

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1309

June 8, 2020

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

The Honorable Kenneth Braithwaite
Secretary of the Navy
Department of the Navy
1300 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-1300

Admiral Michael Gilday
Chief of Naval Operations
Department of the Navy
1300 Navy Pentagon
Washington, DC 20350-1300

Dear Secretary Braithwaite and Admiral Gilday:

I write to request that the U.S. Department of the Navy (USN) prohibit public displays of the Confederate Battle Flag and eliminate any honors that could reasonably be interpreted as commemorating or celebrating any enemy force, foreign or domestic, that engaged in armed conflict against the U.S. Armed Forces and sought to destroy the United States of America.

The Commandant of the United States Marine Corps (USMC), General David Berger, eloquently described why the USMC would ban the public display of the Confederate Battle Flag:

"I ask every Marine to understand that I fully accept my duty and responsibility to help build this team. That means I must identify symbols or subcultures that degrade the cohesion that combat demands of us. It is not enough to show up; we fight to win. Failure to accomplish our assigned mission has never been an option for Marines.

In this vein, I have determined it is time to act to exclude from our Corps public displays of the battle flag carried by the Confederate Army during the American Civil War. In doing so, I am mindful that many people believe that flag to be a symbol of heritage or regional pride. But I am also mindful of the feelings of pain and rejection of those who inherited the cultural memory and present effects of the scourge of slavery in our country. My intent is not to judge the specific meaning anyone ascribes to that symbol or declare someone's personally held view to be incorrect. Rather, I am focused solely on building a uniquely capable warfighting team whose members come from all walks of life and must learn to operate side-by-side. This symbol has shown it has the power to inflame feelings of division. I cannot have that division inside our Corps."

This action is long overdue. Honoring the "lost cause" of those who waged war against the United States of America, or defending the right of an individual State to allow its residents to own, sell and kill fellow Americans as property, has no place in our Nation, especially the U.S. Armed Forces which waged a deadly war to eliminate the barbaric practice of slavery.

Critics of banning the public display of the Confederate Battle Flag may accuse me of seeking to "erase" history. Nothing could be further from the truth. My own family has ancestors who fought for the North as well as some who fought for the South. The Civil War tore apart my family as it did so many others. Banning celebration is distinct from education. Remembering our history and more importantly, learning lessons from that history to avoid future mistakes, has nothing to do with displaying a symbol of past enemy forces, preserving statues that honor enemy forces or insisting that we name installations or platforms after former commanders of such enemy forces.

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Unfortunately, our education system has failed far too many of our Sailors. These Americans were taught that the Civil War was not about slavery and actually a war over “States’ rights.” Textbooks and curriculums perpetuating this myth often fail to dig deeper and students are left to wonder what rights States were willing to die for? The right to dance? If it was not a war fought over a State’s right to sanction the killing, owning and selling of African-Americans – what was it about?

Of course, those who have studied the Civil War know that this narrative is a pernicious, deadly myth perpetuated by those who failed in their effort to preserve slavery and tear apart our Nation. Addressing that foundational deficiency in how we educate our children is beyond the scope and mission of the USN. However, making sure every Sailor truly understands what the Confederate Battle Flag of the Army of Northern Virginia represents does fall squarely within your purview. As does banning this divisive symbol which represents hatred and bigotry that no American should aspire to glorify. Ignorance cannot be an excuse.

The USN should demonstrate moral leadership in acting swiftly to prohibit the public display of the Confederate Battle Flag, rather than waiting on Congress to force such action. Thank you in advance for your consideration of my urgent request.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator