

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE**
**DZULKIFLI  
ABDUL RAZAK**

# Flagging down violence and racial hatred

**Y**ESTERDAY the United States celebrated Independence Day to commemorate the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, declaring independence from Great Britain.

Later from 1861 to 1865, the American Civil War was fought to determine the survival of the Union or independence for the Confederacy.

The war ended 150 years ago with the Union culminating into a powerful nation that purports to be a model for all to emulate (or forced to).

Even as the Civil War is entrenched as part of US history, the recent incident at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina — where nine black victims were gunned down by a white male in his 20s — relived the tragic Civil War yet again.

The Charleston Police Chief was

quoted on Fox News as saying: “No doubt this is a hate crime”, epitomised by the suspect, Dylann Storm Roof, as a racist murderer. Roof was quoted: “I chose Charleston because it is the most historic city in my State, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to whites in the country. We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the Internet. Well, someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.”

In fact, a witness allegedly heard the gunman saying: “I have to do it. You rape our women and you’re taking over our country. And you have to go.”

With Roof caught in a pose with the Confederate flag, the incident quickly took another turn, associating the flag with racism and hate.

To some, the flag has always been a reminder of slavery and implies white supremacy over the coloured.

A Sons of Confederate Veterans executive wrote in *The New York Times* projecting the flag as “a symbol of family members who fought for what they thought was right in their time, and whose valour became legendary in military history... It is our legacy”.

After all, wasn’t it seven slave States in the deep South that seceded and formed a new nation, the Confederate States of America, in response to the decision to keep slavery out of the newly born Union?

And later four more seceded to join the Confederacy.

What started as a civil war grew into an all-out battle. The four-year American Civil War is recognised as “the largest and most destruc-

tive conflict in the Western world between the end of the Napoleonic War in 1815 and the onset of World War I in 1914” wrote Dr James McPherson in *The Washington Post*. It came at a cost of 625,000 lives — “nearly as many American soldiers died in all the other wars in which this (US) country has fought combined”.

In other words, since the Confederacy’s defeat 150 years ago, this is the “legacy” that is embedded silently in the South and kept is very much alive by the Confederate flag, “a symbol of terror”. Historian Edward Baptist tweeted that the flag was also a symbol “of violent intimidation of African Americans who dared assert their rights”.

This sentiment was echoed by the first US black president, Barack Obama, in a memorial for the Charleston victims. He said: “For too long we were blind to the pain

that the Confederate flag stirred in too many of our citizens. It’s true a flag did not cause these murders. But as people from all walks of life, Republicans and Democrats, acknowledge... the flag has always represented more than just ancestral pride.

“That flag is a reminder of systemic oppression and racial subjugation. We see that now.”

He attested that the flag does indeed serve as a reminder of slavery which he dubbed the nation’s “original sin”.

Interestingly enough, bringing down the Confederate flag may not be the ultimate solution to atone for the “original sin”, especially when the first adopted flag of the Confederacy (popularly called the Stars and Bars) is too closely intertwined with the official US flag (the Stars and Stripes). The 13 “stripes” of alternate red and white of the latter are merely replaced by three “bars” of the same alternate colours of the former. The “original sin” is still somewhat alive in the Union flag.

education@nst.com.my

**The writer** is honorary professor at the University of Nottingham and Chair of Leadership at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia