



Picturing Flag Violence in Civil War Sheet Music: The Case of “Down with the Traitors’ Serpent Flag”

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Abstract

Published in Chicago in 1861, “Down with the Traitors’ Serpent Flag” is one of thousands of political parlor songs from the American Civil War. Many of these songs are unremarkable musically and were preserved in homes, archives, and museum collections largely for their vibrant illustrations. In my presentation I examine this song’s lithographic cover illustration—a Union soldier grinding a Confederate flag into the dust—within a broader discourse of Civil War flag imagery taken from songs, political cartoons, and cartes-de-visite.

Compelling secrets exist within this colorful image that may not first meet the eye; to uncover these meanings along with the ways in which they operated for 19th-century audiences, I address how citizens used flags as material objects and signs in a wider social context. I argue that this defiled flag can be seen as a symbol of nation and state, as a reminder of the female presence in war, and as a surrogate for the wounded or even deceased human body. By utilizing flag culture to interrogate objects in an art historical or visual culture context, this presentation argues that vexillology should be accepted by the larger scholarly community not only as an independent discipline but as a theoretical approach to the allied fields of art history, material culture, and cultural studies.



“Down with the Traitors’ Serpent Flag”, 1861

Introduction

A Union soldier stands on a defeated, defiled flag (Fig.1). Under foot and steel, the alternating stripes transform into gore, as the soldier digs his blade into the banner's ribs. The red seems to swell from the sword's point and run into dry brown earth. With his left hand, the soldier plants his own flag on the defeated banner's lifeless form. Fluttering in the wind, this familiar design, with thirteen alternating red and white stripes and a blue canton filled with white stars, bears a family resemblance to the soldier's defeated captive; it too once flew in hope of victory, endlessly folding and unfolding its trailing field of stripes. The canton, however, displays no ordered constellation, but a faintly recognizable tree.



Figure 1. "Down with the Traitor's Serpent Flag", Flint & Higgins, 1861.

Beneath the Confederate (South Carolina) flag, propping up its tree insignia, a drum rests on its side, its head punctured by some unknown thrust. Perhaps this same Union sword has seen more violence than this frozen moment records, hinted at by the blade's darkened point; is it only shadow that colors this sharpened edge? In fact, two cannonballs lie at the soldier's feet, perhaps, as suggested by ethnomusicologist Steven Cornelius, as a castration symbol; not the literal emasculation of defeated soldiers, but a sign that they were rendered impotent by the victorious northern forces.¹

Does this sheet music cover convey only a straightforward message of Northern dominance and the preservation of the Union? While I do not deny this most immediate reading, I suggest that deeper and perhaps more troubling realities exist within this colorful bit of propaganda. Flags, after all, are complicated things, that wind aggressively through private and public human endeavors. To uncover how this image might have generated meaning for 19th-century audiences, we must first understand how these citizens used flags, both as actual material objects and as icons in a larger visual culture. In this paper I will place this lithograph within a visual discourse by comparing it with other Civil War era flag images, including sheet music covers, political cartoons and cartes-de-visite. To uncover multiple layers of potential meaning within the body of the flag, I will locate these images in a broader flag culture. In so doing, I will argue that this defiled flag can be seen as a symbol of nation and state, a reminder of the female presence in war, and as a surrogate for the human body itself, both wounded veteran and corpse.

The Song

C. C. Flint and A. J. Higgins published their propaganda tune "Down with the Traitor's Serpent Flag" through Higgins's own publishing company in Chicago, in 1861. Scored for piano and voice, this song was simply parlor music, never intended for soldiers on the front lines. While Civil War soldiers often made music, they played their camp songs on portable instruments and favored well-known tunes. Cornelius has referred to these troops as "singing soldiers", and emphasized their taste for "minstrel tunes and ballads".² However, many middle-class homes in the 19th century had pianos, and more still possessed pump organs, which women would play as a part of Victorian parlor culture; in performing music, they also performed class, culture, and the outward affectations of refinement.³ To facilitate this culture, music publishers cranked out this type of topical song, with uncomplicated accompaniment and a simple melody that anyone could sing.⁴ This song's pedestrian melody is written in four different clefs to

¹ Steven H. Cornelius, *Music of the Civil War Era* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), 46.

