

CHAPTER 9—Don't Tread on Me

In 1730, my fourth-great grandfather, Benjamin Andrew, was born in the Dorchester Colony near Pon Pon, South Carolina. A planter, he eventually moved to the settlement of Midway, Georgia and owned a large agricultural plantation near Colonel's Island, Georgia. He was a contemporary of southern revolutionaries such as Lyman Hall, George Walton, and Telfair, was named the president of the Council of Safety, was a delegate to the Continental Congress, and later, a Congressman from the State of Georgia. He was one of the original Sons of Liberty, a secret society founded by John Adams to oppose the Stamp Act.

In the Spring of 1773, the British naturalist William Bartram travelled down the east coast of the colonies to make note of the flora and fauna of the Carolinas and Florida. He visited my great-grandfather at his plantation on Colonel's Island with the purpose of learning more about the cultivation of rice. In his book, *Bartram's Travels*, he notes that "I arrived at the seat of the Hon. B. Andrew, Esq., who received and entertained me in every respect as a worthy gentleman would a stranger, that is, with hearty welcome, plain but plentiful board, free conversation, and liberality of sentiment. I spent the evening very agreeably and the day following (for I was not permitted to depart sooner) I viewed with pleasure this gentleman's exemplary improvements in agriculture, particularly in the growth of rice."

By 1776, my great-grandfather's house had been burned to the ground by the British army. He and his family moved to August, Georgia, where he served as Congressman.

Though they were represented by several flags during the time of the Revolution, the Southern delegation of the Sons of Liberty often were represented by the popular Gadsden Flag, pictured below. It's a yellow flag with a coiled serpent and the phrase, "Don't Tread on Me." Gadsden designed the flag in Charleston, South Carolina around 1733. It was one of the many flags used by the Sons of Liberty.

Even though it's more than 250 years old, you might be familiar with the Gadsden Flag. And, like most flags, its meaning is fluid in context. In recent years, the Gadsden flag (which, you must admit, looks pretty cool and very nice on a T shirt), has experienced something of a resurgence at the hands of Tea Party activists, anti-government types, Second Amendment proponents and other activists. Rob Walker notes in a 2016 feature in *The New Yorker*

Along the way, it picked up other connotations: strident anti-government sentiment, often directed with particular vehemence at the first African-American President. As the E.E.O.C. gingerly suggested, the symbol is now "sometimes interpreted to convey racially-tinged messages in some contexts," citing the flag's removal from a New Haven fire station after a black firefighter complained, and a 2014 incident in which two Las Vegas police officers were killed and their bodies covered by the flag. (The officers were white, but the shooters reportedly "spoke of white supremacy" and "the start of a revolution," and were presumably sending that message with the flag.) Other skirmishes around the flag's display, largely centered on its association with the Tea Party, have entangled small businesses, homeowners' associations, and even an empty building. "People who collect historical flags like to fly them occasionally," John M. Hartvigsen, president of the North American Vexillological Association, says. But some have shied away from "historical display" of the Gadsden flag because "it can now communicate a political sentiment that may not be theirs" (Rob Walker, 'The shifting symbolism of the Gadsden flag,' *The New Yorker*, October 2, 2016).

I live in a small mountain town in western North Carolina, in the heart of the Bible belt, in the heart of Trumpland. I drive by at least two of the Gadsden flags in a two mile section of road near my house, just outside my town of approximately 500 loyal Trump supporters, both flying aloft, all alone, on flagpoles in the front of single-wide trailers set in the woods.

Slightly further afield, along Interstate 40 near Charlotte, North Carolina, one sees enormous Confederate Battle flags flying atop 50' flagpoles near the Interstate, on private land, for all to see. Note that this attention, the reverence, for the Confederate flag—lighted at night, blustering in the breeze throughout the day, hundreds of feet in the air, flying presumably at a private residence whose occupant wants to send a clear message to the thousands of travelers who drive that route every single day.

My county, McDowell County, is one of the poorest counties in the state of North Carolina. Here, far from the sophisticated banking centers of Charlotte and the high-tech biotech of the Research Triangle Park, people are bereft of both meaningful employment and basic technology. High speed internet is unavailable outside of the limits of the two small towns where I live—there are many, many schoolchildren in my county who have no access to healthcare, no access to high speed internet to do their schoolwork during the sheltering in place orders caused by COVID-19, many people who have never travelled outside of their home state. The 45,000 residents of my county are largely white (92%). Thirty percent (30%) lack broadband access. More than 80% do not have a college education; of those, 30% did not graduate from high school. Almost 20% live in poverty.

