

# Take It Down: The Confederate Flag After the Shooting at Mother Emanuel

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Symbolism Removal”

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“But we are not going to allow [the Confederate flag] to divide us any longer. The fact that people are choosing to use it as a sign of hate is something we cannot stand. The fact that it causes pain to so many is enough to move it from the Capitol grounds. It is, after all, a Capitol that belongs to all of us.”<sup>1</sup>

– Nikki Haley, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015

On June 17th, 2015, a self-radicalized white supremacist named Dylann Roof shot and killed nine Black Americans in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, also known as Mother Emanuel, in Charleston, South Carolina. Roof had been photographed with the Confederate Flag. It was uncovered that he had released a manifesto and had been posting on white supremacist and alt-right platforms.<sup>2</sup> Roof’s link to Confederate ideology and Confederate symbols, most prevalent in the Southern United States, caused the American people to reflect on the dangers of the remnants of the Confederacy and its lasting memory and Southern heritage.

This essay discusses the way South Carolina deals with Confederate memory, legacy, and heritage in the wake of the Mother Emanuel shooting by examining the pro-flag advocates’ reasoning for keeping the flag. This work also uses Governor of South Carolina Nikki Haley’s speech from June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, a few days after the Charleston church shooting that took place on June 17<sup>th</sup> to illustrate how and why she decided to call for its removal. The Southern United

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<sup>1</sup> “Transcript: Gov. Nikki Haley of South Carolina on Removing the Confederate Flag,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2015, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/22/us/Transcript-Gov-Nikki-R-Haley-of-South-Carolina-Addresses-Removing-the-Confederate-Battle-Flag.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Franz, “‘The South Shall Rise Again.’ Setting the Lost Cause Myth in Future Tense in Dylann Roof’s Manifesto,” in *Rhetoric, Race, Religion, and the Charleston Shootings: Was Blind but Now I See*, ed. Sean Patrick O’Rourke and Melody Lehn (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 9; Sean Patrick O’Rourke and Melody Lehn, “Introduction. Was Blind But Now I See,” in *Rhetoric, Race, Religion, and the Charleston Shootings: Was Blind but Now I See*, ed. Sean Patrick O’Rourke and Melody Lehn (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 1.

States has a long history of racial division and oppression due to Jim Crow segregation and the widespread Confederate symbols.

By focusing on the decision to take down the Confederate flag from Capitol grounds in Charleston, South Carolina, this work takes elements from the United Daughters of the Confederacy's (UDC) long-lasting influence in the South and the present-day alt-right groups of "heritage Americans." The alt-right, short for the alternative right, is defined by the Southern Poverty Law Center as "a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine white people and 'their' civilization."<sup>3</sup>

Because of the UDC, the Confederacy's legacy became a staple in the houses and schools of white Americans, and this was no different in South Carolina. This legacy became a constant in the lives of all Americans. While white Americans could walk around with the feeling of pride and nostalgia, Black Americans walked around with a sense of oppression while desperately trying to obtain rights. After the shooting took place, Nikki Haley called upon the South Carolina House of Representatives and the Senate because she was determined to have the flag removed from public grounds. Haley vowed to call upon the General Assembly if the House of Representatives and Senate were unavailable.<sup>4</sup>

While activists have been working toward removing these Confederate symbols for decades, it was the Mother Emanuel church shooting that led to the actual removal of the Confederate flag and later led to the removal of Confederate monuments. Besides the physical aspects of Confederate heritage, the 2000 Heritage Act and whether it was altered post-shooting will be explored in this essay. Due to the importance of this Confederate heritage in the

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<sup>3</sup> "Alt-Right," Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right>.

<sup>4</sup> "Gov. Nikki Haley of South Carolina on Removing the Confederate Flag."

Southern States, many states have legislation “protecting” the Confederate heritage. This legislation is being drawn up and contested at the same time.

### **What To Do?**

After the shooting at Mother Emanuel, protesters demonstrated for the removal of the flag in front of the South Carolina State House. Herb Frazier, Bernard Powers, and Marjorie Wentworth argue that “six days after the church shooting, almost every major South Carolina political figure, including Governor Nikki Haley, called for the removal of the flag.”<sup>5</sup> They also add that “the prevailing sentiment was that if the flag didn’t come down under these dire circumstances, then there was something deeply, deeply wrong with South Carolina.”<sup>6</sup> South Carolina was at a crossroads and now was the time to decide what to do: continue honoring the legacy the UDC had worked so hard on, or try to work toward an open and accepting society where the symbols of the past were not put on full display.

