360°

What Is a Flag?

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https://youtu.be/nOcS-2U9NVw?list=TLGG0Z7GaBtkyKAyMzAzMjAyMg

Dr. Walter Williams' Personal Profile

Q and D (Quick and Dirty) is a *potpourii* blog series gathered over time relevant to current events relating to worldview. Members, friends, and our own research produced today's medley.

As much as anything, we hope Praxis Circle is emphasizing that narrative or story is a central focus of one's worldview, and that each individual strives to have whatever big or little story at the ready to get through life. Whether the relevant story or life's outcome comes first is often a chicken-or-egg issue, and whether the story is true is often debatable.

In any case, human beings are darn good at story-telling.

We have five groups of references today. Here are the first four. (The fifth addresses the title of this post; it's treated separately in the sections following this one.)

1. We lead off with an edited excerpt from a speech Dr. Os Guinness gave in June at Breakpoint.org's annual Wilberforce Weekend featuring 20 Christian worldview thinkers. Dr. Guinness' topic is "What is truth? Roots of the present crisis." In the speech he talks about why the English, American, French, and Russian Revolutions are relevant to the social unrest we see today. Praxis Circle has been addressing this issue. Interestingly, he talks about what truth is ten years earlier here in a different context. Unless one uses stories only in

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manipulative power plays, one needs to believe in truth to inquire at all about why the four revolutions might be relevant now.

2. Next we feature *A Protestant Appreciation of Pope John Paul II* by Bruce Riley Ashford (a Baptist) in *First Things* dated May 18, 2020. We will be addressing how John Paul II advanced Western narrative and brought the West's many Catholic and Protestant groups together in our *A Journey* blog series later this summer. John Paul II spent much of his life describing the foundations of Western civilization. He did it with such clarity that the people of the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc could see why they'd gotten so far off course and were headed into a wall. Obviously, they had been demoralized, saw the light, and changed course.

3. Along the same lines, if interested in the topic we've recently raised about the relation between the Russian Revolution and today's riots and unrest, please see *The Strange Rise of Bourgeois Bolshevism* by Nathan Pinkoski (May 1, 2020). While we aren't endorsing all the editorial points of this article, we do believe it makes interesting observations about how the ideas of mainstream socialism in America today are often contradictory or incoherent. By all rights, socialism ought to be dead, still, after all these years, like the Generalissimo Francisco Franco; instead, it lives on as ideology like Rasputin the Mad Russian Monk, that perverse peasant mystic and aristocratic wannabe who refused to die.

4. In this set are three articles about the Covid-19 and our civil crisis. One of the leading actuaries in America, Peter Neuwirth, wrote the first article assessing the probability of dying from Covid-19. We know Peter personally and can assure you he is brilliant and writes well. You will find his article interesting. News flash: The probability of dying is quite low unless you're in a known risk category. The second article comments on how most Americans have become "afraid of their shadows" (our words). The last article suggests police actually help make America safer and more law-abiding, especially for African-Americans:

Peter Neuwirth: An Actuarial Look at Covid-19 Mortality

Michael Barone: Covid-19 Shows We're More Risk-Averse Now

Jason Riley: Good Policing Saves Black Lives

Our last set of articles, videos, and pictures concerns American narratives currently centered around the Civil War. The article linked here outlines five narratives or themes that dominate American story telling today. At least three and arguably all five derive their names from having some relation to the Civil War. To a great extent, each centers on the War's events. Of course, there are a number of other possible American narratives or themes. We will touch on others in subsequent posts.

No matter, when taking a position one way or the other on police brutality or "removing statues," most Americans find themselves being forced by political speak in the public square into embracing one of these five narratives.

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As we go forward this year, we will submit that none of them is most accurate or "correct." Furthermore, we want to suggest that history is complicated and that our claim that none of these narratives is accurate will not be easy to make. Human behavior is based on intent and circumstances that varies quickly and much over time. When millions are involved across countries and continents, it's rarely clear what's going on. We should also emphasize that truth remains true, even when we see dimly or not at all.

In the clip above, our Praxis Circle Contributor Dr. Walter Williams asserts that Abraham Lincoln's position toward slavery and African-Americans was a lot more complicated than most of his admirers today, like us, realize or will admit. No question President Lincoln was against slavery and that he was willing to order hundreds of thousands of his own kind to their deaths as he gradually tried to abolish it. No doubt, as well, this is exactly what the South feared he would do. In any case, Lincoln's beliefs concerning African-Americans and slavery were much more nuanced and situational than most will admit today.

