
False Flag Change: History, the Confederate Flag, Obama and the Deeper American Racism

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As the reigning corporate United States media and politics culture responds to a terrible racist atrocity by questioning the political correctness of the Confederate Flag and logo across the South, it is a good time to reflect on the different levels at which race and racism operate in post-Civil Rights America. One level appears at the nation's discursive and symbolic surface. It is about language, imagery, personnel, and representation. It has a lot to do with the color of faces in high and/or publically viewed places and positions.

Recent calls and acts to remove the Confederate Flag and emblem from public and commercial spaces in the U.S. South are excellent examples of race running at this surface level. The flag and logo have long been seen by many Americans, including now (in the wake of the Confederate symbol-waring Dylan Roof's murder of nine Black parishioners in a historic Black church in Charleston, South Carolina) the nation's first technically Black president, as too undeniably connected to slavery and Jim Crow oppression to keep a respectable place in mainstream U.S. culture.

The Deeper Racism Lives On

A different level of race and racism has to do with how the nation's daily capitalist institutions, social structures, and ideologies function. Here we are talking about how labor markets, the financial sector, the real estate industry, the educational system, the criminal justice complex, the military state, the corporate system, and capitalism more broadly capitalism work to deepen, maintain, and/or reduce racial oppression and inequality.

At the first, surface and symbolic level, racism has experienced significant defeats in the United States since the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the middle and late 1950s. Public bigotry has been largely defeated in the nation's corporate-crafted public culture. Prejudiced whites face public humiliation when they voice openly racist sentiments in a nation that took "Whites Only" signs down half a century ago. Favorably presented Black faces are visible in high and highly public places across the national media and political landscape. The United States, the land of slavery, put a Black family in the White House six years and eight months ago. The new attack on the

Confederate Flag is another moment in this long Civil Rights revolution over public-symbolic racism.

At the deeper, more covert institutional and societal level, however, racism is alive and well. It has not been liquidated beneath the public and representational surface – not by a long shot. It involves the more impersonal and (to be fair) the more invisible operation of social and institutional forces and processes in ways that “just happen” but nonetheless serve to reproduce Black disadvantage in the labor market and numerous other sectors of American life. These processes are so ingrained in the social, political, and institutional sinews of capitalist America that they are taken for granted – barely noticed by the mainstream media and other social commentators. This deeper racism includes widely documented racial bias in real estate sales and rental and home lending; the funding of schools largely on the basis of local property wealth; the excessive use of high-stakes standardized test-based neo-Dickensian “drill” and grill curriculum and related zero-tolerance disciplinary practices in predominantly black public schools; the concentration of black children into over-crowded and hyper-segregated ghetto schools where a highly disproportionate share of the kids are deeply poor; rampant and widely documented racial discrimination in hiring and promotion; the racist “War on Drugs” and the related campaign of racially hyper-disparate mass black incarceration and criminal marking. The technically color-blind stigma of a felony record is “the New N word” for millions of Black Americans subject to numerous “new Jim Crow” barriers to employment, housing, educational and other opportunities.

A Card Table Analogy

A critical and underestimated part of the grave societal racism that lives on beneath the selection of a Black Supreme Court Justice or a Black Secretary of State, the election of a Black U.S. President, or the taking down of the Confederate Flag from a Southern state capitol is the steadfast refusal of the white majority nation to acknowledge that the long (multi-century) history of Black chattel slavery – the vicious racist and torture system the Confederacy arose to defend and that the Confederate Flag celebrates – and its Jim Crow aftermath are intimately related to the nation's stark racial disparities (see below) today. The refusal stands in cold denial of basic historical reality. Consider the following analogy advanced by the Black American political scientist Roy L. Brooks nearly two decades ago:

