

The Woman Who Took Down a Confederate Flag on What Came Next

Bree Newsome Bass was arrested after climbing a flagpole at the South Carolina State Capitol. Now, she sees more people moved to act for similar reasons.



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She knew she would be arrested, but that was the least of her concerns. She had to make it to the top of the flagpole first.

Bree Newsome Bass got in her car that morning five years ago this month and drove an hour and a half to Columbia, S.C., from Charlotte, N.C. It had been 10 days since a white supremacist had killed eight black parishioners and their pastor at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church church in Charleston. Ms. Newsome Bass was going to scale a flagpole outside the State Capitol and take down the Confederate battle flag that flew there.

She and other activists had spent the days leading up to that moment practicing everything from how James Ian Tyson, another activist, would help her over the fence at the bottom of the flagpole to how to actually scale the pole. She remembers trying to stay calm as she got to the top, and as the police shouted for her to come down. She told them that she was participating in a nonviolent protest and was prepared to be arrested.

"I had a lot of adrenaline," she said. "I was just on a different level of focus at that point, but I was also just at a certain place of peace."

She unhooked the flag from the pole. When she made it back down to the ground, she and Mr. Tyson were arrested.

Ms. Newsome Bass believed then that the flag, along with the hundreds of Confederate statues and emblems across the country, were symbols of oppression that shouldn't have a place in 21st-century America.

In this time of reckoning after the killing of George Floyd, people all over the world are looking again at those symbols — the names, statues and flags — that memorialize history and actions that are deeply painful to many. Ms. Newsome Bass and others believe that taking down symbols is part of working toward meaningful change in terms of policy, voting and creating a society in which black people's lives and opinions are considered equal to others.

In the past week, NASCAR banned the Confederate flag from its events and races, and the Marine Corps ordered the removal of public displays of the Confederate flag from its military installations. In Virginia, protesters took down a statue of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. In Britain, people removed a statue of a 17th-century slave trader and threw it into a harbor.

"You cannot divorce Confederate iconography from the treatment of African-Americans as second-class citizens of this country during Jim Crow and now," said Julian Hayter, a historian at the University of Richmond.

Lonnie G. Bunch, the founding director of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture and the leader of the entire Smithsonian, said it was important to remember what the symbols mean in the first place.

"These monuments have little to do with the Civil War," Mr. Bunch said in an email on Friday. "They first appeared in large numbers in the 1890s as symbols of white resistance to racial justice and as concrete manifestations of the ascendancy of racial segregation as justified by the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision that legalized the concept of separate but equal, which was inherently unequal."

Confederate symbols are a reminder that the South lost the war but won the peace, Mr. Bunch added, noting that to many African-Americans they are symbols that celebrate slavery and are constant reminders that racism is embedded in American notions of democracy.

By the time Ms. Newsome Bass was released from jail seven hours after her arrest in 2015, the flag was back on its pole, almost as if it were never taken down. But another image came from that day, an image that inspired posters, illustrations and paintings: a black woman from the South removing the flag that represents a society that oppressed her ancestors and those who looked like her for centuries.



Ms. Newsome scaled a flagpole to remove the Confederate battle flag from the State Capitol in Columbia, S.C., in 2015. Adam Anderson Photo/Reuters

The woman to remove the flag

It could have been someone else climbing the pole. She and the other activists involved thought about it, but ultimately decided that it would be meaningful for a black woman to remove it.

Ms. Newsome Bass said the activists understood that the political power of black women is often overlooked and taken for granted. This was before Democrats celebrated the fact that in Doug Jones's 2017 Senate special election against Roy S. Moore in Alabama, 98 percent of black women who voted did so for Mr. Jones, and before former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. faced pressure to choose a black woman as his running mate.

"We need to understand black women as the integrating force within the Democratic Party, an institution and a political party that historically was preserved for white men," Ms. Newsome Bass said. "The things that black women say become the talking points for politicians, but we don't really have much political leverage beyond people calling for a kind of token representation from us in certain places or playing the role of mascot."

Ms. Newsome Bass, 35, was born in Durham, N.C., and raised in Columbia, Md., by black women who took their civic responsibility seriously, she said, recalling going into the voting booth with her mother as a child. Her family, loyal to the Democratic Party, instilled in her early on that voting was her right, as was the right to protest and hold those in power accountable. She also understood that all too often for African-Americans, these rights have been withheld. The history of slavery, imprisonment, gerrymandering and other efforts to disenfranchise black voters, points to a single question, for Ms. Newsome Bass: "Why is black citizenship still a question for the United States?"

She studied art and, in 2011, while she was an artist in residence at Saatchi and Saatchi in New York, she marched with Occupy Wall Street. In the wake of the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, she went to Florida with a group of youth activists and protested at the State Capitol. In 2013, Ms. Newsome Bass staged a sit-in at the office of Thom Tillis, then a state representative and now a senator, who was supporting a bill that said student IDs weren't a valid form of identification for voting. The bill also ended same-day voter registration.

For the past three years, Ms. Newsome Bass has been focused on housing rights. The goal of her activism, she said, is to shift power. She has also traveled across the country, speaking about organizing and activism to communities trying to organize themselves. After the 2016 killing of Keith Lamont Scott by the police in Charlotte, and the uprising that followed there, she recognized that the community was good at mobilizing in the short term to respond to things like Mr. Scott's killing, but needed a more sustainable way to have an impact. Through those efforts, she has worked with down-ballot candidates and helped with the election of a record number of black sheriffs in the state.

Justice Anita Earls of the Supreme Court of North Carolina has seen Ms. Newsome Bass's brand of organizing and activism through her work as a board member of the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, an organization the judge founded. Listening to the artist and activist speak, Judge Earls said, "you know you are in the presence of someone who powerfully brings their entire heart and soul to the service of freedom and equality."



Protesters are fighting to remove a monument to the Confederate general Robert E. Lee from Richmond, Va. Julia Rendleman/Reuters

What's changed in five years

Ms. Newsome Bass believes this year's presidential election is the most significant election since the Civil War. Americans, she said, have to decide whether the United States is going to be a multicultural, multiracial, democratic nation where people get to vote.

"That doesn't mean everybody agrees on everything," she said. "But what we do all have to agree on is that we are all citizens, that we are all human and we're all entitled to these rights."

She added: "And then the other side is white supremacy. You can't reconcile those things now anymore than you could in 1860."

Although some people see the current protests as a blip, a show of anger that can't be sustained or that won't result in change, Ms. Newsome Bass said that she had noticed a shift from demonstrations in previous years. Just a few weeks ago, for example, people weren't willing to entertain the idea of abolishing the institution of policing, she said, but now it's a topic being discussed by legislators and being pushed for by many citizens, including white people who are acknowledging, and speaking about, racial inequalities in policing for the first time.

"It's always great when we get to the point where people who didn't recognize before recognize," she said. "That said, it's a very traumatic experience for everyone who already understands and everyone who's already just waiting for it to happen again. It's a collective traumatic experience."

The protests and conversations happening now are part of the same fight that took place in 2014 in the wake of Michael Brown's death, in 1992 after Rodney King was beaten, and during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. But a significant shift Ms. Newsome Bass has noticed in the recent protests has been around the way people talk about protesting and voting. In the past, she said, the Democratic establishment supported the idea that African-Americans should move beyond protesting and focus on voting. But now, she added, more people are open to the idea that protesting and voting go hand in hand.

"The two things are both part of being a full citizen and participating in the society," she said.

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