbol can serve as a perceptual filter that helps the observer to understand the self in relation to society. As explained above, the symbol expresses a cultural narrative and because of this, it also serves as a filter. This filter, a sort of lens, can be used to gain understanding about the individual’s identity in relation to the group identity. A divisive

⁸ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, 2.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

symbol can thus enhance a social identity and this strengthens a group identity by both including and excluding. A divisive symbol thus can unite and divide by functioning as a perceptual filter.

Chapter 1: The origins of the Confederate Battle Flag

To understand the use of the Confederate flag and its racist connotations in the 20th and 21st centuries, one must first understand the origins of this flag. Consequently, in this chapter the first design and meaning of the flag, as well as why such a symbol was needed, will be explained. The primary focus will be on its symbolism and the causes of the Civil War.

The symbol of the Confederacy

When the 11 Southern states seceded from the Union in 1860 and 1861, they formed the Confederate States of America. Soon they took on symbols such as seals and flags to express their national identity.¹¹ The official flag of the Confederate States became the “Stars and Bars”, which looked a lot like the original Stars and Stripes, the official flag of the United States. The Stars and Bars also featured stars and stripes in the colors red, white, and blue, and this was done on purpose, because the original Stars and Stripes flag was still very much respected, even though the Confederacy opposed the Union. The colors red, white and blue symbolized the republican values.¹²

However, apart from the fact that the Stars and Bars contained too much white and could have been seen as a sign of surrender in battles, the similarity between the Stars and Stripes and Stars and Bars was also a problem. The matching colors and similar symbols on the flags caused confusion on the battlefield, because from a distance they looked alike. Coski states: “At least one Confederate regiment fired on another Confederate regiment”¹³ due to the similarities between the flags. The committee on the Flag and Seal voted against changing the flag, which is why General Beauregard proposed having two flags, a peace and a war flag. The war flag would be used only on the battlefield to distinguish friend and foe.¹⁴ The battle flag, called the “Stainless Banner”, is known in today as the symbol of the Confederacy. The Stainless Banner also features the colors red, white and blue, but has a diagonal cross instead of stripes. Inside the diagonal cross are 13 stars, symbolizing the seceding states plus Kentucky and Missouri.¹⁵

National symbols such as the Confederate flag function as a message. The flag was not casually designed after the Confederate States were formed. As the symbol of a young new nation, it needed to bring people together to create a new Southern collective identity. By

¹¹ Coski J., *Confederate Battle Flag*, 2.

¹² *Ibidem*, 2-3.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 8.

¹⁴ Beauregard to Joseph E. Johnston, September 5, 1861, ESBL.

¹⁵ Chapman R., *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices* (Armonk 2010) 114.

choosing the traditional red, blue and white that represented the republican values, the Southern American people were reminded of their roots. The designers of the flag also used the same concept of stars that were on the original American flag by using them to represent the states of the Confederacy. Ensuring that the Stained Banner had some similarities with the American Stars and Stripes flag was smart because the Stars and Stripes was a well-known flag around the world and loved by many Americans. Using the same colors and stars made the Confederate battle flag recognizable and popular with the soldiers.

Post-Civil War

Although the flag was used during many battles in the Civil War, many other designs were also being used, but the Confederate battle flag was the most popular choice.¹⁶ Even though the Confederate states lost the Civil War, the flag gained popularity as the symbol of Southern heritage and culture.¹⁷ The Civil War became an important episode in the collective history and memories of the people of the South. This collective history creates a social bond between members of a group, in this case the Southerners. The Confederate flag became a symbol for remembering the war and honoring their fallen soldiers. This shared history and experience created a social bond.¹⁸ Schatz and Lavine argue “national symbols thus essentialize the group as a transcendent psychological entity, one that connects the individual to larger meaning and purpose.”¹⁹ In this case, the flag served a particular function: creating a group identity and a memory of a collective history. This means that the flag functions as a connection to the past and to past generations because of the shared memories.

This connection to the past strongly lived on when monuments were built to remember and honor those who had fallen in the fight against the Union. The flag could be prominently recognized on monuments and on memorial days, and played an important role in venerating the Confederate soldier²⁰. Although units used many different flags, only reproductions of the Confederate battle flag were used for the memorialization of the Civil War and its soldiers.²¹ The ritual celebration of the Confederacy and its soldiers thrived from 1880 to 1920.²²

¹⁶ Coski J, *Confederate Battle Flag*, 14.

