

# Mississippi Flag Debate Involves State Officials, Religious Leaders

Mississippi legislators set April 17 as the date for a referendum to choose between the 1894 state flag and a new design. If the new design is adopted, the Confederate emblem currently occupying one third of the flag will be replaced by a circular shape of 20 stars, and the 1894 flag will become a historical artifact.

During the weeks before the referendum, Mississippi communities and religious groups are engaged in debates similar to those in Georgia, where the senate approved the new state flag with a reduced Confederate emblem earlier this year. The Rev. Don Wildmon has sent letters to the 40,000 Mississippi members of his Tupelo-based American Family Association, encouraging them to vote for a new state flag.

In a phone interview with the Mississippi Clarion-Ledger, Wildmon said “it is an issue our Legislature has placed before us and we have no choice but to act. At times we have been left with the impression anyone who votes against the new flag is a racist. I don’t believe that.”

“It’s pathetic what [Wildmon] said [in the letter],” Stan Wilson, associate pastor at Northminister Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss., told BCE. “It had nothing to do with justice or racial issues, but was only meant to silence radicals like Jesse Jackson.”

Former Gov. William Winter, who led the commission that developed the new design, supported Wildmon’s decision.

“He does so on the basis of our Christian belief that we come together around common humanity,” Winter told the 60 or more attendants of Mission Mississippi’s conference on Christian humanity Feb. 2.

Some conference members were unsure how they would vote.

The Rev. Robert Hays, pastor of Pearl Presbyterian Church, told the Clarion-Ledger he will probably go fishing on the referendum day.

“Why? Because I really don’t know how I would vote. I really believe the flag

offends some, not because of its historic background, but because of recent use of it—men wearing masks and doing all kinds of harm,” he said.

The Council of Conservative Citizens, which strongly opposed changing the Georgia state flag, views Wildmon’s project as part of a “propaganda blitz against the Mississippi state flag.”

“[Gov.] Musgrove and his gang have one unlikely accomplice in the state flag subterfuge,” read the unsigned newsletter on the Council’s Web site. “Many flag supporters are wondering who boosted the sagging fortunes of the AFA by financing junk mail on behalf of a liberal like Musgrove.”

Most recently, the Council attacked former Gov. William Winter, who has been accused of pressuring state businesses to enforce the flag change in return for legislative favors.

“If Winter auctions the state government to the highest bidders, then everything from taxes to environmental regulations could be bypassed just to shoot down the state flag,” wrote the anonymous columnist on the Council’s Web site.

Flag discussions are also heard in Mississippi classrooms. State teachers say they are able to use the flag issue to teach compromise and democracy to their classes. State Board of Education Chairman Rowan Taylor of Jackson told the Clarion-Ledger he thinks “healthy discussion is good as long as it doesn’t get bitter.”

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) requested last year that the court declare the 1894 Mississippi flag a violation of free speech. The Mississippi Supreme Court ruled last May it was not unconstitutional.

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