

# The Great Seal of the Confederacy



**Deo Vindice**  
**"God Will Vindicate"**

*The Great Seal of the Confederate States of America* was engraved in 1864, by the late Joseph S. Wyon, of London, England, predecessor of Messrs J. S. and A. B. Wyon, chief engravers of Her British Majesty's seals, etc., and reached Richmond not long before the evacuation of the city, April 3, 1865. It was of silver, and in diameter measured nearly four inches. At the evacuation it was overlooked by the Confederate authorities, and subsequently fell into the possession of the late genial and accomplished Colonel John T. Pickett, of Washington, D.C., who, after having a number of electrotype copies in copper, silver and gold plating made from it, presented the original to Colonel William E. Earle, of Washington, D.C. This last gentleman, on December 27th, 1888, formally presented it to the State of South Carolina. The announcement of the gift elicited from the *Picayune*, in its issue of January 6, 1889, the interesting report of an interview, by one of its representatives, held with Hon. Thomas J. Semmes, of New Orleans, which follows:

"Mr. Semmes said it always afforded him pleasure to converse on the events of the war, particularly the transactions of the Confederate Senate. He was attorney-general of Louisiana in 1861. When it became necessary to elect to the Confederate Senate, organized under the new constitution, Mr. Semmes and General Edward T. Sparrow were chosen senators from this State. In drawing for terms he drew that for four years, while General Sparrow drew that for six years. This was at Richmond, Va., in February, 1862.

"In speaking of his services in the Senate, Mr. Semmes said he was appointed a member of the finance committee in conjunction with Hon. R. M. T. Hunter, of Virginia, and Hon. Robert Barnwell, of South Carolina and a member of the judiciary committee, of which Hon. B. H. Hill was chairman. He was also chairman of the joint committee on the flag and seal of the Confederate States. He drafted, under the direction of Hon. R. M. T. Hunter, the 'tax in kind' bill, which practically supported the Confederacy during the last two years of the war.

"As member of the finance committee, he advocated the sealing and calling in of the outstanding Confederate currency, on the ground that the purchasing power of the new currency to be issued in

exchange would be greater than the total amount of the outstanding currency in its then depreciated condition. He made a report from the judiciary committee adverse to martial law.

"Upon being questioned as to the seal which he had designed, Mr. Semmes said it was a device representing an equestrian portrait of Washington (after the statue which surmounts his monument in the capitol square at Richmond), surrounded with a wreath, composed of the principal agricultural products of the

Confederacy, and having around its margin the words: 'Confederate States of America, 22d February, 1862,' with the motto, 'Deo vindice.'

"In the latter part of April, 1864, quite an interesting debate was had on the adoption of the motto. The House resolutions fixing the motto as 'Deo Duce Vincemus' being considered, Mr. Semmes moved to substitute 'Deo vindice majores aemulamur.' The motto had been suggested by Professor Alexander Dimitry. Mr. Semmes thought 'Deo vindice' sufficient and preferred it. He was finally triumphant."

In this connection it is appropriate and interesting to reproduce the speech made by Mr. Semmes on that occasion. It was as follows:

"MR. PRESIDENT--I am instructed by the committee to move to strike out the words "duce vincemus" in the motto and insert in lieu thereof the words "Vindice majores aemulamur," "Under the guidance and protection of God we endeavor to equal and even excel our ancestors." Before discussing the proposed change in the motto, I will submit to the Senate a few remarks as to the device on the seal.

"The committee has been greatly exercised on this subject, and it has been extremely difficult to come to any satisfactory conclusion. This is a difficulty, however, incident to the subject, and all that we have to do is to avoid what Visconti calls 'an absurdity in bronze.'

"The equestrian statue of Washington has been selected in deference to the current popular sentiment. The equestrian figure impressed on our seal will be regarded by those skilled in glyptics as to a certain extent indicative of our origin. It is a most remarkable fact that an equestrian figure constituted the seal of Great Britain from the time of Edward the Confessor down to the reign of George III, except during the short interval of the protectorate of Cromwell, when the trial of the King was substituted for the man on horseback. Even Cromwell retained the equestrian figure on the seal of Scotland, but he characteristically mounted himself on the horse. In the reign of William and Mary the seal bore the impress of the king and queen both mounted on horseback.

"Washington has been selected as the emblem for our shield, as a type of our ancestors, in his character of princeps majorum. In addition to this, the equestrian figure is consecrated in the hearts of our own people by the local circumstance that on the gloomy and stormy 22d of February, 1862, our permanent government was set in motion by the inauguration of President Davis under the shadow of the statue of Washington.

"The committee are dissatisfied with the motto on the seal proposed by the House resolution. The motto proposed is as follows: 'Deo Duce Vincemus'--(Under the leadership of God we will conquer).

