

Heritage or Hate?

The battle over the Confederate flag: Should it be banned at school?

by Rebecca Zissou

YES

After months of seeing Jacob Green pull up to Millennium High School in Arizona with a Confederate flag hanging from his pickup truck, a classmate spoke up. The offended student confronted Jacob at school, and they got into a fight over the rebel flag. Both boys were suspended for a week, and school officials told Jacob that he couldn't bring the flag onto campus.

To many people, Confederate flags—which Southern troops carried into battle during the Civil War (1861-1865)—represent racial oppression and resistance to civil rights. They point out that one of the main reasons the Confederacy fought the Union was to preserve slavery. Critics of the rebel flag say that it shows a lack of respect and tolerance for African-Americans. If the flag weren't a racist symbol, they add, hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan wouldn't wave it.

Dennis Runyan, the superintendent of Millennium High, says that school officials have a right to ban the flag because they have a responsibility to maintain order. The Confederate flag "has been proven to be patently offensive," he says. It created "an environment [that] was disruptive."

NO

Supporters of the Confederate flag insist that it isn't a symbol of racial intolerance. Instead, they say, it represents their desire to limit the role of the federal government—a cause they say they share with the Confederacy.

"I'm not a racist person," says Jacob. "The flag means . . . more independence, less government. It didn't mean racism, it didn't mean slavery. [Southerners] were fighting for . . . their right to be independent and not have the government control them."

Others say that banning students from displaying Confederate flags at school violates their First Amendment right to freedom of expression. They say teens who are proud of their Southern heritage should be able to show it. Besides, they say, not everyone in the Confederacy supported slavery.

Michael Givens of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a Tennessee group that works to preserve Confederate history, says that the flag pays tribute to the 340,000 Southern troops who died fighting for what they believed in.

"The soldiers of the South fought to defend their homes and families," he tells JS. "The flag represents their . . . struggle for liberty."

The flag is a symbol of Southern pride.

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