¹⁷ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 3.

¹⁹ Schatz, R.T. and Lavine, H., ‘Waving the Flag: National Symbolism, Social Identity, and Political Engagement’, *Political Psychology* 28, (2007) 3, 333.

²⁰ Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 43.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 44.

²² *Ibidem*, 50.

In the post-Civil War period, the Southern states also displayed (parts of) the Confederate flag on their official state flags. Mississippi clearly features the Confederate battle flag in a part of its state flag and Alabama adopted a simple white flag with a diagonal red cross, which can be recognized as the same diagonal cross as on the Confederate battle flag. In 1872, Georgia chose to feature the Stars and Bars on its state flag instead of the Confederate Battle flag. The changing of their state flags was a reference to their Southern heritage and to the memory of the Confederacy. The changes to the flags also coincided with the passing of the Jim Crow Laws, which institutionalized segregation between coloreds and whites. Thornton notes in reference to the change of the Alabama state flag “the appearance of a state flag on a Confederate model was a pointed and timely reminder that to be ‘Southern’ was to be white. It was also an implicit hint that to be Southern was to be Democrat.”²³

Symbolism

Integrating part or the whole the Confederate battle flag into their state flags was a clear reminder of the collective history and group identity that the Southerners in Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia shared. As Thornton notes, it also implicitly refers to what it means to have this Southern identity. But what did the Confederate flag remind Southerners of in the post-Civil War years and what did it mean them? The meaning of the Confederate flag during and after the Civil War strongly depended on the reasons for seceding from the Union, which caused the Civil War. In Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens’ Cornerstone speech in 1861, the differences between the Confederacy and the Union were explained and the causes for the secession of the Confederacy were defended. In this speech, he declared:

Our new government is founded upon exactly [this] idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.²⁴

The Cornerstone speech made it clear that the Confederacy was built on white supremacy. Disagreement between the Northern and Southern states about slavery and equality between

²³ Thornton K., ‘The Confederate flag and the meaning of Southern history’. *Southern Cultures* 2, (1995) 239.

²⁴ Schott, T. E., *Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia: A Biography*, (Atlanta 1996) 334.

people had caused the Southern states to secede and form the Confederacy. Seceding states also published declarations of the cause of their secession and Mississippi, Texas, Georgia and South Carolina clearly mentioned the abolition of slavery as one of the reasons for their secession. Mississippi stated: “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery – the greatest material interest of the world.”²⁵ The Texas declaration affirms:

She –Texas – was received as a commonwealth holding, maintaining and protecting the institution known as negro slavery – the servitude of the African to the white race within her limits – a relation that had existed from the first settlement of her wilderness by the white race, and which her people intended should exist in all future time.²⁶

Multiple sources similar to the Cornerstone speech and the declarations of secession mention slavery as a cause for the secession of the Southern states. This explains the controversy surrounding the Confederate flag in the years after the Civil War; for some the flag represented independence and rebellion against the North and thus Southern pride, while for others it represented racism and white supremacy.

Whatever meaning the flag had for people, we can recognize that it was a divisive symbol. It created a connection to past generations because of its origins in the Civil War and because of the use of the flag at remembrance days and on the monuments and graves of fallen soldiers. However, the Confederate flag carried stronger associations in the years after the war than during the Civil War, according to Moeschberger.²⁷ This will be explored in the next chapter.

²⁵ *Journal of the State Convention*, published in 1861, Jackson.

²⁶ *Journal of the Secession Convention of Texas*, published in 1861, Austin.

²⁷ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, 209.

Chapter 2: The return of the Confederate flag

In this chapter, the focus will be on the use of the Confederate flag during the Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement, and how the flag became a racist symbol in this period. Attention will also be paid to how the flag expressed and maintained a cultural narrative. The chapter is divided into two subsections: the 1940-1950 and the 1950-1965 periods. The flag became a well-known symbol during these years because of its use, in the Second World War, and, later by several protest groups during the Civil Rights campaign. It is relevant to discuss these periods because the symbolism of the flag changed from having national to racist meaning during these years. The reason for this change was the use of the flag by soldiers in the Second World War, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and the Dixiecrats, and in protests during the Civil Rights era.

