

WHITE BANAL NATIONALISM AND THE RICHLAND HIGH SCHOOL REBELS

— Edward H. Sebesta 7/25/2015

The Richland High School of the Birdville Independent School District (ISD) in Haltom, Texas, a suburb of Fort Worth, Texas flew a Confederate battle flag until 1993 when the school district decided to take it down.

What was kept in 1993 was the rest of the Confederate identity of Richland High School. There is a rebel mascot. The sports teams are the Richland Rebels. The logo for the school is clearly derived from the Confederate battle flags, using its colors and a vertical strip identical in design to the cross strips of the battle flag with the blue letters RR for Richland Rebels over red. The school has a Johnny Reb spirit group, and a Dixie Belles drill team.¹



[There are variants of this logo with the vertical blue strip not outlined in white.]

Rev. Kyev Tatum, president of the Fort Worth chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference has asked the Birdville ISD that Richland High School stop having a Confederate identity by stop having Confederate symbolism and identifiers. Rev. Tatum on July 10, 2015 filed a complaint with the Texas Educational Agency and with the U.S. Department of Education when the Superintendent of the Birdville schools refused to meet with him.²

Earlier a Richland High School softball coach, Brenda Jacobson, was alleged to have made multiple statements regarding African Americans for which she was reprimanded by the school district. These alleged statements denied by Jacobson and reported in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* were:

- Telling a black player that “the sun is more attracted to you because you are black.”

- Referring to a black player's hair as "nappy and nasty."
- Saying that a black player wouldn't do a certain drill "because there is water on the ground and black people don't like water."
- Telling a black player, "see, everyone is white on the inside," after the player cut her leg after sliding into a base."³

Rev. Tatum announced that they were going to further investigate this matter.⁴ The investigation letter included a call for the rejection of the entire Confederate identity of Richland High School.

Rev. Tatum's call to drop Confederate symbolism and other identifiers resulted in students, parents, alumni of Richland High School, and the Birdville ISD making excuses and rationalizations for the Richland High School Confederate symbolism and identifiers.

The web page of the Richland High School of the Birdville ISD states the following:

Rebel means ...

Contrary to recent misrepresentations, the Confederate flag has not been a symbol of Richland High School for almost 25 years. As a parent so eloquently stated, "Rebels mean choosing your own path and defining your own future." Richland Rebels stand up for what they believe, and they accept that being different is okay. ⁵

Mark Thompson, a spokesperson for the Birdville ISD reiterated this justification and stated for the press, "They [school officials] feel our students define rebel as choosing their own path and defining their own future."⁶

A Facebook page in defense of the Richland High School Confederate identity had 4,000 supporters by July 11, 2015 and Sunday July 12, 2015 there was a rally in defense of these symbols and the Rebel mascot. ⁷

Some attendees at the rally thought the issue was the defense of the Confederate flag, as reported by Ryan Osborne in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*:

The first woman to speak asked whether the Confederate flag ever meant racism at Richland. The crowd responded with an emphatic "no." Osborne further reports:

“Then why is anyone trying to take it away?” she said. “Because they don’t understand where we come from. We come from a Southern heritage. We love our country.”

In this case, “our country,” seems to be the Confederacy and being Southern being Confederate.

Another speaker strongly rejected the idea that the Confederate flag was involved as reported by Osborne:

“It’s not about the flag,” Duer shouted over the crowd.

Duer said the rally was about preserving the mascot, not defending the Confederate flag.

“The flag was debated years ago,” Duer said. “The Confederate flag was taken away. That was a fight we lost, and that’s fine. But the Rebel mascot, the Dixie Belles, and the Johnny Rebs are what they’re trying to take away ... [those] have never been a racist symbol for us, and that’s what this rally is about.”⁸

It is interesting that Duer feels that “we lost” when the Confederate flag was removed from Richland High School. Those who claim it isn’t about the Confederacy do feel loss when they lose the Confederate battle flag.

The claim in summary is that these symbols don’t have anything to do with the Confederacy or don’t have any racial meaning at Richland High School.

Since it is very likely that this will be a rationalization for other schools, groups, organizations, institutions, and business to keep their Confederate or Confederate derived symbols and identities these claims are worth examining.

First it needs to be understood that national symbols are designed for the purpose of indicating very specific identities, national identities. Confederate flags indicate the national identity of the Confederacy a nation created to preserve white supremacy and slavery. National symbols are anchored in the historical record.

