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COMMUNICATION CRISIS ON CAMPUS: THE PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND RESULTS OF MISSISSIPPI'S LEADING UNIVERSITIES IN RESPONSE TO THE STATE FLAG DEBATE, 2015-2020

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COMMUNICATION CRISIS ON CAMPUS: THE PUBLIC RELATIONS
STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND RESULTS OF MISSISSIPPI'S LEADING
UNIVERSITIES IN RESPONSE TO THE STATE FLAG DEBATE, 2015-2020

by

James Coll

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School,
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and the School of Communication
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation utilizes W.T. Coombs's Strategic Crisis Communication Theory to examine the public relations strategies and effectiveness of Mississippi's three largest public universities, the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi, related to the historic decision to retire the state of Mississippi's flag in 2020. Facing significant reputational threat and public pressure from students and faculty, the universities became public advocates for a new state flag in 2015 and 2016, when each chose to refrain from flying the flag—a flag that featured the Confederate battle emblem for more than 100 years—on its campuses. The universities then became a pivotal force for legislative action in favor of a new flag in 2020, when the universities' affiliated athletics organizations—the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Southeastern Conference, and Conference USA—all threatened to withhold postseason play from the state, a decision that would have resulted in millions of dollars in associated, positive economic impact lost by Mississippi (Scarborough, 2020). That year, the university institutional executive officers, along with athletics administrators and coaches, lobbied lawmakers at the State Capitol in the week leading up to a historic vote for a new flag by state legislators (Kenney, 2020).

In conducting this case study, the researcher examined four sources of data, covering a time period from 2015 to 2020: 1. Public statements and other official press releases from university officials on university websites; 2. Media coverage, including a content analysis of 132 news articles; 3. Facebook posts and feedback; and 4. Interviews with all three institutional executive officers at the time of flag change in January 2021.

This dissertation demonstrates that each university ultimately utilized an aggressive public relations strategy, classified by the researcher using the Coombs' categorization as a rebuild strategy, to public relations success, especially considering the institutions' problematic prior history regarding issues of race, as well as their ongoing relationships with students, faculty, and athletics-affiliated organizations, which were pushing administrators toward greater advocacy for a change to Mississippi's flag.

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Finally, this dissertation would not have been possible without the professional assistance of three coders, Megan Burkes, Emily Covington and Samantha McCain, as well as proofreading by Heather Graves.

DEDICATION

For my wife, Deedre', and daughters, Anna Grace and Macy. Thank you for your encouragement and for being the "why," in all that I say and do, including this dissertation. I hope that it and I make you proud. Oceans of love, always.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SCCT

Strategic Crisis Communication Theory

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Mississippi's reputation regarding race relations can be described, most generously, as complicated. It is a state with a past marked by the lynching of African Americans and the murders of civil rights activists of all races. Its present includes the largest percentage of African-American residents of any state in the country, extreme poverty among its African-American residents and comparatively low education levels across all demographics. Mississippi was also the last of the 50 United States to include the Confederate battle emblem as part of its state flag until a new flag was adopted in January 2021. This dissertation closely examines the public relations strategies, tactics, and effectiveness of Mississippi's public universities in the historic decision to retire the state's flag in 2020 amid a national social justice crisis following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Facing significant reputational threat and public pressure from students and faculty, the state's public universities became public advocates for a new state flag in 2015 and 2016, when each chose to refrain from flying the flag on its campuses. They then became a pivotal force for change in 2020, when their affiliated athletics organizations—the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Southeastern Conference, and Conference USA—all threatened to withhold postseason play and millions of dollars in associated, positive economic impact from the state (Scarborough, 2020); students and faculty pushed hard for a new flag; and the university presidents, along with athletics administrators and coaches lobbied lawmakers at the State Capitol in the week leading up to a historic vote for a new flag by state legislators (Kenney, 2020).

Coombs Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides the lens through which the words and actions of university administrators are examined. In determining the reputational threat of a public relations crisis to an organization, SCCT considers the initial level of assigned responsibility to an organization for a crisis, the organization's prior history with similar issues, and the organization's current relationships with key publics—in this case, most significantly, the students, faculty and athletics-affiliated organizations that were advocating for a new state flag. As this dissertation demonstrates, the three universities employed public relations strategies that were heavily influenced by students, faculty, and athletics-affiliated organizations—all of which are important publics that are critical to the academic and financial success of the universities. This case study will determine and detail the public relations' strategies—in the context recommended by SCCT—implemented by the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi, as they sought to maintain key relationships with students and faculty on their campuses, as well as their affiliated athletics entities, in their advocacy to retire the Mississippi state flag.

In conducting this case study, the researcher examined four sources of data from 2015 through 2020.

- First, the researcher examined public statements from university administrators on university websites, which are expected to provide insight into the public relations strategy from each university within the SCCT framework—which Coombs categorizes as deny, diminish, or rebuild.

- Second, Facebook posts and feedback were examined to help determine the significance of the crisis, the strategies employed, and their results.
- Third, a content analysis by three coders of a total of 132 mass media reports contributed to determining the significance of the reputational threat, as well as provided independent documentation of the words and actions of the universities, in addition to insight into the relationships of the universities with their key publics, including students, faculty and their affiliated athletics organizations.
- Fourth, and finally, through interviews with university leaders, this dissertation examines the considerations, the words and actions of university leaders as they implemented public relations strategies in effort to preserve relationships with key publics and manage a significant reputational threat.

Mississippi Public Universities and the Flag – A Brief, Recent History.

Mississippi's eight public universities are not immune from controversies of race-related bigotry and hatred. Often, these institutions of higher learning are at the center of such controversies. In 1962, the integration of the flagship institution, the University of Mississippi, by James Meredith resulted in violence that left two dead and many more injured (Elliot, 2012). And it would take more than five additional years for the remaining four historically white, public higher education institutions to integrate. Today, the state's universities are home to more than 80,000 students from diverse populations, while its three largest institutions—the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi—are each historically white, and

now welcome students from all 50 states and more than 70 foreign countries, despite still being comprised of predominately white student bodies. Today, too, each of the state's three largest, historically white universities counts a large percentage of African Americans among its student body, and each university includes commitments to diversity or inclusion in its strategic plans, or mission and vision statement. For example, the University of Mississippi has set a strategic goal related to increasing the diversity of faculty, staff and student populations, as well as to improving the retention and graduation rates of underrepresented groups (University of Mississippi, 2018). The University of Southern Mississippi calls for an inclusive community that embraces the diversity of people and ideas as a value, and has set a strategic goal to promote a culture of inclusiveness of people and ideas (The University of Southern Mississippi, 2018). Mississippi State University's mission statement affirms a commitment to a "tradition of instilling among its students and alumni ideals of diversity, citizenship, leadership, and service (Mississippi State University, 2018). Today, the universities are led by institutional executive officers—two white, Chancellor Glenn Boyce of the University of Mississippi, and President Mark Keenum of Mississippi State University, and one Black, President Rodney D. Bennett of the University of Southern Mississippi.

For five years, from 2015 through 2020, Mississippi's public higher education institutions were at the center of a social justice-related debate over a proposed change to the state's flag, which featured the stars and bars of the Confederate battle flag until 2020, when the state's legislature voted to retire the flag. While some contended that the flag represented a nod to the state's history and proud Southern culture, others viewed it as reprehensible and offensive, especially to the state's African-American residents. In

2001, a statewide vote resulted in keeping the flag, but the 2015 murders of nine African Americans at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina by white supremacist Dylann Roof once again sparked interest in the topic (Harris, 2016).

During 2015 and 2016, each of the state's five historically white institutions, a group that also includes Delta State University and the Mississippi University for Women, followed Mississippi's three public Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Alcorn State University, Jackson State University, and Mississippi Valley State University, by removing the flag from places of prominence on campus. But momentum for flag change beyond the borders of university campuses across the state was inconsistent and slow to come, and the debate lessened in intensity until May 25, 2020, when the nation's attention turned again to issues of police brutality of African Americans and other related social-justice issues, with the killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota. And again in 2020, Mississippi's universities led the effort in a quick and aggressive manner advocating for a change.

Changing the State Flag. Flags are powerful symbols that can impart many meanings including allegiance to a state or nation. The retired Mississippi state flag, featuring the Confederate battle emblem in the upper-left corner, was adopted in 1894 and flew until 2020. It also included three horizontal bars: one red, one white and one blue. The flag followed several flags that flew over Mississippi since it became the 20th state in the Union in 1817.

Serious debate about the state's flag had occurred for many years, and notably in 2001 the issue went to a vote of Mississippians, who resoundingly voted to keep the then-current flag (ABC News, 2001). In 2015 the issue arose again, when Roof murdered nine

African Americans at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina. Roof had proudly displayed the Confederate flag in images and expressed hope to begin a race war (Tribune News Services, 2017). Following the attack, South Carolina removed the Confederate flag from its State House grounds (McCrummen and Izadi, 2015), and many called for a change in Mississippi, where the Confederate flag still flew as part of the state flag.

While the state's three public Historically Black Colleges and Universities—Alcorn State University, Jackson State University and Mississippi Valley State University—already did not fly the state flag, Mississippi's five predominately white, public institutions removed the state flag over a period of time from October 2015 to November 2016.

The University of Mississippi, the state's flagship institution, was the first of the five to remove the flag on October 26, 2015. Interim Chancellor Morris Stocks ordered its removal from campus by university police, and the university issued a news release explaining the decision. "The University of Mississippi community came to the realization years ago that the Confederate battle flag did not represent many of our core values, such as civility and respect for others," Stocks said in part. "Since that time, we have become a stronger and better university" (The University of Mississippi, 2015).

The university's announcement came following support for the move in the form of votes and resolutions from student government leaders and faculty and staff governing bodies (Moyer, 2015), just days prior to a permanent chancellor being named. Stocks' statement acknowledged multiple, competing viewpoints on the flag; his love for the state of Mississippi; and in referencing a time for change and the university's core values, it

reflected the language of the student government resolution (The University of Mississippi, 2015).

Also that week, the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) became the second of the state's predominately white institutions to remove the flag. President Rodney D. Bennett emailed faculty, staff and students indicating his decision and instructions to university police on October 28, 2015, an email that was also made public on the university's website (Bennett, 2015). Bennett's email did not specifically reference lowering the state flag and, instead, indicated his decision to raise United States flags on all university flagpoles, some of on which had previously flown the state flag. Bennett referenced his love for the state of Mississippi, and indicated that he looked forward to a time when he could raise a state flag that united Mississippians.

Media reports revealed that Mississippi State University removed the state flag in the summer of 2016 (Harris, 2016). In responding to media inquiries, Mississippi State University's Chief Communications Officer Sid Salter said that the flag had been removed from various locations on the university's Starkville campus at the request of campus divisions and units. The requests had been approved by President Mark Keenum, according to Salter. Salter also said that the flag would remain as part of a 50-state flag display in the university's cafeteria (Harris, 2016).

Mississippi State University's removal of the flag came after a lengthy university discussion. In June 2015, the university released a statement that expressed grieving over "the senseless violence" in South Carolina. The statement recalled the 2001 votes of the university's Faculty Senate and student government calling for a new state flag. The statement distanced Mississippi State University from the flag and its supporters at the

time by saying the university had no association with the flag other than lawful displays of it. The statement also reinforced the university's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

In the years that followed, numerous bills were filed by state legislators, both for and against a change to the flag, some of which targeted annual state appropriations to the universities, in effect threatening to withhold hundreds of millions of dollars necessary to operate the universities (Harrison, 2017). Although none of these bills were approved, they served as reminders that many in the state's Capitol were not supportive of the universities' decisions.

As time passed following the universities' decisions, the flag debate waned in intensity until May 25, 2020, when the nation's attention turned again to issues of police brutality of African Americans and related social-justice issues with the killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Immediately, Floyd's killing sparked protests across the country, including in Mississippi cities like the capital of Jackson and in Hattiesburg, Oxford and Starkville, which host the University of Southern Mississippi, the University of Mississippi, and Mississippi State University, respectively (Judin, 2020). Soon, there were calls for a change to Mississippi's state flag, and universities again led the effort in a quick and aggressive manner. A summary of key moments are as follows:

On Tuesday, June 9, 2020, three highly regarded former student affairs professionals—one each from Mississippi State University, the University of Mississippi, and the University of Southern Mississippi—penned an open letter advocating for a change.

On Thursday, June 18, 2020, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Southeastern Conference, of which the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University are members, and Conference USA, of which the University of Southern Mississippi is a member, all issued separate public statements that indicated no championship play would be held in Mississippi, so long as the state flew the flag. The result of such action would have potentially equated to millions of dollars in revenue losses for the institutions and the state, as all three universities have been regular hosts to conference and NCAA championship play at the highest level, specifically in the sports of baseball and women's basketball. In response, on Friday, June 19, 2020, the presidents of all eight universities issued a joint statement supporting the NCAA and conference actions (Blanton, 2020). Speaker of the House Philip Gunn said that not only was the state "screaming for change," but that the actions by NCAA and the conferences "brought quantifiable hurt to the state" (Middleton, 2020).

The anticipated economic losses had historical bases. In recent years, Mississippi State University, the University of Mississippi, and the University of Southern Mississippi all hosted NCAA Regional baseball tournaments, while Mississippi State had hosted NCAA women's basketball tournament games. In 2019, all three universities ranked in the Top 20 in college baseball attendance figures—the University of Mississippi ranked third, Mississippi State ranked fourth, and the University of Southern Mississippi ranked 16th—totaling more than 700,000 fans (National Collegiate Athletics Association, 2020). All three are also home to one of the top 16 stadiums in college baseball, as ranked by fans (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019), making each a desired location to host postseason play. One study quantified a multi-million-dollar

impact on the Mississippi Gulf Coast of the 2018 Conference USA Baseball Tournament, hosted by Southern Miss (Tisdale, 2019), and Southern Miss was already scheduled to host the tournament again in 2022.

On Monday, June 22, 2020, Kylin Hill, star running back for the Mississippi State football team, the SEC's leading rusher in 2019 and winner of the Conerly Trophy, given to the state's top football player, indicated on Twitter that he would not play football in 2020 if the flag was not changed (Hill, 2020). Hill's tweet garnered widespread support for many other college athletes across the state.

Also on June 22, 2020, 34 current and former student government leaders representing all eight of Mississippi's public universities issued a public letter to lawmakers advocating for a change (Middleton, 2020).

On Wednesday, June 24, 2020, the university presidents held private meetings with key state lawmakers and spoke as a group to the media from the State Capitol, again advocating for a change.

And on Thursday, June 25, 2020, almost 50 coaches representing athletics teams from all eight of the universities, rallied at the State Capitol advocating for a change.

Their efforts, and those of others, proved successful, as lawmakers worked through the weekend and approved House Bill 1796, which retired the current flag and established the framework for a commission that would be tasked with development of a replacement to be voted on in November 2020 by the people of Mississippi. On Tuesday, June 30, 2020, Governor Tate Reeves signed the legislation. The legislation stipulated that the new flag would exclude the Confederate battle emblem and contain the words, "In God We Trust." The nine-person commission appointed by the governor, lieutenant

governor and speaker of the house, narrowed down thousands of public design submissions, eventually selecting a version that featured a magnolia, the state's flower, over a dark blue background that covers the middle half of the flag. Two red panels are separated from the blue with gold stripes, while 20 stars circle around the magnolia, representing Mississippi's status as the 20th state in the union, with one gold, five-pointed star a reflection of Mississippi's indigenous Native American tribes. On Nov. 3, 2020, Mississippi voters overwhelmingly voted in favor of the new flag, with more than 70 percent of voters approving of the new design (Pettus, 2020). In January 2021, the vote was recognized by the state legislature and Governor Reeves, as was required by the original bill, and on January 11, 2021, a new flag was raised in Mississippi.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Mississippi Universities and Race. To understand the current debate regarding the state flag, and to examine and evaluate the universities' public relations strategies and tactics using Strategic Crisis Communications Theory, one must first understand the history of Mississippi's eight public higher education institutions, which include five predominately white institutions, as well as three historically black universities. As the three historically black institutions decided years ago to remove the state flag from their campuses, this dissertation focuses on the three largest, public universities in the state—Mississippi State University, the University of Mississippi, and the University of Southern Mississippi—which all took steps in 2015 and 2016 to remove the flag from places of prominence on their campuses and joined all of Mississippi's public universities in aggressively advocating for change in 2020. While each university's history related to race is complicated, there are also some notable differences. Of the state's public universities, the flagship institution, the University of Mississippi, is the oldest and has the longest and most complicated history.

While the integration of that institution by James Meredith in 1962 is among the most well-known events in state history, the challenges facing "Ole Miss," as it is commonly referenced, date back to its charter prior to the Civil War in 1844. Its founders were among the state's elite—politicians and slave owners—and slaves were forced to participate in the university's construction (Burns, 2012). Its nickname, "Ole Miss," used most prominently by its sports teams, is a reference to the term slaves used to identify planters' wives and daughters. The state's business and medical fields, as well as political

leaders in the state capital in Jackson and in Washington are dominated by Ole Miss alumni. Fifty years after court orders and federal troops were needed to facilitate Meredith's integration of the university, Meredith recalled that the university was the "vulnerable spot to attack the enemy. I was going after the enemy's most sacred and revered stronghold" (Meredith, 2016, p. 45).

The integration of the University of Mississippi, though, was not the end of the conversation and of controversies related to the systemic racism and discrimination of African Americans at Ole Miss. Among Southeastern Conference institutions, the University of Mississippi was one of the last to integrate its sports teams, first doing so in 1970. In 1973, Ben Williams became the first African-American Ole Miss football player, while it took until 1976 for the first African American, Peggie Gillom, to suit up for the women's basketball team. Also that year, Dr. Lucius Williams became the university's first African-American administrator, when he was hired as the vice chancellor for academic affairs (The University of Mississippi, 2021).

Racial progress at Ole Miss, like elsewhere in Mississippi, has been slow and uneven. In 1982, John Hawkins, an African-American cheerleader, refused to wave the Confederate flag as had been tradition, and a Ku Klux Klan rally in Oxford was part of white Mississippi's response (Ballou, 2020). In the 1990s, as concerns about recruiting African-American student-athletes grew, the university tried to bar the Confederate flag from stands at football games. In 2000, when the student body elected its first African-American president, Nic Lott, several incidents, including multiple cases of racially charged vandalism, were indications that while progress was being made, it was not unanimously supported (The University of Mississippi, 2021). Nevertheless, in 2003,

Chancellor Robert Khayat announced that Colonel Reb, the university's controversial mascot, would no longer represent Ole Miss at sporting events (Holman, 2018). In 2009, new Chancellor Dan Jones ordered the university band to shorten the song "To Dixie with Love," as athletics crowds would often chant its concluding line in unison, "The South will rise again" (Associated Press, 2009).

In recent years, at the direction of university leaders, a 49-page report inventoried historically problematic statues, streets, and buildings at the Ole Miss campus in Oxford (The University of Mississippi, 2021). The report has led to contextual plaques being placed at many of these sites, while some building name changes have been recommended. The work has been applauded by many in the media. For example, "The Ole Miss chapter of the NAACP is as attentive to university decisions as are the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Fewer higher education institutions still have addressed their legacies in such a comprehensive and proactive manner," wrote Timothy W. Ryback in *The Atlantic* in 2017. And at the same time as universities were advocating for a new state flag in 2020, the university was also involved in a related public relations crisis regarding a decision to move a Confederate statue to a less prominent location on its campus (Fowler, 2020).

The University of Mississippi, though, is not alone among Mississippi institutions of higher learning to experience struggles with racism, both overt and systemic, and bigotry, each dating back to their establishment, including at Mississippi State University, where Stephen D. Lee, a former Confederate general, served as the founding president and whose bust occupies a prominent location on the campus in Starkville, Mississippi (Salter, 2021, full interview transcripts are presented in Appendix B.)

Like elsewhere, progress came to Mississippi State University in spurts. In 1963, the Mississippi State men's basketball team participated in the NCAA Tournament over the objections of then-Governor Ross Barnett. The all-white Mississippi State team, which had declined invitations to participate in previous tournaments to avoid competing against Black athletes, decided to sneak out of town in order to participate. Although Mississippi State lost the now famous "Game of Change" to Loyola University of Chicago, it left a mark on history (NPR, 2013).

Two years later, Richard Holmes integrated Mississippi State University in July 1965 (Hearn, 2005). The adopted son of civil rights worker Dr. Douglas Conner, Holmes moved to Starkville at age 12 and graduated from Henderson High School in 1963. Conner had previously asked the parents of local student Shirley Hanslaw to attempt to integrate Mississippi State University, but Hanslaw opted to attend nearby Tougaloo College instead.

While the University of Southern Mississippi did not open its doors until 1912, 50 years after the University of Mississippi, it too has had its moments of race-related tragedies and controversies. Prior to Meredith's integration of Ole Miss, Clyde Kennard failed to integrate Mississippi Southern College (Winters, 2021), which later became the University of Southern Mississippi, despite multiple attempts to do so in the late 1950s. Eventually, Kennard was falsely accused of a crime he did not commit, imprisoned, and only released as his death from cancer was imminent. And even though USM integrated peacefully in 1965, the events leading to Kennard's imprisonment and death have not been forgotten.

Like the University of Mississippi, the University of Southern Mississippi's athletics mascots and nicknames would undergo several changes over the years (The University of Southern Mississippi, 2018). When the school was renamed in 1940 to Mississippi Southern College—it became the University of Southern Mississippi in 1962—the student body voted to name the athletics teams the Confederates, a change from the Yellow Jackets, which was quickly changed again in 1941 to the Southerners. In 1953, “General Nat,” a Colonel Reb-like figure who dressed in Confederate battle attire and rode a white horse onto the playing field, was approved as the mascot for the Southerners. General Nat was named for Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest, widely known as an original founder of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1972, alumni, faculty, students, and staff were asked to submit new names, and the present nickname of Golden Eagles and current mascot, a golden eagle named Seymour d’Campus were chosen (Ciurczak, 2017).

As the University of Southern Mississippi attempted to reckon with its past, it unveiled a new theme in 1988, “The University for the New South,” which called for “an inclusive university where qualified students can attend regardless of color, class, religion or economic background” (Morgan, 2010, p. 169). In 1991, USM’s African-American Student Organization (AASO) designated October 15 as Clyde Kennard Day and invited Meredith to deliver an address. The AASO also called for the university to recognize Kennard, and in 1992, the university’s student services building was named in his honor. In 2013, Rodney D. Bennett became the first African-American president of a predominantly white institution in the southeastern United States. In 2018, the Mississippi Humanities Council placed a civil rights marker on USM’s Hattiesburg

campus acknowledging Kennard's life and legacy, and in May 2018, the university awarded him a posthumous honorary degree (*Clarion Ledger*, 2018).

While each of the state's public, historically white institutions had its own history, one of the most notable system-wide controversies came as result of a governing board plan in 1992 to consolidate the state's public institutions from eight to four following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that said Mississippi had not done enough to eliminate racial segregation at universities. Opponents of the plan said it would hurt minority students, which they said had been supported and encouraged at the historically black universities. At the time, the system educated approximately 58,000 students, while only 4,000 African-American students attended the predominately white institutions. Approximately 13,000 African-American students attended the historically black institutions of Alcorn State University, Jackson State University and Mississippi Valley State University. The plan would have closed Mississippi Valley State University, moving that institution's students, faculty and staff to Delta State University. The newly created Delta State Valley University would have been administered by the University of Mississippi. Alcorn State University would have kept its campus but become a branch of Mississippi State University, while Mississippi University for Women would have been administered by USM. Among the state's institutions, only Jackson State would have avoided consolidation and would have benefitted from a \$34 million investment. The plan met serious opposition from legislators and alumni of many of the institutions and ultimately failed (*Diverse Education*, 2009).

In 2002, another legal debate resulted in funding designated for the three historically black universities. That year concluded a 27-year fight after Jake Ayers Sr.

sued the state of Mississippi on behalf of his son, Jake Ayers Jr., a Jackson State student, contending the state funded the predominately white institutions better than the historically black universities. The state, Justice Department and the plaintiffs settled on payments of \$500 million to the three historically black institutions (Pettus, 2004).

Public Relations Strategy and Crisis Theory. Media reports demonstrate clearly that decisions to lower the state flag and advocate for its change presented a public relations crisis for each institution. While many students, faculty, and staff were supportive of the decisions to remove or lower the flag (Harris, 2015, and Salter, 2015), attitudes and perceptions of alumni, donors and other community members were mixed. Each decision was met with both praise and criticism, regardless of the communication strategies and tactics employed.

