

The Charleston Murders: Facing America's Great Evils

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The latest gun massacre – this time at a historic black church in Charleston, South Carolina, and apparently driven by racial hatred – reminds Americans how we all live at the forbearance of the next nut with easy access to weapons that can efficiently kill us, our neighbors or our children. Yet, we remain politically powerless to take even the smallest step to stop this madness.

We also remain in political denial about one of America's original sins, the cruel enslavement of blacks for the first quarter millennium of white settlement of this continent, followed by another century of brutal racial segregation, the residues of which we refuse to scrub from the corners of our national behavior – fearing that doing so will get some pro-Confederate white people mad.

In Arlington, Virginia, where I live, the political leadership can't even find the will or courage to remove the name of Confederate President Jefferson Davis from state roads that skirt Arlington Cemetery, which was founded to bury Union soldiers, and that pass near historic black neighborhoods in South Arlington, sending them an enduring message of who's boss.

Davis's name [was added](#) to Southern sections of Route 1 in 1920 at the height of the Ku Klux Klan's power and amid an upsurge in lynchings – and to Route 110 near the Pentagon in 1964 as a counterpoint to the Civil Rights Act.

Besides leading the secessionist slave states in rebellion, Davis signed an order authorizing the execution of captured black soldiers fighting for the Union, a practice that was employed in several battles near the end of the Civil War.

Some of the victims of Davis's order were even trained at Camp Casey in what is now Arlington County before those U.S. Colored Troops marched south to engage General Robert E. Lee's army around the Confederate capital of Richmond. I've often wondered what message Arlington County and the state of Virginia think they're sending by honoring Davis. Are they saying that it's all right to murder and subjugate black people? [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mystery of the Civil War's Camp Casey.](#)"]

The Charleston Murders

Of course, South Carolina, the heart of the South's slave system and the instigator of the war to defend slavery, has its own messages conveyed to its youth, including its proud display of the Confederate battle flag and its endless promotion of "the boys in gray," including dressing up tour guides in Confederate uniforms for visitors to Charleston.

Some of those messages appear to have sunk in for Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white supremacist who is charged with entering a Bible study class at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Wednesday night, sitting with the black parishioners for an hour and then executing nine of them with a .45-caliber pistol before uttering a racial epithet as he left.

The New York Times [reported](#) that, according to friends, Roof “voiced virulently racist views and had talked recently about starting a new civil war — even about shooting black people. Photographs of him wearing patches with the flags of the former white supremacist governments of South Africa and Rhodesia, and leaning against a car with Confederate States of America on its license plate, drew millions of views online.”

Yet, besides the usual handwringing that follows one of these gun tragedies, there is little sign that anything of substance will change, either in making firearms less promiscuously available to pretty much anyone who wants them or in addressing the legacy of slavery, the ensuing century of terror that enforced racial segregation, or the more recent experience of police violence directed disproportionately at African-Americans.

What Can Be Done?

While the idea of reparations for slavery sends many American whites through the roof in fury, there are substantive actions that government and private industry could undertake, including major investments in the infrastructure of predominantly black or brown communities, to make these neighborhoods more inviting areas to live and invest.

Instead, the opposite generally occurs. Though the current Tea Party dominance of the Republican Party makes any government spending on anything – including maintenance of existing transportation services – almost impossible, what spending that does get approved goes mostly to white areas, using public funds to widen, not narrow, economic disparities.

In Arlington County, for instance, billions of dollars in public money have been invested in two underground Metro lines (Orange and Silver) through overwhelmingly white North Arlington, while a far more modest above-ground Streetcar for racially diverse South Arlington was terminated by large majorities of voters in North Arlington.

The racial mix of Arlington’s schools have also shifted back toward the days of segregation with some North Arlington schools nearly all white – and the County lacking the political will to reverse these trends.

It’s true that the problems of a wealthy county like Arlington – representing the original land of the 100-square-mile District of Columbia that spilled over the Potomac River and was later ceded back to Virginia – pale by comparison to conditions in other urban areas, such as Baltimore or Charleston where racial and police violence has recently flared. But the point is that racial and ethnic discrimination remains part of the American way, in big ways and small.

For that to change, there would have to be a transformation of the American spirit, a recognition that past injustices must not be forgotten or even just lamented but rather must become an inspiration for remedial action.

Then, these disgraceful gun tragedies and our long history of racial violence would not just be a source of frustration and a sign of impotence, but a motivation for a national rebirth

that addresses past wrongs and lifts up the nation as a whole.

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