Opinion: What the Confederate flag really means

By Washington Post

In the aftermath of Thursday's tragedy in Charleston, the U.S. and South Carolina flags flew at half-mast over the top of the South Carolina State House to honor the black victims of a hate crime. But flying high in front of the building was another symbol: a Confederate flag.

Some argue that the flag is a symbol of slavery and oppression, while others insist that it is purely a matter of Southern heritage and pride.

But too little of the conversation takes into account the flag's complicated history, according to Matthew Guterl, a professor of Africana and American studies at Brown University who studies race in the aftermath of the Civil War. Given his research, which has touched frequently on the use of the Confederate flag, Guterl says that he finds it impossible to argue that it's a neutral symbol.

I spoke with Guterl to learn what exactly people misunderstand about the flag, its history, and how that affects what it symbolizes today.

Let's start with what drives the mentality that has angered so many people. Why do people embrace the Confederate flag?

There are at least two reasons why people embrace the battle flag or the stars and bars, which was first used by the army of northern Virginia.

The first, which is a kind of surface explanation, is that they imagine that in that context the flag is a representation of Southern history, Southern heritage, and Southern culture.

They tie it to questions of state's rights, and the absence of federal oversight.

Read the whole story