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A POLARIZED AMERICA: AFRICAN AMERICAN PEOPLE RIGHTS AND THE CURRENT USAGE OF THE CONFEDERATE SYMBOLISM

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the contemporary usage of Confederate symbols, in the United States and in Europe. It also analyses the possible relationship between these symbols to the most violent expression of institutionalized racism, police brutality. My thesis is that police brutality of recent years (especially against African Americans) is coupled with the usage and presence, to this day, of Confederate symbols linked to racism and slavery of the time. The dissertation offers a brief overview of the racism in the United States of America from the 16th century to the present day with the murder of George Floyd. The dissertation concludes with a reflection on the problematics of this complex and deeply rooted issue in American society.

KEYWORDS: African American Rights, Confederate Symbols, African American History, American Civil War, Police Brutality

RESUMEN

Esta disertación explora el uso contemporáneo de los símbolos confederados, en Estados Unidos y en Europa. También analiza la posible relación entre estos símbolos y la manifestación más violenta del racismo institucionalizado, la brutalidad policial. Mi tesis es que la brutalidad policial de los últimos años (especialmente contra los afroamericanos) va unida al uso y la presencia, hasta el día de hoy, de símbolos confederados vinculados al racismo y la esclavitud de la época. La disertación ofrece una breve visión del racismo en los Estados Unidos de América desde el siglo XVI hasta la actualidad con el asesinato de George Floyd. La disertación concluye con una reflexión sobre la problemática de esta asunto tan complejo y profundamente arraigado en la sociedad estadounidense.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Derechos de los afroamericanos, Símbolos confederados, Historia Afroamericana, Guerra de Secesión Americana, Brutalidad policial

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1. INTRODUCTION

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, arrested due to a counterfeit \$20 bill, ended up dying after being immobilized with a forbidden technique for eight minutes and 46 seconds – a period of time under discussion. Despite the arrested's pleas to the Minneapolis police officers, George Floyd was declared dead by the paramedics that arrived 17 minutes after the first police vehicle did (Hill et al.). A shocking and cruel incident that stroke public opinion which, in turn, is unfortunately not an isolated case of police brutality against an African American. According to statistics, in the United States, police kills between 960 to 1000 people each year where, per one white person killed, three African Americans are. Breonna Taylor, shot more than eight times inside her home, or Eric Garner are just other 'names' whose lives were truncated due to police brutality (Altman).

Moreover, police brutality towards African Americans seems to be not the only problematic issue in such a multicultural nation as the United States. Along with American history, there are several examples that expose the inequality towards minority groups. In the case of African Americans, this inequality started with the arrival of the first Europeans to North America, the ones who brought Africans to work as slaves. It would not be until the years before the American Civil War when one of the earliest and essential turning points regarding civil rights produced, which, in turn, is still linked to the present. In the 21st-century United States, it is not unusual to see symbols – flags, statues, plaques, among others – inspired by one of the bands during the Civil War, the Confederate States of America, whose symbolism, linked to slavery and racism, is contradictory nowadays. Last year, the state of Mississippi, "the last state in the country whose flag features the Confederate emblem", finally decided to remove these allusions to one of the Civil War sides (Jones et al.). Even though the States try to remove all these symbols to turn the page, in recent years, these are becoming more present. For instance, during the assault on the Capitol in 2021, a rioter was carrying a Confederate Flag (Anderson). This flag, despite its symbolism, can be even seen outside

the United States, in some parts of Europe and, in other contexts such as political demonstrations, football matches, or 'recreations' of the life in the Southern United States (Mathias).

The aims within this final-year dissertation are mainly three: first, to analyze the role played by the American Civil War concerning African Americans and their rights; second, to make an update about the situation of African American people in the last 15 years in the United States and whether its current situation is connected with the past time (the period around the Civil War) and if so, how; and, finally, to make a reflection about their future situation and what can be expected regarding new social politics.

In this dissertation, the field of study is African American rights in the United States. For this purpose, and, in order to contextualize the matter, the first part of the work will focus on the evolution of their rights from the primary signs of slavery in North America during the XVI century to the present times with Biden's presidency in 2021. As the period spanned is considerably long, this historical review will highlight the most transcendental events. As time goes by, slavery is established as a legal institution in North America and the matter of slavery and slaves was revolved through different Acts and laws. After the Independence of the United States from the British Empire, the U.S. Constitution reflected the "value" of these slaves in comparison to a full-right American citizen. The turning point started a hundred years later with the outbreak of the American Civil War. There is a particular emphasis on this conflict because the years before, during, and after the American Civil War are crucial regarding African American rights. In this period, it is expounded, for the first time, a concern about the situation of the Africans that will culminate with the first approach towards equality with the Reconstruction period (1865-1877). The failure of the Reconstruction supposed a setback regarding African American rights until the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement that marked an inflectional and definitive point regarding equality. This section will also cover the last half of the 20th century until some hints regarding both Obama and Trump's administration in 2008 and 2016, respectively.

Secondly, within the story of the African American rights, the following point will focus on the present time, stressing the current situation of African Americans and how, despite it is supposed they have the same rights as any other U.S. citizen, political, social, and economic inequality is still a reality within this group. This inequality is presented in many aspects of their lives but, I will focus on police brutality towards Africa-American as it a topical subject in the last months and how citizens, not only from the United States, have responded to it. Parallel to that, in this section, I will discuss the historical context, symbolism, and usage of several symbols from the Confederate period in the present time. A controversial topic due to the connection of these monuments to the Confederate States, the Southern part of the United States that was largely in favor of slavery. Moreover, whether there is a connection between the usage of this symbolism in relation to hateful episodes against African Americans both in the past and the present time.

