

## THE CONFEDERATE BATTLE FLAG AND THE ORANGE ORDER

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During the summer of 1996, attacks were made on the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the national police force in Northern Ireland, by members of the Orange Order, a major Protestant political organization supporting the continuation of British rule in Northern Ireland. The issue which set off this particular round of rioting was a decision by the authorities, for the first time, to prevent Protestant parade groups from marching through Catholic neighborhoods in Portadown and Belfast.

Every summer Northern Ireland Protestants commemorate historic events associated with Protestant dominance of Northern Ireland with a series of parades and celebrations culminating on the 12th of July, in memory of the decisive victory which William of Orange enjoyed over Irish Catholics on that date in 1690, at the Battle of the Boyne. Prior to 1996, government policy was to deploy police units to protect Orange Order parade groups from Catholic retaliation as they march through sectarian urban ghettos.

From the point of view of Orange Order members, this policy was justifiable on the ground that Northern Ireland is their country, and they ought to be able to celebrate their heritage wherever they please in their own land. The practice of deliberately targeting Catholic neighborhoods for parade routes is, however, a self-consciously in-your-face assertion of dominance over the Catholic minority. But in 1996 government authorities in Belfast and London publicly acknowledged the deliberately confrontational aspects of this practice, and for three days attempted to put an end to it, despite fervent and sometimes violent opposition of a segment of Northern Ireland's Protestant community. Unfortunately, on July 11, against the protestations of both the Catholic minority and more conciliatory Protestant organizations in Northern Ireland, the government capitulated to the increasingly ugly mood of militant Protestants and permitted over a thousand members of the Orange Order to march through the main Catholic neighborhood in Portadown (once again under police escort).

A year later, in July, 1997, a similar confrontation was avoided when Orange Order authorities voluntarily rerouted their parades to avoid the more incendiary Catholic neighborhoods which they had traversed in Belfast, Portadown, and Derry during previous years. But this decision met with fury and scorn from many Orange Order members, producing a less conciliatory parade policy in 1998. That reversal was met in turn with a (government) Parade Commission decision to ban marching in one particularly contentious parade route in Portadown. Although the government stood its ground on that ban, concerning a parade held on July 5<sup>th</sup>, the ensuing Protestant violence led the government to then reverse its ban against parade access to Lower Ormeau Road on July 12<sup>th</sup>, a Catholic neighborhood in Belfast which had in years past proven to be a flash point for sectarian violence occasioned by the traditional parade route. (As it transpired, the parade through that neighborhood proved to be relatively subdued that particular year, thanks to the funereal pall enveloping both sides of the nationalist/loyalist divide after mounting sectarian violence culminated in the deaths of three Catholic children during the early morning hours of July 11<sup>th</sup>.) Each year since 1998, the government has maintained its forced blockade of the portion of the Portadown parade route which used to traverse a Catholic neighborhood on Garvaghy Road. But most other parades have continued along their traditional routes, under continuing political tensions.

When we reflect on the fervor with which many white South Carolinians insisted that the Confederate Battle Flag should remain over the State House (prior to the “compromise” of 2000), the analogy with these recent events in Northern Ireland should be obvious. The display of the Battle Flag, conceived as a symbol of various aspects of the heritage of white Southerners, is of course much less directly confrontational than Orange Order parades. No one is demanding that government authority be used to protect militant crackers who might choose to march the Battle Flag through black neighborhoods in South Carolina cities and towns. Nonetheless, this difference is somewhat offset by the fact that the flag display, both pre- and post-compromise, is directly state-sponsored, while Orange Order parades are not. By demanding that the flag remain flying over the seat of state government, or failing that, that it be displayed prominently on State House grounds, many white South Carolinians were effectively saying that government authority ought to give special recognition to a particular dimension of South Carolina’s history, regardless of the offense that recognition might understandably give to other segments of our pluralistic society.

Whether we like it or not, the truth is that the Confederate Battle Flag has many negative connotations as well as positive ones. It is associated not only with eloquent defenses of states' rights and local cultural autonomy, but also with racism, the KKK, Jim Crow laws, and slavery. The symbolism of the legislature's 1962 decision to run it up the State House flagpole, just when federal courts were beginning to dismantle the social and political institutions of segregation, was not lost on black South Carolinians. Consequently, the appeal to "heritage, not hate" rings hollow in many people's ears.

Most Northern Ireland Catholics are not members of the IRA, and most members of the Orange Order have nothing to do with Protestant terrorism either. Similarly, most Battle Flag supporters are not virulent racists. But just as there is willful blindness, and some deliberate maliciousness, on the part of Orange Order members who insist on celebrating their heritage by marching the symbols of King Billy and the Protestant Ascendancy through Catholic neighborhoods, we too wear blinders here in South Carolina, and exhibit some malice, by insisting that the Battle Flag be given special recognition by our state government.

While the message implicit in keeping the Battle Flag over the State House may not be "heritage *and* hate," even under the best case scenario it is a message of heritage and blind indifference to the sensibilities of our fellow-citizens. For the subtext here is the same as it is in Northern Ireland: if you don't like symbolic governmental ratification of (or at least sympathetic protection of) majoritarian cultural preeminence, you can go live "across the border" as the case suits, in the Republic of Ireland, or in some northern city. (Chicago? Detroit?)

The elimination of Protestant parade routes through Catholic neighborhoods in Northern Ireland's cities and towns would not eliminate opportunities for Ulster Protestants to celebrate their heritage—in Orange Order Lodge Houses and in Protestant neighborhoods where they are welcome. But it would recognize, and respect, the fact that there is some cultural pluralism in Northern Ireland. Even though the issue has not yet been settled, one thing can be said about the 1996 shift in attitude: it finally matters in Ulster that indirect state support for one particularly obnoxious form of communal celebration is deeply offensive to a third of the polity.

Removing the Battle Flag from the South Carolina State House might have been symbolic of the elimination of the last vestiges of majoritarian tyranny in South Carolina where, similarly, almost a third of the polity (*at least*) was offended by the flag's presence there. (South Caro-

lina is 29.5% black, according to 2000 census figures.) Unfortunately, the opportunity to provide evidence of legislative respect for our own brand of cultural pluralism, a recognition of the importance of sensitivity to the feelings of all our citizens, and not just those of the majority, has been squandered by the South Carolina General Assembly.

By moving the Battle Flag from the State House dome, only to situate it in an even more prominent place on the State House grounds, the majority of South Carolina legislators have opted for a gesture of defiance rather than one of reconciliation. There are plenty of inoffensively voluntary venues for celebrations of the form of Southern heritage these legislators profess to value, such as Civil War re-enactment camps (which are frequent and popular here in the Charleston area), Southern writers' conferences, historical museums, and some historically significant state and federal parks. The alleged compromise, bound as it was to give offense to a large segment of the South Carolina electorate, was just another way to remind everybody living in this state "just who is still in charge around here." It has been the moral equivalent of local Orange Order chapters marching up to the police barricades which prevent access to the Garvaghy Road neighborhood in Portadown, and effectively jeering at their neighbors (and, of course, at the police). There's more than one way to express contempt for the sensibilities of your neighbors, and to symbolize the political dominance of one group over another.