

# How Mississippi Changed Its Flag, Following Bans on the Confederate Flag in the Military and Sports

By Steven A. Knowlton

Among the responses to the widespread Black Lives Matter protests in May and June 2020, were institutional changes to policies regarding the so-called Confederate Battle Flag. The red banner with a blue star-spangled saltire, modeled on the flag of the Army of Northern Virginia (but expanded from a square to an oblong), has been a popular flag throughout the United States, but especially among white Southerners, since the late 1940s.<sup>1</sup> While some who display the flag claim no ill-will toward African Americans, it has been associated with segregationist groups such as White Citizens' Councils and the Ku Klux Klan, and has its origins as a banner for the separatist Confederate States Army during the U.S. Civil War, which fought to detach southern states from the union in order to preserve chattel slavery in which African Americans were denied all liberties.

For many years, groups advocating for African American civil rights, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, argued that the flag should not be flown in any government facility, calling it “the ugly symbol of idiotic white supremacy, racism, and denigration.”<sup>2</sup> In

1983, the University of Mississippi discontinued its formal use at football games after its first African American cheerleader, John Hawkins, refused to wave the flag.<sup>3</sup> Following a racist massacre in 2015 in Charleston, where the shooter had earlier posed with the Confederate Battle Flag, the states of South Carolina and Alabama ended the practice of flying it on state capitol grounds.<sup>4</sup> However, private individuals still displayed the flag in workplaces, homes, and at sporting events, and the square version of the flag had appeared on the state flag of Mississippi since 1894.



**Figure 1.** The Mississippi State Flag, 1894–2020. Source: Flickr/Will

## Military Prohibits the Confederate Battle Flag on Bases

Shortly after protests began on May 26, various authorities began to rule out use of the Confederate Battle Flag within their jurisdictions. Among the first was the U.S. Marine Corps, which prohibited the display of the flag on “public and work spaces aboard an installation” (meaning a Marine Corps base). Guidance was offered that bumper stickers, clothing, mugs, posters, and other items bearing the design were also unauthorized. Commanders were instructed to “identify and remove” any items displaying the flag. Inspections were to occur in “office buildings, open-bay barracks and shipboard berthing, commissaries, all Marine Corps schoolhouses, and front yards of military housing. However, commanders will not inspect inside assigned individual barracks rooms or living quarters; assigned desk drawers, cabinets and lockers; backpacks; private automobiles; or military housing.” Marine Corps Commandant David Berger justified the rule, writing that the Confederate Battle Flag “has the power to inflame feelings of division” and “I cannot have that division inside our Corps. We must remove those symbols that have the effect of division and not mere disagreement.”<sup>5</sup>

On June 9, the U.S. Navy also prohibited the Confederate Battle Flag. Chief of Naval Operations Mike Gilday banned it from “all public spaces and work areas aboard Navy installations, ships, aircraft and submarines.” The order was given to “ensure unit cohesion, preserve good order and discipline, and uphold the Navy's core values of honor, courage, and commitment.”<sup>6</sup>

Secretary of Defense Mark Esper issued a memorandum of guidance on July 16 that applied to members of all the armed services and civilian employees. Rather than banning any flags specifically, the guidance rather outlined the types of flags that are acceptable for display; by inference, the Confederate flag was excluded. Esper observed that “Flags are powerful symbols, particularly in the military community for whom flags embody common mission, common histories, and the special, timeless

bond of warriors” and concluded that “The flags we fly must accord with the military imperatives of good order and discipline, treating all our people with dignity and respect, and rejecting divisive symbols.” Deemed acceptable for display were flags of the United States and individual states and territories, military flags, flags of other nations allied with the U.S., and flags of international organizations of which the U.S. is a member.<sup>7</sup> An aide confirmed to the press that Confederate flags, LGBT pride flags, and flags with political slogans were not acceptable.<sup>8</sup>

### NASCAR Bans the Flag at Races

June 10 saw the auto racing league NASCAR—whose fans often waved the flag during races—ban its presence “from all NASCAR events and properties”. The action was taken at the urging of the league’s only African American driver, Bubba Wallace, who noted that “no one should feel uncomfortable when they come to a NASCAR race” and that the Confederate flag was offensive to him and to African American racing fans. The move came five years after NASCAR’s President, Brian France, called the flag an “offensive and divisive symbol” and initiated a program in which fans bringing Confederate flags to race could trade them in for U.S. flags.<sup>9</sup>

