

South Bend Tribune

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Viewpoint: Coming to terms with history

Darryl Heller South Bend Tribune

July 16, 2015, 5:00 a.m. ET

As a native of South Carolina (I was born in Aiken), I had mixed feelings as I watched the Confederate battle flag being removed from the grounds of the Statehouse in Columbia on Friday. On one hand, like the millions of people who cheered its removal, I was thrilled to see a symbol that had been so racially divisive for so long be relegated to the dustbin of history where it belongs. On the other hand, I recognize that symbols are just that; they represent underlying ideas and beliefs that exist on a deeper, and in this case, a more visceral level. Advocates who argued for the flag to remain in its public location held that this deeper idea was Southern heritage. Many of those who fought for its removal described it as a symbol of hate. I would like to suggest that both are true. Unstated by the proponents for the flag and rarely articulated by advocates for its removal is that the fundamental ideology for which the Confederate battle flag stood was that of white supremacy, which is both an integral component of Southern heritage, and provided fuel for the hate that led Dylann Roof to murder nine innocent people.

To this day I have a love/hate relationship with the state. After attending high school in Monks Corner, S.C., and graduating from the College of Charleston, I couldn't wait to leave and moved away as soon as I could. That was 1982 and the battle flag proudly flew atop the dome of the state Capitol. Although my own journey eventually brought me to South Bend through a convoluted history that included long residences in Boston, New York and Chicago, my ties to South Carolina in particular and the South in general remain strong. As I do every year, I went home for the Fourth of July holiday to participate in a family gathering of food, fun and reminiscing. This year, given the brutal murders in Charleston the conversation

inevitably turned to the debate about the flag. Unsurprisingly, there was unanimous agreement that the flag needed to go.

Most African-Americans recognize that the appeal to “Southern heritage” does not include them. Those who insist otherwise conveniently overlook, or cynically ignore, that the entire premise of Southern culture was based on the presumed superiority of any white person over all black people, regardless of their economic status or educational achievement. While the flag was one clear symbol of this truncated heritage, others abound and are glaring reminders that we still have far to travel.

A stark example of this is the statue of “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman, which remains on the South Carolina Statehouse lawn. Tillman, known for his ardent segregationist positions as state governor and U.S. senator, participated in the murder of African-Americans and played a key role in fashioning the state’s Jim Crow laws that instituted racial segregation. When President Teddy Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to dinner at the White House in 1901, Tillman responded by stating that, “The action of President Roosevelt in entertaining that n----- will necessitate our killing a thousand n-----s in the South before they will learn their place again.”

Now that the flag has been removed, South Carolina has to come to terms with these additional aspects of its history. Although Tillman’s strident and unabashed racism is fortunately no longer the norm in public discourse, it is still very much alive in other, less obvious ways. Thus, while Gov. Nikki Haley believes that discussions about symbols such as the Tillman statue are “a less pressing matter,” the underlying ideology that they express cannot be brushed aside. Furthermore, historical inequities shaped by concrete policies and practices remain and the legacy that Tillman’s pitchfork left continues to tear at the material and psychic life of African-Americans. Until South Carolina — and the nation — honestly confront the full history and contemporary manifestations of white supremacy, the wounds inflicted in Charleston will not only never truly heal, but will continue to fester.

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