

Giving Honor to Treason

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In 1962, the Confederate battle flag was raised for the first time over the capitol in South Carolina. With the national government just beginning to enforce the Supreme Court's desegregation edicts across the South, politicians in South Carolina wanted to symbolize their intention to resist the imposition of what they saw as illegitimate federal authority. Their rallying cry was "states' rights."

Fortunately, the right to equal protection guaranteed by the 14th Amendment won out over the purported right of states to practice segregation. As a result, a century after the end of the Civil War, Americans of all races in every region finally came to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship. There is no question that the right side prevailed in that struggle of the early 1960's, just as the right side had prevailed 100 years before.

And yet, those Stars and Bars are still flying atop the Statehouse in Columbia. Now the N.A.A.C.P. has organized a boycott of tourism in the state, and the state legislature refuses to remove the flag.

With the state's Republican primary just a month away, presidential candidates have been drawn into the controversy. To his credit, Senator John McCain has spoken in detail on the subject (unlike George W. Bush, who has largely brushed it off as a "local issue"). Unfortunately, what Mr. McCain has had to say is not at all creditable.

Last week he initially called the flag "offensive," but then quickly added that he understood the sentiments of "both sides" in the debate. "Some view it as a symbol of slavery," he said. "Others view it as a symbol of heritage. Personally, I see the battle flag as a symbol of heritage."

He also declared that his forefathers fought under the flag in the Civil War, and "they believed their service was honorable."

I believe that Senator McCain is a good and decent man. It is profoundly disturbing, however, that he has chosen to show greater sympathy for the pro-flag cause than any other major candidate.

Let us stipulate that the senator's forefathers thought that bearing arms for the Confederacy was honorable. This does not change the fact that they were wrong to have thought so. To recognize their historical error is in no way to dishonor their memory. One wonders why the senator cannot see this, or if he can, why he does not say so.

Although my African-American forefathers were persecuted under the battle flag of the Confederacy, I take no offense when I see it in the back window of a pickup truck, or sewn on a denim jacket, or draped across a dormitory window. However curious I might find it, I do not object to the association some wish to draw in their private lives between

this symbol of Southern defiance and the rich, morally ambiguous heritage of the American South.

But as an American citizen I am disgusted by the spectacle of civil authorities in South Carolina officially and publicly embracing a symbol of illegal rebellion against legitimate national authority.

Aesthetics matters in our political life. The symbols and images that amplify official public acts can subtly convey powerful meanings. These symbols are instruments of civic pedagogy. They signal to the citizenry, and especially to the young, what public values ought to be embraced. A Confederate battle flag displayed in someone's home may reflect something about culture and heritage, but flying above a state's capitol it represents ideas about our public life that have long been discredited.

The fundamental issue here is not racism, slavery or respect for the Southern way of life. Ultimately, what is at stake is national unity and loyalty to the collective civic enterprise that we call the United States of America.

In retrospect, we can now see that those who fought under the Confederate flag were treasonous rebels bent on the destruction of our union. And those who hoisted that flag over their state's capitol during the height of the civil-rights struggle were obstructing social justice.

There was nothing honorable in any of that, and one need not be a descendant of slaves to say so.

Certainly, anyone who would be president of the United States should be willing to affirm these truths.

Drawing (Ross MacDonald)