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The Confederate Flag

In July 2015, Nikki Haley, the Governor of South Carolina, signed a bill to remove the Confederate Battle Flag from the state Capitol grounds in Columbia. Debates over the complete removal of the flag intensified following the murder of nine African Americans at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston of June 2015. The killer, Dylann Roof, had previously posed for photos with symbols commonly associated with white supremacy, including the flags of Rhodesia and apartheid-era South Africa. Roof had also posed with the Confederate Battle Flag.

The brutal murder of nine African-Americans, the killer's avowed racism, and his use of symbols associated with the Confederate States of America (C.S.A.) re-ignited a national debate over the complex legacies of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, as well as the place of Confederate monuments in modern-day America.

The C.S.A. was made up of eleven states that seceded from the U.S.A. in 1860-61, and the ensuing Civil War tore the country apart, leading to the deaths of over 620,000 Americans and destruction on a scale unparalleled in American history. While not initially fought on these terms, the Civil War also led to the end of slavery in the U.S.

The most commonly recognizable Confederate symbol today is the Confederate Battle Flag. While never the official C.S.A emblem, this flag was carried by several Confederate Army units, incorporated into the state flag of Mississippi in 1894, Georgia in 1956, and placed in the Capitol grounds of several southern states during the 1950s and 60s. The Confederate Battle Flag became the symbol of the "Dixiecrats", a party formed in 1948 in response to the Democratic Party's move towards black civil rights, and which claimed to stand for the segregation of the races. The revival of Confederate symbols in this period reflected southern defiance in the face of legal and political challenges to segregation, perceived challenges to state sovereignty, and in the battle against black civil rights. Throughout the twentieth century the flag has been used by white supremacist terrorist groups, most notably the Ku Klux Klan.

While South Carolina recently voted to remove the flag, arguments over its meaning continue to cause controversy across the South. Supporters of the flag, including groups like the Sons of Confederate Veterans, reject its association with white supremacy and racial violence, commonly using the phrase "heritage not hate" to defend their position. However, attempts to separate secession, the motives of individual Confederate soldiers, and the "heritage" of the Confederacy from the racism of the Confederate cause are immensely problematic. To claim that these symbols represent a glorious Southern history is to mythologize a world in which black people were, and should forever be, property. As the Mississippi secessionists proudly declared in 1861: 'Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery -- the greatest material interest of the world.' While debates will no doubt continue over public monuments and memorialisation in the South, we must be clear in articulating the specific rights and heritage the Confederacy fought to protect.