

PERSPECTIVES

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Never meanin' no harm



A CAULDRON OF IDIOCY

AARON MCKENZIE

The Confederate flag debate is keeping some potentially productive people out of trouble by shifting their minds from genuine problems to safely benign "issues." While the country teems with political questions begging answers, a few folks down in the Southern states seem to think that evil embodied is flying atop their state capitols. Well, maybe, but we might as well let it fly for the time being, as its relative harm is minimal.

A quick, critical gander at the debate shows that this topic is both useful and ridiculous: useful because racism is a disturbing problem; ridiculous because the Confederate flag is the wrong tree, and a lot of seemingly intelligent people are barking at the bottom. The fact that so many protesters have worked themselves into a tizzy over this absurd debate can only make the federal government as happy as a clam in high tide. If citizens' time is occupied with inconsequential nonsense, no one will step back and see the larger picture.

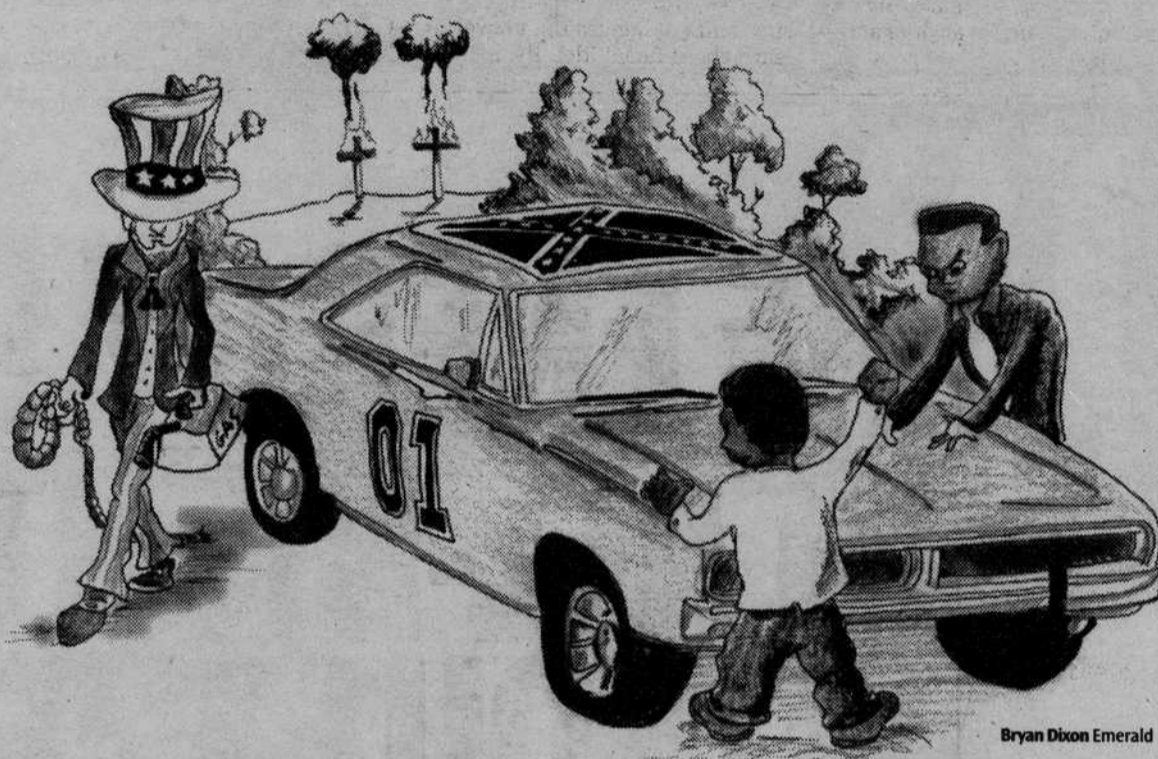
Opponents of the Confederate flag — composed, as you might imagine, of members of the African-American community along with academics of the NPR variety — claim that the flag represents slavery, hatred and everything else wrong in Dixie. The other side — a comfortably homogenous crowd of white individuals — insists that the flag symbolizes its grand Southern heritage. That, in a proverbial nutshell, is the playing field, the teams and the general extent of the controversy.

And all of it is horribly misguided. The debate's appeal is similar to a blind boxing match: interesting as a perverse curiosity, but without much intellectual substance.

Opponents of the flag overlook the fact that

most slaves were imported not by the Confederacy, but under the dubious auspices of the much-revered Stars and Stripes. Moreover, the United States has been the purveyor of many more atrocities than were ever committed at the hand of Jeff Davis and the short-lived Confederate States of America. Indian reservations, the internment of Japanese-Americans and — let's face it — just about every war since 1848 in which this country has been involved have all been based on racist beliefs and headed by those in Washington, not Richmond. Racial segregation, specifically in the South, continued for many years after Lee surrendered at Appomattox, and students from Louisville to New Orleans recited the Pledge of Allegiance throughout these years. Beyond these comparisons, though, the notion that abolishing a piece of cloth could halt racism in its tracks is about as flimsy as relying on the Ten Commandments to stop school violence.

Granted, the Confederate flag is an important symbol for many contemporary racists, who have adopted it as representative of their own half-witted ideology. Boy George would have more influence at a Ku Klux Klan rally than these hayseed pundits exert in modern politics, however. The genuine threat to liberty resides more with the club of Rich White People in Washington than it ever will with a group of good ol' boys in South Carolina. If racism is a real concern, you might have a word, for example, with those who create policy for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. That's racism in a very active, tangible sense, carried out in the name of the United States of America.