Finally, the dissertation ends with a look at the future with the new 2020 presidential election that explores, in rough outlines, what can be expected in the future with Biden's presidency taking into consideration the situation of global alarm with the Coronavirus Pandemic. The last section of the paper is a personal conclusion regarding the information exposed.

2. HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

In order to get a deeper view regarding the current situation of African American rights in the United States, it is essential to take a quick look at their history and social context since the arrival of the first Africans in North America.

2.1. The early stages of slavery in the US

Shortly after the first settlers arrived in the 16-century North America, Black slaves did as well (Schneider 49). Forced to work in the plantations of the New World, the first African slaves came to North America with the arrival of a Dutch ship to Jamestown in 1620. This event would become the starting point of the presence of Africans in the British colonies in this overseas territory (Horton and Horton 27). However, the slave trade, in the strict sense, was born many centuries ago. The first slaves brought to work in the sugar plantations in the Mediterranean sea used to be from the Slavic areas, nonetheless, with the conquest of Constantinople by the Turkish in 1453, sugar producers focused their attention on Africa and, consequently, the settlement of the first trading corporations (Horton and Horton 13-14).

As time goes by, a new route between Europe, Africa and, The New World, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, also known as The Triangular Trade, was born. Divided into three stages, the first departed from Europe and took manufactured goods used to exchange for African slaves; the second, also known as 'the middle passage' was the travel from Africa – where many people were sold as slaves by several African kingdoms – to the New World; and, the third one consisted on the arrival of the primary products from the plantations (Boddy-Evans). The number of slaves in the North and South English colonies were not appreciable during the 17th century but, the figures suffered a large increase in the next century as the British Empire was gaining ground in the New World (Schneider 49).

2.1.1. Legal and social conditions

The regulation of Black slaves was inconsistent because each colony, or state – after the American independence – had its own rules constantly modified according to the new necessities ("Slave code").

In theory, the English common law did not allow slavery because its legal system places great value on individual rights. In fact, at the time, the most similar concept to slavery might be villeinage but, it was far from being considered 'slavery'. However, as a consequence of various pressures, slavery was accepted in North America and, it ended up becoming a legal institution. Maryland became the first English territory in North America in recognizing slavery “as a matter of law”. In 1639, “An act for the liberties of the people”, which provided "all Christian inhabitants, "Slaves excepted" to have the rights of Englishmen" implies the existence of slaves, and, later, the “An Act limiting the time of Servants” a distinction between servants and slaves. This "innocent legal relation", according to its nineteenth-century defenders, led open the question about what a slave was. Although the term 'slave' might not have had a legal meaning until the late seventeenth century, a slave might have been said to be considered as a person forced to serve his master for life, being established as a hereditary characteristic by 1664. This 'serfdom' was an imposed, lifelong, and hereditary condition (Alpert 189 - 191).

Although the line between “servant” and “slave” was not evident enough, there was a clear distinction between white servants and black servants. White servants were not sold for life whereas, on the other hand, there were many cases of black servants who were sold for life, a decision sometimes made by merchants (Alpert 192). At the time, there was no solid legislation concerning the time black servants had to serve. Some masters freed them after receiving the value of their services but, most of them were retained with the excuse of the necessity of civilizing them according to Christian doctrine (Alpert 192).

The Slave code presented in North America was based on the idea of slaves as 'properties', an idea that evolved to laws to both protect these 'properties' as well as the property owner from slave violence. Despite the fact, there was not any common law in all the territories, some clauses were similar such as the "amount of African heritage" that classified a person as 'Black', or the status of a child depending on the mother (Lynch), that is, the children born from the union of a slave woman and her white master would be slaves (Horton and Horton 30). A social hierarchy was established between the slaves from the plantations which depended on the abilities of the slave, although the vast majority belonged to the lowest stratum in charged to work in the fields (Lynch). In the end, they entirely depended on a white person ("Slave code").

Slavery had been part of these territories for many decades and, despite the fact many Black people fought during the American revolution, the ratification of the American Constitution in 1788 entailed the slavery institution to become greatly ingrained along with the former English colonies, especially in the South. Counting slaves as three-fifths of a person (and, consequently, the increase in the number of representatives from slave states in the Congress) or prohibiting Congress from abolishing the trade of enslaved Africans before 1808 were a few of the clauses promulgated (Lynch). This premise would stand by until 1865 with Amendment XIII, Section 1: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." ("Constitution of the United States").

2.1.2. Consequences of slavery

Africans were not the first option for the plantations of the English colonies in North America. The expansion of European empires in the New World supposed the necessity of much workforce. The usage of indigenous people as the workforce was dismissed because most of them died of the illnesses brought by Europeans. On the other hand, European people were neither an option due to the different climate conditions and

tropical diseases therefore, the most obvious alternative was the usage of Africans (Bobby-Evans).

One of the main consequences was that it became a business and, in turn, a well-established institution not only for plantation owners but, also for the African kings who sold these people in exchange for manufactured goods from Europe. Their conditions were precarious, and many slaves died during the trip due to malnutrition or diseases (their death rate was around 13%), however, their lives were not much better in the plantations (Bobby-Evans).

Black slaves played a crucial role in the establishment and development of the United States as a nation. A role that started as an economic interest through the sale of the products got from the plantations but, ended with the birth of a new political power with worldwide influence (Horton and Horton 7). This influence can be especially felt in the economic and cultural development and outlook in the Southern States at the time where religion, music, food, folklore, among others, were born as a blend of the African culture with the European ones that lasts to this day (Lynch).

