

# League of the South's Internet Rhetoric: Neo-Confederate Community-Building Online

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## ABSTRACT

A nationwide backlash against the Confederate flag and other Confederate symbols occurred after the deadly June 17, 2015, church shootings in Charleston, South Carolina, when images of the alleged gunman displaying a Confederate flag surfaced. This backlash sparked a reactionary movement among pro-Confederate supporters who viewed the attacks on Confederate symbols as an affront to their Southern heritage. Some neo-Confederate groups exploited the backlash, and the pro-Confederate sympathy it generated, as an opportunity to build their communities. This essay examines how the neo-Confederate group League of the South (LOS) used its website to attract members to its community in the week before the Confederate flag's removal from South Carolina's state capitol on July 10, 2015. Analysis reveals LOS may have aided its community-building efforts by attempting to foster a sense of shared identity within the pro-Confederate community and employing fear-raising rhetoric relating to the backlash against Confederate symbols. The relevance of examining U.S.-based hate groups' Internet rhetoric has substantially increased in recent years as the United States has witnessed a series of deadly mass shootings perpetrated by various extremists, some of whom were apparently motivated by rhetoric they accessed on U.S.-based extremist sites.

*Keywords:* Confederate, pro-Confederate, neo-Confederate, community building, Internet

## LEAGUE OF THE SOUTH'S INTERNET RHETORIC: NEO-CONFEDERATE COMMUNITY-BUILDING ONLINE

On June 17, 2015, nine black worshippers participating in Bible study were gunned down inside Charleston, South Carolina's historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Ford, 2015; Lee, 2015). Shortly after the fatal shootings, authorities arrested suspected shooter Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old high school dropout and white supremacist (Capehart, 2015; Lee, 2015). As news of Roof's arrest made headlines, several photographs of the suspected shooter appeared in news media coverage. In one photograph, Roof was shown wearing a jacket adorned with the apartheid-era flags of Rhodesia and South Africa, and in at least one other photograph,

Roof was shown holding a pistol while displaying a Confederate flag (Ford, 2015; Taylor, 2015). The flurry of mass-mediated images of suspected shooter Dylann Roof displaying a Confederate flag instantly reignited the decades-long call for South Carolina to remove the racially-divisive banner from its state capitol (Ford, 2015; Taylor, 2015). On July 10, 2015, South Carolina officially removed the Civil War-era flag from its state capitol where the emblem had flown since 1961 (Brumfield, 2015; Worland, 2015).

South Carolina's decision to fly the Confederate battle flag was a controversial one, a controversy that intensified over time. Following the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, many white Southerners became enraged by the federally-mandated racial integration of public schools (Watts, 2008, p. 88). When looking for icons to display during their protests, white Southerners chose to resurrect symbols of the Confederacy, including the Confederate battle flag (Watts, 2008, pp. 88-89). Although various flags were used by the Confederacy during the Civil War, in contemporary times the Confederate battle flag is widely regarded as "the Confederate flag." In 1961, South Carolina raised the Confederate flag at its state capitol with the stated intent of commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Civil War, but the flag's critics believed the actual intent was to protest desegregation (Brumfield, 2015; Watts, 2008, pp. 88-89; Worland, 2015).

Since the Civil War, the Confederate flag has been viewed by its defenders as symbolizing an honorable heritage of fighting for liberty, while critics view the flag as symbolizing a hateful history of racism and racial oppression (Watts, 2008, pp. 87-88). As Watts (2008) writes in her book about Southern identity, "[N]o symbol has divided the contemporary South as widely and to such an extreme as the red field, blue cross, and white stars of the Confederate battle flag" (p. 87). Certainly, the Confederate flag, or "rebel flag" as it is often referred, has been displayed as a symbol of race-based hatred by Ku Klux Klansmen and other white supremacists since the Civil War (Watts, 2008, p. 87). Although overtly racist displays of the Civil War-era symbol have instilled fear and loathing in those individuals and groups who have been the targets of race-based hatred, it was not until July 10, 2015, amid a nationwide backlash against the Confederate flag, that South Carolina would officially remove the Civil War-era flag from its state capitol.

In the months following South Carolina's removal of the Confederate flag from its state capitol, political leaders in many other Southern states began calling for the removal of Confederate flags, or flags bearing the Confederate battle cross, from public properties and government-produced products. Alabama Governor Robert Bentley ordered the removal of four Confederate banners from a monument on the state capitol grounds (Brad-

ner, 2015; Kytte & Roberts, 2015). In Virginia, Governor Terry McAuliffe ordered that the Confederate flag no longer be placed on license plates, and political leaders in Georgia, Maryland, Tennessee, and North Carolina vowed to do the same (Bradner, 2015; Robertson, Davey, & Bosman, 2015). Philip Gunn, Mississippi State House speaker, called for the removal of the Confederate battle cross from the upper-left corner of his state's flag, the only remaining state flag incorporating the emblem (Bradner, 2015; Robertson, Davey, & Bosman, 2015). Political leaders in a number of Mississippi cities (e.g., Macon, Columbus, Hattiesburg, Grenada, Magnolia, Clarksdale, Greenwood, Starkville, Yazoo City) voted or issued executive orders to eradicate the state flag from city property (Guarino, 2015; McLaughlin, 2015). The City Council in Mississippi's state capitol, Jackson, which had not displayed the state flag on city property for over a decade, voted to urge the state of Mississippi to create a new flag (McLaughlin, 2015).

