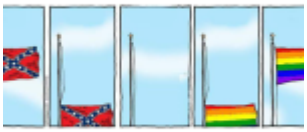
The Longest Arc



It’s been a good week to be a liberal in America. The affirmation by the Supreme Court that the Affordable Care Act will be allowed to remain the law of the land, along with their upholding of Obama-era policies regarding housing discrimination, are big victories.

Even bigger: today the Supremes affirmed the right for everyone to get married. This is a huge stride forward. Obama is correct in saying that “We have made our union a little more perfect” with this decision. The *Obergefell* decision is one of *the* key social justice decisions SCOTUS has delivered, and today we saw momentous history in the making, as surely as Brown v Board of Education was sixty years ago.

This is all huge stuff, great stuff that helps me put aside my usual ‘glass is half empty, and would it kill you to add a little ice’ mindset.

Also big this week: the Stars and Bars has become de facto radioactive to almost every public official and corporation. The rapidity of this has been stunning, albeit long overdue. Sure, it’s pretty evident that many of the pols speaking out against the Confederate battle flag are just playing a triangulation game, trimming their positions just in time.<fn>I’m looking at you, Nikki Haley.</fn> But in this case, having these folks play along with their “me too” duplicity is welcome. That battle rag has loomed over the South – and the Nation – for far too long. There will be predictable pockets of holdouts, a bunch of ‘fergit, hell!’

yahoos who refuse to give up their precious. But at last, there is rapidly growing agreement that the flag is a symbol of a shameful legacy of racial hatred. I'm more than okay with that.

But this change comes with a hefty price tag that belies the *happening overnight* feeling. It took nine *more* people dying at the hands of yet another wacko with a gun to get to this moment. It's not too much to suggest that every step in the movement to repair our national shame surrounding racial inequality has carried similar costs, that carnage has been the necessary currency in the struggle to get white people to do something as basic as to recognize our shared humanity. But unlike, say, the Newtown massacre, this horror is actually leading to a significant, if insufficient, piece of social change.<fn>Gun control remains somehow too much to even consider, and it would not surprise if the NRA crowd was somehow fueling the anti-flag fever to divert attention away from the well-armed elephant in the room.</fn> But if this overdue disgrace of the battle rag is really *just* a step in the right direction, it is a gol-durned big un, especially in the states that still whistle Dixie a little too often.

I come from the South, from a family background that is typically conservative in the way the White South has pretty much always been, and that was not always let's say *flexible* in our view of difference. It appears that ancestors fought on both sides of the Civil War, but mostly for the Confederacy. One ancestor was a prosperous slave holder in South Georgia.<fn>None of that wealth survived the war, and that side of the family scraped along after that.</fn> On the other side of the family, my great-grandfather was, among other things, a bootlegger in Mississippi who employed black men to help work the still, and who earned frequent uninvited visits from the local Klan who disapproved of this economic arrangement. Like most Southern families, the past is a muddle of strange happenings and inherent contradiction.

But either way, the elders of my experience were polite, white Southerners who would never dream of being overtly rude to a 'Colored'<fn>Never a colored *person*, although occasionally perhaps a *Nigra,* which was the genteel substitute for that horrible word that I was taught from an early age was only used by White Trash.</fn>, but who were quite certain in their belief that black people were something other, and absolutely *less than* in some indefinable way.<fn>But who might also, through dint of hard work and diligence, elevate themselves above the aforementioned White Trash. The granular slicing of social strata was elaborate. The point was to always have some group that was *lower* than your own.</fn>

And so it came to pass somehow that at a tender young age, when we lived in the Tennessee tri-city area, I was given a small Stars and Bars of my own.<fn>I cannot remember who gave it to me, other than that it was a relative, not my parents.</fn> It was not very large, and cheaply made, with staples holding it to a dowel that served as an ersatz flagpole. Nobody explained anything about it, other than that it was "the Southern flag". I hung it my room and really didn't think much about it.

And then we moved to southern Connecticut, where I unpacked my stuff and hung it in my room. I still had no concept of what it meant. And it came to pass that I made friends in the neighborhood who were more overtly racist than anybody I'd known in the South. Not necessarily more racist, but they lacked the gentility to say *Nigra*, preferring that other word that gets readers of *Huck Finn* so riled up these days. And so, like anybody wanting to fit in, I started using it, too.

In the north, I attended an elementary school that was pretty much all-white, with the exception of the son of the caretaker of our church. Willie and I became pretty good friends. You'd think this cognitive dissonance of having a chosen friend, who was Black, and a bunch of racist neighborhood friends, would provide a sharp spur of conscience in a young boy. No such

luck.

One day, Willie visited my house. I'm not sure if he saw the flag or not. It really didn't occur to me that it might make a difference. But we somehow got into an argument, and I ended up getting mad and dropping the N-bomb on him. He punched me in the gut so hard I dropped to the ground. And he left to walk home, not even asking for a ride or the phone to call his mom.

And we never spoke again.

Make no mistake. I knew I was crossing a line when I said it, and I knew that it was fucked up to do so. But I felt I had it in my power to knock this really nice friend down to size, just because he made me mad about something. But he was having none of that.

I was around 10 years old at the time. The shame of what I did that day still burns. It's the most overtly racist act of my life, and that word has not passed my lips since. But I can't claim innocence of more subtle racist behaviors, like getting nervous when a group of black males gets on an empty subway car with me, or even just not considering that a great scientific advance might have been realized by a Black man or woman, or of being surprised when I met a Black man who *loves* 80s hair metal bands. Because that's not what *they* do, right?

I was not raised by bad or malevolent people. I was not taught to be racist, at least not in any obvious sense. But I did live in a world where hanging the battle rag was fine, where assuming the racial superiority was the order of things, where laughing and joining the guys in crude racial jokes was no problem. I thought I was not a bad or malevolent person. But by every reasonable measure of the word, I was a racist. And I somehow managed to *get* that those two statements could not live together.

I'm not sure when I decided to change, not clear on exactly

when I quietly took that toy battle flag and threw it in the trash. I'm not sure when I actually realized that I could work to be rid of the burden of lies that led me to assume my superiority based on my pale skin. I've struggled with that for over 40 years, I guess, but even though I like to congratulate myself on how far I've come, that stain is still there. Just like that stain is indelible on our Nation. If I treat every person I meet, from now until I die, with full dignity and respect – doubtful, but it's a goal – the stain will remain.

Getting rid of the battle rag is not going to change much in the overall calculus of how racial "difference" plays out day to day. But like the day I threw mine in the trash, it can represent a decision to make conscious choices about the messages we endorse and about how we wish to be, even while we are never going to be able to fully attain that goal. For most whites in my generation, the stain is pronounced. For later generations, for people who do not grow up with the message that a symbol that represents slavery and segregation and racial animus is approved by their governments and institutions, maybe that stain begins to fade.

And even though the shame of how I behaved remains, I am not ashamed of being from the South. Many of the better examples of American culture come from the South. The music I love, the food, the literature, the seemingly genetic predisposition to gothic humor…this is the bounty of Southern heritage. The Civil Rights movement started in the South and rippled out across the country to force people in other regions to grapple with the institutional racism as it manifested in those places. There's plenty to be proud of. This is the heritage – shared across race and class lines – that we can celebrate. And we can do it just fine without that miserable battle rag.