A Confederate apologist turns college president

Chicago Sun-Times: Web Edition Articles (IL) - Sunday, April 27, 2014

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Section: otherviews

Late last month, the College of Charleston’s board of trustees sparked protests from students and faculty when it chose South Carolina Lt. Gov. Glenn McConnell as the school’s next president. Critics have highlighted McConnell’s lack of experience for the job and a flawed selection process, but his strident support for Confederate heritage has elicited the greatest outrage.

An avid Civil War re-enactor and member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, McConnell co-owned a Confederate memorabilia store and gallery in Charleston for two decades. As a state senator and senate president pro tempore in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he fought to keep the Confederate battle flag flying over the statehouse in Columbia, and rallied to the side of Maurice Bessinger, a barbeque chain owner who displayed Confederate flags and sold proslavery tracts at his restaurants.

McConnell has long argued that critics of his pro-Confederate stance seek to whitewash the past. In 1996 he said that the removal of the flag from atop the Columbia statehouse would be “the final installation of an intolerant mind-set, whereby we sanitize history based on the demands of the new monopolists of morality.” More recently, he dismissed an infamous 2010 photograph of him in a Confederate uniform and flanked by two Gullah preservationists, who appeared to be dressed as slaves, in a similar fashion. The picture was taken at a historical re-enactment intended for education purposes, he explained. “Tell me what is offensive about having the differing parts of the culture there? What are we going to try and do in America, sanitize history?”

Yet, when it comes to the negatives sides of the Confederate States of America he so admires, McConnell rarely practices what he preaches. On the contrary, he often marches in lockstep with the old monopolists of morality, who sought to sanctify the Confederacy by dissociating it from the institution of slavery. Indeed, a quick survey of McConnell’s words and actions during Charleston’s commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War suggests that this Civil War buff could use a history lesson.

Four years ago, McConnell was one of several hundred Confederate enthusiasts who gathered in Charleston to celebrate the anniversary of South Carolina’s secession from the Union. A gala affair, the Secession Ball featured music, dancing and guests dressed in period costume as well as a historical re-enactment of the 1860 state secession convention, in which McConnell played the role of convention president D. F. Jamison.

At the original convention, the delegates — 90 percent of whom were slaveholders — made no bones about why they were seceding. In their “Declaration of Immediate Causes,” they declared, “A geographical line has been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery.”

Although a few delegates to the 1860 convention wondered whether it should downplay the issue of slavery so as not to undermine secession in the court of world opinion, the overwhelming majority — including McConnell’s Jamison — sided with Laurence M. Keitt.
This partial approach to history may be appropriate for a Confederate enthusiast seeking to venerate his ancestors or a politician trying to win votes. But now that McConnell has been chosen to lead a major public university in a city that has long struggled to own up to its slave-holding past, the time has come for him to take off his Confederate blinders. At the very least, when the fall semester begins the new president of the College of Charleston should head over to Maybank Hall and take a history class or two.

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History News Network

Index Terms:
MCCONNELL, CONFEDERATE, WAR, SLAVERY, CIVIL, SECESSION, CHARLESTON, HISTORY, PRESIDENT, STATES

Record Number: 65465373

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