Given the significance of emergency situations—in which communication can be life or death—crisis communication is perhaps the most important area of study for the public relations practitioner. As Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2017, p. 4) argue, “Some organizations communicate so poorly in the wake of a crisis that they are forever weakened, having lost the confidence of both their members and the public.” And what constitutes a crisis? Citing Hermann (1963), Ulmer says three characteristics are required: a troubling event must come as a surprise, pose a serious level of threat to high-priority goals and force a short response time (2017, p. 5). In 2015 and 2016, Mississippi’s historically white universities faced protests and student and employee support for the removal from the flag, as well as lawmakers who threatened to halt public funding of the institutions. The timing of the decisions facing university administrators was a surprise and prompted by key publics’ increased awareness following the Roof

murders; it did pose a significant threat to the goals of each institution; and the calls both in support of the flag's removal and remaining contributed to an urgency to the decisions. In 2020, the pressure to increase efforts accelerated with another out-of-state event, the killing of George Floyd. And by then, many others were joining the call for change, notably the Mississippi Baptist Convention (Vicory, 2020) and the Mississippi Economic Council (Williams, 2020), in addition to the universities' athletics-affiliated organizations.

Regardless of the type or origin of crisis, an organization's public relations response may contain up to five stages, according to Horsley and Baker's "Synthesis Model for Crisis Communication," a model they say has application to the public sector (2002). The stages include ongoing public relations efforts, identification of and preparation for potential crises, internal training and rehearsal, the crisis event, and evaluation of public relations efforts.

Jim Grunig (1984) outlined "4 Models" of public relations practice over more than a century, including an ideal model of "two-way symmetrical communication," in which all parties benefit from the communication. Grunig suggests an evolution of public relations practice—from the "press agency model," to the "public information model," to the "two-way asymmetrical model," to the utopian "two-way symmetrical model."

In the press agency model, promoters work through the media to create news, with little or no thought given to ethics or truth. The goal, Bill Sledzik says, is behavior manipulation (2008). The public information model offers one improvement, according to Sledzik, as truth and ethics are considerations. In this one-way communication model, the public relations professional acts as an information dispenser. The two-way

asymmetrical model is the first to consider the audience, but also has a goal of getting “inside the heads of consumers” to “help sell the message.” In the two-way symmetrical model, the public relations professional must account for the concerns of both clients and key publics and help them adapt to one another.

A crisis can be intentional or unintentional, according to Ulmer. Many of Ulmer’s intentional crises are internal to an organization, like poor employee relationships, poor risk management, and unethical leadership. While a decision to change the flag would have to be initiated by state lawmakers, in advocating for a change, university administrators could help to preserve relationships with key publics, faculty and students, while athletics administrators and coaches could do the same with student-athletes, and the universities’ affiliated athletics organizations, the NCAA, the SEC, and Conference USA.

Unintentional crises, according to Ulmer, include a number of external forces, like natural disasters and downturns in the economy. The nature of the crisis, whether internal or external, is a key factor in the manner in which an organization responds, and these response approaches have been documented by researchers for decades. Ulmer identifies four theories of crisis communication, including Corporate Apologia, Image Repair Theory, Organizational Renewal Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

Corporate Apologia Theory is implemented by public relations practitioners most often and effectively when an internal force has created the crisis—the organization accounts for its actions and takes a defensive stance through a public apology or apologies. Management of the threat is a key characteristic of this theory, according to Ulmer.

Image Repair Theory, developed by Benoit (1995), considers two key components—is the organization being held responsible for the crisis—in other words, was it internally or externally created? Furthermore, is the action considered offensive? As it relates to an organization’s response, the theory stresses management of the threat and accounting for actions that caused the crisis.

Ulmer suggests that organizations that have “recurring crises or poor reputations are not likely to have their messages accepted by stakeholders.” Organizational Renewal Theory contends that the potential for positive discourse following a crisis can provide an opportunity for an organization to rebuild an image. This theory emphasizes identifying opportunities and taking advantage during a crisis. Given universities’ complicated histories with race, as well as other current issues, such as a call for the removal of a Confederate statue on the University of Mississippi’s campus (Pettus, 2019), the state flag debate could have had long-term, negative public relations effects on each institution.

It is Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2007), though, that offers the best lens through which to examine the decisions related to the state flag. Coombs indicates that SCCT has its roots in Attribution Theory. Attribution Theory posits that people search for the causes of events, especially negative events. Further, people assign responsibility for events and respond emotionally—with anger when they assign responsibility to an organization or person and with sympathy when they perceive the crisis as externally created or caused. The state flag debate was one such issue. SCCT considers three important factors for professional communicators to consider when faced with a crisis, then recommends responses that are most likely to offer reputational

protection. The factors include the level of responsibility for the crisis, the organization's history with similar crises, and its relationships with affected publics. The victim level represents the lowest level of crisis attribution (the crisis could not be avoided by the organization, nor was it created by the organization); while the accidental level represents moderate attribution (the crisis could not be avoided by the organization, but the organization has a role in creating or contributing to the crisis); and the intentional level represents strong attribution (the organization knowingly is contributing to the crisis). Coombs recommends the following strategies based on those factors and calls for consistency of response strategy throughout the crisis. The strategies can be grouped into three categories: deny, diminish, and rebuild. In the deny category, the organization attempts to remove any connection with the crisis. In the diminish category, the organization attempts to communicate that the crisis was not as bad as thought and/or that the organization lacks control over the crisis. In the rebuild category, the organization attempts to improve its reputation by offering support for victims of the crisis. SCCT recommends the following public relations strategies and tactics based on the contributing factors of initial attribution level, prior history, and current relationships with key publics:

1. Informing and adjusting information when crises have minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises), no history of similar crises and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation
2. Victimage (reminding stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis) as part of the response for workplace violence, product tampering, natural disasters and rumors

3. Diminish (the crisis is not as bad as people think) crisis response strategies for crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises) coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation
4. Diminish crisis response strategies for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), which have no history of similar crises, and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation
5. Rebuild crisis response strategies (offering material or symbolic forms of aid) for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation
6. Rebuild crisis response strategies for crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility (preventable crises) regardless of crisis history or prior relationship reputation
7. Deny posture crisis response strategies for rumor and challenge crises, when possible

As it relates to the Roof murders and the state's flag, Mississippi's universities assumed little direct responsibility attribution—with the notable exception of flying the flag—but prior reputation and similar crises posed significant public relations risks for each of the universities. While it was clear that the universities did not create the crisis of the state flag, they nevertheless were participants that were assigned a level of accidental responsibility by students and faculty so long as they flew the state flag. And based on Coombs' considerations, which in this case included an accidental level of assigned responsibility, a poor prior history with similar crises, and the universities' relationships with key publics, strategy No. 5, rebuild, is the appropriate response strategy.

CHAPTER III – METHOD AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This dissertation will closely examine the effects of public relations strategies, messages, and tactics employed by Mississippi's three largest, predominately white, public universities—the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi—as each made the decision to lower the state flag in 2015 and 2016, and then further advocated for flag change in 2020.

Using response categories outlined by Coombs as part of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), this dissertation will compare the type of response that theoretically should have resulted in maximizing reputational protection for the institution with the type of response employed.

Methodology. As part of this case study, the researcher hypothesizes that officials at the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi employed a rebuild crisis strategy to public relations success in its response to the state flag crisis, as Coombs' Strategic Crisis Communication Theory recommends, based on the universities' prior histories, relationships with key publics, and the level of assigned responsibility to the universities for the crisis by those key publics. In doing so, the universities were largely able to avoid negative or lasting public relations effects to its relationships with key publics, including students; faculty; state legislators; and its athletics-affiliated organizations, the National Collegiate Athletic Association for all three universities, and the Southeastern Conference for the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University, and Conference USA for the University

of Southern Mississippi. Case studies, “if thoughtfully conceived and well executed are a research tool well suited to the study of public relations” (Cutler, 2004).

Case studies are a method frequently employed by researchers to cover a distinctive event, and the changing of the Mississippi state flag in 2020 certainly qualifies as distinctive. The flag flew over Mississippi beginning in 1884, and it had survived a public vote for a change in 2001, as well as numerous legislative attempts to retire it in recent years. In addition, the public, coordinated advocacy of Mississippi’s public universities was unprecedented, at least in recent years, and especially rare in a matter of political debate not directly related to the core academic and research missions of the universities. While the universities re-entered the public debate in 2015, by 2020, the broad support from key publics encouraged university officials to aggressively and publicly advocate for a change to the flag, including the legislative action required to retire the old flag. This public relations strategy also aligned university leaders with three key publics, representing important revenue streams such as tuition dollars from students and athletics funding. In 2015, this full alignment of resources and key publics did not yet exist, but by 2020, circumstances had changed, support for a new flag had gained momentum across the state, and universities played a role in leading to a change.

Research Questions. This case study will attempt to answer the research questions below.

Research Question No. 1A: To what Situational Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did students and faculty assign responsibility to university administrators for flying the state flag in 2015 and 2016—victim, accidental, or intentional? Research Question 1B: To what Strategic Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did

students and faculty assign responsibility to university administrators for advocating for a new flag in 2020—victim, accidental, or intentional? This question will be answered through the results of the content analysis, which will code for quotes in media reports from these key publics, as well as through interviews with each university's top administrator.

Research Question No. 2A: Which Situational Crisis Communication Theory category best defines the communication strategy for each of the three universities in 2015 and 2016—deny, diminish, or rebuild? Research Question 2B: Which Situational Crisis Communication Theory category best defines the communication strategy for each of the three universities in 2020—deny, diminish, or rebuild? This question will be answered through the review of the official statements online and Facebook posts, as well as additional quotes that will be examined as part of the content analysis of media reports, with a more detailed and deeper understanding of the strategies revealed as part of the interviews.

Research Question No. 3: To what extent did the strategies align with those recommended by Situational Crisis Communication Theory? Based on Coombs' considerations, which in this case included an accidental level of assigned responsibility, a poor prior history with similar crises, and the universities' relationships with key publics, strategy No. 5, rebuild, is the appropriate response strategy. This research question will be answered by the review of university statements and actions as found on university websites and social media, as well as interviews with the universities' leaders.

Research Question No. 4: Did the public relations strategies and tactics result in a positive public relations outcome for the universities? This question will be answered by

the results of the content analysis of media reports, a review of social media feedback, and interviews with administrators.

Four data sources were examined and revealed an intentional, coordinated effort by university leaders to advocate for a new flag that was elevated in the public conversation in both 2015 following the Charleston church murders and in 2020, following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis, Minnesota, police officer Derek Chauvin.

First, the official websites for all three universities and Mississippi Public Universities, which governs the state's public universities, all contain official statements on the Mississippi flag.

Second, a content analysis of mass media reports from the years 2015 through 2020, which covers the full-time period during which all three removed the flags from campuses and then rallied lawmakers to take action, provide insight into the universities' effects. Media frequently reported on the universities' role in the flag debate, including comments from key administrators.

Third, each university's Facebook account contains multiple comments from users in 2015 and 2016, and each account contains multiple, highly engaging posts in 2020 that document the universities' advocacy, as well as the responses by users. Facebook was the social media platform most frequently used by the universities, and generated the most consistent engagement from key publics. While Twitter was also used, use was less frequent, and when used, contained identical or very similar content to Facebook posts. A search of Twitter posts, using the term "state flag" revealed only two original posts each from the primary accounts of the University of Mississippi and

Mississippi State University, and zero posts from the primary account of the University of Southern Mississippi. In each of the four original tweets, all coming in 2015, the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University linked to full, official statements originating from official websites. These direct observations from websites, mass media and social media posts demonstrate the universities’ public support for a new flag, as well as a progression to a more aggressive communications strategy from 2015 to 2020.

Finally, interviews with administrators and communications strategists complemented and confirmed findings resulting from the observations of the content on the digital platforms. The interviews of university leaders and communications professionals offer richer and more extensive qualitative data that help to explain the public relations strategy and tactics, as well as their effectiveness.

A summary of the data sources and the associated research questions is as follows:

Table 1. *Data Sources*

Official Websites	Research Question No. 2A and 2B: What response strategy was employed—in 2015/2016 and in 2020?
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Table 1 (continued).

<p>Content Analysis of Media Coverage (2015-2020)</p>	<p>Research Question No. 1A and 1B: To what Situational Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did students and faculty assign responsibility to university administrators for flying the state flag in 2015 and 2016—victim, accidental, or intentional? To what Strategic Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did students, and faculty assign responsibility to university administrators for advocating for a new flag in 2020—victim, accidental, or intentional?</p> <p>Research Question No. 2A and 2B: What response strategy was employed—in 2015/2016 and in 2020?</p> <p>Research Question No. 3: To what extent did the strategies align with those recommended by Situational Crisis Communication Theory?</p> <p>Research Question No. 4: Did the public relations strategies and tactics result in a positive public relations outcome for the universities?</p>
<p>Facebook Posts and Feedback</p>	<p>Research Question No. 2A and 2B: What response strategy was employed—in 2015/2016 and in 2020?</p> <p>Research Question No. 4: Did the public relations strategies and tactics result in a positive public relations outcome for the universities?</p>

Table 1 (continued).

Interviews with University administrators	<p>Research Question No. 2A and 2B: What response strategy was employed—in 2015/2016 and in 2020?</p> <p>Research Question No. 4: Did the public relations strategies and tactics result in a positive public relations outcome for the universities?</p>
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Official Websites. The official university websites of the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi, as well as the site of the governing body of the institutions, Mississippi Public Universities, include one dozen official statements and news releases from 2015, the year the University of Mississippi and the University of Southern Mississippi removed the flag from its campuses, through 2020, the year the state legislature retired the state flag featuring the Confederate battle emblem and Mississippi voters selected a new design. A search on each of the four websites using the term “state flag” produced two unique results on the Mississippi Public Universities website, both from 2020; two unique results on the University of Mississippi’s website; four unique results on the Mississippi State University website; and four unique results on the University of Southern Mississippi’s website. The statements were used to assist in answering Research Question 2A and 2B, related to the public relations response strategies implemented in 2015 and 2016, as well as in 2020.

Both results from the Mississippi Public Universities' website came from June 2020—a joint statement on June 18, 2020, from the leaders of all eight public universities in support of the NCAA's position to withhold postseason athletics competition from the state until the flag was changed, and a media advisory on June 25, 2020, promoting the names of athletics administrators and coaches from each university who were advocating for a flag change at the State Capitol that day.

The University of Mississippi's website included a press release about the removal of the state flag from campus on October 26, 2015, that included quotes from Interim Chancellor Morris Stocks, as well as references to resolutions from the Student Senate, the Faculty Senate, the graduate student council, and the staff council, in favor of a new flag. The University of Mississippi website also contained a microsite that provided information on the flag's history, as well as the process for selecting a proposed new flag.

The Mississippi State University website contained an unattributed statement on June 23, 2015, about the flag following the Charleston murders, and a news release announcing a Faculty Senate vote on a resolution in favor of a new flag on August 21, 2015. A statement attributed to President Mark Keenum in response to the Southeastern Conference's statement on the flag was posted on June 18, 2020, and the university also shared the IHL media advisory on June 25, 2020, regarding the athletics administrators and coaches' visit to the State Capitol.

The University of Southern Mississippi's website included an unattributed statement on the university's position on the state flag on June 25, 2015, following the Charleston murders, and a statement from President Rodney D. Bennett on October 28,

2015, when the university removed the state flag from its campuses in Hattiesburg and Long Beach, Mississippi. The student affairs section of the website also included the open letter in favor of a new flag from former student affairs professionals at all three universities in June 2020. And on November 4, 2020, Bennett issued a statement following the public vote on the state flag.

Searches of the official websites revealed no new content related to the state flag in the years from 2016 to 2019, a time period that included Mississippi State University's removal of the flag from its campus, as well as multiple legislative attempts to force universities to fly the state flag.

Content Analysis. As part of this dissertation, the researcher conducted a content analysis of media reports in an effort to help answer all four research questions: Research Question 1A and 1B, related to assigned responsibility for the crisis to the organizations by students and faculty in 2015 and 2016, as well as in 2020—victim, accidental, or intentional; Research Question 2A and 2B, related to the public relations strategy employed—deny, diminish, or rebuild; Research Question No. 3, related to the alignment of strategy with recommendations from Strategic Communications Theory; and, Research Question No. 4, related to the effects of the universities public relations efforts.

Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as the “objective, systematic and quantitative description” of text. As it is defined by Krippendorff (2004), content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts. Content analysis predicts or infers phenomena that cannot be directly observed; its goal is to legitimately make inferences from available text. Content analysis, when conducted with

care, meets standards of reliability and validity that ensure the objectivity Berelson calls for in his definition.

While Mississippi's state legislators ultimately made the decision to retire the flag, media reports from the years 2015 through 2020, covering the full-time period in which all three removed the flags from campuses and then rallied lawmakers to retire the flag, provide insight into the universities' prior histories with similar crises, their relationships with key public, the public relations strategies and tactics they employed, and their effects.

Media reports were obtained through nine Lexis/Nexis searches using the terms, "state flag" and the names of the three universities over three time periods, from January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2016; from January 1, 2017 to December 31, 2019, and from January 1 to December 31, 2020. The time periods were selected based on expected media coverage during three phases of crisis response from the universities—the first covering the period when each removed the flag from its campuses, the last covering a period during which the universities' advocacy for a new state flag contributed to flag change, and an interim period during which the crisis subsided, at least as it relates to substantial media coverage.

In conducting the content analysis, the online article was established as the unit of analysis and three coders, all public relations professionals with more than 10 years of experience, participated in a pretest in which they each independently coded the same 10 articles on 11 items, including: 1. The reach of the publication; 2. The year of publication from 2015 to 2020); 3. The university or universities included in the article; 4. The focus of the article; 5. Inclusion/Exclusion of historical context; 6. Inclusion/Exclusion of

current climate on campus; 7. Source words/actions that prompted the coverage; 8. Tone of quotations from students or faculty, if applicable; 9. Tone of quotations from NCAA, SEC, or Conference USA officials, if applicable; 10. The response strategy, using Coombs' categorization, of the university/universities; and 11. Attribution of a contribution to legislative action to change the state flag by the universities.

On 3 of the 11 items (reach, year of publication, and tone of quotations from NCAA, SEC, of Conference USA officials), 100 percent agreement was achieved from all three coders on the 10 articles. On 6 additional items (university/universities represented, current climate, source words, tone of quotes from students and faculty, response strategy, contribution to legislative action), 70 to 90 percent agreement across all three coders was achieved, while 100 percent agreement was achieved among two coders on all items. On the remaining two items (article focus, historical context), less than 70 percent agreement was achieved across all three coders, and in one case 100 percent agreement of two coders was achieved for the 10 articles.

Following the pretest, an additional group discussion was held to discuss questions and adjustments to the coding instructions and categories. In addition to clarifying comments, some modifications were made to the coding instructions and categories. Those included:

1. The removal of the "All three universities" as a potential response to question No. 3. In addition, if the article did not name a specific university, but rather references "universities," coders were instructed to select "More than one university."

2. The final wording of Question No. 7 was changed from “most quotes” to “emphasizes the position of” as to avoid having coders count quotes and to include paraphrased comments. The researcher clarified that the goal of the question was to determine if the article emphasized the point of view and/or actions of a particular group of people. For example, if the student government group passed a resolution, and the article referenced the resolution but did not include a quote from an elected student representative, the coding nevertheless reflected that the article emphasizes the position of students.
3. In Questions No. 8 and No. 9, the response labeled “neutral” was updated to “balanced or neutral.”

The final coding sheet is included as Appendix C.

Articles were then identified by the researcher to be coded by the three public relations professionals through a mixed-method selection process. Specific effort was made to include all articles from each of the three universities’ student newspapers from 2015 to 2020, as those publications were the most likely to not only cover the events closely, but more importantly, include insight on the relationship of the universities with key publics, including students and faculty. These articles were identified by searches for the term “state flag” on the websites for *The Daily Mississippian* at the University of Mississippi, *The Reflector* at Mississippi State University, and *The Student Printz* at the University of Southern Mississippi. Articles from outside of the time period examined as part of this study, 2015 through 2020, were excluded from analysis. A total of 69 articles from student newspapers were coded, including 29 from *The Daily Mississippian*, 23

from *The Reflector*, and 17 from *The Student Printz*. The researcher then attempted to identify an approximately equal number of articles that would be representative of local/state, national and international coverage of the issue as it related to Mississippi universities through a Lexis/Nexis search using the terms, “state flag” + “Mississippi” + “university,” which resulted in approximately 1,600 articles from the years 2015 to 2020. The researcher then selected every 20th article from the results, excluding those that were repetitive either because it was a duplicate of a student newspaper article already included or a wire story already included, or was clearly a re-publication of a press release from a university. In all, an additional 63 articles were selected through the Lexis/Nexis search, for a total of 132 total articles coded by the three public relations professionals.

The articles were then coded over a four-week time period, with a summary of the key items to be coded and their associated research questions located below:

Table 2. *Coded Items*

<p>Historical context.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Article does not include references to prior, similar debates or issues at the university referenced in the article. 2. Article includes references to prior, similar debates or issues and is positive in tone. 3. Article includes references to prior, similar debates or issues and is neutral in tone. 4. Article includes references to prior, similar debates or issues and is negative in tone. 	<p>Research Question No. 3: To what extent did the strategies align with those recommended by Situational Crisis Communication Theory?</p>
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Table 2 (continued).

<p>Current climate.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Article does not include references to similar ongoing debates or issues at the university referenced in the article (in addition to the flag). 2. Article includes references to similar, ongoing debates or issues at the university. 3. Article includes references to national debates or issues. 4. Article includes both references to ongoing debates or issues at both the university and on the national level. 	<p>Research Question No. 1A and 1B: To what Situational Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did students and faculty assign responsibility to university administrators for flying the state flag in 2015 and 2016—victim, accidental, or intentional?</p> <p>To what Strategic Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did students and faculty assign responsibility to university administrators for advocating for a new flag in 2020—victim, accidental, or intentional?</p> <p>Research Question No. 3: To what extent did the strategies align with those recommended by Situational Crisis Communication Theory?</p>
<p>Tone of quote(s) or paraphrased quotes from student(s) or faculty (to include quotes from individuals or governing bodies like the Faculty Senate).</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Article did not include quotes from a student or faculty member. 2. Positive toward the university. 3. Balanced or neutral. 4. Negative toward the university. 	<p>Research Question No. 1A and 1B: To what Situational Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did students and faculty assign responsibility to university administrators for flying the state flag in 2015 and 2016—victim, accidental, or intentional? To what Strategic Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did students and faculty assign responsibility to university administrators for advocating for a new flag in 2020—victim, accidental, or intentional?</p>

Table 2 (continued).

<p>For articles that include quote(s) from university officials, which crisis response strategy is being employed?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Article did not include quote(s) from university administrator. 2. Denial – Removes any connection between the organization and the crisis 3. Diminish - The crisis is not as bad as you think.” “The University lacks control over the crisis. 4. Rebuild - An attempt to improve the organization’s reputation by offering aid to victims. 	<p>Research Question No. 2A and 2B: What response strategy was employed—in 2015/2016 and in 2020?</p>
<p>Contribution to legislative action to retire the flag.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No association of an effect of the university/universities on the legislative decision to retire the flag—either by direct attribution or inference—is included in the article. 2. University/universities words or actions is identified as a factor on the legislative decision to retire the flag. 3. University/universities words or actions is inferred as a factor on the legislative decision to retire the flag. 	<p>Research Question No. 4: Did the public relations strategies and tactics result in a positive public relations outcome for the universities?</p>

Social Media. A search of the three universities Facebook pages took place on December 7, 2020. All three pages attract large audiences from multiple key publics, including students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors to the universities and fans of athletics teams. As of December 7, 2020, 97,210 Facebook accounts followed the University of Mississippi's page; 88,792 accounts followed the University of Southern Mississippi's page; and, 190,549 accounts followed the Mississippi State University page.

On each of the three Facebook pages, the search term used was "state flag" and posts were filtered by date, using June 18-29, 2020, to compile posts during the period of greatest advocacy by the universities leading up to, and the day after, the legislative vote to retire the state flag on June 28, 2020. An additional search of references to "state flag" of the years including the removal of the state flag from each university's campus—2015 for the University of Mississippi and the University of Southern Mississippi, and 2016 for Mississippi State University—revealed no posts specific to the removal. Notably, these searches returned many more results than posts by the universities, as users continued to comment on the issue on unrelated posts, long before and after the universities ceased to publicly comment the issue. Users commented about the University of Mississippi's decision to remove the state flag on October 26, 2015, on 27 different posts from September 20 through December 27, 2015, including on 16 unrelated posts in October 2015. Users also commented on older posts, and continued to comment on many posts throughout the end of the calendar year, despite no engagement from the university. Users commented about the University of Southern Mississippi's decision on October 28, 2015, on 47 different posts from July 6 through December 5, including 26 posts in October and 14 in November. When it was revealed through media reports that

Mississippi State University removed the state flag on campus in August 2016, users commented on 26 Mississippi State Facebook posts from April 6 through November 14, including 15 posts in September.

Although each university failed to engage users on the issue on Facebook in 2015 and 2016, each did so in 2020, with Mississippi State University by far the most frequent user of Facebook, posting 16 times on the issue from June 18 through June 29, 2020. On June 18, the university posted a statement from President Mark Keenum in response to the statements from the NCAA and Southeastern Conference. On June 19, 2020, all three universities shared a joint statement from all eight leaders (seven presidents and the University of Mississippi chancellor), in support of the NCAA's position on the state flag. On June 24, Mississippi State shared Chief Communications Officer Sid Salter's post of a photo of the presidents at the Capitol, and the university's frequency of posts increased to nine posts, including videos and photos of Mississippi State athletics administrators and coaches meeting with Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann and Speaker of the House Philip Gunn on June 25. On June 28, when legislators voted to retire the state flag, Mississippi State University posted four times to the primary university Facebook account, while the University of Southern Mississippi posted a link to a statement from President Rodney D. Bennett.

