Embattled Emblem: The Army of Northern Virginia Battle Flag, 1861 to the Present (Exhibit)

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**Embattled Emblem: The Army of Northern Virginia Battle Flag, 1861 to the Present.**
Exhibition at the Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia, through April 1995.
Project director and director of museum programs: Malinda W. Collier. Script by John M. Coski.

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The battle flag of the Confederacy continues to fly over scenes of tumult and conflict. It turns up at Ole Miss football games, over the Georgia capitol, at German political rallies, and in Harvard dorm rooms. Laid end to end, recent newspaper discussions of the Confederate flag would likely stretch from Alexandria to Austin. Everyone feels pretty sure they know what the flag stands for, but everyone disagrees.

What people don't know is the history of the flag. We picture it being raised at Jefferson Davis's inauguration, flying at the head of every Confederate charge, and being hoisted in unbroken adoration by white southerners ever since the end of the Civil War. This exhibit at the Museum of the Confederacy punctures these images, albeit with considerable understatement and decorum. In a series of photographs, videotapes, and artifacts—including, of course, many flags—the "embattled emblem" lays out a history more complicated than even close observers of the South might expect.

The flag we argue about arrived relatively late. The first Confederate flag bore more than a passing resemblance to the United States flag because, its designer complained, southern whites held "so strong and earnest a desire to retain at least a suggestion of the old 'Stars and Stripes.'" This flag, not the rebel flag people recognize today, was the real Stars and Bars and remained the official flag until 1863. But its similarity to the Union flag
led to confusion on the battlefield, and it did not win the hearts of the Confederate people. After failing in their official request for a new flag, Generals P. G. T. Beauregard and Joseph Johnston took it upon themselves to create a more serviceable battle flag. They asked the same man who had designed the Stars and Bars to design a flag more distinguishable from the Union's. He suggested what he had preferred all along, a blue cross on a red field. Perhaps in deference to requests from Jewish Confederates, the cross used was St. Andrew's, turned at an angle. It was first unfurled in Virginia in late 1861. General Beauregard took the new flag with him when he assumed command in Tennessee and ordered that it replace the crazy quilt of other flags that flew over Southern armies. Though the Confederate government continued to tinker with the national flag, placing the battle flag in the corner of a large field of white, the battle flag remained the most visible symbol of the Confederacy.

The battle flag flew at ceremonies throughout the half century after Appomattox as the cult of the Lost Cause rose and fell. The United Confederate Veterans, their Daughters, and their Sons all venerated the flag. They sponsored essays and investigations, defined protocol, and made sure the flag received the support of southern state governments. They wrote pamphlets calling attention to the proper shape of the battle flag: it should be square, not rectangular. But the flag eventually escaped the control of even these assiduous guardians.
It is at this point that the Museum of the Confederacy's show becomes most interesting, as it attempts to walk the fine line between scholarly context and concern for the feelings of people who care enough about the Confederacy to journey to Richmond and the museum. The tone is firm yet careful: "As a part of American popular culture, the flag has also entered a kind of marketplace of ideas. Widely divergent individuals and groups have used the flag in ways that have given it meanings for our own time as a symbol of southern heritage, of 'rebeldom' and defiance, and of racism."

The flag's visibility, surprisingly enough, seemed to fade somewhat in the 1920s and 1930s as the North and the South followed the road to reunion, though the Gone With the Wind craze did give the flag a new lease on life in the late thirties. During World War II, United States troops raised it over conquered forts and hills; the military and the federal government recognized the flag as a symbol of fighting spirit. American troops in Korea officially represented the United Nations and could not fly their national flag, so they often flew the Confederate battle flag instead. The United Daughters of the Confederacy gladly supplied banners to the many soldiers who requested them.

The flag took on other meanings after World War II. While we need to know more about the exact timing and motivation of events in the immediate postwar years, the "Embattled Emblem" show suggests that the battle flag first received national attention in 1947, when the University of Virginia football team creamed Harvard 47–0 in Charlottesville and Virginia fans waved the flag with wild enthusiasm. A month later, in what the UVA paper called "the largest concentration of Southerners in Pennsylvania since Gettysburg," many flag-wielding Virginia fans accompanied the team when it invaded Philadelphia to play Penn. For some reason, the national media found this fascinating, and the flag became prominent in a way it had not been before. (The museum does note that the University of North Carolina claimed to have waved the flag since the late 1930s. Only further research can untangle the true claim to precedence.)

Things began to get ugly in 1948, when Dixiecrats, who supported states' rights and balked at Harry Truman, took the flag as the symbol of their revolt. While the extent of the connection with politics is unclear, the early 1950s saw a "flag fad" throughout the nation, inside and outside the South. Leaders of the Kappa Alpha fraternity, the self-proclaimed guardian of the flag for decades, worried over the fad. They "deplored" the flag's use as a "political symbol" and object of commerce; they sought to dissociate themselves from "all manner of cheap, tawdry, and vulgar exhibitions."

But the flag could hardly have appeared more tawdry or vulgar than it did in the 1950s, displayed on every sort of commodity imaginable. In this form, it embodied the consumerism so popular in the relatively prosperous South of the fifties and sixties, as people could buy a little piece of rebellion and regional pride; the rebel flag made a nice license plate on a new Impala and a nice beach blanket at Myrtle Beach or Pensacola. The opponents of the civil rights struggle, meanwhile, seized on the flag as a symbol of their supposed constitutional arguments and independence. The resurgent Ku Klux Klan appropriated the flag as a potent sign of their claim on the white southern past; in the early twentieth century, by contrast, the Klan had adopted the United States flag and the Christian cross. More recently, skinheads and other racists have taken to displaying the flag alongside the swastika. These uses of the flag have, in many eyes, reduced the earlier ambiguity of its symbolism to a simple racial code.

The final part of "Embattled Emblem" cautiously lays out the current issues sur-
rounding the flag, including the recent debates over the state flags of Georgia and Mississippi the right of municipalities to fly the flag, and the display of the flag on college and high school campuses. The show ends with a tape in which a number of influential people, ranging from the Grand Titan of the Klan to Virginia governor Douglas Wilder, say what the flag means to them. A questionnaire invites visitors to record their own opinions.

One has to admire the honesty and courage of the Museum of the Confederacy and hope that a sense of perspective will help us get beyond the dismal, deadlocked argument over the flag.