### Mississippi’s State Flag: A History of Contention

Mississippi’s state flag, in the meantime, had been subject to criticism for some time. Adopted in 1894, it bore the square version of the Confederate Battle Flag in its canton. The University of Mississippi took steps to discourage fans from waving the flag at football games in the late 1990s.<sup>10</sup> In 2001, a referendum was held on the question of replacing it. Although the voters of Mississippi elected to retain the design with the Confederate symbol 64% to 36%, the vote was racially polarized: statistical analysis shows that nearly all African American voters supported the replacement of the Confederate symbol.<sup>11</sup> After the Charleston shootings, pressure to change the Mississippi flag increased. Writer John Grisham and actor Morgan Freeman joined dozens of prominent Mississippians calling for flag change in an open letter in 2015.<sup>12</sup> In 2016, the Oregon legislature removed the Mississippi flag from its 50-state display on the state capitol grounds in Salem;<sup>13</sup> in Juneau, Alaska, the 1861 “Magnolia Flag” replaced the Mississippi flag.<sup>14</sup>

In 2015 and 2016, the state’s largest universities, University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University, ceased flying the state flag on their campuses.<sup>15</sup> In 2017 Judge Carlos Moore, in Clarksdale, Mississippi, publicly removed the flag from his courtroom on his first day on the bench.<sup>16</sup> For 17 years in a row, state Representative Bryant Clark introduced bills to change the flag.<sup>17</sup> As late as March of 2020, however, a committee of the state legislature killed Bryant’s proposal to change the flag.<sup>18</sup>

### An Alternative Design Gains Favor

Artist and activist Laurin Stennis (a NAVA member), the granddaughter of the ardent segregationist John Stennis (who represented Mississippi in the U.S. Senate from 1947 to 1989), gained attention for an alternative design she developed in 2013; it was proposed as a replacement by a state legislator in 2016, but



**Figure 2.** The “Hospitality flag”, previously called the “Stennis flag”, on the desk of state representative Kathy Sykes. Source: <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2020/06/11/stennis-flag-5-things-know-popular-replacement-choice/5345862002>

the bill did not pass. Numerous Mississippians nonetheless began flying the “Stennis flag” as an alternative to the official state flag (and some Stennis flags were even seen during Black Lives Matter protests in Mississippi).<sup>19</sup>

Jim McIntyre, proprietor of A Complete Flag Service in Jackson (a NAVA member), agreed to serve as the exclusive retailer for the Stennis flag, and reported that for the last few years it has been his second most popular flag, behind only the U.S. flag. By 2019, the design had proved popular enough that the legislature approved a measure offering the flag as an alternative design for car license plates.<sup>20</sup>

### The Turning Point: Black Lives Matter Protests in 2020

As the 2020 protests gained attention, citizens and legislators began taking action to pressure the legislature to revise the state flag. A football player for Mississippi State gained statewide attention with a Twitter posting. Tight end Kenny Yeboah wrote on May 29, “It’s Crazy that as an African American Student-Athlete I play for a team in a state, that STILL has the confederate flag incorporated into their flag....STILL in 2020!!!”<sup>21</sup> At a Black Lives Matter rally in Jackson on June 6, among the chants was “Change the flag!”<sup>22</sup> An online petition had garnered 100,000 signatures (not necessarily all from Mississippians) by June 8.<sup>23</sup>

Around the same time, African American Democratic State Representative Chris Bell and Republican State Representative Shanda Yates began discussions with a bipartisan group of legislators about reviving the flag-change bill that had earlier in the year died in committee. The dozen or so lawmakers from both Democratic and Republican parties met in private, and later with State Speaker of the House Philip Gunn, a Republican who had been a public proponent of flag change in prior years. The initial proposal was to replace the 1894 design with the Stennis flag. The garnering of votes necessary for passage was complicated by a legislative protocol requiring that two-thirds of the House vote to suspend the rules and reconsider a bill that had already been voted down in committee.<sup>24</sup> Gunn pledged that if the sponsors could find 30 votes from Republican

representatives, he would move the legislation forward.<sup>25</sup> For ease of reference, the racial and partisan breakdown of the legislature is shown in table 1. While Bell and Yates had hoped to work quietly to build support, word about the talks was leaked to the media—resulting in both stiffening of legislative opposition to flag change due to constituent pressure, and a growing number of public statements in favor of flag change by non-legislative organizations.<sup>26</sup>

The bill would change the flag by legislative action, while Republican governor Tate Reeves publicly stated his preference for a referendum to change the flag.<sup>27</sup> Referenda around flags are rare, as flags are typically chosen through the legislative process. Among the few that have occurred at the state or national level are the Mississippi referendum of 2001, the Georgia referendum of 2004, and the New Zealand referenda of 2015 and 2016.

