

Taking Down the Confederate Flag for all the Wrong Reasons

By: **Michael Meyers, Executive Director of New York Civil Rights Coalition**

The Confederate flag is about to come down on the grounds of South Carolina's state capitol. But that doesn't impress me — because its descent is tied, irrationally, to an incident that attributes the murderous actions of a sole self-avowed white supremacist, Dylan Roof, to a way of life in the South.

There was no evidence of a white-black divide in mourning the deaths of those nine black churchgoers in Charlotte (sic—Charleston), S.C. — and surely no “white” support, beyond the hateful fringes, for Dylan Roof. But, to those accustomed to shorthand, the Confederate flag became a convenient scapegoat and target for venting dismay about the “legacy of racism.”

The Confederate flag does not offend me as much as the reasons advocates have given for why we must take it down and take it down right now. They make me uneasy about false equivalencies, about the unsupportable notion that the new South is as bad and as vicious on race as was the Old South.

These contentions are lies. Neither the South nor America stands up for racist murder or lynchings anymore. Neither stands behind the Confederate flag as a symbol of “segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” Not anymore.

I also take exception and offense at President Obama's declaration — and the NAACP's insinuation — that racism is in our DNA as a nation.

Notwithstanding the Southern Poverty Law Center's watch list of “white supremacists,” and notwithstanding NAACP President Cornell Brooks' rant that Dylan Roof is symptomatic of some 300,000 “hate” incidents per year in America, racism is increasingly confined to the fringes. Besides, such haters who add violence to their putrid voices of hatred, have plenty of symbols to carry and wave besides the Confederate flag. Would we remove the American flag from our eyes' view if a sole racist murderer were to wrap himself in it? As haters like Louis Farrakhan make clear, the American flag itself is to them a symbol of American-style racism, of a commitment to white supremacy.

Nuts like Farrakhan we quickly dismiss; we might as well and as quickly dismiss Dylan Roof's garb too, at least as the supposed “cause” of his slayings of the Charlotte (sic—Charleston) Nine.

The decision of big retailers like Wal-Mart to ban the sale of the Confederate flag is more than a bit much. It condemns and smears a large section of the South as racist just because people there want to wave a Confederate flag on their own property or drive a car with a Confederate decal. What is the meaning of freedom of choice and free speech if all uses and possession of erstwhile hate symbols are banished or banned?

Where would the list of hated symbols start and end? If censorship is the trend or fashion, what will be enough to soothe all the hurt feelings that are rooted in history? Will the slave-abiding

Presidents be banished from our coinage and their statues removed and sent to the museums and dung heaps, as some have urged?

Will we go as far as to banish certain words — such as the n-word — as “hate speech”? Do we also ban “polarizing” ads — for instance with images of Muhammed (sic---Mohammed) — as hate speech directed at religious, ethnic or racial groups?

Other countries make such speech illegal, but here in the United States, our First Amendment guarantees the kook’s right to hate, non-violently. Speech codes and anti-hate laws are simply incompatible with our constitution’s First Amendment guarantees. We are different. We are unique. We rebut and answer hate speech. We do not ban it or banish its symbols.

Once we do that, we are going to jail Louis Farrakhan, and others who preach black supremacy, not just the Dylan Roof among us.

Of course deep-seated racism can sometimes result in violence — but not always. When it does, our laws severely punish malefactors. More perilous for a democracy is driving hate symbols underground. Vandalizing statues and taking “civil disobedience” against the lawful flying of any flag is un-American.

I fight the good fight for equal rights, but I just can’t get upset over old or new symbols of “hate.”

I don’t want to silence but answer people who disagree with me about race. While taking down the Confederate flag will be comforting to many, black and white, I doubt that it alone will signify anything more than a momentary feel-good chasing after an easy mark of an already discredited past.

America is not what it used to be. Neither is race. Let’s not take the campaign to stamp out racist violence by misdirecting it to banishing symptoms and symbols of bigotry.