With these introductory remarks in mind, please consider these six quotes:

"Secession was a traitorous act that threatened to destroy the American nation, and the South's leaders don't deserve to be given a place of honor." (2020)

"In this enlightened age, there are few I believe, but what will acknowledge, that slavery as an institution, is a moral & political evil in any Country. . . While we see the Course of the final abolition of human Slavery is onward, & we give it all the aid of our prayers & all justifiable means in our power, we must leave the progress as well as the result in his hands who sees the end; who Chooses to work by slow influences; & with whom two thousand years are but as a Single day." (1856)

"If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy* slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and it is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help to save the Union." (1862)

"Everybody has asked the question, . . . , 'What shall we do with the Negro?' I have but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us! . . . If the Negro cannot live by the line of eternal justice . . . the fault will not be yours, it will be his who made the Negro, and established the line of his government. Let him live or die by that. If you will only untie his hands, and give him a chance, I think he will live." (1865)

"I am rejoiced that slavery is abolished. I believe it will be greatly for the interests of the South. So fully am I satisfied of this, as regards Virginia especially, that I would cheerfully have lost all I have lost by the war, and have suffered all I have suffered, to have this object attained." (1869, as quoted from a conversation afterwards)

"The march of Providence is so slow, and our desires so impatient; the work of progress is so immense and our means of aiding it so feeble; the life of humanity is so long, that of the

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individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope." (1870)

So, we ask the question in the title of this post, What is a flag? The answer to this rhetorical question is not mysterious to you readers: A flag is a symbol of distinctive design usually shown on a piece of fabric. But why would people be willing to die in war for a flag? Thucydides' famous three categories – fear, interest, and honor – cover most of the waterfront.

Fear involves the desire to protect and preserve home or self in the face of deadly aggression always pursuing its own glory, interest, or honor. In defense, invasion is the only reason needed for war, and fear of losing a defensive war or siege due to perceived long term weakness often causes the defending party to go on offense.

These considerations explain the military course of our Civil War.

Of course, interest includes interests in self, family, home, property, tribe, country – whatever humans value most. Honor involves one's or a group's relation to other people, groups, or God. Humans are particularly curious beings when it comes to honor. In sum, all three influences involve love and a critical category Thucydides might have neglected, justice.

In every case, war produces love's competitive opposite, hatred.

The man who flew the flag featured in this post and who was willing to die for his national flag during the American Civil War believed slavery was evil, and he said so in no uncertain terms before the War. Members of his family had been against slavery for generations and were among the first Americans to free their slaves in large numbers, as early as the late 1700's. They had discussed the evils of slavery at the time of the nation's founding. The conversation had never stopped.

Great Britain was leading the world toward abolition.

Even with a significant free black population, his home state Virginia had chosen years earlier in a close vote to maintain slavery due largely, or at least in significant part, to fear caused by recent and severe slave uprisings. Some Southerners simply felt trapped. The man who flew the flag above knew, lived, and fully understood the tragedy of Southerners fighting "subjugation" between 1861 and 1865 with slaves in their midst. To him, it was extremely painful.

When the War opened he saw himself in a binary situation where honor or duty required him to make a choice. He had been a military man all his life and was a recognized leader. No doubt, emotion played a larger role than a man who had always prided himself on reason would have admitted. He did make a choice, and he gave his subsequent effort his best. He always hoped for the best.

As anyone today would agree, life doesn't always offer neat and tidy solutions to every problem; yet, we all need to keep living.

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Welcome to life, Friends. Some things never change. Even in our relatively cushy times, life's all at once beyond beautiful and terrifying.

The flag shown here is RE Lee's Camp Flag – the one he flew near his tent away from the battlefield. The flag's stars in the upper left are said to represent the Old Testament's Arch of the Covenant or the Bread of Life, signifying a spiritual approach to life. It's believed his wife, Mary Custis Lee, George Washington's step great-grand daughter, and his own daughters made it for him. In the mid-1800's perhaps most Americans were completely familiar with the Old and New Testaments and presumed such knowledge in communication.

To many in the South today and across the America, more than ever, General Lee remains a person, not a symbol or uniform. We will grant him that, knowing we're all deeply flawed. We think it's a good idea to grant the same to each other; we were taught this as children.

Of course, early in the Civil War during battle, the Confederacy flew the "Stars and Bars" flag that looked a lot like the American flag. It was confusing in the First Battle of Bull Run's (First Manassas') melee and caused soldiers to shoot their own by mistake. As a result, after about a year of war, the South changed its battle flag to the flag we're all familiar with, featuring St. Andrew's Cross.

