

The Gadsden Flag is a Symbol. But Whose? *continued from page 6*

cattle, Bundy called on militias for help. They came, their members bearing .50 caliber machine guns and Gadsden flags. “I really don’t want violence toward (the government),” Jerad Miller told a TV reporter. “But if they’re gonna come bring violence to us? Well, if that’s the language they want to speak, we’ll learn it.”

Six weeks later, the Millers walked into a Las Vegas pizza parlor and shot two police officers. They draped one of the bodies in a Gadsden flag and a swastika, pinning a note to the other: “This is the beginning of the revolution,” it read.

In 2017, a man named Jeremy Christian thrust Nazi salutes into the spring air at an alt-right march in Portland, Oregon, while all around him people waved Gadsden flags. Weeks later, Christian lobbed racial slurs at two teenage girls on a crowded commuter train. When three other passengers confronted him, Christian slashed their throats with a knife, killing two of them. In court, where he would be convicted of murder, Christian was photographed holding up a small Gadsden flag.

“It’s become a symbol of anti-government, Patriot and militia members,” Travis McAdam, program director at Montana Human Rights Network, told me. The revival and repurposing of the Revolutionary symbol makes sense to McAdam: “So many of the militia folks that are out there view themselves as the modern-day version of this country’s founders.”

THE YEAR WAS 2020, the month was April. America was 244 years old, and the struggle for control over an American symbol of freedom was far from over. From Olympia, Washington, to Lansing, Michigan, Gadsden flag-carrying protesters railed against COVID-19 stay-at-home orders handed down by state governments. Ammon Bundy, son of the Nevada rancher, even sermonized about the flag in Emmett, Idaho, where he had gathered a group of people who deemed the virus harmless and the restrictions tyrannical.

“On the Gadsden flag we have a snake, and it says, ‘Don’t tread on me.’ We’re gonna flip that

around. What we want to become, what we will become, we are going to be like a den of rattlesnakes,” Bundy said. “We will be so venomous if our rights are even threatened one bit!”

The way the flag was being embraced by extremists reminded Morigeau, the Montana representative, of the fight to remove the Confederate monument in Helena — as if it was another chapter in the same book. Like that monument — erected long after the war’s end, far from any Civil War battlefield — the Gadsden flag has come to function as an extremist dog whistle: “Things can take on new meaning. It can be used as a tool,” he said. “Some people are trying to take liberty and defiance to the extreme.”

“There’s a moment where we have to step up, too, and talk about the real history on this and not let these people... make it a symbol of hate,” he told me. “I might just go buy a damn flag now and put a sticker on my car because of this conversation.”

Later that day, Morigeau texted me an Amazon link for a \$6.99 vinyl Gadsden flag sticker. “A great way to showcase your political views!” the description read. By the next week, he’d affixed it to the window of his pickup. He texted me a photo, along with a note: “I’m not going to let the Tea Party repurpose a flag and tread on its universal meaning.”

In Montana, conversations about the flag often do come down to car decorations. In 2017, Montana became the only state in the West to offer

residents the option to put a bright yellow “Don’t Tread on Me” specialty license plate on their vehicle. As of March 2020, nearly 2,800 Montanans had one. The plate was the creation of a Billings nonprofit called the 1776 Foundation, which is focused on upholding “traditional American values, historic civil liberties, the Montana Constitution and the Constitution of the United States of America.” The organization — which did not respond to multiple requests for comment from High Country News — earned \$61,000 from the plates in 2019 alone.

The nonprofit is the work of Jacob Eaton, a combat veteran and campaign manager for Republican Rep. Greg Gianforte’s gubernatorial run. Eaton served as the executive director of the Montana GOP until 2008, when he stepped down in a flurry of controversy after unsuccessfully challenging the validity of 6,000 voter registrations — particularly of Indigenous people and residents of liberal-leaning counties — in federal court. The state GOP backed off, but not before U.S. District Court Judge Donald Molloy took a swing at Eaton: “One can imagine the mischief an immature political operative could inject into an election cycle,” he wrote, “were he to use the statutes, not for their intended purpose of protecting the integrity of the people’s democracy, but rather

to execute a tawdry political ploy.”

Around the state, the Gadsden plates are perceived as a symbol loaded with conflicting messages — even to those who know the emblem’s history. A member of a proud military family, William “Bill” Snell Jr., who lives in Billings, Montana, and is an enrolled Crow tribal member, grew up respecting the Gadsden flag. And even though his reverence for the flag is lifelong, Snell says he would not fly one — or put the plate on his car. “I think people would label me. And I really don’t need that,” he said. “I would definitely fly some other flags, including tribal flags, but that particular flag I probably wouldn’t, just because of the misinterpretation it might bring to me and my family.”

Still, his attitude toward the flag might help explain its persistence, and its ominous warning. “It demonstrates strength; it demonstrates authority,” Snell said. “To me, it indicates that whole philosophy that everything is good, but don’t mess with us in a bad way. ... If you see a nail, don’t step on it. Because there’s a consequence. There’s always a consequence.”

This article was originally published in the June 2020 High Country News. Leah Sottile is a correspondent at High Country News. She writes from Portland, Oregon.



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