There was a time crunch to remove the flag. Senator and Reverent Clementa Pinckney, one of the nine victims, would be lying in state under the capitol dome on June 25<sup>th</sup>, a week after the shooting had occurred. The thought that Pinckney would have to pass by the Confederate flag was unimaginable to the protestors.<sup>7</sup> It was this Confederate symbol that had played such a big part in the self-radicalization of his murderer. Unfortunately, the flag was not removed in time. The urgency to remove the Confederate flag from state grounds was out of respect for the victims. As this essay shows, the Southern cultural landscape was altered after the Mother Emanuel shooting. The shooting emphasized that the flag was a symbol of racial

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<sup>5</sup> Herb Frazier, Bernard Edward Powers Jr., and Marjory Wentworth, *We Are Charleston: Tragedy and Triumph at Mother Emanuel* (Nashville, Tennessee: W Publishing Group, 2016), 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

divide, and its immediate removal was meant out of respect for the victims and to take a stance against this symbol of hate.

On June 27<sup>th</sup>, on the day of the funerals of three victims (Cynthia Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, and Tywanza Sanders) of the church shooting, Bree Newsome, an activist, felt like she could not wait for the official removal of the Confederate flag. She climbed up the flagpole and removed it herself. She was arrested and charged with defacing a monument. A replacement flag was raised within an hour.<sup>8</sup> Rhetoric scholar Sean Patrick O'Rourke argues that Newsome and Roof "came to represent rhetorically the strong passions of what had become two vehemently divided flag cultures."<sup>9</sup> After the shooting, this divided flag culture could not be justified anymore. It was now directly linked to hate, oppression, and racial divide. White supremacist groups, the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), and United Daughters of the Confederacy could no longer argue this was not the case.

### **The "True Meaning" of the Flag**

The meaning of the Confederate flag has changed over the past few decades and even the past few years. What does the Confederate flag stand for? Who does it belong to? According to groups such as the UDC and the SCV, the flag's symbolism is the following: independence, honor, valor, and liberty. Besides the meaning of the flag and what it stands for, the UDC and SCV also argue that there is a difference between approving racist attitudes, such as Roof's, and recognizing that the Confederacy holds a place in Southern culture and memory.<sup>10</sup> Randy Burbage, a Charleston leader of the SCV, told Charleston's newspaper that "the flag didn't

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> Sean Patrick O'Rourke, "The Rebel Flag and the Rhetoric of Protest: A Case Study in Public Will Building," in *Rhetoric, Race, Religion, and the Charleston Shootings: Was Blind but Now I See*, ed. Sean Patrick O'Rourke and Melody Lehn (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 183.

<sup>10</sup> Vickie T. Carnegie, *Government Responsiveness in Race-Related Crisis Events*, Democratic Dilemmas and Policy Responsiveness (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023), 8.

cause Dylann Roof to do what he did.”<sup>11</sup> This is a sentence often repeated by other white supremacists to argue that the flag has nothing to do with the Mother Emanuel shooting.

In her speech, Haley argues that for some, the flag is seen as a symbol of duty, integrity, and respect, which stands for “traditions that are noble.”<sup>12</sup> She also claims that the flag is seen as a memorial to honor ancestors who fought for their state during a conflict.<sup>13</sup> It must be noted here that Haley and her speechwriters carefully chose the last few words of that sentence by using “state” instead of “country.” She also emphasizes that removing the flag is South Carolina’s decision. Not naming the Confederacy in this section of her speech is telling the watchers and listeners that her loyalty is to her state, not to the history of the flag. The side of history where the flag highlights the pro-slavery side of South Carolina during the Civil War. The other side of history and the flag that Haley has brought up, the side of pride and respect, is not hate or racism, she argues.<sup>14</sup>

Haley contends that for others, the flag is seen as an offensive symbol that comes from a “brutally oppressive past.”<sup>15</sup> She also argues that no winner or loser needs to be declared but that freedom of expression must be respected.<sup>16</sup> It is here that alt-right groups often say that the freedom of expression is not being respected because the flag is being removed. Haley has a double agenda during her speech. While being the Governor means that she has to consider all of her constituents, she is also a Republican who needs to be mindful of how she addresses this controversial issue in order not to lose votes or support. She still has to give meaning and a voice to her conservative voters. According to Haley, “[f]or those who wish to show their respect for the flag on their private property, no one will stand in your way.”<sup>17</sup> Besides this, she

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<sup>11</sup> Frazier, Powers Jr., and Wentworth, *We Are Charleston*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> “Gov. Nikki Haley of South Carolina on Removing the Confederate Flag.”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

ensures that the flag will always remain an essential part of South Carolinian history and will always be a part of South Carolina's soil. So, while it is seen as a large part of the past, according to Haley, it does not represent the state's future.<sup>18</sup>

In the meantime, O'Rourke explains that the sale of the Confederate flag skyrocketed after Haley's speech. He adds that "when Walmart, Amazon, Sears, and eBay all announced that they would no longer sell the Confederate flag, pro-flag advocates staged 'park-ins' in Walmart parking lots and mounted gigantic rebel flags on the back of pickup trucks."<sup>19</sup> In 2017, after the rally in Charlottesville, sales of the Confederate flag spiked again.<sup>20</sup> This shows the perseverance of the heritage conservationists in the United States.

### **Who "Owns" the Flag?**

The fact that the Confederate flag is used as a symbol of hate is unacceptable for Haley. The United Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of Confederate Veterans agree that the flag cannot and should not be used as a symbol of hate. After the riots in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, the commander-in-chief of the SCV, Thos V. Strain Jr., denounced any connection between Southern heritage, SCV, and white supremacy. He stated that:

The SCV condemns all acts of hatred and the improper use of our ancestors' battle flag which they nobly carried into battle for their own political independence. The Battle Flag was not and is not a symbol of racism; it is a soldier's battle flag given to the SCV by the Confederate Veterans. The KKK, nor any other group has legitimate use of our Confederate Symbols.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> O'Rourke, "The Rebel Flag and the Rhetoric of Protest," 186.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>21</sup> Carnegie, *Government Responsiveness in Race-Related Crisis Events*, 9.

The UDC's President General, Patricia Bryson, agreed with Strain's statement. Bryson also argued that the groups using the Confederate symbols are part of white supremacist and hate groups should discontinue the use of them. The practices of these groups are seen as reprehensible and abhorrent. Bryson contends that these groups and their use of the symbols are an "ill reflection of the organization's 123-year history of 'promoting patriotism and good citizenship.'"<sup>22</sup>

This "promotion of patriotism and good citizenship" means erecting statues on public grounds and promoting white power. This promotion of citizenship, Bryson mentions in her 2017 statement, raises the question of whom this patriotism is directed to. Is it directed to the United States of America or the Confederate States of America? How is this patriotism being shown exactly? The majority of Americans associate the Confederate flag with racial attitudes and Southern heritage. The second part of Bryson's statement, the "good citizenship," is not being questioned; as historian Karen L. Cox argues, the UDC felt it was their duty to honor the fallen Confederates and establish a legacy that would go on for generations by instilling the values of the Confederate generation.<sup>23</sup> The devotion and allegiance to the United States of America are being questioned.

The flag is a direct connection between the past and the present. As sociologist Ryan Talbert explains, the Confederate flag was removed from the State Capitol grounds after a period of troubled times. This resulted in a shift in cultural attitudes and social change. When researching the removal of the flag in Charleston, a few notions need to be taken into account: politics, religion, and race.<sup>24</sup> Talbert also argues that historical political realignment directly influences modern perceptions of the flag.<sup>25</sup> When keeping this and the flag's history in mind

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 32.

<sup>24</sup> Ryan D. Talbert, "Culture and the Confederate Flag: Attitudes toward a Divisive Symbol," *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 2 (2017): e12454, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3.