² *Ibid*, 82.

³ Kenneth Ames, *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 140. Ames dedicates an entire chapter of his study to pump organs in Victorian parlors.

⁴ Ames, in fact, discusses the differences between piano and organ music in Victorian culture, explaining that the piano was the "star instrument", of the day, and was played more for public recitals, often by men. Pump organs, on the other hand, lacked "pyrotechnics", and dynamics, and were used for playing simple chorded accompaniment in the parlor. See Ames, 151.

correspond with various vocal ranges. The lack of written vocal harmony lines suggests that this piece was to be performed by amateur singers, perhaps huddling around the family organ.

It may seem shocking to imagine genteel Victorians uniting their voices with such violent words. I will quote the first verse to demonstrate the song's overall aggressive message:

*Sons of the bright and glorious land
Where freedom first did find a home
Arouse and with avenging band
Consign the traitors to their doom
Down with the traitors' Serpent flag
Death to the wretch o'er whom it waves
And let our heaven born banner float
O'er freemen's homes and traitors' graves.*

The final couplet is worth noting, as in one sense it describes the scene we have been considering. Through this loose synchronization of word and picture meaning, we can make the preliminary suggestion that this traitor flag is meant to stand in for deceased Confederates, as the Union flag will fly only over "freemen's homes and traitors' graves".⁵ I will explore this idea more completely in a later section of this paper.

Though this object suggests a likely broad middle-class audience, it is difficult to reconstruct who sang this song or whether or not it was commercially successful—there was not, for example, a Billboard "Hot 100" list in 1861. It seems safe to say, however, that this song, as merely a musical artifact, is unremarkable. Throughout the Civil War the many publishing companies in Northern urban centers like New York and Chicago published new tunes daily, resulting in thousands of songs.⁶ The most popular of these remain known in our time, such as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", or "The Battle Cry of Freedom". In fact, the most popular tunes often sold themselves without the aid of colored lithographic covers, while lesser-known songs relied on the visual to attract attention from potential buyers.⁷ Perhaps it is reasonable to assume that these illustrations would utilize common imagery and thereby conform to a broader visual discourse in order to appeal to the consumer. An examination of contemporaneous sheet music, lithographs, and *Harper's Weekly* illustrations will argue that this is the case. While I cannot say for certain how many people viewed this image as a unique entity, I suggest that this cover draws on commonly used symbols and ideas, and as such provides an entry into the previously mentioned visual discourse of flags and violence in the 19th century.

⁵ Here I am employing the phrase "loose synchronization", as used in John Richardson, "Resisting the Sublime: Loose Synchronization" in *La Belle et la Bete and The Dark Side of Oz, Musicological Identities*, ed. Steven Baur, Raymond Knapp, and Jacqueline Warwick (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2008) 135–148. Richardson examines multimedia artifacts wherein existing musical material is coupled with separately produced visuals (or vice versa), resulting in a "loose synchronization", which despite occasional contradiction or slippage can still yield significant symbolic meaning.

⁶ Cornelius, conversation with the author, 25 March 2010.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The Visual Discourse: Flags and Violence in Visual Culture

Though “Down with the Traitors Serpent Flag” may not have been a “hit” song, its illustrated cover drew from an existent body of violent flag images. In fact, the first Union soldier to die in action, Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, was killed because of a flag. Subsequently, flags feature prominently in the visual construction of his memory.

Ellsworth’s troops entered Alexandria Virginia in May 1861, to see the first accepted national flag of the Confederate states, the so-called “Stars and Bars”, flying from the roof of the Marshall House hotel. Ellsworth entered the hotel, ascended the stairs, and removed the banner, only to be shot by the hotel’s owner on the stairwell. An accompanying Union soldier shot and killed Ellsworth’s murderer. The young colonel’s martyrdom became a cause célèbre in the North, as poems, images and songs lionized his heroic actions.



