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The Gadsden Flag's Potential for Right-Wing Extremists

Gadsdenova vlajka a její potenciál pro pravicové extremisty

Abstract

This article investigates the Gadsden flag's extremist potential. Initially, it addresses the differences between European and American approaches to extremism. Based on rigorous analysis of its historical development, current employment, and observation of three selected far-right rallies, the article conceptualizes the Gadsden flag's denotation and connotations. Moreover, it proposes a definition of extremist symbols derived from the existing literature whose key elements concurrently serve as assessment parameters. It concludes with a discussion about the Gadsden flag's position among other far-right symbols.

Keywords: Gadsden flag, extremists, symbol, far-right, meaning.

Abstrakt

Článek prozkoumává Gadsdenovu vlajku a její potenciál pro pravicové extremisty. Ve svém úvodu adresuje rozdíly mezi evropským a americkým přístupem k extremismu. Článek konceptualizuje denotaci a konotace vlajky na základě analýzy jejího historického vývoje, současného využití a pozorování tří vybraných krajně pravicových shromáždění. Zároveň představuje definici extremistických symbolů odvozenou z existující literatury; její části zároveň slouží jako hodnotící parametry. Ve svém závěru diskutuje pozici Gadsdenovy vlajky mezi ostatními krajně pravicovými symboly.

Klíčová slova: Gadsdenova vlajka, extremistický, symbol, krajně pravicový, význam.

Introduction

The relationship between people and symbols has a long history, as the former know that the latter allows the mobilization of new sympathizers through simplified objects that bear promoted ideological standpoints. While the symbols of the past must have undergone a thorny journey before being accepted by the extremist family, online fora and social media have made this process much easier. The problem that the students of extremism face is that many new symbols appear innocent at first sight as

a result of many existing connotations. Therefore, one cannot be sure whether the displayed symbol actually serves the extremist purpose or not.

Historical symbols are not an exception. A closer look at the contemporary United States offers two bright examples: the Confederate battle flag and the Gadsden flag. While the former has already been addressed,¹ the latter remains relatively understudied.² For instance, Platoff and Knowlton included the Gadsden flag among other flags that have adopted new meanings. However, they associated it solely with the Tea Party. Therefore, this article follows the existing research and explores whether the Gadsden flag has undergone an extremist transformation.³ In order to do so, two research questions constitute the article's deliberation: *What is the Gadsden flag's position among other far-right symbols?* and *What is the contemporary meaning of the Gadsden flag?*

Right at the beginning, the article does admit that American symbols do not play a significant role among European right-wing extremists. However, it argues that scholars and security experts must be able to recognize their subversive connotations as these symbols might appear in the old continent and potentially substitute any of the most notorious ones. To underpin such reasoning, Fig. 1 presents a Confederate battle flag sticker located in the city center of Prague, Czechia.

¹ HOLYFIELD, Lori. 2009. "Race discourse and the US Confederate Flag." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12, No. 4, 517-537.

EHLINGER, Joyce *et al.* 2011. "How Exposure to the Confederate Flag Affects Willingness to Vote for Barack Obama." *Political Psychology*. 32, No. 1, 131-146.

BARNETT, Brett A. 2016. "Lone wolf extremists and the US news media." *The International Journal of Communication Ethics*. 13, No. 4, 50-58.

SINCLAIR-CHAPMAN, Valeria. 2018. "(De)Constructing symbols: Charlottesville, the confederate flag, and a case for disrupting symbolic meaning." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6, No. 2, 316-323.

² ASHBEE, Edward. 2015. *The right and the recession*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. ISBN 978-0-7190-9082-0.

WEIMANN, Gabriel and MASRI, Natalie. 2020. "Research Note: Spreading Hate on TikTok." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. [online]. [cit. 2022-06-21]. Retrieved from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1780027?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

ALLEN, Jack. 2020. "The national perils of free-market ideology." *Quadrant* 64, No. 10, 70-73.

³ PLATOFF, Anne M. and Steven A. KNOWLTON, 2022. "Old Flags, New Meanings." In: *escholarship.org* [online]. [cit. 2022-06-21]. Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/content/qt75v7n8h2/qt75v7n8h2.pdf>

Fig. 1 - A Confederate battle flag sticker seen in Prague (authors' own archive)



To systematically advance, the article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the difference between American tolerant and European militant democracies. Then, theoretical approaches to extremist symbols follow. Afterward, the article addresses the historical evolution of the Gadsden flag together with its non-extremist employment. Subsequently, its denotation and diverging connotations are conceptualized, followed by observation of three far-right events during which the Gadsden flag played different roles. The presentation of the results and their discussion conclude the article.

What do Europeans need to know about the American approach to extremism?

At the very beginning, the article must draw a line between diverging approaches to the protection of democracy against extremist entities in the United States and European countries. Not only does this differentiation precondition a smooth proceeding and flawless interpretation of this article, but it also indicates the differences between both environments, from which extremists can benefit on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Not all democracies approach extremist groups in the same way. Scholars recognize two fundamental concepts: militant and tolerant democracy. While the former is mainly connected with European countries, e.g., Germany, Austria, or the Czech Republic represent the shining examples, the latter is associated with the American constitutional framework.

