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What I Saw of the Rally: A Few Observations from the Confederate Flag Protests

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Abstract

The normally quiet town of Gettysburg was once more disrupted by battle when two groups of protesters went head-to-head over the memory of the Confederate flag. Since the tumult and confusion of that fateful Saturday two weeks ago, many have weighed in on the day's events with varying degrees of accuracy and distorted perceptions of reality. The following is my account. [*excerpt*]

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

What I Saw of the Rally: A Few Observations from the Confederate Flag Protests

March 18, 2016

By Jeff Lauck '18

The normally quiet town of Gettysburg was once more disrupted by battle when two groups of protesters went head-to-head over the memory of the Confederate flag. Since the tumult and confusion of that fateful Saturday two weeks ago, many have weighed in on the day's events with varying degrees of accuracy and distorted perceptions of reality. The following is my account.

I first heard about the pro-flag rally a couple months ago when the Gettysburg chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans received a permit to protest on the Gettysburg National Military Park grounds. I did not think much of it, mostly because my spring break was scheduled to begin the day before the rally. About a week later, I learned that there would be a counter protest against the Confederate flag. This seemed a worthy reason to push back my spring break plans by one day.

We gathered near [the Lincoln statue outside Stevens Hall](#), inspired by the statue's intent to serve as a forum for discussion on our nation's continued problems with race relations. There were about 20 of us, holding signs with slogans like "Heritage of Hate" and "The Battle is Over! Surrender the Flag!" Dr. Scott Hancock, a professor of history and Africana studies at Gettysburg College, reminded us that the "flaggers" were exercising their freedom of speech, just as we would be. When speaking about the flag, he encouraged us to say that we supported a more holistic interpretation of the flag, one that included the centrality of slavery to the Confederacy and the flag's use by many white supremacist groups since the end of the war. After taking a photo in front of the Lincoln statue, we marched over a mile up to the Eternal Light Peace Memorial where the flag rally was to be held.



After gathering at the Lincoln statue, we marched up to the Peace Light, getting honks of approval from cars that drove by. Photograph by the author.

When we arrived at the top of the hill, we saw that there were two demonstration areas set up by the National Park Service. The Sons of Confederate Veterans stood behind a police barricade to the left of the Peace Light. Fifty yards away, anti-flag protesters stood behind their own police barricade. We were not the only group who showed up to oppose the flag rally. Roughly 20 other people were already there dressed mostly in black and covering their faces with balaclavas and bandanas. They organized their demonstration via Facebook and came from all over the region – Baltimore, Reading, Frederick, Altoona, Carlisle, and Washington D.C. – and had no leader or name. Wielding black flags and megaphones, they shouted chants like “The South will not rise again! Your heritage is hate!” and “Hey hey! Ho ho! Your racism has got to go!” Other chants were not so polite. Those who had megaphones frequently hurled expletives at the pro-flag demonstrators, much to the chagrin of many attendees on both sides. These remarks were invariably answered by similar language from the pro-flaggers, but their words could not penetrate the wall of noise from the megaphones.



*Facebook activists from all over the region also showed up to protest the Confederate flag rally.
Photograph by the author.*

At first, I could not help but feel a little angry at this hodgepodge group who seemingly had hijacked our quiet and peaceful anti-flag protest. I knew that the efforts of the silent anti-flag demonstrators that I had marched up with would be undermined by the fact that now our entire side would be entirely identified as a bunch of ill-mannered activists. It wasn't until a few days later that their message really set in for me. They had shown up to demonstrate their freedom of speech, just like myself and the pro-flaggers on the other side. These radical protesters used that freedom to insult Confederate flag sympathizers with foul language and ad hominem attacks. Simply put, they were being offensive in an entirely legal way. The same could be said of the pro-flag demonstrators, as they too demonstrated their First Amendment right to proudly display a flag that to many Americans is an offensive symbol of oppression and hatred. The black-clad protesters had effectively turned the tables on the flaggers.

Needless to say, the flaggers did not like that very much. Nor did they get the irony. By the next day, Facebook posts and "news" articles were denouncing the anti-flag protesters collectively as a bunch of rowdy delinquents from Gettysburg College who had come to upset the peaceful and otherwise good-natured Confederate rally. This was simply not the case.

