Recollecting Union: “‘Rebel Flags’” and the Epideictic Vision of Washington’s Farewell Address

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In February 1862 numerous celebrations of George Washington’s birthday commenced with ceremonial readings of the Farewell Address. With heightened public interest, Harper’s Weekly published a flag display in its reporting of the event. This essay explores how the illustration functioned as an epideictic vision to reconstitute the meaning of the Farewell Address within the context of competing Civil War ideologies and disparate strategies of commemoration. Moreover, this study demonstrates how epideictic visions like the Harper’s Weekly image work as public pedagogy that aid audiences in understanding the civic virtue relevant to ceremonial repetition.

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In early 1862, after ten months of civil war, Northern stalwarts attempted a rhetorical rescue of Unionism for George Washington’s birthday. Keeping with tradition, 22 February was marked with public readings of the 1796 Farewell Address (Furstenberg 54, 100). However, under the stress of debating nationalism, the 1862 remembrance was celebrated “as it was never before and never will be again” (Bennett 1). Planning began in January when Philadelphia Mayor Alexander Henry petitioned Congress to host a recital of the Farewell Address honoring “Constitution and Union” in the face of the “Great Rebellion” (“Memorial”). Congress acquiesced. Rep. John Crittenden (Unionist-KY) sponsored the measure in hopes that the memorial might bridge...
the gap between Union and Confederate ideologies and “kindle the memory of [Washington] into the flame of patriotism” for citizens devoted to the “free Government and Union which, under God, he established for us” (Cong. Globe 10 Feb. 1862 726–27).

The commemoration that followed, however, was confined neither to the Farewell Address nor the audience that gathered in the US Capitol on 22 February 1862. President Lincoln, who often invoked Washington as proof that national union was “perpetual,” expanded the breadth and character of festivities with two public orders circulated prior to Washington’s birthday. The first order requested citizens’ help in “causing to be read” the Farewell Address for “public solemnities” in local communities (“No. 10”; “Washington’s Birthday” New York Herald). By Lincoln’s reasoning, the greater citizenry, like Congress, should bear witness to the Farewell Address. Public response was extraordinary. One New Hampshire newspaper speculated that “in accordance with the President’s proclamation,” the Farewell Address was heard in “almost every city in the Union” (“Weekly Review”). Second, the president requested that Congress arrange “rebel flags recently captured” to be displayed “immediately” following the recital of Washington’s words in Congress (“No. 14”; “Preparations”). By Lincoln’s reasoning, hearing the Farewell Address and seeing Confederate war emblems was apropos to the occasion. Congress disagreed. Though the display was planned and publicly known, Rep. Crittenden motioned to exclude the presentation of flags mere moments before the commemorative reading began (“Order Respecting the Presentation”; Riddle 184). Remembrance of Washington in 1862 proceeded with far-reaching public involvement, but without Lincoln’s proposed threading of declamation and display. The New York Times lauded Congress for withholding the image of Confederate flags on Washington’s birthday. The “bastard flags” represented a “despicable cause,” the paper noted, alluding to secession: “Better let them rot as the memory of the wicked whose cause they symbolize will rot. Let there be no memorial to keep alive in men’s memories the Nameless Crime” (“Congress and the Rebel Flag”).

Lincoln’s proposal to include this commemorative display is a rich point of critical intervention. What did he see in captured flags that members of Congress did not? We may never know. The president shunned festivities while mourning the recent death of his son, Willie, thereby denying listeners a formal rhetorical response to the moment. Though his silence is regrettable, what remains is equally important. Shrugged from the formal recitation in the Capitol, the sight of captured flags commemorating Washington’s birthday was nevertheless made public when the popular newspaper Harper’s Weekly reported the event. “Rebel Flags in the Old House of Representatives in Washington” (Figure 1), a print derived from Alfred Waud’s firsthand sketch of the prepared display, remains the only artifact from this rich moment of rhetorical history. As an artistic interpretation of the event made public, the print invites close examination of the visual dynamics of ceremonial repetition.

This study analyzes “Rebel Flags” to better understand how popular texts like print illustrations participate in the epideictic process of public remembrance
generally and ceremonial repetition specifically. “Rebel Flags” represents commemorative pedagogy I call an epideictic vision. The text not only chronicles a public happening, but also utilizes the visual conventions of flag symbolism to invite readers to consider a preferred virtue by which the event—repeating the Farewell Address—should be imagined in public remembrance.4 When considered as a text of public memory, I argue, “Rebel Flags” performed an epideictic function by symbolically disciplining competing visions of nationalism through the illustration of flags within the rhetorical context of Washington’s birthday in 1862. Contrary to assessments that frame declamation as rhetorically unproductive, this analysis argues that prints like “Rebel Flags” demonstrate one example of how epideictic visions can broaden our appreciation of ceremonial repetition by directing attention to how public virtues are made visible within the remembrance of speech.

To pursue these claims, this analysis develops as follows. First, I discuss the epideictic qualities of “Rebel Flags,” including its place at the intersection of ceremonial repetition, illustrated journalism, public memory, and the conventional symbolism of flags. Next, I offer an analysis of “Rebel Flags” by noting how its historic and symbolic traits disciplined competing frameworks of nationalism proposed at the time. The text does this by representing a nuanced appeal to Unionism through the conventions of flag representation. When positioned within the far-reaching commemorative efforts of 22 February, moreover, “Rebel Flags” publicly visualizes a preferred value by which to remember the Farewell Address.

