

“You’re Dixie’s Football Pride”: American College Football and the Resurgence of Southern Identity

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The end of the American Civil War began a lengthy period of Southern inferiority vis-à-vis the North—a period so lengthy that some Southerners argue that it lasts to this day. Not until Woodrow Wilson’s election in 1913 did the United States have a Southern-born president after the Civil War. Southerners sought novel means to assert some degree of superiority over their Northern neighbors. College football became a primary means of reasserting a Southern sense of identity and superiority. In inter-regional games in the 1920s and 1930s, the martial spirit of college football allowed Southerners to reassert their sense of honor, which had been maligned since defeat in the Civil War. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown (1982) has shown, the concept of honor defined Southern males’ outlook; secession from the Union and civil war occurred when Southerners perceived Abraham Lincoln’s election to the Presidency as the culmination of anti-slavery assaults upon their honor. Such racial definitions of Southern identity became problematic as the civil rights movement gained impetus in the 1950s and 1960s. To remain competitive with teams from other regions, Southern football teams began to recruit black players; The University of Alabama fielded its first black football player in 1971. However, transition from segregation to inclusion has not been easy. Symbols of white Southern pride highlight lingering racial difficulties, as a 1997 controversy over use of the “Rebels” nickname and fans’ waving of the Confederate battle flag at The University of Mississippi illustrates. Controversies like this raise troubling questions about Southern identity, namely “Whose South is it?” and “Can expressions of Southern nationalist feelings possibly escape racial implications?”

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“Alabama is football; football is Alabama” (Ebinger 13 May 2001). This statement from former University of Alabama head football coach Ray Perkins epitomizes how the sport of football—and particularly college football—is an integral part of the culture of not only the state of Alabama, but also the rest of the American South. The South also possesses a national reputation for producing quality football teams as well: The University of Alabama and three teams from the state of Florida won outright or shared a total of five national football championships in the 1990s. How has this marriage of football and Southern culture come to pass?

The answer can be found in the early twentieth century adaptation of the ethic of Southern honor, that was born before the American Civil War, to the warlike arena of the football field, as Southerners looked to the sport as a source of pride where feelings of defeat were still strong.

Indeed, the end of the American Civil War and the defeat of the Confederacy only served to confirm the stereotype of a South which was economically, politically, and socially backward. Southerners were sensitive to this perceived inferiority before the Civil War, and in the 1850s, at least one prominent editor exhorted his fellow Southerners to improve this image as well as the reality of the South's economic and political standing vis-à-vis the North. In 1852, J. D. B. DeBow reprinted in *DeBow's Review* a resolution of the 1838 Southern Commercial Convention, where the delegates, who were mainly from South Carolina and Georgia, expressed "deep regret" over "the neglect of all commercial pursuits which has hitherto prevailed among the youth of our country, and which has necessarily thrown its most important interests into the hands of those who, by feeling and habit, are led into commercial connections elsewhere" ("Commercial Independence", November 1852: 477, 479). In 1860, J. A. Turner wrote with frustration in the same journal that Southerners were yielding their economic power—and, implicitly, political power—on a daily basis: "How many of us are guilty of the gross inconsistency of *professing to be ultra Southern Rights' men*, and still *invariably employing Northern teachers and mechanics, in preference to Southerners!*" (July 1860: 73–74; emphasis in original).

The South was not diversified economically; agriculture was the chief pursuit and, despite the exhortations of some, the situation did not change. Even a Northern-born transplant to the region, Daniel Pratt, who came from New Hampshire to Alabama and made a fortune manufacturing cotton gins, tried to convince his neighbors of the need for economic diversification during the antebellum years of sectional tension, but he did so in vain. He relied primarily on Northern investors to build and expand his business (Evans 2001: 66–67). Southern planters tended to eschew risky investments in industry after the economic depression of the 1830s; for example, planters controlled only seven percent of Alabama's manufacturing capital in 1860 (Evans 2001: 175, 177). Thus the South had not developed economically as quickly as the North had, and the image of a backward region would survive.

The aftermath of the Civil War saw Southerners become more sensitive about their political and economic status within the nation. As C. Vann Woodward (1951: 50) pointed out, Southern political leaders chose "the eastern alignment" toward Reconstruction; in other words, they encouraged Northern industrialists and financiers to bring badly needed capital into the region. This support came at a high cost, as these industrial and financial interests gained powerful influence over state politics, particularly in Alabama's case. Horace Mann Bond, in his study of education in Alabama, documented the marriage between Northern capitalists and post-Civil War Republican and Democratic governments. As late as 1940, the federal

government reported that the South was basically an "economic colony of the Northeast" (Bond 1994: 35–62; Bartley 1995: 3). Southerners in their predominantly agricultural region indeed felt like colonials in their own country. Their sense of inferiority was intensified by the fact that no Southerner was president of the United States after the Civil War until Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated in 1913; after his two terms, no Southerner held the office again until Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed it in 1963 following John F. Kennedy's assassination. Southern demoralization became seemingly engrained over time. Wilbur J. Cash, a Southerner himself, described the figure of the archetypal Southerner as someone hardly innovative and confident; indeed, this typical Southerner was characterized by "violence, intolerance, aversion and suspicion toward new ideas, an incapacity for analysis, an inclination to act from feeling rather than from thought, [and] an exaggerated individualism and a too narrow sense of social responsibility" (1941: 439). Thus, lacking political power and social esteem, Southerners sought new ways to prove their superiority to Northerners. In the 1920s and 1930s, college football became a novel means for Southerners to rekindle their sense of honor in a sport rich with martial images and language.