Scholars cannot agree on militant democracy's universal definition. The article, therefore, interprets the one formulated by Mareš and Výborný. They suggest that any political system that subjugates its ideological enemies by legal or discursive means can be considered a militant democracy. It not only challenges them but also begins to take legal steps even before extremists initiate subversive activities targeted against

the stability of the existing political system. Under this presumption, extremists face repression derived from the democratic political process that guarantees protection against excessive human rights infringements, as militant democracies can limit some, such as freedom of assembly. Furthermore, the concept of militant democracy is not only a defensive instrument but very often seeks a clash with extremists.⁴ On the other hand, American tolerant democracy is quite the opposite.

The Constitution of the United States does not allow the federal government to initiate legal repression of any existing ideological enemies as the First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and exercise. Although one can be prosecuted for deliberate activities undermining the existing political system, rhetoric or publicly presented opinions are inadequate regardless of the severity of promoted narratives. Moreover, even membership in extremist groups whose members have been sentenced for committing crimes against the United States' stability is not enough. The American constitutional framework considers extremists legitimate members of the democratic system, whose existence is protected by the First Amendment. Should the federal government subjugate any extremist group or rhetoric by European-like repression, such a legal step would be considered unconstitutional. For example, despite the Ku Klux Klan's violent history, Americans cannot be punished solely for being active Klan members. Notwithstanding, the United States has a repressive position regarding terrorist organizations.⁵

The FBI recognizes two types of terrorist organizations: international and domestic. While the former is defined as 'violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are inspired by, or associated with, designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations,' the latter represents 'violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature.'⁶ Having interpreted both definitions, one cannot omit the role of the word *violent*. Although the United States does not subjugate its ideological enemies by legal restraints, it counters potential security risks posed by violent extremists who are considered either international or domestic terrorists.

To conclude this section, while European militant democracies actively seek clashes with ideological enemies regardless of their activities, American tolerant democracy accepts extremists as legitimate members of its democratic environment unless they plot or commit violent crimes.

Theoretical part

To build a thorough theoretical background of such a complex issue, the following subsection debates eight approaches to the phenomenon of extremist symbols from which the article synthesizes its definition. The selected research methods conclude this part.

⁴ MAREŠ, Miroslav and Štěpán VÝBORNÝ. 2013. *Militantní demokracie ve střední Evropě*. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury. pp. 14-17. ISBN 978-80-7325-326-4.

⁵ ZILVAR, Martin. 2021. "Ozbrojené nestátní milice v USA v období prezidentsví Donalda Trumpa." *Bezpečnostní teorie a praxe*. 22, No. 2, pp. 76.

⁶ FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION. n.d. "Terrorism." In: *fbi.gov*. [online]. [cit. 2022-10-24]. Retrieved from: <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/terrorism>.

The existing approaches to extremist symbols

By their very nature, extremist symbols provide camouflage to socially unacceptable and often illegal ideological standpoints by either shifting the context in which they take place or coding and cloaking their terminology.⁷ With this purpose in mind, one may ask what can constitute an extremist symbol - everything. Terms, gestures, actions, colors, songs, chants, geometric shapes, delineation of people, or people themselves can be adopted for extremist purposes. Thanks to such a broad group of potential tools, extremists can agilely consolidate the collective identity through which they express ideological ambitions. In other words, as extremists are very often ostracized inside democratic societies, symbols represent critical links between those who recognize the intended meanings and convey their persuasion outwards.⁸

Extremist symbols interconnect individuals through a sense of belonging to groups of like-minded people who share resentment and resistance against mainstream society. In other words, they represent gateways to various subcultures existing within the far-right community, which offer striven identity, facilitate mutual standpoints, and provide suppositious legitimacy. On the other hand, some symbols might be adopted by individuals only as a coincidence or a trend. Therefore, inflammatory messages must be formulated in a way that the intended receivers recognize the hidden subversive meaning. Extremists must, unlike normal individuals, decode symbols and promote ideological standpoints without hesitation. However, not every symbol can be confidently considered extremist due to more existing connotations; therefore, the contexts in which they are used represent the critical factor determining the extremist meaning. For example, while T-shirts portraying meaningless symbols by no means represent any ideology, an organized group of people wearing such T-shirts at protests reflects the contrary. Furthermore, symbols are not static. Their meanings might change over time. Thus, once innocent symbols are not automatically deprived of extremist potential.⁹ In some cases, symbols are created only to replace those whose public display is illegal. Unlike the swastika or Totenkopf, new symbols usually remain aside from the existing laws.¹⁰

What is the difference between the traditional symbols and the new ones? The answer lies in their mass production. While the former was intended merely for far-right groups to promote shared ideology, the latter is usually either co-opted or

⁷ RICHARDSON, John and WASSER, Matthias. 2020. "A Guide to Online Radical-Right Symbols, Slogans and Slurs." In: *radicalrightanalysis.com* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-24]. Retrieved from: <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CARR-A-Guide-to-Online-Radical-Right-Symbols-Slogan-and-Slurs.pdf>

⁸ MAREŠ, Miroslav. 2006. *Symboly používané extremisty na území ČR v současnosti*. Praha: Ministerstvo vnitra, pp. 3.

