

Sarah Winterbottom
28 April 2017

Jeff Sessions
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U.S. Department of Justice
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Attorney General Jeff Sessions,

I am writing to you to address the current use of symbols and the historical interpretation of the American Civil War and the Confederate States of America to further divide this great country. I am aware that we most likely do not agree on many current issues facing the United States, however, I believe that we have a lot in common, as do millions of Americans. I spent most of my formative years growing up in Southern Texas, learning about the honorable deeds of our shared ancestors, but also learning about some less honorable actions made by the same people. It is important that we as Americans do not allow important symbols of our varied and sometimes difficult history as a union to be used as tools of hate, and so we must change how Confederate symbols are used in this country.

Historical symbols have been used by different groups with different goals and ideologies throughout most of history. In times of great national stress and racial tension, like the current events in America have shown, historical symbols, like the symbols of the American Confederacy, are assigned multiple meanings by different groups of people. While symbols of the American Confederacy do represent Southern heritage and ancestry, these symbols are weaponized by white American "Neo-Confederates" against black Americans and other minorities and public policy makers should take this hateful ideology into account when deciding on the possible removal of these Confederate symbols. The historical significance of Confederate symbols is marked by racism and hate, which lends itself to the Neo-Confederate and "Lost

Cause” ideologies in America, and this appropriation of these symbols, especially in the wake of the American Civil Rights Movement, has not been in the best interest of a large population of Americans.

The heritage represented by symbols of the American confederacy, like the Confederate flag, is rooted in a treasonous, nationalistic system that was deeply involved with slavery and racism in America. Patriotism is an important facet of the American identity, so it is odd that the Neo-Confederate identity is rooted in such an unpatriotic event such as multiple states’ succession from the Union. In an interview with Matthew Guterl, a professor of Africana and American studies at Brown University, Guterl argues that the current use of the Confederate flag is a “reflection of the great treason of the South in the 19th century, of its secession from the Union in defense of slavery, and its rejection of patriotism and nationalism”¹. The reasons for the succession of multiple Southern states that ultimately leads to the American Civil War include more than just slavery, as many people argue that the succession actually concerned different economic systems. It is impossible, however, to disregard the role that slavery had in the Confederate state, as part of the Southern economic structure. In his famous “Cornerstone Speech,” Alexander Stephens, the former Confederate vice president, claims, “[Our new government’s] foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition”². Of course, the Confederate flag as a symbol means that it is open to interpretation by multiple groups, which has led to the argument that while certain interpretations of what the flag represents are wrong, the flag can still represent a symbol of great historical

¹ Ferdman, “What the Confederate Flag Really Means to America Today, according to a Race Historian.”

² Cleveland, *Alexander H. Stephens, in Public and Private: With Letters and Speeches, Before, During, and Since the War*, 717-729.

value. As a differing opinion of the historical and cultural significance of the Confederate flag, John Poniewozik, in his article “Dump the Confederate Flag. Dump Cosby. But Don’t Dump the Reruns” argues that the Confederate flag, as seen in the TV series *The Dukes of Hazzard*, also represents the American culture of rebellion and traditionalism and can be learned from.³

Poniewozik is not wrong in saying that the Confederate flag can represent values that most Americans believe in, however, it is wrong to simply pick and choose the values that a national symbol represents, and the other interpretations cannot be ignored.

The current use of the Confederate flag represents the American Neo-Confederate ideology, which is built on the idea of the “Lost Cause” of the South. In his essay, “Living With Confederate Symbols,” Franklin Forts discusses the myth of the “Lost Cause,” which claims that Confederate ancestors were gallant, brave men who were simply fighting for their constitutional principles and their homelands and unfortunately lost to the greater military power of the North. Forts argues that the identity of the “Old Southerners” and the history of the modern Neo-Confederate identity is based on an uncompromising nationalistic collective hero myth concerning the Confederate South.⁴ This idea of “Old Southerners” is supported by current polling in the American South. In their polling findings presented in the article, “Confederate Symbols, Southern Identity, and Racial Attitudes: The Case of the Georgia State Flag,” Beth Reingold and Richard Wike claim that, in the case of white Georgians, there is a prominent divide between white Georgians who relate to a racially conservative “Old South” and white Georgians who relate more to a racially liberal “New South.”⁵ Although this study only took place in Georgia, this polling data represents a larger context in the American South. In his

³ Poniewozik, “Dump the Confederate Flag. Dump Cosby. but Don’t Dump the Reruns.”

⁴ Forts, “Living with Confederate Symbols.”

⁵ Reingold and Wike, “Confederate Symbols, Southern Identity, and Racial Attitudes,” 578.

journal article, “The Problem of Confederate Symbols: A Thirteenth Amendment Approach,” Alexander Tsesis argues that American Neo-Confederates and white supremacists use Confederate symbols because it links them to a larger collective social context, and these “threatening signs” have historical meaning that “draw upon and enhance the ‘badges’ and ‘symbols’ of servitude, discrimination, oppression, and persecution...”⁶ In this way, the real ideology and goals of American Neo-Confederate and white supremacist groups, such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans, are obvious, in that they stand for the discrimination of a portion of the American population, and therefore the further division of the American people.

Confederate symbols have been weaponized by white Americans against black Americans and other American minorities, and thus should be addressed by public policy makers. In his journal article, “The Problem of Confederate Symbols: A Thirteenth Amendment Approach,” Alexander Tsesis argues that “glorifying Confederate symbols on official state property should be prohibited pursuant to the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution,” because the Thirteenth Amendment “prohibits all relics of servitude.”⁷ The Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution declared that slavery and involuntary servitude, in most forms, would not exist anymore in the United States. Later in his article, Tsesis claims that the revival in interest of Confederate symbolism was directly related to the Civil Rights Movement in America during the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the case of racial segregation. He argues that the Confederate flag is “a continued badge of servitude that has a detrimental effect on state and national life because it disregards the dignity rights” of the black American population and furthers racial discrimination in America.⁸ The fact that the revival of the Confederate flag in the

⁶ Tsesis, “The Problem of Confederate Symbols,” 548.

⁷ Ibid, 543.

⁸ Ibid, 601.

U.S. took place at a time when America sought unification in integration reflects the racist and divisive nature of the Confederate symbols. In her article, “The Long Shadow of the Confederacy in America's Schools: State-Sponsored Use of Confederate Symbols in the Wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*,” Kathleen Riley addresses the feelings of discrimination and inferiority experienced by African-American students in schools that prominently feature Confederate symbols, in the examples of Rebel mascots and the proud display of Confederate flags and colors on school property.⁹ When black American children are forced to face a symbol that represents a system that saw their ancestors as property, that only serves to further discriminate and degrade an important part of the American population. In his article, “The Confederate Monument Movement as a Policy Dilemma for Resource Managers of Parks, Cultural Sites, and Protected Places: Florida as a Case Study,” Irvin Winsboro, a history professor at Florida Gulf Coast University, argues that, based on a case study in Florida, resource professionals who make decisions about American sites and symbols of national memory need to address the issue that “memories of the past are now based not only on interpretations but also romanticized and politicized viewpoints” and their decisions must be publicly justified.¹⁰ A historical interpretation sometimes has nothing to do with how a nationalistic, ideologically charged group of people irrationally use a historical symbol for their own possible gain.

There is no immediate solution to the problem I have discussed, however, I believe legal action can be taken against those groups that seek to use the Confederate flag and statues of prominent Confederate leaders as badges of hate against a large population of American citizens. The inescapable truth is that there is currently only one American South, a South that is shared by millions of people, who are currently unified in their Southern identity. The manipulation of

⁹ Riley, “The Long Shadow of the Confederacy in America’s Schools.”

¹⁰ Winsboro, “The Confederate Monument Movement,” 225.

Confederate symbols, such as the Confederate flag and statues of Confederate leaders, by blatantly racist and unpatriotic white American citizens against black American citizens threatens that American unity that has been so many years in the making. If this issue is not addressed, the country risks further division, which as history has shown, did not work out particularly well for the American South previously. If public policy makers in America do address this pressing issue by ending the Neo-Confederates' and white supremacists ability to use these symbols, however, then America as a whole will prove to be taking an important step towards a better country for all its citizens.

Sincerely,

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