Alabama redeems Southern honor

The University of Alabama's football team, known as the "Crimson Tide," became the leading source of regional pride beginning in the 1920s and 1930s. It became the first Southern team to win intersectional games versus powerful Northern and Western teams. In 1922, the team won a dramatic upset over the University of Pennsylvania's squad and from 1926 to 1931, the Tide had a record of two wins and one tie in the oldest and most prestigious postseason match, the Rose Bowl. With each of these triumphs, Alabamians and Southerners in general campaigned for nationwide respect for the valor and athletic skill of their young men. As we shall see, the racial terms in which Alabama supporters and Southern journalists expressed their Southern identity and pride became problematic beginning in the 1960s, when Southern blacks demanded equal access to public universities and racially integrated teams from other regions enjoyed greater success over all-white Southern teams. Legendary Alabama head coach Paul "Bear" Bryant integrated his team in 1970 to regain a national competitive edge, embodying the spirit of the more inclusive New South. Vestiges of the South's slaveholding Confederate past still highlight racial divisions. At another Southern state university, the University of Mississippi (known as "Ole Miss"), the team's nickname, the "Rebels," and the waving of the Confederate battle flag by some of the team's supporters have inspired great debate as to how important racial diversity is to Southern identity.

The relationship of football to Southern identity and particularly to The University of Alabama is ironic since the sport was a Northern import. A student from Massachusetts originally introduced it to the Alabama campus in 1892. Northern influences continued as Alabama rose as a national power. Wallace Wade, the coach

who led Alabama to its first three Rose Bowl appearances, was a native of western Tennessee, but he learned the game as a player at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. His successor, Frank Thomas, who coached the Tide to a national championship in 1934, was from Illinois and had played at football power Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana, where he was a protégé of the great coach Knute Rockne.

Despite these Northern connections, Southerners hailed success on the football field as examples of virtue and strength of native sons. Indeed, the players themselves were for the most part representatives of the South. Of the forty-seven players on the 1935 team, only seven were born outside the South (Alabama Club Roster 1935). Only three out of twenty-eight players on the 1930 team were born outside the South (one from Connecticut, one from New York, and one from Arizona) (*The Alabama Crimson Tide* 1931: 6). So Alabamians could truly look at their team as their own, going to battle just as Confederate soldiers had done over sixty years previously.

Analogies between football and the Civil War cannot be overdrawn where the rise to national prominence of Alabama football is concerned. Sportswriter Bob Phillips of the *Birmingham Age-Herald* made such a direct comparison as Alabama prepared to face the powerful Washington State University Cougars in the 1931 Rose Bowl. Phillips (1930) asked in his column, "What is it that makes a Southern team so gosh darned hard to beat in an intersectional clash such as this Rose Bowl we're headed for?" The answer was a Southern "spirit," which original Northern college football powers like "Yale, Princeton, and Harvard" had "let go." He believed, "The idea is that they have the spirit of the soldiers of Lee who fought and almost won the War Between the States in the face of the greatest handicaps and hardships known in the history of wars. So, teams go to battle with the spirit of the Crusaders." He added, "Southern football teams are riding the crest inspired by a fanatical fervor that enables them to do the impossible," like traveling about 2,500 miles to the Pacific Coast by train and still finding the strength to win against West Coast powers, as not only Alabama had done in 1926 and 1931, but also had Georgia Tech when that team defeated the University of Southern California in the 1928 Rose Bowl (Phillips 1930). Fans shared the warlike spirit, as one Colonel Nelson, who was interviewed in a Memphis newspaper, was quoted after Alabama's 1926 Rose Bowl win over the University of Washington Huskies, "I feel just as proud today as if General Lee had been given General Grant's sword that day at Appomattox Court House. . . . Stonewall Jackson and Jeff Davis ought to be living today" (Millen, January 1926).

Phillips cited Head Coach Wallace Wade as a primary source of Alabama's fervor, as he used sectional language to motivate his players before and during games. Phillips wrote that Wade was a "very able 'before the battle speaker'" who would inspire his team to "do or die for old Dixie" and rise "to heights never before attained." Phillips supposed that "next will come the Rebel yell. And the reminder that the folks in Dixie are depending on them, praying for them to win"

(1930). Indeed, Wade appeared to be always conscious of his section's honor, reflecting after the Crimson Tide's first Rose Bowl appearance, "We were the South's baby" (Browning 1987: 13). His language indeed appeared to affect his players greatly. Running back Pooley Hubert reflected after that first Rose Bowl, "Coming home was the best part about it, because we had been out there representing the South" (Browning 1987: 13). As he prepared to coach his last Rose Bowl for Alabama on New Year's Day, 1931, he was lauded in the Southern press as the ideal man and natural leader of men. (Wade had accepted the head coaching position at Duke University effective after the 1931 Rose Bowl game.) He personified the ideal of the honorable Southern soldier and leader of men, having served in World War I as a captain in the United States Army's 117th Infantry (Blake, 6 January 1931; Wallace Wade 1931). According to Bertram Wyatt-Brown (2001: 198, 202), the ideal of honor could explain Southerners' pursuit of martial glory, especially in the Civil War, as men like Robert E. Lee felt a need to defend "their kinfolk, their state, and their region" against any perceived moral "attacks" from other sections, such as antebellum anti-slavery attacks. They thus reacted with strong language when they perceived that observers in other regions of the country did not properly respect their success in a game where they were asserting physical superiority.

For example, sportswriter Ed Danforth of the *Atlanta Constitution* reported that Wade upheld his section at the expense of the West Coast when a representative of a school there approached him about a possible coaching opportunity. Danforth explained, "Coach Wade told his interviewer he believed it easier to be a successful coach on the coast than in the South." He believed the Western teams to be rather soft and easy to defeat, as he added he would "rather play any six teams on the Pacific Coast than any six in the Southern Conference" (Danforth 23 December 1930).

Not only sportswriters but also other supporters of Alabama football evoked images of civil war and Southern honor in their descriptions of Alabama's football success. Alabama Governor Bibb Graves spoke in terms of region and honor in Tuscaloosa after the first Rose Bowl win, "The hearts of Dixie are beating with exultant pride. We are here to tell the whole world the Crimson Tide is our Tide and an Alabama troop of heroes. It upheld the honor of the Southland and came back to us undefeated" (Browning 1987: 32). In honor of the 1927 Rose Bowl tie against Stanford, J. H. Cooper contributed a poem to the *Tuscaloosa News* with a similar tone:

... But in the last quarter of play
 It looked as if Stanford had won the day.
 But Southern pride began to soar
 And the Crimson Tide made her score.

And the fans were held spell bound
 At the valor of the boys from a Southern town
 With Alabama's Crimson Tide and Stanford's eleven

To the world proclaiming from North to South; from sea to sea;
The prestige of Alabama's great University (Browning 1987: 23–24).

Finally, Danforth and another sportswriter, Morgan Blake of the *Atlanta Journal*, used martial terms to report Alabama's 1931 Rose Bowl victory. Danforth of the *Atlanta Constitution* penned, "Alabama's heavy infantry became a slashing, murderous troop of cavalry today. . . [and] cut to pieces a gigantic red-garbed eleven from the mountains of Washington" (Danforth 1931). Indeed, the "gigantic" Cougars of Washington State were made to appear like Goliaths against the David-like Alabamians (Danforth 4 January 1931). Meanwhile, Blake wrote (1 January 1931) "The Cavaliers of Dixie cut and slashed their way to a glorious victory." As Bertram Wyatt Brown points out, even in the twentieth century Southerners described the American Civil War with language related to the English Civil War. Robert Cave, for example, wrote in 1911 that the South, "led by the descendants of the Cavaliers," carried "a high sense of honor" and "a strong tendency to conservatism which New England Yankees lacked with their "corrupted 'Puritanism'" (Cave 1911: 96, as quoted in Wyatt-Brown 2001: 180).

Southern whites: Perceiving their racial and regional identity under siege

Of course, implicit in the allusions to the American Civil War and an ethic of honor is the fact that the South was being defined as a region in which whites were supreme and blacks were expected to keep a subservient position. Journalists from the region wrote many pages on the Southern mind in the early twentieth century. As journalist and author Clarence Cason stated in 1935, not long after the rise of the Alabama football team to national prominence, most white Southerners had "the deeply imbedded notion that the Negro must be kept in his place," and this belief represented a "hold-over from the elaborate efforts of the latter-day plantation masters . . . to justify slavery on moral grounds" as well as "natural jealousy between white workmen and their black competitors" among the working class (1935: 108). Inherent in this white supremacy was an inertia that distinguished the South from other regions. As Cason stated (1935: 45), people of the American Midwest were characterized by an acquisitive zeal within their agricultural economy, as they had an evident "pent-up nervousness" in their bodies and a "determination to push their acreages farther and farther toward the horizon." Southerners, by contrast, did not appear to have that entrepreneurial zeal in Cason's view. He pointed to the group of writers at Vanderbilt University in Nashville known as the "Agrarians" as illustrators of staunch Southern resistance to modern forces of "industrialism and liberalism" (1935: 48). Similarly, the trial of John Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee, for violating a law against teaching Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection in 1925—a trial that was followed nationwide—showed that "the Tennessee people were threatened by an alien force, which sought to destroy their

self-determination" (Cason 1935: 62). "The southerner is generally content to state simply that outsiders do not understand him," Cason concluded (1935: 59).

