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Civil liberties of Ole Miss students

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OPINION

Civil liberties of Ole Miss students may be violated by flag display ban

■ Government must not censor neighbors by telling them what they can wear or say or display.

While many Ole Miss friends and alumni are concerned about possible changes in traditional university symbols, such as "Colonel Reb," *Dixie* and even the name Ole Miss, a new ruling in the final stages of approval may pose a significant threat to the civil liberties of Ole Miss students.

That edict, already applied to university dormitories, is ostensibly aimed at achieving "a uniform and attractive appearance" in the windows of privately owned fraternities and sorority houses but actually results in a ban on the American flag, the state flag and the Confederate flag.

One Ole Miss administrator tells me this policy outlaws all "pennants, flags,



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Guest columnist

banners, posters, signs or any other items" in order to get at the Confederate battle flag, which "offends some students." Officials there are also exploring ways to bar the use by fans of small Confederate flags at sporting events.

It is true, there are some of our fellow citizens who are so offended by the U.S. flag they like to burn it, by the state flag, which contains within it the Confederate battle flag, by the Christian cross, by the Star of

David, and they want to remove some or all of these objects from sight wherever possible. These symbols have all been abused and misused by various extremist organizations over the years, but that is not a sufficient reason for outlawing them.

There is no reason why any of us, individuals or groups, should be able to use the force of government of its institutions to censor our neighbors by telling them what they can wear or say or display. Even though it may irritate or offend or even outrage us, we have to be mature enough to live with dissent if we expect our own liberties to be protected. We must defend the right of others to be wrong.

If the authorities at Ole Miss no longer wish the Rebel flag or the song *Dixie* to be emblematic of their university, that is their business. They can fight that out with their alumni. But when they invade

the privacy of residence, outlaw the flag of our nation, our state and our former nation as being "offensive objects" which must not be seen, even through a window, they have gone too far.

What we need on our campuses and elsewhere is more respect for diversity, a diversity which respects the right of people to be different, to say and write and display things which others may dislike. Intolerance for and legal prohibitions against the political, religious, ethnic, and social symbols that some hold dear and others reject is not the answer.

Our civil liberties — even those of college students — are too important to be left to the whims of university administrators. For relief from this transgression, it would be refreshing to see the ACLU intervene. Having defended the right to burn flags, this would be a good occasion for them to

defend the right to display them.

But an even better solution would be legislative action which would apply not only to one errant university but to all of them and more. Let us hope that someone either in this session of the state Legislature or the next will introduce and see to enactment a bill which would state something like the following: "The right to display the U.S. flag or the flag of the state of Mississippi, or any portion thereof, on property owned by the state of Mississippi or its political subdivisions, or their institutions, agencies, or instrumentalities, shall not be abridged."

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David Bowen is a former member of Congress, who represented Mississippi's 2nd Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. He now lives in Jackson.