



# The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem

By John M. Coski

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In recent years, the Confederate flag has become as much a news item as a Civil War relic. Intense public debates have erupted over Confederate flags flying atop state capitols, being incorporated into state flags, waving from dormitory windows, or adorning the T-shirts and jeans of public school children. To some, this piece of cloth is a symbol of white supremacy and enduring racial injustice; to others, it represents a rich Southern heritage and an essential link to a glorious past. Polarizing Americans, these "flag wars" reveal the profound--and still unhealed--schisms that have plagued the country since the Civil War.

*The Confederate Battle Flag* is the first comprehensive history of this contested symbol. Transcending conventional partisanship, John Coski reveals the flag's origins as one of many banners unfurled on the battlefields of the Civil War. He shows how it emerged as the preeminent representation of the Confederacy and was transformed into a cultural icon from Reconstruction on, becoming an aggressively racist symbol only after World War II and during the Civil Rights movement. We gain unique insight into the fine line between the flag's use as a historical emblem and as an invocation of the Confederate nation and all it stood for. Pursuing the flag's conflicting meanings, Coski suggests how this provocative artifact, which has been viewed with pride, fear, anger, nostalgia, and disgust, might ultimately provide Americans with the common ground of a shared and complex history.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

Few emblems in American history have provoked stronger passions than the battle flag of the vanquished Confederacy. To some it symbolizes honor and independence; to others, hatred and slavery. This highly charged icon has finally found the fair and fact-based treatment it so desperately needs. John Coski probes every aspect of the flag's complex history, from Civil War to Civil Rights, from rebel icon to NASCAR kitsch. As readable as it is incisive, *The Confederate Battle Flag* shows how reactions to the banner have revealed fault lines in our culture from Appomattox to the present day. (Tony Horwitz, author of *Confederates in the Attic*)

At last we have a dispassionate history of that passionate symbol, the Confederate battle flag. John Coski has dispelled myths held by both supporters and opponents of the public display of the flag. Blending cultural history and the history of memory in a lucid manner, he has written a definitive account of the numerous 'flag wars' in both South and North during the past century and more. (James M. McPherson, author of *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*)

This book is a sorely-needed and unique achievement--a deeply researched, scholarly treatment of the Confederate battle flag and its many meanings over time. With an engaging writing style fully accessible to general readers, with international sweep, and with great sensitivity, Coski brilliantly shows that the battle flag is the 'second American flag,' fraught with both racism and endless popular uses across borders that no one can expect to control. (David W. Blight, author of *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*)

This splendid book is more than timely--it's long overdue. Coski shows how a flag originally designed to avoid confusion has become a sort of Rorschach blot. It still identifies partisans, but often they seem to be fighting different wars. Whatever the flag means to you (valor, bigotry, and boogie-till-you-puke are just three of the possibilities) you'll learn something here. (John Shelton Reed, co-author of *1001 Things Everyone Should Know About the South*)

Coski presents a cogent history of the Confederate flag and the controversies surrounding it in the post-Civil War era...While some see it as emblematic of racism, to others it represents historic tradition. (Grant A. Fredericksen *Library Journal* 2005-04-01)

In his comprehensive new book, John M. Coski chronicles the rich history of the so-called second American flag...[He passes] along a plethora of surprising stories, anecdotes, economic statistics, and editorial quotations regarding the flag. As a result, Mr. Coski's book is ultimately worth reading. Mr. Coski's meticulously researched book boils down to a simple truth: The Confederate flag means different things to different people. (Felix Gillette *New York Sun* 2005-03-14)

John Coski...has given us the first documented consideration of the dispute over the appropriate use of what he calls 'the second American flag,' and he begins by dispelling a number of historical misconceptions about its origins and identity. (Edwin M. Yoder Jr. *Weekly Standard* 2005-05-02)

In his richly detailed book *The Confederate Battle Flag*, John M. Coski calls that very familiar symbol of the Old South 'America's most embattled emblem' and he is no doubt right. Is there any icon of the American

past more beloved and at the same time reviled than the star-studded diagonal blue cross against a red background...Mr. Coski's book is not just about recent debates over the flag. It is about its whole history. (Steve Goode *Washington Times* 2005-04-24)

No symbol in the past few decades has been more divisive than the Confederate battle flag. In his important new book, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, John M. Coski shows how it got that way. The battle flag, though not the official banner of the Confederacy, emerged over the course of the war as the sentimental favorite among Confederate soldiers and civilians alike. Coski takes the story forward from there, but his most important contribution is his recounting of the tumultuous story of the flag in the second half of the 20th century, when the civil rights movement emerged, setting loose a variety of groups that made competing claims over the meaning of the flag--and the meaning of the war...Coski's book will speak to the flag's opponents as well as its defenders, but his most inspired message is aimed at those cheerleaders who insist that the flag has one, unchanging, fundamentally benign meaning. He shows that the history of the flag is simply too complicated for anybody to reach such simplistic conclusions...The depth and breadth of his research give his book real authority, and future disputants on both sides will have to reckon with his clear, reliable conclusions. (Joseph Crespino *Washington Post Book World* 2005-05-22)