House of Representatives		Senate	
Republicans	73	Republicans	33
African American	0	African American	0
White	72	White	33
Hispanic	1	Hispanic	0
Democrats	46	Democrats	19
African American	36	African American	13
White	10	White	6

Source: Alex Rozier and Kayleigh Skinner, “Do Your Lawmakers Look Like You?”, *Mississippi Today*, February 6, 2019, <https://mississippitoday.org/2019/02/06/do-your-lawmakers-look-like-you>

**The Early Stages of the Process**

While members of the House were whipping their votes, the Mississippi Association of Educators (the state’s teachers union), asked its members to press their legislators to support flag change. In a message sent on June 11, its President Erica Jones wrote, “Educators are charged with ensuring our students feel safe, cared for, and protected in their schools. That is a daunting task under the best of circumstances. When there is a racist relic of the past flying above our schools, it is simply not possible to say we are fulfilling that duty. We would never stand for displaying a symbol of hatred inside of our classrooms. Why should we tolerate it outside of our school buildings, next to the doors our students walk through each and every day?”<sup>28</sup> The teachers were only one of many groups of constituents lobbying their legislators. One lawmaker reported that he had received more than 1,500 messages in the two days since it became public that the issue was on the table—and they were evenly divided between support for and opposition to changing the flag.<sup>29</sup>

The Mississippi State Senate began its own process to consider flag change on June 11, as Democratic senators filed a resolution to suspend their own rules and allow the body to consider a bill from the House. The Democrats conceded that the bill was

unlikely to pass the Senate, but their leader Derrick Simmons wanted to “see where the votes are”. The Chair of the Rules Committee, Republican Dean Kirby, was on record as supporting a referendum rather than changing the flag via legislation.<sup>30</sup> On June 17, Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann, a Republican with the duty of presiding over the State Senate, assigned the Senate bill for consideration by the Constitution Committee, which traditionally only reviews proposed changes to the text of the state constitution; the flag had been adopted as legislation and thus was not in the committee’s normal purview. Because the chair of the Constitution Committee, Chris Johnson, declared he had no intent to call up the resolution for debate, political reporters judged that the law was unlikely to change.<sup>31</sup>

In a public opinion poll published June 15, 46% of respondents favored retaining the 1894 flag, while 45% favored a change. 84% of African American respondents preferred a change. The starkest divides among respondents were according to age and political party. 62% of respondents over the age of 65 preferred to retain the flag, while in all other age categories change was seen favorably by 52% of respondents. 81% of Republicans favored the existing flag, and 74% of Democrats wanted change.

**The Sports Industry Speaks Out**

However, prominent voices continued to make their disapproval of the flag known. NASCAR driver Tommy Joe Martins, a native of Como, Mississippi, made public his decision to swap the state flag for a Stennis flag decal on his car.<sup>32</sup> And the industry surrounding college sports in Mississippi began to exert influence to change the state flag. On June 18, the Southeastern Conference (SEC), the governing body that organizes sports for universities in the southeastern United States (including University of Mississippi and Mississippi State), demanded that the state change its flag and threatened to consider disallowing conference tournaments to be held in the state if the flag were not changed. SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey said,



**Figure 3.** Mississippi State University women’s head basketball coach Nikki McCray-Penson joins other coaches and athletic directors on June 25 to speak against the state flag. Source: <https://mississippitoday.org/2020/06/25/it-screams-hate-colleges-coaches-urge-lawmakers-to-change-state-flag>

“Our students deserve an opportunity to learn and compete in environments that are inclusive and welcoming to all.”<sup>33</sup>

The next day, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which organizes intraleague play among college sports teams, determined that no championship or postseason events would be held in Mississippi until the state flag was changed. The chair of NCAA’s board, Michael V. Drake, noted that “there is no place in college athletics or the world for symbols or acts of discrimination and oppression.”<sup>34</sup>

In the midst of debate on June 22, Mississippi State running back Kylin Hill tweeted, “Either change the flag or I won’t be representing this State anymore. I meant that ... I’m tired.”<sup>35</sup> Conference USA, which includes the University of Southern Mississippi, announced on June 22 that no postseason events would be held in the Magnolia State until the flag was changed.<sup>36</sup>