2.2. The American Civil War

The American Civil War, also called the 'Abolition war' by the Union and 'War between the States' by the white Southerners (Foster 416), was a four-year conflict between 1861 and 1865. The two sides of the battle were divided into the Northern States – the states part of the Union – and the Confederate States of America – the states that seceded from the Union (Weber).

2.2.1. Antebellum America

During the first half of the XIX century, the economic development was unequal between the Northern States and the Southern States. The first ones invested in the

modernization of their means of transport and industries while the economic base of the Southern states remained in farming, especially in cotton. Therefore, they depended on slavery which became a very lucrative business. By 1860, the Southern states were wealthier than the Northern ones (Weber).

Since the beginning of slavery, many slaves from the Southern States escaped to the Northern States or Canada. Nevertheless, as 'properties', they were legally allowed to be claimed and captured by their 'owners' as contemplated in Article IV, Section 2 of the American Constitution. These slaves had no right to protection or any trial, and, sometimes, many slave catchers did not bother if they were chasing the right man. Nevertheless, as time goes by, some Northern States approved several laws to modify this practice, and, consequently, many slaves had the chance to be subject to trial even though the resolution was not always positive. There was no period of prescription, therefore, a person could be arrested anytime as in the case of a man arrested after presumably having escaped nineteen years earlier or a woman accused of having fled twenty-two years before (McPherson 78-81).

Another important issue within the history of slavery in the United States was the adoption of the Missouri Compromise in 1820, in which Missouri was recognized as a slave state and Maine as a free state, banning slavery from the 36° 30' parallel (History editors). This compromise entailed the first political deals that resulted from the arguments between pro-slavery and antislavery forces. The questioning concerning the legitimization of slavery had started. The sense of morality and resistance increased in the 1850s, which clashed against the interests of the white Southerners (Weber). Many antislavery lawyers tried to defy the fugitive slave law but the U. S. Supreme Court ratified it in 1851, which provoked considerable resistance against the Law. The local antislavery society of Boston declared that it was to be denounced, resisted and disobeyed due to moral and religious implications (McPherson 81-82). These acts and arguments against slavery happened in many cities in the States. One of the most significant events took place in Christiana, Pennsylvania, in 1851, an incident known as

the Battle of Christiana. A slaveowner came to the village to search for two slaves who had escaped two years earlier. Despite the warnings made by the armed black men who were protecting these slaves, the slaveowner refused to leave without them. Consequently, this man died, and some people from both sides were wounded (McPherson 84-85). But this event was not the only one. In Syracuse, New York, William McHenry, a former slave who had escaped from Missouri, was arrested while an antislavery convention and a fair were being held in the city. Encouraged by two prominent abolitionists and a clergyman, a large group of black and white people entered the police station releasing McHenry. Many people were judged but, most of the black people involved had fled to Canada while the only one convicted died before the verdict (McPherson 86).

Over time, American society was getting more polarized. Finally, this tense dispute would end up breaking out with the presidential election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and, later, the outbreak of a Civil War that would suppose the death of nearly 2 % of the U.S. population (Weber).

2.2.2. The Civil War

The American Civil War was a crucial point for the emancipation of the African Americans, but their role in the conflict did not start well. Even though they had fought during the American War of Independence and the War of 1812, they were not allowed to enlist under the Federal law of 1792. In the beginning, Lincoln was concerned about a possible secession of the border states if he permitted the enlistment of Africans, however, in 1862, with the decline in the number of soldiers at the front, the enlistment of Black men was reconsidered (Freeman 118–120). The initial aim of Lincoln focused on the conservation of the Union rather than the emancipation of Black people (Lynch).

On July 17, 1862, he approved the release of slaves whose masters were part of the Confederate Army. Two days later, Lincoln abolished slavery in the United States.

Many black volunteers from Massachusetts, Tennessee or South Carolina joined the ranks of the Union Army. Between 179,000 (Freeman 118–120) and 186,000 African Americans (Lynch) (one into ten of the Union Army) are estimated to serve from whom 40,000 died. They were also in charge of many support actions as carpenters, cooks, guards, or surgeons. In turn, as many black women were not allowed to join the Army, many worked as spies or nurses (Freeman 118–120).

Nonetheless, Black soldiers had to face some prejudices and discrimination inside the Union Army. Firstly, African American units were not usually sent to combat as frequently as white units and, they were paid less until Congress guaranteed equal pay among all the soldiers regardless of race in 1864. This inequality was especially felt when they were captured by Confederate Units where they were commonly treated more abusively in comparison to white Union troops (Freeman 118–120).

2.3. A Brief summary of the history of African American from the mid-1800s until the 2010s

In this section, I will make a brief review of the evolution of African American rights in U.S. history, from postwar America until the end of Donald Trump's term in 2020. Hence, it is essential to highlight the Civil Rights Movement as a decisive event in the acquisition of political and social equality for African Americans.

2.3.1. From the mid 1860s until mid-1910s.

After the war, a new period called Reconstruction began. The term makes reference to the decade after the American Civil War between 1865 and 1877 and the attempts to erase the seeds of slavery in politics, society, and economy (Foner) through the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. These amendments documented the legal abolition of slavery, in turn, the freeing of almost four million slaves, the grant of American citizenship to those liberated as well as the right to vote. Nonetheless, these

assumptions were sometimes disregarded and hampered, especially in the South (Lynch). This period also meant the readmission of the 11 states that seceded from the Union (Foner). Nevertheless, Reconstruction was characterized by two opposing issues: the African Americans' struggles lived in order to be full members of the society at the same time they claimed for their rights to be recognized and, on the other hand, many white southerners wanted to establish their dominance and, in turn, their old way of life (Schneider 346).