For those in Texas who doubt that the Confederacy was about either slavery or white supremacy, the Texas secession convention in its Declaration of Causes declared:

In all the non-slave-holding States, in violation of that good faith and comity which should exist between entirely distinct nations, the people have formed themselves into a great sectional party, now strong enough in numbers to control

the affairs of each of those States, based upon the unnatural feeling of hostility to these Southern States and their beneficent and patriarchal system of African slavery, proclaiming the debasing doctrine of the equality of all men, irrespective of race or color—a doctrine at war with nature, in opposition to the experience of mankind, and in violation of the plainest revelations of the Divine Law. They demand the abolition of negro slavery throughout the confederacy, the recognition of political equality between the white and the negro races, and avow their determination to press on their crusade against us, so long as a negro slave remains in these States. ⁹ [Note: Prior to the Civil War the United States was referred to as a confederacy, so the secessionist are complaining about abolitionists wanting to abolish slavery throughout the United States. Lower case spelling of negro in the original.]

WHAT IS BANAL WHITE NATIONALISM?

As an illustrative example imagine a fictional town, Potsburg,¹⁰ with a Potsburg High School, which has as their sports team name the Potsburg Panzers, and a Luftwaffe spirit team, and a SS Fraus drill team. This hypothetical high school did pull down a swastika flag some years ago, but their logo for the team still has little swastikas.

The reaction to such a high school would be that of outrage. The various rationalizations and excuses that it doesn't represent anti-Semitism but just German heritage would be met with the most emphatic disbelief and scorn. In fact it would be impossible for such a school to actually exist in the first place. The humanity of Jewish people, quite rightly, is valued by almost all of us and such a high school would be intolerable. We imagine that Jewish people are part of "we" as we should.¹¹¹²

Yet the students, the alumni, the parents, and the administrators of the Richland High School who wish to be "rebels," don't see any problems with seeking to be "rebels" derived from the Confederacy. In addition it doesn't seem to be a matter of much concern to the general public.

Why are public schools identified with the Confederacy the objects of general indifference but a hypothetical school identified with the Third Reich would certainly be immediately the object of public outrage?

This leads to a discussion of white banal nationalism.

The public's concept of a racist is often a stereotype. They think of some belligerent person, perhaps wearing strange or unusual clothing, screaming hostile slogans of white supremacy and racial slurs, some uneducated lower-income Halloween character

lacking good middle class decorum. The members of these racist groups will often be persons marginal in society and of no political influence or any other type of influence.

The public has the concept that the racist is someone outside normal society, someone they wouldn't like anyways, and not someone they would know. Emphasis is placed on the racists as being psychological in origin and disconnected from sane society.

These stereotypes of who a racist is, has significant negative effects. The first of which is that people can avoid confronting their own attitudes on race because they see the racist as their "other," an alien type individual which they don't share any characteristics with. They can believe that they themselves aren't racists since they don't shout and they are educated and they have good middle class decorum. The second of which is that they don't recognize, let alone challenge, racism in people they know. Since their friends, spouse, relative, co-worker, boss, subordinate, neighbor with racist attitudes usually doesn't fit the stereotype.

Michael Billig in his landmark book, "Banal Nationalism" discusses the fact that the discussion of nationalism usually resolves around extremists to the exclusion of seeing the banal nationalism in everyday life. Billig contrasts the focus of the usual analyst of nationalism to the analyst of banal nationalism as follows:

The analyst of banal nationalism does not have the theoretical luxury of exposing the nationalism of others. The analyst cannot place exotic nationalists under the microscope as specimens, in order to stain the tissues of repressed sexuality, or turn the magnifying lens on to the unreasonable stereotypes, which ooze from the mouth of the specimen. In presenting the psychology of a Le Pen or Zhirinovsky, 'we' might experience a shiver of fear as 'we' contemplate 'them', the nationalists, with their violent emotions and 'their' crude stereotyping of the Other. And 'we' will recognize 'ourselves' among the objects of this stereotyping. Alongside the 'foreigners' and the 'racial inferiors', there 'we' will be – the 'liberal degenerates', with 'our' international broadmindedness. 'We' will be reassured to have confirmed 'ourselves' as the Other of 'our' Other.

By extending the concept of nationalism, the analyst is not safely removed from the scope of investigation. We might imagine that we possess a cosmopolitan broadness of spirit. But, if nationalism is a wider ideology, whose familiar commonplaces catch us unawares, then this is too reassuring. We will not remain unaffected. If the thesis is correct, then nationalism has seeped into the corners of our consciousness; it is present in the very words which we might try to use for analysis. It is naïve to think that a text of exposure can escape from the times and place of its formulation. It can attempt, instead, to do something more modest: it

can draw attention to the powers of an ideology which is so familiar that it hardly seems noticeable.¹³

Similarly violent and extremist white supremacists in America comfort people that they are not racists since they are not like these extreme groups.

If there can be a banal nationalism, could not there be a banal white nationalism? Would we be able to see it? As with banal nationalism, could there not be such ordinary, so familiar and routine words, actions, symbols, objects, that we can't see them for the white banal nationalism that it is?

