

After #Charlottesville - What kinds of Engagement on Statues and Symbols in Passionate Debate?

Author : John Stephens

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White Supremacy. [Confederate Heritage](#). Preserve or remove statues and memorials?

Many communities are facing passionate people and arguments about these monuments and their meaning. Some Confederate memorials have already been removed in recent days ([Franklin, Ohio](#); [Baltimore](#)), including one in [Durham toppled illegally](#). Other vandalism of memorials or statues have occurred in [Arizona](#) and at [Duke University](#).

In North Carolina, [Governor Roy Cooper](#) and [legislative leaders](#) are chiming in.

What should be done - and HOW should it be done? This blog focuses on community engagement, so beyond the *what* to do is the *how to go about deciding* action or preservation of Confederate memorials. While these issues are attracting national attention, the choices are highly local or guided at the state level, per the 2015 NC General Assembly action on the [preservation or relocation of statues and memorials](#).

Following the [June 17, 2015 killing of nine people by Dylann Roof](#) in Charleston's [Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church](#) I wrote [Conflicting Views on Confederate Flag, Memorials, Symbols: What to do in a "Post-Charleston" Environment?](#) It appeared in the *Fayetteville Observer* as an [op-ed](#), and I reprint that post below with some updates.

Blogger Michelle Bir also contributed in November 2015: [Fayetteville History and City Symbols: the Weakness of Online Opinion](#)

I am eager to hear viewpoints on the "how" of making good decisions in the wake of the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally, counterprotest and violence. It seems one risk is [attribution bias](#) (or errors): assuming that if a person believes X then she or he must believe Y and Z (which are equally or more outrageous to the listener).

1. What kinds of stakeholders should be included in these discussions?
2. Can memorials stand for honoring slain soldiers yet not be symbols of 20th century terrorism and oppression of African-Americans?
3. Is moving certain statues or memorials to military cemeteries, [veterans park](#) or history museums a "balanced" solution?
4. If a city council or county commission chooses to consider these issues, what kinds of input will help their decision?

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Conflicting Views on Confederate Flag, Memorials, Symbols: What to do in a "Post-Charleston" Environment?

More than a Flag: How a community talks and decides

There are strong feelings and many ideas about what to do with Confederate flags and memorials in the aftermath of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church murders. The Confederate battle flag and flagpole were removed from the South Carolina Statehouse grounds on July 10th, after emotional debate in the S.C. Legislature.

North Carolina Governor Patrick McCrory believes the state should stop issuing Sons of

Confederate Veterans car license plates which feature the Confederate battle flag [UPDATE: as of August 17, 2017, NC DMV lists Sons of Confederate Veterans as an [available license plate](#)]. One writer calls for [taking down the NC Capitol Confederate Memorial](#). Some other local flashpoints have included the [Salisbury Confederate Statue](#), the use of the [Fayetteville Market House as a town symbol](#), and several reports of vandalism of Confederate statues and memorials. [UPDATE - [Vandalism of the Robert E. Lee statue at Duke University](#), August 17, 2017].

Having the “Right Conversation”

While the Confederate flag is a potent symbol, an equally important way to express community values is to seek respect and understanding as a city or state decides what to do about local memorials and displays of the Confederate flag at government institutions.

I have worked with many N.C. local government leaders to address difficult issues on the environment, land use, public safety and community planning. From 1998-2006 I facilitated United Methodist Church groups across the U.S. as they struggled to stay together despite their differences on whether to ordain gay and lesbian ministers or to hold gay weddings in their churches.

It is unlikely for everyone in a community will be satisfied with a specific outcome about flag display or memorials. But seeking understanding amidst differences is a way to grow individual and community character and strengthen the invisible glue that holds communities together.

I offer these guidelines for city and county managers, elected leaders, cemetery committees and others who wish to have a proactive, strong way to engage people who care about these matters:

1. Be sure to have input from different viewpoints as you plan the meeting or forum. Participants are more trusting when the announcement comes from people who share their view. It also is more likely for people to see the gathering as open and fair.
2. Include small group conversations. Avoid the standard one speaker at a time model which often inflames the atmosphere. Aim for a “kitchen-table” style setting, where people talk and listen better by talking with rather than at one another.
3. Set some clear rules for respect. Listening without interrupting, and summarizing someone’s views before offering your thoughts are good first steps. Another rule is to ask genuine questions: not courtroom cross-examination style, but out of true curiosity. There will be a lot of “how can you believe *that*?” coming from a feeling of exasperation or anger. The key is to turn down the temperature and let everyone say what they believe – and where they are uncertain – without being attacked.
4. Try to get beyond either-or choices. Some people may only focus on removing or changing a particular flag display or memorial. Other steps could involve honoring community history not tied to war or Jim Crow discrimination, but to add memorials, markers or celebrations which enhance the history of a community.

5. Avoid having a poll or use any group to represent the community as a whole. Separating the talk and deliberation about an emotional issue from the decision-making stage helps people focus on the substance rather than play to the audience or the board who controls the Confederate memorial or flag display.
6. Be clear about who will decide, and the timeline for a decision. As part of planning a forum or set of conversations, be sure the decision-makers can observe the conversation, but it is probably best for them to not weigh in at that time.

Fortunately, civic leaders can call on various resources to be sure that many voices are heard, and that people are respected in the conversation. [Community mediation centers](#) and the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Government have skilled facilitators. Local ministerial associations, and community relations commissions can be helpful, too.

Flags are potent symbols of history and identity. N.C. leaders – in and out of government – have the opportunity to express community values and shared identity by how the hot feelings about Confederate memorials and flags bend, but do not break, the bonds of civility and neighborliness. Part of wise leadership is creating ways that draw people together ahead of a tough decision.