

OPINION

When States Overlook a Great Injustice

The flying of a symbol of slavery

BY LEE A. DANIELS

"When I was screened for the jury, it welled up inside me and I expressed my feelings."



So said Carl Staples, a black Shreveport, Louisiana radio engineer and announcer, explaining why, while being questioned as a prospective juror for a high-profile murder case in that city in 2009, he criticized the flying of the Confederate flag on the grounds of the courthouse.

Denouncing the Confederate banner as "a symbol of one of the most... heinous crimes ever committed," while being questioned, Staples, according to court transcripts of the voir dire, added, "You're here for justice and then again you overlook this great injustice by continuing to fly this

flag."

It will come as no surprise that the prosecution objected to Staples' being seated on the jury. Indeed, the 12 people ultimately chosen for the jury in the case of a black man accused of murdering a white firefighter during a burglary included eleven whites and one African American.

arguments in the case on Monday. A ruling is expected by July. The murder of the firefighter, Joe Prock, 52, was horrific. He was beaten with a pistol while trying to prevent the robbery of his mother's home and his body was set afire.

Dorsey's attorneys contend that he is innocent of the crime itself. But they also maintain that the conduct

most fundamental questions about the pursuit of justice in the American South.

Those questions continue to reverberate 150 years after the Civil War forced an end to the White South's addiction to the evil of Negro Slavery and 50 years the Civil Rights Movement forced an end to its succeeding addiction to the evil of legalized racism.

Why is a symbol of a treasonous undertaking, led by men who betrayed their oaths as elected officials and military officers of the United States, still honored by those who claim to pledge allegiance to the United States of America?

What "honor" is to be found in any symbol of a system based on the most pernicious form of slavery?

Why would anyone believe that individuals, or any political or judicial entity, that honors any of the symbols of the Confederacy can be trusted to behave honorably toward black Americans?

The creation of the various Confederate flags in the mid-nineteenth

century as emblems of the breakaway slave state is indisputable. Its use for nearly a century in service to white southerners' continued determination to oppress black southerners by every vicious means necessary is indisputable. It is a flag irredeemably drenched with evil.

Why does it continue to receive state sanction in those very states the Slavocracy once ruled and which were very late in treating their black citizens as first-class Americans?

In his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Carl Staples' words underscore that, albeit the great progress made everywhere in America in the last half-century, some whites are still infected by the need to "overlook this great injustice."

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But his words and sentiment continue to resound in the case. They are part of the appeal to the Louisiana Supreme Court of Felton Dorsey, the man on trial who was convicted of murder and sentenced to death, to overturn his conviction. The court heard

of the trail was distorted by the dynamics of race, manifested in part, they say, by the fact of the jury's racial composition.

Leaving aside the particulars of the case against Felton Dorsey or even the conduct of the trial, the words Carl Staples spoke raise the

The Reproductive Rights Wars Rage On

Tide turns again as evangelicals flex power

BY WILLIAMS A. COLLINS

America recorded 1.2 million abortions in 2008. While this sounds like a lot, the availability of birth control and sex education has greatly reduced the U.S. abortion rate over the years. So has the invention of new post-sex "Plan B" drugs.

Europe boasts still fewer abortions, but they are serious about reducing the numbers. We only play at it. For eight recent years under Bush II, our government's concept of sex education was abstinence education. Amazingly, some of those pointless



federally subsidized programs still exist, but the Obama administration has mostly replaced them with more useful ones.

Now though the tide is turning once again. Rep. Joe Pitts (R-PA), the new chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee, is ideologically anti-abortion and unlikely to shake loose any of these more useful funds. He is from the popular "no sex education-no birth control" school of prevention, long endorsed by bishops, Republicans, evangelicals, and crib manufacturers.

In any event, the largest part of lawmaking about sex educa-

tion and abortion falls to the states, whose policies are diverse almost beyond belief. This divergence shows up in the data. Take teen pregnancies. New Hampshire recorded just 16 per thousand in 2009, with most other Northeastern states coming in under 30. Down South and out West it was different. Mississippi, Texas, and Oklahoma each reported over 60 per thousand. Wags have suggested that sex has yet to make significant inroads into New Hampshire, while others credit differing demography. Cooler heads, however, have identified more assertive attitudes toward birth control and sex-ed as the main reason for the difference.

Suffice it to say the reproductive rights wars rage on. Ne-

braska passed a law requiring health screening before an abortion. It was so constitutionally suspect that the attorney general refused to defend it. Oklahoma passed an even worse bill, so bad that the governor vetoed it — only to have the legislature override him. In Colorado the anti-abortion forces have taken to equating fetushood with slavery in an attempt to justify a constitutional prohibition.

Then, as usual, there's Texas. Not for nothing does Texas boast the highest birth rate in the nation. It also ranks third in teen pregnancy and first in repeat teen pregnancy. It turns down federal funding for normal sex education so that it can focus its energies on the abstinence kind. And just to consolidate its na-

tional position, it makes contraceptives very hard for youngsters to come by.

This is particularly ironic because recent research has shown that kids are more responsible about using condoms than adults. That's a good trick since many U.S. sex education programs don't even teach birth control. Other countries not only teach it but advertise the products. Not surprisingly these nations have lower teen birth rates.

One thing is clear: all this political objection to sex education, birth control, and abortion is faith-based. But surprisingly, that base is no longer simply Roman Catholic. The Northeast, where Catholics are strongest, is all for sex ed, and Italy itself has the lowest birth rate in Europe. No, nowadays it's the evangelicals who want to keep women in their place, and they're doing a heckuva job.

OtherWords columnist William A. Collins is a former state representative and a former mayor of Norwalk, Conn.

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