In addition to Lee's Camp Flag being a gift from loved ones, legend has it that General Lee used it away from the battlefield because he didn't believe one could assume God is on one's side. If true, as suggested later in his spectacular Second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln would have been in agreement with Lee: The outcome of the terrible war was in God's hands, not theirs.

Many Americans believed after the War that Providence had settled the outcome because no fault of bravery or effort could be found by anyone on either side. This was important to men then. It had been an all out effort. Such was true of all parties – Union, Confederate, and African-American. The War came; it was bitter, costly, and murderous beyond comparison; and freedom won.

Today, Americans should feel immense pride in that. Today we can see justice, too, and have the privilege of being able to see it even more clearly.

Perhaps this is why Lee accepted defeat with dignity, and why Lincoln and Grant were so magnanimous in accepting unconditional surrender. Without question, the formal Surrender at Appomattox was one of the greatest moments in human history. That is, all of human history in all its Glory.

Immediately, with the rebirth of our Judeo-Christian nation, bravery and forgiveness became the demonstrated American traits.

Before we interviewed Dr. Williams producing the clip at top, we had no idea that he had a picture of Confederate blacks over his desk in his office. (See the pictures hanging on the wall in the picture below.)

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(image)

This amazed us. There is no question Dr. Williams abhors slavery and is acutely aware of all its evils. In fact, his worldview is based on freedom and is dead set against any trace of slavery, other than perhaps in relation to his God or wife, but only, we suspect, as good, proper, or necessary. In any case, we certainly cannot speak for him.

https://youtu.be/qidOvqJIfEg?list=TLGGCFIwwnsp1_0yMzAzMjAyMg

Of course, with this video, we are not suggesting there be no taxation or government regulation. Today, America seems comfortable with a "Welfare State." Anyway, we are finding it practically impossible to change any long established basics. Even a principle of conservatism would suggest slow change in any direction.

However, if the nation should fracture again, not unthinkable given the current state of unrest, it will be over the size, nature, and role of the federal government. That remains our dividing or fault line. From our knowledge of history, we can say that America's Founders and slaves prior to the Civil War were acutely aware of the distinctions Dr. Williams makes in the last video.

In fact, the interviewer was overwhelmed in the moment that he was hearing ancient insights from a hundred and fifty or even thousands of years ago. And from an African-American. The same disagreements over government size and function plagued us in 1776 and 1861, though in radically different contexts. All human beings crave freedom and the product of their labor. The latter makes freedom possible. So simple. These ancient insights allude us all today.

When we interviewed Dr. Williams we did know he is passionate about what he calls "The War of 1861" because we had read his columns for many years. He had been on the board of the media company that owned our city newspaper. No doubt, his columns will be read for his wisdom and style across a wide range of issues for many years to come, and his insights on the American Civil War are always engaging. Even as an economist, he knows the War better than many professional historians.

When asked why he had such pictures hanging above his desk, he said calmly that his professional calling was to help "roll back the frontiers of ignorance." In the past we've introduced some of his historical insights concerning the American narrative. One might say his passion is truth in economics and history. We believe his view of the Civil War is based on a high level of knowledge, applying a view that tries to see historical events through the minds of its players under the circumstances. This requires quite a lot of knowledge which is what good historians do. One cannot be a medical doctor or NASA flight planner without much knowledge, training, and personal experience. The same is true for historians.

Good historians first see people as people, not symbols or uniforms.

Rest assured that Dr. Williams with his pictures is not trying to say that most African-Americans in the South, free or slave, loved the Confederacy or did or would have played any significant role as Confederate soldiers. We know most didn't want to be Confederate soldiers and most

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white Confederates didn't want them to be either. Most wanted the War to play out the way it had begun. What Dr. Williams is probably saying is that those pictures represent the tip of the War's iceberg of historical ignorance that plagues American educational institutions today.

If that is the case, then we believe he is correct, yet again. Our ignorance today is no less than criminal.

Before ending, let's return to Dr. Williams' clip at top. He mentions an analogy that's helpful in thinking about the Civil War involving the power that a husband or wife has over the other in the covenant of marriage. He says abuse can occur within marriage when there is no freedom to leave. We have addressed this before and call it *The Shane Principle*.

As we all know, in most Judeo-Christian societies, adultery and extreme physical abuse has always provided grounds for divorce. Within each monotheism, marriage involves a solemn and sacred oath made between husband and wife in the presence of God and usually a community specially selected by the bride, groom, and their families. Arguably, there is no oath more sacred, and yet circumstances can subsequently change that release the parties from their vows. Cheat on your spouse or beat up him or her, and grounds for divorce exist.

We submit when a soldier pledges an oath to his country, perhaps a less important one than marriage, that similar circumstances exist. Granted, one may be executed for treason (being a traitor), and, certainly today, adultery doesn't have the same consequences, quite a good thing given an American divorce rate exceeding 40%.

Nonetheless, as we know, laws aren't necessarily moral, and legal penalties don't always correlate with moral wrongs.

In any case, we argue that most American soldiers throughout our history have voluntarily joined the Army, Air Force, Navy, or Marines by taking an oath of allegiance first and foremost to serve and protect their nation. The fact that many also needed a job is equally important and only takes us back to Thucydides and General Lee as a young man.

As any American history fan knows, the problem with military oaths of allegiance prior to the Civil War was that most Americans viewed their "home states" as their country of first allegiance. This was recognized by all in 1776 and then again in 1787 during the Constitutional debates. Many across the country still held the view just prior to 1861. Such a sentiment reflected the nation's and most states' immense size, the nature of a largely untamed wilderness in relation to an extremely small population (relative to today), and the average persons's difficultly in travel and the lack of travel beyond home.

In fact, it's very difficult for any American today to imagine what life was truly like in the 1860's.

As a result, if a soldier prior to the Civil War took an oath to protect the nation, and the nation's government subsequently turned to attack one's state (i.e., one's country), this could understandably be seen as "act of adultery" releasing the soldier from his oath. Such an act would defeat the purpose of taking the oath – protecting ones home. In fact, this was probably one of the key reasons the Union was so conciliatory to the South after the war, and why

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almost no Confederate government officials or officers were prosecuted or executed for treason.

Therefore, it helped the cause of abolition before and during the War and the cause of healing in every direction after the War that most Americans were Christians.

If upon reflection of the facts and circumstances few Northerners in high places after the War viewed Confederates as traitors, and if millions who fought on both sides of our great national war or who remained connected to it directly for the next 100 years came instead to see many Southerners as heroes and thus give them a place of honor, why shouldn't we?

Indeed, in the views of some of those quoted above, we would be honoring God Himself for a good and merciful result. We can attribute whatever motives we want to the construction of monuments, but the veneration of heroes was primary in the case of our Civil War monuments. And what heroes they were.

No, we think a more mature view of today's Civil War narrative is buried somewhere hidden in this opinion piece or that one. They aren't perfect statements, but, given the subject matter, what narrative of human history is?

Most certainly, again, to discuss history with authority one needs to know quite a lot about it and, as importantly, to have a mature approach to the subject of history itself. We are not saying that anyone quoted here does not have that; we are just saying that such is essential to have any authority in ones view about the War.

Furthermore, even with equal knowledge, important and severe disagreements will almost always remain.

In sum, we think that a view of history that focuses more on what Americans have earned, as Dr. Williams describes here, is a whole lot better than one of *victimhood*. No good American parent today would instill their children with a narrative of being a victim. We feel sorry for true victims and must reach out to help, but victimhood gets awfully tiresome after generations. In a well-intended, able, free, and prosperous country, this becomes true even to descendants of tragic victims. Just ask some of the African-Americans quoted here or some we know well from having grown up in the South.

So, as long as we have Dr. Williams around, we will be reminded of how much we can accomplish on our own and together – when both are necessary to maximize the total American "Pursuit of Happiness" Experiment.

Lastly, given our own knowledge of the historical facts, we are quite certain that Abraham Lincoln, US Grant, RE Lee, and Frederick Douglass would be in complete agreement with Dr. Williams on that.

That's what they said in so many words, and we should believe and honor them.

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PS – We selected the six quotes above to exaggerate to make a point about the complexity and contextualization needed in proper historical analysis. We are not trying to argue one way or another about what should be concluded concerning anyone quoted, the War itself, its causes, issuing blame, race or racism (whether allegedly systemic or otherwise), or the War's relevance today. You can easily do your own research to get the full quotes and context to support just about any position that's out there. Why?

Because, in the short term anyway, most humans see and hear what they want about their worldview, and we in the praxis circle of life are no different.

But just to remove all mystery, the persons quoted above are (from top-to-bottom): Rich Lowry, RE Lee, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, RE Lee, and RE Lee. The Lincoln quote is from a letter to Horace Greeley, the Editor of the *New York Tribune*, in August, 1862, as a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation sat on his desk. The Emancipation Proclamation was first issued soon after arguably the bloodiest battle of the War, the Battle of Antietam (or Sharpsburg), on September 22, 1862, when only heroism and luck saved Lee's Army of Northern Virginia from total annihilation. The last RE Lee quote is from correspondence written the year General Lee died, 1870.

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