During these weeks, a growing number of municipalities, schools, and businesses declared their intention to refuse to fly the state flag until it was changed.<sup>37</sup>

### The Legislature Floats Two Compromises

On June 19, Speaker Gunn and Lieutenant Governor Hosemann spent the day discussing various matters before the legislature, including flag change. Two ideas were reported as being the most strongly favored. One was a referendum, with details to be clarified later. The second was a “two-flag solution” in which an additional official flag would be adopted, and residents and local governments would have a choice of which to fly. However, Gunn noted that, as of June 19, no measure for flag change enjoyed the support of two-thirds of his house. Speaking in favor of the referendum was Republican Representative Dan Eubanks, who stated that “the Mississippi Legislature has no business stripping the people of our state from having a voice in this matter.” A dissenting voice on the two-flag solution was heard from Republican politico Andy Taggart, who worried that the idea would produce a “white flag” and a “black flag”, rather than a single banner for all residents. The same day, the state Democratic Party declared its support for a legislative change to the flag.<sup>39</sup>

Over the following weekend, it became clear that the two-flag proposal would not gain traction. Gunn admitted that lawmakers had privately discouraged it, and Governor Reeves decried it as a “Separate But Equal flag option”. There was also resistance to the notion of a referendum, as legislators pushed for a solution from within the Capitol. Senator Angela Turner-Ford, leader of the Legislative Black Caucus, compared the issue to that of changing the state seal, which the legislature had done without a referendum in 2014. It became clear that public pressure was changing legislative opinions. Representative Nick Bain, a Republican who until the previous week had been non-committal on the flag, observed, “Our state is at a point in its history that there is no choice but to retire its current state flag. The impending economic, social and cultural pressures are going to create a storm that this state cannot weather. Therefore, it is imperative that our legislature begins to consider options on how we replace the flag. This is an emotional issue and the

politically easy vote for me is to keep the flag. However, there comes a time when every generation must make a change for the better.” Holdouts for the 1894 flag, however, continued to state their support. Republican Representative Ken Morgan said the flag “should stay like it is. I had two “great-great-granddaddies who fought under that flag.”<sup>40</sup>

### Business and Religious Leaders Add Pressure

The pressures alluded to by Bain included public statements from leading business figures in the state. John Hairston, CEO of Hancock Whitney Bank, noted on June 23 that a referendum would slow down investment in Mississippi: “If the issue goes to the polls, it will be covered by every major network. Any business considering locating here will pause, not wanting to take the risk of locating here until resolution.” He also noted that the current flag was a factor in the state’s economic performance, noting, “Employers look at our state as a very good place to consider locating all or part of their workforce, but they are all sensitive to the flag and how it could still be flying after all these years. Every business leader involved in economic development has been forced to defend the state against the image created from the flag.”<sup>41</sup>

Joe Frank Sanderson, CEO of Sanderson Farms, one of the state’s largest companies, also weighed in against a referendum: “There are going to be all kinds of demonstrations. There are going to be boycotts, just like the SEC and NCAA. Conventions are not going to come here, people are not going to come to the casinos, people will boycott Mississippi products, jobs are going to be affected. Those are the economic realities.”<sup>42</sup> These sentiments echoed those of the Mississippi Economic Council, the state chamber of commerce, which had been a longtime advocate of flag change. On June 24, the MEC launched an advertising campaign with the theme, “It’s Time”, with full-page ads in newspapers across Mississippi. The same day, the Mississippi Association of Realtors also called for change.<sup>43</sup>

In hopes that the opinions of religious leaders would sway more votes, Gunn and Hosemann met on June 23 with leaders of Baptist, Roman Catholic, United Methodist, and Pentecostal church bodies.<sup>44</sup> Immediately afterward, the Mississippi Baptist Convention, known for its influence on the legislature, issued a statement calling for the flag to change. “It has become apparent that the discussion about changing the flag of Mississippi is not merely a political issue.... The racial overtones of the flag’s appearance make this discussion a moral issue. Since the principal teachings of Scripture are opposed to racism, a stand against such is a matter of biblical morality.”<sup>45</sup> Other churches had already been on the record favoring change.

