

Mississippi furls state flag with Confederate emblem after 126 years

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Lawmakers voted on Sunday to remove the Mississippi state flag, the last in the nation featuring the Confederate battle emblem, more than 126 years after it was adopted.

The House and Senate passed a bill on Sunday that will immediately remove the state flag, and Gov. Tate Reeves said he would sign the bill into law. A nine-person commission will be appointed to develop a single new design by September, and Mississippi voters will approve or reject that design on the November 2020 ballot. In the meantime, Mississippi will have no official state flag.

The historic vote brought tears to the eyes of many lawmakers. Cheers echoed in the halls of the Mississippi State Capitol shortly after the final votes were cast, and many Mississippians who visited the building to witness the moment openly wept.

"We are better today than we were yesterday," said Speaker of the House Philip Gunn, who authored the bill that passed on Sunday. "Today, the future has taken root in the present. Today, we and the rest of the nation can look on our state with new eyes, with pride and hope."

"We are not betraying our heritage," Gunn continued. "We are fulfilling it."

The flag, long a point of political contention in Mississippi, was seen by many as a symbol of hate. In 2001, Mississippi voters decided nearly 2-to-1 to keep the divisive emblem on the state flag, solidifying its place on the official state banner for nearly two decades. For years, supporters of changing the flag have not been able to garner the simple majority needed to change the controversial banner through the normal legislative process.

But the violent death of George Floyd, a Black man, in Minneapolis sparked nationwide protests that reached Mississippi and shined new light on the state flag. And in recent weeks, immense pressure mounted from religious, business, civic, university, sports and other leaders to remove the Confederate emblem from the flag.

A growing list of businesses, cit-

ies, counties and other groups either stopped flying the flag or asked leaders to change it. Religious leaders spoken out, saying changing the flag was a "moral issue." The NCAA, SEC, and Conference USA this month took action to ban postseason play in Mississippi until the flag was changed.

"As an African American man born in 1958, I grew up as a child of the Civil Rights Movement," said Rep. Robert Johnson, D-Natchez and House Democratic leader. "All the things I heard from those men at the podium – that none of us went up to speak about because we've been saying it for years – but all those things they talked about, we've been feeling for years."

Johnson began crying and paused for a moment before continuing: "What it means to me is it isn't just words. They began to understand and feel the same thing I've been feeling for 61 years of

my life."

Johnson said Mississippi needs help with many problems, such as poverty and poor health care, but the nation and world "have been reluctant" to work with Mississippi and that removing the flag with a Confederate emblem will help.

"Now that this is gone, they will begin to look and see who the real Mississippi is, and see that we are more than what that flag represents," Johnson said.

The Senate debate on Sunday lasted about two hours, with several senators arguing that the issue should go to voters instead of being made by lawmakers. Several senators rebutted that argument before passing the bill.

"I think the Mississippi Senate and me personally, we want Mississippi to have a heart and a soul," said Lt. Gov. Delbert Hosemann after the vote. "Today she had one."

The House approved the bill by a vote of 92-23 on Sunday, with eight more House members voting to approve the final bill than they did on a procedural vote on Saturday. The Senate approved the bill by a vote of 37-14, with one more Senate member voting to approve than on Saturday.

"For 100 plus years, we have been

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