My county, with its shabby trailer parks inhabited by meth dealers and pit bulls on chains, with its unloved children playing in the dirt, miles from the information superhighway, huddled under the banner not of an American flag nor of a military flag but of a 250 year old flag of revolution or a 130 year old battle flag that represents oppression to almost 46 million Americans, is ground zero for Donald Trump and the Republican party.

In the recent local election, the Republican candidates all won handily because the Democratic party, who do exist and are active of Facebook, meeting every month or so at a Chinese restaurant to whine about the lack of Bernie Sanders, failed to put up even one local candidate for the open seats.

Barack Obama made a swing through my county in 2011. He stopped at a local barbecue restaurant, his modus operandi for the bus tour (and, as you might imagine, barbecue being the beloved food of all North Carolinas, perhaps the only thing upon which all people could agree). The Republican sheriff of my county was dining in a small dining room off the main lobby in the tiny restaurant but did not come out to meet the president. Several people said, "I don't like him but it's good to see a president anyway."

Donald Trump carried more than 75% of my county in the 2016 election.

For all the would-be patriotism of the rural south, the shiny, patent-leather veneer of the Bible belt reigns supreme among the God-fearing, poverty stricken, uneducated and unemployed people of the rural South. The county-council in my local town is currently fighting a new business, a brewery that had recently invested millions into a crumbling Main Street, because the town aldermen do not want to approve beer sales on Sunday, citing a law from the 1800s as their precedent.

It would be easy to make some wild assumptions about the people all across America who are living in such communities, the rural poor, the uneducated, the drug addicted, those people who have to choose whether to buy another case of ramen noodles or a week's worth of insulin.

I think the clear understanding of the issues they face—and the type of reporting that they receive at the hands of the national media—is largely absent from the national dialogue about the meaningful way forward.

Sure, the press might visit my community. The New York Times even did a feature on the demise of the textile factory around which the town is built, the nearly 800 jobs that were lost when 'the plant' closed and the textile finishing industry moved overseas. They might write a small snippet about the changing business plans of a company such as furniture manufacturer Ethan Allen, whose recent bankruptcy and restructuring closed one of the main points of pride in my small community, where many people have houses full of upscale Ethan Allen furniture as a result of their involvement in the now-defunct North Carolina furniture industry.

So when the White House press secretary stands on a podium and says, as she did yesterday, that a new day is dawning, I know she's not talking about my community. I know that Donald Trump will never visit to have a look at the small businesses that a new generation of people are struggling to build, the ones that supplant the crumbling mills, the ones that serve hand-crafted beer or the small art gallery or the small beds and breakfasts and might entertain tourists who visit the mountains for adventure and relaxation.

The thing to remember is that the people of my county, the ones who would not come out of the back dining room of a small barbecue restaurant to see the first black man elected as President of the United States, the ones who pray on Sunday and think beer is a fast track to the devil, the ones who don't have internet, who live in a small single wide trailer next to a meth addict and let their kids play in the dirt in the front yard, these are the people who elected Donald Trump. He has their support. And, when the fast-talking, well educated, worldly by comparison Democrats across town show their possible love of multiculturalism by talking politics in a Chinese restaurant and yet fail to deliver one single candidate to the local election, it is certain that the Republicans and all that isolationistic talk of American jobs and America First and Make America Great Again resonate with this base of voters. And while the liberals and the ideologues twiddle their thumbs, the Trumpers are using the power of symbols, the rhetoric of hate and isolationism, to fire their guns from the shoulder of those who don't know any better, the uneducated whose idea of an ultimate vacation would be a condo at Myrtle Beach for a weekend, a round of golf, and a cooler full of beer.

It is a message that resonates with the outcasts. When they see Donald Trump, they don't see a slick, would-be billionaire with a nude model wife, a gaggle of blondes in his wake, a man so confused and convoluted and, frankly, unschooled in the issues of geopolitics, economics, history, health care, and the rule of law that he has brought an entire cadre of frauds, hucksters, opportunists and gold diggers right through the front doors of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Rather, his voter base sees a guy who 'gets them,' who was fun to watch on *The Apprentice*, who is reshaping the culture in his own image thanks to a media that focuses on sound bytes rather than context. They love it when Trump yells at the media, 'fake news!,' because his behavior echoes

their own frustration with a media system that talks down to them, relentless in its stereotypes, utterly irrelevant in its approach to the concerns of their neighborhoods and the reality of their lives.

My family came to America with the Jamestown Landing in 1607. They forged their way into the New World, despite disease, war, and unrest. My mother grew up on a large cattle farm in South Carolina, a farm now run by my cousins who attended universities, worked as engineers, travelled the world and always came back home to the farmhouse built by my great-grandfather.