1940-1950: the KKK and the Second World War

The flag was first used by a group other than veterans or confederate organizations in 1940, by the KKK. Coski noted “No other organization has had a greater role in shaping the media’s perception and presentation of the Confederate flag than the KKK.”²⁸ The KKK is a movement that originated in the South of the USA with strong connections to the Confederacy. It was founded in 1865 and the original members of the KKK were confederate veterans who supported white nationalism. They did not use the Confederate flag at that stage because they feared a negative backlash if they used the symbol so shortly after the Civil War.²⁹ The use of the Confederate flag by someone other than confederate organizations can be seen as a pivotal moment in the history of the Confederate flag. This was the first time the flag was not used as a battle flag in the Civil War or as remembrance symbol, but as a clear symbol of white supremacy. Historians such as Coski agree that the flag gained its racial meaning due to its use by hate groups.

Another shift in the image of the Confederate flag was caused by the Second World War. Confederate banners were flown by Southern soldiers over ships and military bases around the world. By doing this, they honored the Confederate military tradition but, according to Chris Springer, they also sent another message by flying the flag: it was a way for Southern troops to express their regional pride and to announce their presence to Northern troops. The Confederate flag was no longer only a symbol of the Confederacy but also of the

²⁸ Coski J, *Confederate Battle Flag*, 84.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 86-87.

contemporary South.³⁰ The flag was also raised on commemorative days such as Memorial Day during the Second World War and over the ruins of conquered cities.³¹ The American media noticed the presence of the Confederate flag and asked what the explanation was for this display. The *Baltimore Evening Sun* argued that “to emphasize and particularize their own region, they hoist a Confederate flag. It seems a harmless and rather amusing gesture, though it probably puzzles not a few of the inhabitants of the countries in which our men are fighting.”³²

After the Second World War, the Confederate flag became popular among students, who used it to cheer for Southern football teams. Springer muses that perhaps white Southerners were searching for symbols to reaffirm and express their identity.³³ Because of the growing industrialization which endangered the Southern tradition but, more importantly, the stability of segregation, this Southern identity was endangered. With Executive Order 9981, issued in 1948, discrimination in the United States Armed Forces was abolished, which was a major step forward towards abolishing segregation.

Equal rights were becoming a more important topic during the 1948 presidential elections. This was something that most Southern governors opposed and they wanted to prevent people from voting for Truman, who supported equal rights and had issued Executive Order 9981. That is why Southern democrats decided to break away from the Democratic Party and form the States' Rights Democratic Party. The States' Rights Democratic Party, also known as the Dixiecrats, fought for the preservation of the Jim Crow laws that sustained segregation. Strom Thurmond, the governor of South Carolina, was chosen as the presidential candidate and he delivered his acceptance speech on a podium with the official flag of the United States, the Stars and Stripes, and the Confederate flag behind him. In this speech he warned: “There’s not enough troops in the army to force the southern people to break down segregation and admit the Negro race into our theaters, our swimming pools, into our homes, and into our churches.”³⁴ Over and above a presidential candidate flying the Confederate flag on a podium during an acceptance speech, the Dixiecrats also appropriated the symbol as their own.

One can conclude that the Confederate flag was used by the Dixiecrats to express a cultural narrative in which the Southern states rebelled against the Northern states and again

³⁰ Springer, C., ‘The Troubled Resurgence of the of the Confederate Flag’, *History Today* (June 1, 1993) 7.

³¹ “Confederate Flag on Shuri,” *Charleston Post & Courier*, (May 31, 1945).

³² “Flags of the Confederacy,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, (July 3, 1944).

³³ Springer, C., ‘The Troubled Resurgence of the of the Confederate Flag’, 7.

³⁴ Cohodas, N., *Strom Thurmond and the Politics of Southern Change* (New York 1993) 177

more exclusively as a symbol of white supremacy. While the Confederate flag had been linked to the racism of the Confederacy from the start, it was mostly used for remembrance and Confederate festivities. It can thus be argued that the use of the flag by the KKK and the Dixiecrats was an instant reminder of the links between white supremacy and the Confederate flag, while the use of the flag in the Second World War showed that the flag was still being used to express the Southern identity.