“Two persons – one white and the other black – are playing a game of poker. The game has been in progress for some 300 years. One player – the white one – has been cheating during much of this time, but now announces: ‘from this day forward, there will be a new game with new players and no more cheating.’ Hopeful but suspicious, the black player responds, ‘that’s great. I’ve been waiting to hear you say that for 300 years. Let me ask you, what are you going to do with all those poker chips that you have stacked up on your side of the table all these years?’ ‘Well,’ said the white player, somewhat bewildered by the question, ‘they are going to stay right here, of course.’ ‘That’s unfair,’ snaps the black player. ‘The new white player will benefit from your past cheating. Where’s the equality in that?’ ‘But you can’t realistically expect me to redistribute the poker chips along racial lines when we are trying to move away from considerations of race and when the future offers no guarantees to anyone,’ insists the white player. ‘And surely,’ he continues, ‘redistributing the poker chips would punish individuals for something they did not do. Punish me, not the innocents!’ Emotionally exhausted, the black player answers, ‘but the innocents will reap a racial windfall.’”

Seen against the backdrop of Brooks’ living “racial windfall,” there is something significantly racist about the widespread mainstream “post-racial” white assumption that the white majority United States owes Black American nothing really in the way of special, ongoing reparation for the steep and singular Black disadvantages that have resulted from centuries of overt, explicitly racist, and truly brutal oppression and exploitation.

Forget for a moment that American capitalism is still permeated with institutional and societal (and still no tiny degree of cultural) racism. Put aside the basic and important fact that the game is not being played fairly, with genuinely color-blind, “post-racial” rules. As Brooks’ card table metaphor reminds us, even if U.S. capitalism was being conducted without racial discrimination (as both players in Brooks’ analogy seem to falsely assume), there would still be the question of “all those poker chips” that whites – yes, rich whites in particular – have “stacked up on [their] side of the table all these years.”

Brooks’ surplus “chips” are not quaintly irrelevant hangovers from “days gone by.” They are living, accumulated weapons of racial inequality in the present and future. As anyone who studies capitalism in a smart and honest way

knows, what economic actors get from the present and future so-called “free market” is very much about what and how much they bring to that market from the past. And what whites and blacks bring from the living past to the supposedly “color-blind” and “equal opportunity” market of the post-Civil Rights era (wherein the dominant neoliberal authorities and ideology purport to have gone beyond “considerations of race”) is still and quite naturally and significantly shaped by not-so “ancient” decades and centuries of explicit racial oppression.

Given what is well known about the relationship between historically accumulated resources and current and future success, the very distinction between past and present racism ought to be considered part of the ideological superstructure of contemporary white supremacy.

Priceless: The Half Barely Told

There’s no way to put a precise dollar amount on the value added to American capitalism by the Black human beings who provided the critical human raw material for the giant whipping machine that was British North American and US chattel slavery. Their blood-drenched contribution was, to quote the old MasterCard commercial, *priceless*. As the historian Edward Baptist has suggested in his brilliant volume [The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism](#) (Basic Books, 2014), Americans’ tendency to see slavery as a quaint and archaic “pre-modern institution” that had nothing to do with the United States’ rise to wealth and power is deeply mistaken. Contrary to what many abolitionists thought in the 19th century, the savagery and torture perpetrated against slaves in the South was about much more than sadism and psychopathy on the part of slave traders, owners, and drivers. Slavery, Baptist demonstrates was an incredibly cost-efficient method for extracting surplus value from human beings, far superior in that regard to “free” (wage) labor in the onerous work of planting, tending, and harvesting cotton. It was an especially brutal form of capitalism, driven by ruthless yet economically “rational” torture along with a dehumanizing ideology of racism.