In opposition to the re-emergence of white dominance, many African American clergymen, teachers, and lawyers educated in the North started having some political influence in the South. Many Union veterans, firstly seen as proper members of the military, were among these new leaders. In the religious sphere, a black church separated from white clergy would emerge whereas, in the political one, Blacks would tend to ally with the Republican Party. In turn, two other groups, named scalawags and carpetbaggers by some southerners, would join this 'Black activism'. The first group was Southerners who supported the Union policy, while the second group was Northerners in which some were concerned about equality while others sought to get some benefit from the South (Schneider 346-347). All in all, between the late 1860s until 1901, two African Americans became senators and twenty representatives sat in the American Congress (Lynch). Despite all the advances reached, Reconstruction would finally come to an end due to a mixture between corruption in the South and the increasing conservatism among the Northern Republicans. A 'second Reconstruction' would not be until the 1960s (Foner).

Despite the attempts to grant full citizenship to African Americans, new Segregationist laws emerged before the 'end' of Reconstruction. By 1870, Tennessee became the first state which prohibited marriage between Blacks and whites, a measure followed by all the Southern states. By 1885, most states in the South had segregated their public schools (Lynch). In contrast, many African American figures rose again in favor of social rights. In the years before and after the turn of the century, Brooker T.

Washington became the most prominent Black leader. Washington, who had been a slave, advocated focusing on work in order to improve the economic conditions of African Americans instead of focusing all the efforts on political or social concerns. However, discrimination and segregation were an increasing reality, and African Americans saw how some of their rights – such as the right to vote – were being ignored and removed as well as the growing increment of violence and riots against them. In this scenario, Washington was widely questioned by other Black activists therefore, many African American leaders decided to create the Niagara Movement. Eventually, this group, together with some white supporters, would lead to the foundation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 that would soon start winning some legal cases (Lynch).

2.3.2. From mid-1910s until 1950s

By 1900, most African American population of the United States lived in the South; however, as a consequence of a crop damage period between 1910 and 1920, many migrated to the North to work in the industries that supplied goods to Europe during World War I. In comparison to their previous conditions in the South, they had plenty more opportunities in the Northern cities, although they still suffered from segregation and discrimination. When the United States entered the war, many African Americans enrolled but, most of them had minor roles and were not on the battlefield front line. After the war, many workplaces created in order to supply the necessities of the conflict disappeared, and jobs and housing searches triggered violent 'race riots', as the 1919's 'red summer'. The Ku Klux Klan, which had reappeared during the Civil War, spread a new wave of horror among African Americans (Lynch).

Despite all the difficulties faced, racial pride regarding African heritage increased during the 20s. One of the most well-known trends was the Harlem Renaissance, a movement born in New York City that rose 'race consciousness' through literature, arts, and music. Nevertheless, this brief period of advancement in matters of equality did not

last long. The Stock Market Crash of the 1930s – which led to the Great Depression – deteriorated the already weak economic situation of many African Americans. Furthermore, the unemployment rate among African Americans was two or three times higher in comparison to white workers since they were typically excluded from receiving aids. Disillusioned with the Republican Party, many African Americans changed their votes to the Democratic Party and supported its candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt. With the victory of the democratic candidate, many African Americans benefited from Roosevelt's New Deal programs (Lynch).

By the late 1930s, a new military conflict broke out. And, as it had already happened during the Great War, the outbreak of World War II supposed another great migration among African Americans that unfortunately turned into a new wave of race riots. Their service on the battlefield was more recognized in comparison to previous warfare but, it would not be until the Korean War when African Americans would fight for the first time in non-segregated units (Lynch).

2.3.3. From the 1950s until the mid-2000s

Encouraged by the progress reached during World War II, African Americans did not want to lose again the rights achieved; hence, their demands to end racism became more persistent. A new nonviolent movement emerged in the mid-50s, the Civil Rights Movement also known as the freedom movement. Meanwhile, the NAACP could successfully revoke some discriminative laws as the 'separate but equal' legislation that had permitted segregation in public schools. The new legal ruling provoked riots and the temporary closing of a high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, after admitting nine African American students (Lynch).

Nonetheless, not all the advances were reached in the courts; there were also individuals whose actions made the difference (Lynch). For instance, in 1955, a seamstress called Rosa Parks was sent to jail after refusing to leave her seat in the bus to give it to a white

passenger. According to the Montgomery laws, white people had to sit in the front of public transportations while African Americans' seats were at the back. However, an African American must give their seat to a white person if there is no space in the front of the bus (Bredhoff). This incident unleashed a massive boycott against the bus system of Montgomery, Alabama. In fact, one of the most recognizable figures of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr, arose as the person who led the bus boycott. Another civil action that defied segregation in Greensboro, North Carolina, was led by the African American students who forced the desegregation of lunch counters by sitting in them (Lynch).

With the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the federal government was allowed to take legal measures to ensure any citizen their voting rights. This Act was followed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited any type of discrimination and allowed the denial of federal funds to any institutions that supported discrimination. Part of the success of this last measure lied in the March on Washington of 1963, the peak of the Civil Rights Movement. From the Lincoln Memorial, King gave a speech in front of 250,000 protesters. Nonetheless, many southern African Americans still found challenges to exercise their right to vote. In Selma, Alabama, protesters were attacked and arrested by police forces which provoked a 40,000-demonstrator march from Selma to Montgomery in support of the protesters (Lynch).

Although the Civil Rights Movement was mainly pacifist, violent clashes in the streets were common where some white properties were burnt. However, confrontations were mostly between young African Americans and the police forces, being one of the most serious the one in Detroit, Michigan, in 1967. At this time, several nationalist African American organizations also emerged, among them the Black Panther Party. The 'Black Power' slogan became popular in the late 1960s, slogan defended by another significant figure in Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm X. The Black Power Movement was based on the sense of pride regarding African heritage in African Americans as well as the necessity to gain more political and economic presence (Lynch).

Later, in the 1970s, in order to amend the long history of discrimination and racism, many achievements regarding legal and social issues – concerning housing, schooling, and labour – were reached; measures denounced by some non-African Americans as positive discrimination. Nevertheless, as time went on, many African Americans continued to face social and economic difficulties and social tension is still a reality in the following years (Lynch).

In short, the result of the regulation of voting in the late 1960s allowed more than 1,000 African Americans to be elected to state and local offices. Thenceforward, the electoral and political achievements increased exponentially. By 1982, L. Douglas Wilder became the first African American governor. In 1987, Carrie Saxon Perry became the first Black woman mayor of a large city (Harold, Connecticut) whereas, David Dinkins became mayor of New York City, the largest city in the country, in 1989. Nonetheless, the peak of African American politics was reached with the election of Barack Obama as the President of the United States in 2008 (Lynch).

2.3.4. From the Obama election until the late 2010s

Barack Obama became the first African American president in the United States in 2008 (Lynch) who would be re-elected in 2012. However, during his eight years in office, two terms marked by a global economic crisis, Obama's attempts to erase racial inequality were not effective enough. His neutral policies responded to the restlessness of some white voters' section that emerged after his first election. A restlessness that demonstrated the tangible increment of polarization in American society since the early 2000s (Célestine and Martin-Breteau 305-306). The victory of the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, in 2016 increased this division among U.S. citizens.

Trump's policy was widely associated with controversy towards social rights. For instance, one of the earliest and most controversial orders in his presidency was to ban the entrance of citizens from seven Arabic countries; a measure finally defeated three

times in the courts. He also claimed a "zero-tolerance" policy towards illegal immigration particularly the one from the border with Mexico whose citizens, escaping from the violence in their countries, are seeking asylum. In connection with African American situation, Trump showed indulgence in episodes of racist attacks or police brutality in comparison to his heavy criticism towards civil rights organizations. This controversial attitude has been linked many times with the rise of hate crimes particularly against religious minorities – Jews, and Muslims – as well as African Americans, Latinos, and LGBTQ people (Duignan).

3. THE CURRENT SITUATION

Obama's election was an essential turning point in African American history but, the gap or racial inequality between African Americans and white people is still a palpable reality. According to Survey of Consumer Finances data, there is a considerable gap between the median family wealth depending on the race. In 1989, white families earned \$143,560 a year in comparison to the \$8,550 earned by Black families, on average. Today, 30 years later, despite African Americans earn more, the inequality is still very substantial from the \$189,100 earned by white families to the \$24,100 of Black families; far from the \$121,760, on average, of the general U.S. median wealth (“Racial Economic Inequality.”). This disparity extrapolates to other areas as the medical one. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, many African Americans report that they avoid seeing a doctor due to economic reasons. Consequently, young African Americans are more likely to suffer chronic diseases and health conditions that would be typically suffered by elderly people (“African American Health.”). These are a few examples of the current disparity but not the only ones suffered by African Americans.

3.1. Police brutality

The death of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin marked a milestone in American history; a loud sound of solidarity and outrage worldwide, sometimes compared to the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s. Nonetheless, Floyd's death is far from being an isolated case of police brutality (Altman).

According to Amnesty International, police brutality "is sometimes used to refer to various human rights violations by police. This might include beatings, racial abuse, unlawful killings, torture, or indiscriminate use of riot control agents at protests" (*What Is Police Brutality?*). Police brutality is an undoubtedly challenging problem in the United States where, among the 366 days of 2020, there were only 18 days with no

victims reported by police forces (*Mapping Police Violence*). In fact, the figures of deaths caused by police are not counted or stated by the Government but by several private associations – MappingPoliceViolence.org and KilledByPolice.net – and some national and foreign media such as The Washington Post or The Guardian. Although figures may differ from one source to the other, all agree that between 2013 and 2017, about 25% of all people killed were African Americans (Célestine and Martin-Breteau 292). Currently, according to the website mappingpoliceviolence.org, African Americans represent 28% of the 1,127 people killed by police in 2020. A quite high percentage taken into consideration that they are only 13% of the population. There is a clear tendency, regarding the ethnicity of the victims, and a problem with no signs of improvement any time soon (*Mapping Police Violence*).

Another issue to highlight is the general impunity of these police officers. The number of judicial sanctions addressed to the police officers involved in these deaths is trivial. Between 2013 and 2020, more than 98% of killings by officers ended with no criminal charges (*Mapping Police Violence*). Furthermore, police departments pay financial compensation to the victims' families in order to close the cases (Célestine and Martin-Breteau 292-293).

3.2. Black Lives Matter (BLM)

In the context of police brutality, an informal coalition of organizations, Black Lives Matter, emerged. 'Black Lives Matter' started as a slogan and, then, as an informal coalition of organizations during Obama's term in response to the overwhelming amount of cases of police brutality against people of color. The case that sparked the creation of several movements in favor of African American rights phenomenon was the acquittal verdict of George Zimmerman, charged with the assassination of the seventeen-year-old African American Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012. The repercussions were so considerable that Obama had to address the nation; however, his diluted condemnation did not satisfy people's outrage (Célestine and Martin-Breteau 289, 291, 295). This case,

similar to George Floyd's death, is a constant reminder of the African Americans' never-ending fight to end racism, an aim that makes the BLM movement as necessary as ever.