Cason's contemporary Wilbur Cash agreed that Southerners had an essentially conservative mentality that they were under siege by outsiders ever since the Civil War. In Cash's view, because of the "habits of thought" in the South, it was "not quite a nation within a nation, but the next thing to it" (1941: viii). Moreover, "four years of measuring themselves against the Yankee" had rendered Southerners "far more self-conscious than they had been before, far more aware of their differences and of the line which divided what was Southern from what was not" (Cash 1941: 104). This self-consciousness had led Southerners to resist stubbornly any outside influences well after the war was over; this sort of thinking gels with Wyatt-Brown's proposition that Southerners saw assaults against their traditions as a question of honor. A crucial part of this Southern conservatism was white supremacy that only intensified at the turn of the century, when the Populist Party's attempt to challenge the Democratic Party's hegemony by uniting blacks and whites failed in the elections of 1896. To be sure, in Cash's view there was such an entity as "Progress," which was bringing some degree of industrialization to the traditionally agricultural South as well as "the elimination of the strictly aristocratic man from Southern politics," but old traditions died hard. The Populists' political uprising in the late nineteenth century did not change the fact that "economic and social considerations remained . . . subordinate to those of race." In fact, racist attitudes were only strengthened, as "common whites" faced, in Cash's words, "from hustings and pulpits thousands of voices [that] proclaimed him traitor and nigger-loving scoundrel; renegade to Southern Womanhood, and Confederate dead, and the God of his fathers" (Cash 1941: 170). Facing such race-bating pressures from the community, the white Populists "made the walls of Dixie solid again" with loyalty to the Democratic Party and white supremacy, and former Populist leaders, such as Ben Tillman of South Carolina and Tom Watson of Georgia, adopted white supremacist language themselves, as Southern states adopted Jim Crow segregation laws and disfranchised blacks in the late 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century (Cash 1941: 168, 170, 173).

The fact that Southerners were sensitive to outsiders' perceptions of their region as simple-minded and backward, and thus they strived to overcome them on the football field, was illustrated in a column written by Los Angeles sportswriter Royal Brougham. *Atlanta Journal* writer Morgan Blake, who was frequently a pro-Southern spokesman in his columns, recorded Brougham's words: "Out of the sunny Southland came another great Alabama football team and it hit a bewildered Cougar from Washington like a jug of Dixie gin. By a 24-to-0 score the banjo-plucking, mammy-singing troubadors from the land of cotton won the annual Rose Bowl classic. . . . The Bammers unleashed a passing and cleverly masked running offense. . . . And before it the touted Cougars were just corn pone and possum pie" (6 January 1931). The Californian seemed to see the Alabamians as men who had just emerged from the piney woods.

Indeed, the one-sided victory in that Rose Bowl especially allowed Southerners to criticize the rest of the nation for a perceived lack of respect. For example, Ralph Cannon wrote:

It's about time somebody went to bat with a few kind words for Alabama. The only fault of this team is that it did not work in one of the large hokum centers. If this team had been located in the vicinity of New York, its reputation would have been sent reverberating down through the ages. . . . There is a simple sociology in that fact. There is more mediocrity getting by for class in New York than anywhere else in the world, save, of course, Hollywood (1931).

He concluded that Alabamians did not take kindly to the disrespect, seeing themselves as Davids against callous media Goliaths: "Alabama has nursed a grudge against the football world at large, because they have not received the recognition they feel they should have got [sic], and this year brought the grudge to a fever pitch" (Cannon 1931).

As was the case just before the Civil War, Southerners' perceptions of animosity from other regions did not always match reality. As early as 1922, nationally syndicated sports columnist Grantland Rice—arguably the most famous American sports journalist of the time—acknowledged that Alabama's win over Pennsylvania "had proved that Southern football is now on a par with the finest teams in the country" (Schoor 1991: 10). He went even further after the 1931 Rose Bowl victory, writing that it put the Crimson Tide "up to an even level" with the great power Notre Dame (Rice 1931). Likewise, Paul Zimmerman of the national media organization, the Associated Press, acknowledged that the win signified that "Southern football stood at a new high water mark" (1931). Yet in some instances the grudge against national disrespect was warranted. Before an undefeated Alabama team was invited to the 1935 Rose Bowl, fans of the powerful Stanford University Indians chanted, "We Want Minnesota." (The Big Ten Conference banned its teams from post-season play at that time.) The fact that Alabama had had two wins and one tie in three previous Rose Bowl appearances still did not impress the West Coast fans, and after Alabama won the game by a score of 29-13 and clinched a national championship, the enraged Stanford coach did not shake hands with Coach Thomas (Cohane 1983: 33).

However, perceptions of regional disrespect still existed and Southern sports-writers were hardly objective in redressing them. For his part Blinkey Horn of the *Nashville Tennessean* was glad to see for the first time as many as four Southern players designated as All-Americans for the 1930 season. He wrote, "A lusty roar can go up from Dixieland, and probably a wild whoop will go up from the remainder of the nation because some favorite sons were omitted" (1931). Horn thus relished the possibility that Northerners and Westerners might feel the sort of snubbing Southerners had perceived for years.

The Tide also received support behind the scenes from sources other than the newspapers. Wade received telegrams from at least a few fans who expressed their

support in sectional terms. Before the 1926 Rose Bowl, the secretary of the Cullman, Alabama, Kiwanis Club exhorted the Tide to "fight 'em, boys, fight 'em," to "honor your alma mater Alabama and the South" and to show "that Alabama and the South is not surpassed by any other section in America" (Cullman Kiwanis Club, 31 December 1925). One supporter sent a dispatch from New Orleans to Wade in California before the Rose Bowl five years later that stated, "All this part of Dixie pulling for Alabama" (Halligan, 30 December 1930). Likewise, Jimmy Burns, sports editor of the *Atlanta Georgian*, wrote, "I want you to know that football fans in this section are unanimous in hoping for an Alabama victory in the Rose Bowl" (5 December 1930). Morgan Blake of the *Atlanta Journal* also sent a telegram to Wade's final end-of-the-season team banquet in Birmingham praising his "grid-iron triumphs . . . unequalled in Southern annals" (5 December 1930).

Confidence and challenges

Yet another connection between Southern Civil War rhetoric and the touting of football achievements is that both praised the white South. As Vice President of the Confederacy Alexander Stephens asserted definitively that the Southern Confederacy's "cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man," so prominent figures such as University of Alabama president George Denny celebrated the significance of the Tide's 1927 Rose Bowl tie against a great Stanford team in racial terms. "I come back with my head held a little higher and my soul a little more inspired to win this battle for the splendid Anglo-Saxon race of the South" (Eaton 1954: 48; Browning 1987: 32). Morgan Blake also wrote how an Alabama win in the 1931 Rose Bowl would be a great victory for the white South. "The Dixie clans are gathering from all points, counting on a big kill on New Year's," he declared. He continued proudly, "The old Southern drawl predominates. [Georgia] Tech, Georgia, Vandy, Tulane alumni and those of other schools exiled in this section are converging on Pasadena to join hands with Alabama alumni and all and all for Dixie. The Saxons are on the warpath again! The cavaliers are here to fight the war of the sixties over!" (Blake, 30 December 1930). The allusions to the racial dimensions of the American Civil War are unmistakable.

As Alabama firmly established a winning tradition throughout the 1930s, an increasingly confident tone came from the state's boosters. As Andrew Doyle states, the defeatist, romanticized myth of the Lost Cause, according to which the South fought nobly in the Civil War while facing insurmountable circumstances of manpower and industrial inferiority, was being replaced by hopeful confidence in the future of a more economically diversified New South. Alabama Governor Bibb Graves observed how the Crimson Tide's 1934 national championship team represented this new Southern spirit:

For all the last stands, all the lost causes and sacrificings in vain, the South had a heart. And a tradition. But the South had a new tradition for something else. It was

for survival, and for victory. It had come from the football fields. It had come from those mighty afternoons in the Rose Bowl at Pasadena, when Alabama's Crimson Tide had rolled to glory. . . . The South had come by way of football to think at last of causes won, not lost (Doyle 1994: 247).

After the end of the Great Depression and World War II, black Southerners shared this greater confidence. After all, they had fought against oppressive governments overseas just as white veterans had, and so they sought greater political freedoms at home (Egerton 1994: 327–328). Desegregation of public grade schools and colleges and universities became a crucial issue in United States federal courts in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, and Southern state governors led efforts to defy federal orders for integration. Governor Ross Barnett orchestrated a white demonstration that turned violent against admission of the first black student to the University of Mississippi in 1962. A year later Governor George Wallace made good on a pledge to “stand in the schoolhouse door” to block the federally warranted admission of two black students to The University of Alabama. Integration still proceeded, however, and, in view of this Southern white defiance, the question arose as to how long Southern college football teams would wait until they allowed black athletes to compete.

In the 1960s, white Southerners again saw themselves characterized as being backward in light of this resistance to integration. Negative images of Alabama were broadcast nationwide over the young medium of television, as Birmingham's segregationist police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor used water cannons and attack dogs against young blacks demonstrating for desegregated public accommodations and greater employment opportunities in the city. “Bear” Bryant, having come to Tuscaloosa after several successful years at Texas A&M University, tried to overcome with his football team such backward images of Alabama. When the Crimson Tide was invited to the 1959 Liberty Bowl game in Philadelphia in Bryant's second season, he encountered opposition from white Alabamians who did not want to see their team playing racially integrated Northern teams. One white segregationist group, the Citizens Council of West Alabama, sent a telegram to Bryant praising the “Crimson Tide's fine record this year” but also “strongly” opposing “our boys playing an integrated team.” “Tide belongs to all Alabama and Alabamians favor continued segregation,” the message concluded, reflecting the fact that its writers believed football and states-rights politics were intertwined (Wellborn 1997: 70). The sort of racist attitudes and stereotypes of Alabama Bryant had to overcome were further illustrated when Alabama track and field coach Ralph Genito mailed a recruiting questionnaire to junior college coaches nationwide inquiring if they had “any good white boys who meet the standards” for varsity competition in the Southeastern Conference (Wellborn 1997: 74). When a junior college dean in California sent a letter of protest not only to President Rose but also to the United States Civil Rights Commission, the incident became a huge embarrassment for the University. To Bryant, giving Alabamians a team for whom they could cheer because of winning was more important than giving them one