Revising Texts: Repetition, Illustration, and Recollection

Ceremonial repetition resides in a critical bind. As a privileged nineteenth-century practice, declamation was thought to nourish audiences as they witnessed “the rhetorical qualities at work” (Johnson 148; also see Hochmuth and Murphy; Borchers and Wagner). However, contemporary critics have challenged the
credibility of repetition as effective rhetoric. In his call to revive mimetic pedagogy, Terrill discounts the public practice of repetition, arguing that while a speech may have been a “fitting response” in its moment, attempts to “import it directly into a present situation would be absurd, and perhaps repulsive” (303). Beyond originality, Vivian’s analysis of the repetition of canonical texts to mark the one-year anniversary of 9/11 notes how such practice can be bereft of public values, thereby limiting “the citizenry’s collective capacity to derive resources for speech and action from terms of civic memory” (18). Repetition need not be cast out, Vivian cautions: even “formulaic words” can still replenish “the political resources of civic remembrance” if they could be “constructively employed” in practice (23). To transcend its status as mere appreciation of artistry, in other words, ceremonial repetition needs to fulfill the expectations of epideictic rhetoric by conveying a message that speaks to the communal needs of the present as a vision of civic virtue (Sullivan; Prelli).

Epideictic rhetoric helps “explain the social world” in the hopes that a rupture to the collective routine can be understood “in terms of the audience’s key values and beliefs” (Condit 288). Such values affirm a sense of public good, and conventionally follow from “celebrating the deeds of exemplars that set the tone for civic community” as taught by effective speakers (Hauser 9). As an epideictic practice, ceremonial repetition invites the perspective that the meaning of a text is malleable—not unbending—to circumstances. For example, Butler credits repetition as the production of meaning itself, noting that “language gains its temporal life only in and through the utterances that reinvoke and restructure the conditions of its own possibility” (140). Said differently, repetition is a way to collectively witness a public text as memory born anew, or a speech that is “preserved despite its author’s intentions” (Casey 18). Indeed, Union efforts to commemorate Washington in 1862—from Mayor Henry’s petition through the countless public recitals that followed—sifted the document’s many methods of council to speak to the worry of secession, and isolate what Wills called the “master theme” of the text—national unity (“Washington’s Farewell Address” 178). Absent a skilled rhetor, however, communicating the shape and character of Unionism through ceremonial repetition required an unconventional approach to publicly convey this resonant civic virtue. Our critical approaches to understanding this rhetorical process require similar flexibility.

As critics have recently argued, the rhetoric of communal values can be conveyed through informal public messages, and is not reducible to a formal speaker-audience exchange. Hart’s literary analysis posits that forms of “publicity and community” can be discerned in texts by how they “evok[e] communal attitudes in audience members” absent an immediate relationship (39). Further, Ramsey has demonstrated how compiling dictionaries according to presumptions of language was a rhetorical means to “shore up cultural values” during a time when assumptions of education and persuasion were guided by the lexicon (65). Reading cultural texts for their capacity to convey public values means discerning what Olson has called the “epideictic dimension” of a text, or the pattern of “rhetorical choices that reinforce conservative social positions on relevant issues” (450). Such a dimension may not
“be the dominant or preferred reading,” yet warrants attention as the text “coherently, elaborately, and powerfully promotes and justifies values, beliefs and practices” that encourage certain relationships of power between viewers (461). Scrutinizing the expression of public values within informal texts inherits the original justification for analyzing epideictic discourse: “It persuades on deliberative questions without seeming to do so” (Bostdorff 297). As I explain below, the epideictic character of “Rebel Flags” is derived from both its public form as part of illustrated journalism, and its selective representation of flag symbolism.

Newsprint has been credited with encouraging “silent adherence to causes” for an “invisible public from far away” (Eisenstein 42), and joining anonymous participants in a “mass ceremony” of collective observance (Anderson 35). Illustrated newspapers like *Harper’s Weekly* made distant events available for public witnessing—a “vicarious experience of distant and important people, places, and events” (Barnhurst and Nerone 64; Bookbinder). This epideictic dimension is heightened in the case of “Rebel Flags” as the print was well positioned to offer a type of *phantasia*, or form of imagining closely aligned to Aristotle’s view on epideictic speech. Such imagining is designed to show, O’Gorman argues, what is worthy of praise or blame through amplifying strategies like comparisons or analogies (28), and participates in the function of epideictic rhetoric in providing “images of various disparate values for public observation and, perhaps, deliberation” (30). Imagining events of the Civil War through illustrated prints, in other words, emphasizes the rhetorical process by which such events were publicly understood. Within the ceremonial context of widespread recitations of the Farewell Address, the epideictic dimension of “Rebel Flags” extends to a form of commemorative pedagogy: it fulfills the function of illustrated news by displaying a distant scene to an absent public, and also constitutes a preferred associative “sight” for readers to imagine a moment of shared public reflection—memorializing Washington’s Farewell Address.

Commemoration, Rosenfield clarifies, is an opportunity for communities to reify “the meaning of what is in the collective memory and so commemorat[e] a person or event” (135). Though two weeks lapsed between the publication of the print and the celebration of the Farewell Address, “Rebel Flags” asks a reader to make an association between the widespread recitation of Washington’s words and the sight of confiscated flags. As commemorative pedagogy, “Rebel Flags” participates in crafting how the recent ceremony should be imagined in the public consciousness. Though public memory studies generally analyze how assessments of the past take subjective, textual form as public appeals (Browne; Zelizer “Reading the Past”), the distinction between memory and recollection helps us more clearly understand how this process is applied in ceremonial repetition.

In Phillips’s nuanced perspective, rhetorical conceptions of the past are divided into public memory, public remembrance, and public recollection (220). Using Aristotle’s distinction between memory as a sensory image of the past and recollection as a deliberative search for an image of the past (akin to a syllogism), Phillips argues that critics should see the rhetoric of public memory as a struggle wherein efforts to align meaning to the past often meet in contested rhetorical space. Since
Aristotle’s theory of recollection relies on a syllogistic matching of images from the past, Phillips elaborates, it is ideally aligned to rhetoric’s enthymematic appeal to shape public attitudes through “drawing the audience into the act of persuasion,” thereby leaving a key premise of the syllogism unstated (216). When fully realized, Phillips’s argument on the struggle over the “surplus of memory” plays out in three likely phases: the “rhetoric of public memory” represents the emergence and articulation of the past; the “rhetorics of public remembrance” alternately represent “calcified” frameworks that contain and prescribe the meaning of the past through repetitive association; and the “rhetoric of public recollection” designates sites of struggle wherein efforts to establish communal conceptions of the past either attempt to disrupt conventional assumptions and associations of memory, or are disciplined by more dominant frameworks (219).

The rhetorical process of connecting images of public memory and competing modes of recollection represents the linchpin uniting “Rebel Flags” to the ceremonial repetition of Washington’s Farewell Address in 1862. Acts of declamation reintroduced public discourse as “public memory”: like scattered religious denominations reciting a common prayer, the Farewell Address was presented as a symbol of group identity. The visual representation of this affair, however, more clearly engages the process of “public recollection,” or efforts to either discipline or “disrupt the dominant enthymematic logic and dispute taken-for-granted assumptions about the past” (219), namely the preferred meaning of the Farewell Address imagined through a display of flags.

When analyzed next to the wide-ranging forms by which Washington and the Farewell Address were reintroduced into the public consciousness (through repetition and print), “Rebel Flags” participates in the rhetorical work of offering an epideictic vision, or preferred public framework by which the text should be recollected and understood against the challenge of competing ideological positions. Said differently, Phillips’s summary of public recollection helps critics confront how the selective strategies of display (or illustration) can invite alternate interpretations of a text (or memory) repeated in public observance, and thereby clarify the form and character of civic virtue audiences are invited to “see” in words repeated. Burke’s observation of the scene’s influence to a text is therefore apt: “A ringing bell is in itself as meaningless as an undifferentiated portion of the air we are breathing. It takes on character, meaning, significance (dinner bell or doorbell) in accordance with the contexts in which we experience it” (7). For editors of Harper’s Weekly, visualizing commemoration of the Farewell Address in 1862 meant making an association by which the speech could be recollected through resonant public symbolism. Less than one year after the declared establishment of a sovereign Southern nation, no framework was more appropriate for reconciling meaning and memory of nationalism than the symbolic grammar of flags.

In as much as flags can be situated to inspire attitudes of “allegiance to country” (Hariman and Lucaites 372), the symbolism of “Rebel Flags” utilized the potency by which banners affirmed public, political, and military allegiance. This significance emerged, Bonner notes, because dueling visions of unity and secession that defined
the Civil War were easily transferred to both the United States and the Confederate flags (*Colors and Blood* 17). This way of seeing flags relied on an implicit stars-for-states logic in design. For the North, the Stars and Stripes came to be “symbolic of Union and the fight to keep it whole” (Leepson 91). A similar logic animated Confederate sensibilities. Preceding the secession conflict, future Confederate President Jefferson Davis mused that rather than diminish his own state’s standing in the union, he’d prefer to “tear it from its place” on the canton of the Stars and Stripes (qtd. in Bonner “Flag Culture” 302). In other words, the visual icons of the North and South were both vexillogic enthymemes: if viewers understood that a canton’s stars symbolized states, a flag’s display invited them to “fill in” the preferred breadth and character of nationalism. The provisional Confederate Stars and Bars flag illustrated this trait: it imitated the American flag by reducing the number of stripes from thirteen to three, and the number of stars from thirty-four to seven (Bonner “Flag Culture” 294). The result, Confederate representatives hoped, was a visual enthymeme that maintained a distinct and familiar American look while also conveying the “death of the old Union” and the start of a new nation in stars and states reduced (Bonner *Colors and Blood* 33).

The symbolic relevancy of flags at this time is vividly illustrated in the ideological responses to the firing of Fort Sumter. Following the surrender of the fort, South Carolina Governor Pickens translated in speech what the South has symbolically achieved in arms: “We have lowered it [the Stars and Stripes] in humility before the Palmetto and Confederate flags” (qtd. in Teachout 94). The symbolic potential was not lost on Northern sensibilities, where the flag was considered not only an embodiment of ideology, but also the “only Union martyr” of the attack (Neely and Holzer 1). On 20 April 1861, Major Robert Anderson, who served at Sumter during its bombardment, marched in a Union parade in New York City. In a poignant move, he carried the original flag lowered at Sumter to an immense statue of the first president, and “placed it in Washington’s bronze hands,” giving the impression “Washington himself had taken up the cause of Sumter” for the North (Teachout 97). Naturally, this moment was illustrated in the pages of *Harper’s Weekly* (“The Great Meeting”). The symbolic contest for country was well underway.

