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Another Day in Confederate Gettysburg

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Abstract

Today the Sons of Confederate Veterans ‘celebrated’ the confederate flag at the Peace Light Memorial on the battlefields of Gettysburg. The same battlefields where some of their ancestors suffered a pivotal defeat, and then kidnapped free Black Americans as they fled south. When I found out the SCV had obtained a permit from the National Park Service, I did likewise so I could stand up there with my homemade sign that connects the confederate flag to some of its most seminal moments in history: fighting for slavery in 1863, fighting for segregation in 1962, and murdering nine black South Carolinians in 2015. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Sons of Confederate Veterans, Peace Light, Gettysburg, Gettysburg National Military Park, GNMP, NPS, National Park Service, Confederate Flag, Civil War, Secession, Racism

Disciplines

African American Studies | Cultural History | Ethnic Studies | History | Race and Ethnicity | Social History | United States History

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Today the Sons of Confederate Veterans ‘celebrated’ the confederate flag at the Peace Light Memorial on the battlefields of Gettysburg. The same battlefields where some of their ancestors suffered a pivotal defeat, and then kidnapped free Black Americans as they fled south. When I found out the SCV had obtained a permit from the National Park Service, I did likewise so I could stand up there with my homemade sign that connects the confederate flag to some of its most seminal moments in history: fighting for slavery in 1863, fighting for segregation in 1962, and murdering nine black South Carolinians in 2015.

That last moment, as we know, sparked a long overdue national outcry against the confederate battle flag. Confederate flag supporters had to wait nine long months for the official Confederate Flag Day to express their own response. So it was no surprise they had a large crowd. About 80 yards across from them, a few dozen people and I stood with all our homemade signs. And alongside us were a group of young anarchists who show up faithfully whenever the KKK or other white supremacists come to town—they have a style I question though I admire their passionate commitment to racial justice.

And then there was a third contingent. One woman. She stood in the middle with a large American flag. She told the local news “because of this flag we can have this dissension...we’re all Americans and we’re speaking our minds.” For me, her physical location between the groups, and her words, at least what was reported, convey a sentiment that this is what it means to be an American: we can all gather peacefully (with, of course, the necessary presence of National Park Service rangers, state troopers, and local police) to express our divergent perspectives and opinions.

I do not know her personally. I do not doubt her good intentions. Sentiments of unity and neutrality play well in the media, which consistently report the dispute as a matter of

different perspectives and opinions. All perspectives, in that formulation, have equal validity—we simply see the flag differently. It's a matter of interpretation, right?

Wrong. It is not simply a matter of interpretation. Not all opinions are equal. Some opinions are just plain wrong, misleading, distorted, and damaging. Some opinions are based on facts and reality; others on wistful nostalgia that ignores the truth. Whether that ignorance is willful or not is no longer the point, especially when so much information is so easily and quickly available in the internet age.

Truth matters. And the truth is that the Sons of Confederate Veterans and all other supporters of the confederate flag(s) have built a house of cards that pile one lie on another. The history of that flag is easy to learn. It was the symbol of the Confederate government and warmly embraced by a large proportion of white southerners. The Confederacy seceded and fought to maintain slavery—to protect a way of life that depended upon the denial of independence to millions of black women, men, and children. Confederate leaders made this quite plain from the beginning of the war to the end. Jefferson Davis only began saying the war wasn't about slavery when it was clear the Confederacy was going to lose. He was a key figure in starting the myth; when he attempted it, other southern leaders called him on it. They weren't fooled even though so many of their ancestors are so often willingly fooled.

White supremacists didn't always use the confederate flag as a symbol. They didn't use it often from the late nineteenth century up to World War II—because they didn't need it. White racist terrorists were firmly in control for decades through a campaign of murder, vandalism, and theft. Once that control was threatened after World War II, the symbol they needed and the symbol they intuitively knew any white southerner who wanted to maintain white supremacy would understand, was right at hand, ready to leap to their defense once again. In 1956 it goes onto the Georgia state flag. In 1962 it is on the statehouse dome in South Carolina. And it appears at football games, on front porches, in town squares. And there, far too often, it has remained.

There's a store in Gettysburg, just off the town square, that proudly displays a confederate flag t-shirt that says 'Don't criticize what you can't understand.' That shirt epitomizes the confederate flag movement: there's no interest in dialogue because there's no interest in the truth. And the truth is that the KKK and all the other white supremacists groups in the United States and Europe who use the confederate flag actually understand that flag

better than the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Those hate groups see the truth in the flag—that it was born out of a white supremacist state, flown over armies that fought to maintain that state, carried by soldiers who were connected one way or another to slave owning families, brandished by countless white Americans, north and south, in every era when white supremacy was threatened—including today when the nation is moving toward being majority black and brown.

So, to media and to the one lone woman who stood bravely with her American flag, respecting the divergent perspectives: this isn't about perspective. It isn't about respecting everybody's 'interpretation.' It's about what is true and what is false; it's about what is right and what is wrong. To be neutral in this particular debate only gives respect to a lie.

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