A white nationalism which creates a historical narrative which constructs a heroic white nation obscuring the history of race in the nation is a powerful form of white nationalism. It might be a white nationalism in which non-whites are accommodated in a nice guest room in the nation, because the white nationalist imagines they are so magnanimous. Or it could be a nationalism where African Americans are simply nullities, no hostility, but no concern that they are part of our common humanity or nationality, but imagines African Americans as the others.

It is a consciousness in which non-whites are 'them,' but not part of 'we' or 'us' however solicitous 'we' might think of 'them.'

In regards to the students, the alumni, the parents, and the administrators of the Richland High School who wish to be "rebels," they are indifferent to the fact that they derive their rebel identity from those who wanted to establish a white supremacist slave nation, who committed massacres against African American Union troops. They don't see a problem since to them black lives don't matter, there isn't really a feeling of a common humanity with African Americans. African Americans are not part of 'us'. They are not hostile to African Americans, in regards to African Americans they just don't care. The acceptance of Confederate and Confederate derived symbols is an obvious manifestation of this.

The impact of Confederate symbols, monuments and other manifestations of Confederate identity when used by institutions and government is the normalization of the Confederacy. The message is that the Confederacy isn't so bad since if it was certainly we would avoid this identity.

Also, to be avoided is the paternalism of arguing that it is hurtful or upsets African Americans as if it is an entirely an emotional reaction. To see that an institution has embraced the Confederacy, or a government has decided to racialize the landscape and honor the Confederacy, nation created for white supremacy and slavery, surely to any rational African American can be intellectually assessed that those who form the

landscape and local identity and control powerful institutions have little or no regards for African Americans humanity. Anyone would be upset that the local environment stated that their humanity is of little concern. It isn't just some unconscious emotional reaction through association of some symbols with some groups. No more nonsense about the KKK misusing the Confederate flag should be heard.

Also, this paternalism overlooks that Confederate monuments and symbols serve to instruct everyone. They poison the minds of white people by saying the concerns over the humanity of African Americans are not important. Every Confederate monument whispers, "Civil rights are the slogan of the day, but white supremacy is for the ages."

If the humanity of African Americans counted, then why are the Confederate monuments still standing, why do institutions and governments not give up Confederate identities and symbols and names?

The students, the alumni, the parents, and the administrators of the Richland High School who wish to be "rebels," aren't seeking to take some hostile action against African Americans, simply to them black lives don't matter.

The indifference of white student bodies and white school administrations to African American humanity when they engage the Confederacy for their own purposes, whether consciously for racist ends or simply in indifference to African American humanity cannot be tolerated.

The very fact that there even needs to be a civil rights leader, such as Rev. Kyeve Tatum, to raise the issue is a commentary on how the humanity of African Americans is valued by the Birdville ISD, the students of Richland High and others. The dismissive attitude of the Richland High School students, alumni, parents of students, and the Birdville ISD of concerns over their high schools Confederate identity is a revelation of their banal white nationalism and their lack of concern for the humanity of African Americans.

The lack of wide spread outrage in regards to Richland High School in the Fort Worth – Dallas metroplex over Richland High School is revealing of the fact that black lives don't matter to the general public.

Every child in America deserves an educational opportunity without having to go to an environment which obviously rejects their humanity. All children shouldn't be placed in an environment which subtly instructs them in racism or other prejudices.

The various rationalizations or thoughtless excuses for Confederate symbols and monuments and names need to be treated with contempt.

Those who choose to continue to defend that Richland High School rebel identity need to be recognized as the white banal nationalist that they are.

Action needs to be taken to assure that every child in America gets an educational opportunity in America without having to go to an environment which obviously rejects their humanity.

¹ Mosier, Jeff, "Richland High Rebels debate going to school board, but no vote planned," *The Dallas Morning News*, July 22, 2015, <http://thescoopblog.dallasnews.com/2015/07/richland-high-rebels-debate-going-to-school-board-but-no-vote-planned.html/>. Printed out 7/25/2015. For the date in which the Confederate battle flag ceased being used by the Richland High School, Mosier, Jeff, "Activist opposing Richland Rebels name threatens boycott," *The Dallas Morning News*, July 23, 2015, <http://thescoopblog.dallasnews.com/2015/07/threats-of-economic-boycott-regarding-richland-rebels-name-and-claims-of-discrimination.html/>. Printed out 7/25/2015.

