

Commentary...

The Confederate flag and the unreconstructed

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

When I was a young man of about 20 or so, I had a Confederate battle flag sticker on the back window of my Chevy Impala.

Where the stars of the (misnamed) Stars and Bars would usually be, were the letters “LYNYRD SKYNYRD.” Yep. What that flag meant to me was ... Southern Rock! Fly high, Freebird. Southern music was then — and remains — beloved to me. That’s what I was celebrating. Oh, I also dug Neil Young, whether or not a Southern man needed him around anyhow, and by then I’d seen more than a couple of Grateful Dead shows. If all that seems incongruous, I’ve got two words for you: Allman Bros.

I once got pulled over by a Glendale, California, police officer for “rolling through a stop sign.” I didn’t and I knew it. So did he. He was a black man, and he inspected my Confederate flag with considerable interest. Apparently realizing it was a band sticker, he sent me on my way with no ticket,

no warning. But not before a carload of punks drove by on Montrose Avenue screaming “Nigger!”

Symbols are powerful things. Men will die for them. The same symbol can carry multiple and profoundly different meanings to different people. What for me represented a deep, rich musical heritage, seasoned with outdoor living and the pleasures of life as a whiskey rock-a-roller, represents a century of murderous racial oppression to the descendants of slaves. Neither is a “wrong” interpretation of a symbol — because we all assign and receive meaning through our individual and cultural perspective and perception.

But basic decency and good manners require some level of recognition that my Lynyrd Skynyrd tribute looked like something a whole lot less wholesome to that black cop in Glendale.

Took me a while to figure that out, but I got there. On my own, too, with no thanks to hectoring from cultural scolds. I don't fly a Confederate flag of any sort anymore. And, by the way, for the most part neither does what's left of Lynyrd

Skynyrd.

The “heritage, not hate” defense of the Confederate flag gets pretty hard to sustain when hateful people throw it up like a middle finger to those for whom it represents nothing but pain. And, honestly, the heritage can’t and shouldn’t be scrubbed clean. Unreconstructed Southern apologists and neo-Confederates argue that the Civil War was not really about slavery. That argument doesn’t hold up to even the most cursory scrutiny. Defense of slavery is integral to the founding documents of the Confederate states.

In its secession declaration, South Carolina stated that:

“A geographical line has been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery. He is to be entrusted with the administration of the common Government, because he has declared that that ‘Government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free,’ and that the public mind must rest in the

*belief that slavery is in the
course of ultimate extinction.*

“This sectional combination for the submersion of the Constitution, has been aided in some of the States by elevating to citizenship, persons who, by the supreme law of the land, are incapable of becoming citizens; and their votes have been used to inaugurate a new policy, hostile to the South, and destructive of its beliefs and safety...”

Texas, too, placed the defense of the institution of slavery at the center of its act of secession:

"...in this free government all white men are and of right ought to be entitled to equal civil and political rights; that the servitude of the African race, as existing in these States, is mutually beneficial to both bond and free, and is abundantly authorized and justified by the experience of mankind, and the revealed will of the Almighty Creator, as recognized by all Christian nations; while the destruction of the existing relations between the two races, as advocated by our sectional enemies, would bring inevitable calamities upon both and desolation upon the fifteen slave-holding states..."

And on and on.

Recognizing that, yes, slavery was central to the great conflict does not mean that those who feel an attachment to “Southern” ways or who have ancestors who fought for the Confederacy should be made to writhe in eternal guilt over sins and crimes that they did not themselves perpetrate. Nor does removing all vestiges of Confederate heritage from the public sphere or harassing historical reenactors who are trying to touch the past serve a beneficial purpose.

The history should neither be whitewashed nor hidden away in a musty attic. Far better for all of us to genuinely confront our fraught racial heritage, which continues to reverberate down through the centuries to the present day.

That takes study — not with a goal of proving yourself right and someone else wrong — but with the purpose of genuine understanding. It requires dialogue — not shouting across barricades. And it requires honesty — which, in the USA of 2017, is in dire short supply.

Big wheels, keep on turning.

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