that remained racially homogeneous. He wanted to play integrated teams from other regions both to retain a nationally competitive reputation and to educate white Alabamians for inevitable integration of the Tide. The team did go to the Liberty Bowl to play Pennsylvania State University's integrated team, because, as Bryant later wrote, "we were just getting our program good." With his stature as a successful coach and a former player at Alabama in the glory days of the 1930s, he also knew he could be immune to political pressures. "When folks are ignorant, you don't condemn, you teach 'em," he reflected (Wellborn 1997: 71). Bryant was thus more progressive than most white Alabamians in the 1960s on issues of race. However, he was pragmatic enough not to integrate too quickly, before white Alabamians could modify their idealized vision of a white Southern team.

National sports media were quick to point out athletic contests that highlighted the South's stubborn adherence to segregation on the court and on the field. The victory of Coach Don Haskins's Texas Western University basketball team, the first national collegiate basketball champions with five black starters, over Coach Adolph Rupp's powerful all-white University of Kentucky Wildcats in the 1966 national championship game captured the imagination of racial liberals who wanted all aspects of segregation to come to an end. To this day, sports writers in major journals wrongly attribute the integration of Alabama's football team to a similar victory of a team with black athletes over the Tide. Early in the 1970 season the University of Southern California Trojans played the Crimson Tide at Birmingham's Legion Field and devastated Alabama by a score of 42–21. The leading rusher in the game was a black freshman running back, Sam "Bam" Cunningham, who punished the Alabama defense with 135 yards on twelve carries and two touchdowns. A myth has developed over the years that Cunningham's performance inspired Alabama's head coach Bryant to recruit black athletes to remain competitive with teams from other regions. Promoting this myth was a comment by then Alabama assistant coach Jerry Claiborne that "Cunningham did more to integrate Alabama in sixty minutes that night than Martin Luther King had accomplished in twenty years" (Davis 2000). Also, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* perpetuated it in 1992 when a columnist reflected that because of the loss, "suddenly, it was clear to Bryant that signing black players was no longer an issue of conscience: It was now a matter of winning. That night Bryant told his closest friends that he would begin recruiting black players" (Davis 2000). A 2000 article in *The Sporting News* also compares the Alabama–Southern California game to the Texas Western–Kentucky basketball game in importance, although the writer acknowledges that a black player, Wilbur Jackson, was already recruited to the team. Jackson enjoys dispelling the myth about that game (Davis 2000). "I watched the game in the stands that day in Birmingham," he recalls, referring to the Southern California game (Personal interview by author, 11 May 2001). He was a spectator that day because then the National Collegiate Athletic Association did not permit freshmen to compete in varsity intercollegiate sports. Thus, Bryant had clearly considered integrating his program before that loss. However, he did believe that "the time was not ripe" for

such a move in the 1960s (Davis 2000). Having suffered through a season of six wins and five losses before he recruited Jackson, Bryant balanced white Southerners' vision of how their team should represent them with the need to recruit the best athletes regardless of race to maintain the school's winning tradition.

Jackson, who was the first black football player to receive a scholarship to play for the Crimson Tide, marvels to this day about how his and other black players' arrival on the team helped to redefine Southern race relations and how Southern football was perceived nationally. His acceptance on the team actually proceeded smoothly, largely thanks to support from teammates from his hometown of Ozark, Alabama, and to Coach Bryant having "just said how it was going to be" to people on and around the team (Personal interview by author, 11 May 2001). Breaking the color barrier at Alabama was not made an issue during Jackson's recruitment and Coach Bryant insulated Jackson from many outsiders' comments, but nevertheless, Jackson, his black teammates, and black football fans felt proud of what they were achieving not only for their race, but also for their university and region. "It's amazing how far Alabama came," he reflected in a recent interview. "Governor Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door in 1963, and ten years later I was voted a team captain," he remembered (Personal interview by author, 11 May 2001). He specifically relates how a black bus driver in Gainesville, Florida, where the Tide was about to play the University of Florida, commented to him, "I'm proud of what y'all are doing" (Personal interview by author, 11 May 2001). Not only Jackson's election to team captain, but also his designation that year as an All-American player on a team that posted a record of eleven wins and one loss, demonstrate that merit on the field was far more important to Alabamians than race, as their team continued to play intersectional games.

Ole Miss's Confederate imagery

Questions of race continue to be problematic for those Southern football lovers who continue to evoke images of the pro-slavery Confederacy. Debate over the use of Confederate symbols at football games has become particularly sharp at the University of Mississippi, where the athletic teams are nicknamed "the Rebels" in honor of Confederate soldiers and fans have waved the Confederate battle flag for many years. Head football coach Tommy Tuberville (who is now the head coach at another of Alabama's Southeastern Conference rivals, Auburn University) rekindled the current debate when he issued a formal statement two days before Ole Miss's homecoming game versus Vanderbilt University, asking fans not to bring Confederate battle flags into the school's home venue, Vaught-Hemingway Stadium. "It's time to support our teams physically, mentally, and morally with enthusiasm and not symbols," Tuberville declared, adding unequivocally, "The Rebel flag is not associated with Ole Miss" (Boling and Gregoire 1997).