3.3. Symbols of the Confederacy in the present time

On January 6, 2021, a multitude, upset with the results of the presidential election 2020, stormed the U.S. Capitol. The rioters, presumably instigated by a prior Trump's speech, claimed that the elections had been robbed. Either way, the assault had already been planned and, even though several secret services were aware of the high possibilities of an incident happening after the official announcement of the winner of the 2020 election, the assault was successfully carried out (Wamsley). During the assault, American flags mixed with flags supporting Donald Trump accompanied another symbol, one of the different versions of the Confederate flag, typically associated with white supremacy, slavery, and the American Civil War. It had been waved inside the U.S. Capitol, one of the most representative buildings of the U.S. democracy (Anderson). Nevertheless, despite what can be thought of, the presence of Confederate symbols is relatively frequent in the United States.

3.3.1. Confederate States of America

The Confederate States of America, also known as the Confederacy, refers to the government established by the 11 southern states – South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina (Weber) – that seceded the Union in 1860-1861 ("Confederate States of America") as a result of decades of friction regarding slavery and, in the end, the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 (Weber). This secession conducted to a war between the Northern states and the Southern states that would end up with the defeat of the American Confederate States in 1865 ("Confederate States of America").

The political structure of this new conglomeration of states was more or less the same as in the North, with a president and a vice president ("Confederate States of America") but, while the economy of the Northern states focused on the modernization of the infrastructures, the South reminded more rural defending the usage of slaves to work in the plantations (Weber).

3.3.1.1. Important figures

Most of the people who stood out in the Southern states were servicemen and politicians. One of the most relevant figures in the American Civil War, and, in turn, in the Confederacy military force, was General Robert E. Lee. Lee, a long-careered experimented soldier, described slavery as "a moral and political evil". Moreover, he was not in favor of secession but, in the end, he decided to remain loyal to Virginia, his native state (McPherson 280-281). Another important serviceman was Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson, a Confederate general under Lee and also a native of Virginia. Like Lee, he showed his discomfort about secession and preferred Virginia to be part of the Union (Biography.com Editors).

On the other hand, regarding significant political figures, Jefferson Davis, a former soldier during the Mexican-American War, stood out as the president of the Confederate States of America. He was the one who ordered to bombard Fort Sumter after Lincoln's refusal to see his emissaries and prevent a future conflict (Strode).

3.3.1.2. Symbolism

As the Confederate States of America was at war during its 6-year existence, the most representative monuments and symbols from this period are related to the battlefield and its servicemen ("Confederate States of America").

3.3.1.2.1. Monuments and Statues

Many types of symbols honor the Confederacy, from monuments that praised the figure of a person or are a reminder of a significant event to public areas named after these people or events. The meaning of these items resides in the interaction of the majority as well as the individual interpretation. Therefore, the number of senses can be unlimited and variable based on the new way of thinking of the coming generations (Winberry 19). The building of memorial monuments, plaques, and names of public places started shortly after the end of the American Civil War in 1865. However, most of the monuments erected corresponded to the early 1900s, after the unsuccessful Reconstruction attempt, until the late 1920s and, to a lesser extent, during the Civil Rights movement until the late 1960s (Whose Heritage? 2019).

According to John Winberry, these monuments can be divided depending on their location and type. Regarding their location, there are battlefield monuments, cemetery monuments, Courthouse, and urban monuments, along with other monuments in the capital cities of the Southern states dedicated to the soldiers from that particular state. Apart from their location, these monuments can also be classified into another four types. The first type represents a Confederate soldier on a column typically with a rifle or with his arms folded. This type is one of the most common ones, almost 50% of the monuments in cemeteries and parks, most of them, 80%, built after 1900. A second type, the Confederate soldier on a column holding a flag or a weapon ready for battle, represents the 6%. The following two types do not represent any human figures but different structures. On the one hand, there are obelisk-shaped monuments covered with a shroud or flag, half of them erected before 1900, which represent 48% of all the monuments in cemeteries. On the other hand, the fourth type has no particular or distinctive characteristic and includes other symbols such as plaques, fountains, arches that represent the 17% (Winberry 20-21). Although many monuments make reference to the period or the figure of a generic Confederate soldier, many others paid tribute to

specific people such as Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, or Stonewall Jackson (Whose Heritage? 2019).

3.3.1.2.2. The Confederate Flag

At the present time, one of the most recognizable symbols acquired by the Southern states is its flag, the Stars and Bars flag ("Confederate States of America"). One of its most famous versions, the Confederate Battle Flag [Figure 1], also known as the 'rebel flag', is recognized by its red background and blue 'X' with 13 white stars (one for each Confederate State plus Missouri and Kentucky that officially did not secede from the Union) (Whose Heritage? 2016, 8).

The Confederate Flag has become a controversial symbol because it is said to evoke certain political, social, and religious ideologies. Whereas it is claimed as regional heritage by some and, thus, its elimination would be an insult to the southern veterans of the Civil War; by others, this flag is linked to racism and an emblem used by white hate groups (Talbert 1-2). In fact, this flag was commonly used during Ku Klux Klan rallies and as a symbol of opposition to African American rights during the Civil Rights Movement (Whose Heritage? 2016, 8).