The same day, a group of about 40 mostly African American legislators gathered in front of the Capitol to urge swift action on the flag. Democratic Senator Angela Turner-Ford, an African American, remarked that “The emotional distress that the current flag perpetuates on people of color extends throughout the United States, casting us and having people to claim we are backwater and retrograde. We need a new brand, we need a new symbol.” Representative Ed Blackmon, a Democrat, noted



**Figure 4.** Protesters at a Black Lives Matter rally on June 6 call for a change of flag and fly the Stennis (Hospitality) flag. Source: <https://www.wmccactionnews5.com/2020/06/08/gov-reeves-says-mississippians-should-decide-change-flag-not-him>

the irony that “this flag we are here about today was not the flag flown by Mississippi during the Civil War. Mississippi had a different flag with the magnolia tree on it.”<sup>46</sup> He went on to explain that the design was adopted in 1894 to “remind black folk, you haven’t made it yet. That the Confederates still control your livelihood, your quality of life. We’ve been fighting that symbol ever since.”<sup>47</sup>

Amidst these pressures, a new public opinion poll showed that, for the first time ever, a majority of voters (55%) favored changing the flag, and only 41% wished to retain the 1894 design. Scott Waller, president of the MEC, which commissioned the poll, noted, “In the nearly 20 years we have held the position of changing the state flag, we have never seen voters so much in favor of change.”<sup>48</sup> The percentage of likely voters favoring flag change grew to 72% if “In God We Trust” were included on the new flag.<sup>49</sup> The Walmart retail chain announced that it had discontinued stocking the Mississippi state flag a couple weeks before, according to spokesperson Anne Hatfield: “We believe it’s the right thing to do, and is consistent with Walmart’s position to not sell merchandise with the Confederate flag from stores and online sites, as part of our commitment to provide a welcoming and inclusive experience for all of our customers in the communities we serve.”<sup>50</sup>

### Legislative Leaders Come Around

On the 24th, Hosemann revealed that he had changed his approach, and now favored a legislative solution. “The Legislature in 1894 selected the current flag and the Legislature should address it today. Failing to do so only harms us and postpones the inevitable,” he said. House Democratic Leader Robert Johnson III observed that proponents of flag change were “within single digits of having the votes for a suspension resolution.” Hosemann suggested that any new flag “should bear the Seal of the Great State of Mississippi and state ‘In God We Trust’”, a motto which had been added to the state seal in 2014. Republican attorney general Lynn Fitch added her support for both a change, and for including the phrase in a new flag: “The addition of the motto ‘In God We Trust’ from our state seal is the perfect way to demonstrate who we are to all.” State Auditor Shad White and State Insurance Commissioner Mike Chaney, both Republicans,

also declared their support for a legislative change. However, other statewide officials, including Agriculture Commissioner Andy Gipson, Secretary of State Michael Watson, and Governor Reeves, Republicans all, voiced their support for a referendum.<sup>51</sup>

June 25 saw the chair of the state Republican Party, Lucien Smith, declare his personal support for changing the flag, but the party itself did not take a position. Governor Reeves, after meeting with elected officials, reiterated his support for a referendum but noted that he would not veto a bill for flag change. Because a two-thirds vote necessary to pass the bill is the same as a number of votes needed to override a veto, his veto would be ineffectual.<sup>52</sup>

Public pressure continued to mount, as college coaches and athletic directors from around the state met in the Capitol to urge legislators to change the flag. Nikki McCray-Penson, head women’s basketball coach at Mississippi State University, said, “I know firsthand what it feels like to see the Confederate flag and pretend it doesn’t have a racist, violent, or oppressive overtone. It screams hate. There is no place in our society for a symbol of discrimination, hatred, and oppression.” The group included the head football coaches at Mississippi State and University of Mississippi.<sup>53</sup> The coaches also noted that the flag increased the difficulty of recruiting student-athletes from out of state.<sup>54</sup>

The same day, June 25, legislative leaders announced that they would delay a vote on the flag, but that they would extend the legislative session (which was set to expire on June 26), until at least June 28. Amid other considerations such as the state budget and improving rural internet access, the flag bill had gained support from almost enough legislators to clear the two-thirds hurdle.<sup>55</sup>

### The Vote Approaches

Rising tensions between legislators became manifest during the June 26 session of the State Senate. The day before, anti-change Republican Senator Chris McDaniel had made a video on Facebook in which he warned of “a very slick and a very well-funded campaign right now to change the minds of senators and House members” and observed that “these are the days you find out who has a backbone”. His fellow Republican Senator Jeremy England rose on the floor of the Senate, declaring his “backbone in place, standing as strong as I can under this dome” and affirmed that he would support the change, because “this flag, if we let it, it’s going to tear us apart... That flag is going to change. It’s going to. But the longer we put it off, the worse it’s going to be on all us in this room.”<sup>56</sup> That day, country music star Faith Hill, raised in Star, Mississippi, tweeted her support for changing the flag to more than one million Twitter followers.<sup>57</sup> The Mississippi Historical Society also weighed in, “enthusiastically and unequivocally” supporting flag change.<sup>58</sup>

On June 27, as formal proceedings on a flag bill were expected to begin, Governor Reeves announced that he would sign a bill if the legislature were to approve it. “The argument over the 1894 flag has become as divisive as the flag itself and it’s time to end it,” he said. However, he noted his belief that uniting the state after the flag debate would be “harder than recovering

from tornadoes, harder than historic floods, harder than agency corruption, or prison riots, or the coming hurricane season—even harder than battling the coronavirus”, but pledged to “work night and day to do it.” A number of legislators who had come around to supporting flag change made their reasons public. Republican Representative Jody Stevenson said, “Our state faces serious economic impact if we continue flying our current flag, a flag that doesn’t unite all the people of Mississippi but divides us.” Representative Karl Oliver, a Republican, stated, “I am choosing to attempt to unite our state and ask each of you to join me in supporting a flag that creates unity—now is the time.” In the meantime, opponents of legislative change were strategizing amendments to propose, in an effort to peel away the thin margin of votes for flag change, and crowds of protestors on both sides of the issue gathered outside the Capitol.<sup>59</sup>

### The Rules Are Suspended and the Flag Is Abolished

Perhaps bolstered by the pledge of Reeves to endorse a bill, legislative leaders concluded that there was enough support to move the bill through both houses. As the House began its deliberations on June 27, respectful attention was paid to the debate, and in the end, the single amendment offered (requiring a referendum) was defeated strongly in a voice vote. The House passed the resolution to suspend the rules for consideration of a bill by a vote of 85 to 35, with all Democrats, both independents, and 38 (of 73) Republicans in favor.<sup>60</sup> The same suspension of rules was passed that afternoon by the Senate Rules committee and then the entire Senate, with all 16 Democrats and 20 of 36 Republicans in favor. This action cleared the way for the legislature to consider the resolution changing the flag. Supporters of flag change expressed emotional reactions. Senators David Jordan and Barbara Blackmon both remarked that they had never expected to see the flag change in their lifetimes, citing the hostility to flag change that they had witnessed during the 2001 referendum.<sup>61</sup>

The resolution, as written by Gunn and 14 co-sponsors, included language specifying that the 1894 design would be retired upon passage of the law, and that a new flag could not include the Confederate Battle Flag but must include the motto “In God We Trust”. A commission would be created to adopt a new design, reporting out to the public by September 14. On



**Figure 5.** State Senator Robert Jackson appears at a rally in support of changing the flag on June 23. Source: [https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=http%3A%2F%2Fconnecticut.news12.com%2Fstory%2F42299540%2Fmississippi-takes-step-toward-dropping-rebel-image-from-flag&psig=AOvVaw2ZsEhuZgU2hk9ipXmfnPz-&ust=159555594127000&source=images&cd=vte&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCOCsn\\_ah4uoCFQAAAAAAdAAAAABAD](https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=http%3A%2F%2Fconnecticut.news12.com%2Fstory%2F42299540%2Fmississippi-takes-step-toward-dropping-rebel-image-from-flag&psig=AOvVaw2ZsEhuZgU2hk9ipXmfnPz-&ust=159555594127000&source=images&cd=vte&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCOCsn_ah4uoCFQAAAAAAdAAAAABAD)

November 3, voters would be given the chance to approve or reject the new design. Should the new design fail the referendum on November 3, the committee would present new ideas to the legislature during the 2021 legislative session.<sup>62</sup>

On June 28, Gunn’s resolution passed the House by a vote of 91 to 23. Additional language clarified that the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the speaker of the house would each appoint three members to the flag design committee. The governor’s appointees would include representatives from the Mississippi Economic Council, the Mississippi Arts Commission, and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.<sup>63</sup> Later that day, the Senate approved the resolution by a vote of 37 to 14. Post-vote analysis indicated that some legislators who had been holding out against a new flag were swayed by the promise to include the phrase “In God We Trust” on the new design.<sup>65</sup>