As multiple reactions to the bombing of Sumter indicate, the widely accepted symbolic grammar of flags made them the preferred mode by which to convey the events of war. For illustrated newsprints like *Harper’s Weekly*, this followed with boundless application (Neely and Holzer 19–21; Coski 35–37). When the president-elect spoke at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, *Harper’s* showed readers a full view of a comparatively small Lincoln hoisting a giant American flag into the air (“President Lincoln”). When Union troops surrendered to Confederate forces in Missouri, *Harper’s* used the scale of space to show readers a Stars and Bars rising above a trampled Stars and Stripes (“The Rebel Ex-Governor”). When Congress gathered to hear a recital of George Washington’s Farewell Address, *Harper’s* showed readers the confiscated banners prepared—but not formally displayed—for the occasion (“Rebel Flags”). In choosing to bypass the actual reading in Congress—a sight that would have included the rare meeting of both Congressional houses, the Supreme
Court, various heads of state, and “galleries [that] were densely crowded” to hear Secretary of the Senate John Forney revive the Farewell Address “in a clear, loud voice” (“Washington’s Birthday at Washington”)—Harper’s turned readers’ attention instead to the resonant sight of contested banners, forging a contingent relationship between speech and flags, each concerning the question of union.

Given the wide publicity of the congressional event and similar participation in local communities, “Rebel Flags” offers a unique perspective to remembering Washington and the Farewell Address in 1862. When understood in its public context, the print exemplifies the potential for interaction between visual and verbal texts. A visual text, Zelizer clarifies,

might best tell a story by strategically catching things in the middle. It depicts for its onlookers a moment in an event’s unfolding to which they attend while knowing where that unfolding leads. This means that visual work often involves catching the sequencing of events or issues midstream, strategically freezing it at its potentially strongest moment of meaningful representation. (“The Voice of the Visual in Memory” 158)

Within the epideictic context, public foreknowledge of the congressional recital, and general ubiquity of the Farewell Address in local readings, flags were both instrumental means of conveying a sense of national union, and the “strongest moment of meaningful representation” to publicly convey the politics of ceremonial repetition. From a rhetorical perspective, it is well to ask what viewers were invited to see in “Rebel Flags.” As I suggest below, the seemingly ordinary presentation that comprises the print is complicated when understood against the competing visions of nationalism that permeated Civil War ideologies. By analyzing what Finnegan calls the attributes of “production” and “composition” in visual texts, I demonstrate how “Rebel Flags” performed a disciplining function in privileging the recollection of Washington’s union toward a specific ideology and denying others (“Studying Visual Modes” 252–53). In this regard, “Rebel Flags” embodies a specific commitment of civic virtue, and a preferred way of recollecting the Farewell Address as meaningful public remembrance.

Recollecting Union: “Rebel Flags” As Epideictic Vision

Controversy over Lincoln’s proposed flag display centered on a narrow notion of representation. If confiscated flags were “trophies” that would “magnify the deeds” of Union officers, or “evidences of the power of this Government” against rebellion as Rep. James Campbell (Opposition-PA) and Rep. Owen Lovejoy (R-IL) respectively argued, they were appropriate (Cong. Globe 912). To opponents like Rep. Roscoe Conkling (R-NY), however, seceded states had no flags: items proposed for the commemoration of Washington were “badges” and “tokens” belonging to “men red-handed with the murder of the citizens of this country—men who are entitled to no flag, who possess no flag—men whom we ought not to recognize as parties to be treated with or considered here at all” (Cong. Globe 912). Recognition is
powerful. If presence alone conveyed sovereign standing, displaying Confederate banners was blasphemous to the occasion.

The physical display of flags was a fleeting encounter. What remains, by contrast, is the epideictic vision of the display publicized in “Rebel Flags.” “Rebel Flags” aids in the recollection of Washington’s union as permanent and perpetual by visually subverting competing conceptions of nationalism prevalent during the occasion. Against the fears of dissenting members of Congress, “Rebel Flags” managed this feat while both showing Confederate banners and withholding the conventional separatism implied in their conventional design.

“Rebel Flags” has an unexpected preoccupation. Despite the title and adjoining story’s promise to showcase “rebel flags recently captured,” the most compelling aspect of the print is the presence of an American flag (“Washington’s Birthday at Washington” 151). This banner is the most recognizable element of “Rebel Flags,” and intriguingly absent from reports on the prepared display. Though excluded from the ceremony, the visual basis for “Rebel Flags” was nevertheless “on exhibition in the old House of Representatives,” and, according to the National Republican, presented “objects of great interest” to visitors following the recital (“Rebel Flags”). Viewers saw banners “manufactured of silk” and “beautifully ornamented by designs and mottoes,” such as the “pattern of the ‘Southern Confederacy,’” regimental banners embroidered with the phrase “‘We choose our own institutions,’” and a flag with “the Georgia coat of arms and the inscription, ‘Cotton is King’” (“Rebel Flags”). In print, however, these flourishes of design are markedly concealed. For citizens witnessing the artistic rendering of the display, the unannounced anchor of clarity in “Rebel Flags” is the Stars and Stripes.

This point of emphasis originated with the sketch by Alfred Waud titled, “Captured Flags in the O” (see Figure 2). As was often the case, the difference

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between sketch and illustration meant alterations of the first effort by distant engravers. Waud’s original focus in capturing the display was a partial view of the American flag, though the final print widened the original scope from a single banner to a larger room, expanding the potential for visual evaluation, comparison, and contrast. Indeed, the completed “Rebel Flags” print amplifies an inclusive sight of military progress by expanding the view and including numerous banners of the print’s namesake. Readers see a single corner of the Old House of Representatives, showing a crowd of formally dressed sailors, soldiers, and guests mingling among fifteen vertically hoisted flags dispersed among the Greek revival columns. Given the value of flags as jealously guarded marks of Union valor and Confederate defeat, the sheer number of flags—fourteen plus the Stars and Stripes—signals progress. The symbolic organization of “Rebel Flags” far surpasses an issue of numbers, however.

The relevance of this Stars and Stripes is evident in another banner featured in the Harper’s Weekly print. Behind the American ensign viewers see the Fort Walker battle flag, recognizable by its distinctive stripes and canton of two palmetto trees, stars, and a crescent moon. Both flags were collected from battles along the Port Royal coast of South Carolina in November 1861. Transmissions from Flag Officer Samuel DuPont to Navy Secretary Gideon Welles following the Port Royal victories prove the import of this particular American banner, and its inclusion in an otherwise rebel-centric pageant. In an 8 November 1861 memo, DuPont informed Welles that captured flags were being sent back to Washington, DC, adding in a postscript that the messenger delivering confiscated banners also holds the “first American ensign raised upon the soil of South Carolina since the rebellion broke out” (DuPont “Letter”). What was martyred at Sumter rose again during the Port Royal campaign. An article featured in the Richmond Daily Dispatch eleven days later elaborated that “trophies from Port Royal” are now “displayed at the Navy Department,” noting:

One is a South Carolina State flag, another a flag of the rebel Confederacy, and the other the Stars and Stripes that was first set upon the soil of South Carolina since the rebellion. These trophies attract a great deal of attention, coming as they do from South Carolina, the fomenter of all our domestic difficulties. They are more highly prized than if they had been brought from any other of the rebel States. (“Important from Washington”)

Historically, “Rebel Flags” reclaims a sense of national cohesion following Fort Sumter. If formally presented to Congress amid a sea of Confederate banners, this Stars and Stripes might signify the endurance of national union in the face of open challenge. Conveying such primacy of reclaimed unity was equally achievable in print as in person. Even if viewers of “Rebel Flags” were unaware of the significance of the American flag profiled or the presence of the Fort Walker banner, the symbolic presentation of these flags notably distinguishes the presence of the Stars and Stripes.

However, positioning the American Stars and Stripes amid a field of Confederate flags—confiscated or not—could have had an opposite effect, as feared by some members of Congress. Should representation constitute equal standing of a sovereign opponent, the American flag would appear outnumbered, or in the least, of diminished importance. Any danger of this interpretation is leveled in print, however, and
strategically executed by bending conventions of illustrated journalism. “Rebel Flags” displays a consistent organizing principle: flags are seen unequally. The illustration arranges this dynamic through both proximity and distance. The Stars and Stripes occupies space: it is taller than the rest and positioned closest to the foreground. By contrast, most of the Confederate banners are obscured by people, or cloistered in a pell-mell blend of irregular symbolism. Harper’s has positioned the Stars and Stripes within a realm of clarity with other banners separated by both distance and symbolic ambiguity. Under this principle, objects closer to the Stars and Stripes are peppered with minimal and often faded vexillogic detail, while those furthest from it suffer for their distance, show minimal visual resonance and, by implication, diminished enthymematic potential as symbols of nationality.

For illustrated newspapers like Harper’s Weekly, the ability to provide “accurate” drawings was prized above all (Katz 45). The primary convention of illustrated prints, Barnhurst and Nerone elaborate, was a presumed insistence on “clarity and lucidity” as an artistic benchmark (63). Yet this presentational custom varied. According to Barnhurst and Nerone, papers conveyed events through “sketches” or “fine drawings” indicative of Civil War-era prints. Sketches were more likely to feature “irregular shading” and “deep shadow[s],” while fine drawings utilized “precise tonal shading and perspective,” and “greater detail and surface finish” (65). “Rebel Flags” carries the distinction of utilizing both visual styles prevalent at the time—precision for the Stars and Stripes, and greater shading of its Confederate cohabitants.

The discrimination of detail is evident in the larger scene of “Rebel Flags.” While a flag featured to the left of a statue representing Clio the Greek Muse of history likely resembles a Confederate Stars and Bars, the two drooping banners to the right are far less clear, being either national flags or regimental Naval Jack emblems, represented with blue fields and starry cantons (usually seven five-point stars). Seen in draped, limp form, however, their identity is nearly anonymous absent relevant symbolic details. Though they vary in height and, presumably, size and length, any detail inherent of each has been emaciated by compositional design. Consistent with this theme, flags to the back left of the Stars and Stripes are also ghoulishly faded, and nearly blend into the shading of the room’s back wall. Even the faces of spectators distanced from the Stars and Stripes enjoy more visible recognition than a Confederate ensign tucked to the back of this scene. The Fort Walker flag, moreover, participates in this thematic arrangement as midway point between the Stars and Stripes and the blank banners to the far-edge of the print—a middle ground in this schema between clarity and ambiguity. In a quiet alteration, the flag’s distinctive design—two palmettos, stars, stripes, and a single crescent moon—has been altered in illustration to depict its stars in a cup below instead of an arc above the other emblems (Fairchild). Distance from the American flag is visually fatal. With consistent application “Rebel Flags” positions some banners as vaguely recognizable, with others consigned to anonymity, limp banners of minimal import, visually blank, symbolically dead. Whatever elegant detail might have belonged to the Confederate flags in physical form, as summarized by reports in the National Republican and Richmond Daily Dispatch, is absent in print form. Contrary to the concerns of
Congress, “Rebel Flags” proves that Confederate flags could be seen—but not recognized—and still amplify the value of Unionism.