Interviews. Interviews, according to Creswell (1994), provide an advantage of allowing for informants to provide historical information and for control of the line of questioning.

Interviews were requested of and granted by the top administrator at each of the three universities. These interviews assisted the researcher in answering Research

Question No. 2A and 2B: What response strategy was employed—in 2015/2016 and in 2020?, and Research Question No. 4: Did the public relations strategies and tactics result in a positive public relations outcome for the universities? Subjects included the three institutional executive officers of the universities at time of the flag change in 2020—Chancellor Glenn Boyce of the University of Mississippi, President Mark Keenum of Mississippi State University, and President Rodney D. Bennett of the University of Southern Mississippi. Keenum and Bennett served as presidents of their respective institutions for the duration of the time period examined as part of this study, while Boyce previously served as Commissioner of Higher Education for the State of Mississippi prior to taking on his new role in recent years as the University of Mississippi's Chancellor. All interviews were conducted by the researcher, with Bennett's taking place in person on June 21, 2021, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi; and Boyce's, and Keenum's taking place via video conference on August 19, 2021, and August 24, 2021, respectively. Each interview featured open-ended questions and lasted approximately 35-45 minutes. Transcripts are provided as part of Appendix B.

As Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory considers the relationship an organization has with key publics, the interviewer inquired specifically about interactions with, and considerations of the opinions of students and faculty on the issue, as well as the NCAA's and conferences' postseason bans—the SEC's for the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University, and Conference USA for the University of Southern Mississippi. When applicable, the researcher inquired about the process and considerations regarding the decisions to remove the flag from campuses in 2015 and 2016, as well as the public advocacy building to the 2020 vote. Finally, the researcher

asked all interviewees to reflect upon the time period from 2015 and 2020 and offer evaluations of the effectiveness of the universities' public relations strategies, and to convey their perceptions of the universities' role in the debate.

The following measures were implemented for the benefit of the informants, per Creswell's guidance regarding ethical considerations. First, research objectives were articulated in writing in advance and then at the beginning of each interview to ensure the informant's clear understanding. Second, the researcher obtained permission from the interviewee to proceed with the study as articulated. Third, a research exemption form was filed with the University of Southern Mississippi's Institutional Review Board. Fourth, the researcher informed the interviewees of all data collection devices and activities, including audio records of the interviews, until such time as a transcript was produced. Fifth, transcriptions of the interviews were made available to the informants. Following review of the transcript by the researcher and interviewee or his designee, the researcher deleted the audio recording as agreed upon in advance of the interview. Sixth, the interviewee's rights and wishes were considered when choices were made regarding the reporting of data. Seventh, each interviewee agreed to be identified as for the purposes of this dissertation.

CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

Utilizing four data sources—official statements and press releases, mass media coverage, social media feedback, and interviews with top university administrators—this dissertation closely examines the public relations strategies and tactics of Mississippi’s three largest universities, the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi, as they responded to the state flag crisis from 2015 through 2020. The data sources reveal that the universities quickly moved from a public relations response strategy intent to diminish the organization’s responsibility for the crisis in summer 2015 to one intent to rebuild its reputation with key publics, including students and faculty in fall 2015 and spring 2016, by removing Mississippi’s state flag from their campuses. And by 2020, while students and faculty no longer were calling for direct action from the universities, those key publics were joined by the universities’ athletics-affiliated organizations, including the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Southeastern Conference, and Conference USA, in calling for the state’s top public officials to change the flag. That year, the universities continued with a strategy that included rebuilding and maintaining their relationships with those key publics in calling for change. In the end, the advocacy contributed to flag change in Mississippi, with no identifiable long-term negative effects for the universities from supporters of the retired flag.

Data Sources

Official Websites. The researcher was able to identify 12 official statements and news releases on the university websites of the University of Mississippi, Mississippi

State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi, as well as the site of the governing body of the institutions, Mississippi Public Universities, from 2015 through 2020, the year the state legislature retired the state flag featuring the Confederate battle emblem. A search on each of the four websites using the term “state flag” produced two unique results on the University of Mississippi’s website; four unique results on Mississippi State University’s website; four unique results on the University of Southern Mississippi’s website; and two unique results on the Mississippi Public Universities website, both from 2020.

The first official statement from a university in 2015 was located on the Mississippi State University website, which contained an unattributed statement on June 23, 2015 (Mississippi State University, 2015), less than a week following the Charleston murders on June 17, 2015, and that was followed by a news release on August 21, 2015 announcing the Student Association Senate and Faculty Senate vote on resolutions in favor of a new flag (Salter, 2015). In the June 23, 2015, statement, Mississippi State University said, in part, “In 2001, the MSU Faculty Senate voted overwhelmingly in support of changing the state flag of Mississippi prior to the failed statewide voter referendum on that question. Other than lawful displays of the state flag, the symbols in question are not associated with our university.” The statement is indicative of a diminish crisis strategy in the Strategic Crisis Communications Theory categorizations. The August 21, 2015, news release indicated that the Mississippi State Faculty Senate, which is the elected body representing university faculty, called for a new redesigned state flag by a vote of 37 to 1 on Friday, August 21, while the student vote was 20 to 4, with 5 abstentions. The release indicated that this was the second such vote for both elected

bodies in Mississippi State University history, with the first for each coming in 2001, when faculty senators voted 26 to 0 with 5 abstentions, to support the new state flag design and the Student Association Senate also expressed their support. Mississippi voters rejected a new flag design on April 17, 2001 (Salter, 2001).

Two days following the Mississippi State University statement, the University of Southern Mississippi also posted an unattributed statement on the university's position on the state flag. That statement, which could also be classified as diminish in the Strategic Crisis Communications Theory framework, said in part, "Our commitment to inclusion compels us to recognize that the current state flag does not represent the spirit of all Mississippians, and as such should continue to be discussed in an educated and civil manner" (The University of Southern Mississippi, 2015).

While both Mississippi State University and the University of Southern Mississippi issued statements in June 2015, the University of Mississippi was the first to announce direct action, with a press release on October 26, 2015, that communicated Interim Chancellor Morris Stocks' direction to lower the state flag on the University of Mississippi's campuses, becoming the fourth Mississippi public university to do so, following the state's three public Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Alcorn State University, Jackson State University, and Mississippi Valley State University. The release included quotes from Stocks, as well as indicated broad on-campus support for a new flag, including references to resolutions from the Student Senate, the Faculty Senate, the Graduate Student Council, and the Staff Council. "The University of Mississippi community came to the realization years ago that the Confederate battle flag did not represent many of our core values, such as civility and respect for others," Stocks said.

“Since that time, we have become a stronger and better university. We join other leaders in our state who are calling for a change in the state flag” (The University of Mississippi, 2015). The decision to lower the state flag at the University of Mississippi was the first public relations action to firmly place a university in a rebuild public relations strategy in the Strategic Crisis Communications Theory framework, a strategy the University of Southern Mississippi soon mirrored.

Two days after the University of Mississippi’s action, University of Southern Mississippi President Rodney D. Bennett announced via email and on the university’s website his decision to lower the state flag on flagpoles on its campuses in Hattiesburg and Long Beach, Mississippi, on October 28, 2015. Bennett said:

I have chosen to raise American flags on all University of Southern Mississippi flagpoles to remind the University community of what unites us. We have all chosen to work, study and live in a country in which debates like those around the state flag of Mississippi can take place and ideas can be civilly expressed and advanced. While I love the state of Mississippi, there is passionate disagreement about the current state flag on our campuses and in our communities. I am looking forward to a time when this debate is resolved and USM raises a state flag that unites us (Bennett, 2015).

While those decisions sparked discussions, debates, proposed legislation, and protests, the universities largely chose to refrain from entering additional public debate for the next few years. Notably, searches of the official websites also failed to reveal new content related to the state flag in the years from 2016 to 2019, a time period that included Mississippi State University’s removal of the flag from its campus, as well as

multiple legislative attempts to force universities to fly the state flag. When Mississippi State University chose to fully remove the flag from its campuses in 2016, it did so without a public announcement as part of an intentional strategy (Keenum, 2021, full interview transcripts are presented in Appendix B.). Mississippi State University's full removal of the flag came to be known only after media reports inquired in the months after its removal.

In 2020, though, each of the universities renewed its efforts to advocate for flag change in conjunction with a nationwide social justice movement and following announcements that the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Southeastern Conference, and Conference USA would refrain from hosting postseason play in the state of Mississippi—decisions that would result in millions of dollars in lost economic impact to the state, as each of the three universities had hosted high-profile and well-attended events in recent years. By 2020, the University of Mississippi website contained a microsite that provided information on the flag's history, as well as the process for selecting a proposed new flag. As part of this site, the university said the state flag “has become a nightmare for legislators and a controversy that will not subside without a fresh approach” (The University of Mississippi, 2020). These statements demonstrate the University of Mississippi's acknowledgement of the position of key publics and are indicative of the bold action of a rebuild strategy in the Coombs classification.

The student affairs section of the University of Southern Mississippi website included an open letter from June 9, 2020, from former student affairs professionals at all three universities, in which they implored students and alumni to advocate for a new flag. They wrote the following, in part:

The three of us have over 100 years of combined experience in working with college students at Mississippi's three largest universities. We live in a state with great potential and you are that potential. While Mississippi has come a long way from its tumultuous past, we still have a long way to go.

At Southern Miss, State, and Ole Miss we served as your advocates. We are now asking and encouraging you to advocate for the state of Mississippi by involving yourselves in changing the state flag. It's time (Abraham, Paul, Reardon, 2020).

A statement attributed to President Mark Keenum in response to the Southeastern Conference's statement on the flag was posted on June 18, 2020, in which he re-emphasized his personal opinion to change the flag and referenced his recent correspondence with the governor, lieutenant governor, and Speaker of the House that called the legislature to take up a debate on the issue.

I have great respect for (Southeastern Conference) Commissioner Greg Sankey, and I understand why he has taken this position regarding Mississippi's state flag. Clearly, the current national climate is such that this debate may produce unintended consequences for our student-athletes here at Mississippi State University and those at the University of Mississippi. In addition, there may be similar unintended consequences for academic pursuits at our all our state's public universities and negative economic impacts on the state's communities as well.

Since 2015, our Student Association, Robert Holland Faculty Senate and university administration have been firmly on record in support of changing the

state flag. I have reiterated that view to our state's leaders on multiple occasions, including during face-to-face discussions in recent days and hours. On June 12, I wrote to the governor, lieutenant governor and speaker of the Mississippi House reaffirming that support. The letter said, in part, that our flag should be unifying, not a symbol that divides us. I emphasized that it is time for a renewed, respectful debate on this issue (Keenum, 2020).

Both results from the Mississippi Public Universities' website came from June 2020—a joint statement on June 19, 2020, from the leaders of all eight public universities in support of the NCAA's position to withhold postseason athletics competition from the state until the flag was changed (Blanton, 2020) and a media advisory on June 25, 2020, promoting the names of athletics administrators and coaches from each university who were advocating for a flag change at the State Capitol that day. Both items are indicative of a rebuild strategy and demonstrate the universities were pushing forward for a state flag change. The June 19, 2020, statement, read in part, as follows:

Several years ago, our universities recognized that the Mississippi state flag in its current form is divisive and chose to lower the flag on our campuses. Today, we are committed to continuing to do our part to ensure Mississippi is united in its pursuit of a future that is free of racism and discrimination. Such a future must include a new state flag.

In keeping the current state flag, Mississippi will potentially forego the millions of dollars in economic impact that NCAA postseason events bring to our state (Nave, LaForge, Hudson, et al., 2020).

As the vote from the state legislature, subsequently signed by Gov. Tate Reeves retired the flag and established a process for the creation of a new flag, Keenum offered his gratefulness to the state officials on June 28, 2020. “Our elected officials provided a thoughtful, engaged audience to university leaders and to our MSU contingent who traveled to Jackson to respectfully advocate for change,” he said in part (Keenum, 2020).

Finally, on November 4, 2020, Bennett issued a statement following the public vote on the state flag, pledging his commitment to raising the new state flag upon its formal adoption (Bennett, 2020). “The vote to adopt a new state flag marks a historic moment, one that positions Mississippi for advancing our state’s growth and development at national and international levels. Once the new design is formally adopted as the official state flag by the Legislature, the University will raise the new flag, as well as once again raising the USM flag, on the campuses of The University of Southern Mississippi.”

The analysis of postings to the universities’ websites reveals public relations strategies that began early in 2015 in Strategic Crisis Communications Theory’s diminish category quickly moved into the rebuild category, as support on campus from students and faculty rallied, and clearly remained in the rebuild category in 2020.

Mass Media Coverage. An examination of mass media coverage of the state flag as it relates to the three universities reveals a great deal of coverage on both the local and state level as well as on the national level. That coverage peaked in 2015 following the University of Mississippi’s removal of the state flag from campus and again in 2020, as the universities aggressively advocated for a change to the flag. The coverage supports the following conclusions by the researcher:

- Key publics, including students, faculty, and alumni, assigned an intentional level of responsibility for the state flag crisis to the universities until each lowered or removed the state flag in 2015 and 2016, and key publics assigned an accidental level of responsibility for the crisis to the universities in 2020.
- The public relations strategy of the universities quickly moved from the Strategic Crisis Communications Theory category of diminish to the category of rebuild in 2015 and 2016 and remained in the rebuild category in 2020, when the state flag was retired by state officials and a new flag was selected by Mississippians.
- The rebuild strategy aligned with Strategic Crisis Communications Theory's recommendations based on the universities' prior histories, current climate, and an initial level of assigned responsibility for the crisis by key publics.
- The rebuild strategy did not produce observable negative public relations effects.

In 2015 and 2016, media coverage was most significant and most frequent leading up to, during, and just after the University of Mississippi made the decision to remove the flag from campus on October 26, 2015. While coverage of the University of Southern Mississippi's decision to lower the state flag on October 28, 2015, generated media coverage as well, far more outlets covered the University of Mississippi's decision as the first of the historically white universities to remove the flag. Mississippi State University's decision in 2016, as well as the events leading to it, generated coverage as well, but again not to the extent of coverage about the University of Mississippi.

The content of media coverage from 2015 and 2016 makes it clear that the Charleston mass murder had implications well beyond South Carolina. In early October 2015, Florida legislators voted to remove the Confederate battle flag from the state's

official seal (Clark, 2015), and for the first time since 2001, serious debate about the state of Mississippi's flag began taking place—if not at the State Capitol, then among its residents, especially those who lived and worked in college towns and cities. The earliest media reports provide evidence of an intentional level of responsibility that key publics were assigning to the universities.

Media Coverage of the University of Mississippi. The Sunday, October 18, 2015, edition of *Oxford Eagle* was among the first media reports examined as part of this dissertation. The University of Mississippi's host city's newspaper reported that the University of Mississippi chapter of the NAACP had held an on-campus rally the previous Friday to encourage members of the university's Associated Study Body Senate to push for the flag's removal from campus (Berryhill, 2015). The protest was met with resistance by off-campus groups, so much so that university police called on the assistance of the Oxford Police Department and FBI. Journalist Lyndy Berryhill's article included the opposing viewpoints, and the protest prompted the first public statements from the University of Mississippi on the issue. Quoting Assistant Director of Public Relations Mitchell Diggs, Berryhill wrote, "As a state institution we fly the flags representing our state and nation; however, as a university committed to fostering a welcoming and inclusive campus for all students, we continue to join other leaders in Mississippi to encourage our government to change the state flag." This position—one that called for change but did not take direct action—was similar across the three universities, which were now all on the public record following the Charleston mass murders. That would soon change at the University of Mississippi, which was also searching for a new permanent chancellor at the time of the debate. The Friday protest

had sparked action, first from the Associated Student Body, and then from the university's Faculty Senate, which both attracted national media attention with their votes to remove the flag from campus.

The Huffington Post, *MSNBC*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* were among those who reported on the Student Senate vote on Tuesday, October 20, 2015, which called for the university to remove the flag from campus with 33 in favor of removal, 15 opposed, and 1 abstaining (Liebelson, 2015; Brown, 2015; Gitau, 2015; Moyer, 2015). Nearly all media reports referenced the Charleston shooting as prompting the renewed conversation on the University of Mississippi's campus. "Attitudes toward the flag and other symbols of the Confederacy are swiftly changing," Liebelson wrote in the *Huffington Post*, noting the Florida Senate's vote to remove the Confederate emblem from its state seal. Gitau too, wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor* that Mississippi "is also experiencing a shift in thinking on the flag and its modern legacy." Nevertheless, Liebelson reported that removal of the flag from campus was not universally supported. Student senator Andrew Soper began an online petition to keep the flag flying and received hundreds of signatures in support. Members of the Ku Klux Klan and pro-secessionist groups also showed up in opposition of the NAACP rally on Friday. In reporting on the student vote in the *Washington Post*, Moyer provided additional context through which the University of Mississippi was navigating this important decision related to the state flag. Moyer opened his report with a paragraph not on the vote, but by providing a brief history of the University of Mississippi and issues of race—noting that much of the student body joined the Confederate cause in the Civil War, and references to Colonel Reb, a Confederate cemetery, and a Confederate memorial. "It is, after all, the

University of Mississippi,” Moyer wrote. Moyer also quoted undergraduate student Dominique Scott, who referenced the history of the university’s nickname, “Ole Miss,” as a term slaves used to refer to the matriarchs of plantations. In the immediate hours following the student vote, the University of Mississippi’s spokesperson, Danny Blanton, said the university would consider input from additional campus representative bodies before making a decision.

Although garnering less media attention than the NAACP protest or the Student Senate vote, the university’s Staff Council and Faculty Senate would also soon offer support to remove the flag from campus. On October 22, 2015, the state’s largest newspaper, the *Clarion Ledger*, reported that the Staff Council had released a statement of support, while the Faculty Senate voted 41-1-0 in favor of a “joint passage of the ASB Senate Resolution” (Harris, 2015).

Those collective actions by the representative bodies on the University of Mississippi’s campus were documented by media and preceded Interim Chancellor Morris Stocks’ decision to order the state flag removed on October 26, 2015, just days after students, staff, and faculty called for its removal. That decision prompted significant local, national, and international media attention. The *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, NPR, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, and *Time* magazine, were among those reporting on the decision, as was the BBC, Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, and *Reuters*.

Few media reports, regardless of source—local, national, or international—varied significantly in content. Most reports announced the decision, quoted from the official statement, and provided a timeline of events leading up to the decision. Harold Gater (2015), reporting from the Jackson, Mississippi-based *Clarion Ledger*, included a short

quotation from the university's official statement, "As Mississippi's flagship university, we have a deep love and respect for our state," Gater quoted Stocks. "Because the flag remains Mississippi's official banner, this was a hard decision. I understand the flag represents tradition and honor to some. But to others, the flag means that some members of the Ole Miss family are not welcomed or valued."

Daniel Victor (2015) wrote in the *New York Times* that the decision brought a "quiet end to a contentious campus debate" as university police officers lowered the flag. Victor's report outlined the recent timeline of events, including the NAACP rally on October 16, 2015, and the subsequent votes from the student government and Faculty Senate and also referenced the objections of multiple, prominent politicians, including Governor Phil Bryant, who said in a statement that he believed publicly funded institutions should fly the state flag.

Additional reports, including those by Susan Svriuga (2015) in the *Washington Post*, Alexandra Starr (2015) in NPR, and Josh Sanburn in *Time*, also provided an outline of recent events beginning their timelines with the Charleston mass murder. The *Washington Post* article also provided a brief history of the University of Mississippi, which Svriuga writes, is "deeply embedded," "making change difficult," in which he extensively quoted University of Mississippi Professor Emeritus of History David Sansing, as Sansing discussed the role of students in the Civil War, the unsuccessful fight to prevent the enrollment of James Meredith in 1962, and the mascot "Colonel Reb." Svriuga wrote of Sansing recalling a presentation by Meredith to one of Sansing's history classes in which Meredith said that times had changed. "If you had been here 10 years ago you would have acted like they did. If they were here today, they would act like you

did,” Sansing recalled Meredith’s reply. Sanburn’s story also included short paragraphs on the university’s history and association with Confederate symbols.

In covering the decision to remove the flag at the University of Mississippi, Krishnadev Calamur’s report in *The Atlantic* (2015) suggested the Charleston mass murder sparked renewed discussion of the state flag, but it did not include the debate on campus. Calamur indicated the political debate was unlikely to advance in the State Capitol, though, reporting that then-Governor Phil Bryant would not call legislators into a special session to debate the flag. Elliott McLaughlin’s CNN story (2015) was one of the few national stories that included original quotations from University of Mississippi students, as they reacted to the decision. Buka Okoye, president of the school’s NAACP chapter, expressed pleasant surprise at the timing of the decision, as it appeared the naming of a new university chancellor was imminent. Student senator Allen Coon shared his pleasure with the decision, while Soper expressed disappointment in the process, which he indicated should have gone “through the state of Mississippi,” indicating a legislative process or a vote by the people of Mississippi, a familiar argument among those both on- and off-campus who opposed the decision.

International coverage of Stocks’ decision at the University of Mississippi followed along the same lines as national coverage, as the BBC (2015) reported on the decision and the events leading up to it, beginning with the Charleston mass murder. Like the BBC, Al Jazeera’s report (2015) also pulled from an Associated Press story, as did *The Guardian* (2015) and *Reuters* (2015).

While media coverage peaked on October 26, 2015, the day of the flag removal, the examination of coverage of the University of Mississippi from 2015 and 2016 also

resulted in related items that provide an indication of the university's ongoing relationship with affected groups, including a student's defacement of an on-campus statue of Meredith that was published across the country, including the *Washington Post* (Svrluga, 2016). The number of media reports from prominent sources make clear that while each of the three universities had challenges related to its prior history with similar issues, the University of Mississippi's history presented it with the most challenging public relations considerations. Even as media coverage waned in the years from 2017 to 2019, the coverage did include a few notable national stories that placed the flag conversation in the larger context of race relations at the University of Mississippi, such as a story by the *Chronicle* titled, "The Trouble with 'Ole Miss'" (Parry, 2019). The article detailed the long and troublesome history of the university with race-related issues, as well as its current challenges with racist symbols.

As it was for Mississippi State University, media coverage of the University of Mississippi in 2020 was highlighted by the NCAA and SEC's involvement in the issue (Pickman, 2020), as well as athletics administrators' and coaches' advocacy for a new flag (Vance and Middleton, 2020). Student advocacy and related stories on the removal of the flag from other cities and entities were also included in the coverage.

Media Coverage of Mississippi State University. Media coverage of Mississippi State University was less frequent than that of the University of Mississippi from 2015 to 2019, in part due to the lack of visibility of the state flag on its Starkville campus in 2015, in part due to an intentional decision by President Mark Keenum to refrain from announcing full removal of the flag from its campus (Keenum, 2021), and in part due to the sequencing of events in which the University of Mississippi fully removed the flag

from its campus first. The earliest coverage came in July 2015 following the Charleston murders, as media reports documented Keenum's call for immediate debate on the state flag and in the summer and fall of 2015, when media reports documented continued calls for change to the state flag by Mississippi State University faculty and students.

Mississippi State University's student newspaper, *The Reflector*, reported on September 9, 2015, that the Student Association Senate passed Resolution 12, which called for the state legislature to take up flag legislation and was delivered to Keenum, President of the Faculty Senate Cody Coyne, Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant, Mississippi Lt. Governor Tate Reeves, and Mississippi Speaker of the House, Philip Gunn (Flinn, 2015). In early November 2015, Keenum stressed to media that the university's Faculty Senate and Student Government Association had both called for change again in 2015 as they had done in 2001, while Director of Public Affairs Sid Salter indicated that the flag was flying only in limited locations on campus (Flinn, Bowden, and Wimbley, 2015).

Prior to Mississippi State University's decision to fully remove the flag from campus in 2016, media coverage provides an indication that key publics still were assigning the university an intentional level of responsibility for the crisis through its flying the flag on campus. In April 2016, a group of students calling themselves the Lucky 7 organized a rally and march to Lee Hall, which houses Mississippi State University's administrative offices, calling for the full removal of the flag from campus (Robertson, 2020). The Lucky 7 included the removal of the flag among a list of demands of the university, a list that also included a call for increased minority faculty representation and support for black student organizations. And it was through media coverage that it was revealed that Mississippi State University had fully removed the flag

from campus, when, on August 29, 2016, the student newspaper, *The Reflector*, reported that the state flag had been removed from remaining locations at Mississippi State (Gillon, 2016). *The Reflector* reported that the remaining flags were removed at the request of individual units on campus with Keenum's approval to proceed. In the article, Director of Public Affairs Sid Salter called the removal of the last flags part of an evolving process dating back to 2001, when the first calls to remove the flag came from faculty, students, and administrators. Overall, coverage of Mississippi State University in 2015 and 2016 was primarily focused on two topics—advocacy for a new flag by students and faculty, the university's removal of the flag from campus (Grinberg, 2016), (Harris, 2016), and others. Coverage from 2017 to 2019 was limited and included minimal coverage of an on-campus art exhibit that presented alternatives to the state flag (Dantzler, 2016).