(being a rebel flag), it is understandable that white supremacists and hate groups have chosen to use it.<sup>26</sup>

While the UDC and SCV believe that the flag is theirs, this ‘rule’ is not being followed. Many aspects need to be taken into account when researching the sentiment of the Confederate flag in the South, and more specifically, South Carolina: location, political affiliation, and growing up in the South. The following survey outcomes show the link between the shooting and the eventual removal of Confederate symbols. In 2000, a national telephone survey was carried out; 49% said they wanted the flag removed. After the shooting, 55% of respondents believed that the flag should be removed from public grounds, such as government property. The data presented here highlights the nation's reaction and opinion of the Confederate flag. There was a rise in the demand for the removal of the Confederate flag in 2015 after the shooting.<sup>27</sup>

The Pew Research Center held national surveys in 2011 and 2015. In 2011, the survey indicated that thirty percent had a negative reaction as opposed to nine percent having a positive response when seeing the flag displayed. Four years later, in 2015, twenty-eight percent had a negative response, and thirteen percent had a positive response.<sup>28</sup> The Pew Research Center’s responses to the survey are interesting because the adverse reaction to the flag declined, and the positive response to the flag rose. This begs the question of whether the location (private property or state grounds) of the Confederate flag matters in these surveys.

When considering political affiliation, a 1997 vote in South Carolina’s congress resulted in ninety-four percent of Republicans taking a pro-flag stance compared to eighteen percent of Democrats taking a pro-flag stance. Americans who identify as Southerners are more likely to react positively when seeing the flag than Americans who do not. Talbert also argues

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

that inhabitants of rural areas are commonly more supportive of the Confederate flag than those in suburban or urban areas.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Heritage Acts of 1996 and 2000, But Not of 2015**

A vote took place in 2000 to relocate the Confederate flag from the top of the Capitol dome to a statue remembering Confederate soldiers on the same grounds. According to O'Rourke, the change in location from the dome to a statue on the state capitol grounds resulted in the flag obtaining a more prominent position. This is because it was flown at the intersection of Charleston's busiest streets. The location change did not please the pro-flag advocates or those protesting the flag.<sup>30</sup>

Haley reflects on the moment when, in 2000, the Confederate flag was moved. Now, she argues, it is time to remove the symbol that causes a divide between South Carolinians. Haley hopes the citizens "can move forward as a state of harmony and [...] can honor the nine blessed souls who are now in heaven."<sup>31</sup> She emphasizes that the focus of her speech is the removal of a symbol that divides, but first and foremost, the victims of Mother Emanuel.

The 2000 Heritage Act was meant to update the 1996 Heritage Act. The 1996 Act enacted that:

In addition to the flag of the United States of America and the State Flag of South Carolina, **the South Carolina Infantry Battle Flag of the Confederate States of America [the Battle Flag of the Army of Northern Virginia (General Robert E. Lee's Army)] shall be flown on the flagpole atop the State House** and shall be displayed above the rostrum in the chambers of the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 6, 7.

<sup>30</sup> O'Rourke, "The Rebel Flag and the Rhetoric of Protest," 182.

<sup>31</sup> "Gov. Nikki Haley of South Carolina on Removing the Confederate Flag."

House of Representatives and the Senate of this State and in the front ground floor foyer of the State House.<sup>32</sup>

In 2000, however, this was amended, and the following became the new law:

**Only the United States flag and the South Carolina state flag may fly atop the dome of the state house** and be displayed within the state house, which stipulates on this date where certain flags of the confederacy shall be flown or be displayed on the grounds of the state capitol complex, and which **prohibits the removal of these confederate flags on the state house grounds and the removal, changing, or renaming of any local or state monument, marker, memorial, school, or street erected or named in honor of the confederacy or the civil rights movement** without the enactment of a joint resolution of the general assembly approving same adopted by a two-thirds vote of the membership of each house.<sup>33</sup>

It is worth noting that the Heritage Act was not amended again after the flag was removed from the State Capitol grounds in 2015. This removal, a significant event in the flag's history, was not in line with the Heritage Act of 2000 provisions. According to this Act, the South Carolina legislature would require a two-thirds vote to remove the flag from the State Capitol. However, in a unique turn of events, Haley removed the flag with a separate legislature, bypassing the Heritage Act's requirements. This raises the question of whether the 2000 Heritage Act could be implemented again.

