

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

The Confederate Flag On Interstate 95 In Richmond



VIRGINIA CENTER FOR
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

People are likely to grapple with the meaning of the Confederate flag for years to come; indeed, it has been a source of controversy dating back generations. The flag's presence on Interstate 95 in 2013 offers a new opportunity for residents of the Richmond region (and beyond) to work across lines of difference to increase understanding and respect. The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities offers this guide as a resource to engage in important and potentially challenging dialogues regarding this topic. We invite schools, houses of worship, workplaces, and families to explore the questions of history, identity, and community that are connected to the Confederate flag. It is our hope that the heightened awareness that results can move the region ever closer to a more inclusive community.



ABOUT VCIC

Our Mission

“Achieving Success Through Inclusion” – The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities works with schools, businesses, and communities to achieve success by addressing prejudices, in all forms, in order to improve academic achievement, increase workplace productivity, and enhance local trust. Through workshops, retreats, and customized programs that raise knowledge, motivation, and skills, VCIC develops leaders who work together to achieve success throughout the Commonwealth.

Our History

Our organization traces its roots back to 1935 in Virginia. With a lengthy and rich history, we have been destined to change with the times, even as we work to change the times in which we live. Originally founded as the Virginia Region of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities has concluded our association with NCCJ and has joined with many of our fellow offices across the country to become the cornerstone of a new movement fighting prejudice in all its forms.

Our Programs

VCIC programs are offered in four major areas:

- ◆ Emerging Leaders Institute
- ◆ Diversity in Higher Education Division
- ◆ Inclusive Workplaces Initiative
- ◆ Community Programs and Partnerships



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The flag flying along Interstate 95 in Chesterfield County is one of the most recognizable and most controversial symbols in American history. The Virginia Flaggers explain that they raised the flag to “serve to welcome visitors and commuters to Richmond, and remind them of our honorable Confederate history and heritage.” Whatever the Flaggers’ intent, the flag they have raised has a complex history that means many different things to different people – and many of those meanings do not send a welcoming message.

The flag in question of course is the star-studded blue diagonal cross on a red field. Although modern Americans tend to call it the “Stars and Bars” and consider it “the Confederate flag,” it was not the Stars and Bars (that name belongs properly to another Confederate flag) and was never in fact *the* Confederate flag. It was (in many variations) the most common of the many Confederate battle flag patterns; it was incorporated into the Confederate national flag beginning in 1863 and has been by far the most common Confederate flag used since 1865.

The fine points about the flag’s identity are important to the modern discussions about it. Flag defenders have long insisted that it was *only* a battle flag and should not carry the burden of association with the Confederate cause (whether one believes that cause to be slavery, states rights, or something else). The flag was a soldier’s flag, closely associated with the heroic efforts of the men who fought under it. Anyone wishing to understand the passion the flag evokes among its defenders must understand its connection with venerated ancestors.

But even during the life of the Confederacy, the battle flag also became the primary symbol of Confederate nationalism. It was destined to be the flag that carried the baggage of the Confederate cause – whether you consider that baggage positive or negative.

If the flag had been furled permanently at the end of the war, modern controversies surrounding it would relate only to the nature and history of the Confederacy. In fact, the flag was not furled and it stayed alive symbolically, subject to new uses and thus to new perceptions and meanings. Its history did not end in 1865; even those who insist that its only “true” meaning is its association with the Confederate soldier must study its subsequent uses to understand why others don’t share their perception of it.

From the Civil War until after World War II, the flag was widely used in the South in memorial ceremonies and in celebrations of the Confederacy and its heroes. Not coincidentally, this was also the era of Jim Crow, when African Americans had virtually no role in mainstream southern life.

The decades following World War II saw the transformation of the flag from a quasi-sacred memorial symbol into an icon of American popular culture, “confetti in careless hands,” according to distressed observers. A nationwide “flag fad” in the early 1950s made it a symbol of generalized rebellion in addition to its older symbolism of Confederate ancestors and of regional pride.

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT (cont.)

Also in the decades after World War II, the Confederate flag became a favorite symbol of ordinary white southerners (not just Ku Klux Klan extremists) who fought against federally mandated racial integration. Segregationists waved and marched with it, consciously connecting the Confederacy with a new fight on behalf of a cause that blended “states rights” with what earlier generations unashamedly called “white supremacy.” This civil rights era history has shaped the discussion of the flag ever since.

These often trivial and sometimes sinister postwar uses of the flag provoked intense discussion and efforts – led then by Confederate heritage groups – to curtail those uses. The controversies that have dominated headlines – disputes over students wearing flags on clothing, over flag displays on public property, and the big flag on Interstate 95 – are not new to our time, but began in the 1960s as African Americans gained a more significant voice in public affairs.

Understanding the flag’s history cannot alone solve controversies surrounding it, but studying the flag’s history *fully*, not selectively, reveals that conflicting interpretations of its meaning are based on historical experience, not imagination or malice.

