

## HOW TO FAIL AT DE-CONFEDERATING YOUR CITY – Ed Sebesta 11/5/2017

At this time it is questionable that any Confederate Dallas street names will be changed. It is questionable that the Confederate monument in Pioneer Park near Dallas city hall will be moved either. Finally Dallas's Fair Park looks like it is not likely to be addressed either. The one-third replica Arlington Hall wasn't on the agenda of the Dallas Task Force on Confederate monuments

It appears that the Mayor and city council of Dallas only removed the Robert E. Lee statue in a rush in Oak Lawn Park, formerly Robert E. Lee Park to avoid a major public disturbance such as happened in Charlottesville, Virginia which would give Dallas a bad reputation. Also, large, very visible Confederate monuments would tend to work against locating corporate headquarters in a city. Though it is good that activists did help the process along a little, it was the financial interests that drove the statue removal.

The approaches taken to de-Confederate Dallas involved multiple errors such that worked for the defeat of de-Confederating Dallas beyond the Robert E. Lee statue.

This is for two purposes.

1. Serve as a guide to other cities what not to do.
2. For Dallas activists concerned about de-Confederating Dallas a guide to avoid repeating a failed strategy.

So these are some of the key failures.

1. **Representing the opposition as primarily sensational extremists:** Often there is an attempt to represent all the pro-Confederates and enablers of neo-Confederacy as being extremists such as seen in some demonstrations or the radical right. In fact this failing alone can by itself defeat your efforts. Some people will see these racist demonstrations and be opposed to Confederate statues and it does help some, however, in general it sabotages your efforts in three ways:
  - 1.1. Your opposition very often won't fit the stereotype of racists, belligerent slur spouting individuals with perhaps funny clothing and racist symbols. They will be individuals who will have good decorum and will include in their arguments that they are against prejudice, perhaps they will state that they have African American friends or relatives, or perhaps they will state that they voted for Barack Obama for president, or some other item to represent themselves as against racism. They will be the face of the opposition. They will side step this strategy easily.

- 1.2. You won't be prepared or comprehend or effectively respond to a significant segment of your opposition which will be liberals, progressives, radicals, or leftists, moderates, who have multiple issues: They are still invested in the Confederacy; they are really banal white nationalists; they are superficial in their anti-racism. As liberal/left/moderate/progressives they will be adept at rationalizing their actions.

You will try to point out that their arguments against some de-Confederating agenda item is wrong, and you will face opposition which will primarily consist of the opponent and the opponent's friends pointing out that your criticism is somehow mean because the individual doesn't fit the stereotype of a sensational extremist because they don't comprehend that an enabler of neo-Confederate memory doesn't have to fit that stereotype.

- 1.3. Focusing on the sensationalistic aspects of extremists has multiple negative effects:

- 1.3.1. Failure to educate activists and the public on the issues involved such as a racialized landscape, banal white nationalism, neo-Confederacy, historical memory and most importantly the nature of the opposition you will face. Instead the focus will be on the sensationalist aspects of some of the more fringe opponents.

- 1.3.2. Tendency for the discourse being self-congratulatory about how superior an individual is to some extremist or fringe element. It tends to enable those who see social justice as a fashion accessory. It prevents the self-recognition by some of their real racial attitudes. Some individuals will look at the fringe elements and in noting how different they are, fail to recognize their own attitudes in their opposition to de-Confederating.

2. **Failure to educate the public on the historical record of the neo-Confederates both locally and nationally:** The neo-Confederates have so many prejudices and have denigrated or hoped to have denigrated so many groups in the past if all these groups knew of the historical record there would be a lot less willingness to tolerate neo-Confederacy and the marks of Confederacy on the landscape in the present. The actions of the neo-Confederates in the past are so disgusting that many people if they had been informed would have been unwilling to tolerate the Confederacy in the present.

However, the strategy in 2017 that was adopted was to discuss Dallas's racist past and point out when the statues were put up Dallas was a very racist place and therefore the statues were part of this agenda. The fact that they are coincident in time does suggest that it is very possible that the motivating factors was racism, but it would have been much more convincing if the historical record about what the

neo-Confederates had said as to their motivations for the erection of the statues was made known to the public. Also, it tends to give the argument that people in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were just not enlighten enough that the Confederacy was bad because they weren't advanced in their thinking. There is a tendency to think that removing a statue is about proving how advanced we are or an ultra-plus moral achievement.

Knowing the historical record dispels this.

3. **Failure to educate the public on the agenda of the neo-Confederate movement today:** The neo-Confederates are hostile to so many people and democracy itself that there would be a solid majority against the monuments only if people knew. People attitudes change when they see that they are the target of vile prejudice in the past or the present or both. They become much less tolerant of rationalizations and excuses for those that hate them. In Dallas the public is largely unaware of the agenda of the neo-Confederates. These both are really vile and if the public knew there would be much less tolerance for the Confederacy to be honored on the landscape. Combined, public knowledge of the neo-Confederate agenda past and present would very much have shifted public opinion towards de-Confederating.
4. **Overconfidence/ Opposition:** There was overconfidence that Dallas Confederate landscape would be just washed away by events. There wasn't a serious consideration that there would be a significant opposition or and the expectation was that it would be screaming fringe people. However, there was an opposition and they contributed numerous op-ed for the *Dallas Morning News* and in other media to justify or rationalize the retention of Confederate monuments. It was an opposition of people in the establishment and not fringe individuals.

