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OLD TIMES THERE ARE BEST FORGOTTEN The Future of Confederate Symbolism in the South

by Lucas Carpenter

On a Sunday afternoon, April 23, 1899, special excursion trains brought thousands of white citizens to Newnan, Georgia, to witness the public lynching of Sam Hose, a black man who had killed his white employer in what was clearly self-defense. According to Leon F. Litwack's introduction to *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, an extensive, well-documented, and utterly appalling collection of lynching photographs,

[a]fter stripping Hose of his clothes and chaining him to a tree, the self-appointed executioners stacked kerosene-soaked wood high around him. Before saturating Hose with oil and applying the torch, they cut off his ears, fingers, and genitals, and skinned his face. While some in the crowd plunged knives into the victim's flesh, others watched "with unfeigning satisfaction" (as one reporter noted) the contortions of Sam Hose's body as the flames rose, distorting his features, causing his eyes to bulge out of their sockets, and rupturing his veins. . . . Before Hose's body had even cooled, his heart and liver were removed and cut into several pieces and his bones were crushed into small particles. The crowd fought over these souvenirs. Shortly after the lynching, one of the participants reportedly left for the state capital, hoping to deliver a slice of Sam Hose's heart to the governor of Georgia, who would call Sam Hose's deeds "the most diabolical in the annals of crime." (Allen, et.al 9)

A primary component of the horror and revulsion one experiences in viewing these extraordinary images derives from how public the lynchings were. Several of these photographs depict very large crowds, mainly white men but also women and children, who certainly appear pleased with what they've done. The lynchers would also know that there was almost no chance that they would ever be charged with, much less convicted of, any wrongdoing.

The success of such obvious racial oppression required the almost complete support of white Southern society and its institutions of church and state, and that is exactly what happened. The "Progressives" who came into power around the turn of the century by opposing corporate interests and the privileging of wealth countered this obvious tilt to the left with an even more virulent racism that by now formed the

core of Southern white unity. The resulting apartheid insured white supremacy and controlled Southern life to such an extent that even as late as the 1960s the white Southern community was capable of closing ranks to protect the killers of black children and black and white civil rights workers. The few Southern whites who dissented were at best shunned and at worst physically assaulted, and the sad history of anti-lynching legislation in Congress during the first half of the 20th century shows how successful the "Solid South" was in intimidating the rest of the nation politically and economically into not interfering with the "Southern Way of Life," a grand euphemism for extreme apartheid.

The images in *Without Sanctuary* also help deflate an argument sometimes employed by Southern apologists that lynchings were largely "poor white trash" affairs with their attendant ignorance and cruelty, behavior that was never countenanced by the educated, sophisticated gentry. Instead the photographs reveal many well-dressed citizens who have been identified as prominent members of the community, illustrating the simple but crucial truth that, as the venerable Southern historian Ulrich B. Phillips said, the white South was unified by "a common resolve indomitably maintained" that the South "shall be and remain a white man's country." This unshakable resolve, according to Professor Phillips, could be "expressed with the frenzy of a demagogue or maintained with a patrician's quietude" (Woodward 10).

Consequently, as much as many white Southerners would like to deny it, comparison of the ante-bellum and Jim Crow South with Nazi Germany is not unwarranted and in fact unavoidable. After all, both shared the same beliefs in racial superiority and used them as the foundation of their social structure, both employed a vicious violence to brutally oppress a minority, and both had to be physically overpowered in order to force social change. Also like the Germans, white Southerners have had to contend with the highly uncomfortable issue of their collective guilt for having their "Way of Life" morally discredited. This guilt then strongly shapes the societies that emerge in the wake of fascism and tribalism.

But while the Germans, although still troubled by neo-Nazis, have at least publicly acknowledged and accepted a collective guilt for World War II and its attendant horrors—even paying reparations to surviving victims—the white South has never fully come to grips with its moral culpability in the systematic oppression of the African-American. The hardships and punishments of Reconstruction only served to make the defeated white community sullen and resentful (a phenomenon that would reoccur in the aftermath of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s that finally ended the career of Jim Crow). Rather than acknowledging guilt and expressing remorse, the white South responded by romantically mythologizing its ante-bellum culture. This collective coping mechanism manifested itself as a form of redemptive ancestor worship, white society seeing itself as the descendants and cultural heirs of what Southern poet Donald Davidson called the "Tall Men," the honor-bound Confederate veterans who had stubbornly and gallantly resisted the armed invasion of their land until overcome by greedy, materialistic, industrial Yankees and their hordes of immigrant "wage slaves" and free Negroes. But the near-apotheosis of not only Lee, Jackson and Davis but also the Confederate veterans as a whole is only a part of a larger myth established in the aftermath of Reconstruction of an ante-bellum Golden