While the House of Representatives tried but failed to pass two acts, H4365 and H4366, concerning flags and the Clementa C. Pinckney Act, respectively, the Senate passed the bill

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<sup>32</sup> General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, "1995-96 Bill 1: Heritage Act of 1996," accessed April 3, 2024, [https://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess111\\_1995-1996/bills/1.htm](https://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess111_1995-1996/bills/1.htm); emphasis from the author.

<sup>33</sup> General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, 1999-2000 Bill 4895: Heritage Act of 2000, Flags, Confederate; Confederacy, Buildings, State House, General Assembly.; emphasis from the author.

S0879, SC Infantry Battle Flag of the Confederate States of America.<sup>34</sup> The passed bill stated the following:

An act to amend section 1-10-10, code of laws of South Carolina, 1976, relating to the flags authorized to be flown atop the state house and on the capitol complex, so as to **remove references to the South Carolina infantry battle flag of the Confederate States of America**, to provide for the permanent removal of the South Carolina infantry battle flag of the Confederate States of America from its location adjacent to the confederate soldier monument, and to provide that **upon its removal, the South Carolina infantry battle flag of the Confederate States of America shall be transported to the Confederate relic room for appropriate display.**<sup>35</sup>

The debate lasted hours, and people throughout the state stayed up all night to watch it unfold. On July 9<sup>th</sup>, the first approval vote came in at ninety-three Yeas and twenty-seven Nays. A second approval vote came in, and the bill was passed with ninety-four Yeas and twenty Nays on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Four days earlier, however, on July 10<sup>th</sup>, Haley removed the flag from state grounds.<sup>36</sup> This was approximately twenty days after her speech where she argued that Roof and other individuals were choosing to use the Confederate flag as a symbol of hate. In the meantime, the Senate chose to pass a bill banning the Confederate flag from public ground and move forward. As the bill states, the final resting place of the Confederate flag that had been flying on the Capitol Dome and Capitol grounds for decades became the Confederate relic room.

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<sup>34</sup> “H 4365 (Flags),” accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.scstatehouse.gov/billsearch.php>; “H 4366 (Clementa C. Pinckney Act),” accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.scstatehouse.gov/billsearch.php?billnumbers=4366&session=121&summary=B&headerfooter=1>; “S 0897 (SC Infantry Battle Flag of the Confederate States of America)” (2015), <https://www.scstatehouse.gov/billsearch.php?billnumbers=897&session=121&summary=B&headerfooter=1>.

<sup>35</sup> S 0897 (SC Infantry Battle Flag of the Confederate States of America).

<sup>36</sup> S 0897 (SC Infantry Battle Flag of the Confederate States of America).; Carnegie, *Government Responsiveness in Race-Related Crisis Events*, 71; Frazier, Powers Jr., and Wentworth, *We Are Charleston*, 32.

## Conclusion

Nikki Haley emphasizes Roof's actions and that they altered the way the Confederate flag is viewed instead of how the Confederate flag was already being viewed. Haley argues that there are two sides to how the Confederate flag is perceived. One side shows the memory, pride, and memorialization of the fallen Confederate soldiers and the Confederacy. The other side shows the oppression of Black Americans and the fact that they were not seen as citizens of the United States.

Another point of discussion is patriotism and loyalty to the United States flag. Roof wrote that he disagreed with the American flag and argued that modern-day patriotism was a joke. While this essay does not explore the meaning of modern-day patriotism, it does look at memory and heritage. This is what the latter two tell us: even after seceding, the UDC ensured that the memory and legacy of the Confederacy were upheld. This begs the question of whether these groups can be seen as patriots.

The UDC, the SCV, and other groups that want to secure the future of the Confederate flag, Confederate statues, and other Confederate symbols are still loyal to Confederate history and uphold *their* version of the events. The Confederacy fought for states' rights, the states' rights to hold enslaved people. These statues and the flag uphold this heritage and memory.

To conclude, the heritage and legacy of Confederate symbols consist of multiple narratives. It is the state or city's choice to do something about it. As explained in this essay, Southern states have protected themselves in the twenty-first century with legislation and heritage acts. It will take a while to undo what has taken a long time to form: the white supremacists, UDCs, and SCVs foothold in the South through clear emblems of white power.

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