Similar to the University of Mississippi, media coverage of Mississippi State University peaked again in 2020, as each maintained a rebuild public relations strategy, and joined their key publics in advocating for a new state flag. Mississippi State University and the University of Mississippi's coverage was highlighted by the NCAA and SEC's calls to withhold postseason play from the state of Mississippi until the flag changed, and the media outlets frequently discussed Mississippi State University's and the University of Mississippi's role in tandem. A tweet by Mississippi State University's star running back Kylin Hill in favor of a new flag attracted national attention from media outlets, including *Sports Illustrated* (Dellinger, 2019).

Media Coverage of the University of Southern Mississippi. Media coverage of the University of Southern Mississippi as it relates to the flag issue also was most extensive

in 2015 and in 2020, although not as extensive as the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University. Coverage, nevertheless, was similar in content to the other two universities and included the removal of the state flag from campus (Magee, 2015) and (Ciurczak, 2015), advocacy at the State Capitol, athletics-related entities, and the presidents' call for a new flag. In 2015 and 2016, media reported on the decision to lower the state flag, protests that encouraged the decision, protests of the decision, and an interaction involving a University Police Department officer and pro-flag supporters (WDAM, 2016).

University President Rodney D. Bennett's decision to lower the state flag generated media attention that included the university's student newspaper, *The Student Printz*, and the local daily newspaper, the *Hattiesburg American*. The *Hattiesburg American's* coverage indicated that approximately 20 students and faculty members attended the protest, as well as a handful of counter-protestors. The protest was organized by Susan Hrostowski, an associate professor of social work, who said the flag was an offensive symbol that should not be flown over public buildings. The article also included quotes from students who were for and against Bennett's decision, an indication that not all members of the university's key publics were supportive of flag change at the time (Ciurczak, 2015). The university's student newspaper, *The Student Printz*, also covered the lowering of the flag and the protest, quoting from the flag's supporters and detractors (Thornhill, 2015). A day later, *The Student Printz* called the decision controversial and credited the protestors with encouraging Bennett's decision. The article again included quotes from university stakeholders for and against the decision (Beauti, 2015). In the days that followed, media covered the continued debate among faculty, staff, students, and

community members. Media reported that students protesting the decision were met with counter-protesters three days following the lowering of the flag and the university's Student Government Association had collected opinions of students (Ware, 2015).

Like coverage of the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University, media coverage of the University of Southern Mississippi waned in the weeks after Bennett's decision to lower the state flag with a few notable exceptions, including protests from a relatively small group of flag supporters that continued each Sunday for the next five years and generated minimal media coverage (Roll, 2017). Those protests reached a crescendo on a Sunday in 2017, as counter-protesters also numbered more than 100 in opposition of flag supporters, who by that time had protested on 95 consecutive Sundays (Clark, 2017). *The Student Printz* and others also covered various proposed legislation in the years of 2016 (Lavigne, 2016) and 2017, including a failed attempt to deny tax breaks to universities that refused to fly the flag (Bass, 2017). Other coverage from 2016 through 2019 was also minimal and included reports on a 2019 Governor's Debate, held on campus in Hattiesburg (Herrington, 2019), and on a movement by key publics to rename the university's McCain Library and Archives, named for the institution's fifth president, William D. McCain, who presided during Clyde Kennard's failed attempts to integrate the institution in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Notably, media coverage of the University of Southern Mississippi in 2020 was primarily limited to that which reported on all of the universities.

Content Analysis. As part of this study, an extensive content analysis of mass media coverage of the three universities and the state flag debate was conducted to assist in answering the research questions posed. Key results included the following:

- Evidence that each universities' poor prior history with issues of race supports the researcher's conclusion that rebuild is the preferred public relations strategy for each of the universities: Of the 50 articles that provided some historical details, 48 were coded as negative in tone, while 2 were neutral in tone. Zero articles which placed the current debate within a historical context were coded as positive in tone (Coding Category 5).
- Evidence that the current climate that included heightened awareness of social justice issues across the country, as well as on the universities' campuses, supports the researcher's conclusion that rebuild is the preferred public relations strategy for each of the universities: 59 percent of articles included references to ongoing debates on campuses or nationally, or both (Coding Category 6).
- Evidence that the universities engaged in a rebuild public relations strategy as the crisis continued: In 63 percent of the articles in which coders identified a response strategy (29 of 46), coders classified the response as rebuild. Only four times did a coder classify a response strategy as deny, and in each of those instances, the focus of the article was on an alternate event, only indirectly related to the state flag debate (Coding Category 10).
- Seventy-two percent (96) of articles came from local or state publications, while 20 percent (26) were from national sources.
- Forty percent (64) of articles came from the year 2020, while 19 percent (25) came from 2015, the year that the University of Mississippi and the University of Southern Mississippi lowered the state flag.

- Thirty-nine percent (52) of the articles referenced at least two of the universities, while 33 percent of the articles (44) focused on the University of Mississippi.
- Forty-one percent of the articles coded emphasized the position of students or student leaders, likely the result of the manner in which articles were selected for inclusion, which emphasized coverage of student newspapers, as outlined in the Method chapter.

Coders, three public relations professionals, each with at least 10 years of experience in the field, returned the following results:

Table 3. *Coding Category 1: The publication*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
Local/State media outlet	96 (72 percent)
Regional media outlet	2 (2 percent)
National media outlet	26 (20 percent)
International	8 (6 percent)

Table 4. *Coding Category 2: Year of publication*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
2015	25 (19 percent)
2016	7 (5 percent)
2017	17 (13 percent)
2018	2 (2 percent)
2019	17 (13 percent)
2020	64 (49 percent)

Table 5. *Coding Category 3: The following university/universities are referenced in the article*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
Mississippi State University	23 (17 percent)
The University of Mississippi	44 (33 percent)
The University of Southern Mississippi	13 (10 percent)
More than one university	52 (39 percent)

Table 6. *Coding Category 4: The focus of the article, as it relates to the universities*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
University's/Universities' officials' words or actions (for example, the article has been prompted by a statement from the university or an action).	42 (32 percent)
Universities' officials' words or actions are included, but are not the focus of the article.	54 (41 percent)
Universities' officials' words or actions are not referenced.	36 (27 percent)

Table 7. *Coding Category 5: Historical context*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
Article does not include references to prior, similar debates or issues at the university referenced in the article.	82 (62 percent)
Article includes references to prior, similar debates or issues and is positive in tone.	0 (0 percent)
Article includes references to prior, similar debates or issues and is neutral in tone.	2 (2 percent)
Article includes references to prior, similar debates or issues and is negative in tone.	48 (36 percent)

Table 8. *Coding Category 6: Current climate*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
Article does not include references to similar ongoing debates or issues at the university referenced in the article (in addition to the flag).	54 (41 percent)
Article includes references to similar, ongoing debates or issues at the university.	15 (11 percent)
Article includes references to national debates or issues.	34 (26 percent)
Article includes both references to ongoing debates or issues at both the university and national level.	33 (25 percent)

Table 9. *Coding Category 7: Article emphasizes the position of individuals/groups associated with a university*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
The article does not emphasize the position of an individual associated with the university.	63 (47 percent)
Yes – emphasizes the position of a university administrator.	18 (14 percent)
Yes – emphasizes the position of a student or student group.	41 (31 percent)
Yes – emphasizes the position of a faculty member or group.	6 (5 percent)
Yes – emphasizes the position of an athletics director or coach.	4 (3 percent)

Table 10. *Coding Category 8: Tone of quote(s) or paraphrased quotes from student(s) or faculty*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
Article did not include quotes from a student or faculty member.	66 (50 percent)
Positive toward the university.	6 (5 percent)
Balanced or neutral.	45 (34 percent)
Negative toward the university.	15 (11 percent)

Table 11. *Coding Category 9: Tone of quote(s) from NCAA/SEC/Conference USA officials*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
Article did not include quotes from NCAA/SEC/Conference USA officials.	111 (84 percent)
Positive toward the university.	2 (2 percent)
Balanced or neutral.	15 (11 percent)
Negative toward the university.	4 (3 percent)

Table 12. *Coding Category 10: For articles that include quote(s) from university officials, which crisis response strategy is being employed?*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
Article did not include quote(s) from university administrator.	86 (65 percent)
Denial – Removes any connection between the organization and the crisis.	4 (3 percent)
Diminish – “The crisis is not as bad as you think?”	13 (10 percent)
Rebuild - An attempt to improve the organization’s reputation by offering aid to victims.	29 (22 percent)

Table 13. *Coding Category 11: Contribution to legislative action to retire the flag (for 2020 only)*

Response	Frequency (Percentage)
No association of an effect of the university/universities on the legislative decision to retire the flag—either by direct attribution or inference—is included in the article.	113 (includes 2015-2019 total) (86 percent)
University/universities words or actions is identified as a factor on the legislative decision to retire the flag.	3 (2 percent)
University/universities words or actions is inferred as a factor on the legislative decision to retire the flag.	16 (12 percent)

The examination of media coverage, including the content analysis, provides important insight into the current climate, including relationships with key publics, as well as the historical context within which each university was shaping its public relations strategies. The media reports also documented the level at which students and faculty assigned responsibility to the universities for the crisis—intentional in 2015 and

2016, and accidental in 2020. This level of responsibility, combined with poor prior histories within the climate of the time, including relationships with students and faculty, resulted in the researcher's conclusion that the Strategic Crisis Communications Theory framework recommends a rebuild public relations strategy for the universities, which each engaged in as early as 2015, and continued through 2020, when a new flag was adopted for the state of Mississippi.

Social media. Facebook posts from each of the three universities, as well as user feedback, supported the researcher's conclusions that the universities were engaged in a rebuild strategy, and that by 2020, support for the universities' advocacy for a new state flag, emblematic of that strategy, was overwhelmingly positive. The posts and feedback examined were identified on December 7, 2020, through searches on the primary Facebook pages for the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi. The three pages attract large audiences from multiple key publics, including students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors to the universities and fans of the universities' athletics teams. As of December 7, 2020, 97,210 accounts followed the University of Mississippi's page; 88,792 accounts followed the University of Southern Mississippi's page; and, 190,549 accounts followed the Mississippi State University page.

On each of the three Facebook pages, the search term used was "state flag" and posts were filtered by date, using June 18-29, 2020, to compile posts during the period of greatest advocacy by the universities leading up to, and the day after, the legislative vote to retire the state flag on June 28, 2020. An additional search of references to "state flag" of the years including the removal of the state flag from each university's campus—2015

for the University of Mississippi and the University of Southern Mississippi, and 2016 for Mississippi State University—revealed no posts specific to the removal. Notably, these searches still returned results, even though posts were not initiated by the universities, as users continued to comment on the issue on unrelated posts, long before and after the universities ceased to publicly comment on the issue. While universities appeared reluctant to address the issue in 2015 and 2016 on Facebook, user comments revealed that this was a significant public relations concern for all three universities. Users negatively commented about the University of Mississippi’s decision to remove the state flag on October 26, 2015, on 27 different posts from September 20, 2015, through December 27, 2015, including on 16 unrelated posts in October 2015. Users also commented on older posts, as well as continuing to negatively comment on many posts throughout the end of the calendar year, despite no engagement from the university. Users negatively commented about the University of Southern Mississippi’s decision on October 28, 2015, on 47 different posts from July 6, 2016, through December 5, 2016, including 26 posts in October and 14 in November. When it was revealed through media reports that Mississippi State University removed the state flag on campus in August 2016, users negatively commented on 26 Mississippi State Facebook posts from April 6 through November 14, including 15 posts in September.

Although not part of the specific search parameters, the researcher also identified a Mississippi State University statement on the Charleston mass murder, attributed to President Keenum on June 23, 2015, that generated more than 3,800 Facebook reactions, along with 769 positive and negative comments and 1,000+ shares. The statement condemned the violence in Charleston and read, in part: “Other than lawful displays of

the state flag, the symbols in question are not associated with our university. As the most diverse university in the Southeastern Conference and the most diverse of the original land-grant universities in the country, Mississippi State remains committed to diversity, inclusion, equal opportunity and a culture of fellowship, tolerance and peace” (Keenum, 2015), an indication of a diminish public relations strategy in the Coombs classification.

By 2020, though, the tone of user comments had significantly changed, and provided additional evidence of the successes of what was clearly a rebuild public relations strategy with each receiving positive feedback on Facebook for its comments and role in flag change. Mississippi State University had by far the most frequently used institutional Facebook account, posting 16 times on the issue from June 18, 2020, through June 29, 2020. Each post received overwhelmingly positive feedback. A summary of the content and reactions to the post are included in the subsequent paragraphs.

On June 18, 2020, Mississippi State University posted to Facebook the statement from President Mark Keenum in response to the statements from the NCAA and Southeastern Conference. The statement read, in part, “I have great respect for Commissioner Greg Sankey, and I understand why he has taken this position regarding Mississippi’s state flag. Clearly, the current national climate is such that this debate may produce unintended consequences for our student athletes here at Mississippi State University and those at the University of Mississippi. In addition, there may be similar unintended consequences for academic pursuits at our all our state’s public universities and negative economic impacts on the state’s communities as well.” Feedback included 572 reactions (387 likes, 137 loves, 26 angry, 18 cares, 3 wow), as well as 118 primarily positive comments and 202 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).

On June 19, 2020, all three universities shared a joint statement from all eight leaders (seven presidents and the University of Mississippi chancellor), in support of the NCAA's position on the state flag. The Mississippi State University Facebook page included a headline with a link to a news release of the presidents' statement and returned 93 reactions (68 likes, 14 loves, 4 cares, 4 angry, 3 sad), as well as 18 primarily positive comments and 12 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020). The University of Southern Mississippi Facebook page included two paragraphs of the presidents' statement with a link to the news release of presidents' statement), which returned 212 reactions (148 likes, 55 loves, 8 cares, 1 angry), as well as 3 comments and 50 shares (The University of Southern Mississippi, 2020). And the University of Mississippi Facebook page included a quote from the release, attributed to Chancellor Boyce, with a link to the full statement that returned 154 reactions (121 likes, 15 loves, 8 sad, 7 angry, 2 cares), as well as 105 comments and 21 shares (The University of Mississippi, 2020).

On June 24, 2020, Mississippi State University shared Director of Public Affairs Sid Salter's post of a photo of the presidents at the Capitol, as the presidents advocated for a new state flag. That post returned 749 reactions (546 likes, 143 loves, 38 angry, 12 care, 5 sad, 4 wow), as well as 191 comments and 68 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).

On June 25, 2020, Mississippi State University's frequency of posts increased dramatically to nine posts, including videos and photos of Mississippi State athletics administrators and coaches meeting with Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann and Speaker of the House Philip Gunn. All received overwhelmingly positive feedback.

- The first post, shared from Mississippi State University Athletics, included photos of the arrival of athletics coaches and administrators at the Capitol to advocate a new flag and returned 642 reactions (489 likes, 135 loves, 14 angry, 3 care), as well as 101 mostly positive comments and 37 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).
- The second post, shared from the *Clarion Ledger*'s Facebook page, returned 323 reactions (220 likes, 72 loves, 18 angry, 9 cares, 4 sad), as well as 81 mostly positive comments and 8 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).
- The third post, shared from Salter's page, featured a photo of coaches talking and returned 316 reactions (229 likes, 56 loves, 18 angry, 10 cares, 3 sad), as well as 83 mostly positive comments and 4 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).
- The fourth post, shared from Salter's page, featured a press conference photo and returned 392 reactions (281 likes, 80 loves, 18 angry, 10 care, 3 sad), as well as 60 mostly positive comments and 16 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).
- The fifth post, also shared from Salter's page, featured a photo of a meeting with Lt. Gov. Hosemann and returned 366 reactions (276 likes, 65 loves, 19 angry, 4 cares, 2 sad), as well as 159 mostly positive comments and 27 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).
- The sixth post, also shared from Salter's page, featured a photo of a meeting with Speaker Gunn and returned 640 reactions (469 likes, 119

loves, 40 angry, 9 cares, 3 sad), as well as 234 mostly positive comments and 34 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).

- A seventh post was shared from the television station WTVA’s Facebook page, in which the station covered the advocacy at the Capitol, and returned 356 reactions (234 likes, 80 loves, 22 angry), including 108 mostly positive comments and 20 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).
- An eighth post, shared from Mississippi State University Athletics’ Facebook page, which featured a quote from Head Women's Basketball Coach Nikki McCray, returned 457 reactions (285 likes, 116 loves, 40 angry, 13 cares), including 210 mostly positive comments and 32 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).
- A ninth post shared a video from Mississippi State University Athletics’ Facebook page and returned 307 reactions (208 likes, 71 loves, 22 angry, 4 sad), as well as 176 comments and 21 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).

On June 28, 2020, when legislators voted to retire the state flag, Mississippi State University posted four times to the primary university Facebook account, while the University of Southern Mississippi posted a link to a statement from President Rodney D. Bennett. A summary of those Facebook posts and reactions are included here.

- Mississippi State University’s first post of the day featured a statement from President Keenum, in which he thanked state officials for their decision, saying, in part, “I heartily commend the Mississippi Legislature

for their vision, commitment, and courage in voting to give our state a new flag in which all Mississippians can feel unity and pride. I am also appreciative for the support of our governor in this endeavor. Our elected officials provided a thoughtful, engaged audience to university leaders and to our MSU contingent who traveled to Jackson to respectfully advocate for change.” The post returned 179 reactions (196 likes, 67 loves, 14 angry), as well as 71 mostly positive comments and 50 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).

- Mississippi State University’s second post was a video of the universities’ advocacy, shared from the university’s athletics Facebook page. The post returned 294 reactions (194 likes, 83 loves, 10 angry), as well as 50 mostly positive comments and 30 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).
- Mississippi State University’s third post was a share of a WCBI television news article that generated 513 reactions (315 likes, 139 loves, 51 angry, 5 sad, 3 care), as well as 144 mostly positive comments (Mississippi State University, 2020).
- Mississippi State University’s final post of the day was a link to a *Mississippi Today* article about the vote that generated more than 2,000 reactions (1,100+ likes, 537 loves, 293 angry, 78 sad, 15 wow, 10 cares), as well as 660 mostly positive comments and 580 shares (Mississippi State University, 2020).

The University of Southern Mississippi’s June 28, 2020, Facebook post featured a statement from President Bennett, in which he said, in part, “I am excited about what this

decision could mean as an opportunity to remove barriers to advancing our state’s growth and development at national and international levels.” The post generated 660 reactions (420 likes, 215 loves, 13 cares, 12 angry), as well as 159 mostly positive comments and 79 shares (The University of Southern Mississippi, 2020).

The results of a social media review lend support of the researcher’s conclusions that a rebuild strategy—in line with the recommendations of Strategic Crisis Communication Theory—was successful and reflective of the opinion of key publics, especially as flag change was imminent in 2020.

Interviews. A total of three interviews were conducted to gather data as part of this dissertation. Subjects included the three institutional executive officers of the universities at time of the flag change in 2020—Chancellor Glenn Boyce of the University of Mississippi, President Mark Keenum of Mississippi State University, and President Rodney D. Bennett of The University of Southern Mississippi. Keenum and Bennett had served as presidents of their respective institutions for the duration of the time period examined as part of this study, while Boyce previously served as Commissioner of Higher Education for the State of Mississippi prior to taking on his current role as the University of Mississippi’s Chancellor. All interviews were conducted by the researcher, with Bennett’s taking place in person on June 21, 2021, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi; and Boyce’s and Keenum’s taking place via video conference on August 19, 2021, and August 24, 2021, respectively. Each interview featured open-ended questions and lasted approximately 35-45 minutes. Transcripts are provided as part of Appendix B.

As it pertains to Strategic Crisis Communication Theory’s three factors organizations should consider in strategy development, the interviews reveal that the

current climate on campuses, influenced by the national discussions in both 2015-2016 and in 2020, and the relationships with affected groups were among influential factors in the development of a public relations response that quickly shifted from diminish to rebuild in the Coombs categorization. As Bennett and Keenum reflected upon 2015 and 2016, as students and faculty were pushing toward a new state flag, both presidents communicated that there was not unanimous support among the universities' key publics, and their public relations strategies reflected their care and concern for all of their key publics, as they considered their words and actions as to try and advance the flag change conversation without fully alienating those who sincerely believed the flag should remain in place for historical reasons.

As the other data sources also suggested, the interviews reveal that university students and faculty, motivated by external events, in Charleston in 2015 and across the country in 2020, were critical to encouraging action by administrators at all three universities—first to lower the state flag on campuses and then to aggressively advocate for formal change in 2020. The interviews clearly revealed in 2015 and 2016 that an assignment of an intentional responsibility to the universities by students and faculty as part of the crisis was a factor in action to lower the state flag at Mississippi State University and the University of Southern Mississippi, as it was undoubtedly at the University of Mississippi based on mass media reports. The interviews of the institutional executive officers also offer support that the advocacy of students and faculty, when combined with the advocacy of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Southeastern Conference, and Conference USA in 2020, were among the most critical factors in influencing the public relations strategy of each institution—strategies that can

be accurately described as rebuild in the Coombs classification. The three administrative leaders also provided confirmation that they were unaware of any significant long-term negative effects from the lengthy state flag crises on their campuses, with both Bennett and Keenum pointing to enrollment and private giving increases over the time period examined.

University of Southern Mississippi President Rodney D. Bennett. Providing insight into his decision to lower the state flags at the University of Southern Mississippi, President Rodney D. Bennett indicated that in October 2015, the state flag featuring the Confederate emblem had become an “overwhelming distraction to our institutional agenda” for the university’s key publics, an agenda that he hoped would lead the University of Southern Mississippi to become the “model for public higher education” in the country.

To become the model, we would be growing enrollment at the undergraduate and the graduate level. We would be allowing for far more support of the university through private donations and private giving. We would be engaging with our alumni stakeholders and others in and around the community. We would be representing our body of work to national and international organizations that could help us with the placement of students, and help us with funding of great research, and allow us to be host to things that we would want to be host to.

People were saying, “We can't come there because your flag is not an inclusive symbol of what our organizations are working toward.” (Bennett, 2021).

The decision and action to lower the flag, the key element in the university’s public relations strategy, moved the university from a diminish strategy in the immediate

aftermath of the Charleston mass murder, to a rebuild strategy. The decision was also met with a mixture of support and criticism in 2015, according to Bennett. As time progressed, though, the criticism waned with the exception of a small group of pro-flag supporters who protested at the main entrance to the university each Sunday from the time of Bennett's decision to the election of the new flag by voters in 2020. By then, Bennett said the larger social climate in 2020 "propelled all of these dominoes to fall into place," as the universities joined many others in aggressively advocating for a new state flag. "I think that the thing that was the most important to communicate was that there are repercussions to public higher education for continuing to fly the flag with a Confederate battle emblem. It is not this harmless act; it is not without consequences. We wanted them (state government leaders) to know that we are being harmed by this; we are unable to do some of the things that you would have us do as state educators" (Bennett, 2021).

With the advantage of hindsight in 2021, Bennett said the university fared well despite initial criticism in 2015.

The backlash, and I'll put that in lowercase letters, by and large, especially now as I reflect on it six years or so later, the backlash that came really was a backlash from people who likely backlash against anything when they can remain anonymous. People threatened to not send their kids to school here, and our enrollment grew. And they threatened to withdraw their support from our USM Foundation, and we've raised more money than we've ever raised in the history of the university. People said they were not going to come to our games, and we didn't see attendance fall off the cliff that people threatened us with as a result of that act. A person would be hard pressed to be able to quantify the substantive

impact of lowering the state flag for USM. Yes, we were stressed out. Yes, we had to answer irate emails from people with a lot of threats. Yes, the campus was a little bit disrupted on Sunday afternoon for three or four hours. Yes, there were protests and counter protests, people arguing their points. But you know, six years later, there were not substantive negative impacts to the university as a result of lowering the flag. (Bennett, 2021).

Mississippi State University President Mark Keenum. Like Bennett, Mark Keenum served as president of his university throughout the full time period examined as part of this study. In 2015, when the University of Mississippi removed the state flag from its campuses, and the University of Southern Mississippi lowered it from its flagpoles, Keenum reported increased public attention on the university. Keenum indicated that the state flag was not located in any prominent locations on the university's campuses at the time, and following advocacy of students, faculty, and staff, he quietly authorized the removal of the flag from Mississippi State University's campuses in 2016. Keenum described the conversations which resulted in the flag's full removal from campus.

The two flags that we had were on property controlled by these two deans. I talked to them and asked the Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine. I said, "Do you and your faculty, do you feel strongly about flying that flag in front of the vet school?" He said, "Oh, no, we'd like to take it down." I said, "Well, I think you ought to take it down." Same conversation with the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. And he felt the same way, that they needed to take it down as well (Keenum, 2021).

