Foreword: A Connected Fringe

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Although the Confederate States of America lasted only four years, its impact has continued for almost a century and a half. Today its romance, ideology, and symbolism still sway millions of men and women—and boys and girls—across the nation and around the world.

If its appeal were just a harmless atavism, then no one would mind that the ratio of Confederate to Union Civil War reenactors is two to one. No one would care when high schools, even in Northern states, name their athletic teams “Rebels” and “Colonels” and wave Confederate flags at football games.

But there’s a darker side to the neo-Confederate revival. In 1995 I chatted with a flag vendor at a flea market near Brattleboro, Vermont. He displayed more Confederate flags than any other single item, but not the usual battle flag of the Army of Northern Virginia. Embroidered across them were the words “If the South had won, we’d have no trouble now.” Consider that phrase for a moment. Who is “we”? Exactly what “trouble” would we not have? The implications are chilling. “What does this mean?” I asked him. “If the South had won, we’d have no trouble now,” he answered. “I can read it,” I replied, “but what does it *mean*?” “I don’t know,” he parried. “It’s my best seller.” In 1999, at North High School in Appleton, Wisconsin, conflicts between Mexican Americans and whites were a frequent occurrence. On the day after whites had defaced a Mexican flag at North, white students came to school “wearing Confederate Battle Flag symbols hanging from pockets on shirts and on car antennas,” according to reporter Kathy Nufer. For decades Appleton had been a sundown town, requiring African Americans to be outside its city limits after dark, and residents of such towns frequently own and display Confederate flags. Although it no longer enforced this rule in the 1990s, the fact that students already owned these symbols and saw this conflict as their chance to use them probably derived from Appleton’s sundown past.¹

In various ways, Southern white culture, more broadly defined, wields huge influence, even dominance, over our nation. From music to NASCAR to barbecue, the “Southernization of America” has come a long way since John Egerton used that phrase back in 1974.² Around that time, I met a neighbor of mine in Vermont walking out of our woods with a small tape recorder in hand, repeating words when prompted. “What language are you learning?” I asked. “Southern,” he replied with some embarrassment. Anxious to improve his standing in a country and western band he played in, Paul was learning to say “lack” for “like,” “dai-oun” for “down,” and “love” with at least two syllables.

Again, this seems benign—tasty, even—but it has a darker side. From 1964 to 2008, only two candidates for president from outside Dixie were successful. One of them, Richard Nixon, won partly owing to his “Southern strategy,” appealing to white voters by using coded language that implied he would go slowly on civil rights. The other, Ronald Reagan, kicked off his 1980 general election campaign at that most Southern of all locations, the Neshoba County Fair. This is a traditionally white venue in the Mississippi county whose law enforcement officers had notoriously helped to kill three civil rights workers in 1964. Reagan never mentioned that tragic event, although some of the perpetrators and their relatives and friends were in his audience. Instead, he focused his remarks on the need for “states’ rights,” a code phrase for getting the federal government to leave race relations alone.

Unfortunately, Confederate symbolism and ideology inevitably come with white supremacy baggage. Hague, Sebesta, and Beirich show that neo-Confederates also are anti-immigrant, homophobic, and profoundly anti-democratic, and that’s with a small “d.” (They are profoundly anti-Democratic as well.)

This book performs three crucial functions. First, it shows the nuts and bolts of neo-Confederate ideology, often in its adherents’ own words. Their own words make many neo-Confederates look nuts indeed. These are Americans who heroize John Wilkes Booth, not despite but because he assassinated Abraham Lincoln. They glorify Confederate cavalry leader Nathan Bedford Forrest, not despite but because he later led the Ku Klux Klan. And they seriously propose to secede again from the evil anti-white empire that they believe the United States of America has become.

Many Americans believe some of the claims made by neo-Confederates about our past. Probably half of all Americans think the Confederacy seceded for states’ rights, for example. Certainly neo-Confederates say so. In reality, South Carolina proclaimed why it was leaving the United States in 1860, and it was for slavery—and *against* states’ rights—as their “Declaration of the

Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union” made clear.

The present volume also performs a second crucial function: it points to historical realities like these—facts that undercut the many neo-Confederate claims that do *not* look nuts to too many miseducated Americans today. Most important of all, by providing evidence of neo-Confederate linkages to important foundations, Republican politicians, and professors at major universities, the essays published herein show that even when neo-Confederates *are* nuts, we must not dismiss them as on the fringes of society. Republican leaders like former attorney general John Ashcroft, Senator Trent Lott, and Richard Quinn, former spokesperson and campaign organizer for John McCain, have ties to some of the nuttiest and most racist neo-Confederate organizations and publications. John Shelton Reed, former president of the Southern Sociological Society, repeatedly wrote (under a pseudonym) for *Southern Partisan*, the pro-Confederate magazine that sells T-shirts with Abraham Lincoln’s visage over the words “Sic semper tyrannis,” the quotation that John Wilkes Booth shouted right after murdering him. Donald Livingston, a professor of philosophy at Emory University, is “currently engaged in a book-length study on the moral, legal, and philosophical meaning of secession,” according to his department’s web site, but judging from his description in these pages, Livingston is more likely to advocate secession than study it. The Ludwig von Mises Institute at Auburn University and the Rockford Institute in Illinois are among institutions with connections to the neo-Confederate movement. One of *Neo-Confederacy*’s most interesting chapters details how, in the late 1990s, the neo-Confederates took over an important organization, the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

What will they take over next? Nothing, if Hague, Sebesta, and Beirich have their way. For knowledge is power, and this book provides the necessary information for anyone to stop neo-Confederates dead in their tracks, using their own words against them. Hague, Sebesta, and Beirich have done the heavy lifting. In the process, they have created an essential tool for those who work to bring justice and healing across racial and sectional divides in America.

Notes

1. Nufer, Kathy W. “Racial Tensions Mount at North,” *Appleton Post-Crescent*, 24 September 1999.
2. Egerton, John. *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*. (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974).

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