Figure 2. Death of Col. Ellsworth, Currier & Ives, 1861

The 1861 Currier & Ives print, “Death of Col. Ellsworth”, exemplifies the visual component of constructing Ellsworth’s memory (Fig. 2). The image captures the very moment of Ellsworth’s death; the hotelman literally holds a still smoking gun. The Union soldier, however, is already in place, poised to take the proprietor’s life in retribution. Though the architectural elements of the story are visible, we can see the stairs that Ellsworth climbed and from which he fell, the background of this picture is deemphasized. The story is told through its four figures, the two soldiers, the rebel, and the flag itself. This final actor in the tale plays a significant role; infernal in flight, it is now subdued underfoot and ultimately sanctified as a relic (despite its use as a symbol of secession) through the martyr’s spilled blood.

“Ellsworth’s Funeral March”, composed by J. C. Beckel and published by Oliver Ditson & Co. of Boston, was paired with a Buffords’ lithograph that avoided the violence of the Currier & Ives, creating a contemplative memorial (Fig. 3). This image does not illustrate the narrative so much as reposition its characters in a frozen eternity. Ellsworth, his hat cocked handsomely to the side, stands triumphantly upon the infamous flag, his sheathed sword jabbing into the stars as his right hand sweeps the bars up behind his back. The setting is not the Marshall House, but an unspecific landscape with military encampments, as though Ellsworth, having fulfilled his duty in life, now presides over his troops in eternal youth. Though he lost his life in the process, this image reminds us that he succeeded in tearing down the rebel flag, which became his saintly attribute. Just as the flag gives Ellsworth his meaning—his new martyred identity—Ellsworth’s sacrifice changes the flag’s character from a threatening to a subdued symbol.



Figure 3. “Ellsworth’s Funeral March”, Oliver Ditson & Co., 1861

The trampled flag features in more general images as well, such as political cartoons in *Harper’s Weekly*, which, like the sheet music under consideration, were intended for a broad middle-class, Northern audience. A cartoon entitled “The Flag He Fights Under”, published in the 31 August 1861 edition of *Harper’s*, shows an unidentified man, with a caricatured oversized head, defiantly pointing down to the Union flag on which he stands and into which he plants the Stars and Bars (Fig. 4). While the specific event or individual being skewered in this image is not immediately apparent, from the labels within the print “Southern Lottery Exchange”, and “Confederate Scrip Taken”, it appears that this figure represents Northern businessmen who profited through financial exchange with the South. Such actions are here shown as treasonous, tantamount to kicking the American flag into the dust. This Union flag, however, seems curiously animated despite its unfortunate position; it ruffles and billows underfoot and raises its finial like a weary head.



Figure 4. “The Flag He Fights Under”, cartoon in *Harper’s Weekly*, 1861.



Figure 5.
“Virginian of 1776”

Another striking trampled-flag image, published in the 18 May 1861 *Harper’s*, commented on Virginia’s recent secession from the Union. A pair of images entitled “Virginian of 1776”, and “Virginian of 1861”, this cartoon criticizes Virginia’s traitorous decision, by calling upon symbols of historical sacrifice. The Virginian of 1776 is a tired colonial soldier in tattered clothing with sprung boots that reveal his toes (Fig. 5). With his left arm he rests a rifle over his shoulder,

his right hand clenched in a determined fist. He trudges through an uncertain landscape, a faintly visible tree to his left the only indication of



Figure 6.
“Virginian of 1861”

setting. However, from the positioning of his feet, we can see that he has been ascending an incline, doggedly pursuing a difficult but elevating course. His 1861 counterpart is poised for violence, pulling his saber back behind his head for a murderous slash (Fig. 6). The capitol building occupies the space beneath the man’s gaze, where his sword soon will fall. His legs are awkwardly apart as he steps menacingly on both the flag and a fasces, both symbols used by the federal government to suggest unity and political authority.

While this is a short list of examples, not intended to be an exhaustive study of violent flag imagery, it serves to argue that the Charles Shober and Company illustration for “Down with the Traitors Serpent Flag” drew from a popular visual tradition wherein Unionists and Confederates alike trampled flags. As these examples suggest, depending on the image’s maker and audience a trampled flag can represent an act of treachery, tyranny, or bravery.

While thus far I have placed this one image into a larger visual context, I have yet to consider what flags themselves meant to these same 19th-century Americans. I will now turn to an examination of Civil War flag culture to uncover potential meanings of flags that may not immediately appear to 21st-century audiences. I will begin by addressing this specific “Traitors Serpent Flag”, its history and meaning, before turning to more general observations on how soldiers and societies used flags and how flags generated meaning for those who made them, carried them, who fought and died under their colors.