Like Bennett, Keenum experienced a similar combination of criticism and support in 2015 and 2016, despite a strategy that refrained from a ceremonial removal of the flag similar to what occurred at the University of Mississippi, or a public announcement similar to the University of Mississippi's or the University of Southern Mississippi's. "I did not want to make a big spectacle out of it," Keenum said. "It was the right thing to do, so we dealt with it. There were a lot of people were angry with me, primarily elected officials, and then just alumni who revered that state flag and were very angry with the decision to take it down. We just kind of kept going forward one day at a time, and eventually the reaction waned a bit" (Keenum, 2021).

By 2020, with the support of key publics, and a rebuild public relations strategy that aligned with the recommendations of Strategic Crisis Communications Theory, Keenum described Mississippi State University's role in supporting flag change.

Right on the heels of the SEC statement was a very strongly worded directive from the NCAA Board of Governors that said there would not be any postseason NCAA tournaments—baseball regionals, super regionals, or women's basketball tournaments that we typically host—allowed until the state flag has changed. I think at that time, with all that was going on and all the dialogue, those who were proponents for a change seized upon those statements, and used those to highlight that there is a serious consequence for our universities.

Now, you had the business community, the Mississippi Economic Council, the Mississippi Manufacturers Association, and other leading economic entities and organizations who were very vocal in their desire to see a change. And by that time, we had strong support among our university, Mississippi State

University alumni leadership, our foundation leadership, and so that's when we started talking really seriously with leadership in the legislature (Keenum, 2021).

That strategy in 2020 also included effective visits to the State Capitol, first by the universities' presidents, and then by their athletics coaches and administrators—further evidence of a rebuild strategy that was gaining momentum.

We held a press conference there in the Capitol right after we met with both of these leaders and after the press conference, Commissioner (Alfred) Rankins said, “Well, why don't we all go somewhere here in the Capitol to meet and talk about what the next steps are?” And so they found a room for all of us to meet in and so we were in the room, and someone brought up okay, “What’s next? What can we do, as university presidents?” I was sitting there and our university Governmental Affairs director, a guy named Lee Weiskopf, leaned over and he whispered in my ear, and he said, “Bringing all of our coaches to the Capitol,” because he worked in the Capitol for quite a number of years. He said, “Bringing all of our coaches to the Capitol would have a very significant impact. So, I just kind of blurted out what he just told me. I said, “Why don't we invite all of our coaches to come to the Capitol?” And everybody kind of looked at each other and said, “Well, can we do that?” And, I said, “Well, I don't know where any of our coaches are, but I'll have every one of our head coaches here by nine o'clock in the morning.” And the Commissioner liked the idea, and all the Presidents said we will do our best to get all of our head coaches here (Keenum, 2021).

Keenum concluded that the universities played a role in flag change and, like

Bennett, could not identify negative, long-term effects to the university over which he presides.

I'm sure there may have been a parent or two who wouldn't let their child come for that reason, but that would be all anecdotal. I'm just speculating that might have happened. Listen, we have a very strong MSU Development Foundation...And the rank and file all throughout that board were highly supportive of our decision not to fly the flag. And, you know, these are the people that make major donations, but also help us raise major donations. We've seen very strong fundraising over these years. So, I didn't see people not stepping up support our school just because of that issue (Keenum, 2021).

Upon reflection, Keenum indicated his belief that the public relations strategy for Mississippi State University was as effective as possible, including in 2015 and 2016, when criticism of all three universities was at its peak. “In my mind, when it was done on campus (removing the flag), I wanted to do it in a respectful manner. I didn’t want to bring a lot of hoopla around it, and we just quietly did it. And we wouldn’t have done it any other way, in my opinion” (Keenum, 2021).

University of Mississippi Chancellor Glenn Boyce. Unlike Bennett or Keenum, Boyce became Chancellor of the University of Mississippi while the state flag crisis was ongoing, and after the flag had already been removed from the university’s campus. And Boyce’s recollection of the University of Mississippi’s involvement in advocacy for change in 2020 came following a meeting with two University of Mississippi football players, Ryder Anderson and Momo Sonago. Boyce informed the student-athletes of the potential process for flag change and supported their efforts by connecting them with

Speaker of the House Philip Gunn. “All of us agreed that the flag needed to be changed,” he recalled. “And some of those reasons were the economic impact on the state. I’m not sure there is any way to truly estimate what that impact is on the state, but we knew it was a negative impact” (Boyce, 2021).

Boyce detailed the role of the university as an advocate for flag change and described public relations strategies and tactics that the researcher classifies as rebuild in the Strategic Crisis Communications Theory framework. “Once it appeared Speaker Gunn was getting traction, once it looked like it was actually moving someplace, we as a unified group of presidents went to the Capitol. And there were a lot of reasons to support change—athletics was certainly one—but just the way that the state could move forward unified with a new state flag was important.” The work continued in private conversations as well as the athletics coaches’ visit to the Capitol, were successful from a public relations and a political standpoint. Boyce said, “We were testing the waters. How was it going to move forward and where were the road blocks? I think we did the right things strategically. We went out front with our coaching staff. We went out front as a group of presidents and chancellor. We put the right people at the Capitol at the right time to help the traction and momentum continue, but I really believe that there wasn’t much more we could do. It was up the legislators and how they thought about the issue” (Boyce, 2021).

In 2020 it was clear according to Boyce, that the universities were positioned well from a public relations standpoint.

In the arena of crisis management, the only place I felt like crisis management was necessary was in the initial statement (the June 19, 2020, joint statement from

the presidents in response to the NCAA’s decision to withhold postseason play from Mississippi)—when we first came out and declared a position. We spent a huge amount of time nuancing over every word. In terms of crisis PR, it was interesting because after that first statement, after being clear about our position, I didn’t feel like anything we did required crisis PR. We were just doing our part. It was just one of those issues, where if you could make it clear one time, you could reiterate it at the Capitol, you could reiterate it in front of the television camera. It wasn’t an issue that had great complexity. It had great emotion, but it didn’t have great complexity. When we first put it out, that’s when I held my breath and said, “What’s coming at us?” (Boyce, 2021).

Research questions and answers are included below and summarized in Table 5.

Research Question No. 1A. To what Situational Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did students, faculty, and staff assign responsibility to university administrators for flying the state flag in 2015 and 2016—victim, accidental, or intentional? Research Question 1B: To what Strategic Crisis Communication Theory attribution level did students and faculty assign responsibility to university administrators for advocating for a new flag in 2020—victim, accidental, or intentional?

It is clear from mass media reports, and supported by the interviews of top administrators, that the pressure to act by the universities was greatest in 2015 and 2016 until each removed the state flag, and that key publics felt universities had an intentional role in the state flag crisis by flying the flag featuring the Confederate battle emblem on their campuses. As it was revealed by media reports and interviews, both formal and informal pressure was mounting on the universities to remove the state flag from their

campuses. By flying the state flag, the universities were considered by their key publics as intentional participants in the public relations crisis created by the Confederate battle emblem on the Mississippi flag and re-energized by the mass shooting of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church members in Charleston, South Carolina. At all three universities, protests were conducted, and resolutions of student and faculty representative bodies called for the removal of the flag from the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi.

In 2020, students, faculty, staff, and others were again calling for change to the state flag following the murder of George Floyd and other police-involved killings. By then, though, those key publics and the universities were joined by many others, including the National Collegiate Athletics Association, the Southeastern Conference, of which the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University are members, and Conference USA, of which The University of Southern Mississippi is a member. Those athletics organizations took issue with the state of Mississippi, rather than the universities themselves, calling for change to the flag and indicating that each would withhold postseason championship play, and by extension millions in economic impact to Mississippi, from the state until the flag was changed. In 2020, students, faculty, and staff were also no longer assigning intentional responsibility to the universities for the crisis, but rather, the universities were accidental participants. Nevertheless, the universities joined their students, faculty, and athletics-affiliated organizations in continuing to call for change.

Research Question No. 2A: Which Situational Crisis Communication Theory category best defines the communication strategy for each of the three universities in

2015 and 2016—deny, diminish, or rebuild? Research Question No. 2B: Which Situational Crisis Communication Theory category best defines the communication strategy for each of the three universities in 2020—deny, diminish, or rebuild?

In June 2015, as the nation was reacting to the mass murder in Charleston, media reports on the flag debate at the University of Mississippi, and official statements on both the Mississippi State University and the University of Southern Mississippi websites, provide an indication that conversations regarding the state flag had been renewed on Mississippi's universities campuses. Each statement called for additional debate on the issue but lacked corresponding action by the universities and could be classified as part of a diminish strategy in the Strategic Crisis Communications Theory framework. By 2016, though, all three universities had engaged in a rebuild crisis communication strategy as evidenced by the highly debated decisions to remove the state flag from their campuses. While the institutional executive officers at the University of Mississippi and The University of Southern Mississippi removed the flags from their campuses in October 2015, the presence of the flag on Mississippi State University's was already minimized in 2015 and fully removed in 2016. In 2020, all three universities clearly remained in the rebuild category, with a unified strategy and tactics for lobbying the state legislature to take action toward a new flag. By then, Mississippi State University was the most publicly visible, especially on social media, where it outpaced the University of Mississippi and the University of Southern Mississippi in the number of related posts.

At no time could any of the three universities' response strategies be classified in Coombs' deny category. All four data sources support this conclusion, with the results of the content analysis providing particular insight. Of the 46 articles that included an

indication of a response strategy, 29 were classified by coders as rebuild strategies, while 13 were classified as diminish strategies, and only four were classified as denial strategies. In each of the four articles in which coders identified a university strategy as denial, the article's focus was on a related event—one in which the state flag debate was referenced as part of an article about broader issues. Those included an email controversy at Mississippi State University (Robertson, 2016), student-athletes kneeling during the National Anthem at the University of Mississippi (*New York Times*, 2019), and the proposed relocation of a Confederate memorial statue on the campus of the University of Mississippi (McCausland, 2020).

A summary of strategies employed is as follows:

Table 14. *Summary of Strategies*

Years Examined	New, Key Primary Publics	Assigned Level of Responsibility	Strategy / Universities Public Relations Actions
2015, 2016	Students, Faculty, Staff	Intentional, shifting to accidental following lowering of the flag on campuses	Diminish shifting to Rebuild. Removal of the flag from campuses
	Alumni and Community Members	Intentional, with moderate support for the lowering of the state flag on campuses	
2017-2019	Legislators	Intentional, with moderate support for lowering the state flag on campuses	No new public action. Few public comments.
2020	NCAA, SEC, and Conference USA	Accidental	Rebuild Support for the NCAA, SEC, and Conference USA's position. Advocacy at the State Capitol by institutional executive officers, head coaches. Private phone calls and meetings with legislators advocating for change.

Research Question No. 3: To what extent did the strategies align with those recommended by Situational Crisis Communication Theory?

Strategy development should be guided by three factors, according to Coombs: an initial level of responsibility for the crisis, as assigned by an organization's key publics; an organization's prior history with similar crises; and an organization's relationships with key publics affected by the current crisis. As indicated in conjunction with Research Question 1A and 1B, the universities were assigned an intentional level of responsibility in 2015 and 2016, until each lowered the flag, then an accidental level of responsibility through 2020. Even a surface-level review of the history of all three universities, as well as the state that hosts all three, reveals challenging histories related to race relations—histories that include great tragedies like James Meredith's integration of the University of Mississippi, which resulted in multiple deaths (Elliot, 2012), and Clyde Kennard's failed attempts to integrate Mississippi Southern College, which later became the University of Southern Mississippi. In-depth reviews only reveal more of the same—each university is an institution struggling to put its past behind it. Notably, of the 50 articles coded that included some reference to the historical context of the flag debate, 48 were coded as negative in tone, with two coded as neutral in tone, and zero coded as positive.

The climate on the campuses from 2015 through 2020 was complicated as well, as the consciousness of students, faculty, staff, and others regarding social justice issues rose in the wake events on campuses nationally, including the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church mass murder in 2015 and the police murder of George Floyd in 2020. As each institutional executive officer acknowledged in their interview responses, the social climate was a factor in re-invigorating the flag conversations on their campuses. Each too was experiencing related controversies on their campuses like an effort to rename the McCain Library at the University of Southern Mississippi, but

most notably at the University of Mississippi, where multiple incidents, including a noose hung on an on-campus statue of Meredith (Svrluga, 2016), kept anxiety levels elevated. Of the 132 total articles coded as part of this study, 78 included some reference to the broader context in which the state flag debate was occurring, 64 of which included some reference to national conversations, either alone (34) or in conjunction with the context of similar debates on one or more of the campuses.

While not all equal in degree, each university entered the state flag crisis with a relatively high level of initial assigned responsibility, a poor prior history with related incidents, and strained relationships with affected groups. As such, the researcher determined a rebuild strategy should have resulted in the best outcome for the universities. Coombs would clearly recommend an aggressive public relations strategy falling into the rebuild category. The data sources reveal that as early as 2016, all three universities were implementing a rebuild strategy. In 2020, they continued in a similar fashion.

Research Question No. 4: Did the public relations strategies and tactics result in a positive public relations outcome for the universities?

Initially, the strategies resulted in balanced feedback in mass media and on social media, but by 2020, the universities were receiving primarily positive feedback to Facebook posts which demonstrated their positions in favor a new state flag for Mississippi. Nineteen times, coders identified mass media coverage that either directly credited or inferred a relationship of the universities to the flag change. The debate also took place on social media, and user comments were mixed in 2015 and 2016 and overwhelmingly positive in 2020, as supporters of a new state flag celebrated flag

change. However, the interviews with the top administrators revealed the best evidence of the relative success of the public relations strategies and tactics, as none of the three institutional executive officers—Chancellor Glenn Boyce of the University of Mississippi, President Mark Keenum of Mississippi State University, and President Rodney D. Bennett of the University of Southern Mississippi—could point to long-term negative effects of the flag debate with Keenum and Bennett, who held their current positions throughout the full time period examined as part of this dissertation, pointing to gains in enrollment and private fundraising.

Table 15. *Research Questions and Answers Summarized*

Years Examined	University	Existing Situation	SCCT Strategy Employed	Observed Effects
2015 – 2016	University of Mississippi	Poor Prior History Intentional Level of Assigned Responsibility Poor Relationships with Affected Groups	Deny/Diminish, shifting most quickly to Rebuild, including lowering the state flag	Support from students, faculty. Mixed responses on social media from other publics, including alumni.

Table 15 (continued).

2015-2016	The University of Southern Mississippi	<p>Poor Prior History</p> <p>Intentional Level of Assigned Responsibility</p> <p>Average Relationships with Affected Groups</p>	<p>Diminish, shifting to Rebuild, including lowering the state flag</p>	<p>Support from students, faculty.</p> <p>Mixed responses on social media from other publics, including alumni.</p>
2015-2016	Mississippi State University	<p>Poor Prior History</p> <p>Intentional Level of Assigned Responsibility</p> <p>Average Relationships with Affected Groups</p>	<p>Diminish, shifting most deliberately to Rebuild, including statements of administrative support for a flag change</p>	<p>Support from students, faculty.</p> <p>Mixed responses on social media from other publics, including alumni.</p>

Table 15 (continued).

2017-2019	All Three Universities	<p>Poor Prior History</p> <p>Accidental Level of Assigned Responsibility</p> <p>Supportive Relationships with Affected Groups</p>	Few public statements.	<p>Continued support from students, faculty.</p> <p>Mixed responses on social media from other publics, including alumni.</p> <p>Legislative support and resistance, including competing calls for flag change and to withhold funding from universities that failed to fly the flag.</p>
2020	All Three Universities	<p>Poor Prior History</p> <p>Accidental Level of Assigned Responsibility</p> <p>Supportive Relationships with Affected Groups</p>	<p>Rebuild, including:</p> <p>Support for the NCAA, SEC, and Conference USA's position.</p> <p>Advocacy at the State Capitol by institutional executive officers, head coaches.</p> <p>Phone calls and meetings with legislators</p>	<p>No observable negative effects.</p> <p>Overwhelmingly positive social media responses.</p>

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

Sid Salter, Director of Public Affairs for Mississippi State University, may have put the challenges facing today’s public relations practitioners best: “Often (when addressing public relations crises), it seems that we either don’t go far enough, or we go too far, depending on where someone is on the political spectrum, trying to find balance, trying to do what we can without doing harm. That’s kind of the sweet spot we aspire to, and hopefully we make it. I think that’s the nature of the world we live in and with social media” (Salter, 2021).

Crisis communications is difficult. It is time consuming. It can be exhausting for those who engage in it. For public relations professionals and chief executives, including those at major, public universities across the country, crisis communication has become increasingly challenging in an age of social media and political divisiveness. And during a five-year time period from 2015 through 2020, no issue in Mississippi was as contentiously debated on Mississippi’s university campuses, in barber shops and beauty salons, over coffee or over beer, in rural towns or the State Capitol in Jackson than the state flag featuring the Confederate battle emblem that flew as a symbol for the state of Mississippi for more than a century until its retirement in 2020. And Mississippi’s three largest universities—the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and the University of Southern Mississippi—were at the center of the debate, first in 2015 and 2016, when each removed the state flag from its campus; and again in the summer of 2020, when each was instrumental in a final push leading to historic votes in the State Legislature to retire the flag, and finally in November 2020, when the people of

Mississippi voted to adopt a new flag. The bold decisions in 2015 and 2016 opened the universities to years of passionate critique (as well as support), protests, legislative calls to reduce funding for those not flying the state flag, and more, as each tried to delicately balance the interests and passions of key publics, including students, faculty, staff, alumni, community members, and state legislators. While the universities were very much leaders in publicly standing against the then-flag in 2015 and 2016, by 2020 many other organizations had joined in advocating for change. Each university had taken bold action that had allowed it to maintain positive relationships with key publics, including students and faculty, and had contributed to the conclusion of a debate that dated back several decades, a debate that ended with a new flag for the state of Mississippi. Given the magnitude of the crisis, and the universities' critical role in it, the universities' public relations strategies and tactics proved successful. As Salter (2021) said, "I like the fact that we got through that entire episode without any violence or significant damage to the reputation of the university."

The scope of this dissertation is intentionally focused, as this multi-decade issue was resolved less than a year ago and academic research on the topic is not yet comprehensive or developed. The scope—public relations strategies and tactics of three Mississippi universities—is narrow when considering the many layers of a multi-year debate that was as contentious as any in the state over the past 50 years. While narrow, its focus is important, and should prove beneficial to public relations practitioners who deal with their own complex crises, especially those that involve multiple key publics over several years.

This dissertation is of distinct value to other researchers and other studies, as it examines this important topic in a way and to a depth beyond any previous research. It provides insight, especially through the interviews with university administrators, into the process behind flag change beyond anything on the public record, either in academic research or in mass media. This dissertation should have great value to public relations practitioners and researchers, as it examines strategies and tactics of three of Mississippi's largest organizations in a crisis situation over a lengthy period of time. This dissertation also has value well beyond the field of public relations, as it helps to tell, as University of Mississippi Chancellor Glenn Boyce said, "The inside story about how we participated" (Boyce, 2021).

The depth of available data helps to strengthen this dissertation. Extensive media coverage over five years, as well as social media content and the universities' websites, provide a lengthy public record available to researchers. These sources are complemented by the interviews conducted as part of this dissertation. All four data sources provide indications of the intensity of the crisis, especially in 2015 and 2016, as the then-flag was removed from campuses, and the interviews make clear that this was a public relations and political issue that consumed both the time and energy of not only administrators, but many others on the universities' campuses. The extensive interviews with university leaders stand out as beneficial to an academic and public understanding of the thoughts and actions of key contributors to the changing of the state flag, a significant event in the history of the state of Mississippi. While many others contributed, this dissertation provides a unique, in-depth look into not only what was publicly reported, but also the important ongoing work not previously revealed in public reports. The examination of a

wide range of data sources also supports the researcher's conclusions—the results from data source all pointed to the same conclusions regarding strategy, the strategy's alignment with Strategic Crisis Communication Theory's recommendations, and the effectiveness of the public relations strategy and tactics.

The researcher's intimate knowledge of the subject matter also assisted with the quality of this dissertation. The researcher serves as Chief Communication Officer at the University of Southern Mississippi and helped to shape the public relations strategy at the university and provided input on some tactics at the Mississippi Public Universities system level through drafting and editing of statements. To assist with combating any real or perceived researcher bias, multiple steps were taken, including the inclusion of the content analysis, in which three coders, all veteran public relations professionals who were not involved in the state flag crisis as it relates to Mississippi's universities, were able to independently analyze media reports, which supported the researcher's conclusions on all research questions.

While the researcher examined a range of data sources before reaching his conclusions, there are some notable omissions that may have provided additional insight, including the absence of a direct conversation with University of Mississippi administrators who were instrumental in the decision to lower the flag in October 2015. Instead, the researcher relied on the extensive media reports—the decision to lower the then-state flag at the University of Mississippi was among the most frequently covered aspects of the flag crisis—in assisting his answering of the research questions. Such a conversation could have helped to provide additional insight into the rationale behind the

decision; however, results were consistent across all of the data sources that were examined.

In fact, “why” questions are the clear and obvious next steps for researchers, and this dissertation provides a solid launching point for such research. The interview transcripts are rich with content that would assist in answering important questions—economic factors, personal feelings toward the state flag, and different perspectives, all can and should be explored.

Without question, the interviews reveal that the universities’ leaders were subject to criticism, which was at times significant. For each of the three leaders, all of whom were personally in favor of flag change, and their institutions, the flag debate proved to be exhausting, frustrating, inspiring, and especially time consuming. Each institution had to dedicate resources to safely manage protests, and each leader had to endure personal attacks. However, each saw flag change as an opportunity to push the state of Mississippi forward and was spurred on by key publics, who advocated for change in formal and informal ways. The interviews conducted as part of this dissertation fill a significant void in the public record, as top administrators were careful and measured in their public comments as the public debate was ongoing. The combination of data sources demonstrates the significance of the public crisis to the universities—no less than the future success of the universities was at stake.

Reflecting on 2015 and 2016, Bennett expressed concern that his decision would negatively impact the university. “I was scared to death, not for my own personal safety, because I was never afraid that somebody was going to personally do something to me or my family. I was scared to death of those threats, those calls for the pulling of public

support, that people would not enroll, that private dollars would not come. I was scared that could happen. If it happened, how further back does that push us” (Bennett, 2021).

While each university came to the same conclusion—lowering the flag and advocating for flag change—they did so in slightly different ways and for slightly different reasons. Each though engaged in a rebuild public relations strategy to eventual success. For Bennett, his decision to lower the then-state flag was a personal one, although not personally motivated.

I didn't want a lot of undue chatter in my ear, a lot of noise about if you do this, you're going to get fired, or you're going to get a cross in your front yard, or you are going get run out of town. I didn't want that to cloud my thinking about what I knew needed to be done. On this issue, I was prepared to pay whatever the cost was that was going to be paid for doing it. So, if it meant that I'd be terminated, okay. If it meant that I was going to be reprimanded, okay. If it meant that nothing was going to happen, okay. So, I didn't seek counsel outside of just the normal chatter that everybody was hearing about the state flag (Bennett, 2021).

Bennett, the state's first African-American president of a historically white Mississippi university, said the then-state flag had become a distraction to the institution's mission in 2015. “Every time I looked at that flag, it reminded me of what I had overcome, and how proud I was to have been able to overcome it, while that flag flew 50 yards or so from my office every single day. But having said that, it really became an overwhelming distraction to our institutional agenda.” He continued,

I could work here for my career, and the now retired state flag could still be flying, and I would not personally have been offended by it. But once the issue

came up, and once there was discussion, and once we're talking about it every day and spending valuable hours on the state flag that we could be spending on other things, it was time to act. It was a decision that I thought was in the best interest of the institution and The University of Southern Mississippi's ability to become the model for public higher education across the country—that was the context in which the ultimate decision to lower the flag was made” (Bennett, 2021).

For Bennett, the decision sent a message from the university to its key publics. “I want people to understand that we believe that we are an institution of opportunity, an institution of inclusion, and an institution where people can march to a different drum, and that we're going to embrace people for who they are, and we're going to meet you where you are. And we're not going to knowingly allow symbols to impact people's ability or desire or belief that The University of Southern Mississippi is a place where they can come and be successful” (Bennett, 2021).

The time period from 2017 through 2019 helped to reassure Bennett that the decision was sound, even beyond any moral considerations, of which he was already confident.

After the flag was lowered, I had days where I thought surely somebody will call and tell me to put that flag back up. That day never came. And so, in some ways, it made me think and believe that this was absolutely the right thing to do—and that if it had not been for a lack of courage from other people, it would have been done long before now. Because when somebody finally had the courage to do it, the powers that be—the leadership, the decision makers—did

not say, “What are you doing? You don't have the authority to do that.” So that was very affirming that we had done the right thing (Bennett, 2021).

Bennett suggested that the universities were instrumental in eventual flag change as a public relations test case for lawmakers, which voted to retire the then-flag in 2020.