Every year, we collect at a brick schoolhouse that my grandfather built for the people of the community. There, we attend the small Methodist church (our ancestor, Benjamin Andrew, was also the grandfather of Benjamin Osgood Andrew, one of the founders of the Methodist Church in America), visit with our cousins and enjoy 'dinner on the ground' at the small, two room schoolhouse. There, with the creaking wood floors and the leaded glass windows, we tell stories, visit with our aging relatives, and always take a walk out to the cemetery to look at the gravestones of our relatives. It's a very rural sort of tradition, eating fried chicken in a small schoolhouse, laughing with your aunts and uncles about their upbringing, coming home.

The classic painting of George Washington, the unfinished portrait, hangs above a pot bellied stove near the chalkboard. I used to sit and wonder about this unfinished portrait, the wooden teeth of the first President of the United States, all that amazing imagery and whether it was true--the cherry tree, crossing the Delaware, the elder statesman of a new country in a (new to them) world.

Though our family's riches seemed to evaporate centuries ago, we were never uneducated people. We understood our history, from the time of Jamestowne, from the rice plantations of Benjamin Andrew, through the Civil War, the World Wars, Vietnam, and Iraq. We attended universities, worked hard, got good jobs. My mother and her sisters, despite their upbringing in a rural corner of the Upstate of South Carolina, could all quote Shakespeare at length, understood history, read books, saw the world. They worked hard but were also capable of seeing the world as it really is.

The challenge with Trump is that he is conning an electorate that barely has the same advantages that my family enjoyed nearly two hundred years ago. He knows you don't know history and the history, the sacrifice, the theoretical constructs of this country don't matter to him. He knows you won't go look it up if he states an outright lie in front of you on television. He knows that you don't have the education, the context, the long view of the history of this country, the one that is essential to know that Don't Tread on Me is not just a cool yellow flag that might make a nice T shirt. It is not an emblem of hate. It is an emblem of sacrifice. An emblem of people, actual founders, the actual living human beings who carved this amazing democratic experiment out of a marshy wilderness and, steeled by that resolve, brought freedom, the rule of law, and a way of life around the world.

It is devastating to see the ideals of our democracy brought low by petty thugs and self-serving messages of division and hate. It is devastating to see so many people suffering in what was the greatest country of earth, the one that others looked to for inspiration and hope in the times of great darkness, the one whose innovation and resolve truly did change the world.

How sad it is that, in this time, our uneducated fellow citizens, themselves frustrated and disenfranchised by a government that only sends them checks, not solutions and a media that gleefully stereotypes their concerns with reality show about moonshiners and pawn brokers, have become the

Commented [LM1]:

people who decide the direction of the United States. They are, after all, the ones who fight the wars. They don't have the luxury of a deferment for bone spurs.

The uneducated 'basket of deplorables' as Hillary Clinton labelled them, are almost the only people who bothered to vote in 2016. Their sentiment was cultivated by the thin disdain of the media, the unbridled avarice and greed of politicians, and their own pathetic prejudices fueled by a system that most certainly has left them far, far behind.

The Gadsden flag is a variation of a theme that was put forth by Benjamin Franklin in his newspaper in 1751. His newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, carried a bitter editorial protesting the British practice of sending convicts to America. The author suggested that the colonists return the favor by shipping "a cargo of rattlesnakes, which could be distributed in St. James Park, Spring Garden, and other places of pleasure, and particularly in the noblemen's gardens."

In 1754, Franklin printed a print of a snake as a commentary on the Albany Congress. To remind the delegates of the danger of disunity, the serpent was shown cut to pieces. Each segment is marked with the name of a colony, and the motto "Join or Die" below. Other newspapers took up the snake theme.

By 1774 the segments of the snake had grown together, and the motto had been changed to read: "United Now Alive and Free Firm on this Basis Liberty Shall Stand and Thus Supported Ever Bless Our Land Till Time Becomes Eternity"

I often wonder if my great-grandfather, Benjamin Andrew, was able to save his Gadsden flag when the British burned his house to the ground. He withstood the challenge and went on to become a legislator, President of Sam Houston's Council of Safety, and a hero of the American Revolution. I think of the agricultural innovations that Bartram mentions in his book, the 'seat of hospitality' that my great-grandfather and mother carved out for themselves there on Colonel's Island, the hope and promise they must have felt for a new world. I think of him standing there, in that pleasant place, and watching it all burn to the ground.

Don't tread on me.

It's time to learn what that really means.