Outside of the political arena, various organizations followed the trend of denouncing the Confederate flag. The University of Mississippi removed the state flag from its campus (McLaughlin, 2015). Some other organizations in Mississippi, such as the Gulf Coast Business Council and the Mississippi Gulf Coast Chamber of Commerce, echoed calls for a new state flag, specifically one devoid of the Confederate battle cross (Guarino, 2015; McLaughlin, 2015). Amazon and eBay announced they would no longer permit the sale of Confederate flags, joining Sears and Walmart, which had already done so (Robertson, Davey, & Bosman, 2015).

In the midst of the nationwide backlash against the Confederate flag, protestors in several states also began directing their ire against Confederate memorials. Statues paying honor to the Confederacy and those individuals who fought for it were vandalized in Charleston, South Carolina, as well as cities such as Asheville, Austin, and Baltimore (Kytte & Roberts, 2015). Soon, some Southern political leaders began calling for the official removal of Confederate memorials from public properties. In Tennessee, leaders from both sides of the political aisle agreed that a bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Confederate general who later founded the Ku Klux Klan, should be removed from the state house (Bradner, 2015; Robertson, Davey, & Bosman, 2015). New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu formally requested that the City Council begin the process of removing four Confederate monuments from prominent locations throughout the city (Rhodan, 2015), a request later approved by a 6-1 vote in December 2015 (Levin, 2015). The New Orleans City Council approval paved the way for the removal of monuments honoring Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee and P.G. Beauregard, as well as a memorial to the postwar battle of Liberty Place (Levin, 2015). Some individuals predict fur-

ther efforts to efface symbols of the Confederacy will extend to the renaming of parks, schools, buildings, and military bases named after Confederate soldiers (Brophy, 2015).

The nationwide backlash against the Confederate flag and other Confederate symbols sparked a reactionary movement among pro-Confederate supporters who claim the removal of these symbols is an affront to their Southern heritage (Bradner, 2015). The week following South Carolina's removal of the Confederate flag from its state capitol, approximately fifty individuals staged a pro-Confederate flag rally at the site (Fieldstadt & Stanley, 2015). In the wake of the rally, the number of pro-Confederate flag rallies and attendees grew. During the same month, pro-Confederate flag rallies in South Carolina and North Carolina drew an estimated 2,000 and 4,000 attendees, respectively (Ingraham, 2015). In July 2015, another pro-Confederate flag rally held in Ocala, Florida, the largest pro-Confederate flag rally thus far, drew an estimated 5,000 attendees (Ingraham, 2015). Several smaller pro-Confederate flag rallies were held in various other Southern states. While pro-Confederate flag rallies were overwhelmingly concentrated in the South, rallies were also held as far north as Michigan and as far west as Oregon (Ingraham, 2015). Before 2015 had ended, over 350 pro-Confederate flag rallies had been held in a total of 22 states, and over 20,000 individuals are believed to have attended those events (Ingraham, 2015; "Mapping hate," 2015).

Given the reactionary movement following South Carolina's removal of the Confederate flag from its state capitol, much attention has understandably been focused on the recent offline activities of the pro-Confederate community, a community comprised of individuals who view Confederate symbols as signs of heritage. However, less attention has been afforded to the community-building efforts undertaken online by pro-Confederate groups, including those adhering to extremist ideologies. Some extremist groups exploited the nationwide backlash against the Confederate flag as an opportunity to publicize their radical pro-Confederate ideology online to an audience of pro-Confederate sympathizers who may have become receptive to their rhetoric. Consequently, the present essay examines the community-building efforts undertaken online by League of the South (LOS), an Alabama-based group that is not only staunchly pro-Confederate but also advocates for Southern independence and a society dominated by European Americans ("League of the South," n.d.).

In a study examining the Ku Klux Klan's use of the Internet to rhetorically build its community, Bostdorff (2004) called for research on how hate groups respond on the Internet to particular public issues, and this essay is a response to that call. This study examines how LOS used the Internet in its rhetorical efforts to attract members to its neo-Confederate community the

week before South Carolina's removal of the Confederate flag from its state capitol on July 10, 2015. Examining LOS's Internet rhetoric in the week preceding South Carolina's removal of the Confederate flag from its state capitol—the most significant event to energize the pro-Confederate community witnessed in recent years—can provide useful insight into how the group has attempted to rhetorically build its neo-Confederate community.

“NEO-CONFEDERATE,” “NEO-CONFEDERACY,” AND “NEO-CONFEDERATES”

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups in the United States, characterizes LOS as “neo-Confederate,” a term used to describe the revival of the principles, including racist doctrines, of the Confederacy (Potok, 2006, p. 57). Like neo-Confederate, the term “neo-Confederacy” has been used to describe modern-day “revivals of pro-Confederate sentiment in the United States” (Hague, 2010). The term *neo-Confederacy* was applied to groups like United Daughters of the Confederacy in the 1920s as well as those individuals resisting racial integration during the 1950s and 1960s (“Neo-Confederate,” n.d.). In its current incarnation, neo-Confederacy is used to describe the pro-Confederate sentiment emerging since the early 1980s with publications like *Chronicles*, *Southern Partisan*, and *Southern Mercury* (Hague, 2010). Today, neo-Confederate groups like League of the South (LOS), Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), and Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC) are among the many “neo-Confederates” in the larger neo-Confederacy network in the United States (“Neo-Confederate,” n.d.).