We (Mississippi Public Universities) have a large platform, in the fact that people know us and know our brands, and know where we are and know what we do. And we are a public agency supported by the taxpayers. I think the decision makers maybe said to themselves, “So our public universities took it down several years ago; they took some heat, but they've actually survived and come out pretty good. So maybe, now that we've seen that nothing really happened to them, all these people threatened to do all the things that they threatened to do, but nothing really happened. Maybe there's something that we can learn from and act as lawmakers and decision makers that will allow us to do what we really believe is the right thing to do. And maybe that same outcome could be the outcome that happens to us. That in some ways is the benefit of time (Bennett, 2021).

Like Bennett, and almost assuredly Morris Stocks, Interim Chancellor at the University of Mississippi at the time the flag was removed from its campus, Mississippi State University President Mark Keenum was subject to personal attacks as the debate began in 2015. Following the University of Mississippi's and University of Southern Mississippi's actions on October 26, 2015, and October 28, 2015, reporters inquired about the status of the flag at Mississippi State University. Keenum recalled:

I was down at Ocean Springs High School, visiting with some students on my school visits. And, of course, they had some media there. And one of the reporters asked me my opinion on the state flag, and I made a comment that our state flag is the state flag and that's an issue that will have to be decided by legislature, but I do think it's time for us to start up a conversation about changing the flag. And I thought it was an innocent response to a reporter. I'm there talking with students about their future and going on to college, maybe considering Mississippi State. But the reaction to that was tremendous, to me and then to our institution. People read into that I was calling for change in the state flag. And I was bombarded over social media. And a lot of personal attacks on me came in from people who want to keep the flag, and how dare I begin a dialogue on this (Keenum, 2021).

Moderate levels of criticism continued for some time, as Keenum recalled.

I think it was that first year, we had a home football game and there was a gentleman who had on a walking billboard around his neck, on his front and on his back. I don't remember all that it said, but I remember it said, "Fire Mark Keenum. We want our flag back." And he was holding the state flag, and he would just go all over through the tailgates and all over campus. He did that every ball game. "Fire Mark Keenum. Bring back our flag." And he did that every year. He was very persistent, and a nice guy, but he wanted his state flag, and he was there to protest and be upset with me about it (Keenum, 2021).

Keenum added that legislators and alumni were among those who offered feedback. "You know, I heard from legislators who were very upset with me. I had no

one ever directly threaten me, just express their displeasure. And I'd be out at meetings with alumni groups, and most people were very respectful. But occasionally we'd have someone raise the issue at an alumni group meeting” (Keenum, 2021).

It is clear, though, that by 2020, all key publics aligned and the universities advocated for a new flag largely absent the criticism from some alumni and legislators that existed in 2015 and 2016. All three university leaders discussed the universities’ role in flag change, while suggesting that universities are uniquely positioned with the state with student bodies and faculty members who are more diverse than other parts of the state and with footprints that stretch well beyond the state’s borders—resulting in particular public relations challenges and opportunities.

Sid Salter, Director of Public Affairs for Mississippi State University, said that the diversity of demographics of universities’ key publics factored into public relations strategy. He explained the “general nature of the university campus” is in some ways different than the surrounding communities. (Salter, 2021).

The state flag to native Mississippians has one connotation, but the state flag to people from all over the country all over the world has another. And because of our expertise, and engineering and some other disciplines, we have a large contingent of international faculty and staff. And so those Confederate symbols that were incorporated into the state flag were a threat to peace and harmony on campus... I think the fact is that we got through that entire episode without any violence or significant damage to the reputation. I like that. You know, students watch to see if what you say matches what you do. And, you know, that's not a bad rule to follow. I think our students were watching to see if the administration

was going follow through what they said, and I believe to Dr. Keenum's credit, he leaned into it when it was time to lean into it. And he kept the peace when it was time to keep the peace (Salter, 2021).

The results of this study of public relations strategies and tactics implemented by the universities and its administrators point to additional worthwhile goals, including broader factors in the change of the state flag. While the data collected as part of this study makes it clear that the universities had a role, it is also clear that many others did as well. At times, specifically in 2015 and 2016, the universities garnered a great deal of criticism and were largely alone in their calls for a state flag, but by 2020, they and their leaders were a few among the many voices calling for change. It would be safe to say, based on the data examined here, that the universities had a role, but a role alongside many others. However, an endeavor that seeks to assign the amount of credit earned by universities and its leaders will need to be explored by other researchers utilizing other research methods. In fact, the administrators interviewed as part of this study were careful to refrain from overstating their roles, or that of their universities, although acknowledging their role.

Athletics' role, especially as it relates to Mississippi's universities is another particularly intriguing aspect of the debate that should be explored further by researchers. Consider that in 2021, both Mississippi State University and the University of Mississippi hosted NCAA Baseball Regionals, while Mississippi State University went on to win a National Championship in the sport. That championship, which some could argue may not have occurred if not for the ability for Mississippi State University to host postseason play leading up to the College World Series, had already helped generate more than \$2

million in private fundraising for the university (DeRosa, 2021) in the weeks after the championship and resulted in huge sales increases of university apparel (Jones, 2021). Without question, athletics played a role in not only encouraging the universities to increase their level of advocacy for a new flag, but in also bringing additional lawmakers into the conversation—how much so and to what extent are questions that are beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nevertheless, the state flag crisis was “a time when sport really played a big role and helped move higher education agenda down the road in a way that without sports, we would have never been able to or probably would have taken a lot longer to happen,” Bennett said. “I think that was when the light bulb went off in people's heads (when the NCAA, Southeastern Conference, and Conference USA threatened to withhold postseason play from the state) and they said, ‘I want to go see my team play, and I want to be able to see that happen in my state in a location where I can drive to and from in the same day, with minimal cost. So, what is it that we need to do to make sure that happens?’” (Bennett, 2021).

The climate of 2020 was critical to change, the institutional executive officers volunteered. Bennett indicated that the larger social movement, which should be examined in greater depth by researchers in other fields, “propelled all of these dominoes to fall into place,” (Bennett, 2021), while Keenum said the “very unique year of 2020” allowed for change to be possible, as the global COVID-19 pandemic delayed the state’s legislative session, and a scheduled 120-day session during the first year of a new governor’s term (30 days longer than in other years) pushed the session into the middle of the summer—and after the George Floyd murder. “Had those occurrences not been in place, if it was just a normal, whatever normal is, year, we would probably still have the

same state flag.” (Keenum, 2021). Of course, that climate also included the announcements of the NCAA, SEC, and Conference USA to withhold postseason play from the state until flag change was achieved. Keenum said the proponents for change “seized upon those statements and used those to highlight that there is a serious consequence for our universities” (Keenum, 2021). Salter emphasized that same point when he said, “You might not get people on the same page to do the right thing, but you can get people on the same page to protect NCAA baseball” (Salter, 2021).

Ultimately, though, there were a lot of reasons for change, Boyce said, including but not limited to, athletics. “The way the state could move forward unified with a state flag was important.” There was “a sense of urgency (in 2020) that we all rally around strategic steps to support the Speaker and other leaders at the Capitol who had decided they were going to take this full-on and take some sort of legislative action in just a few weeks. It was stunning that it moved at the pace that it did” (Boyce, 2021).

While the universities could advocate for change to the state flag, the administrative leaders of the universities conceded that it was only the state’s lawmakers that could eventually end the public relations crisis that stretched well beyond the universities. Boyce (2021) described the role of the universities in 2020 as engaged in important change.

I want our role to be remembered for exactly what it was. I don’t want people to think that we did anything extraordinary. We didn’t cast the vote. The people who did the extraordinary work were the people who were in the chamber casting votes. I want us to be remembered as a university that was part of a university system, that supported change, that we knew was going to move our state

forward. And that we didn't remain quiet or on the sidelines. We were fully engaged as we could be, and we are very proud of our role. But I never want to say that our role was dominant; I would never want that kind of pride or arrogance to be out there (Boyce, 2021).

Both Boyce and Keenum discussed in detail the challenge facing lawmakers, and the difficult decision they faced.

I can't think of anything that would make emotions run any higher than the debate over this. There were so many people torn between what decision to make. Even now, it was so challenging. I was at a dinner just a few months ago, and just listening to the Speaker and legislators around the table talk about it; there wasn't a dry eye at the table. These are a bunch of tough men. It made me understand just how difficult this was for these legislators to make those yes votes. It also made me understand the energy and emotion that went into that vote has not dissipated. I would contend that in five years, 10 years, when these men and women talk about that vote, it will hard for them to keep their composure. Every now and then you have a historical moment, and when you are a part of it, it doesn't dissipate with time (Boyce, 2021).

Keenum also commented on the stress facing lawmakers, "It was tough on members because some members had promised they would never vote to do this, or if they did, they would vote to allow it to be a referendum that citizens would decide. If you looked at trying to get the supermajority needed, there weren't enough votes unless people didn't act upon what they said when they ran for office. That was a tough thing to ask a politician to do" (Keenum, 2021). For Keenum, who had expressed his personal

opinion in favor of flag change years earlier, the process was nerve-wracking at times. “I would say between the action of the legislature and then the actual vote, there was some uneasiness among a lot of people, including me. I liked the flag that was designed. I liked it a lot. And I thought they did a great job. It is a beautiful flag. But there were still a lot of people out there urging people not to vote for it...And so, there was a lot of uneasiness from the summer to November, and even leading right up to the day of the vote” (Keenum, 2021).

Since the public vote in November 2020, and the subsequent formal adoption of the new state flag in January 2021, university leaders have had time to reflect upon the public relations strategies and tactics, and believed the strategies and tactics were effective. Of course, the change of the state flag presents the best evidence of effectiveness, but social media feedback in 2020, media coverage, and more, all support that conclusion. Interestingly, while the strategies of all three universities were similar, the timing and the manner in which each fully entered the debate differed—with no observable long-term differences in public relations outcomes. While each of the universities started at different times and in different ways, each ended with a similar, positive public relations outcome. For the University of Mississippi, the timing of removing the state flag from campus on October 26, 2015, was undoubtedly affected by its search for a new Chancellor, which ended in the announcement of Chancellor Jeffrey Vitter on October 29, 2015. The timing of the University of Southern Mississippi’s lowering of the state flag on October 28, 2015, was indirectly influenced by the University of Mississippi’s decision and came prior to supportive resolutions by representative student and faculty bodies, which preceded decisions at the University of

Mississippi and Mississippi State University. And the timing of Mississippi State University's decision to fully remove the then-flag in the summer of 2016 was influenced by a number of factors, according to Keenum (2021), including the legislative calendar. Mississippi State University's decision to quietly remove the flag also differed from the University of Mississippi, which formally removed the flag and issued a press release, and at the University of Southern Mississippi, which released a statement from Bennett. Those differentiating factors, though, had little long-term public relations effects. The unified public relations approach in 2020, in which each university participated, was a key factor in aligning not only strategies and tactics but results.

Also similar across the three universities though, were the three factors Coombs contends should guide an organization's public relations response—the prior histories of the universities, all of which have poor records related to racial issues; a current climate that was being shaped by a national social justice movement and other similar issues on campuses; and an initial level of responsibility assigned to the universities for flying the then-state flag in 2015 in the cases of the University of Mississippi and the University of Southern Mississippi, and 2016 in the case of Mississippi State University. These factors contributed to the researcher's conclusion that each university's best path to public relations success was through what Coombs labels as rebuild strategies and tactics. Interestingly, all three universities' initial public statements following the Charleston mass murder in the summer of 2015 expressed sympathy and commented on the state flag, but also failed to include significant corresponding direct action. While the researcher identifies these statements as diminish in the Strategic Crisis Communication Theory categorization, it raises the important question of why the strategy shifted in

October 2015 for the University of Mississippi and the University of Southern Mississippi, and in 2016 for Mississippi State University? The answer, the data reflects, is the advocacy of important key publics. While all three universities' positions on the flag had already begun to take shape in the summer of 2015, and evidence beyond the scope of this dissertation suggests much earlier, the boldness of institutional action was at least in part a public relations response intended to assist the universities' relationships with key publics, most notably students and faculty. It is important to note that the climate had evolved from 2015 to 2020, which helps to explain the additional actions of university leaders in 2020. In 2015, there was not widespread legislative support for change to the state flag. In 2015 and 2016, the universities were much more isolated in their public support for flag change. While the universities were not the first to express support for flag change, they were the largest in-state organizations to do so and certainly the most visible. While there may be various reasons each university and its lead administrator took for removing the state flag from campus, on-campus demographics contributed to the most diverse perspectives on the flag, perspectives that do not exist as broadly outside of campus borders.

This study's focus on the universities' responses to the crisis is one perspective—a perspective from some of Mississippi's largest organizations and its leaders—the perspectives of many others who were instrumental in the flag change are beyond the scope of this dissertation and are included only in the ways in which they are reported upon by mass media and in interviews. The perspectives of students and faculty who pushed for change and encouraged their universities to action are included in this dissertation through comments in the mass media but should be explored further. The

perspective of legislators who ultimately made the decision to retire the state flag are included in this dissertation as reported on in the interviews with university leaders but should also be explored further. Ultimately, this dissertation accomplished its purpose: to provide insight into the public relations strategies, tactics and results of Mississippi's three leading universities as each wrestled with a crisis they did not create, but nevertheless forced them to engage in complex and ongoing work to manage their relationships with key publics and avoid negative and significant repercussions. They did so not without a bump or two in the road, but in a manner in which Strategic Crisis Communication Theory recommends, and the results were successful.

CHAPTER VI – CONCLUSION

The topic of this dissertation was selected to provide important insight into the public relations strategies, tactics, and results of Mississippi largest universities throughout a highly publicized and contentious debate—the changing of the Mississippi state flag in 2020. Too often public relations practitioners, including this researcher who has worked in the field for almost two decades, engage intensely in an issue but fail to review their successes or failures in an effort to improve their future efforts or advance the field in a meaningful way. Even more rarely does the public relations practitioner examine her or his own work and the work of her or his colleagues. This dissertation has done that, though, as I have served as the University of Southern Mississippi’s Chief Communication Officer for more than a decade, including the full time period examined during this study. In this role, I had an intimate and personal knowledge of the public relations strategies and tactics related to the state flag as they were being implemented, and was fully aware of the responses generated by those strategies and tactics—at the University of Southern Mississippi as well as the other two universities represented in this dissertation, Mississippi State University and the University of Mississippi. While little of this study’s results surprised me, with the guidance of my dissertation committee I took multiple steps to best limit any real or perceived researcher bias from entering the study, through examining multiple universities, and adding quantitative components to the analysis, including the review of social media feedback and a content analysis of mass media by independent coders.

To be sure, the data I examined confirmed what I expected to be true as I began my research. I expected that the universities had fared well from a public relations standpoint—if not overwhelmingly well initially, then certainly by 2020. And the data confirmed they did. I expected that the university’s leaders struggled with their decisions—more so in 2015 and 2016 than in 2020. They did. And I expected that there were no long-term negative effects for the universities or their lead administrators. There were not. As Rodney Bennett, president of the University of Southern Mississippi, said, yes they were stressed out. Yes, they received threats that alumni and donors would withdraw their support. But no, those threats never came to be in a meaningful way.

As I reflected upon 2015 through 2020, three clear themes emerged.

First, it is clear to me that the relationships with key publics were a critical factor in defining the public relations strategies and tactics of the universities. The universities were successful because, and perhaps only because, they listened to their key publics as the issue was debated and ultimately resolved. The universities acted in 2015 and 2016 when enough faculty, staff, and students demanded action and outweighed any public relations concerns related to removing the flag. While it would be an oversimplification of the issue to attribute removal of the flag to a public relations decision, support for flag change had reached a tipping point in 2015. And in 2020, University administrators acted again as public support for a new flag again gained momentum. Without question, the actions by administrators were bold, and they required courage, as resistance to flag change was also significant, especially in 2015 and 2016. But also without question, those actions would not have occurred were it not for the resolutions, protests, emails, phone calls, and more, from key publics in favor of flag change.

Second, events across the country were the critical factor in the timing of action by the universities. Without question, the murders in Charleston, South Carolina, inspired action on the part of students and faculty, highlighting concerns that the then-state flag still featured the Confederate battle emblem in the upper left corner. While some argued at the time that the issue had been resolved in 2001, when the state's residents voted to keep the flag, college students in 2015 and 2016 were children at the time and many were previously unaware of its symbolism or how that symbolism was being used by some as a tool through which they might implement or represent their own racist beliefs. When Dylann Roof's public admiration of Confederate symbols, including the battle flag, emerged after the Charleston murders such unawareness was no longer possible on Mississippi's college campuses.

Then in 2020, the murder of George Floyd, the police shooting of Breonna Taylor, and other high-profile and tragic interactions of police officers and African-Americans sparked a social justice movement across the country, and re-energized the Mississippi state flag debate. That summer, Mississippians, including those on campuses, were marching for social justice broadly, and for change to the state flag specifically. While I believe that students, faculty, and alumni were more aware of the state flag debate in 2019 prior to George Floyd's murder than they were prior to the Charleston murders in 2015, I am convinced that the debate would not have re-emerged in a significant way in 2020 were it not again sparked by national issues.

Third, while national events motivated students, faculty, and staff to action, I am also convinced that the actions of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Southeastern Conference, and Conference USA, each of which promised to withhold

postseason athletics competition from the state until the flag was changed, was the defining moment politically for flag change. I do not exclusively credit economic factors to flag change, but it is clear to me that national events contributed to social factors, which led to economic factors, which led to change. And, the universities were instrumental at every step in the process. While it is impossible in my mind to point to one reason for flag change, it is equally difficult to imagine flag change without all of those factors working in conjunction with each other.

Of course, each of those themes could and should be explored in greater detail and from different perspectives through additional research. My aim has been to improve the field of public relations through this important case study. In doing so, I have also added new data, including the extensive interviews of the university administrators to the public record. And I am keenly interested in how others might be inspired to use that data and this dissertation to not only better understand public relations, but also social movements, power dynamics, leadership, and more.

APPENDIX A — OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY IRB APPROVAL



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February 10, 2021

To Whom It May Concern,

Acting on behalf of The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board, in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University guidelines, I have reviewed the dissertation project of James (“Jim”) Coll, “Communication Crisis on Campus: The Public Relations Strategies and Results of Mississippi’s Leading Universities in Response to the State Flag Debate, 2015-2020” and have determined that IRB review and approval of this project is not required, given the nature of the research and the data to be collected.

If you have question about this, please contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Bruton". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name.

Sam Bruton, Director

Samuel.Bruton@usm.edu

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT, DR. RODNEY BENNETT

Question: Think back to 2015. I know that was a really tough, difficult decision. And I know there were a couple times you were going back and forth. What eventually prompted your decision?

Answer: So, I was just thinking about that—really reflecting back on that time. You and I've worked so closely together, you may have heard me say this in different situations or in a different context. I have never personally been offended by the state flag that we retired. My office, as you know, faces the Centennial Gateway and the main flagpoles for the university. I would look out the window throughout the day, and I would see the three flags—the university flag, the United States of America flag, and the state of Mississippi flag—and I was never personally offended by the flag with the Confederate battle emblem on it. In fact, I think in many ways it gave me strength and resolve for what I have overcome as a person of color—to be president of this university in spite of what that flag represented, what specifically that emblem on the flag represented, to a lot of people. So, every time I looked out there, I worked harder. I was more determined, and I was more convinced that our agenda for the university was a good agenda. So, it wasn't a personal vendetta or a personal act that, “I'm going to take this flag down,” or “I'm going to put a stake in the ground on this issue as a person of color and show Mississippi how wrong and how hurtful and how bad it has been for generations of people—black people, white people, people from Mississippi, people outside of Mississippi.” And I think it's important for me to share that with you because I think a lot of people would assume that because of my race and ethnicity, I would automatically be in the camp of, “I

want that flag gone, that the flag is offensive, that the flag represents everything that's bad, that it is an oppressive symbol that holds people down." I just wasn't in that camp at all.

Every time I looked at that flag, it reminded me of what I had overcome, and how proud I was to have been able to overcome it, while that flag flew 50 yards or so from my office every single day. But having said that, it really became an overwhelming distraction to our institutional agenda. And our institutional agenda was really rooted in, "How does The University of Southern Mississippi become the model for public higher education across the country?" That is the premise upon which we've been doing our work for eight years now. And so, when you begin to think about how you become the model, the flag just became a daily distraction of the work that we needed to do to become the model. To become the model, we would be growing enrollment at the undergraduate and the graduate level. We would be allowing for far more support of the university through private donations and private giving. We would be engaging with our alumni stakeholders and others in and around the community. We would be representing our body of work to national and international organizations that could help us with the placement of students, and help us with funding of great research, and allow us to be host to things that we would want to be host to. People were saying, "We can't come there because your flag is not an inclusive symbol of what our organizations are working toward." All kinds of people were saying to us that that flag doesn't represent me. It doesn't represent what my interests are and what I believe. And as a state agency, and a state agency being supported by the taxpayers, we should have a symbol that's more

inclusive, that's more welcoming, and that better represents the citizenry of the state of Mississippi.

After the flag was lowered, I had days where I thought surely somebody will call and tell me to put that flag back up. That day never came. And so, in some ways, it made me think and believe that this was absolutely the right thing to do—and that if it had not been for a lack of courage from other people, it would have been done long before now. Because when somebody finally had the courage to do it, the powers that be—the leadership, the decision makers—did not say, “What are you doing? You don't have the authority to do that.” So that was very affirming that we had done the right thing.

The backlash, and I'll put that in lowercase letters, by and large, especially now as I reflect on it six years or so later, the backlash that came really was a backlash from people who likely backlash against anything when they can remain anonymous. People threatened to not send their kids to school here, and our enrollment grew. And they threatened to withdraw their support from our USM Foundation, and we've raised more money than we've ever raised in the history of the university. People said they were not going to come to our games, and we didn't see attendance fall off the cliff that people threatened us with as a result of that act. A person would be hard pressed to be able to quantify the substantive impact of lowering the state flag for USM. Yes, we were stressed out. Yes, we had to answer irate emails from people with a lot of threats. Yes, the campus was a little bit disrupted on Sunday afternoon for three or four hours. Yes, there were protests and counter protests, people arguing their points. But you know, six years later, there were not substantive negative impacts to the university as a result of lowering the flag.

Question: Were the responses what you thought they would be? What was your expectation of how people were going to react?

Answer: Well, I was scared to death. I was scared to death, not for my own personal safety, because I was never afraid that somebody was going to personally do something to me or my family. I was scared to death of those threats, those calls for the pulling of public support, that people would not enroll, that private dollars would not come. I was scared that could happen. If it happened, how further back does that push us from becoming the model for public higher education across the country? There wasn't sort of a playbook to go to that said when this other state did it, here's what happened. Here's what you can probably expect—the probability of x number of people will withdraw support from your school is 10% or 2% or 90%. So, what you can learn is, you need to have the courage to do what you think is the right thing to do.

So, the question was, upon making that decision, what did you expect the reaction to be from key stakeholder groups, students, alumni, faculty community? And was there anything in the reaction that surprised you? You know, I think the surprise is that, that people did not follow through on what their allegations were, and what they said they were going to do. So, I was surprised by that, because I really thought in Mississippi, over this issue that had been such a prominent part of the state's identity for so long, I really thought people would follow through. I really thought that the decision makers or the state would force our hand on this issue, and they did not.

Question: You mentioned the flag became a significant distraction to the institutional goals. Was there anything about what the anticipated responses you thought would come from people that influenced the decision?

Answer: No, I can't really say that there were. In fact, I think I just wanted to keep my opinions pretty close to the vest. I didn't want a lot of undue chatter in my ear, a lot of noise about if you do this, you're going to get fired, or you're going to get a cross in your front yard, or you are going get run out of town. I didn't want that to cloud my thinking about what I knew needed to be done. On this issue, I was prepared to pay whatever the cost was that was going to be paid for doing it. So, if it meant that I'd be terminated, okay. If it meant that I was going to be reprimanded, okay. If it meant that nothing was going to happen, okay. So, I didn't seek counsel outside of just the normal chatter that everybody was hearing about the state flag. Now, I did have people after the fact call me to say you've made a horrible mistake, you need to put that back up. And I said to them, you know, once a bell like this has been rung, you cannot un-ring it. It has to play out, and whatever is going happen is what's going to happen. And I remember saying to people, that I'm an employee who has multiple layers of oversight and supervision. And so just like I overrule and override decisions that are made on campus by subordinates, I too, am a subordinate. I have a chain of command and a governance structure that could do to me what I do to people who work at the university. So, if I've made a poor decision, if I've done something that's out of line with the wishes of the state of Mississippi and the governance structure for public higher education in Mississippi, there's a mechanism by which that act can be corrected. And I was really relying on that, if in fact, I had acted in error. That day never came.

Question: You mentioned your responsibility to the institution.

Answer: That's correct. That's correct. I could work here for my career, and the now retired state flag could still be flying, and I would not personally have been offended

by it. But once the issue came up, and once there was discussion, and once we're talking about it every day and spending valuable hours on the state flag that we could be spending on other things, it was time to act. It was a decision that I thought was in the best interest of the institution and The University of Southern Mississippi's ability to become the model for public higher education across the country—that was the context in which the ultimate decision to lower the flag was made.

