

Stonewalled



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On Friday, July 10th, 2015 the Confederate battle flag that has flown for over half a century over South Carolina's capitol grounds was taken down. That's a good idea as far as I'm concerned.

Back in the 1990s when the Confederate emblem on the Georgia state flag was a hotly debated issue I thought removing the symbol

of the Lost Cause was a good idea. Whatever official flag a state flies should be as inclusive as possible of all the state's residents. And the vehement defenders of the flag as "heritage not hate" should have put as much effort in defending it against segregationists and racists who co-opted it as a symbol of white supremacy if they wanted to be taken seriously. I also remember discussing the issue with a black friend and coworker who told me her issue was that the emblem was state sanctioned. "*Put it in a museum*", she said. And I agreed.

The "put it in a museum" line has been parroted over and over since South Carolina's flag became even more of a [bone of contention](#) than it already was after nine black Americans were gunned down in cold blood in Charleston last month. Photos of the alleged perpetrator and white supremacist brandishing the battle flag were posted online. At this point the flag is certainly as divisive as it's ever been. It has become so toxic that people are [losing their jobs](#) for [displaying it publicly](#). And the image has prompted widespread removal of the Confederate flag from retailers such as Amazon, Walmart, and Apple video games. Warner Bros. got into the act, too, when they announced they would cease the licensing of die-cast replicas and vehicle model kits featuring the General Lee car from the Georgia-produced TV show "The Dukes of Hazzard" because of the flag on its roof. TV Land even stopped broadcasting reruns of the old sitcom.



It appears that mounting pressure is testing the lie that we should put that symbol in a museum, because now there are calls to take it *out* of museums. The National Park Service severely limited [the sale of Confederate flag merchandise](#) in gift shops last month after the Charleston church massacre, and U.S. House Republican leaders have yanked a [controversial vote](#) on keeping Confederate battle flags in national parks.

Georgia State Rep. LaDawn Jones, D-Atlanta, called on residents to boycott Stone Mountain Park until the Confederate flags there come down. Calls for a 4th of July boycott failed miserably as many turned out to celebrate the holiday. In fact, the park

officially shut the gates to traffic after reaching its full capacity at 6:15 pm. In the wake of this development the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta is reconsidering whether it will hold its annual conference at the park. Said spokeswoman Jean Tate:

“The Atlanta Fed is committed to diversity and is sensitive to the concerns raised surrounding the display of confederate (sic) flags at Stone Mountain State Park. Each year, the Bank evaluates potential venues for the Financial Markets Conference, taking into consideration costs and other criteria. With that in mind, the concerns raised by the display of the flags will be a part of the evaluation process moving forward.”

John Bankhead with the Stone Mountain Memorial Association attempted to clarify the park’s position on the matter last week:

“It’s not an endorsement [of the Confederacy] at all. It’s just a representation of the historical context as a museum for the Confederacy on what flags flew over during that time period. Stone Mountain is preserved by state law as a Confederate memorial. The law that changed the flag to our current state flag also expressly prohibited changes at Stone Mountain Park. Some on both sides of these issues have said that these Confederate symbols belong in a museum. Here in Georgia, Stone Mountain Park serves that purpose.”

And now comes a [renewed call](#) for removal of the park's Confederate Memorial Carving — [the largest high relief sculpture in the world](#) — which depicts three Confederate heroes of the Civil War, President Jefferson Davis and Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. Georgia [Democrats are now urging the state](#) to quit celebrating [Confederate Memorial Day](#) and Confederate Heritage Month, and the [state has stopped selling license plates](#) with the battle emblem after [Gov. Nathan Deal announced a “redesign” of the tags](#). Now that the ball is really rolling the list is growing for more [things to ban](#), names to [change](#), places to [boycott](#), monuments to [take down](#), mascots to [get rid of](#) and bodies to [dig up](#). One wonders if the hundreds of Civil War markers and plaques that dot the South will be targeted as well in this effort to erase history. Someone even came up with the bright idea to file hate crime charges for merely [flying](#) the Confederate flag — the ones that aren't being [stolen](#), that is.

But is all this actually going to change anything? Well, not according to CNN who reported that taking away these reminders of the Confederacy *“isn't going to solve the sole issue that is at hand with the world — racism!”* Another article reported that taking down the offending piece of cloth from the South Carolina statehouse grounds, *“doesn't mean a damn thing”*. A recent Huffington Post piece called for “Republicans, [to] Take Down That Flag — And Stand Up for Voting Rights”. (Nice trick by the Democrats to foist the burden on Republicans when it was the Democrats in the 1950s who embraced the battle flag to protest

desegregation.) The author posits that, *“doing away with official reverence for the flag is largely a symbolic move that doesn’t come close to addressing the problems surrounding race in America”*. How typical in this day and age that symbolism over substance drives this *“extraordinary narrative of good and evil”*.



Photo by Lynn Lee

As I recall people didn’t take much notice of these symbols that have been around for generations until they learned to be offended by them. And according to recent data, the majority of Americans

actually don't find these images offensive. A CNN poll found that American public opinion on the Confederate flag remains virtually unchanged from 15 years ago, with most respondents describing the Rebel emblem as a symbol of pride and heritage, and 57 percent of Americans say that the Confederate flag is a symbol of Southern pride. That's compared to just 33 percent who feel the flag is a symbol of racism. Among whites, just 28 percent feel that the flag has racial undertones. But 72 percent of black Americans say the flag is racist, so interpretations obviously vary widely. And there should be sympathy towards that point of view.

Many don't (or refuse to) understand that the various Civil War memorial sites in the South are not so much a point of pride for residents as they are a place of reverence — not for the cause, but for the sacrifice. And from the Battle of Peachtree Creek to [Gettysburg](#) a [LOT of people died](#) in that war. They were the ancestors of people who live here now, and have roots here going back several generations. As a Southerner I recognize that the war is over, and I do not fetishize its iconography. The right side won as far as I'm concerned. But the war dead deserve to have the space that was set aside to honor their sacrifice, whether it's a carving or grave yard — win or lose, right or wrong — because they fought for this land.

Leave the Stone Mountain carving alone. Removing art historical works is something more akin to the behavior of the Taliban, not Americans. And if we can expend such energy and effort

combating so-called symbols of hate that harken back to American slavery, which ended 150 years ago, then imagine what we could accomplish if we channeled that energy into combating [slavery](#) [today](#).