It wasn’t just the South, home to the four wealthiest US states on the eve of the Civil War, where investors profited handsomely from the forced cotton labor of Black slaves. By the 1840s, Baptist shows, the “free labor North” had “built a complex industrialized economy on the backs of enslaved people and their highly profitable cotton

labor.” Cotton picked by southern slaves provided the critical

cheap raw material for early Northern industrialization and the formation of a new Northern wage-earning populace with money to purchase new and basic commodities. At the same time, the rapidly expanding slavery frontier provided a major market for early Northern manufactured goods: clothes, hats, cotton collection bags, axes, shoes, and much more. Numerous infant industries, technologies and markets spun off from the textile-based industrial revolution in the North. Along the way, shipment of cotton to England (the world’s leading industrial power) produced fortunes for Northern merchants and innovative new financial instruments and methods were developed to provide capital for, and speculate on, the slavery-based cotton boom. All told, Baptist calculates, by 1836 nearly half the nation’s economy activity derived

directly and indirectly from the roughly 1 million Black slaves (just 6 percent of the national population) who toiled on the nation's southern cotton frontier.

Geographical section aside, *The Half Has Never Been Told* shows that "the commodification and suffering and forced labor of African Americans is what made the United States powerful and rich" decades before the Civil War. The US owes much of its wealth and treasure precisely to the super-exploited labor of Black chattel in the 19th century. Capitalist cotton slavery was how United States *seized control of the lucrative world market for cotton*, the critical raw material for the Industrial Revolution, emerging thereby as a rich and influential nation in the world capitalist system by the second third of the 19th century:

"From 1783, at the end of the American Revolution to 1861, the number of slaves in the United States increased five times over, and all *this expansion produced a powerful nation*...white enslavers were able to force enslaved African American migrants to pick cotton faster and more efficiently than free people. Their practices transformed the southern states into the dominant force in the global cotton market, and cotton was the world's most widely traded commodity at the time, as it was the key material during the first century of the industrial revolution. The returns from cotton monopoly *powered the modernization of the rest of the American economy*, and by the time of the Civil War, the United States had become the second nation to undergo large-scale industrialization." (emphasis added)

After short-lived and half-hearted reformist and democratic experiments under northern Union Army occupation during the Reconstruction era (1866-1877), Black cotton servitude was resurrected across what became known as the Jim Crow South. The last thing that Black ex-slaves wanted to do after slavery was go back to work under white rule in Southern cotton fields. But, as the historical sociologist Stephen Steinberg noted thirty-four years ago,

"Though the Civil War had ended slavery, the underlying economic functions that slavery had served were unchanged, and a surrogate system of compulsory paid labor developed in its place...ex-slaves...were forced to struggle for survival as wage laborers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers in southern agriculture. Once again, black paid the price and carried the burden of the nation's need for cheap and abundant cotton." Untold thousands of Black Americans died at the hands of white terrorists and authorities, both private and public, to keep Black lives yoked to cotton toiling for a pittance or worse under white owners during the long Jim Crow era – this for the sake of national U.S. capitalism, not just regional exploiters. With all due respect to that great Canadian Neil Young, it was never just about "Southern [white] Man."

Speaking of Symbols...

Perhaps people who care about racial justice should talk about down the United States Flag as well as the Confederate one. As the Black historian Gerald Horne has shown in his provocative book [The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States](#) (NYU Press, 2014), the nation that invented the Star Spangled Banner (SSB) broke off from England largely because of its propertied elite's reasonable fear that North American Black chattel slavery could not survive and expand under the continued rule of the British Empire. The *Declaration of Independence* contained no criticism of North American slavery (though it did accuse King George of "excit[ing] domestic insurrections amongst us"). The U.S. Constitution sanctioned and defended the vicious institution of slavery. Exactly 76 years after U.S. independence was declared and 9 years before the Confederate Flag was first flown, the great Black escaped slave and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass reflected on "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" As Douglass answered in the shadow of the SSB:

"a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages."

Reading Douglass's famous and bitter oration again as I do each year on July 4th, I was reminded of Patrick Campbell's painting *New Age of Slavery*, which was inspired by the police killings of Mike Brown and Eric Garner and went viral last December:

Thin also of the millions of Native Americans and persons abroad who have died and suffered subjugation under the “hollow mockery” of the SSB.