Question: So, when you made the decision, what did you want people to know about it? And what did you want people to understand about your decision?

Answer: I want people to understand that we believe that we are an institution of opportunity, an institution of inclusion, and an institution where people can march to a different drum, and that we're going to embrace people for who they are, and we're going to meet you where you are. And we're not going to knowingly allow symbols to impact people's ability or desire or belief that The University of Southern Mississippi is a place where they can come and be successful. And I wanted people to know that even though the Confederate battle emblem had flown over the state and had been a part of the state's history for many years, that we were still going to respect that flag and that symbol for the people who may really have seen it as a part of their heritage and not a part of hate. I thought it was a really important part of the overall strategy. For them, it needed to be respectfully retired. It needed to be respectfully lowered and respectfully handled for what it is—a part of our history that we shouldn't forget. Because I think for the people who suffered, and who had horrible things done to them under the flag, I don't think that their ancestors ever want to forget it either. I think they want people to know how that flag was used—to hold people back and to oppress people and to place fear in people and

to kill people and to separate families. And I'm not talking about 400 years ago. There's evidence of that being used in modern day in the 21st century.

Question: Do you think that that the events around the country raised the flag debate again in 2020?

Answer: I don't know that it took the George Floyd event for this particular issue. I think that it was probably a series of all of those things that happened, the compounding of it all. And here's this flag down in Mississippi that is just another layer of what's going on. I think the larger movement is what sort of propelled all of these dominoes to fall into place. I think that even for white citizens of Mississippi, challenging the Confederate battle emblem is, on some level, as much of a concern for white citizens as it is to black citizens. There were large numbers of white citizens, who for years have sat solidly on some of these issues for fear that if they spoke out about the Confederate battle emblem or things that they, in their hearts, knew were wrong, that they would become “part of the problem.” They were fearful their businesses would not be patronized, that they would have adverse actions happen to them—the same way the black people would. I think that's a part of this that people may not be giving enough credit to is that lots of people of different backgrounds and persuasions felt differently about the flag—not just black folk. And I think we saw that as evidenced in the vote, and the margin of the vote, of what ultimately led to the change of it.

Question: So in 2020, you went to the state capitol to discuss the issue with legislature. What prompted that, and why was that important to you?

Answer: The universities were a little bit of the test case, a little bit of a guinea pig. And I think that what people saw is these big public universities, public in the sense

of access to citizens of the state. We have a large platform, in the fact that people know us and know our brands and know where we are and know what we do. And we are a public agency supported by the taxpayers. I think the decision makers maybe said to themselves, "So our public universities took it down several years ago; they took some heat, but they've actually survived and come out pretty good. So maybe, now that we've seen that nothing really happened to them, all these people threatened to do all the things that they threatened to do, but nothing really happened. Maybe there's something that we can learn from and act as lawmakers and decision makers that will allow us to do what we really believe is the right thing to do. And maybe that same outcome could be the outcome that happens to us. That in some ways is the benefit of time.

Question: What was important for you to communicate to legislators at that time?

Answer: I think that the thing that was the most important to communicate was that there are repercussions to public higher education for continuing to fly the flag with a Confederate battle emblem. It is not this harmless act; it is not without consequences. We wanted them to know that we are being harmed by this; we are unable to do some of the things that you would have us do as state educators.

It was a time when sports really played a big role and helped move the higher education agenda down the road in a way that without sports, we would have never been able to or probably would have taken a lot longer to happen. I think that was when the light bulb went off in people's heads and they said, "I want to go see my team play, and I want to be able to see that happen in my state in a location where I can drive to and from in the same day with minimal cost. So, what do we need to do to make sure that happens?"

Question: How do you feel about that sport was so influential?

Answer: Well, I think that sports—and this is not the Rotary Club answer—I think sports has an opportunity to be a true partner in public higher education. But I think that in many ways, we've allowed it to get out of its lane, and we've allowed that, which I consider to be the tail wagging the dog. And I think that this is one time when the presence of athletic teams, of competition and sports, was a true partner in ways that we wish they can be in every instance.

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT, SID SALTER

Question: I'm starting to record here. As I said in my email, this is an examination of public relations strategies related to the state flag over a five-year time-period from when the flag started coming down on the campuses to when the flag changed in 2020. And so, I want to ask you a few questions about some of your recollections from that time in 2015 and 2016, and then in 2020—all the trips to the Capitol and just how it all unfolded from your perspective. I know you have some unique perspectives given your knowledge of the state and in Mississippi State's role in the effort. I'm just going to go through it chronologically. And so take me back to 2015. What do you recall about some of the conversations that were taking place on campus, maybe with President Keenum and what were you thinking in 2015, when the flag went down at Ole Miss and what the conversations were like in 2016, when it came down at Mississippi State?

Answer: Well obviously, I remember the first iteration of flag change efforts from the administration of Governor Ronnie Musgrove, and of course, back in that era, the students and the Faculty Senate came out in favor of flag change. We're on the record for that. And so, as things tend to happen on campuses, quietly and without fanfare, the state flag kind of disappeared on our primary green space, the drill field, which is also outside the administration building. And the American flag was made larger, and it just sort of quietly faded, but the state flag was still in, at that point, five or six locations on campus—the Perry cafeteria, which had a 50-state flag display, plus a territorial flag display, lining the roofline inside; and in an ag building. And then there were three or

four other places on campus that still had the state flag as it normally stands along with the American flag. And so, as we move forward, the Dylann Roof shooting in South Carolina obviously was the catalyst, of the renewal of that debate. And I think our administration realized that this was an event that was so shocking to the sensibilities that our students were going to embrace a call for change, and our faculty were going to begin to strongly call for change and to be part of a statewide effort for change.

Another area where we began to deal with the whole issue of the display of the flag was in the football stadium. We had a pregame routine—a pretty lengthy presentation of the colors that involved the university ROTC. The routine would normally take several minutes pregame, when the color guard would bring the American flag and Mississippi state flag across the field. And that display of the flag, because it was slow and kind of in your face, was also one that some of our students and faculty had a negative reaction to. It was also coinciding with the renewal of our (sports marketing) Learfield contract, which made all of that time pregame more valuable from a monetary standpoint. There were people that wanted advertising and wanted time on the jumbotron. So, we were looking to economize the pregame time and make sure that our famous Maroon Band got their exposure. So, it just sort of came together that perhaps one way to economize that time would be to shorten the pregame ceremony, up to and including the presentation of colors.

That also coincided with a growing call by the NCAA and other groups to remove Confederate symbols from our sporting events. And, you know, we knew at some point that the former state flag was going to be an impediment to intercollegiate athletic competition. We had already seen elsewhere in the state that it was an impediment to

economic development and that, most of all, it was an impediment to peace and to folks getting along and mutual respect. Dr. Keenum always talks to our students in terms of treating each other with respect, and it was so very difficult to extend that respect when pushing a symbol that was offensive to so many of our students and faculty and staff.

Of course, there's also just the general nature of the university campus. The state flag to native Mississippians has one connotation, but the state flag to people from all over the country all over the world has another. And because of our expertise, and engineering and some other disciplines, we have a large number of international faculty and staff. And so those Confederate symbols that were incorporated into the state flag were a threat to peace and harmony on campus. So, the decision was made to shorten the flag presentation time pregame. Of course, we received some criticism from a lot of our own alumni who were former military who really didn't like it, and they were adamant on social media, adamant in emails and phone calls. They confronted the president, they confronted me, and they confronted others in the administration. But it didn't change the fact that we came perilously close to losing the ability to host important events, particularly regional and super regional baseball competition. That's pretty serious business.

Dr. Keenum thought that it was important after the Dylann Roof shooting to remind the body politic that flag change was not an issue that he brought to campus. It was one that had been on campus for at least 20 years and that our students had spoken to formally. They never rescinded those calls for change. Matter of fact, after the Dylann Roof shooting in South Carolina, both groups restated their support for flag change and urged the administration to do so as well. We also had a new group emerge on campus, a

group of primarily African American students that called themselves the Lucky 7. They began to express their opposition to the state flag and call for change—first on social media, then with some posters, signage on campus, and some chalk writing on sidewalks. There was a protest on the Drill Field and the submission of a manifesto from this group of students to the administration. As a part of that, Dr. Keenum myself, others in the administration, met with members of the Lucky 7 to try to foster a dialogue about the whole issue of the flag and what role the university could play in changing it. We took the position, as did other institutions of higher learning, that while our students and our faculty and staff were supportive of the concept of flag change, and our president personally expressed his support for flag change, we did possess the authority under law to totally remove the state flag. So, then it became sort of almost a game of “gotcha.” We had flag supporters who confronted the university and said, “Well, where's the state flag? If you guys are going to take state money, where's the state flag?” And I would assure them, truthfully, that the flag was still displayed on campus. And they would say, “Where?” And I would go down the laundry list. And of course, their response was, “Well, you've got it hidden in the closet, and you're claiming that it's still displayed.” And I said, “No.” But then they'd say, “It's not on the Drill Field,” and I would say that it hadn't been on the Drill Field for 20 years. It got personal, particularly for Dr. Keenum. We had a guy that would walk around on game day with a state flag on a stick across his shoulder, carrying sort of an inflammatory sign about Dr. Keenum turning his back on the flag. Of course, Dr. Keenum's ancestors fought in the Civil War. My ancestors fought in the Civil War. So, very few of us dealing with these issues didn't have some connection to the Civil War and had family members that fought on one side or the other.

Of course, the rest of the story is that Dr. Keenum, while trained as an agricultural economist, is somewhat of a self-taught expert on the history of Stephen D. Lee, our founding president. And of course, Stephen Lee was a major general in the Confederate army. He was captured, and the irony of this and pretty rich, he was captured by Ulysses S. Grant, whose Presidential Library we host here on campus. But Stephen D. Lee was captured, released, went back to fighting, was captured again, both times by Grant, and they had a lot of respect for each other because of their devotion and how hard they fought each other. But the rest of the story is Stephen D. Lee came here, and he served almost 20 years as president of Mississippi State. And then he is named head of the commission to establish the National Military Park cemeteries, one of which of course, was the Vicksburg Military Park Cemetery. By this time, Stephen D. Lee is the council general for the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad, which would be the equivalent today of being the chairman or the General Counsel of Apple. And so a sculpture of Stephen D. Lee was commissioned. She does one that is in the cemetery where Stephen D. Lee is buried in Columbus and then another one here on campus, which is in the middle of the Drill Field right now. She also did the life-size, full-scale battle dress on horseback that's in Vicksburg Military Park. It is sort of kismet that Stephen D. Lee gazes south, and in his vision every day is the Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library and the third-largest Lincoln memorabilia collection in the United States.

Stephen D. Lee is the namesake of Lee Hall administration building, the iconic original building on campus. His bust is in the middle of the Drill Field. And, obviously

the Lucky 7 and members of the faculty and staff took note of that, and there's been discussion of that, I guess, for 50 years.

The flag change was about a five-year process for us. Dr. Keenum increasingly became convinced that not only were their dollars and cents reasons to embrace flag change, but there was the moral imperative as well. It just made our students uncomfortable, and it required them to demonstrate an allegiance that they could not feel because of historical awareness. And so, Dr. Keenum decided that perhaps the time was ripe for change, and so when the NCAA came out, and along with the Southeastern Conference, that we're no longer going to hold tournaments in states that display this symbolism, we kind of had a perfect storm. We were facing the loss of what we consider a major sport and the ability to compete at the highest level. And remember now, we played for the national championship in 2013 against UCLA. They had two really great pitchers, like Leiter and Rocker (of Vanderbilt, Mississippi State's opponent in the 2021 College World Series Championship), and we couldn't overcome that. But we had already played for national championship baseball. We have won a bunch of Southeastern Conference titles. We have won a bunch of regionals and a bunch of super regionals. And we were in the middle of building, and there is not a lot of arguing about this, the finest college baseball facility in the United States. And so that was not a decision we took lightly, plus our students had gotten to the point that they were tired of going along to get along on the issue of the flag, and they wanted to speak to it. So, Dr. Keenum decided to not just participate, but to take a leading role. So, when I went to the Capitol, Dr. Keenum spoke with a great deal of passion to the issue and tried to explain why that he felt that it was time for us to move past the division and the argument and to

move on to more substantial problems—confronting Mississippi poverty, economic distress, all of the things that make life difficult in Mississippi. And so he put his weight behind that.

But given the fact, as I told the bartender in Omaha (where the College World Series is held) this year, “You know, I like our team. I don't know what's going to happen, but I like our chances. But I think if we had to play a three-team tournament to come up here, and our opponents were Ole Miss and Southern, I don't know if we could get out of a state tournament, much less, get back here, because that's how good baseball is in Mississippi.”

And so, I knew from my previous life in journalism that the stars were in alignment, if they were ever going to be, for us to achieve flag change. You might not get people on the same page to do the right thing, but you can get people on the same page to protect the NCAA baseball. There are some who were appalled that it took that to get the deed done. You know, as an old, bald-headed white guy, it didn't matter to me what it took to get it done as long as it could get done. And now my grandchildren do not have to engage in this argument through their lifetime. So yeah, I think the strategy here probably could be described as a holding action, trying to strike a balance between the two sides of this argument that were so far apart even 20 years ago, 10 years ago. But I think the atrocity in South Carolina had a tremendous impact. And then I think people in Mississippi began to confront the fact that larger units outside the state were prepared to leave us behind to wallow in our stubbornness about the former state flag and to penalize our young people. You know, what a crying shame it would have been, you know, in ‘13 and 18 and 19 for these young people not to be able to compete, and not just at

Mississippi State, but at Ole Miss and at Southern Miss; it's just not in our best interest to place ourselves in positions where our young people suffer. And I think that's what it finally got down to achieving the political will to do this. You had a black caucus that was past ready. You had some rural white Democrats that saw the handwriting on the wall. And then you had some urban Mississippi Republicans that looked at it both from an economic standpoint and from a moral standpoint. And so, I think all of those stars aligned, and we got to it, but I will say threading the needle. You know, over the last decade, it was one of the more difficult challenges we've had in the Office of Public Affairs.

Question: Did anything surprise you back in 2015, 2016? You had a Faculty Senate that was behind change. You had students that were behind change. You had alumni that offered mixed support. Did anything surprise you about how people reacted in 2015 or in 2020? Did anything catch you off guard?

Answer: I was a little surprised how difficult it was for some of those that I had considered progressive, how tightly they held to the symbolism, and how personally they took it. And, of course, I kept hearing the argument that my great, great, or my three-times great grandfather, you know, got killed, fill in the blank here, and he didn't own slaves. And he was a hill country farmer, and he just did what people in his community expected him to do. He was honorable—all of those things—all of which I can say about my own family. But, you know, the fact is, it gets down to dealing with historical facts of what the Civil War was all about. And, at the core, it's difficult not to conclude that it was about the institution of slavery. So, I think that was a surprise to me.

It also surprised me how many folks had already long since moved on and just thought it was odd that we were still talking or fighting about it, because you had the political class of people who were laser focused on the debate, but you had two-job working families, black and white, church-going people, who said that that argument was not part of their daily lives. They were making a living and trying to get kids educated and making house payments. So, I really think both of those things were surprises to me.

I've also been a little pleasantly surprised that the adoption of the new flag—at the Neshoba County Fair, in particular—most cabins have three flags. They have an American flag, they have a state flag, and they have the fair flag, which is very distinctive, and has no Confederate symbolism.

Question: Did you notice any negative implications to the change after the new flag was adopted? At USM, the emails and the comments that were coming in, very heavily in 2015 and 2016, and a little bit in 2020, “I'm not going to donate, or I'm not going to do this.” And we didn't see any of that come to fruition. I'm imagining just based on my knowledge of Mississippi State that you didn't realize any of that either, right? Your enrollment went up, you've had a lot of success, despite the threats from those who were mad about the university's position on the flag.

Answer: I have heard every threat you can imagine from, “I'll never give another dime. I won't attend another athletic event. I won't buy season tickets. I won't, you know, all of those threats,” and there might have been a handful of people who followed through with that. But I can say, this will be our seventh consecutive year of enrollment growth, and we are at an all-time high in endowment and our fundraising numbers. Even through

COVID, we have failed well, and while everyone is still euphoric over Omaha, our fan base is probably more together right now than they've been since Dak.

Those threats were mostly hollow. And, people say things when they're angry that they don't mean and that they don't intend to follow through on, but it's harmful nonetheless. The flag is just one of a handful of issues that stir great passions among our fan base, and so I'm watching some of the reaction on COVID in the second round, and someone said that the state motto in Mississippi ought to be, "Ain't nobody gonna tell me what to do," and unfortunately, that plays out a lot in debates like this. Fortunately, when people calm down and cool off, their better angels normally return, and we have not seen long-term effects of the flag change.

The all hands-on deck approach we took, we took a bus full of coaches, just like our basketball coaches and administrators down there. We had folks on the phone back channel with individual legislators. We tried to make our case for why we felt like the time had come for this change to be made. But ultimately, you know, as would lobbying on anything, all we can do is honestly and forthrightly share our views with the legislature. They ultimately cast the vote. And of course, I'm proud of what Mississippi State did to help flag change come about, but the bottom line is that the legislature reached down, it was a hard vote—it didn't matter which side you were on, it was a hard vote. They reached down and found the courage and the vision to change that flag. And it undoubtedly cost a few of them dearly. But they did it, and I think it was a proud day for the state of Mississippi, and I think it was really a great day for higher education.

We still have our struggles—poverty, insularity, lack of broadband—I mean, I can give you a laundry list—but we also have a wonderful state full of good people. And we have a lot to offer visitors here, and there are a lot of things in this state that should be attractive to an academic in Nebraska or Rhode Island. I will not say that it was easy, and I will not say that we were totally successful in our efforts to kind of finesse and handle it. We stubbed our toes. We made mistakes, and we were fortunate to get through it with as few knots on our head as we as we got.

Question: As you reflect on it, do you see any positive effects with relationships with students like the Lucky 7 or positive outcomes with faculty and staff?

Answer: Unfortunately, Jim as you see on your own campus, you might have student leaders and flamboyant personalities among your student activists, but graduation comes and they move on. And so, the Lucky 7 primarily has moved on, but they were replaced by other bright inquisitive, courageous students and they took up other causes. We still have, like every campus, some buildings with names that are lightning rods or histories that are lightning rods. But I do think the flag change effort established trust and respect that Dr. Keenum followed through on what he told the Faculty Senate. And I think the fact is that we got through that entire episode without any violence or significant damage to the reputation. I like that. You know, students watch to see if what you say matches what you do. And, you know, that's not a bad rule to follow. I think our students were watching to see if the administration was going follow through what they said, and I believe to Dr. Keenum's credit, he leaned into it when it was time to lean into it. And he kept the peace when it was time to keep the peace. And so, I think, we just this last year, as I'm sure you did, we encountered the reaction to the Asian murders in

Atlanta. And we have a substantial Asian population in our student body and faculty and staff, and there was real fear, real anger. And I'm sure you encounter this yourself, but it seems that we either don't go far enough, or we go too far, depending on where someone is on the political spectrum, trying to find balance, and trying to, you know, do what we can without doing harm. That's kind of the sweet spot that we aspire to, and hopefully we make it. But you know, every time you whack a mole, one of these societal ills, another one pops up. And I think that's the nature of the world we live in and with social media.

APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT, DR. GLENN BOYCE

Question: What are your recollections of last summer?

Answer: I have to tell you, Jim, about how Ole Miss got involved. That seems like a good place to start. It was kind of interesting. I had two football players contacted my AD (athletics director) and said we'd like to talk with the Chancellor about how we can make a difference. It was during this period when there was a lot of social unrest across the nation. They were talking about, "What more can we do in order to move the state forward?" So, I went to visit with them. It was Ryder Anderson and Momo Sanago. They were the ones who emphasized the state flag. They thought this would be a great effort to see about getting the state flag changed. So, in talking with them I explained the legislative process. I explained how challenging it was. I explained prior efforts and attempts to change the state flag. I said, "You know, men, the one thing that I can do for you is, given the expression of your feelings and how intense those feelings are, let me see if I can set up a visit with the Speaker of the House. If the Speaker of the House would come to Oxford to visit, I would love for you to express everything you have expressed to me to him.

And then, we called Speaker Gunn and invited him to come up to Oxford, and Jim, he spent over two hours with our students, which is a considerable amount of time for a man who is that busy. We had a nice lunch together; we had a good visit. He informed them of what the process would be, and his position was that he wanted to change the flag. So, it was not like there was any division, all of us were in agreement that the flag needed to be changed. And some of those reasons were the economic impact

on the state. I'm not sure there is any way to truly estimate what that impact is on the state, but we knew it was a negative impact. We work with enough companies. We visit with enough executives. We read enough. We understand that changing the flag was bigger than athletics.

I want to make it clear I don't believe that this was all about athletics. I believe that when our legislators stepped into the chamber and had to place their votes, I believe that they were placing their votes for reasons that were far more significant. They were asking themselves about their grandchildren's futures. They were looking themselves in the mirror and saying, "What is the future of Mississippi?" They knew they were faced with a historical moment.

From that point on, once it appeared Speaker Gunn was getting traction. Once it looked like it was actually moving someplace, we as a group of presidents went to the Capitol, and as a unified group, we made a decision to support the changing of the flag. And there were a lot of reasons to support change—athletics was certainly one—but just the way that the state could move forward unified with a new state flag was important. Flags are important throughout history. There are very few things that are more symbolic for a nation than a flag. Then there began a sense of urgency that we all rally around strategic steps to support the Speaker and the other leaders at the Capitol, who had decided they were going to take this full-on, and take some sort of legislative action in just a few weeks. It was stunning that it moved at the pace that it moved. It just seemed to gain momentum and traction so quickly behind the Speaker's leadership and the leadership of many others. Then, of course, we invited our head coaches to the Capitol. Jim, there are sometimes in life when circumstances come together. We had a new

football coach, along with Mississippi State, and there was a lot of excitement about the future. It was quite interesting because we had to fly (Ole Miss football coach) Lane (Kiffin) in from California. And off they went. Of course, (Ole Miss basketball coach) Kermit Davis did a great job with his talk and the Mississippi State women's basketball coach (Nikki McCray) did a great job.

It was not just under the threat of the NCAA or the SEC. Yes, that lingered some, but it was just time for Mississippi to make a statement to the rest of the country. And after that, we all stood ready to do whatever we needed to do. If we needed to call a legislator who are friends of ours, or who were really challenged to make a decision. Imagine, these are people who are voted in by their constituents. They were wrestling—when we put this to a vote years ago, it did not go well. My role and the university's role once these events took place, was a lot of private conversations with legislators to test the waters—how was it moving forward. And so, I think we did the right things strategically. We went out front with our coaching staff. We went out front as a group of presidents and chancellor. We put the right people at the Capitol at the right time to help the traction and momentum continue, but I really believe that there wasn't much more we could do. It was up to the legislators and how they thought about the issue. I know that they explored their consciences so carefully, and what they thought the future of this state could look like, and was this the right moment in history to make this happen. I think many of them thought about the process. Was it the right process? Let's face it, the Governor wanted the people to vote, and so they were concerned about, in essence, how independent we are, as Mississippians. Our independence and our rights are critical to us. There is nothing wrong with that, and I believe in all my fiber. It was up to them to do the hard

work. It was up to them to turn the votes. It was up to them to figure out how to work across the aisle.

That's pretty much what we did. Of course, I am summarizing it for you.

Question: You mentioned the unity on campus and the other institutions. Were there concerns from other stakeholder groups? My experience at USM was many students, faculty and staff supported a flag change, but once we got out into the community, it was not as unanimous. Did you give consideration to those other groups? Did anything surprise you about their responses to what you were doing last summer?

Answer: There will also be some inherent differences between alumni and your university community as it is right now, because the experiences of alumni, depending on the generation, they have their views based on their experiences. So, yes, there was going to be a certain segment of alumni, who without question, were going to be opposed to changing this flag. As is always the case, there were also a group of alumni who were saying stay the course. There was no way to measure the percentage of those who wanted us to stay the course, and those who wanted us to drop out of the conversation all together and not take a stance.

Question: We are a year removed from the debate in Jackson. Looking back, how do you want the University of Mississippi's role to be remembered?

Answer: That's a great question. I want our role to be remembered for exactly what it was. I don't want people to think that we did anything extraordinary. We didn't cast the vote. The people who did the extraordinary work were the people who were in the chamber casting votes. I want us to be remembered as a university that was part of a university system, that supported change, that we knew was going to move our state

forward. And that we didn't remain quiet or on the sidelines. We were fully engaged as we could be, and we are very proud of our role. But I never want to say that our role was dominant; I would never want that kind of pride or arrogance to be out there. Even though the conversations with the players, with Speaker Gunn, I do think it had an impact. I asked him, and he said, "Oh yeah, that was valuable." But somehow the Speaker got this thing rolling, because he was passionate about it. I do think the conversation with those young men helped fuel that passion. But I would never suggest that we were the ones who ignited the fire. This is the inside story about how we participated, and our role was the same as the role of our friends in Hattiesburg, in Starkville, and so on, and it was to support the change the flag, and to do whatever we could to help strategically to help people understand how important it was not just to the universities—let's face it, all of us had already taken it down. It was how important it was to the state of Mississippi. And that's what we are all about as universities—we create the future labor force; we create the future programming. Our efforts are to drive this state forward to a future like it has never seen before in so many different ways. We knew that this was a moment when we could participate and do our part to make the future of the state of Mississippi a little brighter.