Strongly nativist, neo-Confederate ideology involves advocacy for measures to end immigration and a conception of race suggesting support for racial segregation and the belief in white supremacy (Hague, 2010). Often, neo-Confederates are openly secessionist (“Neo-Confederate,” n.d.). Neo-Confederacy also involves advocacy for traditional gender roles, strong opposition to homosexuality, and hostility toward democracy in favor of a hierarchy (i.e., superiors, equals, and inferiors) believed to be God-ordained (Beirich & Hicks, 2008, p. 86; Hague, 2010). Adherents of neo-Confederacy claim to be in pursuit of Christianity and heritage as well as other supposedly fundamental values perceived as having been abandoned by modern Americans (“Neo-Confederate,” n.d.).

Overall, neo-Confederacy is a reactionary, conservative ideology corresponding with the worldview of white nationalists as well as other more radical extremists within the racist right (Hague, 2010). Indeed, some former members of white supremacist organizations, such as James Edwards, who used to be a member of the neo-Nazi group National Alliance, went on to become active members of neo-Confederate groups like Council of Con-

servative Citizens (Beirich, 2015). As host of the racist radio program *The Political Cesspool*, Edwards has invited guests such as neo-Nazis and other white supremacists (Beirich, 2015). In 2013, Michael Cushman, also a former member of the neo-Nazi group National Alliance, became chairperson of LOS's South Carolina chapter (Hankes, 2013). What is more, in recent years white supremacists from Klan and neo-Nazi organizations have been attending the same events as members of neo-Confederate groups. For example, LOS members were joined by members of the neo-Nazi group National Socialist Movement and other white supremacists at a "Feds Out of Kentucky" rally in northern Kentucky organized by an LOS member who lived in the area ("With hate," 2015; "League of the South," 2015).

In addition to appealing to some individuals within the racist right, neo-Confederacy has also garnered favor with some members of the political right (Hague, 2010). Support for neo-Confederacy among members of the political right is evidenced by various elected officials within the Republican Party being directly involved in the activities of neo-Confederate organizations (Hague, 2010). Some elected officials within the Republican Party, most notably then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS) in the late 1990s, have spoken at meetings of the neo-Confederate group Council of Conservative Citizens and even expressed sympathy for the group's positions (Hague, 2010; Phillips, 2015). In 2004, a photo surfaced of Haley Barbour, Republican candidate for Mississippi governor, posing with leaders of Council of Conservative Citizens at a barbecue (Phillips, 2015); Barbour won the governor's office that year and again in 2008, serving the state's maximum number of terms. In discussing the political influence of Council of Conservative Citizens, particularly within the Republican Party, *Washington Post* columnist Amber Phillips (2015) explained the group "has a long history with politicians in the South – a history that includes a level of success that today seems pretty remarkable." What is more, some other elected officials within the Republican Party have been members of neo-Confederate groups while in office, such as the late Alabama State Senator Charles Davidson, who was a member of LOS between 1994 and 1998 (Hague, 2010).

#### LEAGUE OF THE SOUTH

Founded in 1994, League of the South (LOS), formerly called Southern League, touts itself as a "Southern Nationalist" organization, having as its ultimate goal a free and independent Southern republic ("League of the South," n.d.; "Online home," n.d.). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), LOS's overarching mission "is to accomplish what the Civil War did not – Southern secession" ("League of the South," n.d.).

Starting with a single office in Killen, Alabama, LOS has grown to include chapters in 15 states, including the 11 former Confederate states (i.e., Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) as well as Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and West Virginia (“League of the South,” n.d.; “State chapters,” n.d.).

In the beginning, LOS’s board was comprised largely of academics, mostly Southern professors like the group’s only president Dr. Michael Hill, who was then a professor of British history at Stillman College, a historically-black university in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (“League of the South,” n.d.). Under Hill’s leadership, LOS grew quickly as white Southerners became attracted by the group’s academic façade and its initial assertion that it was not a racist group, despite the fact LOS included some racist hardliners from the outset, such as founding member and life-long segregationist Jack Kershaw (“League of the South,” n.d.). Never one to hide his racist views, in 1998 Kershaw told a reporter, “Someone needs to say a good word for slavery. Where in the world are the Negroes better off today than in America?” (“League of the South,” n.d.). Despite such publicly and overtly racist comments by one of its founding members, LOS had recruited 4,000 members by 1998 (“League of the South,” n.d.).

When first established, LOS seemed to focus on a cultural defense of the South, including bitter complaints about mainstream media’s treatment of Southerners (Beirich & Potok, 2004). Initially, LOS suggested Southern secession might only be required “if the rest of America did not straighten out” (“League of the South,” n.d.). However, it was not long before LOS began seriously advocating for Southern secession, openly advocating a theocratic form of government, and calling for “a return to ‘general European cultural hegemony’ in the South” (Beirich & Potok, 2004).

By 2000, LOS claimed to have 9,000 members, a number that would soon grow to 15,000 (“League of the South,” n.d.). That same year, LOS was listed as a hate group by SPLC as the group’s ideology had become more explicitly racist, but the group nevertheless continued to assume a leadership role in the larger pro-Confederate community (Beirich & Potok, 2004). LOS’s ideas regarding the “Anglo-Celtic” (i.e., white) nature of the South were widely embraced by other “pro-South” groups, and the group worked actively with other racist groups to promote pro-Confederate flag rallies throughout the South (“League of the South,” n.d.).

LOS’s leadership status within the larger pro-Confederate movement was dealt a serious blow following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (“League of the South,” n.d.). Within days of the attacks, Michael Hill suggested the attacks were deserved because they were “the natural fruits of a regime committed to multiculturalism and diversity” (“League of the

South,” n.d.). Hill’s comments provoked a mass exodus of LOS members, perhaps most significantly Donald Livingston, a professor of philosophy at Emory University who headed LOS’s Institute for the Study of Southern Culture and History, which hosted workshops and distributed literature (“League of the South,” n.d.). By 2004, Hill’s increasingly hardline positions continued to drive away LOS members, including many of the academics involved in founding the group, such as Grady McWhiney and Forrest McDonald, both well-known historians and authors who mentored Hill while he completed his Ph.D. in history at the University of Alabama (“League of the South,” n.d.). By 2009, LOS was only able to draw a handful of individuals to the group’s events (“Michael Hill,” 2015).

Faced with declining membership, LOS shifted its rhetorical strategy to cloak its hardline positions (“League of the South,” n.d.). However, in recent years LOS has returned to espousing radical rhetoric, including writings about potential violence, criticisms of perceived Jewish power, and warning blacks they would be defeated in a “race war” (“League of the South,” n.d.; “Michael Hill,” n.d.). For example, in a July 15, 2014, post on LOS’s website about warfare and bearing arms to defend personal freedoms, Hill (2014) made the following statement: “the primary targets will not be enemy soldiers; instead, they will be political leaders, members of the hostile media, cultural icons, bureaucrats, and other of the managerial elite without whom the engines of tyranny don’t run.” Hill’s militaristic rhetoric took on added significance when SPLC, during that same month, reported LOS had formed a secret paramilitary unit tasked with advancing LOS’s goal of initiating a second Southern secession and the unit was believed to include various white supremacists who were formerly members of Klan and neo-Nazi groups (Lenz, 2014). Indeed, LOS’s rhetoric became so radical, the group began to be barred from many pro-Confederate events (“Alabama Flaggers,” 2015; “League of the South,” n.d.). As LOS’s rhetoric became more radical, the group’s community of supporters further dwindled.

Although LOS’s radical views (e.g., pro-secession, pro-segregation, deservedness of September 11 terrorist attacks) caused other pro-Confederate supporters to distance themselves from the group in recent years, LOS appears to be returning to prominence within the pro-Confederate movement in the wake of the ever-growing national campaign against Confederate symbols (“Alabama Flaggers,” 2015). For example, in an August 2015 SPLC article about an upcoming Confederate flag rally sponsored by the Alabama Flaggers at Alabama’s state capitol it was stated:

The Alabama Flaggers have made it clear that everyone is welcome, including members of the LOS, which was extended a special invitation

despite being barred from many Confederate flag rallies in the past months for their extreme views (“Alabama Flaggers,” 2015).

Given LOS’s previous exclusion from pro-Confederate events, the group’s renewed acceptance within the pro-Confederate community was so significant it warranted special mention. Moreover, in 2015 LOS participated in 35 Confederate flag rallies (“Michael Hill,” n.d.). With the tide of pro-Confederate sympathy generated in the wake of the nationwide backlash against the Confederate flag and other Confederate symbols, LOS’s radical rhetoric may begin to resonate with like-minded individuals within the larger pro-Confederate movement.

Confederate flag supporters commonly make the oft-disputed claim that the flag and other Confederate symbols are about Southern heritage not hate, and this claim has long served to unify the pro-Confederate community. Today, this claim is helping to unite the pro-Confederate community in an unprecedented way as evidenced by the large number of pro-Confederate flag rallies taking place across the United States. Accordingly, the pro-Confederate community’s response to the ongoing backlash against the Confederate flag and other Confederate symbols warrants examination.

#### LOS’S NEO-CONFEDERATE ONLINE RHETORIC

LOS has been using the Internet in its community-building efforts since establishing its first website, *www.dixienet.org*, in the mid-1990s (Barnett, 2007). Amid the nationwide backlash against Confederate symbols following the Charleston church shootings, LOS continued its online efforts to create a sense of shared pro-Confederate and Southern identity on the group’s new website, *www.leagueofthesouth.com* (“Online home,” n.d.). Although Michael Hill posted comments on LOS’s website five days after the Charleston church shootings denouncing the murders as “a reprehensible act,” he also suggested suspected shooter Dylann Roof may have been “provoked” into committing the deadly acts. Hill wrote:

It is evident that young Mr. Roof, if his manifesto is legitimate, had had a belly full of a society that treats blacks like spoiled children, Big Daddy Government catering to their every need and want, and conversely blaming whites for being perpetual scoundrels whose main goal in life is to make things miserable for black folks. And he acted in his anger and allegedly committed murder. Now, the question looms: will blacks be “provoked” to take revenge? (Hill, 2015a).

Elsewhere in the post, Hill decried the public backlash against the Confederate flag that ensued after images of Roof displaying a Confederate flag surfaced, writing:

Now we have the same Establishment politicians and media howling that alleged Charleston AME church shooter Dylann Roof, far from being solely responsible for his own actions, is a product of a dark and horrible culture—the traditional white South. To sum it up, the Confederate battle flag and all who have ever said a good word for it are collectively guilty for everything that has ever afflicted the black community (Hill, 2015a).