American Civil Liberties Union attorney William Simpson, who helped broker a 1989 settlement in a North Carolina school controversy lawsuit, explained one way of translating the flag’s history into practical and ethical guidelines. “If your need to express pride in your Southern heritage is worth hurting those who are offended by the flag, then do what you must,” Simpson said. “But at least try to see why the message you intend to send is not always the one that is received.” On the other hand, Simpson asked those offended by the flag “to see that the Confederate flag means many different things to many different people. Recognize that the flag has significance beyond racism. Try to understand that the message you receive when you see the flag may not be the message the person displaying it intends to send.”

Dr. John M. Coski is Historian and Director of Library & Research at The Museum of the Confederacy. This article is adapted from his book, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America’s Most Embattled Emblem* (Harvard University Press, 2005), and an op-ed piece published in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 29, 2007.



FACILITATION GUIDELINES

Facilitating conversations, particularly when discussing controversial topics, is an important responsibility that requires preparation and care. A facilitator creates an atmosphere in which the participants feel understood and safe to communicate openly and freely. To do that:

- ◆ Facilitators anticipate the nature of the group and the group's perception of the situation.
- ◆ Facilitators are willing to relate to the customs and norms of the group without making value judgments. They do not say "that's great," "good," or make judgments about input.
- ◆ Facilitators control and focus the direction of the communication process toward the specific objective of the discussion. They keep the group moving toward its goal.
- ◆ Facilitators develop skills in the timing of the questions and in providing the transitional sequence of questions during the discussion process.
- ◆ Facilitators listen carefully on several levels. They visually observe reactions of the participants, they hear what is being said (with ears and hearts), and they physically adjust voice, tone, and body position so that it allows the greatest reinforcement.

To maximize the potential for effective and meaningful dialogue, the following process is suggested:

- ◆ Before the discussion begins, consider the room setup and logistical considerations. Will participants be able to see and hear one another? Are they seated on an even level? What potential distractions or outside factors might impact the conversation?
- ◆ Begin by introducing the facilitator(s) and explaining the purpose of the dialogue.
- ◆ Introduce the discussion norms. Invite questions and additions. Ensure full agreement before beginning the dialogue.
- ◆ If the participating group is large, it might be helpful to provide some opportunities for pair or small group conversations for the introductory questions. That format provides opportunities to increase feelings of safety and comfort, as well as giving everyone an opportunity speak.
- ◆ Move through the categories of questions sequentially, adjusting the order of the specific questions under each heading as needed to meet the needs of the group.
- ◆ Make sure to leave time for closure. Use that time to mirror back some trends and themes of the conversation and/or identify opportunities for continued learning.



DISCUSSION NORMS

The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities utilizes the following norms to create safe, respectful climates for diverse groups to work and learn together:

- ◆ Focus on one speaker at a time, and share the time so that diverse perspectives can be heard.
- ◆ Use “I statements” in order to speak personally and take ownership for your experience.
- ◆ Practice purity of motive. Make statements and ask questions with genuine intentions.
- ◆ If offended, share that with others in a spirit of educating and moving the conversation forward.
- ◆ Maintain confidentiality and respect risk-taking.
- ◆ Take responsibility for what you say and how you say it.
- ◆ Allow for silence and reflection.
- ◆ Be real and truthful in all you say and do.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

We use the term “Confederate flag” in these questions because that is the common usage and understanding today. See the historical context for a more complete and accurate description of the appropriate terminology

INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is your earliest memory of seeing what is understood today to be the Confederate flag?
 - What did you think about it?
 - What messages did you receive about it?
 - Who shared those messages with you?

- ◆ Have the messages you received about the Confederate flag been consistent throughout your life?
 - If they have not been consistent, what were the differences?

- ◆ From your perspective, what role(s) has the Confederate flag played throughout history?
 - From your perspective, what role(s) do you think the Confederate flag plays today?

REFLECTIONS & FEELINGS

- ◆ What does the Confederate flag represent to you?

- ◆ What feelings come up for you when you see the Confederate flag?

- ◆ What assumptions, if any, do you make about people who fly the Confederate flag?

- ◆ What assumptions, if any, do you make about people who protest the flying of the Confederate flag?

EXPLORING DIFFERENCES

- ◆ What might be some interpretations of the Confederate flag that are different from what you believe?
 - In what ways are they different?
 - How do you think people came to have those views?

- ◆ How can a person’s experiences shape her/his views on the Confederate flag?
 - How might one’s understanding of the flag be different based on race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, geography, or generation?

- ◆ What can you learn from those who have a different perspective about the Confederate flag?

- ◆ What can you teach those who have a different perspective about the Confederate flag?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (cont.)

TAKING ACTION

- ◆ In what ways can you educate yourself about the Confederate flag and its history?
- ◆ In what ways can you educate others about the Confederate flag and its history?
- ◆ What can make having conversations about the Confederate flag difficult?
 - What can you do to improve the quality and frequency of such conversations?

ABOUT RICHMOND

- ◆ What does it say about the Richmond region to have a Confederate flag flying on Interstate 95?
- ◆ What are some ways that the Richmond region is distinctive?
 - What are some other symbols that you would select to represent this region?