

South Carolina legislature ends display of Confederate flag

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After bitter debate and attempts to block action by a diehard minority, the South Carolina legislature completed action early Thursday morning on a bill to authorize removal of the Confederate flag that has been displayed on the state capitol grounds for more than 50 years.

The State Senate passed the bill by 37-3 Monday, and the State House of Representatives approved the required third reading of the bill in the early morning hours of Thursday, by a vote of 94-20. Both votes easily cleared the two-thirds margin needed for action. Republican Governor Nikki Haley signed the bill into law Thursday afternoon, and the flag was to be lowered permanently Friday morning at 10 a.m.

The final, protracted House debate came on Wednesday night, exactly three weeks since the massacre at an African-American church in Charleston by white supremacist gunman Dylan Roof. It was the killing of nine people, including the pastor, Clementa Pinckney, a Democratic state senator, that triggered a wave of public revulsion against the Confederate flag as a symbol of bigotry and racist violence.

In a belated effort to catch up with popular sentiment, Governor Haley, the state's Republican senators and congressmen, and the bulk of the South Carolina business establishment announced their abandonment of the display of the Confederate flag, after years of adamant refusal to respond to complaints that the flag was an offensive emblem of the slave-owning South. (See, "Why the politicians have united to take down the Confederate flag")

The South Carolina state government placed the Confederate flag atop the state capitol, not in the course of the Civil War, but a century later, in 1961. Democratic Governor Ernest Hollings pushed for the display of the Confederate flag as a symbol of

resistance to the civil rights movement and the determination of the South Carolina Democratic Party to defend Jim Crow.

While Hollings remained a Democrat, becoming a US senator and holding office until 2005, most of the defenders of segregation followed the lead of the state's senior senator, Strom Thurmond, and went over to the Republican Party, which now dominates state and federal office throughout the Deep South.

In 2000, when controversy flared over the presence of the Confederate flag and the NAACP initiated an economic boycott of South Carolina, the state government, by now under Republican control, made a deal with the Democrats. The flag was moved from the top of the state capitol to a nearby flagpole, a slight demotion. At the same time, its new location was seemingly made permanent, by requiring a two-thirds vote of both houses of the legislature to change it.

Although the bill to remove the flag was pushed through the legislature quickly, it was not without significant resistance. In the State Senate, the senate majority leader, Harvey Peeler, and Senator Lee Bright, South Carolina chairman of the Ted Cruz presidential campaign, actively opposed it.

In the House of Representatives, the opposition was more vociferous and nearly torpedoed the bill through parliamentary maneuvers, mainly the introduction of dozens of amendments. The goal was to change the bill from that passed by the Senate, which would force a new vote in the upper house and delay passage for at least a week.

Governor Haley and the bulk of the state Republican leadership sought to avoid this, particularly when the Ku Klux Klan scheduled a July 18 rally at the capitol to defend the Confederate flag. This threatened to produce television coverage of open racists outside the

legislature allied with filibustering Republicans inside it.

Under heavy lobbying from business interests, all the amendments were defeated, with the closest votes coming on proposals to replace the Confederate flag with a lesser-known secession flag carried by a South Carolina regiment (defeated 61-56), and to replace it with the South Carolina state flag (defeated 63-57).

There were numerous statements during the debate that demonstrate the systematic falsification of the history of the Civil War that prevails in neo-Confederate and ultra-right factions of the Republican Party. One legislator, Gary Simrill, claimed that the goal of the flag-removal campaign was to “remove vestiges of what the South was, to remove history, almost a cultural genocide.”

Another legislator, retired policeman Michael Pitts, claimed that his ancestors fought not for slavery, but against invasion from the North. “Growing up, in my family, it was called the war of Northern aggression,” he said. “It was where the Yankees attacked the South, and that’s what was ingrained on me growing up.” This claim is particularly grotesque when voiced in South Carolina, where the Confederate bombardment of Union troops at Fort Sumter was the well-known opening shot of the Civil War.

While Governor Haley and her allies, both Democrats and Republicans, portrayed the removal of the Confederate flag as a “new day in South Carolina,” as Haley put it in signing the bill into law, the real purpose of the action is forestall demands to go beyond empty symbolism, for any more fundamental change in the brutal class oppression facing working people in South Carolina, black, white or immigrant.

Despite the wealth of Hilton Head and other plush resorts, or upscale portions of Charleston and Columbia, the state is one of poorest in America, with low wages, widespread poverty, poor housing and abysmal public services. The violence used to enforce these conditions was on display in April, in the brutal police murder of Walter Scott, a 50-year-old black man, in North Charleston, captured on cellphone video.

Meanwhile, for all the claims that official display of the Confederate flag has suffered a fatal blow, an incident in Washington DC, the same day as the legislative debate in South Carolina, suggests otherwise.

Republicans in the House of Representatives introduced amendments to a spending bill for the Department of Interior to allow the Confederate flag to be flown in national parks. Current policy bans such displays except when required by historical context, as in the Civil War battlefield parks and monuments.

After protests from the Congressional Black Caucus, which led to shouting matches on the floor of the House between supporters and opponents of the measure, Speaker John Boehner withdrew the Interior spending bill from consideration, pending further negotiations with the Democrats and the Obama administration.



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