I decided to talk to a few of the Facebook activists to listen to their thoughts on the flag and their counter-protest. "It all makes me feel bad that I have to fight for freedom," remarked one. "The flag means that someone is more superior to others. It represents oppression and hate – not freedom," she continued. "Now it represents ignorance and turning a blind eye," another added.

Both were optimistic about a future in which the flag would be understood as a symbol of hatred and oppression. “One day we won’t have to stand out against this. Hopefully we’ll be able to come here and just enjoy the park,” one said with a laugh.

One of my motivations for attending was to try and understand why hundreds of people would come out on a cold, damp Saturday to support the Confederate flag. With this curiosity, I ventured across no man’s land to get the perspectives of some of the pro-flag demonstrators. In doing so, I came across an older woman standing between the two barricades holding an American flag. She stood as still as a monument, the flag slowly waving in the light breeze. She said she was standing there to remind people on both sides that we are a united nation, that “we are Americans first, Democrats and Republicans, Northerners and Southerners second.” She told me that the flag belonged to her father who served at Okinawa and was the same flag that he was buried with.



A woman stands with her father’s WWII burial flag, reminding protesters on both sides that we are, after all, a united nation and have been for over 150 years. Photograph by the author.

With that fresh breath of reconciliationism, I plunged deep into the depths of the Confederate flaggers. I walked up to a man in a Union officer’s frock. He was flanked by a man dressed in a Confederate officer’s coat. The two men, who identified themselves as Union General John Newton and Confederate General Isaac Trimble, were there with two women who were also dressed in period attire. Together, the group spoke to me about why they attended the pro-flag rally. “The Confederate flag was originally for states’ rights over the federal government,” one person said. “It’s part of our nation’s history.” “It gave the soldiers an identity,” another chimed in. These answers did not surprise me. I could have expected their arguments just as easily as I could have predicted the comparisons between the swastika and the Confederate flag made by

the other side. “The Confederates didn’t want the flag to be a racist flag,” another told me “Lincoln made it a racist flag.” I asked for an elaboration. “The government needed a way to retaliate against states standing up for their rights, so they did so by saying they were racists. Lincoln made the war about slavery, but the Emancipation Proclamation was only a war aim. Lincoln did nothing about slavery in the Northern states.” In the background, people around me began to sing “Dixie.”



Generals John Newton and Isaac Trimble lock hands across the symbolic chasm between the countries they represent. Photograph by the author.

The next person I spoke with was a young man waving a Confederate flag and wearing a Confederate flag bandana. He had driven over 4 hours from western Virginia to show up and support his ancestors in the 29th Virginia. “We have a right to be here,” he said. “We’re here peacefully,” he continued, undoubtedly a dig at the anti-flag protesters that could be heard loud and clear from the other side of the barricade. By now, the anti-flag protesters had begun chanting “Black Lives Matter,” only to be answered by “All Lives Matter” chants from the pro-flag side. The man I was talking with picked up on the war of chants and took our discussion in a determinably political direction. “The Left wants to put everything we do down. Black lives? What about police lives? Obama ignores it and Michael Brown gets all the attention,” he said, in reference to [the unarmed black teenager killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014](#).

While not explicitly partisan in nature, the rally and protest were marked by more than a few comments regarding our nation’s current political theater. It seemed as if both sides supported the First Amendment very strongly, while simultaneously believing that their freedom of speech was under siege from those on the left or the right. Anti-flag protesters frequently made comments about Donald Trump and the continued legacy of racism in America. Pro-flag

demonstrators responded by telling protesters that “the Bernie Sanders rally is over there!” while pointing to the college. One of the black-clad protesters asked me if there was still a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society on campus (there is not). At times, it was difficult to tell whether many of the other protesters even cared about the Civil War at all. They seemed more interested in protesting the hateful rhetoric of 2016 than the legacy of a flag from the 1860s.

We are still fighting the Civil War. This little skirmish that broke out beneath the Peace Light proves that. While blood is rarely spilt and the only weapons in that fight today are the tongue and the keyboard, we cannot escape the battle over the war’s memory. The fight to control the war’s legacy, as well as the meaning of its symbols, goes on and on.

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