

WHITE SUPREMACY:  
NOT BORN IN DIXIE

In the current controversy over the removal from public spaces of Confederate memorials it has become a common argument among those favoring removal to say that “the Confederacy stood for white supremacy and Confederate memorials are a tribute to white supremacy.” Such a statement is an excellent example of lying by telling a half-truth. Such a statement also betrays an abysmal knowledge of history.

Did the white people who lived in the Confederate States believe they were superior to all other races? Yes! Did white people living in the United States and in Europe believe the same thing? Yes! The belief that white people were superior to all other races was an almost universal belief among Caucasians in the Western world.

To be accurate, the term “white supremacy” is of rather recent origin. It began to be used widely after the 1954 “Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas” decision. Prior to that time the commonly used term was “Anglo Saxon Superiority.”

So, since “white supremacy”, or “Anglo Saxon Superiority” was not born in Dixie Land early on a frosty morn, where did it come from? Over the

course of recorded history many groups have felt themselves to be superior to all others. The Greeks, during their time of intellectual dominance of the Western World, divided all of humankind into two groups: Greeks and barbarians. Clearly, the Greeks thought of themselves as superior to all the rest of mankind. Ancient Israel divided the world into two groups, Jews and gentiles, and identified themselves as a special people. Among the original inhabitants of North America it was not uncommon to find tribes of the Native Americans whose name meant "The People." Only their tribe was "people" and all others were of some lesser species. The proper term to describe this feeling of superiority is "ethnocentrism", the feeling that the group to which one belongs is the center of all good things and that all other groups are of lesser achievement and value. A feeling of superiority has made itself evident frequently in history and this feeling is not limited to white people.

During the modern period of history, since the Seventeenth Century, the feeling of superiority has most often been expressed by white people. When Europeans began to explore and to colonize lands in Africa, South America, and North America they came in contact with people of other colors whose technology was not as developed as that of the Europeans. This technological advantage allowed the Europeans to conquer the original inhabitants of these lands and to exploit the people and natural resources.

Not surprisingly, the Europeans felt they were superior—they had the technology, they had the victory, they had the rewards, they had won.

Using the belief in white superiority the Spanish, English, and French build large colonial empires. The Germans got into the race of seizing colonies late but they shared the same ideas.

This feeling of superiority was reinforced by the science of the Eighteenth Century, beginning with the writings of Carol Linnaeus, (1707-1778) a Swedish botanist and zoologist. You may remember Linnaeus from your basic biology course years ago, he developed the system of classification used to identify and to categorize plants. Linnaeus also classified human beings as belonging to one of five groups: Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Australoid, Negroid, and Indian. Of these, Linnaeus, said, the Caucasoid was the most advanced. Other scientists and philosophers took a similar approach, building on Linnaeus. These included Johann Friedrich Blumenback (1752—1840), Emmanuel Kant (1724—1804), G.W.F. Hegel (1730—1831), Arthur Schopenhaur (1788—1860), Charles Darwin (1809—1882), and Joseph Arthur Gobineau (1816—1862). All of these men were Europeans.

Since ideas readily cross oceans and national boundaries it should not surprise anyone that the idea of white supremacy was accepted by the

people who founded and who settled the United States. John Hancock owned slaves and was cared for by six slaves while he was in Philadelphia signing the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, said black people were equal to whites in memory but inferior in intelligence and in imagination. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 which allowed for the creation of the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan, excluded slavery not because slavery was thought to be morally wrong but because there was a desire to create an all-white enclave where the races would not have to mix. Once they became states Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois all passed laws prohibiting black people from living in their territory. In 1790 Congress passed a law which allowed foreign born people to become citizens of the United States. This law limited the right of citizenship to white people only. This restriction was not formally repealed until 1965. During the early days of this nation the assumption was that democracy required high moral character and that only white people had that character.

Throughout the Nineteenth Century the prevailing philosophy which guided the expansion of the United States “from sea to shining sea” was the concept of “manifest destiny.” This idea held that God Almighty had determined that the Anglo-Saxon peoples should dominate North America and that all other groups could legitimately be forced out of the way.

Obviously, the idea of white supremacy existed long before the Civil War. Equally obvious is the fact that this idea did not originate in the United States, much less in the South.

Today many people think that the Civil War was a moral crusade to eliminate slavery and to establish racial equality. This belief portrays an ignorance of history. While slavery was the issue that had caused national turmoil for a dozen years Lincoln made it clear that he did not begin the war with the goal in mind of ending slavery. Engraved on the wall of the Lincoln Memorial, to the left as one enters, is the quote: "*My enemies say this war is about slavery, I tell my friends it is about the Union.*" Lincoln's state to Horace Greeley about being willing to end the war without freeing any slaves if that would save the Union is well known.

Less well known is the attitude of most white Abolitionists who wanted black people to let them end slavery and then have nothing to do with free black people. William Lloyd Garrison, the first prominent Abolitionist, openly broke with Frederick Douglass because Douglass insisted on leadership roles for black people while Garrison did not think them capable of such roles. One of the criticisms made by Abolitionists of the South was that Southern whites and blacks lived too close together and associated with one another too much so that the "pure Anglo-Saxon characteristics" were being

lost in the South.

Most telling of all about Abolitionist and Northern views on racial equality is the Homestead Act of 1862. This war-time measure opened the west to settlement by offering 160 acres of free land to any white person who would settle on it and make improvements. That's right---only white persons were given free land in the west, no black person need apply to the Lincoln Administration for a homestead, the “new territories” were to be a white-only enclave.

General Lorenzo Thomas, Adjutant General of the U.S. Army during the Civil War, made it quite clear that the army was not to send any of the freed slaves north, all refugee camps for the “Freedmen” were to be established in the South since Northern public opinion would not tolerate the presence of “an inferior race” in the North.

Incidentally, isn't it interesting that modern critics of Confederate monuments want to remove or to “reinterpret” them because they do not mention slavery? Have you noticed any Union monuments which mention slavery? All the Union monuments I have seen only mention saving the Union. Should Union monuments be “reinterpreted”? Notice, they are called “Union” monuments because the soldiers they commemorate called themselves the “Union” army, not the Abolitionist army! These are

monuments to white supremacy as much as Confederate monuments are.

In the decades following the Civil War a new academic discipline began to develop, a social science called Sociology. In Europe, Herbert Spencer proposed that Darwin's ideas about evolution in nature were applicable to human beings and that the idea of natural selection (often called “survival of the fittest”) explained the differences in the races. Spencer's idea was called Social Darwinism. Each race was in their “natural condition” and white people were on top. This idea was popularized in the United States by William Graham Sumner who taught at Yale and by John Fiske who was on the faculty at Harvard. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts strongly supported this idea.

Social Darwinism justified the war to exterminate the American Indians and was the basis for legal segregation. Segregation of the races was approved by the U.S. Supreme Court in the case *Plessy v. Ferguson* and 27 states adopted laws demanding separation of the races. Even in the states where segregation was not the law separation was the norm. When Jackie Robinson broke the color line in major league baseball there were no major league teams in the South, they were all located in Northern cities. When the Supreme Court ruled against segregation the case overturning the practice was *Brown, et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.

Horrible things were done during World War II when the idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority was used to justify the deaths of fourteen million people in Europe by the Nazi regime in Germany and other European nations. White supremacy has been used to justify the colonization and domination of South America, Central America, Africa, and the Pacific. It was the basis for the eradication of the Native American tribes and their way of life. It provided the social support for segregation. But, the idea is not a Southern thing!

White Supremacy was not born in Dixie! It was a European concept which came here with the earliest settlers of the country. It is an idea which has had supporters in every section of the country. So, why the current association of white supremacy with Confederate symbols?

The United States has a race problem. It is a nation-wide problem, and it needs to be dealt with. But our society does not seem to want to do that. For more that a hundred fifty years the reaction to the issue of race has been to blame the problem on the South. This is much easier than admitting that the entire country is involved in the problem; it allows people to point fingers and blame others instead of looking at their own actions. White Supremacy is not something unique to Dixie, but it is a whole lot easier for the rest of the nation to pretend it is.

For the last four hundred years the European peoples have dominated



world politics, economics, and culture. There are reasons why this is so but race is not one of the reasons. Anyone who knows much history knows there have been times in the past when other peoples have had major roles on the world stage. Anyone today who follows the news knows that India and China are growing strong economies and developing technology which is making them major players in world affairs.

We need to face the truth about race and stop blaming a few people for the problems of us all. We need to recognize and respond to the accomplishments of other groups. And we need to do it now. Removing Confederate monuments does not bring us any closer to a solution.

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