

Community and Society Archive

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South Carolina Uber Alles

By Daniel Brenner

Being a native North Carolinian, I've looked on with amazement as the state immediately southward has decided after bitter debate to remove the Confederate (or as I was taught "Dixie") flag flying on it's state capitol. A symbol of White power hate groups, the flag has been the target of protests by thousands of African-Americans. In response, one of Gov. Jim Hodges compromises has been adopted--flying the flag on the capitol grounds instead of on the building itself. But still many are angered that the flag has any place of glory on state property.

The question of what to do with the flag raises once again the tricky ethical issue of how to remember and honor events that polarize communities. From a Jewish perspective, we may be reminded of Reagan's visit to the German War Veteran's graveyard at Bitburg, and the thin ice he broke as a result.

How do we remember troubled moments of history?

Two years ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to take a group of high school students, half of them Jewish, and half of them African-American to South Carolina. On one of our more interesting excursions, an African-American tour guide directed our attention to a run down shack that stood beside a glorious colonial home. "If I was a White tour guide I'd tell you that that shack was a storage shed. But since I'm Black, I'll tell you the truth-that's where the White men chained up my great-grandparents when they were disrespectful."

For the students on our trip, this revelation opened up a new way of seeing history. They began to understand how history is manipulated, and how history has power over how we see ourselves in the present. But they also were presented with a history that unfairly demonized White southerners. I found myself wrestling with how we could find a way to teach history that didn't rely on creating an enemy.

In Junior High School, I was taught that the civil war was "The war of northern aggression", and that protecting slavery was not the reason that so many young Southern families gave up their sons to battle. Apparently, there were deep economic changes stirring up a bitter rivalry between states. For many of my friends, whose great-great grandfathers fought for the confederacy, that is their proud history. And many of these friends were and are decent folks, to whom prejudice was 'backwards'.

So is it possible to publicly honor a part of the past that has bitter memories for so many?

As a Jew, I can understand why African-Americans protested to have the flag pulled down from the capitol. But I can also understand those who wish to keep it in public view. Now the more difficult question arises: How will slavery's victims be honored? Where is their statue and flag? Where will it be placed?

Until those questions are answered, and until there is a memorial site on state grounds which addresses them, there is no justification for maintaining the Civil War memorial which flies the confederate flag.

South Carolina is far from healing its racial rift. The NAACP still wants the flag to be buried, and many White republicans feel that it should be back up on the roof. Both are short-sighted.

The healing will come only when two things happen. The White legislators must

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realize that only when you have truly honored the victims of slavery can you begin to honor those who fought to keep them enslaved. Then the Black activists must come to understand that honoring White men of the past, even if some of their actions were disturbing, has a place in the history of a people.

Can such histories co-exist? For the future of South Carolina, and the rest of the nation, the answer must be yes.



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