1950-1965: the fight against segregation

The fight against segregation continued in the next decade. After the abolition of segregation in the United States Armed Forces, ending segregation in the American education system was the next step. African-American Oliver Brown tried to enroll his eight-year-old daughter in a white school in 1950 but he met with resistance. The school refused to register Brown's daughter as a student and, in response, Brown sued the school system with the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This led to the case *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, in which the NAACP lawyers argued that that segregation in public schools violated the 14th amendment. The United States Supreme Court decided in favor of Brown, which marked a significant moment in history because this decision ended segregation in public schools in the United States.

The use of the flag by the Dixiecrats had been the beginning of the use of the flag for something other than reaffirming identity and remembering the Civil War. Because of the message that the Dixiecrats had espoused during the elections supporting segregation, the Confederate flag and its meaning had become intertwined with segregation. Therefore, when the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* was won by Brown and segregation at schools was disallowed, the supporters of segregation again chose the Confederate flag to protest against this decision. Coski describes segregationists carrying the flag in protests over school integration in New Orleans, Atlanta and Birmingham.³⁵ The use of the Confederate flag had changed from being a regional and memorial symbol to being a rebel flag, and a clear connection could be made between supporting segregation and the use of the Confederate flag.

The Southern states were using the flag as a way of rebelling against the court decision and fighting for segregation. This happened in Georgia in 1956. There are no exact documents that can prove that the change of the Georgian state flag happened because of the court

³⁵ Coski J., *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 147.

decision. However, according to Alexander J. Azarian and Eden Fesshazion, who wrote the article “The State Flag of Georgia: The 1956 Change In Its Historical Context”, the flag change can be explained by either of two arguments: it was done in preparation for the Civil War centennial that would start in 1961 or it was to honor the Confederate veterans and soldiers who fought in the Civil War.³⁶ By contrast, Michael Reksulak, Gökhan R. Karahan and William F. Shughart II write in “Flags of our fathers: Voting on Confederate symbols in the State of Georgia” that the change of the Georgian state flag was an expression of disapproval of the Civil Rights Movement and the decision made by the court in the *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* case.³⁷ Using the Confederate flag as the state flag was primarily a connection to the past. However, the change also sent a message that expressed a cultural narrative. The Southern cultural narrative is about the Southern identity, in which rebellion and segregation play a big part. The new Georgia State flag containing the Confederate flag expressed this rebellion against the abolishing of segregation and reminded the people in Georgia that this rebellion was inherent to their Southern identity.

The Civil War centennial that was a possible reason for the change of the Georgia state flag also resulted in the appearance of more Confederate flags in official locations. To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Civil War, the flag was hoisted over the capitol in South Carolina on April 11th 1961. It was meant to fly for a week but a resolution was presented to fly the flag for a year instead and it ended up being there for almost 40 more years.³⁸ Governor Wallace of Alabama also raised the flag at the Alabama state capitol in 1963. Wallace was known for his pro-segregation opinions and said: “I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”³⁹ during his inaugural speech as governor of Alabama. He had put up the flag on April 25 in 1963, the same day that General Robert F. Kennedy would visit Alabama to meet with Governor Wallace about integration at the University of Alabama. Coski strongly implies in his book that Wallace had put up the Confederate flag as a message to Kennedy about segregation.

From 1940 to 1965, a change can be clearly seen in the image and use of the Confederate flag. Moeschberger affirms that the displaying of the flag by groups such as the KKK imbued the flag with a new social connotation that was directly linked to hatred and

³⁶ Azarian, A.J., Fesshazion E., *State Flag of Georgia: The 1956 Change In Its Historical Context*, Senate Research Office (Atlanta 2000) 24.

³⁷ Reksulak, M., Karahan, G.R., Shughart, W.F., *Flags of our fathers: Voting on Confederate symbols in the State of Georgia*, ‘Public Choice’, (Stateboro 2007) 86.

³⁸ Burse, B., *The day the flag went up*, <http://www.scpronet.com/point/9909/p04.html>, retrieved on 15-03-2017.