Use of the Confederate battle flag has been a particularly explosive issue in the mid-to-late twentieth century. In 1948, delegates from states in the Deep South

walked out of the Democratic National Convention after the party adopted a civil rights platform and selected President Harry S. Truman as the party's nominee in the upcoming presidential election. The Confederate battle flag was prominent at the convention the seceding delegates held in July 1948, in Birmingham, Alabama, where they nominated then South Carolina Governor J. Strom Thurmond as the States Rights Democrat—or "Dixiecrat"—candidate for president. According to *The Birmingham News*, one group of fifty-five students comprised "the convention's noisiest demonstrators" ("Ole Miss Boys" 18 July 1948) and were particularly "colorful in their rebel hats and with Confederate flags"; they were from the University of Mississippi ("Mississippi Students", 17 July 1948).

In the decades following the Dixiecrats' challenge to the Democrats, several Southern states used the Confederate battle flag as a symbol of protest against federal court decisions mandating desegregation, such as the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, in which the United States Supreme Court ruled segregated schools unconstitutional. In 1956, the Georgia state legislature incorporated the Southern Cross as part of the state flag and in 1962 the South Carolina state government, commemorating the 100 years since the Civil War, began to fly the battle flag atop the state Capitol along with the United States flag and the South Carolina state flag. South Carolina's use of the Southern Cross has inspired furious debate in recent years, as African-American protests led the state legislature to take the flag down from the Capitol dome. The flag was placed on a Confederate monument on the grounds of the Statehouse, causing renewed protests by blacks.

With the flag thus having been used as a powerful political symbol, Coach Tuberville became especially concerned that Ole Miss's widespread use of the battle flag would adversely affect recruiting of quality black athletes. A columnist of the campus newspaper, *The Daily Mississippian*, a leading voice against the flag and nickname, echoed the coach's fears, pointing to Alabama as a model of winning and respect for diversity. Referring to the South's tragic history of racist lynchings, Richard Swinney wrote, "If Alabama had a nickname such as Hangmen rather than Crimson Tide, they would have never been national champions"—the idea being that journalists who vote for the national football champion would not have voted for a team with such a nickname (7 October 1997). However, African-American athletes, faculty, and staff alike disagree about the impact of the flag and the nickname. John Avery, a black running back who was then the team captain when Tuberville issued his plea, agreed with his former coach. "It hurts recruiting a great deal. When I first came to Ole Miss all my family knew about [the university] was the rebel flag. My family was a hundred percent against it" (Gregoire 1997). Jada Love, a football recruiter, similarly stated at a round-table discussion on black student-athletes that same year, "We lost a good linebacker to Mississippi State because of the rebel flag" (Gregoire 1997). Charles Ross, a professor of history and African-American studies, also agreed, "Some of the best athletes go to other schools because of the image and the legacy of the rebel flag" (Gregoire 1997). Other African-Americans representing Ole Miss, clearly in an awkward

position when asked about this controversial issue, have tried to gloss over the issue. Lisa Miller, then a member of the women's basketball team, asserted, "The flag does not bother me. I did not come here for the flag; I came for an education" (Gregoire 1997). Rob Evans, the first black head basketball coach at Ole Miss, also suggested that overcoming racism and outmoded ways of thinking provided a challenge which inspired him to come to Ole Miss. "I came to Ole Miss because I felt I could be a part of a positive change" (Gregoire 1997). However, Evans's successor, also a black coach, and other coaches have tended to agree with Tuberville's strong stand. Coach Rod Barnes publicly stated his support for a new Mississippi state flag that would do away with the image of the Confederate battle flag in its upper left corner. Tuberville's successor as head football coach, David Cutcliffe, also endorsed the new state flag, which was defeated in a referendum in 2001 ("Thanks to UM Coaches" 12 February 2001).

Miller's stated opinion that the flag was not relevant to her decision to attend the University of Mississippi appears to echo the views of most of the white student body. An editor of *The Daily Mississippian* chastised his fellow students for being "apathetic" about the referendum on the state flag (Rosenkrans 24 January 2001). Other comments in the newspaper suggest that use of Southern nationalist symbols and rhetoric is more important to older alumni than contemporary students. "The lack of the flag's presence at football games . . . or on posters depicting the university is not the most prevalent issue on campus," another editorial declared, adding that students of 2000 "are willing to embrace new ideas and values" ("Decision" 21 August 2000). One undergraduate, Kristina Fall, appreciated the differences of feeling between age groups and highlighted students' willingness to see both sides of the debate when she said, "I don't think there's anything wrong with it [the Confederate battle flag]. It's just tradition. I can see how some will be offended but think of the alumni and how they would feel if their Rebel flag was taken away" (Boling and Gregoire 26 September 1997).

