

COMPROMISE AND SYMBOLS OF RACISM

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Compromise is a good thing. We could not have majority rule and minority rights in a democratic society without it. We could not endure as a reasonably tolerant social order that shows respect for the sensibilities and interests of others without it. Peace and security would be unattainable without the willingness to compromise some claims, however strongly held, however vigorously believed to be just. Compromise is the lifeblood of democratic politics.

At the same time, not everything in a just society is subject to compromise. Some values and some principles, we suppose, do not permit of compromise lest we lose our moral integrity. Respect for human dignity and the equal rights of all citizens are strong candidates for such central, uncompromising commitments in the United States of America.

Symbols, too, are important: on some accounts, both our personal identities and our institutions are largely constituted symbolically. Clothing, jewelry, even hair in important ways all symbolize how we conceive ourselves as individuals. Names, customs and of course, flags, all do so collectively.

In the present case, therefore, we need first ask: what is symbolized by the Confederate Battle Flag, and more specifically, by state sanctioned display of it on public grounds? Defenders of such practices would have us believe that they do so out of respect for “southern heritage,” construed as a celebration of the culture and traditions of the South, where these are rooted in a righteous indignation of domination by Northerners. The Civil War, we are to suppose, was largely a struggle between the industrialized North and the agrarian South, and rooted in “the North’s” attempt to impose upon “the South” burdensome tariffs. The Confederate Battle Flag and its public display are an affirmation of resistance to unjust domination of one region over another.

Even in this very brief account of how to understand the Civil War and its symbols, there is much to admire. Resistance to unjust domination

is a tradition to celebrate among all who love justice and admire courage. A fuller account of the forces at work in creating a civil war in the U.S. in the 19th Century might well show there to be as much to criticize in the practices of Northern industrial plutocrats as in those of Southern plantation slave owners.

But what those who offer this account of the Civil War conveniently leave out is the inextricable connection of slavery to the agrarian economy of the mid-19th Century South. Slavery was not an accidental add-on, but at the heart of what made King Cotton possible. So to defend Southern agrarian interests and the cultural traditions that grew around them is also, inescapably, to celebrate the “peculiar institution” of slavery. The Confederate Battle Flag, on this understanding, is not “hijacked” by white supremacists, but appropriately used as a symbol of their defiance to the political and moral imperatives that oppose racism in all its forms. Construing the Confederate Battle Flag as a symbol of “white power” over the interests of black people is as accurate a representation of its function in the 21st Century as it was in the 19th.

From this point of view—in the present case, represented as that of the NAACP—it is appropriate and necessary to oppose displays of such a racist symbol in public places with state approval. Simply moving the flag from atop the capitol dome to an adjacent and even more conspicuous Confederate Soldier Monument is hardly an acceptable compromise. Inasmuch as displays of the Confederate Battle Flag on the public commons with state sanction constitute a symbolic endorsement of resistance to racial equality, they must be opposed not simply by “special interests” but as well by all who value racial equality and human rights.

Of course we must include in this number those who genuinely value southern heritage. When “southern heritage” is construed as other than one region’s historically hostile relations to another, there is much in the history, traditions and culture of the American South to admire and value. Civility, gentility and compassion are pervasive in many Southern communities. The South boasts an often-unique cuisine. It has a rich, subtle and highly nuanced literature that insightfully explores race consciousness and race relations.

Still more significant, and pertinent to the case at hand, is a proud tradition of resisting the real oppression of slavery, and later, of legalized racial discrimination. Courageous editors, clergy, teachers, slaves, the descendants of slaves and ordinary citizens, both black and white, who spoke out against and resisted first slavery then institutionalized segregation, often putting themselves in great personal danger, deserve to be

honored as the best representatives of our southern heritage. What those who would advocate respect for a southern heritage must not allow is that their heritage be hijacked by right-wing ideologues who would distort its admirable features by giving a place of honor to a symbol of racism.

This still leaves open the question of whether calling for and promoting an economic boycott of the entire state of South Carolina is an appropriate response to the legislature's decision to continue flying the Confederate Battle Flag, albeit in a different location. That is a question, I believe, about morally appropriate means to address a clear racist offense. As such, it requires careful assessment of the tactic's likelihood of being successful, on how to go about carrying it out, on whether others will sign up and cooperate so that it can be effective. Economic boycotts have sometimes been spectacularly successful, as in Montgomery and Nashville in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. But they have also failed dismally, the more so the larger the target and the smaller the community of support.

Personally, I am not well situated or sufficiently informed to have a firm conviction on this call for boycott. For my part, I am willing to trust the leadership of the oldest and most enduring civil rights organization in our nation on this one, so I will not be spending my "tourist dollars" in South Carolina in the foreseeable future. But I also recognize this as a judgment that persons of good will, at least equally opposed to racism and the public display of its symbols, may well disagree with. The question of whether to participate in an economic boycott of South Carolina until it ceases to display the Confederate Battle Flag on state property—unlike the question of whether such displays are racist—is one that allows for compromise.

