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Alabama lawmaker who honored Klan leader says he's surprised by criticism

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (WSFA) - Alabama Rep. Will Dismukes, a Republican from Prattville, says he's surprised by the response to his recent Facebook post that showed him giving the invocation at an annual birthday celebration for Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Forrest was a leader in the Confederate Army and the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

The event was held Saturday at Fort Dixie in Selma, the same day the late U.S. Rep. John Lewis was remembered for his vast civil rights contributions during a service at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church.



Had a great time at Fort Dixie speaking and giving the invocation for Nathan Bedford Forrest annual birthday celebration. Always a great time and some sure enough good eating!!



Alabama Rep. Will Dismukes gave the invocation at an annual birthday celebration for Nathan Bedford Forrest. (Source: Facebook)

"To be 100 percent honest with you, when I made the post I wasn't even thinking about that connection," Dismukes said. "You know, hey, that's on me. That wasn't even running through my mind. There were two things that weren't running through my mind and that's one, the passing of Representative John Lewis and the next is Nathan Bedford Forrest's connection to the Ku Klux Klan."

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle quickly condemned Dismukes for attending the event.

Republican Danny Garrett tweeted, “I cannot fathom why anyone in 2020 celebrates the birthday of the 1st KKK Grand Wizard. And while the body of a civil rights icon beaten by the Klan lies at state Capitol being honored by GOP/Dem leaders from all over the state. This mentality doesn’t represent me or my faith.”



Rep. Danny Garrett
@DannyGarrett44

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8:51 PM · Jul 26, 2020 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

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Rep. Danny Garrett reacted to Rep. Will Dismukes' Facebook post about celebrating Nathan Bedford Forrest's birthday.(Source: Twitter)

Dismukes is an advocate for Confederate preservation and serves as the Chaplain for the Prattville Dragoons, Sons of the Confederate Veterans. Dismukes told WSFA 12 News he won’t apologize for his family’s heritage and their service during what he called the “war between the states,” which he doesn’t believe was primarily fought over slavery. Dismukes believes the public took a critical stance on the post due to the ongoing racial discourse across the country.

“I guess, with the anti-southern sentiment and all, and the things that we have going on in the world today, there’s a lot of people that are seeming to be more and more offended,” Dismukes stated. “We live in a time where we literally are going through cancel culture from all different areas and people are even more sensitive on different issues and different subjects. This was just one of those times that it didn’t quite go the way I expected, and I never intended to bring hurt to anyone, especially my own family with everything that’s been said.”

The annual party is hosted by the Friends of Forrest, who advertised the gathering as as the 199th birthday celebration with food and live music from the “Unreconstructed Band.”

The invitation stated, “This is your perfect opportunity to experience the TRUTH spoken about our history, our heritage, our hero Nathan Bedford Forrest and our Christian Southland by Pastor John Weaver.”

When asked why he felt it was important to celebrate Forrest’s birthday, Dismukes stated, “It’s like a just a huge public event where people come and eat and all that. It is centered around, you know, Nathan Bedford Forrest’s birthday, it is what it is.”

Terry Lathan, chairman of the Alabama Republican Party, called on Dismukes constituents to contact him to share their thoughts on his actions.

“Rep. Dismukes offered no explanation for why he participated in a birthday celebration of Nathan Bedford Forrest. Additionally, I find his statement to be shallow in understanding why his activities are deeply offensive to so many Alabamians. His constituents will be the final decision makers of his political future,” Lathan stated.

The SPLC Action Fund Chief of Staff Lecia Brooks addressed Dismukes’ post in a statement.

“It was no accident that State Rep. Will Dismukes chose to blatantly celebrate a brutal slaveholder, Nathan Bedford Forrest, a former Confederate general and first Grand Wizard of the original Ku Klux Klan who spent his life intimidating, dehumanizing and working to keep Black people in chains,” said Brooks. “Rep. Dismukes’ incessant need to romanticize the failed Confederacy even at the expense of the late Congressman John Lewis — one of Alabama’s favorite sons and one of the nation’s revered civil rights icons — is beyond the pale. Dismukes cannot be allowed to play both sides of the fence this time.”

The House Democratic Caucus also responded.

“The Alabama House Democratic Caucus believes Dismukes should be strongly, loudly, and clearly condemned by everyone of every political stripe across the state of Alabama, full stop,” the caucus said in a statement. “It is a sad fact that we had an elected official praising racist and terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. It’s even sadder that his colleagues in the Alabama Republican Party choose to make excuses for his behavior.”

During our interview, Dismukes worked to distance the Confederate Army from the Klan, which evolved after the Confederacy lost the Civil War. He stated it was Forrest’s choice to join the Klan, which is labeled as a white supremacist hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Dismukes declined to answer whether this changed his perspective on Forrest and whether he would attend the event again.

Dismukes denies he’s a racist but doesn’t see the need for the current movement for racial reconciliation, calling the Black Lives Matter movement a communist organization. Dismukes says it’s time to focus on equality for all.

“We no longer drink from separate water fountains, and we no longer have segregated schools,” he explained. “You know there’s abundant work opportunities for all colors, there’s abundant scholarship opportunities for all colors. So what are you asking that needs to be racially reconciled?”

Dismukes says he fairly represents all his constituents, including the African Americans who live in his district.

“When I go to the statehouse I’m there to focus on the State of Alabama and District 88, it has nothing to do with my heritage or my past or anything like that,” he said. “I mean I don’t go in there and say, oh, you know, I’m not going to represent part of my constituency today. I have an open door to anyone who wants to come into my office.”

State Sen. Clyde Chambliss, a Prattville resident, cited WSFA’s interview with Dismukes in a tweet, calling for the representative’s immediate resignation.



Senator Clyde Chambliss

29m · 🌐



Since first being elected in 1996, I've had a policy of not publicly criticizing other elected officials, but at this time I am making an exception since Rep. Dismukes is MY state representative. He does not represent my views or the views of the vast majority of people of District 88. The post is bad enough, the timing is even worse, but the real problem is that an elected official in 2020 would attend a celebration of the life of someone that led a group that terrorized and killed other human beings. He has had 24 hours to understand why people are so upset, but his interview on WSFA a few moments ago confirms that he is lacking in understanding and judgement - he should resign immediately.

State Sen. Clyde Chambliss tweeted about Rep. Will Dismukes. (Source: Twitter)

In June, the Alabama Democratic Party's executive director [called for Dismukes to resign](#) after the lawmaker's public [support](#) to not defund the Confederate Memorial Park.

The Friends of Forrest, who hosted the event, was [in the news in 2015](#) when it erected a billboard of the former Klan leader ahead of the visit of President Barack Obama's visit to Selma ahead of the 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday, which stated, "Keep the skeer on em".

As a result of the ongoing dialogue about slavery and systemic racism, the Department of Archives and History recently [released a memo](#) about foundational truths about the period before and after Reconstruction, [acknowledging that despite the advancements of civil rights](#), blatantly racist systems still exist today.

"It's not like flipping a light switch, things don't change instantly," stated Steve Murray, director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, during an interview in June. "It has taken generations for Americans to move into the post-segregation world. The effects of those previously, thoroughly racist practices, whether it's housing or access to education or job discrimination, those don't go away overnight. When we talk about that legacy of systemic racism, it's an acknowledgement that those have lasting effects that sometimes span multiple generations."