In addition to discussing the backlash against the Confederate flag, Hill discussed how he believed “the white South,” particularly the neo-Confederate community, was being unfairly demonized as a result of the Charleston shootings. Near the end of the post, Hill wrote, “In this very hostile anti-white and anti-South environment, it would be wise for us in the Southern nationalist movement to be ‘situationally aware’ in all matters” (Hill, 2015a).

Hill’s comments during the week of the Charleston church shootings would foreshadow commentary posted on LOS’s website the week preceding South Carolina’s removal of the Confederate flag from its state capitol. For example, in a July 3 post, LOS used terms like “our people,” “we Southrons,” and “fellow Southrons” when referring to members of the pro-Confederate community and terms like “they,” “those people,” and “other ‘americans’” when referring to individuals living in the United States who were not part of the pro-Confederate community (Hill, 2015b). LOS further expressed disdain for the non-Confederate segment of society with statements such as “the enemy’s flag” and the use of lower-case references to the United States (e.g., “america,” “american,” “americans,” “u.s.,” “u.s.a.,” “united states”) (Hill, 2015b).

Having framed the narrative in us-versus-them terms, LOS attempted to energize the pro-Confederate community by claiming the “u.s. regime” is oppressing their community and then offering hope that the pro-Confederate community could liberate itself from this oppression. Referencing the backlash against Confederate symbols following the Charleston church shootings, LOS wrote, “the events of the last two weeks provide us with a nice, concise view of some of that reality . . . the denigration and hopeful elimination of all things Southern and Confederate from the public, and perhaps private, sphere” (Hill, 2015b). Following the oppression rhetoric, LOS instructed the pro-Confederate community on how to liberate itself from this oppression:

If you are willing to live and act in the real world, there is hope. There is a sane, sensible, and practical solution to the oppression and evil under which the South and her people are suffering. Yes! Suffering! But you must take your head out of the sand, or maybe your own backside, reject the u.s. regime, its symbols, its culture of death, and join the ranks of we

in the Southern nationalist movement who are struggling for our cultural, social, economic, and political well being [*sic*] and INDEPENDENCE from this tyrannical occupier of our native lands. See things for what they truly are, and NOT what you wish they were. . . . God save the South!! (Hill, 2015b).

The page on which this message was posted also included a graphic with an image of LOS's Southern nationalist flag (i.e., a black diagonal cross on a white background) along with the words "For the Southern people! League of the South" (Hill, 2015b).

On July 4, LOS used the national holiday as an opportunity to renew its call for Southern independence. In a post, Hill (2015e) continued LOS's denouncement of the nationwide backlash against Confederate symbols, particularly the Confederate flag, following the Charleston church shootings. Couching the backlash in terms of war, Hill warned the pro-Confederate community, "everything even remotely connected to the South and her history has been put in the Cultural Marxists' cross-hairs. And they have pulled the trigger" (Hill, 2015e). Hill referred to the nationwide backlash against Confederate symbols as "cultural genocide" intended to destroy the cultural underpinnings of Southern people, and he even went so far as to suggest this "cultural genocide" may be a prelude to "physical genocide." Hill then advised that if the pro-Confederate community wanted to resist this "onslaught," its members needed to organize and aggressively "push for the protection and advancement" of their Southern identity. Hill further explained "Southern nationalism" refers to the movement aimed at protecting and advancing their identity, as well as promoting "the survival, well being [*sic*], and independence of the Southern people" (Hill, 2015e).

After a call for the pro-Confederate community to organize for purposes of advancing the "Southern nationalist" movement, Hill heralded LOS as the ideal organization to lead the movement writing, "There is no other organization willing to stand for the Southern people outside of The League of the South" (Hill, 2015e). Following his promotion of LOS, Hill asked Southerners to join the group and "take a stand for the South," emphasizing Southerners should pool their numbers and resources. Hill further explained LOS is an ideal organization to lead the Southern nationalist movement, in part, because the organization does not cower when called "bigots," "racists," "xenophobes," or "anti-Semites." Indeed, in describing individuals he viewed as "Southern people," Hill declared true Southerners as "the white people of the South, of European descent" (Hill, 2015e). After declaring LOS's membership to be exclusively white, Hill then asserted, "our end game is one which promises a permanent solution to the sorts of attacks we have seen lately" (Hill, 2015e).

Hill continued his rhetoric of Southern oppression in another July 4 post. Unapologetic about his reverence for the Confederate flag, Hill (2015c) wrote, "I have celebrated so far by raising my Confederate battle flag . . . God willing, I will spend the rest of the day working in The League of the South office . . . for a future for my people free from this monstrosity called the USA." Hill followed up his rhetoric about working to free Southern people with a call to action stating, "I hope you'll be doing the same" (Hill, 2015c). The page on which this message was posted also included a graphic with the words "We Are Prisoners" and an image of an American flag in which the stripes of the flag were altered to depict a cell in which a person was imprisoned (Hill, 2015c). Also on July 4, Hill posted the following statement, "'Heritage Not Hate' is the effeminate, limp-wristed, apologetic battle cry of Rainbow Confederates designed to inform the recipient of his message that he is not a 'racist.' Pathetic" (Hill, 2015d). The post, which was adorned with a Confederate flag, echoed Hill's earlier comments about how LOS does not shy away from being called a racist organization.

