

## The Confederate Flag

Recently politicians and news channels have been enjoying the distraction *du jour* that is the role of the Confederate flag today. People phone up radio shows and declare (1) the flag is a racist symbol and/or (2) all memorials to the South's part of the Civil War, including those of Robert E. Lee, should be removed.

The flag has gotten mixed up in the stories about the shooting deaths of 9 black people in a Charleston, SC church by a young white man, homicides involving guns, gun control, and racism.

America was founded on slavery and was ripped asunder by the secession of the southern states, the formation of the Confederacy, and the Civil War. The facts and motives of these events are poorly known let alone understood.

Racism is not an artifact of the South, it is an artifact of all of America. Even as Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence with its emphasis on the freedom and equality of all men, he and his contemporaries could not deny the hypocrisy—some of them were slave owners, including Jefferson himself.

The Founding Fathers were unable to address the dissonance between freedom and slavery because, for some of them, their livelihoods depended on slavery. And because their Union, achieved by war with the mother ship of England that had established the colonies, was more important than quashing slavery. Southern economies relied on slavery. Southerners resisted all attempts to stop it. The compromise needed to establish the Union included the acceptance of slavery.

In the 1786 Treaty of Paris that marked the end of the Revolutionary War, Britain recognized American sovereignty from the Atlantic coast west to the Mississippi River. Territorial expansion began shortly thereafter in a series of wars with the indigenous Indians and the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. New states were added to the Union, beginning with Vermont in 1791 (formed with land from New York and New Hampshire), Kentucky in 1792, Tennessee in 1796, Ohio in 1803, Louisiana in 1812, Indiana in 1816, Maine in 1820 (formed with land from Massachusetts), and Missouri in 1821. As new states were proposed, the main issue was whether they would be slave or free. While the southern cotton producers needed slavery for expansion, the northern merchants who relied on the shipping trade and banking benefitted greatly from slavery, enough to accept its expansion.

The secession of slave states that began in December 1860 was not a surprise. Threats of secession, in response to proposals of abolition which struck at the labor system as well as the social structure of the slave states, had punctuated the political dialogue from 1819 through 1860. It became inevitable after the 1860 campaign of Lincoln's Republican party with its anti-slavery expansion platform and the November 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency without a single Southern vote. The southern states seceded from the Union as the best way to preserve their autonomy and economy.

Lincoln's November 19, 1863 address at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania following the Battle of Gettysburg memorialized the sacrifices of the Union soldiers who died there and urged "we here [to] highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Hiding all signs of the Civil War will not bring America peace regarding its continued racism. Pretending the Civil War did not happen, or that slavery did not happen, is a gross insult to all the people who lived during those times, before them, and after them. Those times are in the DNA of America, like it or not.

Racism has many factors and actors, the indigenous peoples of North America are still persecuted. Black people in America are discriminated against. But persecution and discrimination are not unique to racism and not unique to America. Religious persecution, which compelled many of the early settlers, continued here as the colonies decided what beliefs and practices were “okay” and what were not; early Massachusetts was a theocracy. Discrimination based on things like wealth, income, education, family, business or trade predates America. Extending it to skin color is just plain human—or rather inhuman but common.

A focus on racism is not particularly useful. It is just another way of saying “I’m right, you’re wrong.” It cannot be ended by fiat or law. The wounds that slavery left on America can only be healed by grace and authentic democracy. Modern American capitalism, which was born on and relies on slavery for profits and on white male privilege for its control of governments, must be transformed into an economic system that resists slavery and privilege in favor of freedom and equality.

As for the Confederate flag, it symbolizes the evils of slavery and the strength of the South’s commitment to slavery that led them to secede. We should not forget that such things happened, they can all too easily happen again. Yes, it can be uncomfortable to be confronted with such an ugly past, but ignorance and pretending will not change history and will not serve us as we face today’s challenges of our democracy.