

Opinion (/Opinion/)

Andrew G. Reiter: Unintended consequences in Confederate flag's forced retreat

By ANDREW G. REITER

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SOUTH HADLEY — Less than a week after the tragic mass shooting in Charleston, major retailers in the United States, including Amazon, Google Shopping, Wal-Mart, Sears, the online auction site eBay and the online marketplace Etsy, have all banned the sale of Confederate flag merchandise.

Target pulled its few Confederate-related items from its shelves. Several flag manufacturers, including Valley Forge Flag, have announced plans to stop making Confederate battle flags entirely. In the coming weeks, many other retailers will likely follow suit.

The banning of the sale of Confederate flag items by mainstream retailers will, in time, have a powerful effect on how the symbol is used and viewed in everyday life, significantly reducing its prevalence and mainstream appeal.

Yet this is just an important first step, and these moves will also have the unintended consequence of making the Confederate flag a far more divisive and dangerous symbol than it already is. It is up to society to use this as an opportunity to confront racism.

Given the glut of Confederate flag merchandise already on the market, the effect will take years to be visible, but in time there will be noticeably fewer displays of the symbol in daily life. The bumper stickers, T-shirts, bikinis, and flags that are — in some places — ubiquitous, will become rare sights.

Moreover, bystanders will know that the displayer likely went out of his or her

way to track down and purchase the item, suggesting a dedication to the more extremist views associated with the symbol. The display of Confederate flag items will thus come with an even greater aura of overt racism, drawing social scorn.

Eventually, the symbol will become taboo, and individuals will refuse to ride in a friend's Confederate-flag wielding pickup truck and will avoid going into the Confederate-themed bar for fear of the social repercussions of being seen associated with the symbol.

The ultimate hope is that the taboo surrounding the Confederate flag will provoke more questions, from children in particular, about its symbolism, in turn leading to more teachable moments where racism can be discussed and tolerance preached.

The major retailers' decisions will then have a positive long-term effect of reducing racism and the number of people like Dylann Roof, the alleged perpetrator of the Charleston shooting, in society.

But there will also be unintended consequences. These steps by mainstream retailers will shift the sale of Confederate flag items to specialized military memorabilia websites, secondary auctions and flea markets, and extremist groups themselves.

Indeed, the taboo surrounding the symbol will draw in some segments of society, who want to own something forbidden and feared by the mainstream public. Prices will skyrocket and Confederate flag items will be highly coveted and prominently displayed by extremist groups — much as swastikas are by many neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups today (despite similar bans on their sale).

The result will be that the Confederate flag will become an even more racist and divisive symbol than it already is, and Roof will not be the last extremist wielding it proudly and committing violence. The more taboo the symbol becomes the more it will become shorthand for extremist ideas and turned to by violent actors who know they can invoke it to make an easy statement and attract attention.

In the end, we will never be rid of the Confederate flag. The response of retailers

to the actions of the Confederate flag-wielding Roof will mean that in generations the everyday Confederate flags of the Dukes of Hazzard will have gone away. But we will still be left with the Confederate flags wielded by future extremists like Roof.

So it is up to us to ensure that the retail ban leads not just to less tolerance of the flag itself but also of the racism and prejudice that it symbolizes, leading to a more accepting society where fewer extremists like Roof exist.

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