Age, a veritable Eden in cotton, peopled by happy slaves, stalwart yeoman farmers, and a benevolent, cultured aristocracy who conducted themselves according to a strict code of personal honor and *noblesse oblige*. The latter class provided the leaders of the Confederacy and, when the humiliation of Reconstruction was over, reemerged as the Redeemers who seized power from the carpetbaggers, scalawags, and Negroes, all of whom had ruled only when there were federal troops to enforce their power.

In short, it is pretty much the plot of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, itself one of the prime purveyors of this pervasive Southern metamyth. The premier of this rabidly racist silent epic in 1915 sparked riots in Northern and Southern cities but was publicly praised for its historical accuracy ("history written in lightning") by President Woodrow Wilson, a Virginian and the best formally-educated President of the United States. The film's powerful impact is also linked with the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan from its new home base in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and with the widespread race riots in 1919.

The reason so many white Southerners have believed and continue to believe so fiercely in the myth, even when it is so patently false, is that to do otherwise would bring dishonor not only to oneself but also to one's ancestors. Contemporary Confederate sympathizers want free use of Confederate symbolism because, they say, it represents their "heritage." It does, of course, but it is a heritage chiefly characterized by its brutal oppression of slaves and their "free" descendants. The most important thing to know about the South is that until recently it was a region ruled by slavery and apartheid. The extraordinary cultural tension between myth and reality is the ultimate cause of the schizophrenic identity of the New South. It was also at least partly responsible for much of the best literature of the so-called Southern Renaissance of the first half of the last century and after.

While the modernist black writers of the Harlem Renaissance were advancing their own versions of the South, their white Southern counterparts were employing the latest modernist techniques from Europe to present the South more realistically. Chief among them was William Faulkner, who rejected the myth but could never completely embrace the reality. From the beginning of his career, Faulkner set himself against the so-called "moonlight and magnolias" school. Faulkner's South is defined by its abject poverty, drunkenness, greed, lechery, brutality, and race hatred, and driven by dark forces of violence and lust. Likewise, the Nashville Fugitives, who proclaimed in the first issue of their important little magazine, *The Fugitive*, that the Fugitive "flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South." Nevertheless, they clearly admired the Confederacy and strongly believed that the New South's attempt to ape the industrial North would result in a loss of the South's agrarian identity and lead to absorption by an amoral, impersonal Yankee materialism. Joining forces with other leading Southern intellectuals, they formed the Agrarian movement, and in their 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* they presented an agrarian utopia based ultimately on the Confederate myth.

It is no wonder the federal government eventually had to force racial integration on the white South. Just as the Civil War is sometimes called the Second Revolution because it resolved issues like slavery and states' rights that were avoided in both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, so the victory of the Civil Rights

movement that culminated in the federal civil rights legislation in the 1960s was in a sense a second Civil War because it finally completed what should have been in place since Reconstruction. Slavery and Jim Crow had long made a mockery of the nation's founding principles and the South itself was a fascist state governed by demagogues, ordered by race hatred, and perpetuated by intense patriotism and an often brutal intolerance of dissent.

The simple, painful truth is that there is nothing worthy of pride or credibly defensible in white Southern "heritage." The institutions of slavery and apartheid so warped the South's ethical paradigm that even today many white Southerners continue to believe that the "real" story of the South can be somehow separated from its racist history, as if there could be separate-but-equal historical narratives. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the current controversy concerning the Confederate battle flag and other symbols of the Confederacy. *Should their public display be permitted? After all, the Germans banned the swastika and other Nazi symbols.* My answer is that it should be permitted as a means of individual or collective expression, and for the same reasons that one may burn our national flag. However, the only circumstances under which a government-funded agency or institution should display Confederate symbols is when their use is required to identify historic sites or to otherwise convey historical information. Such policy precludes Confederate-based holidays and Confederate symbols on state flags. It is, quite simply, self-destructive for democratic governments to employ divisive symbolism.

But Confederate symbolism should not be suppressed by the state either, for to do so is to engage in the same sort of historical revisionism undertaken by Neo-Confederates who still insist that the Civil War was not fought over slavery but over "states' rights." Rather than being offended by the Confederate monument on the Southern town square we must learn to see it as a reminder of what really used to be.

