

South Carolina Banishes Confederate Flag to Museum

South Carolina's Senate passed legislation Tuesday to remove the Confederate battle flag from the state capitol's grounds, where it has flown for five decades despite being viewed by many as a symbol of slavery.

A bill to banish the flag from the State House grounds to a museum easily passed a third and final 36-3 vote in the Senate. It was headed to the state House of Representatives, which voted to bring it to the floor for debate on Wednesday.

The legislation was deemed an impossibility only months ago. But it gained strong bipartisan support since nine black churchgoers were gunned down on June 17 during Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, about two hours southeast of the state capital, Columbia.

Photos of Dylann Roof, the white man charged in the shooting, showed him posing with a Confederate flag on a website bearing a racist manifesto. A grand jury indicted Roof, 21, on nine counts of murder and three counts of attempted murder, a prosecutor said on Tuesday.

The flag's defenders argue that it is part of South Carolina's heritage, representing those who fought and died for the rebellious Southern states that formed the Confederacy in the 1861-1865 Civil War.

Republican state Senator Lee Bright, who is white, argued on Tuesday that the flag had been unfairly tied to slavery. He noted that many leaders in the 18th-century fight for American independence from Britain were slave owners.

"Not one Confederate flag flew over a slave ship," Bright asserted.

While most politicians recognize that the banner is part of the state's heritage, many agree it should no longer be flown in public places.

The flag was raised atop the State House in 1961 – along with the U.S. flag and the state flag – in what critics say was a deliberate slap in the face to the black civil rights movement. In 2000, it was moved to a Civil War memorial for the Confederate dead only yards from the entrance to the capitol.

Support for the flag in the Republican-controlled legislature has evaporated amid a wave of sympathy for the victims and their families, who were widely acclaimed for expressing unconditional forgiveness for Roof at his bond hearing less than 48 hours after the murders.

Several politicians say the shootings opened their eyes to the flag's divisiveness and what it means to South Carolina's black population.

The Senate vote to take down the flag exceeded expectations. The legislation may face a stiffer challenge when the 124-member House begins debating it on Wednesday. But it still appears to have the two-thirds majority support it needs to pass, according to a local media poll.

The bill could be approved as early as Thursday. Republican Governor Nikki Haley said she would order the flag taken down as soon as it becomes law.

South Carolina House Democratic leaders on Tuesday urged fellow legislators to follow the Senate's lead.

"Take the flag down and give the people of South Carolina nothing to fight about. ... This is our moment. This is our time," Todd Rutherford, a black representative who is House minority leader, told a news conference.