Gunn noted, “We are better today than we were yesterday. We are not betraying our heritage, we are fulfilling it.” Robert Johnson suggested that the passage of the bill was a triumph of empathy: “What it means to me is it isn’t just words. They began to understand and feel the same thing I’ve been feeling for 61 years of my life.” He expressed hope that removal of the old flag would clear the way for those outside the state to help it combat problems such as poverty and health care disparities: “Now that this is gone, they will begin to look and see who the real Mississippi is, and see that we are more than what that flag represents.” Senator Turner-Ford remarked, “Today we mark a transition for Mississippi, a day where we can be proud to move forward to adopt a symbol that is inclusive, a symbol that all of us can rally behind.”<sup>66</sup>

Of those who voted against the bill, many stated that their preference was for a referendum. Senator Chris McDaniel noted that all he wanted was to give the voters of Mississippi a say in whether to retire the current flag. “I don’t see how that makes me a racist. I don’t see how that makes me a terrible human being.”<sup>67</sup> Speaker Gunn assured proponents of the former flag: “Those who still want to fly the current flag can still fly it. No one says you have to take it out of your yard. You are allowed to put it on your house, you can do whatever you want to.”<sup>68</sup>

On June 30, Governor Reeves signed the bill, using several pens so that he could hand out souvenirs to the key lawmakers behind the bill. He remarked, “We are all Mississippians and we must all come together. What better way to do that than include ‘In God We Trust’ on our new state banner. The people of Mississippi, black and white, and young and old, can be proud of a banner that puts our faith front and center. We can unite under it. We can move forward—together.”<sup>69</sup>

### Flags Are Lowered and the State Prepares to Consider New Designs

On July 1, a solemn ceremony was held in which the three state flags flying over the Capitol were lowered, given a police escort, and donated to the Museum of Mississippi History.<sup>70</sup> At the museum, Ruben Anderson, president of the board of directors for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, commented that the museum was an appropriate home



**Figure 6.** Members of the Mississippi Honor Guard lower the state flag at the State Capitol on July 1. Source: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/north-america/2020/07/02/richmond-removing-confederate-statues-mississippi-retires-state-flag>



**Figure 7.** The last three flags to have flown over the state capitol are deposited in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History on July 1. Source: <https://yallpolitics.com/2020/07/01/mississippi-state-flag-is-retired-with-the-mississippi-department-of-archives-and-history>

for the flags, because “it will be studied, argued about, because it is an artifact and that’s where it should be, in the history museum.” With tears in his eyes, Democratic Senator John Hohn, an African American, observed, “When that young man at Mississippi State said I can’t run for this state, I think that touched my heart.”<sup>71</sup>

The redesign commission planned to accept proposals from the public until August 13. Drawing upon some of the guidelines published in the NAVA booklet “*Good*” Flag, “*Bad*” Flag,<sup>72</sup> the commission recommended that designs 1) Keep It Simple. The flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory; 2) Use Meaningful Symbolism. The flag’s images, color, or patterns should relate to what it symbolizes; 3) Use Two or Three Basic Colors; 4) Be Distinctive or Be Related. Designs were also required to include the motto “In God We Trust” and to eschew the Confederate Battle Flag.<sup>73</sup> As was established during debate over the bill in the state senate, other Confederate symbolism is not forbidden.<sup>74</sup>

NAVA member Clay Moss (creator of the artwork for the 2001 referendum) was asked to speak to the commission in late July, and to remain available to advise it throughout the process. He arranged to distribute copies of “*Good*” Flag, “*Bad*” Flag to all the members.

Even before the bill was passed, Mississippians were discussing the look a new flag might have. Many, such as a group of law students at University of Mississippi, found in the Stennis flag a suitable replacement; they urged the university to fly the design on their otherwise empty flagpole.<sup>75</sup> However, others were wary of anything bearing the name of a famous segregationist. Earlier in the month, activist Jarrius Adams, an African American, publicly stated his discomfort with the Stennis flag because of its associations with the late senator (who, to be clear, died many years before his granddaughter designed the flag). Laurin Stennis offered, “I totally understand that, but if they’re good with the design, they recognize the momentum we have and they can understand that this is, you know, a white person cleaning up another white person’s mess”.<sup>76</sup> Despite having named the design as the “Hospitality Flag” early in June, Laurin Stennis herself recognized that her name was an obstacle, and after meeting with Black Lives Matter activists, on June 21 publicly removed herself from the campaign for a new flag, stating, “In a continued effort to be of service, I will be stepping away from this endeavor as I understand the hurt and potential harm my last name can cause. But I will always continue to fight for Mississippi and her people, which I consider both a duty and a joy. Mississippi needs and deserves a new flag; help make it so.”<sup>77</sup> On July 1 a revamped design including the motto “In God We Trust” was revealed.<sup>78</sup>