As a native white Southerner with slaveowner ancestors, my apparent disavowal—I view it as an unconditional acceptance—of what others call their Southern heritage has not come easily. Two of my great-great-great uncles rode with Morgan's cavalry, and one of them died on the legendary raid that brought the Confederacy into the suburbs of Cincinnati in 1863. I can take you to their graves in Cold Water Cemetery near Elberton. My great-great-grandfather served in the 15th Georgia infantry, was taken prisoner at Antietam, and spent the duration of the war at the federal prisoner of war camp at Elmira in upstate New York, a place which was by most accounts at least the winter equivalent of Andersonville. According to family history, religiously preserved and vividly conveyed by my great-aunts Ivan and Mary in rural Georgia, he walked home to his farm in Elbert County after the surrender at Appomattox. While growing up in Elberton and Charleston, South Carolina, I heard these stories and others like them so often that my Confederate ancestors seemed almost as real as my living family and the symbolic significance of the Confederate battle flag approached that of the cross. No one talked about slavery; instead we heard stories of gallant charges where no one ever let the flag touch the ground.

Furthermore, I recognized early on the centrality of race as a defining feature of Southern history and culture, for I also grew up in the last years of the segregated South. My class of 1965 was the last all-white class to graduate from North Charleston

High School. I remember separate facilities for White and Colored, the telling of “nigger jokes” in public by white politicians, and the good deacons of our Methodist church deciding they would link arms to bar the entry of any uppity blacks who might want to worship in our “sanctuary.” This white racist resistance to civil rights reform was pervasive, vitriolic, hateful, and sporadically violent. It was also unquestionably the sole motivation of the bigoted demagogues who in 1956 replaced the Stars and Bars, the official flag of the Confederacy, in the Georgia State flag with the more familiar Confederate battle flag as a gesture of defiance in the face of the federal government’s initial enforcement of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954). For black and white Southerners alike, there was no mistaking the ugly racist message of that new state flag, or of the Confederate battle flag hoisted over the South Carolina Capitol, or, for that matter, of the frenzied waving of Confederate flags at University of Mississippi football games.

Having witnessed firsthand the subsequent and surprisingly rapid collapse of institutional apartheid in my native South, I want to foster an understanding of just how much the presence of African Americans has determined the course of Southern history and the evolution of Southern culture and how meaningless it is to consider a white Southern culture independent of its African-American counterpart (and vice versa). The South has become what it is largely in response to the presence of its African-American population, and whether we want to be or not, white and black Southerners are bound together not because we share a common experience but because our respective experiences have each been irreversibly shaped by the other.

But if our racial heritages cannot be separated, neither can they be said to have mixed. The totally integrated, colorblind society that was the visionary goal of the early civil rights movement and the centerpiece of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream has not been achieved and no longer seems to draw much support or even acknowledgment from either black or white Southern leaders. In fact, some say that even to use the term “colorblind” in a favorable sense reveals a fundamental racism. One of the greatest ironies of Southern history could turn out to be our return to separate-but-equal as an organizing social principle.

It doesn’t have to be that way. Despite what extremists from the right and left of both races tell us, we are not all racists, and many of the major breakthroughs in the civil rights struggle involved an interracial cooperation based on mutual respect and a shared vision of the future. The demise of slavery and apartheid is the clearest evidence that we are capable of morally improving our increasingly diverse society, but to continue on this path will require that we resist both the straightjacket of identity politics and the lure of a laissez-faire atomism that privileges individual rights at the expense of the common good. Above all, however, we must not be hesitant in rejecting cultural myths and symbols that serve only to inflame, divide and demean.

As time further distances us from slavery, the Confederacy, and Jim Crow, they seem all the more transparently cruel and morally indefensible, like the Inquisition, colonial imperialism, and the Holocaust. All are fascinating subjects of study, but the only value they contain lies in what they can tell us about the dark side of Western civilization. On my desk is a photograph taken probably near the beginning of the

Civil War of my great-great-grandfather and his brother in Confederate uniform, Bowie knives and pistols crossed in front of them, and the kneeling slave boy they had brought with them from home. I keep it there as a reminder not of my heritage but of the blind, helpless contingency of our historical existence. No matter how firm our convictions, no matter how sure we are that we occupy the moral high ground, no one can tell how things will turn out.

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