John M. Coski's history, *The Confederate Battle Flag*, brings some needed rationality to a debate driven by the raw emotion of soul injury. (Diane McWhorter *New York Times Book Review* 2005-04-03)

If you'd like to dazzle your friends at the next cookout with what you know about the much-misunderstood Confederate flag, Coski's book is for you...Go ahead. Bring up the subject of the flag and then stand back. But if you have Coski's book under your arm, you might be able to turn the debate into something more than just finger-pointing. (Linda Wheeler *Washington Post* 2005-08-11)

Whether you love or hate the flag, after reading Coski you will love it or hate it in a different way. (Theo Lippman Jr. *Savannah Morning News* 2005-07-23)

A book that explains its history has been long needed, and now John M. Coski has written a very good one which everyone on both sides of the controversy over the flag should read and appreciate. Coski provides a well-researched, clearly presented, and most important of all, scrupulously fair account of the history of the battle flag and the controversies surrounding it, one that avoids polemics and strives to be true to the historical record. *The Confederate Battle Flag* is a splendid example of how a careful scholar can contribute to an important public debate. (Gaines M. Foster *Civil War Book Review*)

This is a solid and well-researched book. Coski's work is very much in the spirit of...David Blight's *Race and Reunion*. It is another excellent look at the history of Confederate memory. (Richard R. Hourigan III *Southern Historian*)

John M. Coski has given us a well-researched, clearly written history of the Confederate battle flag and how it became "America's most embattled emblem."...From Mississippi to Georgia to South Carolina to Alabama and well beyond, Coski provides a meticulous account of the flag's rapid installation as an institutionalized emblem of recalcitrant racism and defiance of federal authority. (James C. Cobb *Journal of American History*)

John M. Coski has written the first full published assessment of the changing role played by the Confederate battle flag in American history. It is a thoughtful, methodical account of how the starred blue diagonal Cross of St. Andrew on a red field eventually came to be regarded as the preeminent symbol of the would-be southern nation...Coski argues convincingly that use of the emblem was relatively infrequent and

uncontroversial until it was adopted in semiofficial fashion by the 1948 Dixiecrat convention in Birmingham, Alabama. Thereafter the battle flag was associated closely in the public mind with the fight against integration--a linkage responsible for the so-called flag wars of recent years, the diversity and complexity of which Coski details with admirable clarity and fair-mindedness. (Robert Cook, *Journal of Southern History*)

The St. Andrew's cross battle flag--a star-studded blue diagonal cross on a red field--continues to this day to stir fierce emotions. In this deeply researched, dispassionately argued, and ultimately wise book, John M. Coski provides a careful history of that flag, its uses, abuses, and meanings...As the nation continues to debate the meaning of the Civil War, *The Confederate Battle Flag* provides badly needed historical and ethical clarity about one of the most provocative symbols of that war. (James L. Roark *Civil War History Journal*)

Coski does not move from a survey of "the modern debate" (which he shows to be several debates) into a discussion of the aspects calling for contextualization and analysis. Instead, he provides a biography of the battle flag from 1861 to the present. He carefully examines the claims about its history that have been sharply contested over the last fifteen years, but his narrative is most valuable for the wider perspective it offers in tracing the path by which the Confederate battle flag became a symbol prominent enough to sustain such vigorous controversies...This story provides a fresh background to the recent "flag wars" that Coski ably recounts in his final section. As he recognizes, these contests have taken a variety of forms that might be grouped into two basic categories. The first set has concerned the rights of individuals to display the emblem in schools or on license plates or in other regulated forums. The second set has revolved around governmental rather than individual expression, particularly in state flags or on statehouse grounds or at public schools and colleges...By moving analysis of the flag debates beyond the terms chosen by its participants, Coski achieves a stimulating success in his aim to help readers understand the controversies. (Thomas J. Brown *South Carolina Historical Magazine*)

The battle flag is enigmatic, its history has been clouded by political debate, and it is often referred to, erroneously, as the "Stars and Bars." John M. Coski's analysis of the flag's history, its uses, and its various meanings, therefore, is both welcome and needed. (Karen L. Cox *American Historical Review* 2006-10-01)

Utilizing contemporary sources through newspapers and magazine articles, as well as primary sources such as diaries, Coski has produced a fascinating work delivered with a remarkable absence of passion involving a topic that generates seemingly little else...Coski has performed a valuable service in shining a dispassionate and informing light on the topic. (Robert Sampson *H-Net Online* 2007-10-09)

#### Review

Few emblems in American history have provoked stronger passions than the battle flag of the vanquished Confederacy. To some it symbolizes honor and independence; to others, hatred and slavery. This highly charged icon has finally found the fair and fact-based treatment it so desperately needs. John Coski probes every aspect of the flag's complex history, from Civil War to Civil Rights, from rebel icon to NASCAR kitsch. As readable as it is incisive, *The Confederate Battle Flag* shows how reactions to the banner have revealed fault lines in our culture from Appomattox to the present day. (Tony Horwitz, author of *Confederates in the Attic*)

#### About the Author

John M. Coski is Historian and Library Director at The Museum of the Confederacy.

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