³⁹ *Inaugural speech Governor Wallace of Alabama*, 1963.

racism.⁴⁰ In the previous timeframe, about the origins of the Confederate flag during the Civil War, we saw that the flag continued to be used at memorial festivities and on the graves of fallen soldiers in the years after the Civil War. The use of the flag was solely for remembrance purposes, to honor the veterans of the Civil War. It continued to be used as such a symbol until the Second World War. Soldiers from the South hoisted the Confederate flag at military bases and continued to use it as a memorial symbol to honor Confederate soldiers. They also used it to reaffirm their identity and to show Northern soldiers that they were also taking part in the war. A start was made to abolish segregation in American society by prohibiting segregation in the United Armed Forces. This caused a split in the Democratic Party and the start of the Dixiecrats, who used the Confederate flag in their campaigns and appropriated the symbol as their own in the fight for segregation. This use of the Confederate flag by the Dixiecrats is significant for the changing meaning of the flag. Its meaning became intertwined with the support for segregation, which is why it was used again by supporters in the fight for segregation in public schools. As the Civil Rights era continued, more public officials used the Confederate flag to symbolize their support for segregation, for instance by raising it at the state capitols of South Carolina and Alabama and making it the official state flag of Georgia. This evolution of the development of the use of the Confederate flag from 1940 to 1970 is of great significance for the meaning of the flag. In its original days, it functioned as a connection to past generations, to a collective history. In the Second World War, it functioned as a symbol to express the Southern identity and in the years following the war it became a rebel symbol because of the use of the flag in segregation debates.

⁴⁰ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, 211.

Chapter 3: The end of the Confederate flag?

In the last chapter, we saw the change in the use of the Confederate flag in the period from 1940 to 1970. In this chapter the use of the flag from 2000 until 2016 will be explored. It continued to be a controversial symbol in the 21st century, and even more after the Charleston shooting. The focus will be on the use of the flag as a political symbol at state capitols and in state flags and how this use partly changed. Furthermore, the future of the Confederate flag will be examined in light of the writings of Coski and Moeschberger.

Moving and changing the flag

After flying for almost over 40 years over the South Carolina state capitol, the Confederate flag was moved in 2000. Earlier, in 1994, attempts had been made by the NAACP, which had threatened to boycott the state economically if the flag was not moved. The governor of South Carolina, David Beasley, even proposed moving it to a Confederate soldiers' monument after racial tensions in South Carolina erupted, but he faced strong opposition to this proposal.⁴¹ When rallies were held at the South Carolina State Capitol against the flag, the debate about the location of the flag heated up again. Many South Carolinians agreed that the flag should be moved, but people could not agree on where it should be moved to. In April 2000, the State Senate and state house voted in favor of moving the flag from the dome of the state capitol building to a flagpole located next to a statue of a Confederate soldier that was at the entrance to the state capitol's grounds.⁴² While this may seem a positive development, Coski argues that the move of the Confederate flag to the statue was a compromise. He labels the move as 'off the dome and in your face', because while the flag was moved from the spot that implied sovereignty or representation over the people of South Carolina, it had barely been visible flying high on the dome of the building and, more importantly, it had been recognizable. The new location, on the flagpole next to the Confederate soldier's statue, at the entrance to the state capitol grounds, made it more visible to the public.⁴³

Debates over the flag continued and Mississippi was the next state to reconsider its use. Mississippi had adopted the use of a state flag that featured the Confederate flag in 1894, along with Alabama and Georgia. In 2001, the state chose to hold a referendum for its citizens to vote on the state flag. After a lawsuit filed by the NAACP in 1993 to remove the flag, the

⁴¹ Leib, J.I., Webster, G.R., Webster, R.H., 'Rebel with a cause? Iconography and public memory in the Southern United States', *GeoJournal* 52 (2000) 4, 308.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 309.

⁴³ Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 251.

Mississippi Supreme Court ruled that Mississippi did not have an official state flag. In the referendum, the population of Mississippi could vote for the old flag featuring the Confederate flag or a newly designed flag. The old flag won the referendum and continued to be the official state flag of Mississippi.⁴⁴ In his article “White racial attitudes and support for the Mississippi State Flag”, Byron Orey examines racial attitudes in Mississippi and the influence of this on the referendum. After conducting quantitative research, he concludes: “racism proves to be strongly related to the intensity of the support for the Confederate flag in Mississippi.”⁴⁵ The inclusion of the Confederate flag in the Mississippi flag, the support for it and thus the use of it can be linked to racism.