At the same time, if the Confederate Flag is going to come down, should Confederate names and symbols perhaps also disappear from other public spaces in the region? As the *New York Times* noted recently, “Black people across the South live on streets named for heroes of the side of the Civil War that opposed the end to slavery.” The region is rife with Confederate war memorials, along with numerous public and private buildings, parks, and other places bear the names of former rich slave-owners and Confederates. What about the offensive presence of that vicious Indian-killer and southern slaver Andrew Jackson on the U.S. \$20 bill, or for that matter the wealthy slave-owner George Washington on the \$1 bill and the liberal slave-owner Thomas Jefferson (the great revolutionary who worried about “domestic insurrections” in North America) on the \$5 bill?

“History Belongs in a Museum”

Symbols aside, Baptist’s book and other recent volumes documenting the centrality of cotton slavery to the United States’ emergence as a powerful player in the world system raise the question of what Black America is owed today for the richly capitalist crime of slavery. What sort and amount of reparations are due in light of the fact that the United States owes its rise to wealth and power to Black slaves who suffered unimaginable misery and ordeal under the torments of cotton slavery between the American Revolution and the American Civil War?

As Baptist muses with irony, “if the worst thing about slavery was that it denied African Americans the liberal rights of citizens, one must merely offer them the title of citizen – even elect one of them president – to make amends. Then the issue will be put to rest forever.” If we look honestly at the scale and (more importantly) the pivotal historical significance of the wealth stolen from African Americans, we are talking about reparations and that is something that America appears to be institutionally and ideologically incapable of addressing in a forthright and substantive way. We raise the question of reparations – yes, the “R word” that can’t be uttered in polite “post-racial” company.

Take down the Confederate Flag? “Fine. Should have been long ago.” Deal truthfully and significantly with – and advance compensation for – the profits made, the crimes committed, and the long and living price imposed on Black Americans by the multiple-centuries system of Black chattel slavery that the Confederacy fought to defend and indefinitely prolong? “Forget it. Get real. Get over it. Move on. Nothing more to see here. Put the flag in a closet and stop whining.”

Driving in my car a couple weeks ago I heard some white authority in Charleston say (in a very deep South Carolina accent) that the flag should come down because it’s a piece of “history and there’s a place for history, History belongs in the museum.” For some folks, taking down the Confederate Flag is a way of pushing Slavery and Jim Crow yet further down Orwell’s memory hole. And for many liberals, it’s an all-too welcome diversion from taking on the killer racist police and mass incarceration state. couple of weeks ago I heard some older white authority figure (I did not catch his name or title) in Charleston say (in a deep South Carolina) accent that the Confederate banner should come down because “it’s a piece of history and there’s a place for history. History,” the elite Caucasian intoned, “belongs in the museum.”

For some right-wing folks, taking down the Confederate Flag is a way of pushing the all-too living historical relevance of slavery and Jim Crow further down Orwell’s memory hole. That history is too transparently related to contemporary racial oppression in a time when Black Americans are locked up *en masse* and murdered by police on an all too regular basis.

For many milquetoast liberal and progressive civil rights sorts (including Black middle- and upper-class Urban Leaguers and NAACP members), it should be added, the flag issue is an all-too safe and welcome diversion from the difficult grassroots struggle and work required to take down the contemporary racist police, apartheid, and mass incarceration state – living and substantive legacies of chattel slavery.

Symbolic Change, Cloaking, and White Self-Congratulation

It is tempting, perhaps, to see contemporary America’s split race decision – progressive victory on the surface level of race and continuing defeat on the deeper societal, institutional, and historical level of race – as a case of glass half-empty versus glass half-full. “Let’s celebrate the victory on Level 1 racism and build on that triumph to

