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A Union Divided: South Split on U.S. Civil War Legacy

By Claire Suddath

In 1867, former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest became the first Grand Wizard of a newly formed organization called the Ku Klux Klan. Forrest had been a slave trader before the Civil War; he was also the commanding officer during a battle known as the "Fort Pillow massacre" in Tennessee at which some 300 black Union troops were killed in 1864. (Whether they died in combat or were killed after they surrendered is still a matter of dispute.)

Now, in honor of the Civil War's 150th anniversary, the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) are seeking to put Forrest on a Mississippi license plate. But the state government opposes it. When asked to comment on the proposal, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, a Republican, told the Associated Press, "It won't become law because I won't sign it." ([See a history of photographing the nation's war dead.](#))

Barbour's reaction is just one sign that things have changed since the South commemorated the Civil War's centennial in 1961. Back then, much of the South was still segregated — and many people, including Mississippi's then Governor Ross Barnett, were fighting to keep it that way. State and local governments took an active role in Confederate celebrations, using them to promote their causes. When the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, a group sponsored by the federal government, held its inaugural event in a Charleston, S.C., hotel, Madaline Williams, a delegate from the New Jersey legislature, was denied entry because she was black. For this year's anniversary, there is no such commission.

And in February of this year, when a Jefferson Davis impersonator was sworn in on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol for a re-enactment of the Confederate States of America's 1861 presidential inauguration, Alabama officials stayed away. Similarly, a December "Secession Ball" held in Charleston drew protests and a candlelight vigil by the NAACP. ([See pictures of the Cold War's influence on art.](#))

This year's Civil War anniversary caps a decade in which Southern institutions have struggled mightily with the racial undertones of their Confederate monuments. In 2001 Georgia redesigned its state flag, shrinking the Confederate battle emblem that had adorned it since 1956. Six years later, it removed the symbol altogether. The University of Mississippi — the same school that endured riots when James Meredith became the school's first African-American student in 1962 — ditched its mascot Colonel Rebel, a plantation owner, in 2003. And last November, a federal appellate court upheld a Tennessee school district's ban on Confederate-themed clothing.

As much of the South continues to distance itself from its racially divisive past, the organizations fighting to maintain the prominence of Confederate symbols are pushed further right of the mainstream. Nonetheless, the SCV plans several highly publicized events over the next four years, as various Civil War–related anniversaries come up. The club has 840 local chapters across 29 states, plus Europe and Australia. It was founded in 1896; aspiring members must prove direct relation to a former Confederate veteran in order to join. The SCV openly denounces the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups that use the Confederate flag as a racist symbol. Former President Harry S. Truman and Clint Eastwood are often cited as members. ([See a TIME Q&A on how America fights its wars.](#))

But even as the SCV rejects traditional symbols of racism, it provokes debate with its promotion of contentious Civil War leaders like Forrest. "Robert E. Lee has been replaced as the great [Confederate] hero by Nathan Bedford Forrest by these Southern white heritage groups," says Mark Potok, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, which investigates extremist groups. Lee owned slaves, Potok says, but "he was very much a statesman, and at the end of the Civil War, he encouraged Southerners to rejoin the Union in heart and soul. Forrest was very much *not* like that. The fact that they want to honor him specifically says a lot about what they stand for."

Chuck Rand, a member of the SCV, calls any assumption that the Forrest license plate is racist a "knee-jerk reaction" by people who don't understand the "real causes" of the Civil War. Or, as he calls it, "The war for Southern independence." But critics point out that slavery isn't addressed in these commemorations. The group's re-enactment of Davis' inauguration took place near Martin Luther King Jr.'s old Montgomery, Ala., church and the spot where Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat in 1955. But during the event, there was no mention of the South's racial history.

The SCV's controversial events often make the news, but its perspective on the war and its causes doesn't get much traction. In December, the History Channel refused to run one of the SCV's [commercials](#), which blamed the North for slavery, claiming that slaves were essentially forced onto Southern plantation owners. Another commercial, also refused by the History Channel, claimed that the Civil War was "not a civil war ... [but] a war in which Southerners fought to defend their homes

and families against an aggressive invasion by federal troops." ([Comment on this story.](#))

"Lincoln waged a war to conquer his neighbor," Rand explains. "In our view, he was an aggressor against another nation, just as Hitler was an aggressor against other nations." Most people, Southern or otherwise, are not likely to agree with such an inflammatory statement, but the sentiment underlying Rand's assertion has deep roots. "Coming out of the experience of the Civil War and Southern Reconstruction, there was a sense of wounded pride and grievance," says James Cobb, a history professor at the University of Georgia and the author of *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. But even if racism, intolerance and discrimination still plague the South — as they do the rest of the country — the sense of regional separateness on those issues has largely diminished. "Time has passed," says Cobb. "To uphold the Confederacy in this way has become a fairly extreme position."

Extreme or not, the SCV isn't giving up the fight. The group pledges to advance its cause through parades, advertisements and the battle for commemorative license plates. The South may never rise again, Rand admits, but that doesn't mean it has to disappear completely. "The North is a direction," he says. "The South is a place."

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