⁹ MILLER-IDRISS, Cynthia. 2017. *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far-Right Youth Culture in Germany*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 79-81. ISBN 9780691170206.

¹⁰ BUNDESAMT FÜR VERFASSUNGSSCHUTZ. 2018. "Right-wing extremism: Signs, symbols and banned organisations." In: *verfassungsschutz.de* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-24]. Retrieved from: https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/EN/right-wing-extremism/2018-10-right-wing-extremism-symbols-and-organisations.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=10

deliberately/accidentally adopted. Not only do both approaches guarantee less recognizability but also much easier proliferation in everyday life. This trend has also affected extremist symbols' viability due to the role of social media and several discussion fora. While some symbols become immediately popular, others do not receive the intended reaction and disappear. The internet has allowed the mass production of new, constantly developing symbols. Extremists, right-wing or left-wing, can quickly adopt symbols belonging to other countries or regions within hours without attracting public attention.¹¹

Ambiguous connotations provide far-right groups with a powerful ability to increase their visibility. As ordinary people do not necessarily connect such symbols with subversive ideology, extremists can publicly gather and identify without causing unintended public or legal responses. Furthermore, this issue might mobilize individuals who use similar symbols associated with different meanings. Such caused confusion then, to some degree, legitimizes the existence of those symbols.¹² This is the fundamental problem of research on extremist symbols that Smolík emphasizes. Indeed, there is a group of symbols that conspicuously represent right-wing extremism, such as the swastika; however, others that belong, for example, to Celtic, Viking, or Germanic mythologies are disputable as their extremist nature is not clearly articulated.¹³ Therefore, it is essential to evaluate the vast majority of symbols regarding the context in which they appear.¹⁴

The proposed definition of extremist symbols

To constitute rigorous research boundaries, the following definition of extremist symbols was formulated in respect of the literature review. Not only does the article contribute to academic knowledge, but it also derives three assessment parameters from the definition.

Extremist symbols promote anti-democratic values through which they mobilize like-minded individuals with similar subversive ideological beliefs who gather in groups that are distinguishable based on employed symbols.

Methodology

Concerning the objective to explore the extremist potential of the Gadsden flag that required a theory-driven proceeding, deductive research based on a qualitative case study was particularly appropriate. As Anderson argues, case studies allow researchers to concentrate on particular issues derived from phenomena within real-

¹¹ MILLER-IDRISS, Cynthia. 2019. What Makes a Symbol Far Right? Co-opted and Missed Meanings in Far-Right Iconography. In M. Fielitz and N. Thurston (Eds.), *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US*. pp. 123-133. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag. pp. 123-132. ISBN 978-3-8376-4670-2.

¹² BENTON, Bond and Daniela PETERKA-BENTON. 2020. "Hating in plain sight: The hatejacking of brands by extremist groups." *Public Relations Inquiry* 9, No. 1, pp. 18-22.

¹³ SMOLÍK, Josef. 2010. "Armáda České Republiky a Extremistická Symbolika – Kontext a Konsekvence." *Obrana a strategie* 10, No. 1, pp. 103.

¹⁴ ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE. 2019. Hate on Display: Hate Symbols Database. In: *adl.org* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-01]. Retrieved from: <https://www.adl.org/media/13525/download>.

life contexts.¹⁵ At the same time, Gerring perceives this research approach as an intensive study of a single case where the purpose is to shed light on a larger class of cases.¹⁶ Despite its conspicuous benefits, case studies bear several limitations that deprive them of generating theoretical value. However, as Lijphart suggests, discovered evidence indirectly contributes to theory-building due to its thorough, in-depth analysis. Of six possible case study categories: 1) atheoretical, 2) interpretative, 3) hypothesis-generating, 4) theory-confirming, 5) theory-infirming, and 6) deviant, the article adopted the interpretative approach as this particular one advocates for the explicit use of established theories to shed new light on the case rather than of improving the generalization in any way.¹⁷

Two research methods guided the article's analytical proceeding. Whereas an empirical analysis allowed rigorous observation of the Gadsden flag's development,¹⁸ a semiotic analysis instrumented the identification of its denotation and connotations.¹⁹ Both methods employed primary and secondary data, live broadcasts represented the former and books, academic articles, online materials, and videos the latter, were collected and evaluated according to three assessment parameters derived from the proposed definition of extremist symbols. They were as follows: 1) representation of anti-democratic values; 2) mobilization of like-minded individuals with similar subversive ideological beliefs; 3) distinguishability from other groups.

Despite methodological rigor, the article faced one limiting factor. The author's inability to attend selected events forced the study to rely primarily on recorded data. Had some evidence been missed, the article would omit it. Moreover, as the meanings of symbols continuously develop, the analysis focused only on the most dominant connotations. In other words, some less prevalent meanings might have been disregarded.

Analytical part

Having established the article's theoretical framework, the analytical part follows. In the next subsection, the Gadsden flag's historical development as for the evolution of diverging meanings is debated. Then, three selected far-right rallies are observed. This part concludes with a presentation of the results.

Evolution of diverging meanings

Until now, we are not entirely sure when the rattlesnake motif originated. However, a scholarly accepted consensus connects it with a simple illustration in Benjamin Franklin's essay published in 1754. The picture, which Franklin very likely

¹⁵ ANDERSON, Gary. 1998. *Fundamentals of Educational Research*. London: The Falmer Press. ISBN 0-7507-0858-1.

¹⁶ GERRING, John. 2007. *Case study research*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 20. ISBN 978-0-521-85928-8.

¹⁷ LIJPHART, Arend. 1971. "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method". *The American Political Science Review* 64, No. 3, pp. 691-692.

¹⁸ GIVEN, Lisa M. ed. 2008. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE. pp. 253. ISBN 978-1-4129-4163-1.

¹⁹ BERGER, Arthur Asa. 2018. *Media Analysis Techniques*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE. pp. 23-25. ISBN 978-1506366210.

drew, portrays a divided snake symbolizing the American colonies above the phrase 'Join, or Die.' Despite our limited knowledge about its true meaning, the image presumably endeavored to interpret the unity between the settlers facing a threat from the French and Native Americans.

As for the origin of the Gadsden flag, scholars confidently associate it with the American Revolution, during which various flags emerged. Those that depicted different kinds of rattlesnakes very likely symbolized the self-defense of the colonies against the British, as this animal is believed to strike only when attacked. Although still uncertain, the first known banner with the 'Don't Tread on Me' phrase and uncoiled rattlesnake should have been the 'Fist Navy Jack' that contained it on thirteen red and white stripes. In 1775, Christopher Gadsden²⁰ elaborated on Franklin's idea, perhaps the 'red-and-white' navy flag as well, and introduced the yellow 'Don't Tread on Me' flag. Not only was it intended for the commander-in-chief of the American Navy, but it also was the first American flag designed expressly for American naval use. Some evidence implies that Esek Hopkins may have adopted the yellow 'Don't Tread on Me' flag as his personal standard.²¹ Despite its oblivion for most of American history, the US Navy reintroduced the 'First Navy Jack' flag to celebrate the nation's bicentennial in 1976.²²

Fig. 2 - A sailor raising the 'First Navy Jack' (Faram 2019)



²⁰ A South Carolina politician and slave owner whose Gadsden's Wharf in Charleston, South Carolina, was the major slave-trading site. It is believed that as many as 40 % of the enslaved Africans arrived there. The contemporary estimations suggest that between 60 % and 80 % of today's African Americans can trace their ancestors to this place.

²¹ RANKIN, Hugh F. 1954. "The Naval Flag of the American Revolution." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 11, No. 3, pp. 342-343.

²² BRUSKI, Paul. 2021. "Yellow Gadsden flag, prominent in Capitol takeover, carries a long and shifting history". In: *theconversation.com* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-12]. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/yellow-gadsden-flag-prominent-in-capitol-takeover-carries-a-long-and-shifting-history-145142>

Like the 'First Navy Jack,' the Gadsden flag started reappearing during the previous century. However, its original naval meaning has shifted more to the far-right political spectrum since the second part of the twentieth century. Whereas the Ku Klux Klan embraced it in the late 1960s, the flag underwent a major political transformation around 2009 due to the Tea Party's growing influence. The Tea Party was a conservative political movement that emerged around 2009 due to the 2007-2008 Financial Crisis. The movement opposed suppositional excessive taxation and government intervention in the private sector and concurrently supported more robust immigration control.²³

On top of that, the association of the Gadsden flag with right-wing groups suddenly started altering the enemy's perception. While the original intent was to unite the colonies to fight the outside oppressor during the American Revolution, its heirs started perceiving the federal government in such a way around the 2010s. In other words, instead of applying the Gadsden flag against Russia or Al-Qaeda to symbolize the American people's unity and will to defend the country's values, the new adherents of the Gadsden flag suppressed this perception. Moreover, they adopted it to express their view of the federal government as an oppressive authority. Around the same time, pro-Second Amendment advocates employed the Gadsden flag's motif to protest any proposed gun control measures. To underpin the newly gained perception, one might look at the Bundy standoff in 2014.²⁴ When the incident escalated, Bundy called paramilitary militias to provide security to gathered protesters. Arriving militiamen were carrying, besides firearms, the Gadsden flags as the suppositious symbol of freedom of the people from the federal government.²⁵

²³ RAY, Michael. 2010. "Tea Party movement." In: *britannica.com* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-13]. Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tea-Party-movement>

²⁴ Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher, refused to pay a fee as a result of having his cattle grazing on federal land from 1993, when the Bureau of Land Management increased its restrictions on grazing to protect the then-endangered tortoise, to 2014 when Bundy owed \$1 million in unpaid fees and fines. Although Bundy lost several court hearings, he refused to abide. Therefore, a Nevada district court judge permanently banned Bundy's cattle from grazing there and authorized the government to confiscate the cattle. Numerous out-of-state armed groups arrived in order to support Bundy. The standoff concluded on April 12, 2014, when around 400 cattle were returned to Bundy. In: PROKOP, Andrew. 2015. "The 2014 controversy over Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, explained." In: *vox.com* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-13]. Retrieved from: <https://www.vox.com/2014/8/14/18080508/nevada-rancher-cliven-bundy-explained>

²⁵ SOTTILE, Leah. 2020. "The Gadsden flag is a symbol. But whose?" In: *hcn.org* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-12]. Retrieved from: <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.6/north-extremism-the-gadsden-flag-is-a-symbol-but-whose>

Fig. 3 - The waving Gadsden flag during the Bundy standoff (Ritter 2019)



On the contrary, the Gadsden flag's modern development cannot be only associated with right-wing groups. By the 1970s, some Libertarians perceived its meaning according to their ideological standpoints emphasizing minimal government and the rights of individuals. Despite a limited mainstream interest in the flag, Chris Whitten, a self-proclaimed representative of the broader Libertarian movement, created a website dedicated to the Gadsden flag's history. Similarly, organizers of the radical environmental group Earth First! gave speeches from Gadsden-draped stages in the 1970s.²⁶

Empirical cases of non-extremist employment

Although nobody can deny the Gadsden flag's employment by groups belonging to the American far-right, one cannot neglect its popularity as a symbol of patriotism or the legacy of the American Revolution. Therefore, the following section summarizes the non-extremist utilization of the Gadsden flag or its motif.

In 2010, Nike decided to introduce a new soccer jersey for the FIFA World Cup in South Africa. The uniform bore an acronym beneath the U.S.A. Soccer Federation crest comprised of the letters "D.T.O.M.", i.e., the 'Don't Tread on Me' phrase.²⁷ Ryan Miller, an American former ice hockey player, wore several patriotic motives on his goaltender mask, including the Uncle Sam, bald eagle, and the 'Don't Tread on Me' phrase.²⁸ Carl Edwards, an American former NASCAR driver, had a sticker portraying

²⁶ WALKER, Rob. 2016. "The Shifting Symbolism of the Gadsden Flag." In: *newyorker.com* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-14]. Retrieved from: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-shifting-symbolism-of-the-gadsden-flag>

²⁷ FLINT, Jessica. 2010. "Don't Tread on Tradition: The U.S. National Team's World Cup Jerseys, by Nike". In: *vanityfair.com* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-13]. Retrieved from: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2010/05/dont-tread-on-tradition-the-us-national-teams-world-cup-jerseys-by-nike>

²⁸ FLINT, Jessica. 2010. "Don't Tread on Ryan Miller." In: *vanityfair.com* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-13]. Retrieved from: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2010/02/dont-tread-on-ryan-miller>

the Gadsden flag on his racing car.²⁹ The logo of Philadelphia Union, an American soccer club, depicts a rattlesnake that reminds the one on the Gadsden flag. However, the club argues that it is based on Franklin's original image from the 1750s.³⁰ During a Black Lives Matter protest in Columbus, Ohio, organized in response to the death of George Floyd, a protester raised a Gadsden-like flag with a black background resembling the African American community. Another Gadsden-like variant represented the LGBTQ community as the rattlesnake was depicted on a rainbow background.³¹ Several American states allow citizens to acquire specialty license plates, including the Gadsden-like flag variant. As these license plates are subjected to extra fees, states use them to fund non-profit organizations. For example, while Florida uses the money to support the Florida Veterans Foundation,³² Kansas finances the Kansas State Rifle Association.³³ Lastly, *Assassin's Creed III*, published by Ubisoft, depicts the Gadsden flag quite often as the game is dedicated to the American Revolution.³⁴

The Gadsden flag's denotation and connotation

Several groups have employed the Gadsden flag. However, their diverging nature restrains scholars from connecting them with one ideological stream. Therefore, the following section conceptualizes its fundamental denotation upon which presents the most dominant connotations.

Denotation

The denotation of the Gadsden flag corresponds to the behavior of rattlesnakes, which supposedly strike only in self-defense. It describes a relationship between one group/entity trying to subjugate another. In other words, such reasoning applies to an individual or a group that feels endangered and will retaliate against the oppressor unless the hostility is stopped.