History professor David Sansing pointed out that the complimentary nature of white expressions of Southern pride and football is undeniable. The flag in fact first appeared in widespread usage in 1948, when Ole Miss celebrated its 100th anniversary and a group of men bearing the Confederate battle flag re-enacted the charge of the Eleventh Mississippi Regiment at the Battle of Gettysburg. Of course, as noted earlier, 1948 was the same year the battle flag and the wartime song "Dixie" were used by the Dixiecrats. In 1949, the Ole Miss Home Economics Department boasted of its creation of the "world's largest rebel flag," which was unfurled at halftime of football games while the university band played "Dixie" in Confederate uniforms. As Ole Miss became a successful football power in the 1950s and 1960s (going to seventeen post-season bowl games in eighteen seasons), the rebel flag became more visible on national television screens at the same time that same flag was waved by white opponents of the civil rights movement (Dodson 1997). Thus, in the popular view, Confederate nationalism and all-white Southern college football teams like Ole Miss were clearly linked.

Conclusion

Like Mississippi and South Carolina, Alabama has recently been a scene of debates over the use of the Confederate battle flag. Black legislators in Montgomery objected to the flag's place in the state House of Representatives. Ironically, however, the black legislators who led the effort to get the flag out of the House Chamber did not even know the meaning of a blue state secession banner left standing there. When asked about the banner, five-term Representative James Thomas could only respond with uncertainty, "In our chamber? I'm going to investigate it" ("Secession Banner" 14 May 2001: 1A, 3A). The fact that the debate has centered around the Confederate battle flag and has failed to address other emblems of secession shows how strong a symbol of segregation the Southern Cross has become.

The debate is more than simply symbolic in nature, for Southern leaders are concerned about the South's image; they clearly want to show that the South is modernizing, not only to attract more diverse student bodies and African-American athletes to state university campuses, but also to attract businesses from outside the region. Alabama, for example, has seen two foreign automobile manufacturers, Mercedes-Benz and Honda, open factories in the state since 1993, and the Korean automaker Hyundai will open a factory near Montgomery in 2005. At the University of Mississippi, Chancellor Robert Khayat and Athletic Director Pete Boone have continued to lead efforts to disassociate the institution from the white-supremacist past by announcing that "Colonel Reb," the university's mascot, which is a representation of a Confederate officer dressed in gray with a gray goatee and resembling Robert E. Lee, would no longer appear on the sidelines at home football games and that his image would no longer appear as the athletic teams' logo. Boone explained the move by expressing the need for a modern image, saying that Colonel Reb is "an 18th-century person who doesn't fit anything we do" (Bianchi 2003: D1). Although the current image of Colonel Reb has only been used since 1979 as an official mascot, students, alumni, and fans of the university have expressed their support for the mascot by demanding merchandise with the mascot's image and threatening to withdraw monetary support of the university, especially if the Rebel nickname is changed in the future (although Khayat has denied any plan to do so; Sindelar 2003; Owen 2003).

But if the nickname was changed, as some alumni fear, the move would only serve as another example of how Southerners have followed the North's lead toward "modernization," as the North has always been a topic for comparison. Just like Daniel Pratt preached greater Southern industrialization in the mid-nineteenth century as sectional tensions increased and just like Paul "Bear" Bryant integrated his football team in order to compete with Northern football programs, so any change of the nickname by Ole Miss would only echo changes by Northern institutions such as Eastern Michigan University, St. John's University, Miami University in Ohio, and the University of Massachusetts, which have discarded Native-American Indian mascots.

Such imitation resembles the process of “modernization,” which Theodore H. Von Laue ascribed to former colonies of Western European nations as they sought independence and prosperity. “Imitation” became synonymous with “modernization” and “Westernization” in these Asian and African countries and, as much as anti-imperialist leaders and intellectuals such as Julius Nyerere and Frantz Fanon decried the dominance of the West, they could not escape measuring progress in Western materialistic terms. Nyerere even drove a Mercedes-Benz and flew in a British-built private airplane (Von Laue 1987: 4, 240, 305–307). Similarly, although Southerners have been sensitive about their region being reduced to a mere colony of the North in the decades since the Civil War and although, like *Natchez Democrat* columnist Sam R. Hall, they believe that outsiders will never truly understand them, most Southerners realize that the old images of the Confederate past must go for the sake of economic progress (Hall 2003). As Von Laue (1987: 181) has noted, the arrival of transnational corporations in the Third World has suppressed traditional ethnic rivalries; racial animosities and tensions would not attract more business to the South, while traditional Southern agriculture continues to decline.

So, the South remains an interesting mix of tradition and change, with a consequent mix of pride and resistance. At The University of Alabama, for example, fraternities and sororities who remain voluntarily segregated watch a racially integrated team play football on autumn Saturdays. There is no more waving of the Confederate battle flag at the stadium, no playing of “Dixie” by the University’s “Million Dollar Band,” nor reference to Robert E. Lee in the newspaper, but the Alabama fight song still proclaims the team’s importance to the region with the line, “You’re Dixie’s football pride, Crimson Tide.”

Notes

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