Another flag design change was made in 2001, when a new state flag for Georgia was designed. The official state flag had featured the Confederate flag since 1956, a design chosen primarily because of the Civil Rights Movement. The change of flag design in 2001 was caused by the rejection of Atlanta’s bid to host an important basketball tournament.⁴⁶ The new flag featured all of the old flags, including the old state flag that contained the Confederate flag, with the Georgia seal on a blue background. However, a survey conducted by the North American Vexillological Association ranked the new Georgian state flag as the worst flag and stated: “Its complex design violates all the principles of good flag design.”⁴⁷ When Sonny Perdue was elected as new governor in Georgia, he decided to let the Georgians choose their own state flag in a state referendum. A new design was created and in 2004 the Georgians could vote for the old or the new design during a referendum. They voted in favor of the new state flag that did not feature the Confederate flag. The new flag, partially based on the Confederate Stars and Bars flag, seemed like a compromise that still honored the heritage of Georgians but no longer featured the Confederate flag, which had become inherently connected to racism.

Charleston and the future of the Confederate flag

On June 17th in 2005, Dylann Roof took part in a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and then killed nine people there. Afterwards his online manifesto was discovered and his motive turned out to be racial hatred. His manifesto was

⁴⁴ Orey, B.D., *White racial attitudes and support for the Mississippi State Flag* (Lincoln 2004) 102.

⁴⁵ Orey, B.D., *White racial attitudes and support for the Mississippi State Flag* (Lincoln 2004) 113.

⁴⁶ Reksulak, M., Karahan, G.R., Shughart, W.F., ‘Flags of our fathers: Voting on Confederate symbols in the State of Georgia’, *Public Choice*, (Stateboro 2007).

⁴⁷ Kaye, T., ‘New Mexico tops state/ Provincial Flags survey, Georgia loses by wide margin, *NAVA News* 34, (2001) 2, 4.

accompanied by photographs of Roof waving the Confederate flag and burning the American one. This was proof to many Americans that the Confederate flag was still a racist symbol, used by many unknowing Americans but also by white supremacists such as Roof. The day after the shooting, many flags were flying half-staff in respect for the victims and their relatives. However, the Confederate flag that had been moved to the entrance of the state capitol grounds, next to a statue of a Confederate soldier, was not flying half-staff, which did not impress the majority of South Carolinians. It turned out that only the General Assembly could take the decision to lower the Confederate flag, and that the governor had no authority to make that decision. On June 22nd, Governor Haley made a statement in which she said that while the flag was “an integral part of our past, it does not represent the future of South Carolina.”⁴⁸ The South Carolina senate voted on the issue and those in favor of removing the flag won the vote by a two-thirds majority. Almost a month after the shooting, on July 10th, the flag was taken down.

The Charleston shooting was a terrible happening but it did pave the way for the Confederate flag to be finally removed from the state capitol, something the NAACP had fought for many times before. Leib and Webster argue in “Religion, Murder, and the Confederate Battle Flag in South Carolina” that the location, timing and Southern religiosity helped in the successful attempt to move the flag.⁴⁹ Not only was the flag moved from Capitol grounds, but also many American companies, such as Walmart, Target and Ebay, vowed to stop selling articles featuring Confederate flags or toys that represented Confederate soldiers out of respect. Furthermore, the United States House of Representatives voted for a Confederate flag ban on flagpoles at veteran cemeteries in 2016.⁵⁰ This means that the Confederate flag is becoming less used for official state purposes and will appear less in its memorial function.

What does this mean for the future of the flag? Will it be banned and disappear from the Southern landscape? Defenders of the flag argue that removing it would be to erase the history of the South. John Coski asks the readers of his book: “Is it possible to accept the public presence of Confederate flags as recognition of history without promoting or celebrating the Confederacy?”⁵¹ He compares the Confederate Flag to the Union Jack, which

⁴⁸ Niquette, M., ‘South Carolina Governor Backs Removal of Confederate Flag’, *Bloomberg Politics* (June 22 2015), retrieved on 17-03-2017.

⁴⁹ Webster, G.R., Leib, J.I., ‘Religion, Murder, and the Confederate Battle Flag in South Carolina’, *Southeastern Geographer* 56, (2016) 1, 32.

⁵⁰ House Amendment 592.