² Mosier, Jeff, "Richland High Rebels debate going to school board, but no vote planned," *The Dallas Morning News*, July 22, 2015, <http://thescoopblog.dallasnews.com/2015/07/richland-high-rebels-debate-going-to-school-board-but-no-vote-planned.html/>. Printed out 7/25/2015, this article mentions Rev. Tatum filing with the U.S. Department of Education a complaint. For the date in which the Confederate battle flag ceased being used by the Richland High School, Mosier, Jeff, "Activist opposing Richland Rebels name threatens boycott," *The Dallas Morning News*, July 23, 2015, <http://thescoopblog.dallasnews.com/2015/07/threats-of-economic-boycott-regarding-richland-rebels-name-and-claims-of-discrimination.html/>. Printed out 7/25/2015. News article For article on the filing of the complaint with the Texas Education Agency; Osborne, Ryan, "Civil Rights complaint filed with Texas Educational Agency against Birdville ISD," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 10, 2015, <http://www.star-telegram.com/sports/high-school/article26970586.html>, printed out 7/26/2015. For date of filing the complaint, email from Rev. Tatum, July 26, 2015.

³ Osborne, Ryan, "Richland softball coach reprimanded for racially insensitive remarks," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.star-telegram.com/sports/high-school/article26688673.html>, printed out 7/26/2015. For more about the remarks by the Jacobson, see Osborne, Ryan, "Richland softball coach accused of making racially insensitive remarks to players," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 29, 2015, <http://www.star-telegram.com/sports/high-school/article19882557.html>, printed out 7/26/2015

⁴ Osborn, Ryan, "Civil Rights Group to investigate comments by Richland softball coach," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 8, 2015, <http://www.star-telegram.com/sports/high-school/article26731183.html>, printed out 7/26/2015.

⁵ No author given, "Richland High School/ Overview," <http://schools.birdvilleschools.net/rhs>, printed out 7/25/2015.

⁶ Mosier, Jeff, "Richland High Rebels debate going to school board, but no vote planned," The Dallas Morning News, July 22, 2015, <http://thescoopblog.dallasnews.com/2015/07/richland-high-rebels-debate-going-to-school-board-but-no-vote-planned.html/>. Printed out 7/25/2015.

⁷ Save our Richland Rebels, <http://www.facebook.com/SaveourRebels?fref=ts>, 44 pages printed out 7/25/2015. Signature count reported, Osborne, Ryan, "Rally Held to support Richland High's Rebel mascot," Fort Worth Star-Telegram, <http://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/article27097243.html>. Printed out 7/25/2015.

⁸ Osborne, Ryan, "Rally Held to support Richland High's Rebel mascot," Fort Worth Star-Telegram, <http://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/article27097243.html>. Printed out 7/25/2015.

⁹ Texas Secession Convention, "A Declaration of the Causes Which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union," February 2, 1861," William Winkler, Journal of the Secession Convention (Austin: State Library, 1912), pages 61-65. The complete text is online at www.confederatepastpresent.org.

¹⁰ I used maps.google.com to avoid using the name of any actual town. Apologies is your town is named Potsburg.

¹¹ It is useful to apply the arguments rationalizing the Confederacy, Confederate monuments or symbols to another history to show the absurdity of the argument without a lengthy deconstruction. To avoid seeing the absurdities those who are fond of the Confederacy like to start being outraged by the Confederacy being compared to the Third Reich to avoid being confronted by the fact that their rationalizations and excuses are absurd. The author is not going to regard this tactic as anything but idiotic including those who take it seriously.

¹² Lest readers think that the possibility of groups rationalizing the Third Reich as some type of heroes as entirely out of the realm of possibility, I recommend visiting these two website pages. There are Third Reich re-enactor groups in the United States with their own rationalizations why re-enacting army units of the Third Reich is okay. This is an *Atlantic* magazine about a Republican Party candidate involved with a Third Reich re-enactment group. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2010/10/why-is-this-gop-house-candidate-dressed-as-a-nazi/64319/> Printed out 7/26/2015. As reported in the *Atlantic* magazine article the following is these Nazi re-enactors' rationalization.

Nazi Germany had no problem in recruiting the multitudes of volunteers willing to lay down their lives to ensure a "New and Free Europe", free of the threat of Communism. National Socialism was seen by many in Holland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and other

eastern European and Balkan countries as the protector of personal freedom and their very way of life, despite the true underlying totalitarian (and quite twisted, in most cases) nature of the movement. Regardless, thousands upon thousands of valiant men died defending their respective countries in the name of a better tomorrow. We salute these idealists; no matter how unsavory the Nazi government was, the front-line soldiers of the Waffen-SS (in particular the foreign volunteers) gave their lives for their loved ones and a basic desire to be free.

<http://www.5sswiking.com/> Warning, loud music plays at this website. Like the Sons of Confederate Veterans they have their own disclaimers that they are not associated with extremist groups.

¹³ Billig, Michael, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage Publications, London, 1995.

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about the Civil War and Reconstruction in the notorious Texas teaching standards in *Politics and the History Curriculum: The Struggle over Standards in Texas and the Nation*, published by Palgrave

Macmillan. <http://www.keitherekson.com/books/politics-and-the-history-curriculum/>