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Bye Bye Bubba

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Almost 40 years ago, I had an idea.

At the time, I thought it was an original. Today, however, it seems widely used in businesses ranging from psychotherapy to closet decluttering.

My three-year-old son, John Nicholas, was accustomed to sitting on my lap in the living room before bedtime as I read to him. He nursed on his bottle, “Bubba.”

I thought it was time for him to take a step toward bigger little boyhood. I applied Sesame Street’s wise counsel: You have to put down the Bubba if you want to play the saxophone.

My decision, of course, was another example of obtuse patriarchy setting an oppressive agenda for a confined-child-feeding operation.

I had been broad-minded for a long time about Bubba. I was also cowed into silence by the cutting-edge example of Mrs. Jonas Salk who nursed her kids until each decided at whatever age to stop.

I started imagining John Nicholas as a 25-year-old man bellying up to a western bar and saying, “Barkeep: Give me a Bubba.” Gadzooks!

Would a future spouse accept a wedding toast as she held a flute of champagne, and he raised a nippled baby bottle full of milk?

At the risk of being an over-anxious, over-bearing and chauvinistic Dad, I seized the Bubba by the horns.

With his mother at a meeting getting liberated, I lined up all his bottles on the kitchen counter, along with rubber nipples and cleaning paraphernalia. I moved the trash can next to the counter.

John Nicholas asked for Bubba.

“We’re going to play Bye Bye Bubba, sweetheart.”

He looked confused. “Bye Bye Bubba? Want Bubba.”

“No,” I said, “Bye Bye Bubba.” I took one of the six bottles and threw it with some authority into the trash bag.

“Bubba?” he asked with some dismay. He looked into the trash to see how Bubba was doing down there.

“Bye Bye Bubba,” I said and handed him the next empty bottle.

He looked at the empty, then me, then the trash bag.

“Bye Bye Bubba,” I said. “You do it.”

He put the bottle in the bag.

“Bye Bye Bubba,” I said.

“Bye Bye Bubba,” he said, with much hesitancy.

I gave him the next bottle.

“Bye Bye Bubba,” he said, with a smidgen of conviction.

After he had placed each item in the trash with increasing enthusiasm and a Bye-Bye-Bubba farewell, I tied the bag and took it outside. Back in the kitchen, I waved and offered a last Bye Bye Bubba.

We went into the living room, and I lifted him onto my lap and got ready to read his book.

“Bubba?” he asked plaintively.

“No Bubba,” I said. “Bye Bye Bubba.”

“Bye Bye Bubba?” he said, trying to connect what we had done in the kitchen with the change in his nightly routine.

He looked me in the eye. “Bubba?”

“Bye Bye Bubba,” I said.

And then I saw his mind make the connection. “Bye Bye Bubba,” he said and settled in for his book. He never asked for a bottle again.

I thought this was an act of great courage by a little boy stepping into an unknown future. A declaration that he thought he could get along without this dependency.

Some years later, Bye Bye Bubba worked on a girlfriend’s cigarette habit. She, too, had courage.

I thought of Bye Bye Bubba over the last couple of weeks as Southern elected officials -- not all, of course -- decided it was time to stop championing the Confederate battle flag as a matter of public policy.

As a certifiable Yankee who's lived in the mountain South for 40 years and who's spent time in the Deep South, I've learned this flag represents a connection to a time when white ideas ruled. Southern states resurrected the flag in the 50s and 60s as a symbol of resistance to school desegregation, civil rights, federal intervention and social change.

The flag calls up a lost place that valued whiteness and blackness differently to the advantage of the former at the expense of the latter. That place is history, so its flag no longer has a country.

Allegiance to that place and a stateless flag was a thumb in the eye of prevailing authority, a statement of defiance, loyalty and nursed grievance. It was also a warning to avoid expressing certain ideas and having a beer in a Klan bar.

I've always thought that the South had a reasonable argument on behalf of secession. If a state voluntarily joined the Union, what in the U.S. Constitution prohibited that state from choosing to withdraw peacefully? I can't find that prohibition.

The Ninth and Tenth Amendments say that rights that are not specifically delegated to the federal government nor prohibited by the Constitution to the states are reserved either to the states or the people.

Well, that could include a right to leave a national government, just as the 13 colonies declared their independence from Great Britain.

In the 1869 case of *Texas v. White*, the U.S. Supreme Court finally ruled that state secession was unconstitutional, because states are not sovereign in our republic.

Had the slave-owning South played by the rules and played smart, it's entirely possible that a pre-1860 U.S. Supreme Court would have upheld the right of a state to secede peacefully had the Justices been presented with the issue. No Southern state brought such a case. Firing cannons on Fort Sumter was brought instead.

So does the battle flag invoke the right to secession? With some, I suppose.

Does it represent bravery, commitment, loyalty to community and grit. Yes.

Does it represent a blinkered memory of the South's virtues and liabilities, Reconstruction and the time before school-ordered desegregation? Yes, to that too.

The flag also represents to some whites an ugly meanness in which they revel, a prejudice so deep and out of place today that it tarnishes the good of those who carried in it in battle, including my wife's ancestors.