⁵¹ Coski J., *The Confederate Battle Flag*, 274.

also flies at several places in the United States. However, Coski admits that there are reasons for this and says that while the British Empire is no longer a threat to the Americans, the Confederate flag is perceived as a threat by the African-American community. In his book, he reasons that it is difficult to see the Confederate flag as a neutral symbol.⁵² He is an advocate of preserving the flag, but only as a memorial symbol of the Southern heritage. The Confederate flag has an unavoidable place in American history and should not be banished from the public view. The flag should be free to be used festivities on memorial days, according to Coski. However, he urges Confederate flag advocates to oppose the trivialization of the flag by using the symbol on items such as shirts or towels. Similarly, it should not be displayed at state capitols or on state flags because this blurs the meaning of the Confederate flag. Coski also emphasizes that the flag can have more than one meaning and writes: “Just because someone views the flag as a symbol of racism does not give him the ethical right to assume that someone who displays it is a racist.”⁵³

Moeschberger agrees with Coski that the flag should be preserved as a Southern symbol. Both authors acknowledge that it is an important part of American history that cannot be erased. However, while Coski approves of removing the Confederate flag from official political sites, this is not something Moeschberger supports. Moeschberger argues: “Attempting to ban or remove the flag from all public spheres would undoubtedly empower and embolden the very ideologies that flag supporters cherish.”⁵⁴ The flag has already become a cultural icon, which increases the complexity of the issue. Moeschberger wonders if it is possible for some in the African-American community to see the Confederate Flag apart from the racist connotations and recognize it as a display of Southern pride.⁵⁵ This is possible and has been proven by different cases. For example, Byron Thomas, an African American who displayed the Confederate flag in his dorm window as a student, says in the *Washington Post* that “my Confederate flag isn’t racist; after all, I am black.”⁵⁶ He displayed the flag to honor the hard work of one of his ancestor, who was a black cook during the Civil War.⁵⁷ For Thomas, the flag is a symbol of Southern pride. American singer Kanye West also took the flag and made it his own by wearing a jacket with the Confederate flag stitched on it.⁵⁸

⁵² Ibidem, 301.

⁵³ Ibidem, 304.

⁵⁴ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, 216.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 217.

⁵⁶ Thomas, B., ‘I am a black South Carolinian. Here’s why I support the Confederate flag’, *The Washington Post*, June 24 2015.

⁵⁷ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, 214.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, 214.

Thomas and West each appropriated the symbol in a different manner by displaying it or wearing it, and interpreted it in their own way. This supports Moeschberger's statement that the Confederate flag is a dynamic symbol that can be used by multiple communities that imbue it with differing meanings. At the end of this chapter, he concludes: "the future transformation of the meaning of the Confederate flag will depend on how American society embraces the conversation of race and history."⁵⁹ The future of the Confederate flag is thus dependent on American society, according to Moeschberger.

Recent developments, such as removing the flag from the grounds of the state capitol or discontinuing its use as the official state flag, make it clear that the future of the standard is at risk. Its use has become a synonym for racism. While the flag is also still a symbol for Southern pride, Americans began to realize that it also carries negative connotations. The changing of the use of the Confederate flag had already begun with the referendum in Georgia regarding changing the flag but the shooting in Charleston put the controversy surrounding it on the agenda again. This raised the question of what should happen with the flag and made its future unsure. Its meaning had already changed in the past century due to its use by groups such as the KKK, which connected the symbol to racism. This connection is the reason for which the flag has been being removed from official political functions such as being a state flag. Coski clearly agrees with this, while Moeschberger argues that removing the flag is not the sole solution. Their opinions might be different, but it has become clear that the flag has become a controversial symbol that is slowly being removed from public spaces, but that it is also still possible to see it as a symbol of Southern pride, or to interpret its symbolism in one's own way, as Thomas did.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 217.

Conclusion

This thesis centers around the question: “To what degree has the flag gone from being a national symbol to a symbol of racism?” I have tried to answer this question by firstly offering a theoretical model about divisive symbols in the introduction and then exploring three different timeframes in which the use of the Confederate flag as a racist symbol increased significantly. In this conclusion, the model will be applied to the Confederate flag with the information that was provided in the three chapters to answer the central question.

According to the model, divisive symbols serve four interrelated functions: “(1) connection to past generations, (2) elicit a strong emotional reaction, (3) express and maintain cultural narratives as they contribute to social representations, and (4) a perceptual filter to understand the self in relation to society.”⁶⁰ We can now examine whether the Confederate flag serves all of these functions, and in which manner.