Why distinguish some flags in clear presentation and others in less recognizable form? “Rebel Flags” isn’t merely an outlier on the journalistic standard of detail in illustration. The print is also an exception within the pages of Harper’s Weekly itself. From the firing on Fort Sumter to the publication of “Rebel Flags,” Harper’s featured 173 images including flags as a key component of various prints. Of these images, only ten lessen the potency of flags by using ambiguous illustrated detail. While Harper’s Weekly displayed Confederate and Union emblems clearly in numerous prints prior to “Rebel Flags,” it was the commemoration of Washington’s Farewell Address wherein the coveted competition for visual recognition was resoundingly granted to the Stars and Stripes and consistently stripped from its Confederate associates. Indeed, “Rebel Flags” captures a revealing epideictic dimension in how contested icons of the Civil War were witnessed within a popular text. When considered within the commemorative context of Washington’s birthday, however, the importance of this visual appeal elevates the print into the realm of epideictic vision: a text that prescribes how readers might remember Washington and the Farewell Address against competing frameworks that might justify rebellion and secession.

As the New York Herald noted soon after Mayor Henry’s petition was taken up, commemoration of Washington’s birthday in 1862 was a special moment: “Never in the history of our country have we had so much cause to revere the memory of Washington as now” (“Washington’s Birthday”). As Barry Schwartz has argued, the memory of Washington—like the idea of national union itself—was experiencing the pull of bilocation: “In the North, Washington stood for union; in the South... Washington stood for resistance to tyranny” (195). The presumed value being celebrated through “the memory of Washington” was not in full agreement, however. The community implied in “Rebel Flags” presents a selective contrast from alternate expressions that imagined the form and character of union differently.

First, “Rebel Flags” dispenses with competing applications of the stars-for-states logic that would define nationalism as anything but whole. Such competing materialized rhetoric was evident from both abolitionist and Confederate sources alike. As Leepson and Teachout note in their respective works, some Northern abolitionists purposefully removed the appropriate number of stars for seceded Southern states from their flags as a symbolic acquiescence to Confederate appeals for separatism (94; 87). For these abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison’s logic that the presence of slavery justified dismantling the union and casting aside the Constitution as an “agreement with hell,” (qtd. in Lowance 335) was easily transferable to mutated flag symbolism. Such concern is not represented in “Rebel Flags.”

A more overt challenge to the notion of perpetual Unionism was the Confederate flag’s insistence of displaying a new Southern union reborn from the design of the old. Even more striking than the Stars and Bars design and stars-for-states appeal was the second inauguration of Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Virginia, which was also timed to coincide with Washington’s birthday in 1862. Speaking beneath a statue depicting a Revolution-era Washington on horseback (an image that, with the date
22 February 1862, would later constitute the seal of the Confederacy), Davis proclaimed the establishment of a permanent Southern government, musing that “the date, the memory, and the purpose seem fitly associated” (224). This association with Washington is a relevant competing framework of remembrance not only because of the relevance of Confederate flags in the Harper’s Weekly print, but because Harper’s presented “Rebel Flags” in the same issue in which it summarized the dichotomous ceremonies celebrating Washington’s birthday. The Richmond event was mockingly summarized thusly:

On Saturday, February 22, while the Congress, Judges, and naval and military officers of the United States were assembled in the Capitol, listening to the Farewell Address of Washington, the miserable remnant of the Southern rebels were gathered in the principal square of Richmond, Virginia, listening to Mr. Jefferson Davis’s last apology for his crimes. (“The Rebel Inaugural Address” 146)

If the stars-for-states logic that defined the visual grammar of flags at the time held sway, Confederate appeals to nationalism are, within the visual space of “Rebel Flags,” at best absent, or at worst tinged with the hypocritical incongruity of aligning a memory of Washington to a cause against his union.

Commemorating Washington’s birthday in 1862 posed a challenge for how to navigate a celebration of Unionism while disciplining counterviews of rebellion and separation. As reports from local readings, editorial writings, songs, and other political texts illustrate, strategies to isolate and rhetorically convey Washington’s union were not themselves uniform. In New York City, for example, some local commemorations took no pains to hide acrimony toward the Confederate South as Washington and the Farewell Address were celebrated with participants displaying “effigies of Jeff[erson] Davis,” seen “suspended by the neck in various quarters of the city” (“Celebrating Washington’s Birth-Day”). Displays at other localities included speeches and prayers by local residents, military displays, the illumination of public buildings, and the hoisting of the American flag (“The Birthday of Washington” The Sun; “Celebration of Washington’s Birth-Day” National Republican).