Other discussions ranged around reviving older flags that have represented Mississippi in the past, including a Civil War-era flag with a magnolia tree and the “Bonnie Blue” flag of the same period.<sup>79</sup>

The now-former state flag has not lost its proponents, however. At A Complete Flag Source, owner Jim McIntyre says, perhaps hyperbolically, that he’s sold more of that flag in the last month than he did all year. Co-owner Brenda McIntyre reports that many customers tell her they are interested in owning a flag as a “piece of history”.<sup>80</sup>

The opposition to change did not end with the adoption of the law. A group rallied in Jackson on July 11, waving Confederate Battle Flags and the former state flag. Their stated purpose was to draw attention to a campaign led by Senator Chris McDaniel to gather enough signatures to place a proposal on the November 3 ballot that would offer the 1894 design as an alternative to the new design to be chosen by the committee.<sup>81</sup> As well, officeholders who voted for change have been greeted by angry protestors at their public appearances since the vote was held.



**Figure 8.** Workers install an improvised replacement flag in the U.S. Capitol on June 30. Source: <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/06/30/mississippi-flag-confederate-emblem-removed-senate-building>

*Vexillum* will keep readers apprised of the outcome of the November 3 election. In the meantime, Mississippi has no official state flag. Flagpoles over the Capitol remain empty, while private citizens, businesses, and local municipalities fly alternative designs or official flags of some other entity. In the United States Capitol, workers improvised a horizontal tribar flag with the state seal in the center to occupy Mississippi's place in the display of state flags in the tunnel connecting the Capitol to Senate office buildings.<sup>82</sup>

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**Figure 9.** A protester greets House Speaker Philip Gunn at the Neshoba Fair on July 30. Source: <https://msbusiness.com/2015/07/house-speaker-greeted-by-flag-supporters-at-neshoba-fair>

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough history of the flag see John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in J. Michael Martinez, "Traditionalist Perspectives on Confederate Symbols", in *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South*, edited by J. Michael Martinez, William D. Richardson, and Ron McNinch-Su (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 249.

<sup>3</sup> Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliaee, "The Flag and the Fury", *Radiolab*, July 12, 2020, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/flag-and-fury>

<sup>4</sup> For vexillologists' views on the 2015 events, see Simon Vozick-Levison, "'It's Come Back to Haunt Them': Flag Historian on the Confederate Flag", *NAVA News* no. 225 (September 2015): 5, and Ken Reynolds, "The Confederate Flag Question Through Canadian Eyes", *ibid.*: 6.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Stancy Correll, "Marine Corps Bars Public Display of Confederate Flag on Installations", *Marine Corps Times*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2020/06/06/marine-corps-bars-public-display-of-confederate-flag-on-installations>

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<sup>8</sup> Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, "Esper Unveils Guidance on Symbols Effectively Banning Confederate Flag on Military Installations", *CNN*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/17/politics/esper-pentagon-flag-policy/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> Vanessa Romo, "NASCAR's Bubba Wallace Wants Confederate Flags Banned From Race Tracks", *NPR*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/09/87352287/nascars-bubba-wallace-wants-confederate-flags-banned-from-race-tracks>; Vanessa Romo, "NASCAR Bans Confederate Flag", *NPR*, June 10, 2020, [https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/10/874393049/nascar-bans-confederate-flag?utm\\_campaign=npr&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_term=npnews&utm\\_source=facebook.com&fbclid=IwAR25h05j1R2UTrYs7i2k9S1v4Uy6v\\_ZuqhdowQbgwIj0JXoj8ivev88ncKk](https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/10/874393049/nascar-bans-confederate-flag?utm_campaign=npr&utm_medium=social&utm_term=npnews&utm_source=facebook.com&fbclid=IwAR25h05j1R2UTrYs7i2k9S1v4Uy6v_ZuqhdowQbgwIj0JXoj8ivev88ncKk)

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For items of current interest, (including letters to the editor) please submit material to the editor at [VexillumEditor@nava.org](mailto:VexillumEditor@nava.org) by the following deadlines:

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Longer pieces or items with less urgency will be worked into the publication queue as space and time permit.