Bryan Dixon Emerald

In the other delusional corner, those who advocate the flag as a piece of historical beauty have yet to portray themselves in the brightest light. Mississippi resident Justin McNamee was quoted in a recent Associated Press article as saying, "What that flag means is freedom." Sure. Keep voting and drinking beer, buddy; you're doing your government an incalculable favor. Flags in no way represent freedom, and this man's reasoning mirrors that of people who pad around with 'Free Burma-Myanmar/Tibet/Etc.' patches on their backpacks. Free them from what, and unto whom? Shifting control of a country from one government to another is anything but a liberation.

Digressions aside, governments are not concerned with the liberty of their citizens. Vaclav Havel (president of the Czech Republic, ironically) put it quite succinctly when he said that our political systems serve people

only to the extent necessary that people will serve them, and Edward Abbey was right when he noted that freedom begins between the ears. Political flags of any persuasion — not merely the Nazi or Confederate flags — are symbols of repression. All of which is important only if you choose to vest as much of yourself in an abstract symbol as those on both sides of the Confederate flag debate.

My suspicion is that both the NAACP and the white establishment could, if they so desired, find more important projects on which to spend their time. Instead, they've succeeded only in drawing an outrageous number of people into an inane, one-dimensional squabble.

Aaron McKenzie is a columnist for the Oregon Daily Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald. He can be reached at awmckenzie@yahoo.com.

Letter to the editor

Activists do more than protest at Johnson Hall

Thank you, Jeremy Lang, for producing a mostly balanced update of the issues surrounding last year's protest ["Old issues, new strategies," ODE, April 4]. Yet I am compelled to remark that the Emerald, resembling most University students I have encountered, still lacks much more than a "Mason Westian" understanding of activism (see West's column in the April 11, 2000, Emerald).

By focusing only on the most visible and radical activists, you deny the prolonged, behind-the-scenes work of those who use different tactics in different situations. Hundreds of students, faculty and staff on this campus have been working for years to make the University more diverse, to stop racism, to end sexism, to win fair contracts, to make the campus safer, to hold our representatives responsible, to register people to vote, and many other underreported efforts. So please don't say "activism has been in a slump since last year."

This is not to excuse the countless students on the political left who have verbally bludgeoned me and others for the tactics we used. I won't apologize for the events of last year. Without the Human Rights Alliance there would have been no discussion of sweatshops on this campus — bottom line.

All of us working against oppression and exploitation need to work together to create a better society. "Divide and conquer" is an old and very effective strategy. Those who seek to oppress and exploit now only have to focus on the latter; we divide ourselves.

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'Free trade' favors only corporations

GUEST COMMENTARY

John W. Herberg

Would you support an agreement that forces the government to pay multi-national corporations not to poison citizens and destroy natural resources? Sound far-fetched?

In 1997, Canada banned a gasoline additive, MMT, that was found to cause adverse neurological effects similar to Parkinson's disease. Five days later Ethyl Corporation, a U.S. company responsible for exporting the additive to Canada, filed a claim for compensation because of lost potential profits. Canada agreed to lift the ban and pay \$13 million for legal fees and lost profits.

In 1996, a Mexican state declared a toxic-waste storage owned by U.S.-based Metacal Corporation an environmental hazard and ordered the site shut down. The result: Mexico had to pay Metacal

\$16.7 million.

And after Santa Monica's municipal wells were contaminated and closed, California enacted a law to phase out MBTE, the carcinogenic gasoline additive responsible for the contamination. Soon after, Canadian-based Methanex Corporation, the producer of MBTE, filed a claim against California for \$1 billion.

These claims and the resulting settlements were made possible by the North American Free Trade Agreement. NAFTA grants foreign investors the ability to file a claim against a country if the ability to make a profit is impeded. The cases are decided in secret by anonymous tribunals. The proceedings and findings are not disclosed to the public unless both the investors and government allow it.

"Free trade" agreements also dismantle environmental and health regulations by resulting in a "race to the bottom." Multi-national corporations are "free" to move their operations to countries with the lowest wages and weakest environ-

mental, safety and health laws. In order to compete, the other countries must lower wages and dismantle regulations. Proponents of "free trade" justify this by claiming it allows "less developed" countries to compete more effectively, and therefore it reduces poverty. The statistics say otherwise. For example, the United Nations reported the number of Mexicans in poverty increased 47 percent from 1994 to 1997.

Economists like to say there is no such thing as a "free lunch." Yet, they tout "free trade" without recognizing the costs. Free trade does not exist. Citizens are paying via lower real wages, increased taxes, decreased governmental services and environmental degradation. By allowing corporations to externalize health and environmental costs, wealth and power are transferred from the public as a whole to the wealthy minority.

Sound bad? It's about to get worse. On April 18-22, negotiators from 34 countries will meet in Quebec to continue discussion of the Free Trade of

Americas Agreement, often referred to as "NAFTA on steroids." It will incorporate many of the provisions from NAFTA, the WTO and the failed Multilateral Agreement on Investment into one agreement and will cover all countries in the Western Hemisphere except Cuba.

Since late 1999, trade ministers have been meeting secretly to negotiate FTAA details. Not even members of Congress have been allowed to know exactly what is being written. However, more than 500 corporate representatives have access to FTAA/NAFTA expansion documents. Who do you think is really running our country?

A coalition of groups, including the Campus Green Party, will be providing an FTAA teach-in Saturday, April 14, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. in Grayson Hall. It's free, and unlike the negotiations in Quebec, everyone is invited.

John W. Herberg is an environmental studies post-baccalaureate student and a member of the Campus Green Party.