Flag Culture

From the white canton and tree insignia, this flag is identifiable as a South Carolina banner, as the palmetto tree has been a symbol for the state since the Revolutionary War. In the battle for Charleston Harbor, in 1776, a colonial fort made of palmetto wood successfully withstood British fire, apparently because of the material’s elastic, springy qualities. The Palmetto Fort became a popular symbol of colonial resilience, and images of palmetto trees decorated local militia flags and the banners born by Carolinian forces fighting in the Mexican War.⁸ The official South Carolina state flag, accepted in 1861, still features the palmetto. This battle flag, however, includes a rattlesnake slithering up the palmetto’s trunk.



Figure 7. “Join, or Die”, Benj. Franklin, 1754.

Snake imagery has a long past in American flag design, including numerous Revolutionary War banners bearing rattlesnakes and the slogan “Don’t Tread on Me”. Most scholars, including Whitney Smith and Robert Bonner, attach the American interest in rattlesnake designs to Benjamin Franklin’s 1754 political cartoon (Fig. 7), which depicted the colonies as separate slices of a dead or dying snake, insisting that the colonists must “Join, or Die”.⁹

Bonner, however, specifically connects these Colonial examples to the South Carolina flag design, which adds an intriguing layer to the unionist’s hatred of this particular “traitors serpent flag”. Not only does this flag represent the first state to secede from the Union, the “traitors” had drawn their imagery from Colonial sources, in effect re-appropriating a shared

⁸ Robert E. Bonner, *Colors & Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 25.

⁹ Booner, 127 and Whitney Smith, *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), 193.

Colonial visual heritage for their own ends. Just as the Stars and Bars can be seen as a derivative of the Stars and Stripes, the design's elements deconstructed and reconfigured into a new emblem, the Palmetto flag arranges elements from the American Flag, South Carolina military banners, Revolutionary War legend, and Colonial propaganda into a new symbol of state sovereignty. Civil War banners, however, represented much more than secession when they were carried into battle.

As James McPherson explains, "The pride and honor of an individual soldier were bound up with the pride and honor of his regiment, his state, and the nation for which he fought, symbolized by the regimental and national flags".¹⁰ McPherson further argues that most soldiers in the Civil War were afraid to fight, but were even more afraid to betray a code of honor; they did not want to die, but they would rather risk their lives than be thought cowardly.¹¹ Given the importance of the flag in uniting and focusing the will of the individual with the needs of society, the color bearer held a position of particular honor. In fulfilling his duty, he put himself at great personal risk, as opposing forces would focus their attack on the flag.¹² If the flag bearer fell, any soldier at hand was bound by his honor and his allegiance to regiment, state, and nation to take his place. With such focus on the colors, both as a rallying totem and target, it is not surprising that one of the ultimate goals of Civil War battle was to capture the enemy's colors.

This passion to bear the banner, even at risk of death, is captured in H. Lovegrove's 1864 song "Let Me Hold it Till I Die", published in Burlington Vermont. As the title suggests, this song romanticizes the color bearer's self-sacrifice, implying that this important position's glory is only earned while losing life:

*See, the one who bears the banner
Where the guns are crashing loud,
Staggers now, for he is wounded,
And his comrades round him crowd;
Hands are raised to grasp the standard;
But on it he turns his eye,
Murmuring, "Comrades, do not take it,
Let me hold it till I die! Let me hold it till I die!
I have borne it into battle,
When we forced our foes to fly.
Do not take it from me comrades,
Let me hold it till I die! Let me hold it till I die!*

The same celebration of self-sacrifice, this construction of the color bearer as willing would-be martyr, is seen in Thomas Nast's *Harper's Weekly* cover illustration "A Gallant Color-Bearer", published on 20 September 1862 (Fig. 8). The accompanying text explained:

¹⁰ James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

The color-bearer of the 10th New York Regiment deserves to be placed high upon the roll of our heroes. He received three terrible wounds in a recent engagement, but clung to his colors with tenacious grasp. While being taken into the hospital he became insensible, and an attempt was made to take the flag away, but his unconscious hand held it more powerfully; even then his ruling passion was strong. Such men in life and death are glorious examples. Our picture is a just homage to distinguished gallantry.¹³



In this dramatic image, the flagpole has slipped from the bearer's harness, as his hands, the only active part of his fading body, cling tenaciously to their charge. The officer himself is willing to abandon his sword to take the bearer's place, yet is unable to pry the colors from the wounded man's grasp.

