The Final Refrains of 'Dixie': Ole Miss sent its sons off to war in 1861, then waged a civil righ...
BY KEVIN SACK
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The Final Refrains of 'Dixie'

Ole Miss sent its sons off to war in 1861, then waged a civil rights battle of its own a century later. Now, in its 150th year, the university is beginning to shed its image as the last bastion of the Confederacy.

BY KEVIN SACK

OXFORD, MISS.

NOT SO LONG AGO, IT WOULD have been considered an act of cultural treason: Allison Grisham, a white sorority sister at the University of Mississippi, stood onstage at Fulton Chapel and explained to a hushed crowd why it was so important for students and alumni at football games to stop waving the Confederate battle flag and singing "Dixie."

Standing beside her good friend Jada Love, who is black, Ms. Grisham told a forum sponsored by President Clinton's advisory board on race that she understood that many students regarded the rituals as a demonstration of school spirit, inherited from red-sweatered parents on family pilgrimages to Oxford.

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Rollin Riggs for The New York Times

August 1998 *Robert C. Khayat, chancellor of the University of Mississippi, is working to change his alma mater's "Lost Cause" image.*

But, she argued, those days have passed.

"The need of the university to be welcoming to all students far outweighs the perceived tradition of the controversial flag and song," she declared.

The crowd's ovation, the most enthusiastic of that March night, accelerated quickly to a crescendo, no one applauding more admiringly than Chancellor Robert C. Khayat, the man who has made it his mission to change the hidebound image of Ole Miss. With Ms. Grisham and Ms. Love side by side, here was the embodiment of the university of his aspirations, a place where a fresh breeze of civility might finally cut through the fog of stale tear gas and defiance.

Still, the old Ole Miss lingered in the audience. Before long, a man from DeSoto County, Bryant Walker, rose to declare, "It's my freedom to fly that flag." He then suggested that the university was suppressing its symbols only to recruit black football players. "I'll tell you one thing," Mr. Walker concluded, "before it comes to me losing a flag that I believe in, I'll lose football games."

The Faulknerian tension between past and present never eases for long at Ole Miss, a university that sent its sons off to war in 1861 and then waged a civil rights battle of its own a century later.

The cemetery behind the basketball arena holds hundreds of Confederate dead from the days when classrooms were converted into hospital wards for the wounded from Shiloh. Nearby, the columned administration building, known as the Lyceum, is still pocked with bullet holes from the riot that greeted the court-ordered arrival of the first black student, James H. Meredith, in 1962.

Many white Mississippians have long venerated the University of Mississippi as sacred space. But nationally, because of its violent resistance to desegregation and the suppression of academic freedom that followed it, the school has been regarded by many as a place where scholarship seemed secondary to the preservation of a bygone culture.

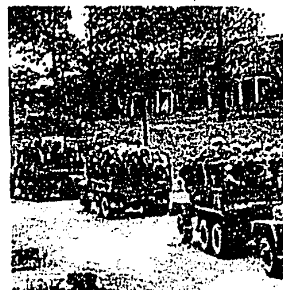
Since taking office three years ago, Dr. Khayat (pronounced KI-yat) has shown fierce determination to change all that. In a turnabout worthy of Nixon to China, Dr. Khayat, a former Ole Miss student, football hero and law professor, has effectively staked his legacy on recasting the school's image by aggressively confronting its shortcomings, both real and perceived.

It is no accident that Dr. Khayat, 60, explains his goal for Ole Miss as a dual one: "To be — and to be perceived as — a great public university." Image, Dr. Khayat understands, is a university's most precious asset. When it gleams like a gilded dome, a school sells itself effortlessly, whether its reputation is deserved or not. Conversely, when a school's image is tarnished, it is doubly hard to attract top students, star faculty, alumni support and research grants, no matter how outdated the perception.

In the academy, perhaps more than in any other realm, perception often lags reality by decades. And nowhere has that phenomenon been more crippling than at Ole Miss, which has struggled for decades to claw its way out of the disastrous public relations hole it dug for itself in the early 1960's.