move forward against Level 2 racism"... right? *Not so fast.* It's more complicated than that. For, perversely enough, the deeper level of racism may actually be deepened by Level 1 Civil Rights victories insofar as those victories and achievements have served to encourage the great toxic illusion that, as Derrick Bell once put it, "the indolence of blacks rather than the injustice of whites explains the socioeconomic gaps separating the races." It's hard to blame millions of white people for believing that racism is dead in America when U.S. public life is filled with repeated affirmations of the integration and equality ideals and paeans to the nation's purported remarkable progress towards achieving it and when we regularly celebrate great American victories over Level 1 racism (particularly over the open racial segregation and terror of the South). As the black law professor Sheryl Cashin noted in 2004, five years before the existence of a first black U.S. president, there are [now] enough examples of successful middle- and upper-class class African-Americans "to make many whites believe that blacks have reached parity... The fact that some blacks now lead powerful mainstream institutions offers evidence to whites that racial barriers have been eliminated; [that] the issue now is individual effort . . . The odd black family on the block or the Oprah effect — examples of stratospheric black success," Cashin wrote, "feed these misperceptions, even as relatively few whites live among and interact daily with blacks of their own standing." One of the many ways in which Obama's presidency has been problematic for the causes of racial justice is the way it has proved to be something of a last nail in the coffin for many white Americans' already weak willingness to acknowledge that racism is still a major problem for Black Americans.

This is something that Martin Luther King, Jr. anticipated to some degree. "Many whites hasten to congratulate themselves," King noted in 1967, "on what little progress [black Americans] have made. I'm sure," King opined, "that most whites felt that with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, all race problems were automatically solved. Most white people are so removed from the life of the average Negro," King added, "here has been little to challenge that assumption." (Note the importance of segregated experience in the observations of both professor Cashin and Dr. King. The media image of black triumph and equality trumps the reality of persistent racial inequality in white minds so easily thanks in part to the simple fact that whites have little regular contact with actual, ordinary black Americans and little understanding of the very different separate and unequal ways in which most Blacks' experience life in the United States. This is one of many ways in spatial and residential segregation — still quite pronounced in the U.S. — matters a great deal.)

"A Reminder of Systemic Oppression and Racial Subjugation"

Like the election and re-election of President Obama, the takedown of the Confederate Flag carries with it the risk of providing deadly "post-racial" cloaking for the nation's deeper societal, institutional, and ideological racism. How appropriate in that regard it is to hear the deeply conservative and neoliberal Obama (for whom the notion of reparations is both ideologically and pragmatically unthinkable) call in his funeral oration at the stricken Charleston church for the final takedown of the Southern slave confederacy's flag and symbol:

"For too long, we were blind to the pain that the Confederate Flag stirred into many of our citizens. (Applause). It is true a flag did not cause these murders. But as people from all walks of life, Republicans and Democrats, now acknowledge, including [South Carolina's right wing and objectively racist] Governor [Nikki] Haley, whose recent eloquence on the subject is worthy of praise...(Applause)...as we all have to acknowledge, the flag has always been represented more than just ancestral pride (Applause). For many, black and white, that flag was a reminder of systemic oppression (Applause)...and racial subjugation (Applause). We see that now. Removing the flag from this state's capital would not be an act of political correctness. It would not be an insult to the valor of Confederate soldiers. It would simply be acknowledgement that the cause for which they fought, the cause of slavery, was wrong (Applause). The imposition of Jim Crow after the Civil War, the resistance to civil rights for all people, was wrong. It would be one step in an honest accounting of America's history, a modest but meaningful balm for so many unhealed wounds. It would be an expression of the amazing changes that have transformed this state and this country for the better because of the work of so many people of goodwill, people of all races, striving to form a more perfect union. By taking down that flag, we express God's grace. (Applause)"

In his oration, Obama said that the murdered minister and state senator Clem Pinckney "embodied the idea that Christian faith demands deeds and not just words."

Obama was right, of course, to observe that the Confederate Flag represents slavery, Jim Crow, and opposition to the great Civil Rights Movement that arose more than half a century ago. But what, really, are the "amazing

changes” that have pushed the U.S. towards a “more perfect union,” racially speaking, in recent decades? Obama was referring mainly to the rise of a certain number of Black faces into high and public places, none more notable than his ascendancy into the White House. But beneath the surface change, as Obama knows all too well, the Black poverty and unemployment rates remain double that of the white rates and Black median household wealth has fallen to less than one twentieth of white media household wealth. Blacks make up more than 40 percent of the nation’s globally and historically unmatched population of prisoners and a third of Black men are marked with the crippling lifelong stigma of a felony record. A shocking 38 percent of Black children are growing up at less than the federal government’s notoriously inadequate poverty level. The poverty rate among Black children is more than twice as high as that of white children.