Connotations

Numerous individuals and groups have adopted the Gadsden flag. While some have done so to publicly express their feeling of self-preservation, others solely wanted to underpin their pride in being American. Considering this empirical evidence, at least

²⁹ NASCAR. 2015. In: *Twitter* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-13]. Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/nascar/status/641005465946734592>

³⁰ PHILADELPHIA UNION. 2022. "Club History." In: *philadelphiaunion.com* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-13]. Retrieved from: <https://www.philadelphiaunion.com/club/history>

³¹ CECIL, Owen. 2021. "The Evolving Interpretations of The Gadsden Flag." In: *go.distance.ncsu.edu* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-13]. Retrieved from: <https://go.distance.ncsu.edu/gd203/?p=60367>

³² FLORIDA VETERANS FOUNDATION. n.d. "Order Your Gadsden Flag License Plate." In: *helpflvets.org* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-14]. Retrieved from: <https://helpflvets.org/specialty-license-plate/>

³³ KANSAS STATE RIFLE ASSOCIATION. n.d. "Promote freedom on the road and make a real statement: Don't Tread on Me!". In: *kansasrifle.org* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-12]. Retrieved from: <https://kansasrifle.org/about/resources/gadsden-flag-signup/>

³⁴ DARSH DAVIS ENTERTAINMENT. In: *YouTube* [online]. May 17, 2015 [cit. 2022-04-13]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLDV5-nvxxM>

five diverging core meanings must be differentiated. First, right-wing groups express their hostile attitude toward the federal and state governments, which they portray as the oppressor of constitutional rights. Second, Libertarians employ it to advocate for maximal autonomy and political freedom. Third, African Americans, LGBTQ groups, or any other minority use the flag to promote the fight for equality in American society. Fourth, it represents one of the patriotic American symbols rooted in the American Revolution. Fifth, the weakest connotation bears the legacy of North American slavery due to Christopher Gadsden's involvement in slavery.

Unite the Right rally, the 2020 Michigan Capitol protest, and the 2021 United States Capitol attack

Knowing the contemporary development of American politics, one cannot omit the recent three events that occurred during the Trump administration. They bear crucial empirical evidence regarding the position of right-wing extremists in the United States and allow this article to measure the association of the Gadsden flag with the growing influence of far-right groups. The article does so as it recalls the case of the Confederate battle flag, which also possesses diverging meanings. Based on empirical observation, the article strives to identify what position the Gadsden flag acquired and whether its role changed as these three events differed by their nature. While Charlottesville had a neo-Confederate context, Michigan was motivated by coronavirus restrictions, and the January 6 represented a pro-Trump protest. This article can therefore analyze the employment of the Gadsden flag in three different environments. Moreover, the presence of other symbols is interpreted according to Anti-Defamation League's Hate on Display database.³⁵

Extremist symbols in Charlottesville, Virginia

As no unified footage of this event exists, six videos served the purpose to supplement the inability to collect primary data during the event in this subsection: amoeba films (2017),³⁶ Shular (2017),³⁷ National Geographic (2017),³⁸ VICE News (2017),³⁹ FRONTLINE PBS (2019),⁴⁰ and The New York Times (2017).⁴¹

One of the most violent and atrocious events in modern American history brought to Charlottesville various groups ranging from anti-Semites and white nationalists through the Ku Klux Klan to Southern separatists. They gathered to protest the

³⁵ ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE. 2019. Hate on Display: Hate Symbols Database. In: *adl.org* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-01]. Retrieved from: <https://www.adl.org/media/13525/download>

³⁶ AMOEBA FILMS. In: *YouTube* [online]. August 13, 2017 [cit. 2022-04-15]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aZNG9uUQwA>

³⁷ SHULAR, Daniel. In: *YouTube* [online]. August 16, 2017 [cit. 2022-04-15]. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_fSIO9Je6g

³⁸ SHULAR, Daniel. In: *YouTube* [online]. August 16, 2017 [cit. 2022-04-15]. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_fSIO9Je6g

³⁹ VICE News. In: *YouTube* [online]. August 15, 2017. [cit. 2022-04-15]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P54sP0Nlmg>

⁴⁰ FRONTLINE PBS. In: *YouTube* [online]. August 12, 2019. [cit. 2022-04-15]. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPLvWO_SOgM

⁴¹ THE NEW YORK TIMES. In: *YouTube* [online]. August 16, 2017. [cit. 2022-04-15]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJ7CYH9tabl>

intended removal of the statue dedicated to Robert E. Lee, a general of the Confederate Army. Despite this initial objective, the two-day-long event erupted into a presentation of racial rhetoric that was irrelevant to the statue in many parts. Moreover, the violent scimmages claimed one life.⁴²

Various far-right symbols were displayed during the rally from which the article derives three categories according to their significance. Among the most dominant symbols were: the Confederate battle flag, the League of the South flag, the Vanguard America logo, and the League of the South's black cross depicted on a white background. Various forms of Fasces and the Black Suns constituted a moderate category as these symbols were present but supplemented the first group. The remaining symbols, such as the Gadsden flag, Identitarian lambda, Identity Europe, the Ku Klux Klan motifs, and the Detroit Red Wings logo, were among the least visible ones. Although their role can by no means be considered less important, other symbols overshadowed them. It appears that the latter group was present due to the initiative of individuals who strove to express their personal beliefs and attachment to those symbols rather than a group affiliation.