"Ole Miss is not the national repository of racial guilt," Dr. Khayat said, "and we are not the last bastion of the Confederacy. We lived through the Civil War and we lived through the civil rights movement, and the university was significant in each of those. But this is 1998. We are a fully integrated, open, caring, nurturing, vital community, and I am ready for the rest of the country to understand that that's where we are."

This, of course, is why Dr. Khayat invited the President's advisory board to Oxford in the first place, to demonstrate that it was now possible to have an open conversation about race at Ole Miss. But that evening, like other recent events, also made it clear that change does not come without challenge in a place where history resonates so strongly. Last year, for instance, when Dr. Khayat broached even the possibility of examining the university's remaining Old South symbols, including the flag, he received hate mail so virulent that the university tightened security around his house.



United Press International

Sept. 30, 1962 *A campus riot protesting integration left two dead and prompted President Kennedy to send in nearly 30,000 Federal troops.*

Still, in this, the university's sesquicentennial year, there are signs of progress. Most visibly, and perhaps most remarkably, the Confederate flags have virtually disappeared from Vaught-Hemingway Stadium on football Saturdays, the result of repeated efforts by the administration, the coaches and the student government. Grandstands that once swirled with Rebel flags, even as dozens of black players took the field, are now largely an impressionist blur of red-and-white pompoms.

Less evident, but perhaps more significant in the long term, are Dr. Khayat's notable fund-raising successes and the gradual improvement in the university's persistently mediocre academic standing. But even with the improvement, Ole Miss remains well behind other Southern universities in critical areas, like faculty salaries, research grants and number of library volumes. Yet its forward momentum, however tentative, may prove the best cure for the university's reputation as a static, backward-looking place.

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1848 *The university's first building, the Lyceum. It is now pocked with bullet holes from the riot after the court-ordered arrival of the first black student, James H. Meredith, in 1962.*

"Chancellor Khayat's great goal is to free the University of Mississippi from these negative images," said David G. Sansing, an Ole Miss historian and the author of the university's sesquicentennial history. "And he feels that if you can maximize the positive images of this institution, the negative images will take care of themselves."

TO MOST OF THE 255 COLLEGES AND UNIVERsities with chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, the honor society's presence on campus is so taken for granted that it hardly merits mention. That is what makes its absence so hurtful — humiliating, really — to the handful of flagship universities where the quality of undergraduate liberal arts education is not deemed high enough to rate membership in the club.

Dr. Khayat has made it his obsession to win a Phi Beta Kappa chapter for Ole Miss, which shares its ignominy with the universities of Alaska, Montana and Nevada. Success, he said, would help Ole Miss overcome an inferi-

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Sept. 19, 1962 *An amended sign a few days before Mr. Meredith arrived at the university, left. The word "white" was later removed.*

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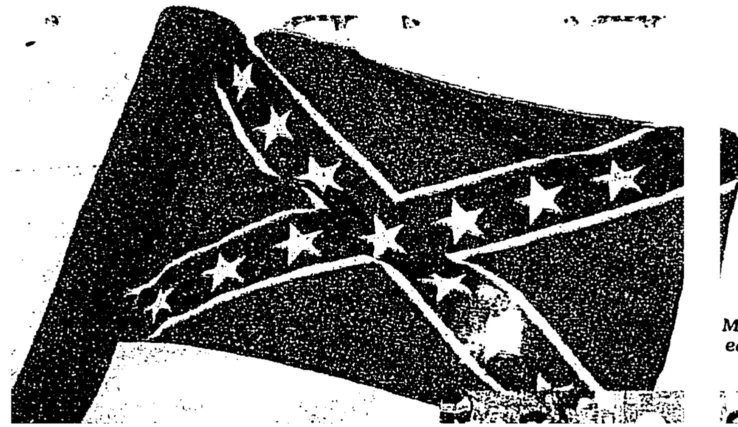

Sept. 30, 1962 *Mr. Meredith being escorted onto the campus by Federal marshals.*

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Rollin Riggs for The New York Times

Sept. 12, 1998 *Though the school's Confederate relics are fading, old symbols die hard.*

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University of Mississippi

1889 *The University Greys, a campus Confederate unit, are honored by stained-glass depictions in Ventress Hall, built just after the Civil War.*

ority complex that he said seems native to all Mississippians. "As our self-perception changes," he said, "then the external perception will change as well."