There was no reflection that the Confederate landscape had been there for decades long after the civil rights era and that there might be those outside neo-Confederate and extremist groups that were invested in keeping the Confederate landscape.

5. **Reliance on celebrity activists instead of grassroots organizing:** Celebrities have constraints in their actions. They are prominent individuals who must consider their activist programs and their careers as activists and have to navigate a path forward and they have to consider many issues and interest groups and the establishment which they prefer not to alienate needlessly. They may speak at a rally or lead one. They may testify at city hall. However, they had gained prominence on other issues prior to the current effort against the Confederate landscape and these other issues are what they will want to focus on and consider how their role in the effort against the Confederate landscape will impact their ability to gain support for their regular agenda. Certainly it is useful to have them speak at rallies and have them take stands, but they will not drive the effort over the long term and they will

carefully consider what might negatively impact their agenda. They have a tendency of being co-opted.

Some celebrity activists are merely the favorites of the media and local institutions to speak on certain issues and they will be very careful not to alienate their base of support.

## 6. **Action through cliques and closed elite groups instead of grass roots organizing:**

This is a very Dallas failing. Elite individuals and their cliques much like celebrity activists have their own agendas and careers and have to consider them. This puts constraints on them. They will also have a tendency to be co-opted. This method has several failings, the chief of which it is that it is done instead of grassroots organizing. It also will tend to have a narrow base of ideas from a narrow base of individuals. It does not include and tape a larger diversity of people with different ideas. It precludes an avenue where a new leader on this topic might arise. This method tends to avoid protests and have private conversations in which there isn't public accountability.

## 7. **Failure to organize a grassroots group which will have de-Confederation as its sole focus.** This will result in multiple reasons for a campaign to de-Confederate to fail.

7.1. **Persistence:** The opposition is often consisting of neo-Confederate groups such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) and the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) which have been in existence over a century. Usually the local preservation and historical societies are in opposition to de-Confederating and they have been around decades if not generations if not a century in some cases.

In contrast elected officials can reasonably assume and it is almost always the case that the forces for de-Confederation will evaporate after a few months. Organizations that did support de-Confederation will be on to other goals and not devote resources for an ongoing campaign.

It is easy to see which side the elected officials will take. One side will still be there to push their agenda for the foreseeable future and reward and punish, the other side will not exist to publicize their record on this issue.

7.2. **Commitment:** On the specific issue of de-Confederation. It is good that progressive groups do get involved, but often their interest will be transitory. Some groups' agendas basically follow the headlines. If your issue isn't in the headlines they will be gone. Others have an ongoing agenda focused on

particular issue or area of concern and de-Confederation will be a one-time issue or an occasional issue without the necessary resources applied to succeed. Initial failure will tend to direct the organization to pursue other objectives which it feels are more achievable.

If individuals want their city to de-Confederate they need to pull their own wagon and not expect others to do it for them.

**7.3. Advocacy/ Ideas:** There is the necessity doing research and of developing ideas and arguments to advocate de-Confederation in the following ways:

7.3.1. You will need to explain why this is an important issue and why de-Confederation needs to be done. You need to explain what Confederate memorialization does. You will need to educate that politics is downstream of culture and Confederate memorialization shapes that culture. They need to understand that if the stage is set for “Gone with the Wind,” you can’t do “Raisin in the Sun.”

7.3.2. You will need to have counter arguments to those rationalizations for retaining Confederate monuments, street names, park names, and other ways the Confederacy is marked on the built environment.

7.3.3. You will need educate the public on the historical record to reject Lost Cause mythologies.

7.3.4. You will need to educate the public on the historical record of the neo-Confederates and their current agenda. A lot of people don’t realize how many groups the neo-Confederates are prejudiced against and that they are enemies of democracy. The rationalization of many for Confederate monuments would stop if they realized that they were one of the targets of the neo-Confederate movement. Other defenders of the Confederate landscape would keep quiet when they see that the public is fully informed of the neo-Confederate agenda.

7.3.5. **You will need to have a strategy.** Instead of a jumble of actions you will need a strategy.

**7.4. Hold Individuals Accountable:** Without a grass root group taking actions, the fact that many people and organizations acted to retain a Confederate landscape will be without consequences. They will be rewarded for their actions by individuals in the establishment and there won’t be negative consequences. With an ongoing organization there can be consequences and their actions in opposition to the de-Confederating Dallas will be a part of their historical record known to the public.

This will dissuade many from opposing de-Confederating the landscape and for others their potential influence in the future can be diminished.

Also, organizations will not want to be associated with known enablers of neo-Confederacy and known opponents of de-Confederating Dallas.

In conclusion we need to avoid the mistakes done so far in the campaign to de-Confederate Dallas, build a grass roots movement, and educate the public on what neo-Confederacy is and what it has been in the national, Texas, and Dallas historical record. We need to hold the enablers of neo-Confederacy and the opponents of de-Confederation accountable.