Newspaper editorials, following the language of Mayor Henry’s petition and congressional accents of division, also remembered the text as a way of highlighting division, and presenting Washington’s text as prophecy for Union victory. For example, the San Francisco Bulletin heralded the Farewell Address as a “magnificent chapter of prophecy” and prescience for the “triumph of loyalty over treason . . . of the Constitution over insurrection” (“Washington’s Birthday”). In kind, the New York Herald editorialized after-the-fact that the day was one of “fighting for the ‘old Union’” and celebrating its might over a “gigantic sectional rebellion” (Bennett 1). Finally, in a song inspired by the Capitol flag display, John Fowler offered yet another interpretation of the connection between the flag and Washington. Fowler’s song, “Rebel Flags: Exhibited at the Capitol February 22, 1862,” contrasted feelings of anger at Southern rebellion and mourning at a loss of national family. Fowler recalls “gaz[ing] upon the Flags, Torn from our brothers’ hands,” and regretting the South’s claim to sovereignty: “Mark what treacherous deed it was, From what good old flag to
turn; With us they dwelt beneath its folds, But now the Stars they spurn. *They’ve left the flag of Washington, The Flag our fathers gave; A richer boon was never given, Or prouder flag to wave*” (“The Rebel Flags,” emphasis added).

By varying degrees of symbolic violence and sorrow, the above characterizations of Washington’s birthday lament a broken national community and separate Union loyalists from a notable enemy. Any of these commemorative rhetorics might direct listeners’ attention to a distinctive epideictic vision of national union in the Farewell Address. Given its organizing dynamic of clarity and ambiguity, however, “Rebel Flags” constitutes a scene distinctive from these otherwise blunt characterizations of Washington’s union. As an epideictic vision, “Rebel Flags” invites viewers to value Unionism over separation—epitomized in the clarity of the Stars and Stripes—but in a form that, given the norms of visual culture at the time, is more conciliatory than contested, more inviting than defensive. Indeed, the symbolic virtue audiences are called to look upon in “Rebel Flags” is far from contested effigies of Confederate rascals, the lamenting of the “Old Union,” or proclaiming a victory over a separate, formidable foe. The more profound implication of the print’s design is the lack of clear visibility for said foe. Indeed, the print elides the competitive tenor of newspaper editorials in and around the 1862 commemoration.

“Rebel Flags” utilizes the visual grammar and enthymematic appeals for nationalism to conceptualize Unionism as perpetual and permanent. In this regard, the print previews and materializes an appeal familiar to Lincoln’s own public discourse; as Garry Wills notes: “The states *had* not seceded since they *could not*” (*Lincoln at Gettysburg* 133, emphasis in original). Far from remembering the Farewell Address as a rhetorical weapon to overtake a military opponent, the recollection implied here frames the text as a mutual covenant that both sides—particularly the South—should renew. Two important texts around the 22 February commemoration of Washington reinforced this distinctive appeal for unadulterated Unionism. Lincoln’s General Order No. 16, issued 18 February 1862, offers insight into the president’s preferred memory of the Farewell Address. Lincoln directed that “extracts” of Washington’s text be read at “every military post and at the head of several regiments and corps of the Army” (“General Order No. 16”). Though prescribed only to military audiences, Lincoln thematically altered the Farewell Address to remove references to national division. In the president’s hands, Washington’s original call to “confirm the attachment” of citizens to their country and common interest of the Union and its laws are unchanged. By contrast, the detailed distinction between North and South, the potential of domestic “geographic discriminations,” and Washington’s well-known caution of political factions are all excised to silence. Lincoln’s edit serves this purpose: it maintains the virtue of original and permanent Unionism without recognizing potential (and obvious) fault lines of regional or ideological divides. This openhanded alteration of the text is similarly crystallized in public fashion through Chaplain Thomas Stockton’s prayer—a key component of the congressional celebration. Stockton called to “our southern brethren,” that they “soon lay down the arms which they ought never have taken up, and return to the common love which waits to embrace them” (*Cong. Globe* 913). This public
recollection of the Farewell Address—a departure from competing characterizations of nationalism that conveyed rancorous or even separate relations between North and South—recognized the seceded states as acting out of bounds from Washington’s council, but not beyond the national community defined within the text. The Unity of Government which constitutes you one people,” as Washington wrote, was invoked in these circles and through “Rebel Flags,” as an ethos perpetually, even stubbornly, “dear to you” in remembrance (“Farewell Address” 964).

“Rebel Flags” publicly constitutes the distinctive attachment to absolute and permanent Unionism that was quietly advocated by Lincoln’s military order and Chaplain Stockton’s prelude. In utilizing and manipulating the public symbolism of flags, the American flag becomes more than a vestige of clarity amid confusion. It is the symbolic centrality of complete Unionism, and the resilience of American nationality in the midst of competing claims to the contrary. The illustration depicts sailors carefully supporting and unfurling the cloth, ensuring it does not touch the ground, while visitors and soldiers turn the display of banners. Joining in the gaze is Carlo Franzoni’s statue of Clio the Greek Muse of history. Like the Harper’s Weekly image, she sketches the day’s happening—and the value of complete Unionism—for posterity.