Color bearing as a noble pursuit, as a burden more significant than preserving one's own life, is central to Civil War flag culture. As such, I would return to "Down with the Traitors Serpent Flag" to suggest that this fallen banner does not simply represent secession, or South Carolina, but references the numerous fallen soldiers who were charged with keeping it

Figure 8. "A Gallant Color-Bearer", Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly*, 1862

¹³ H. Alexander, "Touching Devotion to the Flag", *Harper's Weekly* 20 September 1862, p. 594.

aloft. Though this Union soldier is the only person, his possession of this flag demonstrates that the man or boy who once carried it into battle has already fallen. In all likelihood, he was but the first of several who lost their lives clinging to these colors. As the words of the song itself suggest, this Union soldier raises his own banner above, and drags his feet across, a mass grave, unmarked save for this defiled flag. Such a scene is more explicitly represented on the cover of H. N. Hempsted's "Union Volunteer's Quickstep", where the victorious soldier plants feet and flag atop a Palmetto banner, and a pile of corpses (Fig. 9). I would argue, however, that the lack of bodies in "Down with the Traitors Serpent Flag" is problematic, in that it suggests the scene has been cleansed for our viewing. The corpses have been hidden out of sight, but the emblems of their destruction are evident. It is a scene of sanitized violence, as frightening as it is casual. In some instances, however, the flag does not simply represent fallen soldiers, but seems to take on a subjectivity all its own.

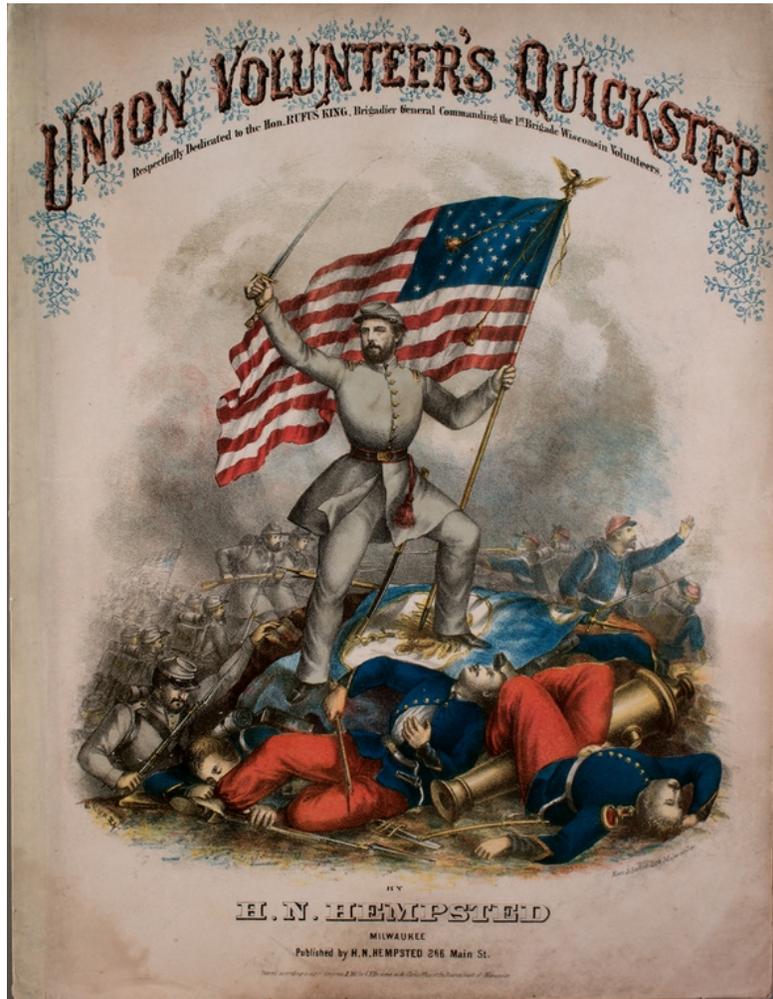


Figure 9. "Union Volunteer's Quickstep", H. N. Hempsted.

Despite their rectangular bodies and abstract symbolism, flags are strangely anthropomorphic when we use them. Certainly, citizens of a nation or state feel from their banner what Robert Plant Armstrong has called an affecting presence. In *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence*, Armstrong discusses works of art, common in all societies, that have powers which defy their object-ness.¹⁴ These works "draw power from the tension between subject and object".¹⁵ Though these objects are human-made,

¹⁴ In this context, I am using a broad inclusive definition of art, referring to a wide range of material, visual, or potentially even physically non-existent cultural works.

¹⁵ Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1981), 6. Though I provide the page for this and other

their users treat them as human-like; we may house them, clothe them, and honor them—in nearly every case, we serve them. Armstrong explains that these works may receive their power through processes of virtuosity or invocation. In the first instance, the maker's unique individual ability imbues his or her work with power. From an art historical perspective, we may think of this power of virtuosity as being tied to the aura of the artwork as a singular object. Works of invocation, on the other hand, rely not on the maker's ability but the ritual functions of society for their power.¹⁶

National flags fit easily within Armstrong's second category, as their power is not borrowed from another celebrated subject, but is invoked through socio-political ritual until the banner becomes its own self, a subject that transcends its object-ness. Though speaking chiefly of African artifacts, Armstrong's words are helpful in thinking through this confusing nature of the flag as he explains: "The work of affecting presence—sharing psychological process with persons—sometimes seems as much to apprehend its witness as its witness apprehends it".¹⁷

Considering the words of Armstrong and McPherson, it seems clear that flags in this martial context have an affecting presence of invocation, granted to them through social beliefs and actions. Armstrong, in fact, argues that in a ritual context, people and their creations may switch positions in their power relationship, humans in effect becoming objects in the service of their work of affecting presence.¹⁸ So too, I have described Civil War soldiers as willing to sacrifice their subjectivity, their very self and life, for the preservation of their flag's affecting presence. A curiously similar process can be seen in the documentation of the war wounded, which may be connected to these ambiguous relationships of subject and object, and which adds another layer of meaning to our flag imagery.

Several authors have discussed the use of the *carte-de-visite* medium to document Civil War wounded. For example, Dr. Reed Bontecou took a photograph in 1865, as he drained several pints of pus from Israel Spotts's lung, without anesthesia (Fig. 10).¹⁹ The point was not to document Spotts as an individual, but to fix his ailment and the doctor's chosen treatment in time. As Alan Trachtenberg explained while writing of such images: "The men appear as sullen objects of scientific attention, as if detached from their bodies, witnesses rather than possessors

direct quotations from Armstrong, I will be summarizing and using the general theoretical ideas he expounds in chapter one of this work, "Powers of Invocation, Powers of Virtuosity".

¹⁶ Though Armstrong, for ease of explanation, separates these into two categories, I would suggest that most works, especially in the Western art tradition, gain power through the synthesis of these processes. Leonardo was certainly a virtuoso painter, but "Mona Lisa", has gained power through a complicated system of invocation that outreaches her maker's abilities. The mere fact that the thousands of tourists who visit her are unable to see Leonardo's brushstrokes and delicate *sfumato* through bulletproof glass and reflected camera flashes attests to this.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁸ Armstrong, 16. "I myself have felt scrutinized to my essence, turned nearly into an object before the insistent confrontations of a mask danced."

¹⁹ Kathy Newman, "Wounds and Wounding in the American Civil War: A (Visual) History", *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, volume 6, number 2, p. 79.

of their wounds and scars, their memory and knowledge of pain.”²⁰ Kathy Newman, while looking at the same pictures, wrote, “these soldiers, while beneath the scalpel or the camera lens, do not belong to themselves so much as to the surgeon and to the annals of medical science”.²¹ Yet, while these wounded veterans lose their subjectivity, to become objects in the fixed image, other wounded figures gain a surprising subjectivity through a similar photographic process.

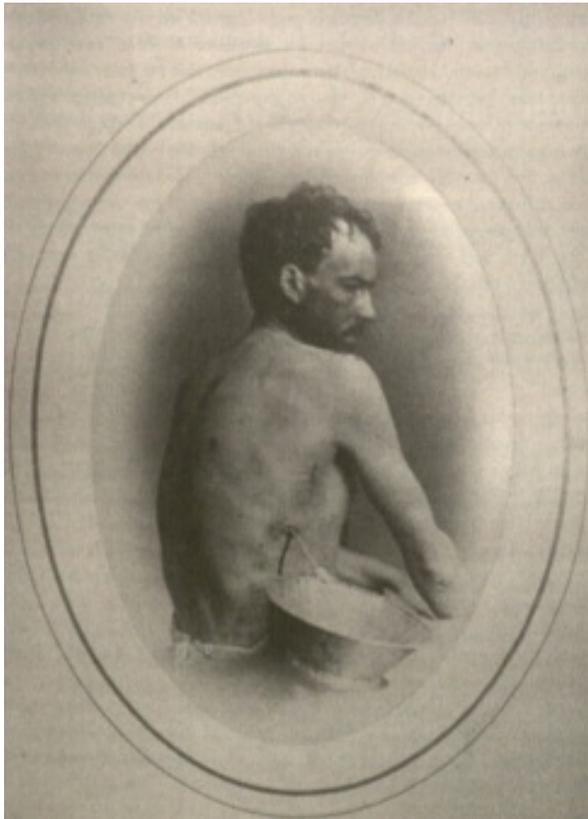


Figure 10. Carte-de-visite image of Israel Spotts, Dr. Reed, 1865.



Figure 11. Regimental colors of the First New Hampshire Volunteer Cavalry, 1866.

Consider a carte-de-visite of the regimental colors of the First New Hampshire Volunteer Cavalry, produced by Kimball and Sons of Concord in 1866 (Fig. 11). Clearly a battle veteran, bearing gaping holes made with rifle and bayonet, the battered banner’s central eagle insignia is still legible. Now the banner requires no bearer, as it seems capable of staying aloft on its own. Unlike the wounded soldiers, turned into display objects under the camera’s eye, through photography wounded flags are fixed as ambiguously powerful selves. Again Armstrong assists in understanding this image: “a work in invocation tends to exist in an ambient time; what has

²⁰ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 113.

²¹ Newman, 82.

happened to it in the past is portion of its being”.²² In this instance, the photograph creates this ambient time, fixing one moment—and through it all preceding moments—for eternal observation. However, in this fixed moment, the object seems curiously alive, while the soldier’s wounded body under similar observation becomes a detached husk.

The subjectivity of flags is further displayed in images where their power is directly questioned. Such is the case in Waud’s image of General Custer presenting captured Confederate flags at the War Department, published in *Harper’s Weekly* on 12 November 1862 (Fig. 12). These tattered colors, hanging limply without an activating breeze, are not only trophies, but captives. By viciously fighting for these scraps and proudly toting them back to Washington, the Union forces display these flags as powerful, now subdued, entities. The soldier who risks his life to capture the enemy’s flag, every bit as much as the flag’s original bearer, believes in and serves the banner’s power.²³

Returning again to the “Traitors Serpent Flag” we can now see this fallen banner as not only a symbol of lives lost in defense, but as a captive itself, a presence of such power that this soldier was compelled to subdue it. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that despite their powers, flags are human-made objects. This is, as Armstrong suggested, what places these works in such a curious space; we make them so we can serve them.



Figure 12. Custer presenting captured Confederate flags at the War Department, *Harper’s Weekly*, 1862

The manufacturing of Civil War flags adds one additional layer of complexity to these startling images, suggesting the female presence in war. In most cases, women made the colors that their husbands, brothers, and sons carried into battle. Bonner cites numerous examples where men and women reflected on these feminine associations to sanctify the flag:

²² Armstrong, 11.

²³ W. J. T. Mitchell has made a similar observation regarding radical iconoclasm, arguing that those who would destroy images are those who have the strongest believe in images’ powers. See W. J. T. Mitchell, “Vital Signs, Cloning Terror”, in *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5–27.