Extremist symbols in Lansing, Michigan

The United States witnessed several anti-Covid-19 protests during the pandemic. Although the article might have selected a different case, the Lansing one was picked because armed protesters breached the Michigan State Capitol building during its course. To adequately cover the rally organized on April 30, 2020, the analysis adopted the following videos: Hendrickson (2020),⁴³ WOOD TV8 (2020),⁴⁴ and MLive (2020).⁴⁵

The protest reacted to the introduction of new preventive measures in Michigan to decelerate the spread of Covid-19. Although the rally was relatively small, five symbols dominated it. First, the American flag, the Gadsden flag, and various pro-Trump banners were the most prevalent. Second, anti-pandemic slogans and several kinds of paramilitary militias' insignias constituted a supportive category of symbols. Judging by the empirical evidence derived from the presence of paramilitary militias and displayed banners, the Gadsden flag clearly represented anti-government sentiment. In other words, the people employed it to express 'the will of jeopardized citizens' who opposed the new preventive measures that, in their view, were intended to infringe on their constitutional rights.

⁴² KATZ, Andrew. 2017. "Unrest in Virginia." In: *time.com* [online]. [cit. 2022-04-15]. Retrieved from: <https://time.com/charlottesville-white-nationalist-rally-clashes/>

⁴³ HENDRICKSON, Pete. In: *YouTube* [online]. April 30, 2020 [cit. 2022-04-24]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3TkjJ50GS4>

⁴⁴ WOOD TV8. In: *YouTube* [online]. April 30, 2020 [cit. 2022-04-24]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEh3y0KebDY>

⁴⁵ MLIVE. In: *YouTube* [online]. April 30, 2020 [cit. 2022-04-24]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbpKnWxMhyg>

Fig. 4 - The Gadsden flag during the Michigan protest on April 30, 2020 (MLive 2020)



Extremist symbols during the 'Stop the Steal' rally on January 6, 2021

To supplement the inability to observe the January 6 insurrection firsthand, the analysis adopted a live stream broadcast by the Washington Post.⁴⁶ In this subsection, the article endeavors to achieve two objectives. It endeavors to prove the Gadsden flag's presence at the protest and analyze whether its prevalence increased compared with the 'Unite the Right' rally. The article does so because different ideological narratives framed the 'Unite the Right' rally's contextual background as the January 6 protest leaned more toward the Michigan protest. The Gadsden flag's anti-government extremist potential would be significantly weakened if such evidence was not discovered.

The twelve-hour-long footage indicates the presence of various symbols and flags. Of them, three represented the most prominent ones if compared with others. Besides the American flags, multiple variants of pro-Trump/MAGA banners and the Gadsden flags were the most dominant symbols under which protesters gathered. Other symbols, such as the Kek, America First, or 'Come and Take It' flags, played a subordinate role. On the contrary, one cannot confidently distinguish which groups particular protesters belonged to. Whether paramilitary militias, pro-Trump supporters, or QAnon. Although it is possible to link them through anti-government sentiment, this connection seems rather weak. However, the Gadsden flags' role during the protest can be confidently interpreted as the expression of the striking federal government that attacks the jeopardized protesters. One may draw a parallel with the Bundy standoff, during which a federal agency, the Bureau of Land Management, also represented the oppressor in the view of protesters. At the same time, the ranchers were considered the victims.

⁴⁶ THE WASHINGTON POST. In: *YouTube* [online]. January 6, 2021 [cit. 2022-04-15]. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_EQfUbe4bL8

Fig. 5 - A group of protesters in front of the Capitol building on January 6, 2021 (The Washington Post 2021)



Comparison of the Gadsden flag's role in the selected events

After observing the Gadsden flag's role at the events, it can be associated with two different positions. Whereas the flag played merely a subordinate role to neo-Confederate symbols during the 'Unite the Right' rally, it belonged among the most dominant symbols during the Michigan and January 6 protests. Nevertheless, one cannot rush to quick conclusions, as contextual backgrounds must be considered. It is essential to remember that the rally in Charlottesville was motivated by the controversy connected with Robert E. Lee's statue. Therefore, it is plausible to suppose that the event's nature attracted neo-Confederates more. Anti-government groups might have also been present as several right-wing extremists, such as neo-Nazis or white supremacists, successfully exploited the event to their manifestation. On the contrary, the Michigan and 'Stop the Steal' protests were fueled by anti-government sentiment mixed with pro-Trump advocacy that portrayed the federal and state governments as the oppressor of constitutional rights. To expect the Confederate battle flag or the League of the South flag in Lansing or Washington, D.C., would have been unreasonable as no Confederate topic was involved in both events.

Results

As noted above, the article derived three assessment parameters from the proposed definition of extremist symbols. The following section evaluates each assessment parameter individually based on the empirical evidence.

The first parameter

Positive assessment. Despite its neutral historical development and non-extremist employment as for a patriotic symbol, the Michigan and 'Stop the Steal' protests indicated the Gadsden flag's increased diversion to anti-government ideology. Not only was the flag present at those protests, but it also conspicuously represented

a symbol under which people gathered. At the same time, people expressed their subversive standpoints regarding the legitimacy of federal and state governments through the Gadsden flag. Moreover, its resurrection bound to the Ku Klux Klan and Tea Party had initiated the growing influence of its far-right connotation that portrays the federal and state governments as the oppressor, unlike the original one that perceived belligerent states in such a way. Furthermore, the Gadsden flag might be associated with the legacy of Northern American slavery as, by its very nature, it bears the life story of Christopher Gadsden, one of the most influential enslavers.