When Phi Beta Kappa denied the University of Mississippi's membership application in the mid-80's, it cited the school's substandard libraries and laboratories and its inability to attract and challenge the brightest students.

But that was then. Although the honor society's officials will not formally visit the campus until next spring, its executive secretary, Douglas W. Foard, already offers a complimentary assessment. "In all cases, images lag," he said, "and there's still a lot of that old mint julep image left. But my sense is that it's a much improved academic institution, that it's no longer a Southern party school, that it's a much more serious place for students to study and for faculty to do research and teach."

Phi Beta Kappa's judgment will provide only one gauge of progress. With other yardsticks, the university's standing depends on whether it is measured against its past or against its peers. Compared with the Ole Miss of a decade ago, it is a more diverse, more selective and more rigorous school. But compared with the prestigious state schools that Dr. Khayat hopes to compete with someday, like the universities of Michigan, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia, it has a distance to travel.

Research funding at Ole Miss, for instance, has grown to $20.5 million this year, from $13 million in 1989. But that sum pales when compared with other flagship schools: the University of Georgia, for example, reports $209 million in annual research funds.

In each of the last three years, Ole Miss has broken its previous record for the average A.C.T. score of its entering freshmen. This year, that score has increased to

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Rollin Riggs for The New York Times

The pompom squad at Ole Miss is called the Rebelettes; Colonel Reb, a university symbol, still appears at tailgate parties.

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23.44 (out of a possible 36), from 22.21 in 1990. Its scores now are comparable to those reported by the University of Alabama, the University of Arkansas and Louisiana State University, but are well behind those of other Southern schools, like the University of Florida and the University of North Carolina. And faculty members complain that many students are ill prepared, particularly in their writing and analytical skills, shortcomings they attribute to the poor quality of Mississippi's public schools.

In a state that is 36 percent black, the number of black students is only 11.4 percent of the total enrollment of 10,731 students, but that represents an increase of nearly 50 percent in the last 10 years. A new honors college has helped to attract bright students of all races who might not otherwise have considered Ole Miss.

One of them, Markeeva A. Morgan, a black sophomore from Strayhorn, Miss., said he chose Ole Miss over Harvard and the University of California because of its nurturing environment. "Looking at pure academics," he said, "I don't think I could justifiably compare Ole Miss to the other two. But when I compared the personal atmosphere as well as the intellectual rigor, there was no comparison. I was determined to go to a university where I wasn't a number. There's a genuine interest in the administration and the professors to see a student excel."

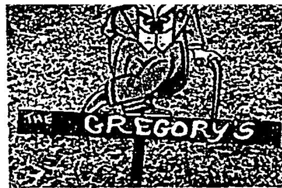
Like students at many colleges, those at Ole Miss tend to segregate in dining halls and at parties. But a new biracial group of university students is addressing questions of race and diversity, and students have also formed a foundation to raise $150,000 to commission a civil rights memorial for the campus. They have raised about a third of that sum in three years.

Perhaps the most challenging issue remains the recruitment of black faculty, currently 6 percent of the total. The school's respected Center for the Study of Southern Culture, for all its research on the blues and other aspects of African-American heritage, has never employed a black professor. Natashia S. Gregoire, a black senior who is editor of the student newspaper, said she had yet to take a class taught by a black faculty member.

But Ole Miss still has done better than many of its peers. And one of its faculty appointments speaks volumes in symbolism. Donald R. Cole, one of seven black students who were expelled after a racial protest in Fulton Chapel in 1970, is now the associate dean of the graduate school.