Firstly, the Confederate flag functions as a strong connection to past generations. This function can be recognized in the first chapter, in which the origins of the flag were described. By using the flag on monuments to fallen soldiers and at remembrance festivities for the Civil War, it directly reminds people of the shared history of the South and the battle against the North. The connection to the past is perhaps the most important function that makes the Confederate flag a divisive symbol. Its history as national symbol for the Confederacy is the reason for the use of the flag as symbol of Southern pride. However, it was, from the beginning, connected to racism because of the connection between slavery and the Confederacy. This conflicted meaning of both racism and Southern pride continued to be of importance in the second period, described in chapter 2, when the flag was used in the Second World War to express the Southern identity, while the KKK and Dixiecrats used it as a racist symbol.

Secondly, the Confederate flag evokes a strong emotional reaction. In the second chapter, we saw that negative connotations that most African-American people experience when seeing the flag are elicited partly because white supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan used the flag.⁶¹ It also reminds the African-American community of the history of slavery in the South because of its origins. However, we see in the third chapter that the Confederate flag also elicits other emotional reactions. As described in the third chapter, when the symbol is under threat of being removed from State Capitols, it has been found that people

⁶⁰ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, 2.

⁶¹ Rhea, G., *Why Non-Slaveholding Southerners Fought*, ‘Civil War Trust’ (January 25 2011), retrieved on March 9 2017.

still see it as a symbol of Southern pride.⁶² The flag thus elicits a variety of strong emotional responses.

Thirdly, a cultural narrative is expressed and maintained through the Confederate flag and this contributes to social representations. The cultural narrative of the South partly involves the story of the Civil War. The first focus of this thesis was on this narrative in the first chapter, where the Confederate flag and its connection to the Confederacy were explained. In the present day, the narrative of the seceding Southern states still plays a huge part in the formation of the Southern identity. The story of the brave Southern soldiers who fought for independence in the Civil War has become part of the cultural narrative of the Southern identity. In the second and third chapters, this narrative evolved. Due to the different uses of the flag, which was at first mostly commemorative, the meaning and thus the narrative of the flag changed. Its use by the KKK and the Dixiecrats placed the flag in a racist narrative, which would stick to the flag, as seen in chapter three.

Lastly, the Confederate flag can be seen as a perceptual filter that helps people to understand themselves in relation to society. Dezalia and Moeschberger write “this filter ultimately helps shape cognitive attributions related to group membership and categorization. In this way, symbols serve to both enhance and inform social identities.”⁶³ Not only does the Confederate flag contribute to identity forming, but it also contributes to creating a group identity. A group identity can be recognized when a group includes and excludes by sharing a collective history, such as the Civil War. For white Southerners the flag is a symbol that helps them to understand their individual identities in relation to society. However, in chapter three, the case of African-American student Thomas illustrated that not only white Southerners use the flag as a perceptual filter.

The Confederate flag is a dynamic symbol with a meaning that has shifted over the past 160 years. Through this theoretical model, it becomes clear that the Confederate flag can unite, as national symbol, but divide even more because of its racist connotations. These connotations originated in the Civil War, where the link between the flag and slavery can easily be made. This link was furthermore secured by the KKK and the Dixiecrats, who stamped the meaning of the flag with racism. From the third chapter, where the controversy around the flag as a political symbol was explored, it can be concluded that the connection between the Confederate flag and racism was carried into the 21st century.

⁶² Agiesta, J., ‘Poll: Majority sees Confederate flag as Southern pride symbol, not racist’, CNN Politics (July 2 2015), retrieved on march 9 2017.

⁶³ Moeschberger S.L and Dezalia, R.A.P., *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, 5.

Although the flag can thus be recognized as a racist symbol to some extent, it is also still considered a national symbol. Both Coski and Moeschberger recognize the status of the Confederate flag as both a Southern symbol and racist symbol. They do not exactly agree on how the flag should be used: Coski proposes a ban of the flag from any political context because it does not represent all the people, and thus promotes exclusion. Moeschberger argues that the flag has become such an iconic symbol in popular American culture that a ban would only trigger the wrong ideologies. In my view, the Confederate flag will always remain a symbol of the Confederacy and thus a symbol of Southern pride. However, the meaning of the flag has changed permanently because of the racist connotation that has its roots the Confederacy itself and the use of the flag by groups with direct links to white supremacy ideology, such as the KK and the Dixiecrats, and criminals who commit hate crimes such as Dylann Roof. Those connotations will stick and have transformed the flag into a racist symbol to a great extent. It can be concluded that while the Confederate flag can still be used as national symbol for Southern pride, it has changed into an inherently racist symbol.

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