On July 7, LOS's Internet rhetoric shifted toward discussing how the group had made appeals to "fellow Southerners" at a July 6 "Confederate Flag and Heritage Rally" held at the Mississippi state capitol in Jackson (Tracey, 2015a). Some members of LOS's Georgia chapter spoke at the rally, which was organized primarily as a show of support for keeping the current Mississippi state flag in the wake of demonstrations calling for its removal. A link to a YouTube video of a speech given at the rally by William Flowers, Georgia League of the South vice chairman, was included in the post. In the video, Flowers discussed LOS's Southern nationalist ideology, explaining he had attended the rally because an attack on a fellow Southerner was an attack on himself and opining Southerners should be outraged by recent events in which their "history and their heritage" have been denigrated. Using us-versus-them rhetoric, Flowers ended his speech by calling for Southern secession as well as individuals to join LOS in the Southern nationalist movement. The post also included a photograph of Flowers speaking at the rally along with a statement in which Flowers described his own speech as being "well received" with many listeners expressing interest in examining Southern nationalism (Tracey, 2015a).

On July 9, the eve of the removal of the Confederate flag from South Carolina's state capitol, Michael Hill (2015f) continued his calls for the pro-Confederate community to resist the "cultural genocide" he believed was being unleashed against the South and Southerners. Once again speaking in us-versus-them terms, Hill expressed the view that Southerners owed no one an explanation regarding their culture or the symbols they have chosen to represent their culture. Hill wrote, "Those symbols are ours. We define them and they define us" (Hill, 2015f). Accompanying the text-based

rhetoric was a graphic including the third national flag of the Confederate States of America (i.e., “Blood-Stained Banner,” a white banner with a Confederate battle cross canton and a trailing red stripe), which is also the final flag of the Confederate government, along with the words “THE UNSURRENDERED BANNER OF THE SOUTHERN PEOPLE 1865-PRESENT” (Hill, 2015f). In a rather ominous fashion, Hill ended the post:

For those in our midst who are outsiders, as well as for home-grown traitors, we will not forget your diabolical attacks on our very identity. I can promise you this: you will pay a heavy price for it. When, where, and how? You’ll be finding out. I promise (Hill, 2015f).

On July 10, the day the Confederate flag was removed from South Carolina’s state capitol, LOS posted a story about how LOS’s Florida chapter, along with other pro-Confederate supporters, had counter-protested a July 9 “I hate Dixie” rally in Gainesville, Florida, a rally demanding the removal of a Nathan Bedford Forrest monument (Tracey, 2015b). According to Andrew Tracey (2015b), an author of frequent posts on LOS’s site, the group was counter-protesting the “‘cultural rape’ of all things Southern” being perpetrated at the rally by the protestors, who he claimed were “feminists,” “Marxists,” “black supremacists,” and “cross dressing trannies.” In Tracey’s post, protestors were described as persons who “wore all different types of clothing with signs full of hate filled messages” and “ran around yelling and swearing” (Tracey, 2015b). Conversely, pro-South counter-protestors were described in flattering terms as being “well dressed, calm,” and “well behaved” (Tracey, 2015b). The post also included several pictures of the event, including an image of pro-Confederate supporters holding signs (e.g., “Stop Southern Cultural Genocide”) and Confederate flags.

LOS’s community-building efforts are perhaps most clearly reflected in a short YouTube video accessed by clicking a link at the bottom of the webpage. Making reference to the nationwide backlash against Confederate symbols, the video began with the following statement appearing on-screen: “When they want your flags, your monuments and your heritage gone . . . What they are really saying is they want YOU gone.” Next, an LOS advertisement appeared on-screen that read: “Fight the Cultural Genocide of the Southern people . . . LeagueoftheSouth.com” (Tracey, 2015b). As with other posts on LOS’s website, the on-screen advertisement was a call for Southerners to fight back against the eradication of Confederate symbols. What is more, like other content on LOS’s website, the on-screen advertisement’s inclusion of the group’s website address was a call, albeit implicit, for Southerners to join LOS’s neo-Confederate community.

Later on, the video transitioned to the “I hate Dixie” rally featuring

both protestors and pro-Confederate counter-protestors engaging in activities at the event. Video of protestors calling for the removal of the Nathan Bedford Forrest monument and holding signs with statements such as “heritage of hate” was annotated with derogatory on-screen comments referring to the protestors as “spoiled children” and “hate-filled minions” (Tracey, 2015b). Then, in a scene seemingly inspired by the movie *Birth of a Nation*, video of white pro-Confederate supporters at the rally appeared with the exclamation “The calvary [*sic*] arrives!” Throughout the rest of the video, a series of images of pro-Confederate supporters, including children, displaying Confederate flags and pro-South signs (e.g., “Stop Southern Cultural Genocide,” “Confederate Lives Matter”) were supplemented with a variety of pro-Confederate community rhetoric and calls for Southerners to take action. The on-screen, pro-Confederate community rhetoric included statements such as “Love your people,” “our folks combine together and fight the hate of our heritage,” and “To have a heritage and identity is the basics of what it means to be human” (Tracey, 2015b). The on-screen, pro-Confederate call to action rhetoric included statements such as “Build Southern identity in your children,” “Take a stand before it’s too late,” and “unite together as a folk – the Southern people” (Tracey, 2015b). Near the end of the video, there appeared another on-screen graphic of LOS’s website address, further emphasizing how important the group views its website in its neo-Confederate community-building efforts.