White America repeatedly congratulates itself over its readiness to shed open public bigotry and make symbolic statements against racism like electing a Black president (though it should be noted that Obama has never won a majority of the national white electorate despite his best efforts to not seem “too Black” and concerned with racial justice) and taking down the Confederate Flag. Meanwhile, these savage racial disparities persist and even deepen thanks to the underlying societal, institutional, historical, and political-economic racism that churns on behind the curtain of an officially color blind and, yes, politically correct media and politics culture.

In her speech calling for the removal of the Confederate Flag (which she called “a deeply offensive symbol of a brutally oppressive past” for “many”) from the grounds of the South Carolina state capital, that state’s right wing Republican Governor Nikki Haley said that “we have made incredible progress in South Carolina on racial issues.” There is surely some basis for that statement at the surface level, in the racial composition of the state’s legislature and evening broadcast news teams and the like. But underneath all that, damn near half (44%) of South Carolina’s Black children are growing up in officially poor families, compared to roughly a sixth (16%) of the state’s white children. While Blacks make up 28 percent of South Carolina’s population, they comprise 62% of the state’s 22,000 prisoners. The state’s Black poverty rate (28%) is nearly three times as high as its white population’s poverty rate (10%).

Such glaring racial disparities reflect the long living legacy and price of chattel slavery, inextricably intertwined past and present with the nation’s amoral profits system. Slavery may perhaps qualify as the nation’s “Original Sin,” as Obama called it from the pulpit in Charleston, but it was, as Baptist shows, an integral, highly profitable, and driving force in the so-called free market system – capitalism – that Obama has upheld as the source of the United States’ supposed “unmatched prosperity.” And today, as in the nation’s early development, America’s not-so “color blind” capitalism remains inseparably bound up with deeply entrenched and egregiously under-acknowledged structures, institutions, and ideologies of racial oppression and inequality.

Obama’s Curious Case for Keeping the Confederate Flag Flying

Listening to Obama’s Charleston speech and hearing my fellow Caucasian Americans talk about the supposed over-ness of U.S. racism and the purportedly ancient and “long ago” nature of slavery and Jim Crow – and hence about the supposed personal and cultural responsibility of Blacks themselves for their position at the bottom of the nation’s steep class hierarchies – I almost wonder if the Confederate Flag ought not stay put. After all, the President says the flag is “a reminder of systemic oppression and racial subjugation.” He says that taking it down is a “modest balm for unhealed wounds.” Constantly barraged with reactionary neoliberal messaging on how poor and working class people and especially poor and working class people of color supposedly created their own difficult situations in the “land of the free” (the ever more savagely unequal and openly plutocratic nation that happens to be leading prison state and military force in world history), Americans of all colors could use some good reminders of “systemic oppression and racial subjugation.” They need to be reminded of such oppression both in the past and in the present – and of the intimate relationship between past oppression and racial subjugation and present systemic oppression and racial subjugation.

The Real Issue to be Faced

When it comes to “deeds and not just words,” moreover, they don’t need a symbolic “modest balm.” “A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years,” the great democratic socialist Martin Luther King, Jr. noted in 1967 (as violence erupted across the nation’s largely jobless northern ghettos) “will ‘thingify’ them – make them things. Therefore they will exploit them, and poor people generally, economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together.” That all being no less true 48 years later, and with capitalism now bringing livable ecology to the edge of ruin, the people need deep systemic change along the lines of what Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr. called the “real issue to be faced” beyond “superficial” matters (like the color or gender of a president): “the radical reconstruction of society itself.”