For audiences conditioned to seeing flags as enthymematic commitments to nationalism, the plane between clarity and ambiguity that organizes “Rebel Flags” renders the import of the Confederacy—numerous banners or not—at best unintelligible and at worst arbitrary. Claims of Confederate nationalism, once declared in sight, are seen as diminished in significance. “Rebel Flags” robs these flags of their import by washing them of their symbolism. Confederate banners are blurred, shaded, and generally obstructed, yet Southern states are nevertheless present in “Rebel Flags” in a fashion most damning to the sovereignty thesis: as the enthymematic potency of the Stars and Stripes is clearly conveyed, the nation is whole and, given the presumed relationship of stars-for-states foundational to Civil War visual culture, unchanged since the South’s supposed secession. To see rebel flags as Harper’s Weekly has designed them is to know the South has not left the union.

As an epideictic vision, “Rebel Flags” is neither a literal view of, nor an auxiliary complement to, the Farewell Address. Instead, it is a constitutive display utilizing the vibrant flag culture of representative nationalism that conveys how readers should “see” and remember the Farewell Address through flags. “Rebel Flags” supports a perpetual Union thesis through a representation of enthymematic public symbols, and accomplishes in design what dissenting members of Congress were fearful might happen from exhibition: visual arguments for Southern sovereignty are undermined through presence, and made less visible to the public imagination through display. United by the enthymematic middle term of Union, “Rebel Flags” imagines a collective scene of repeating Washington’s words and, in this, visualizes a recollection of the Farewell Address that privileges arguments for perpetual Union and disciplines competing frameworks from gaining associative ground.

Harnessing the available means of representation and display, the illustration envisions an occasion of ceremonial repetition, and clarifies its subject: it visualizes a preferred memory of the Farewell Address and a vision of permanent Unionism
within its historical and rhetorical context. With the far-reaching ceremonial participation of Washington’s birthday in 1862, “Rebel Flags” represents an apt example of an epideictic vision. These visual texts help bridge acts of ceremonial repetition and the implied civic virtue intended in collective observance, particularly amid competing ideological frameworks. As commemorative pedagogy, finally, “Rebel Flags” broadens our understanding of how publics might utilize resonant imagery to invite others to bear witness to a vision of virtue.

Conclusion

Washington’s birthday in 1862 indicates that ceremonial repetition can be a useful site to understand the tensions inherent in competing forms of public recollection. Analysis of “Rebel Flags” as an epideictic vision, moreover, further unearths the rhetorical complexity of ceremonial repetition and the work of disciplining competing conceptions of public virtue in a text repeated. As this analysis has shown, repetition of the Farewell Address in 1862 was not an effort to hear familiar words again, but to recollect their meaning for a new moment. Instead of unpacking memory represented in speech, the link between ceremonial repetition and epideictic visions sheds additional light on public address as public memory. Against critical perception of repetition as rote sameness, epideictic visions offer an accessible way for critics to determine how publics have imagined political texts through visual (or other) means that help represent a sense of civic virtue. To further account for the value of ceremonial repetition, critics should consider not what words were said, but how the recollection of such words were publicly imagined beyond the presence of a declaiming voice. The history of repeating textual pillars of commemoration in American public discourse is extensive.11 The opportunity is at hand to further examine the rhetorical complexity of repetition and the creative means by which publics remember through the words of another.

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Notes

[1] In his First Inaugural Lincoln argued the Union was “much older than the Constitution,” and therefore “perpetual.”


[3] Congress prescribed that “ten thousand copies of the proceedings” in the Capitol, with the Farewell Address, be publicly distributed. See Congressional Globe 835.

[4] While concepts like Mitchell’s “imagemetext” help scholars understand the relational meaning between visual and verbal texts, epideictic visions refer to the more specific rhetorical appeals of communal virtues that would otherwise be less apparent in ceremonial repetition alone. See Picture Theory 94.

[5] Guenter argues that after Fort Sumter “the flag replaced George Washington as the single most important symbol employed to encapsulate the values of American civil religion.” Further elaborating, Guenter writes, “For Northerners, it was ’War against the Flag,’ and the specific Southern atrocity that provided it was the firing on the American flag on Fort Sumter.” See Guenter, The American Flag, 1777-1924 65.

[6] The enthymeme is an essential theory of rhetoric, and illustrates the participatory nature of persuasion. Aristotle notes that when speakers rely on an audience to accept a premise, “it does not have to be stated, since the hearer supplies it.” See Aristotle, On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse 30. Also see Finnegan, “The Naturalistic Enthymeme and Visual Argument.”

[7] The number of stars-for-states in the Confederate flag was open to interpretation. As Bonner notes, “It was unclear how many states the new country would encompass.” See Colors and Blood 51.

[8] Waud is credited with the “sketch” for “Rebel Flags.” However, like other sketch artists of the time, his influence on the finished product is debatable. See Frederic E. Ray, Alfred R. Waud: Civil War Artist 33 and 52, and William Huntzicker, “Picturing the News: Frank Leslie and the Origins of American Pictorial Journalism” 318.

[9] Readers are invited to consider the depiction of flags in the pages of Harper’s Weekly during this time period, available online through the HarpWeek database, or via the informal website (not endorsed by Harper’s Weekly), <http://www.sonofthesouth.net >.

[10] My conclusion on the president’s edit should not suggest Lincoln conducted the war gently. Lincoln’s War Order of 23 January 1862 specifically called on a “general movement of the Land and Naval forces” against “insurgent forces” to commence on 22 February 1862. See Lincoln, “President’s General War Order No. 1” 303–04.


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