I don't think in your study you can understate what I am about to say. It was so emotional at the Capitol. I can't think of anything that would make emotions run any higher than the debate over this. There were so many people torn between what decision to make. When you hear those people who were torn, and were key votes, and when you hear the Speaker talk about them. There wasn't a dry eye in the house, even now. Even now, it was so challenging. I was at a dinner just a few months ago, and just listening to

the Speaker and legislators around the table talk about it; there wasn't a dry eye at the table. And it made me understand, because I wasn't in that chamber, and I didn't have the final vote. I just knew how I felt about it. It made me understand just how difficult this was for these legislators to make those yes votes. It also made me understand the energy and emotion that went into that vote has not dissipated. I would contend that in five years, 10 years, when these men talk about that vote, it will hard for them to keep their composure. Every now and then you have a historical moment, and when you are a part of it, it doesn't dissipate with time. It really doesn't. You will always remember how challenging it was to stand in front of that mirror that morning and think I've got the most important vote of my life today. That's why you have to have the deepest respect for all of those legislators who faced that mirror that day.

Question: That seems like a good place to stop, but let me ask one more question specifically as it relates to public relations. Do you feel like a year later, and maybe project forward a bit, that this process had or has long-term effects on relationships with students, faculty, or alumni—either positive or negative?

Answer: I think about the only truly emotional moment that I had was when we raised that state flag that first morning. That was a pretty cool experience. Finally raising the state flag over our university after it had been down for a period of time was good. We raised the flag. We were proud. But we had work to do, and everyone refocused and went back to their jobs.

I will say that in the arena of crisis management, the only place I felt like crisis management was necessary was in the initial statement—when we first came out and declared a position. We spend a huge amount of time nuancing over every word. We

looked at other statements, and we did not feel the need to be first. You weren't going to get any extra credit for being number one out of the gate. In terms of crisis PR, it was interesting because after that first statement, after being clear about our position, I didn't feel like anything we did required crisis PR. I feel like everything else we did was just part of the gang. We were just doing our part. It was just one of those issues, where if you could make it clear one time, you could reiterate it at the Capitol, you could reiterate it in front of the television camera. Because it wasn't an issue that had great complexity. It had great emotion, but it didn't have great complexity. When we first put it out, that's when I held my breath and said, "What's coming at us?"

APPENDIX E – INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT, DR. MARK KEENUM

Question: As I said in my letter, I am examining the three largest universities in Mississippi's public relations response to the state flag debate over a five-year period, from 2015 through 2020. In 2015, the Dylann Roof shooting in Charleston reinvigorated the conversation around the state flag. How did we all respond to that, and how did we respond in 2020? And how did that affect the relationship with our all of our key stakeholder groups? So, it's not really a study about how much influence did the universities have on the state flag change as much as it is how did our faculty, students, staff and alumni respond to what we said and did? So, it's more about public relations than the political strategy side of this. If you don't mind, take me back to 2015 and after the Charleston shooting. Can you tell me what was going through your head at that time, and maybe some of the conversations you were having?

Answer: Well, you know, I go back to when that occurred, and it was very shocking and disturbing. And in, and there was an outcry back in 2015. And we had conversations among some of the IEOs (institutional executive officers) about what those institutions should be doing. And I think the immediate thought was probably just sit tight for a while. But then, I was down at Ocean Springs High School, visiting with some students on my school visits. And, of course, they had some media there. And one of the reporters asked me my opinion on the state flag, and I made a comment that our state flag is the state flag and that's an issue that will have to be decided by legislature, but I do think it's time for us to start up a conversation about changing the flag. And I thought it was an innocent response to a reporter. I'm there talking with students about their future and going on to college, maybe considering Mississippi State. But the reaction to that was

tremendous, to me and then to our institution. People read into that I was calling for change in the state flag. And I was bombarded over social media. And a lot of personal attacks on me came in from people who want to keep the flag, and how dare I begin a dialogue on this.

And then that started conversations on our campus as we began that school year with various student organizations, mainly with some of our minority student organizations, underrepresented student groups. We have an active Black Student Association, and we have numerous under-represented student organizations. And I met with their leadership officers over the course of that semester, and we talked about it.

I think it was along that time that Morris Stocks, who was the interim chancellor at Ole Miss, indicated at one of our IEO meetings that he thought it was time for Ole Miss to bring down their flag. And I remember the University Police marched out there and had a ceremony, and they took the flag down. And of course, there was a huge outcry there, either for it or against it. It was a big deal. And so obviously, a lot of eyeballs are looking at us at Mississippi State. And so, I gave a great deal of thought, and how in the world could we do it? And you know, I'll never forget I had a meeting with student leaders. I think they were the presidents of like six or seven of our underrepresented student organizations. And they were in my office; we were talking about the flag. And they were all upperclassmen. They weren't freshmen or sophomores, they were juniors and seniors. And I asked the group of student leaders to raise your hand if you've ever seen the Mississippi flag on the campus. And they looked at each other. And I said, "Could you tell me where the state flag is?" You know, very few people notice the flag. One was over on the very south end of our campus where our College of Veterinary

Medicine is located. And then on the very north end of our campus on what I'd call our North farm, there's a very remote Mississippi agriculture and forestry experiment station conference center, that you can't see from the main road. In front of that conference center. There's a flagpole there, and they had American flag and a Mississippi flag. So, at the heart of the university campus, there was no state flag. And, and so I think that put it in a little bit of perspective for the student leaders. It was not something that's directly in your face. And that, I guess, I don't know if that bought me any time, but the pressure seemed to subside at that time going into the Spring of 2016.

And then I had meetings with some of our student leaders, and these weren't necessarily these formal organizations, but you had the student NAACP here, working in concert with Oktibbeha County NAACP. And the student leaders of the NAACP, the Mississippi State chapter, came to me with other prominent student leaders, and said it's time for me to take a formal position announcing that we're going to bring down the state flag. As you may know, in spring of a year, we're typically in the middle of legislative session. I talked to my student leaders, and I was very empathetic, very supportive of their idea to make this change. And I said, the timing is just not right for this moment, but if you have trust in me and have faith in me, know that I have a plan for how to move forward where this is concerned. And, I was a bit disappointed because the next week there was a big rally on our campus with a group of students. We had a number of faculty who were leading the effort, and the TV cameras came out. I held a press conference with media to talk about my position on the flag. And I said I felt like changing the flag was something we definitely needed to give serious consideration to for moving our state

forward, for these young people, and their future. But I didn't I didn't make any announcements.

So, we went all the way through the semester and had graduation. And it was soon after graduation, that I talked to the Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine and the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Because the two flags that we had were on property controlled by these two deans. I talked to them and asked the Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine. I said, "Do you and your faculty, do you feel strongly about flying that flag in front of the vet school?" He said, "Oh, no, we'd like to take it down." I said, "Well, I think you ought to take it down." Same conversation with the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. And he felt the same way, that they needed to take it down as well. "I see no reason why you shouldn't take it down if that's what you want to do." And that's what happened. It probably was in May; it was after graduation, so it could have been early June. I can't remember. But it was not long after our May commencement of 2016. And that was it. There were no newspaper ads, or TV, or reporters or anything or ceremonies. Just one day, the flag was there; the next day, it wasn't. Nobody contacted my office or said anything about it. So, we went through that entire summer. Not one word was said because they were in very remote locations, and nobody had really paid any attention to them to start with.

And so, it was when school began in the fall of 16. I got a phone call from a student, maybe two weeks after school began, and this young lady was a reporter with our school newspaper, The Reflector. And she asked me, "President Keenum. I've heard that the Mississippi flags have been removed from the campus. Is that true?" And I said, "Well, my understanding is that the Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine, and the

Dean College of Ag and Life Sciences, decided back several months ago that they were going to make a change. I authorized it if that's what they want to do, they could do it. And so as far as I know, there is no other state flag on the campus. That went out in the campus newspaper, and then the whole world exploded after that. The print media, the tv media, but it was something that happened three months earlier.

I didn't feel like I wanted to make a big spectacle out of it. It was just something we were doing out of respect, and it was the right thing to do. So, we dealt with that. There were a lot of people were angry with me, primarily elected officials, and then just alumni who revered that state flag, and were very angry, very upset with the decision to take it down. So, we just kind of kept going forward one day at a time and eventually the reaction waned a bit.

And then I noticed, I think it was that first year, we had a home football game and there was a gentleman who had on a walking billboard around his neck, on his front and on his back. I don't remember all that it said, but I remember it said, "Fire Mark Keenum. We want our flag back." And he was holding the state flag, and he would just go all over through the tailgates and all over campus. He did that every ball game. "Fire Mark Keenum. Bring back our flag." And he did that every year. He was very persistent, and a nice guy, but he wanted his state flag, and he was there to protest and be upset with me about it.

So that's how we managed dealing with it on our campus. And, you know, I heard from legislators who were very upset with me. I had no one ever directly threaten me, just express their displeasure. And I'd be out at meetings with alumni groups, and most people were very respectful. But occasionally we'd have someone raise the issue at an alumni

group meeting. But, none of the campuses were flying the flag by then. So, I think people just were not happy, but they just didn't dwell on it. We had to have conversations with student groups on campus, maybe a fraternity or two, and urge them not to display the flag. We never issued a formal university policy on it, and for the most part, all of our student groups came around and cooperated with us. So that's, that's, that's my memory of how that all came about.

Question: You mentioned that the outcry in '16 or '15, but especially in '16, but that it just sort of waned. Right. As I'm looking through the media and looking through social media, that was the experience of all of the universities—you had this outcry in 2015 and '16. And then, in '17, '18, and '19, really not a whole lot written about it. I mean, there was one or two attempts in the legislature to make you fly the flag, but that was really that was really it. Did you see any lasting effects from that outcry? At Southern Miss, just like I'm sure you had, we had the threats of, "I'm never going to donate again. My kid is not going to go to go there." But your enrollment has been up, and your fundraising has been up. I imagine none, those threats never came to fruition. Is that correct?

Answer: I'm sure there may have been a parent or two who wouldn't let their child come for that reason, but that would be all anecdotal. I'm just speculating that might have happened. Listen, we have a very strong MSU Development Foundation, as I'm sure the USM does as well. And the rank and file all throughout that board were highly supportive of our decision, not to fly the flag. And, you know, these are the people that make major donations, but also help us raise major donations. And you are right. We've

seen very strong fundraising over these years. So, I didn't see people not stepping up support our school just because of that issue.

Question: Well, so then in 2020, we much like in 2015, you have these events outside of Mississippi occur and raise the conversation again. When you think about George Floyd and some of the other incidents in other parts of the country, the flag conversation comes up again in 2020. And then, Mississippi State was very active in lobbying the legislature. Can you talk a little bit about your thinking there and some of the things that y'all did?

Answer: Well, you know, the unfortunate situation with George Floyd was tragic and did spark a national awareness, no doubt. And as part of that awareness here in the state of Mississippi, you've got this symbol of hate, that still flying over our Capitol and many of our buildings. As I share with people, I'm a product of this state, I'm a son of Confederate Veterans on both sides of my family, and I revere my family, but I don't condone what the effort was to overthrow our national government, and the basis for that, which was slavery. And, so people over the years took that symbol, that battle flag of the Confederacy, and they co-opted it as a symbol of up terror and hatred. And when people see that symbol, that are not from our state, who may not understand where people come from a heritage standpoint, to them it is terror and hatred. And, and that's the symbol of our state. And that's not who we are as a state.

So, it became very apparent that this was the time to do it. If this wasn't a time to do it, there never would be a time that we would be able to do it. And so the dialogue had been going on for some time. Speaker Gunn had stepped out there, very courageously, and talked about the time and the need for us to have a dialogue and change the flag, and

boy, the opposition groups came down on him like a ton of bricks. And that effort waned. And I think that there was just not a real belief that there would ever be enough votes in either house of the legislature, because it would take a supermajority. And I don't think people ever thought that you could get the supermajority in either house to do something like this. And, really, there was not a lot of sentiment to put it on a vote in a referendum. Millions of dollars would be spent on both sides of that; it would be a national spotlight on our state. And goodness gracious if the vote, I think it would have been close, but if the vote had turned out to keep the flag, can you imagine a fallout and the negativity and how people not just in the country, but around the world, how would people think about Mississippi? And so, my biggest fear was that there would be a referendum. And even if it was close vote and we prevailed, the fact that it was such a close vote would still be a negative black eye for our state. But I never dreamed that we would get to the point where we could actually have a really serious discussion in the legislature to possibly bring it to vote. You have the Speaker and Lieutenant Governor, they're not going to want to step out there and push something if they don't feel like the votes are there.

Maybe it's just the stars all lining up just in this very unique year of 2020, because normally the session would have ended at the end of April. It was the first year of a four-month session of a new four-year term, and because of COVID and having to suspend the legislature while we were in lockdown, they had to extend it over into the summer months. And of course, that's when the George Floyd incident occurred, and all this was out there and the highlight and the turmoil and the attention.

And then you had the Southeastern Conference, and my Commissioner Greg Sankey of the SEC, who had been talking with Mark Emmert, who's president of the NCAA. He knew that the NCAA Board of Governors were prepared to start taking some action against Mississippi to show some response to all that's going on in this racial awakening, and that the time had finally come for there to be a change. And if not, there will be some consequences for athletic programs in the state of Mississippi. And so that prompted the Commissioner of the SEC to take an action. And I'll never forget him calling me and saying that he is going to be bringing an item to the agenda that I'm going to be part of, that's going to be a very strong message. Now the members of the board for the SEC issued a very strong statement until this flag is changed there is a high probability that there will be an inability to host SEC postseason events in the state of Mississippi. The resolution didn't just come right out and say it will, but it said it's very likely. But the way people read that statement, they inferred that it meant no more SEC postseason tournaments or events in our state—that impacted State and Ole Miss; it didn't have anything to do with USM. But right on the heels of the SEC statement was a very strongly worded directive from the NCAA Board of Governors that said there would not be any postseason NCAA tournaments—baseball regionals, super regionals, or women's basketball tournaments that we typically host—allowed until the state flag has changed. I think at that time, with all that was going on and all the dialogue, those who were proponents for a change seized upon those statements, and used those to highlight that there is a serious consequence for our universities.

Now, you had the business community, the Mississippi Economic Council, the Mississippi Manufacturers Association, and other leading economic entities and organizations who were very vocal in their desire to see a change. And by that time, we had strong support among our university, Mississippi State University alumni leadership, our foundation leadership, and so that's when we started talking really seriously with leadership in the legislature. The Speaker of the House was trying to get members in his body to hear from constituents. Of course Mississippi State has a large alumni base, and people all over the state who have various roles, government and business and so forth, and his house members were hearing from Mississippi State people, and the same in the Senate for (Lt. Gov.) Delbert Hosemann, whose senators were hearing from Mississippi State people, from USM people, from Ole Miss people, and others. And so, we had a meeting, that the Speaker called all the IEOs to meet with him in the House, and he said he didn't know if the votes were there, but that he was willing to go to work to try to push this forward—if we can get members to step up and do the courageous thing. And it was tough on members because some members had promised they would never vote to do this, or if they did, they would vote to allow it to be a referendum that citizens would decide. If you looked at trying to get the supermajority needed, there weren't enough votes unless people didn't act upon what they said when they ran for office. That was a tough thing to ask a politician to do.

And so, but I will tell you that I had a meeting with the speaker and then we all went over and met with the lieutenant governor. Then we held a press conference there in the Capitol right after we met with both of these leaders and after the press conference, Commissioner (Alfred) Rankins said, “Well, why don't we all go somewhere here in the

Capitol to meet and talk about what the next steps are?” And so they found a room for all of us to meet in and so we were in the room, and someone brought up okay, “What’s next? What can we do, as university presidents?” I was sitting there and our university Governmental Affairs director, a guy named Lee Weiskopf, leaned over and he whispered in my ear, and he said, “Bringing all of our coaches to the Capitol,” because he worked in the Capitol for quite a number of years. He said, “Bringing all of our coaches to the Capitol would have a very significant impact. So, I just kind of blurted out what he just told me. I said, “Why don't we invite all of our coaches to come to the Capitol?” And everybody kind of looked at each other and said, “Well, can we do that?” And, I said, “Well, I don't know where any of our coaches are, but I'll have every one of our head coaches here by nine o'clock in the morning.” And the Commissioner liked the idea, and all the Presidents said we will do our best to get all of our head coaches here.

Our head football coach was down in South Florida. And we had to hurry to get the plane to pick him up and get him back in time. We had to get him a suit; he doesn't keep a suit down in Florida. But we got them there, and I think that had a big impact with a lot of members, on the heels of the message from the SEC, in what the NCAA Board of Governors had just put out there. Our women's head basketball coach gave an eloquent speech. The head basketball coach for Ole Miss gave a very eloquent speech. Then they spent time visiting with the members, and it helped keep the momentum going. It didn't necessarily get us all the votes we needed that day, but it helped keep that momentum going really strong. And then, just a lot of phone calls. I can tell you that we had very prominent Mississippi State graduates, very influential leaders across the state are calling their House or Senate members and telling them this is the time you've got to step up and

be courageous. We need you to do so. And I know that alumni of all of our universities, USM and Ole Miss, were all reaching out and talking to these key leaders and to get the votes. And then we all held our breath on the day of the vote, particularly in the House. And then we got there.

Question: I don't know that there were a whole lot of surprises in the conversations that I've had with some other individuals on this, but they all seem to say that one thing that may have that wasn't necessarily a surprise to them, but maybe caught them a little off guard was how quickly the conversation after the vote went away, right? It was this conversation that we had been having in Mississippi for a couple decades. And the vote happens, you know, and Governor Reeves signs it, the new flags go up, and everybody seemed to have moved on.

Answer: I think in the immediate aftermath, there was there were a lot of negative comments and threats towards members, you know, you're going to we're going to get you in the next election. And so that there was a lot of that—you let us down, you didn't live up to your word, you said you would never vote to do it, you did give us a chance to have our voices heard on a referendum. But you know, what was passed was to create a commission to design a new flag, and then have a vote on that design in the November election. So, I would say between the action of the legislature and then the actual vote, there was some uneasiness among a lot of people, including me. I liked the flag that was designed. I liked it a lot. And I thought they did a great job. It is a beautiful flag. But there were still a lot of people out there urging people not to vote for it. And you know, if they didn't vote for it, it didn't mean that we go back to the old flag, it just meant that we would start all over and just keep dragging this out. And it would keep the

momentum on the side of those people who want to go back to the old flag and try to force a statewide referendum on the whole issue. And so, there was a lot of uneasiness from the summer to November, and even leading right up to the day of the vote. We're looking at polling numbers, and the polling numbers showed that we were up to ratify the new flag, but they weren't exceptionally high numbers. They were just like in the low 50s, so it was still concerning for me. But to see the vote that we had, when it was 70+, 72 or so percent—that was very gratifying to see that number of people vote to say yes, this is our new flag.

And I think in my opinion, the relief didn't come until that validation at the ballot. And since then, I think it's just gone. It's just a non-issue now. Yeah, there are people that still are unhappy about it, but they recognize that people have really spoken on this issue. Obviously, the legislature did so in a very overwhelming manner, and then you had this statewide vote to approve this new flag, and it was such an overwhelming vote that I think people who are unhappy or just unhappy and they're never going to change. They may still fly that flag in their home, or put it on a tag on the front of their car, but it was an election, that vote, that I think allowed us to finally put this behind us.

Question: So, as you look back over those five years was there anything you would have done differently or said differently? I think the fact that we all got out of this without too many bumps and bruises is evidence that it went okay, but was there anything, as you reflect back was a lesson learned?

Answer: That's a good question. Like I said, I felt like it was going to have to take a referendum and I just loathed that idea. We had conversations back when the Speaker came out, and said what he said, I can't remember what year that was—that

caused all the upheaval. And I think people don't want someone taking something from them. And for whatever reason, their heritage or their beliefs, there are just a lot of people who have a strong tie to the old 1890 flag. And so there was discussion, pretty serious discussion, I think it was a bill introduced at one time in the House, maybe in both '18 or '19, that would have allowed for there to be two state flags. And so there was a lot of discussion about that, for people who want to keep the old flag, let them keep it. It still be an official flag, but we're going to, for those who don't want to fly that flag, we're going to give them the option to fly a new flag. And I genuinely felt like it at one point in this whole process, that's probably the best compromise we could come up with to move forward. Because I truly believe that if we had a second flag that most people, most universities and most public schools, and even businesses, would fly the new flag. And eventually, over a period of time, the other fly would just kind of go by the wayside. And so that never really got much traction; it was it was an idea it was out there. And I'll tell you, it was an idea right up until the last weekend before the historic votes, that was still permeating among the leadership. And eventually, they had to decide that no, we're just not going to take approach.

So, I don't know if I would say I'll do anything differently. It was just all the circumstances, the tragedy of George Floyd, the COVID environment that allowed for them to have more time, in a session when normally they wouldn't be in session—had those occurrences had not been in place, if it was just a normal, whatever normal is, normal year we probably still have the same state flag.

So, I think the universities definitely played a role and the things we discussed, and being there to reinforce where we stood, where our rank and file alumni, our students, our faculty, and again, our strong alumni supporters, that it was time for the change. And we were able to again, mobilize these efforts and organize these efforts. Can you imagine us, or Southern Miss, or Ole Miss not being able participate in postseason baseball in Mississippi. I think that people came around, and it wasn't easy, but they finally came around. We had the referendum, people have now moved on. And so I don't think that there will be as serious political ramifications to those courageous House and Senate members who cast those very courageous votes back in 2020. I think things have calmed down, and are calming down, and people will have moved on by the time we have our next election, I guess in 2023.

I don't know that there is anything that I can think of offhand. In my mind, when it was done on campus, I wanted to do it in a respectful manner. I didn't want to bring a lot of hoopla around it, and we just quietly did it. And we wouldn't have done it any other way, in my opinion.

APPENDIX F – CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING CATEGORIES

1. The publication is a...

1. Local/State media outlet,
2. Regional media outlet,
3. National media outlet,
4. International media outlet.

2. Year of publication.

1. 2015
2. 2016
3. 2017
4. 2018
5. 2019
6. 2020

3. The following university/universities are referenced in the article:

1. Mississippi State University,
2. The University of Mississippi,
3. The University of Southern Mississippi,
4. More than one university.

4. The focus of the article, as it relates to the universities:

1. University's/Universities' officials' words or actions (for example, the article has been prompted by a statement from the university or an action).

2. Universities' officials' words or actions are included, but are not the focus of the article.

3. Universities' officials' words or actions are not referenced.

5. Historical context

1. Article does not include references to prior, similar debates or issues at the university referenced in the article,

2. Article includes references to prior, similar debates or issues and is positive,

3. Article includes references to prior, similar debates or issues and is neutral,

4. Article includes references to prior, similar debates or issues and is negative.

6. Current climate

1. Article does not include references to similar ongoing debates or issues at the university referenced in the article (in addition to the flag),

2. Article includes references to similar, ongoing debates or issues at the university,

3. Article includes references to national debates or issues,

4. Article includes both references to ongoing debates or issues at both the university and on the national level.

7. Article emphasizes the position from which individuals/groups associated with a university/universities:

1. The article does not emphasize the position of an individual associated with the university,
 2. Yes – emphasizes the position of a university administrator,
 3. Yes – emphasizes the position of a student or student group,
 4. Yes – emphasizes the position of a faculty member or group,
 5. Yes – emphasizes the position of an athletics director or coach.
- 8. Tone of quote(s) or paraphrased quotes from student(s) or faculty (to include quotes from individuals or governing bodies like the Faculty Senate).**
1. Article did not include quotes from a student or faculty member.
 2. Positive toward the university,
 3. Balanced or neutral,
 4. Negative toward the university.
- 9. Tone of quote(s) from NCAA/SEC/Conference USA officials.**
1. Article did not include quotes from NCAA/SEC/Conference USA officials.
 2. Positive toward the university,
 3. Balanced or neutral,
 4. Negative toward the university.
- 10. For articles that include quote(s) from university officials, including presidents, communications staff members, athletics directors and coaches, which crisis response strategy is being employed?**
1. Article did not include quote(s) from university administrator,

2. Denial – Removes any connection between the organization and the crisis,

3. Diminish - The crisis is not as bad as you think.” “The University lacks control over the crisis,”

4. Rebuild - An attempt to improve the organization’s reputation by offering aid to victims.

11. Contribution to legislative action to retire the flag (for 2020 articles only)

1. No association of an effect of the university/universities on the legislative decision to retire the flag—either by direct attribution or inference—is included in the article,

2. University/universities words or actions is identified as a factor on the legislative decision to retire the flag,

3. University/universities words or actions is inferred as a factor on the legislative decision to retire the flag.

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