

US Confederate Flag: Confronting Southern “Victimhood”

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Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

Many white Southerners are getting their backs up again over demands that the Confederate flag and other symbols of slavery be removed. But the core problem is that the South never admitted that slavery and then segregation were wrong, instead offering endless excuses.

Unlike the Germans after World War II who collectively shouldered blame for the Holocaust and the war's devastation, America's white Southerners never confessed to the evil that they had committed by enslaving African-Americans and then pushing the United States into a bloody Civil War in their defense of human bondage.

Instead of a frank admission of guilt, there have been endless excuses and obfuscations. Confederate apologists insist that slavery wasn't really all that bad for blacks, that the North's hands weren't clean either, that the Civil War was really just about differing interpretations of the Constitution, that white Southerners were the real victims here – from Sherman's March to the Sea to Reconstruction. Some white Southerners still prefer to call the conflict “the war of Northern aggression.”

Indeed, Southern white “victimhood” has been at the heart of much bloodshed and suffering in the United States not only during the Civil War and the ensuing decades but through the modern era of the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s to the present bigoted hatred of the first African-American president and the coldblooded murders of nine black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina.

Dylann Roof, the alleged perpetrator of the Charleston murders, apparently was motivated by racist propaganda that highlighted incidents of black-on-white crime and led Roof to believe that he was defending the white race, under siege from blacks, another excuse used to justify the Confederate cause.

Yet, the overriding reality has been centuries of white racist violence against blacks – from the unspeakable cruelties of slavery to Jim Crow lynchings to the murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders to recent police shootings targeting blacks.

Considering that grim history, what is perhaps most remarkable about white Southerners is that they as a group have never issued an unequivocal apology for their systematic abuse of African-Americans, let alone undertaken a serious commitment to make amends. Instead, many white Southerners pretend that they are the real victims here.

We see this pattern again with the white backlash against public calls from South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and others to retire the Confederate battle flag and other pro-slavery symbols. This weekend, news reports revealed a rush among white Southerners to buy the flag and clothing items featuring the flag. And across the Internet, Confederate apologists rushed to reprise all the sophistry that has surrounded the pro-slavery cause for generations.

In Arlington, Virginia, I encountered some of that when I again urged the County Board to petition the state legislature in Richmond to remove the name of Confederate President Jefferson Davis from roadways that pass Arlington National Cemetery (founded to bury Union soldiers killed in the Civil War) and that skirt historic black neighborhoods in South Arlington (conveying a racist message of who's still the boss).

Jefferson Davis's name was put on the stretch of Route One in the early 1920s amid a surge of Confederate pride, a period of increased lynchings of blacks, a growth in Ku Klux Klan membership, and release of the movie, "Birth of a Nation," celebrating the KKK as the brave defender of innocent whites endangered by rampaging blacks. In 1964, as a counterpoint to the Civil Rights Act, Virginia extended Jefferson Davis Highway to a roadway near Arlington Cemetery and the Pentagon.

'Rankled' and 'Crazy'

A year ago when I first suggested removing Jefferson Davis's name, the local newspaper treated my appeal as something of a joke, referring to me as "rankled" and prompting angry responses from some Arlingtonians. One hostile letter writer declared, "I am very proud of my Commonwealth's history, but not of the current times, as I'm sure many others are."

A top Democratic county official confronted me after a public meeting and upbraided me for raising such a divisive issue when there were more practical and immediate issues facing the county. The official said the state legislature would think Arlington County was "crazy" if it submitted a recommendation on removing Davis's name.

However, after the Charleston massacre, I wrote to the board again: "When even South Carolina's Republicans say it's time to retire old symbols of the Confederacy — especially ones associated with slavery, white supremacy and violence — isn't it time for Arlington County to petition the state legislature to rename Jefferson Davis Highway something more appropriate to our racial diversity?"

"As we've seen tragically in recent days, symbols carry meaning. They encourage behavior, either good or bad. And, in the case of Confederate symbols, it is clear how individuals like Dylann Roof interpreted them, as a license to murder innocent black people. As for Confederate President Davis, not only was he a white supremacist who wished to perpetuate slavery forever, but he also authorized the murder of captured or surrendering black soldiers of the Union Army, an order that was acted upon in some of the final battles of the Civil War.

"There's even an Arlington connection to some of those U.S. Colored Troops murdered based on Davis's order. Some were trained at our own Camp Casey before marching south to fight for freedom. Some Camp Casey recruits fought in the Battle of the Crater in a desperate effort to save white Union troops who were being slaughtered in battle. However, after the fighting stopped, Confederate troops — operating under President Davis's order —

executed captured USCT soldiers.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[The Mystery of the Civil War’s Camp Casey.](#)”]

My letter continued: “As a longtime resident of Arlington, I have often wondered what we think we are honoring when we name a major highway after Jefferson Davis. Are we saying that we think slavery was a good idea? Are we saying that we believe in white supremacy? Are we saying that we favor murdering black people simply because of the color of their skin? What message are we sending to our children — and indeed perhaps to some troubled young people like Dylann Roof?

“Please, finally, petition the legislature to remove Davis’s name from these Arlington roadways — and keep at it even if it requires multiple efforts. It is way past time to do so.”

I have received no reply from the County Board. My guess is there will be the same timidity about riling up the Confederate defenders who will draw fury from their bottomless well of victimhood. When my letter circulated on some local message boards, it did prompt a number of hostile responses (as well as some supportive comments).

But history should tell us that a grave injustice that is not confronted – that is allowed to lie dormant while its perpetrators nurse their imaginary grievances – will resurface in a myriad of ugly and destructive ways. It is best, albeit difficult, to take on the injustice and demand accountability.

(Update: Sadly, some of the comments to this story only prove my point. Confederate apologists just can’t bring themselves to admit that American slavery was one of history’s great evils. Instead, they engage in endless sophistry, obfuscation, excuses and misdirection. The goal apparently is to confuse the topic and distract from the heart of the matter — that many of them still believe in slavery and white supremacy. If they don’t, why don’t they just say so.)

*Investigative reporter **Robert Parry** broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).*

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