The second parameter

Neutral assessment. Indeed, the Gadsden flag may mobilize individuals with similar subversive ideological beliefs primarily from the anti-government spectrum; however, non-extremist Americans simultaneously use it to express patriotic feelings. Moreover, not only is the flag widely adopted across the United States, but several American states also offer Gadsden-like license plates, Philadelphia Union designed Franklin’s snake image into its logo, and athletes have competed with the ‘Don’t Tread on Me’ phrase on jerseys as a symbol of dauntlessness. Hence, these contrary factors restrained the article from a positive evaluation.

The third parameter

Negative assessment. Regardless of the Gadsden flag’s strengthened anti-government connotation, it cannot differentiate one group from another without the presence of other extremist symbols. Pro-Trump banners, paramilitary insignias, the Confederate battle flags, or Fasces provide such extremist support, for example. Unlike the swastika or Totenkopf, the Gadsden flag does not have such power.

Table 1 - Results of the analysis

Parameter	Evaluation
<i>Representation of anti-democratic values</i>	+
<i>Mobilization of like-minded individuals with similar subversive ideological beliefs</i>	neutral
<i>Distinguishability from other groups</i>	-

Discussion

Unlike other symbols whose extremist meaning is clearly articulated, the Gadsden flag’s position is less straightforward. Although its anti-democratic connotation mobilizes like-minded individuals with similar subversive ideological beliefs, the flag’s employment is not significant enough to instantly associate an individual/a group with right-wing extremism. It concurrently does not differentiate one group from another. Therefore, this article argues that the Gadsden flag’s position among far-right symbols is supplemental to answer the first research question. In other words, if anti-governmentalists, Libertarians, and patriotic Americans stood next to each other, one would not be able to recognize who is an extremist. The presence of other far-right symbols, such as MAGA banners or the Confederate battle flag, is necessary to consider the Gadsden flag an extremist symbol persuasively.

Fig. 6 - An example of the Gadsden flag as an extremist symbol (Crider 2017)



At least five significant connotations have developed around the Gadsden flag; however, two currently possess the strongest position among others: the patriotic and anti-government ones. While the former is connected with the legacy of the American Revolution and everyday Americans use the flag to express their belonging to the United States of America, the latter has developed since its resurrection in the mid-twentieth century. A closer look at the events of the 2010s and 2020s consolidated the anti-government connotation even more. Therefore, to answer the second research question, the Gadsden flag's contemporary meaning should be primarily connected with either non-extremist Americans who solely express their patriotism or extremist anti-government groups, such as the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, American Patriot Vanguard, or Sovereign Citizens.

Another problematic issue is connected with the life story of Christopher Gadsden, a prominent enslaver. Although this connotation has not been exploited yet, it should not be omitted, as right-wing extremists could do so in the future. The Gadsden flag could follow the Confederate battle flag's storyline and potentially play an important role among white supremacists.

Having said that, security experts must always thoroughly analyze the Gadsden flag's contextual employment. While people driving cars with Gadsden-like license plates or athletes competing with the 'Don't Tread on Me' phrase on jerseys are by no means extremists, other utilizations must undergo a rigorous analysis of its employment, especially when it comes to rallies or protests. To conclude this section, the article strongly discourages Europeans from using the Gadsden flag. Because the flag is by no means connected with European history, its utilization in any European state should always be considered extremist in respect of the American anti-government connotation.

Conclusion

The relationship between people and symbols has not changed; the twenty-first century is no exception. Presumably, it is quite the reverse. While symbols of the past must have undergone a very long process before being recognized and accepted among extremists, modern technology interrupted this process and made it much easier. Online fora and social media have produced many, at first glance, innocent symbols or memes that were later adopted or co-opted by right-wing extremists who successfully obscured their inflammatory views behind yet unrecognized objects. Moreover, the internet allows agile adaptation of symbols that belong to different regions. Thanks to this ability, these symbols can be publicly displayed; therefore, right-wing extremists can bypass the existing laws. Thus, American and European researchers must continuously study newly appearing symbols to prevent the public presentation of subversive standpoints without noticing in respect of the transnational form of contemporary right-wing extremism.

However, this reality should not compel our attention solely to new symbols. As the case of the Gadsden flag indicates, historically neutral symbols can resurrect and tilt to either part of the political spectrum. Multiple connotations can deprive observers of an immediate assessment of their extremist potential. After all, even the swastika had been innocent until the early twentieth century.

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Fig. 4 - The Gadsden flag during the Michigan protest on April 30, 2020

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Fig. 5 - A group of protesters in front of the Capitol building on January 6, 2021

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Fig. 6 - An example of the Gadsden flag as an extremist symbol

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