"The word 'duce' is too pagan in its signification, and is degrading to God, because it reduces him to the leader of an army; for scarcely does the word 'duce' escape the lips before the imagination suggests 'exercitus,' an army for a leader to command. It degrades the Christian God to the level of pagan gods, goddesses and heroes, as is manifest from the following quotation; 'Nil desperandum Tenero duce.' This word duce is particularly objectionable because of its connection with the word 'vincemus'--(we will conquer). This connection makes God the leader of a physical army, by means of which we will conquer, or must conquer. If God be our leader we must conquer, or he would not be the

God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, nor the God of the Christian. This very doubt implied in the word 'vincemus' so qualifies the omnipotence of the God who is to be our 'leader,' that it imparts a degrading signification to the word 'duce' in its relations to the attributes of the Deity.

"The word 'vincemus' is equally objectionable because it implies that war is to be our normal state; besides, it is in the future tense --' we will conquer.' The future is always uncertain, and ,therefore, it implies doubt. What becomes of our motto when we shall have conquered? The future becomes an accomplished fact, and our motto thus loses its significance.

"In addition to this there are only two languages in which the words will and shall are to be found-- the English and the German--and in those they are used to qualify a positive condition of the mind and render it uncertain; they are repugnant to repose, quiet, absolute and positive existence.

"As to the motto proposed by us, we concur with the House in accepting the word 'Deo'--God. We do so in conformity to the expressed wishes of the framers of our Constitution, and the sentiments of the people and of the army.

"The preamble of the Provisional Constitution declares that 'We, the deputies of the sovereign and independent States of South Carolina, etc., invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God, do ordain,' etc.

"In this respect both our Constitutions have deviated in the most emphatic manner from the spirit that presided over the construction of the Constitution of the United States, which is silent on the subject of the Deity.

"Having discarded the word 'duce,' the committee endeavored to select in lieu of it a word more in consonance with the attributes of the Deity, and therefore more imposing and significant. They think success has crowned their efforts in the selection of the word 'vindex,' which signifies an assenter, a defender, protector, deliverer, liberator, a mediator and a ruler or guardian. 'Vindex' also means an avenger or punisher.

"No word appeared more grand, more expressive or significant than this. Under God as the asserter of our rights, the defender of our liberties, our protector against danger, our mediator, our ruler and guardian, and, as the avenger of our wrongs and the punisher of our crimes, we endeavor to equal or even excel our ancestors. What word can be suggested of more power, and so replete with sentiments and thoughts consonant with our idea of the omnipotence and justice of God?

"At this point the committee hesitated whether it were necessary to add anything further to the motto 'Deo Vindice.' These words alone were sufficient and impressive, and, in the spirit of the lapidary style of composition, were elliptical and left much to the play of the imagination. Reflection, however, induced us to add the words 'majores aemulamur,' because without them there would be nothing in the motto referring to the equestrian figure of Washington. It was thought better to insert something elucidative or adaptive of the idea to be conveyed by that figure. Having determined on this point, the committee submitted to the judgment of the Senate the words 'majores aemulamur,' as best adapted to express the ideas of 'our ancestors.' 'Patres' was first suggested, but abandoned because 'majores' signifies ancestors absolutely, and is also more suggestive than 'patres.' The latter is a term applied to our immediate progenitors who may be alive, whereas 'majores' conveys the idea of a more remote generation that has passed away.

"That being disposed of, the question arose as to the proper signification of the word 'aemulamur.' Honorable emulation is the primary signification of the word; in its secondary sense it is true it includes the idea of improper rivalry, or jealousy. But it is used in its primary and honorable sense by the most approved authors.

"The secondary and improper sense of the aemulari is excluded in the proposed motto by the relation it bears to 'Deo vindice.' This relation excludes the idea of envy or jealousy, because God, as the asserter of what is right, justifies the emulation, and as a punisher of what is wrong checks excess in case the emulation runs into improper envy or jealousy. In adopting the equestrian figure of Washington, the committee desires distinctly to disavow any recognition of the embodiment of the idea of the 'cavalier.' We have no admiration for the character of the cavalier of 1640 any more than for his opponent, the Puritan. We turn with disgust from the violent and licentious cavalier, and we abhor the acerb, morose and fanatic Puritan, of whom Oliver Cromwell was the type. In speaking of Cromwell and his character, Guizot says that ' he possessed the faculty of lying at need with an inexhaustible and unhesitating hardihood which struck even his enemies with surprise and embarrassment.'

"This characteristic seems to have been transmitted to the descendants of the pilgrims who settled in Massachusetts Bay to enjoy the liberty of persecution. If the cavalier is to carry us back to days earlier than the American Revolution, I prefer to be transported in imagination to the field of Runnymede, when the barons extorted Magna Charta from the unwilling John. But I discard all reference to the cavalier of old, because it implies a division of society into two orders, an idea inconsistent with confederate institutions."

Mr. Semmes moved to amend by substituting "vindice" for "duce," and it was agreed to.

In taking his leave, the reporter was informed by Mr. Semmes that he did not know the seal was in existence and was glad to learn that it had been presented to the State of South Carolina, the first State which seceded from the Union.