#### DISCUSSION

Within the scholarly literature regarding Southern culture, several scholars have examined Southern identity (e.g., Cobb, 2005; Goldfield, 2002; Watts, 2008). Certainly, Southerners have a distinctive group identity, one difficult if not impossible for non-Southerners to fully grasp. Indeed, as Watts (2008) writes, “‘Distinctiveness’ may be the key to identifying Southerners with one another while recognizing the value to be found in the diversity that has kept them divided both from one another and the rest of the nation” (p. 161). Even today, it is not unusual for whites living in the Southern United States to regard themselves foremost as Southerners rather than Americans. Although the Confederacy’s bid for a distinct national identity (i.e., secession) from the United States was thwarted during the Civil War, white Southerners’ sense of Southern identity was not diminished; it was arguably heightened by the myriad of extraordinary experiences Southerners sustained during the war and its aftermath. In describing the enduring significance of the Civil War in the South, Goldfield (2002) writes:

The Civil War is like a ghost that has not yet made its peace and roams the land seeking solace, retribution, or vindication. It continues to exist, an event without temporal boundaries, an indeterminable struggle that has generated perhaps as many casualties since its alleged end in 1865 as during the four preceding years when armies clashed on the battlefield (p. 1).

One must also recognize that the history of the Confederate South, a contentious and sometimes even disputed history, is an indelible part of white Southerners' identity. In his book on the history of Southern identity, Cobb (2005) writes:

Architects of new group identities typically base their claims to distinctiveness and superiority on the *vision* [emphasis added] of a glorious communal past. The more venerable that past, the better, for it is usually harder to exalt events and deeds that can actually be recalled clearly than those that must simply be imagined (p. 42).

Accordingly, for the pro-Confederate community seeking to preserve its distinct identity, an identity shaped in large part by perceptions of a revered Confederate South, there is perhaps no battle of greater import than the fight to preserve the Civil War-era battle flag, arguably the most iconic symbol of the Confederacy.

The fight to preserve the Confederate flag took on added urgency for pro-Confederate groups when a nationwide backlash against the emblem ensued following the Charleston church shootings. Some neo-Confederate groups such as League of the South (LOS) exploited the nationwide backlash against the Confederate flag as an opportunity to publicize their radical ideology to members of the pro-Confederate community who may have become receptive to their rhetoric. In discussing the recent pro-Confederate flag movement, SPLC's Mark Potok (2016) commented on how LOS "took a leadership role among the many groups, including Klan groups, supporting the Confederate battle flag after the Charleston massacre." Moreover, LOS's renewed involvement in public pro-Confederate events suggests the neo-Confederate group is growing its community, a growth likely attributable to the rhetoric LOS espouses online.

LOS's success in garnering support for its neo-Confederate community may be largely due to the credibility individuals assign to the online rhetoric of the group's leader Dr. Michael Hill, a retired university professor from a Southern college turned outspoken advocate for Southern secession. Hill has authored many of the "scholarly" essays posted on the group's site, essays that serve as the rhetorical foundation on which LOS's community continues to be built. Indeed, in the week preceding the removal

of the Confederate flag from South Carolina's state capitol, Hill was responsible for most of LOS's radical neo-Confederate online rhetoric in an effort to attract members to the organization's neo-Confederate community in the week preceding South Carolina's removal of the Confederate flag from its state capitol.

For one, the non-textual content (e.g., Confederate flags, Confederate battle cross, image of Nathan Bedford Forrest monument) appearing on LOS's site had a Southern theme, creating an inviting environment to Southerners generally and to individuals with strong pro-South sentiments particularly, the two groups constituting the core of the pro-Confederate community. Moreover, as much of the non-textual content on LOS's site reflected the group's pro-South sentiment (e.g., Confederate flags, LOS's Southern nationalist flag), it helped to instill a sense of group identity and Southern pride in Southerners that, in turn, may have increased the likelihood of their becoming involved with, or remaining involved with, LOS's neo-Confederate community.

While some of the non-textual content posted online by LOS served mainly to give its website a pro-South aesthetic, several of the images on the site helped the organization further legitimize itself as a bona fide group within the larger pro-Confederate movement, thus aiding its community-building efforts. LOS posted photographs and videos of its members engaging in various activities in the offline world (e.g., meetings, pro-Confederate rallies) and portrayed a respectable, conservative public image that could help the group to maintain members within, and attract new members to, its neo-Confederate community. Indeed, the mere existence of these photographs and videos on LOS's website aided LOS's community-building efforts by demonstrating the group has an offline presence, knowledge that serves to instill a deeper sense of purpose in current members, while suggesting to prospective members they can be part of something worthwhile. LOS further reinforced this belief by describing public speeches given by their members as being "well received" and generating interest in their cause. Additionally, LOS utilized computer-generated images on its site (e.g., logos for the various LOS state chapters, graphics including the words "South" or "Southern") to help promote its ideology and state chapters, all of which served to further build its neo-Confederate community.

However, LOS's efforts to build its community were likely aided more by the group's online textual rhetoric, the main content of its website. For one, current and potential members may have been drawn to LOS's site, wherein they are exposed to the group's neo-Confederate rhetoric, simply because it contains various Southern-themed posts (e.g., survival, well-being, and independence of Southerners). By continuously expressing affection for the South, proclaiming its commitment to defending Southern

interests, and speaking out on behalf of Southerners, LOS may have helped generate sympathy for the pro-Confederate cause, especially from white persons living in the South. In promoting itself, LOS publicized its agenda and activities, something that could have helped the group in recruiting new community members while maintaining current ones.

