

Nikki Haley: Moving Forward

It started as a normal day when young Namrata Nikki Haley drove to Columbia with her father, stopping at a roadside fruit stand. As her father bagged produce, Haley watched as one of the owners, "eyeing his turban," picked up a phone and two minutes later two police cars showed up (Alberta). Her father went up "to the register, shook their hands, said thank you, paid for his things and not a word was said going home," (Scott). As a daughter of Indian immigrants, Haley was used to being racially profiled. Every time Haley drove by that stand, she was reminded of the pain she felt that day. Just as the fruit stand represented discrimination and inequality to Haley, the Confederate flag served as a symbol of prejudice, slavery, and white supremacy, causing some the same pain Haley felt whenever she passed the fruit stand. This flag had been flying proudly on South Carolina's State House grounds. Recognizing the hurt caused by the Confederate flag, Governor Haley decided it was time for the flag to go.

Despite the hardships she faced, Haley became the first female and Indian American Governor of South Carolina in 2011, serving until 2017. Haley's concealed passion to protect the security and freedom of her people brought her a long way, and she had always prioritized her people over herself as a true leader would. June 17, 2015 was a day that challenged Haley's leadership, values, and especially her courage. In the Charleston Massacre, Dylan Roof, a white supremacist, murdered nine worshippers at an African American church. This terrible moment brought awareness to the sickening racial violence against African Americans in the United States (Momodu). A few days after the shooting, photos of Roof with the Confederate flag were circling the internet. This triggered a range of emotions from anger and hatred to support throughout the country when finally, on a Friday night after the funerals of the victims, Haley made up her mind about the flag (Scott). It had to be taken down.

Governor Haley recognized the pain that was felt by some people of South Carolina as they drove by the State House, seeing the Confederate flag. Haley demonstrated empathy and the importance she gave to her moral values. She knew what it was like for those hurt by the Confederate flag when she said, “No one should ever drive by the State House and feel like they don't belong,” (TODAY interview).

It was argued that the flag was a symbol of Southern heritage and that it honored residents' ancestors (Scott) and those who had died in the Civil War. Haley, who had previously opposed the idea of lowering the flag (Schuppe), had changed her view on the Confederate flag. The shooting caused Haley to believe that the Confederate flag "never should have been there in the first place," (Doherty). Additionally, removing the Confederate flag was viewed as contradictory as South Carolina was the first state to leave the Union during the Civil War and join the Confederacy (The Guardian). Haley knew the flag represented the past of South Carolina, yet Haley's heart told her it was morally right to remove the flag. The flag did not represent what her state was anymore. She knew there would be opposition, but she chose to do what she felt was right. Regardless of the hate she would get, she had to lower it. Regardless of the backlash, she had to lower it. Regardless of South Carolina's history, she had to lower it. It was time to move forward. As John F. Kennedy said, “change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future,” (Kennedy). Haley, however, did not miss the future.

Kennedy recognized that someone with political courage “does what he must - in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers and pressures,” and Haley was willing to do what she must, knowing there were consequences (Kennedy). Haley's decision to remove the Confederate flag sparked intense backlash and “relentless criticism” (TODAY interview).

Some brought up Haley's Indian heritage, calling her an outsider. Some accused Haley of political posturing (Ortiz). Some attacked Haley on social media platforms, like Alisa Lynn Parris, who wrote, "you Nikki Haley and your family are not from here," (Salon). Some threatened Haley, promising political and personal retribution, showing the dangers she faced (TODAY interview). When asked if she felt concerned for her personal safety, Haley looked back to Ethel Lance, one of the victims of the Charleston Massacre, and thought about the song she used to sing, asking for the strength to be able to do what had to be done everyday (TODAY interview).

Haley's actions also demonstrate how she met Kennedy's standards of political courage. Kennedy listed three pressures that discourage politicians from acts of political courage: the pressure to want to be liked and get along, the pressure of one's desire to be re-elected, and the pressure from constituents (Kennedy). Haley's decisions show how she pushed these pressures aside. The last governor who tried to take the flag down lost his job when he lost his re-election bid in 1998. However, Haley didn't let David Beasley's outcome affect her decision, and even met with him to strategize, showing the absence of the desire to be re-elected (Schreckinger).

In the end, Haley was recognized for how she handled the Charleston shooting and her leadership. Haley received an award from the Harvard Foundation for "Intercultural and Race Relations," (Miller). Many look back at the leadership and courage Haley displayed. At a time when the city, town, state, nation go into chaos, a courageous leader stands strong. Nikki Haley stood strong. Haley showed that regardless of a state's history, one must keep looking towards the future. She serves as a great role model and inspiration for those stuck looking in the past.

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