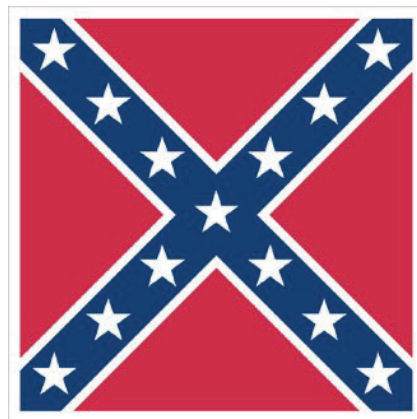


Fig. 1: Confederate Battle Flag. "Confederate States of America". *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

The current opinion towards its symbolism is quite divided from one sector to others. For instance, before the Charleston shootings, in which Dylann Roof, a white supremacist, killed nine worshippers in an African Methodist Episcopal Church, 49% of the population wanted the elimination of the South Carolina Confederate flag, whereas, after the shootings, this figure rose until the 55%. It might not be a pronounced increase but, people started to link this incident with the flag after several photos of Roof carrying the Confederate Flag in one hand and a gun in the other came to light [Figure 2] (Whose Heritage? 2016, 6). Nevertheless, the figures vary in time and not always in the direction expected. According to a Pew national survey, in 2011, 9% of Americans experienced a positive reaction towards the flag in contraposition to the 30%, whereas in 2015, taking into consideration the usage of the same survey, the figures changed to 13% and 28%, respectively (Talbert 4).



Fig. 2: Dylann Roof carrying a gun in one hand and the Confederate Flag in the other one. "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy." *Southern Poverty Law Center*

3.4. The Usage of Confederate symbols in Current Times

According to *Whose Heritage?*, the presence of many confederate symbols in the Southern schools, parks and streets is a constant reminder of a delicate part of American history. A completely different situation in comparison to the North (*Whose Heritage?* 2016, 9).

In 2016, there were at least 1,500 symbols of the Confederacy in the public areas, and 100 public schools were named after a significant Confederate. Ninety-one percent of these schools are located in a former Confederate State where, in some, the African American student population reaches 90%. By 2016, Virginia was the state with the highest number of references to the Confederacy with 223 monuments, followed by Texas with 178. Among all these recognitions, there were 2,500 more – Civil War battlefields, markers, plaques, cemeteries, and similar symbols – that were not included because they were mere reproductions of historical events. Five years ago, at least six states in the South publicly supported the Confederate flag or any emblem associated with it (*Whose Heritage?* 2016, 9-11, 32, 35).

However, the situation seems to be changing. At the beginning of 2020, the Mississippi State decided to change the state flag. The former flag, adopted for the first time in 1894, had several references to the Confederacy – the Confederate battle emblem as well as the characteristic red, white and blue stripes (Jones et al.). In fact, as time goes by, many of these symbols have gradually been removed; for instance, in 2020, at least 160 public Confederate symbols were taken down, among which the Robert E. Lee Statue in the U.S. Congress removed just a few weeks before the assault. However, far from being the final chapter of a dark period of American history, Confederacy symbols are still widely extended throughout the United States (Morrison).

According to the up-to-date 2019's version of *Whose Heritage?*, there are still 1,747 Confederate symbols spread out the United States. Among them, 780 monuments, 103

public schools and three colleges, 80 counties and cities, ten U.S. military bases, and nine state holidays. The most honored figure is still Robert E. Lee with 230 monuments in public places, followed by Jefferson Davis with 152 and Stonewall Jackson with 112. The legal process for the elimination of these symbols can be slow in the United States or impossible in many cases as some of these monuments are protected by law (Whose Heritage? 2019). In fact, people have wanted to remove the laws that protect these monuments or even holidays for a long time but, unsuccessfully, in states such as Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina. For instance, in comparison to other states that have been starting removing Confederate symbols, Alabama passed a law in 2017 that fines with \$25,000 the removal or alteration of at least 40-year-old monuments. Within the same state, the revision that would allow the state the relocation of these monuments for preservation was rejected (Coronado).

As a result of the outrage felt after the death of George Floyd by a police officer, many people started tearing down Confederate statues by force. For instance, some protesters tore down a statue of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy during the Civil War, in Richmond, Virginia ("Confederate and Columbus Statues Toppled by US Protesters") whereas, in Alabama, the Robert E. Lee statue located in front of the Montgomery high school was also forcibly befallen (Cason). However, Confederate symbols and monuments are not the only ones in the spotlight. Floyd's death has entailed such a wave of indignation that many protestors have vandalized and taken down some Christopher Columbus statues in Richmond, Minnesota, Boston, and Miami due to his implications in the colonization of the country and the genocide of the Native Americans. Consequently, many states have started removing these symbols due to their association with slavery and racism. However, this does not end here. The echo of these protests is so powerful that many statues related to slave traders have also been torn down in the United Kingdom, where a Winston Churchill statue was sprayed with paint. So, the United Kingdom started to consider some measures regarding historical evidence as well ("Confederate and Columbus Statues Toppled by US Protesters"). In

the end, the discussion that emerged about the Confederate symbols has affected the questioning regarding the role of the Spanish conquerors towards Native Americans in North America, as well (Coronado).

Unlike the wave of indignation and claims in favor of the recall of these Confederate symbols, there are other cases in which they are still praised, both inside and outside the United States. In fact, the Confederate Flag had already crossed the U.S. border some years ago and, nowadays, is mainly linked to right-political movements. For instance, a Confederate flag was waving during Donald Trump's speech in Warsaw in 2017. According to Mark Pitcavage, researcher at the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, the Europeans who use this flag can be divided into three groups. The first one would be white supremacists, Neo-Nazis, and anti-immigrant groups. The second one comprises right-wing and separatist activists that use the flag in both political and cultural; for example, during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and as a symbol during the protest of a paramilitary group in Northern Ireland as well as by Napoli and Cork football team fans. The last group refers to a group of people whose usage of the Confederate flag has no political connotations but a symbol of life in the U.S. South so, they cannot be considered white supremacists. In the end, experts conclude with the idea that the most common reason is just ignorance, that is, in general, the Europeans who use the flag do not know what represents in the history of the United States, its country of origin (Mathias).

4. PRESENT TIMES

Since the first diagnosed and reported cases in China in December 2019, SARS-CoV-2 rapidly spread out, paralyzing the world during the first half of 2020. Although the current situation, as of mid-2021, has considerably improved since then, the prediction remains complicated in many countries. A disease which, according to World Health Organization figures, makes the United States one of the most affected nations with 33 million infected and nearly 600,000 deaths by mid-June 2021 (World Health Organization). Hence, the Coronavirus marked the U.S. presidential campaign of 2020 becoming its central point.

Joe Biden's arrival in the White House in January 2021 supposed a significant change from the policy direction pursued by the previous presidency over the past four years. After Biden's victory, his policy has inevitably turned primarily to the pandemic by accelerating the pace of vaccination as well as encouraging people to get vaccinated. Other early actions taken focused on different paths, most of them in order to reverse some of the actions taken during the Trump era. On his first day in office, Biden approved 17 measures that included many concerning immigration, equity, economy, climate change, and especially, measures related to deal with the COVID-19 as the reentering of the United States to the World Health Organization. One of Trump's measures revoked by Biden was the attempt of the Republican president to cut the federal funding to the cities that allowed and supported the racial protests led by the BLM movement. A significant reversal that searches the reconciliation with the part of the population upset with the way Trump responded to the racial protests (Hickey et al.).

However, the action, aimed to restructure police departments nationwide, was postponed. The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2021, which would ban the usage of chokehold techniques, invest more in training, and create a national database on police misconduct, was a Biden proposal for his first 100 days in office. But, the bill could not be ratified in time for the first anniversary of George Floyd's death on May the

25th. Having passed the House of Representatives, the bill, up until now, remains stalled in the Senate due to Republican reluctance to revoke police immunity (Smith). Regarding the usage or removal of Confederate symbols, there is no national legislation planned or expected.

5. FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

Currently, efforts to bring a significant change concerning equality in the country appear to have stalled due to the pandemic. However, the mass vaccination of the population could mean a return to a period of relative normalcy in the short or medium term. By mid-June 2021, more than 40% of the U.S. population have been fully vaccinated with either Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer, or Moderna's inoculation (Ivory et al.).

Regarding political context, some of Biden's first measures address social inequalities. Nevertheless, the problem of racism in the country's institutions is deeply rooted, and it is going to take a titanic effort to eliminate hundreds of years of institutionalized racism. Undoubtedly, there are several cases in which many states are aware of the meaning of some of these Confederate monuments and, consequently, they are removing them from some nation's public institutions. Although this is the overall trend, as of today, many state laws still protected these symbols.

It is complicated to predict whether the current presidency will finally get to the point of either end up with inequality at all levels or whether a police reform will be enough to decrease police brutality (especially in the case of African Americans). We draw from the premise that it is a complex situation, but it seems that the Biden administration is on the right track. A change in the institutions is fundamental but another vital point, which might not be emphasized enough, is education. As time goes by, the American mentality is becoming increasingly polarized, reaching extremes where peaceful coexistence is rather complicated. Educating for equality is crucial to ensure the survival of American society and its plurality. And, even if this is finally taken into account, the mentality is not a thing that can be immediately changed, and it would take many years, even decades, to see these changes in a considerable part of the population. Hence, a long process whose wounds are being suffered for centuries and, up until now, are still open.

In any case, Joe Biden, as the new president of the United States, still has three and a half years in office to make a significant change nationally or, at least, to lay the foundations in order to allow the future generations to make a new America, an example of plurality and equity.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The history of the United States is relatively short but, since the arrival of the first European settlers to the present day, it has been marked by slavery and racism. Since the 16th century, the history and, in turn, the rights of African Americans have suffered fluctuations. The American Civil War would be the first inflectional point but, it would not be until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s that supposed a considerable advancement in equity and the election of Barrack Obama in 2008 as the peak moment.

On the other hand, even though the current situation has substantially improved in comparison to 50 years ago, there is still inequality between minority groups – African Americans in this case – and white people. For instance, regarding police brutality, a challenging problem in the country, 28% of the people killed by police officers last year were African Americans when they only represent 13% of the population. However, police brutality is not the only issue to face. The extended usage of Confederate symbolism is another problem because it is a constant reminder of the racism and slavery in America. Indeed, the usage of the Confederate Battle Flag is quite common in the United States and, most of the time waved with racist connotations. The flag, also presented in Europe, is used in a different number of contexts – political demonstrations, football matches or, the recreation of the life of the U.S. society in the South.

In recent years, the election of Donald Trump and his harsh political actions concerning immigration, and his lack of disapproval towards police brutality intensified the tensions among the population. At the present moment, with Joe Biden as the new U.S. president, concerning his first measures, the direction of his policy seems to search for a mutual understanding and agreement. But, his term has just started; therefore, it would be impossible to predict whether his policies will calm down the atmosphere or his measures would be the effective change the country needs; or, on the other hand, the situation will remain the same.

In short, institutionalized racism is a long-time problem for the country that implies the need for a change, not only at the institutional level but also in the mentality of the people. In the end, a challenge that should start in the public institutions and, to a greater extent, in the education sphere. Such change will take time, years, or even decades as it is a problem that has been part of American history long before its consolidation as a nation.

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