Clearly, though, the university's image has hindered recruitment of black faculty, just as it has limited its appeal to black athletes. Tommy Tuberville, the football coach, and Rod Barnes, the basketball coach, maintain that they lose recruits because rivals play the race card against Ole Miss. Dr. Cole said the same holds true in the competition for black professors.

"With faculty that are highly sought," he said, "other universities will use our past against us. I often think about whether we



can get on the fast track out, or do we just throw up our hands and say it's hopeless."

JANICE W. MURRAY, A black New Yorker, remembers the puzzled looks she got last year when she decided to leave Yale to become chairman of the art department at Ole Miss. "People would say, 'What's wrong with you? Are you running away from something?" she said with a chuckle.

But after a year, Ms. Murray is charmed by Faulkner's hometown, with its endearing courthouse square. She likes her colleagues and admires her students and their manners. "I probably heard more 'thank you's' in the first week here than I heard in 10 years," she said.

And she quickly became captivated by the university's history. She fell hard for the story of the University Greys, a company of young students who marched off to protect the Confederacy in 1861, only 13 years after the university opened its doors. Almost all were killed or wounded, many during Pickett's charge at Gettysburg.

As she told the tale over dinner in a crowded restaurant one night this fall, she began dabbing her eyes with her napkin. "They almost all died," she said.

That a black woman could shed tears over Confederate dead seems incongruous on a campus whose history has so mirrored

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the racial conflicts of the South. By the 1950's, even as integrationist movements were gaining strength elsewhere, the imagery of the Lost Cause had been thoroughly woven into the fabric of the university, according to Dr. Sansing. It had adopted the nickname Ole Miss, a phrase once used by slaves to refer to the mistress of the plantation. Its athletic teams bore the name Rebels, as they still do today. Its hallowed shrines included the Confederate cemetery, a monument to the Confederate dead and a stained-glass window that paid tribute to the Greys.

In 1948, the same year that the segregationist Dixiecrats revived the use of the Confederate flag, the Ole Miss band began to play "Dixie" and unfurl an enormous battle flag as part of its halftime routine. In 1950, students inaugurated "Dixie Week," which featured a ceremonial reading of the Ordinance of Secession and the auctioning of cheerleaders as slaves.

Then, in the autumn of 1962, under Federal court order, Mr. Meredith became the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi. His arrival on campus was greeted with a riot that became a seminal moment in the civil rights movement, prompting President Kennedy to send in nearly 30,000 Federal troops. The rioting left two people dead, hundreds injured and hundreds more arrested.

Making matters worse, the desegregation of the campus was followed by intermittent purges of faculty members judged to be too liberal on race. An exhibition by Ray Kerciu, an art professor, was ordered removed after complaints that his paintings degraded the Confederate flag. Robert Farley, a law school dean who was considered an integrationist, was forced to retire. James Silver, a prominent historian, left under fire after arguing that Mississippi had become a totalitarian society.

In 1983, as black students and faculty became more integrated into campus life, the university officially dissociated itself from the Rebel flag, meaning that it would no longer be carried by cheerleaders or sold in university bookstores. But some students and fans continued to wave the flag in the stands and to display it proudly in the Grove, the lovely oak-filled green where lavish pregame picnics are held. And each time the university seemed poised to move forward, some embarrassing event always managed to pull it back.

In 1988, for instance, the first black fraternity house being built on Fraternity Row was torched in an unsolved case of arson. (White fraternities helped raise the money needed to rebuild.) A year later, some white fraternity pledges kidnapped a white upperclassman and left him naked at Rust College, a predominantly black school nearby, with racial epithets scrawled on his chest. After the incident, the fraternity was disbanded, and a number of students were disciplined.

IF ANYONE CAN MAKE THE case that Ole Miss must change, the university's loyalists say, it is Robert Khayat. He is, after all, one of them.