Some folks seem to be to be dependent on this memory and the current hatreds they make it support.

Maybe it's their Bubba.

Current defenders of the battle flag say the War Between the States, as they insist, was about states' rights, liberty and the Northern Aggression, not slavery.

Current historians reject that viewpoint, though earlier ones supported it.

It is, however, a matter of record that the Confederate Constitution explicitly permitted slavery of "negroes of the African race" in the Confederacy and any territories that might be acquired.

Perhaps, today's bearers of the battle flag would feel less certain about things had the United States allowed for slavery for people of all skin colors and parentages.

This never happened. American slavery was always limited to people with black African ancestry and enslaved parents. It was based on the belief that blacks are a different "race" of human beings than whites. As long as they were believed to be different, they could be treated differently.

If you believe in the idea of evolution and a common ancestor, we all trace back to black Africans in southwestern Africa about 200,000 years ago. That's the current scientific consensus.

That means we all started with black skin to protect ourselves from the bright African sun's ultraviolet rays. Melanin, our skin's brown pigment, is a natural sunscreen. That melanin in black skin provides a sun-protection factor (SPF) of about 13.4 compared with 3.4 in white skin.

As some of us moved north where there was less sunshine, we selected for lighter skin to pick up enough UV rays to help our bodies use Vitamin D to absorb calcium for strong bones.

Light-colored skin did not create a separate “race” of human beings of greater virtue. We’re all *homo sapiens*, one race.

But those in both South and North who practiced African slavery believed that adaptive skin color did create greater and lesser races, as do most of those who want to live under the Confederate battle flag.

For all the inequities of indentured servitude, share-cropping and industrial peonage, whites in America were never legally enslaved, carried to these shores in chains while innocent of any crime, denied citizenship, defined as property, bought and sold, counted as three-fifths of a person, barred from literacy, free to do almost nothing and forced to have all their offspring committed to life-long bondage. This was the lot of blacks for more than 60 percent of the 400-plus years the two groups have lived together in this country.

To those first 240 some years of slavery, add another 90 years of legal segregation and discrimination after 1865. **That** is the heritage the battle flag invokes for black Americans.

White Americans who fly this flag invoke a heritage of family histories, cultural homogeneity, agrarian virtues and white dominance.

The two sides of this 330-year heritage are inseparable.

Black bondage, legal and *de facto*, built white fortunes. Black hands built the South’s white columns. Thomas Jefferson, a typical example, did not have the income to construct his plantation and Monticello with free labor. Jefferson would not have been Jefferson without slavery.

Slavery and segregation did not -- and could not -- fall benignly on those enslaved and segregated no matter how much denial and forgetfulness is waved over history by the Confederate battle flag.

For these reasons, the battle flag should not be endorsed by public authority. It’s taken a long time for Southern politics to get there.

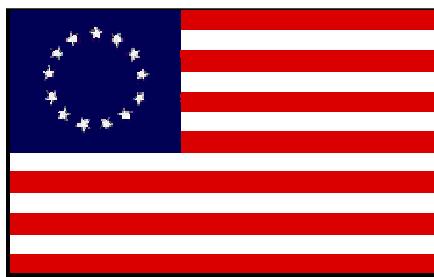
The battle flag is, however, protected as speech and should not be banned as Germany has done with the swastika.

State-issued license plates should offer a battle-flag option as well as other symbols out of the mainstream, because that is an exercise of an individual's right to expression even though others find it offensive.

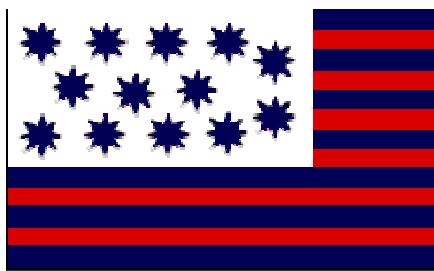
We are less free when the state prohibits that which the state deems objectionable. For better or worse, license plates could bear an ISIS flag, peace sign, black-liberation flag, KKK hood, swastika, marijuana flag, hammer and sickle and the black flag of anarchy without harming the republic for which we stand.

The former Confederate states should consider raising flags of the American Revolution on poles now empty of the Confederate battle flag.

One possibility is the flag that Betsy Ross did not likely sew but is widely attributed to her:



And if Betsy is too Northern, there's the Guilford (NC) Flag of 1781 where Americans "lost" the Battle of Guilford Court House but inflicted disproportionately high losses on the British.



Or there's the South Carolina Naval Ensign Flag of 1778



A flag pole without a flag lacks purpose and meaning. The Revolutionary War heritage -- though it did nothing to end slavery -- is a step in a better direction.

With John Nicholas, Bubba was familiar, a sensed dependency and a great security for a doomed child who would only live five more years. Even he saw that the time had come to move beyond his old comforts.

The Confederate battle flag is welcome on private land and in the public square. It's no longer welcome on public ground with the official blessing of states that fought a four-year war against the American flag.

The battle flag has become a kind of addiction for people who remember things in a certain way and would like things to be more like that than how things are now.

All of us have dependencies of one type or another.

But I think it's time for white southerners to consider understanding why it's time to say, Bye Bye Bubba.