A Texas woman reminded soldiers that while their flag was ‘floating on the breeze,’ they should recall that it had been ‘perfumed with the incense of woman’s prayers.’ A regimental commander in South Carolina predicted in receiving his company’s flag that ‘every rustle of its folds will be to us as music from home.’ And in Georgia, one presenter was told that the Stars and Bars tricolor she had made would bring memories of ‘your rosy lips, fair cheeks, and blue eyes.’²⁴

The flag, as a feminine presence, became a constant reminder of what the soldiers believed they were fighting for: the preservation of home, family, and womanly virtue.



Figure 13. “The Drummer Boy of our Regiment”, Thomas Nast, 1863.

This, perhaps, gives the imagery of “Down with the Traitors Serpent Flag” its most troubling potential meaning, as we think of the Union soldier grinding this flag into the dust. In fact, we can read this image as violence against family and home in more than just this defeated feminized flag; the punctured drum also speaks of violated innocence, as drummer boys were usually pre-adolescent. The drummer boy, like the color bearer, was romanticized in popular culture, including in the Thomas Nast illustration “The Drummer Boy of our Regiment”, printed in *Harper’s Weekly* on 19 December 1863 (Fig. 13).

The young boy is shown in multiple vignettes, playing among the soldiers, writing and receiving letters, and of course, charging into battle. The scene entitled “Home Again” shows the drummer boy returning to his mother and grandmother, with a steely look set on his face. While the overall effect of this illustration is to celebrate the drummer boy’s position as a surrogate younger brother or son to the troops, this returning image, it seems, also suggests childhood’s end and innocence lost.

Just as the fallen flag can be seen as evidence of numerous fallen soldiers, so too does this

²⁴ Bonner, 80–81.

punctured drum take the place of a wounded boy, who sacrificed his life and fell in violence. Such scenes were not unknown in popular culture. The popular song “The Drummer Boy of Shiloh”, tells the tale of a young boy who, mortally wounded in battle, rises up on his knees and with his last breath prays for his comrades.²⁵ While that song was obviously intended to play on the audience’s emotions, this scene, as I previously suggested, is eerily devoid of feeling. I am more troubled by this antiseptic, violated, supine banner and perforated drum, than by the exploitative imagery of Shiloh, or the “Union Volunteer’s Quickstep”.

Conclusion

“Down with the Traitors Serpent Flag” may not have been sung in many Union homes. However, the fact that this type of violent sentiment and imagery was intended for a general middle-class audience tells us something about the psychological construction of the war at home. In creating this image, Charles Shober and Co. drew from a wealth of similarly violent flag images. As I have shown, some gorier examples included piles of suffering wounded and corpses. The trampled flag itself was a common icon in political cartoons and popular imagery, which suggested acts of both bravery and treachery, depending on the artist and audience’s perspectives.

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that flags themselves are unendingly complicated symbolic objects. While we are all too familiar with the political symbol, it is necessary to bear in mind the multitude of private and public meanings that unfold as individuals manufacture, carry, serve, capture, and die under these bloody banners. In the end, looking at “Down with the Traitors Serpent Flag” allows us to contemplate the banner as a symbol of nation, state, feminine presence, fallen soldier, and as a mysteriously affecting presence, a subject in its own right, generated by the rituals of war.

²⁵ Cornelius, 60–2.

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About the Author

Kenneth Hartvigsen, a newcomer to NAVA, has been researching American visual and material culture for years, most recently as the Jan and Warren Adelson Curatorial Fellow of American Art at Boston University. A PhD candidate in American Art History at BU, Kenneth works across academic boundaries by investigating contact zones where multiple cultural or artistic practices interface, notably by researching and writing about the visual culture of America's popular music. These interests will culminate in a forthcoming exhibition at the Boston University Sherman Gallery featuring the art of Ellen Banks, which Kenneth is curating, and in his dissertation entitled *What We See, What We Sing: America's Illustrated Sheet Music from the Civil War to World War I*, from which "Picturing Flag Violence in Civil War Sheet Music" is excerpted. Kenneth owes a debt of gratitude to his father, two-time Driver award winner and NAVA member John Hartvigsen, who instilled in him a passion for studying human history, society, and culture through the things we make, display, and revere.