Born in Moss Point near the Mississippi coast, Dr. Khayat was an all-conference baseball player at Ole Miss. He also led the nation in scoring as the football team's place-kicker in 1958 and 1959, and then played for the Washington Redskins for four years. He returned to Ole Miss for law school, then later taught and served as associate dean there. As a professor, he earned a reputation for prescience when he returned an examination to a student named John Grisham with the comment, "Although you missed most of the legal issues, you have a real talent for fiction."

As chancellor, he exudes the courtliness and amiability of a small-town lawyer. He picks up litter on morning jogs through the campus and brakes his Jeep to chat with students. Freshmen get the sweats when his secretary summons them to his office, only to discover that he simply wants to see how they are enjoying the place. He has personally made 30 recruiting trips to predominantly black high schools.

Alumni have responded enthusiastically to his vision for the school. Not accounting for inflation, he has raised more money during his tenure than all of his predecessors combined, according to school records. The university's endowment has nearly doubled to $204 million. Large private gifts have financed the honors college, an international studies institute and salary increases for liberal arts professors. The compact campus is bustling with construction, including the $20 million first phase of a new performing arts center.

Dr. Khayat has attacked the university's image as a party school by pushing fraternity and sorority rush from the first week of fall term to the sixth week. He has insisted that the university library remain open 24 hours a day and has redesigned course schedules so that more students have classes on Fridays, undercutting their tendency to begin weekends on Thursday nights.

After deciding to attack his university's image problem when he took over in 1995, Dr. Khayat turned for help to Harold Burson, an Ole Miss alumnus and the chairman of Burson-Marstellar, the world's largest public relations firm.

"Robert called me up and said, 'We're going after a Phi Beta Kappa chapter,'" Mr. Burson said, "'and I'm just concerned that the one thing that could knock us down is the perception that we're a racist school.' He said, 'I'd really like to change that, but I'm not sure how to go about it.' "

They decided to start with a national opinion survey, but in announcing it last year, both Mr. Khayat and Mr. Burson made it clear that the assessment might raise questions about the university's remaining Old South symbols, including the continued use of the Confederate flag, the name Ole Miss, the nickname Rebels, campus street names, like Confederate Drive, and the white-haired mascot, Colonel Reb.

A backlash swelled quickly. Students formed groups dedicated to

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Refrains Of 'Dixie'

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the preservation of Ole Miss traditions. Letter writers, egged on by the Sons of Confederate Veterans, scorched Dr. Khayat in Mississippi newspapers and in messages sent to the university.

It quickly became apparent that Dr. Khayat would have to moderate his approach to avoid a self-immolating firestorm.

At the same time, somewhat surprisingly, in Mr. Burson's survey relatively few people raised the issue of the symbols at all, and race relations was mentioned even less frequently as a liability than the university's reputation as a party school. The larger problem, Mr. Burson asserted, was not that Ole Miss had a negative image, but that it had little image at all.

Dr. Khayat used Mr. Burson's findings to downplay the need to move aggressively against the symbols. It fell to the student government to pass a resolution last fall encouraging students to leave their Confederate flags at home on game days. The athletic department helped by banning flag sticks in the stadium because they posed a safety hazard. (Banning the flag, it was thought, would violate free-speech protections.)

For the most part, the flags have disappeared. But a small number of students have responded by outfitting themselves in Confederate-flag skirts on game days. And a few alumni still place statuettes of Robert E. Lee on their brunch tables in the Grove, a bastion that remains so white on football Saturdays that some black students and faculty refuse to traverse it.

Some faculty members criticize Dr. Khayat for backing away from a confrontation over the symbols after gauging the resistance.

"The feeling of many faculty here was that he raised the issue in dramatic fashion, and that was important," said Charles Reagan Wilson, the director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. "But he got so much criticism from people outside the university, these neo-Confederates out there, that he really felt the force of that."

But others, including some black professors, say Dr. Khayat had wisely concluded that his other ambitions for Ole Miss would be threatened by a fight to the death over the university's symbols, and that such a confrontation might harm the university's image more than improve it.

"You can't be a lightning rod if you want to stay," said Ms. Murray, the art department chairman. "And if you've got goals for this place, you've got to be here." ■

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