7/13/2015

TO: The Times Leader - letters to the editor

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There seems to be a good bit of confusion locally about the controversy over the removal of the Confederate battle flag and many feel it has been blown clear out of proportion. This flag was not the official flag of the Confederacy nor was it ever officially adopted by the Confederacy. The official Confederate flag wasn’t distinctive enough, especially when not waving, to distinguish it from the Union Flag and so this flag was designed especially for a battle flag. In more recent times it’s meaning has changed. For some it is a symbol of rebellion and for some a symbol of racism and for most it is a flag from our history. A survey conducted in 2011 revealed that 30% of Americans have a “negative reaction” when “they see the Confederate flag displayed”; 9% of Americans have a positive reaction and 58% have no reaction. This Confederate battle flag would probably have ended up in museums along with the other Confederate flags if it hadn’t been resurrected by the KKK and used by Southern Dixicrats during the 1948 presidential campaign. Southern historian Gordon Rhea wrote in 2011 that: “it is no accident that Confederate symbols have been the mainstay of white supremacist organizations, from the Ku Klux Klan to the skinheads. They did not appropriate the Confederate battle flag simply because it was pretty. They picked it because it was the flag of a nation dedicated to their ideals: ‘that the negro is not equal to the white man’. The Confederate flag, we are told, represents heritage, not hate. But why should we celebrate a heritage grounded in hate, a heritage whose self-avowed reason for existence was the exploitation and debasement of a sizable segment of its population.”

I lived over 30 years in the south at a time when all the traditions of segregation were in full bloom. White and colored restrooms in all the public stores, white and colored drinking fountains, colored only sitting on the back seats of the buses, separate and unequal hospitals and medical care, schools and lodging. Woolworths in downtown Jacksonville, Florida had a large soda fountain area but only “Whites” could eat there. Many southerners disagreed with this system but if a person went against it they were at the very least labeled as a trouble maker. So everyone went along with it, including me. The civil rights movement brought violent change but it did bring needed change.

 I was eating in a small restaurant in the south one day with my family when an elderly Afro-American gentleman came in and quietly asked the manager something. The manager responded “Yes we serve everyone in this restaurant.” His wife was waiting in the car, not wanting her to experience the embarrassment of being turned away. He brought her in and they ate their meal. Another time I was in a rather upscale department store and a distinguished diplomat from Africa who was in town on a speaking engagement was nearby. Also within hearing distance were two well dressed women whom I overheard saying, “What’s he doing here? He needs to go back where he belongs.” Incidences such as these gave me insight into racism in the southern part of this country, which I wasn’t used to. I grew up in Barnesville and learned to judge people by their actions and who they are and in some cases what their family reputation was. (The latter can also be a form of prejudice.) I don’t mean to say that we are free of racism here, for we certainly are not, but the south does have a different experience coming from the not too distant past. Last Sunday’s Times Leader in a front page article on this subject quoted Mark Potok, a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center saying; “The response in South Carolina and other states is encouraging after 15 years of no activity but was prompted only by a ‘massacre’. We need a kind of mental cleansing down here, it’s 150 years overdue.” Some are saying that the flag didn’t kill those people, a deranged person did. In a very real sense the hate that the flag represents to some people was responsible. A flag after all is more than a design, it is a symbol of something. The swastica on the Nazi flag was a symbol of prosperity and good fortune throughout the ancient world, but after World War II it has become associated with hate and serious oppression.

So if you fly the Confederate battle flag, do you know what message you are sending to others?