LOS used its site to help forge a sense of community by discussing the activities of its individual members and by allowing those members to contribute to its online discourse. Another way in which LOS helped to create a sense of community was by emphasizing how current, and potential, community members share a common culture. LOS further defined the members of its neo-Confederate community by identifying the activities (e.g., anti-Confederate rallies), entities (e.g., news media, federal government, opponents of Confederate symbols), and edicts (e.g., official removals of Confederate symbols) the group views as being anti-Southern, typically in us-versus-them terms (e.g., “they,” “those people,” “other americans”). What is more, LOS’s us-versus-them rhetoric persisted throughout the posts examined in this study. Having defined who and what it regards as being anti-Southern, and thus at odds with the neo-Confederate community that the group seeks to build, LOS encouraged pro-Confederate community members to mobilize together (e.g., “unite,” “take a stand”) to initiate changes the group believes would ultimately benefit the South and Southerners, such as Southern independence.

In its community-building efforts, LOS was not above playing to fears that may be held by white Southerners, those individuals most likely to join the pro-Confederate community, about how the nationwide backlash against Confederate symbols was not only a threat to their Southern heritage but also to them as individuals. LOS intensified its rhetoric regarding how it believes the removal of Confederate symbols represents a threat to white Southerners through terms associated with war, terrorism, or political violence (e.g., “death,” “genocide,” “onslaught,” “trigger,” “cross hair”). Similarly, LOS advised Southerners they were being oppressed by the rest of America and needed to “take a stand” (e.g., join LOS, pool numbers and resources) to liberate themselves from this oppression. LOS often followed its oppression-liberation rhetoric (i.e., “suffering” and “struggling” versus “hope” and “independence”) with a call for Southerners to join its movement. In playing to concerns white Southerners may have as well as utilizing a rhetoric of Southern oppression, LOS may have generated even more support for, and attracted more followers to, its neo-Confederate community.

## CONCLUSION

The relevance of examining U.S.-based extremist groups' Internet rhetoric has substantially increased in recent years as the United States has witnessed a series of deadly mass shootings perpetrated by various extremists, some of whom were apparently motivated by rhetoric they accessed on U.S.-based extremist sites (Barnett, 2014). Indeed, the Internet rhetoric of U.S.-based white supremacist groups (e.g., White Aryan Resistance, World Church of the Creator) is believed to have played a role in motivating individuals to perpetrate race-based (e.g., blacks, Asians) and religion-based (e.g., Jewish) murders since the first "hate site," *www.stormfront.org*, was established in 1995 (Barnett, 2007; Barnett, 2014). More recently, it appears that the Charleston church shootings were inspired, at least in part, by content posted on the website maintained by the neo-Confederate group Council of Conservative Citizens (Cohen, 2015; Devine, Griffin, & Bronstein, 2015). An online manifesto believed to have been authored by Roof stated: "The first website I came to was the Council of Conservative Citizens. There were pages upon pages of these brutal black on White murders. . . . At this moment I realized that something was very wrong . . ." (Devine, Griffin, & Bronstein, 2015). Chillingly, web server records indicate the online manifesto was last modified merely hours before the Charleston church shootings (Robles, 2015).

Much like SPLC regards Council of Conservative Citizens as a "crudely white supremacist group" ("Council," n.d.), LOS's ideology is crudely racist despite the group's academic façade. LOS's rhetoric has shifted from denying it is a racist organization, to a strategy of cloaking its hardline positions, to now being overtly racist with anti-black comments appearing in its text-based Internet rhetoric as well as video posted on the group's site. Indeed, LOS proudly proclaimed on its site the group was not concerned with being labeled as "racist" or any other labels (e.g., bigots, xenophobes, anti-Semites) characterizing it as a hate group.

Given LOS's overtly racist rhetoric, the group's renewed prominence within the pro-Confederate movement is disturbing. Even more troubling, LOS's resurgence within the pro-Confederate movement is coming about as the group is articulating even more radical rhetoric, including advocacy for violence. Within the Internet posts examined in this study, LOS called for members of the pro-Confederate community to "take a stand for the South" and made mention of an "end game . . . which promises a permanent solution." These statements, while only implicit suggestions of violence, are nevertheless cause for concern when coupled with LOS's prediction of an impending race war, the group's recent paramilitary operations, and the

passions stirred within the pro-Confederate community following the nationwide backlash against Confederate symbols.

Future studies may want to examine the online rhetoric of LOS and other neo-Confederate groups as such examinations may lend insight into what the groups may be planning to do in the offline world. After all, the pro-Confederate community is likely to remain animated as the move to efface Confederate symbols begins to focus on monuments and facilities named after Confederate soldiers. Moreover, the pro-Confederate movement is likely to remain large-scale given the many coordinated pro-Confederate flag rallies that occurred in the wake of the public backlash against Confederate symbols, rallies no doubt aided by LOS's and other pro-Confederate groups' use of the Internet.

Just as this study examined how LOS rhetorically responded to the public backlash against Confederate symbols to advance its neo-Confederate agenda, future studies may want to examine how extremist groups attempt to use other current events as rhetorical capital to advance their causes. For example, Michael Hill recently posted commentary regarding Muslim ban statements made by Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump, the Pulse nightclub shootings in Orlando, and UK's decision to exit the European Union (i.e., "Brexit") as a strategic means of generating support for LOS's anti-immigration, pro-gun, and pro-secessionist ideologies, respectively. Examinations of how extremist groups respond to current events can lend further insight into how extremists attempt to rhetorically build their communities and advance their causes, information that could assist society in guarding against acts of extremism perpetrated by like-minded individuals.

#### NOTES

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