

Where they belong

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [February 2, 2000](#) issue

The four front-runners for the presidency are following what has become a political pattern: candor when there are no votes to be lost, extreme caution when votes are at risk. This pattern of choosing expediency over courage is in plain view in the current debate over a Confederate flag and a Cuban child. The two issues have an obvious solution—send them back where they belong. When politicians avoid that solution with double-talk, it is an embarrassment to democracy.

The Confederate battle flag—which is not the flag of the Confederacy—was placed on the dome of the state capitol in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1962 as a symbolic statement of defiance during the civil rights struggle. The flag was not raised to honor the Confederacy nor to remember those who died in its defense. It is now an ugly reminder of a time when racial strife divided the nation.

Democratic candidates Al Gore and Bill Bradley have spoken forcefully in favor of removing the flag, but as columnist Steve Chapman writes:

This firm position requires no moral vision or courage on the part of the Democrats. As they compete for the favor of their most loyal bloc, they have no choice but to repudiate what blacks see as a symbol of hate. Bradley and Gore don't have to worry about writing off South Carolina in November because they have already written it off. No Democrat has carried the state since Jimmy Carter in 1976.

The two chief Republicans in contention for the nomination have run for cover on the flag issue, claiming that the state has the right to make its own determination (George Bush) or the right to honor the flag as part of the state's heritage (John McCain); neither answer represents a profile in courage for a potential president.

William Buckley, who is supporting Texas governor George W. Bush, suggests that the legislators who hoisted the Dixie flag were provoked not by the memory of the War Between the States, but by the Supreme Court and the Congress. The South Carolinians were protesting the civil rights activity that began with the 1954 *Brown v*

. *Board of Education* decision outlawing segregated schools.

In his recent State of the State address, South Carolina Governor Jim Hodges called for what is essentially a compromise position by saying that it is time to “move the flag from the dome [of the capitol] to a place of historical significance on the Statehouse grounds.” That is still not enough. The flag had its origins in the Civil War but is now recalled as a symbol of 20th-century segregation. The place for a flag that has been made a symbol of segregation is neither on the dome of the state capitol nor on the grounds of the capitol; its place is back in the history books.

In the case of Elián González, the six-year-old Cuban boy who is caught in a legal battle to determine whether he stays in the U.S. or is returned to his father in Cuba, the two Democratic candidates have joined the Republicans in sacrificing principle to political pragmatism. They are waffling on the issue because Florida and New Jersey are important election states with strong Cuban-American voting blocs. They qualify their answers, in spite of the fact that, as *Newsweek* observes: “If Elián had wandered across the U.S. border from Canada or Mexico, he would have been sent right back to his sole surviving parent.”

The candidates are giving pragmatism a bad name. James McGregor Burns and coauthors explain what we’ve lost in the recently published book *Dead Center*:

Today’s “pragmatism” is not an ethical test of political leadership—it is merely winning votes in the next election. Almost anything legal—and much that borders on the illegal—is justified as the “practical” thing to do. But the pragmatists ignore broader and more long-run aspects of elections. How is the contest being waged? What broader stakes than winning are involved? How will defeat or victory impact the future? Winning elections obviously calls for practicality—but what about the role of vision and idealism?