

Jeb Bush recalls removing Confederate flag from Florida Capitol

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West columbia: Campaigning in South Carolina, where residents are still reeling from a white gunman's massacre of nine black churchgoers, Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush told voters Monday that he removed the Confederate battle flag from the Florida Capitol grounds in 2001 when he was governor.

Bush told about 100 employees of a pharmaceutical manufacturing plant outside Columbia that the banner has been a "racist symbol" in "recent, modern times," though "not perhaps at the beginning."

He said he brought up the flag in an earlier, private meeting Monday with dozens of pastors, about half of them white, half of them minorities, according to the organizer, Republican state lawmaker and non-denominational pastor Samuel Rivers Jr.

The events marked Bush's first campaign appearances in the state since 21-year-old Dylann Storm Roof was charged with killing the pastor and eight parishioners at Charleston's historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Photos distributed since the killings show the alleged gunman flaunting the Confederate battle flag flown by forces supporting the pro-slavery, secessionist southern states in the American Civil War. Authorities say Roof admitted he wanted to start a race war.

Rivers said none of the pastors at the closed-door session in Charleston asked Bush about the flag or specifically about the massacre. "We prayed about the situation," Rivers said, but added that they didn't discuss it in detail.

"That wasn't why we were there," he said, adding that participants "wanted to know who Jeb Bush is as a man."

Rivers, who is black and a Bush supporter, said the candidate talked "openly and honestly" about race relations. Rivers said Bush called for "empowerment, education and strengthening the family" in the black community.

Speaking later to employees at Nephron Pharmaceuticals, Bush did not bring up the murders or the flag until he was asked. He praised South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley for her call to lower the battle flag that remains alongside a Confederate monument in front of her state's Capitol and to remind the assembly what he did more than a decade ago by executive action. Haley's proposal will require legislative approval.

Bush said he decided to send the flag in Florida to a museum "where our heritage can be respected" while recognizing that the banner is among "symbols that have divided the South" for generations.

Bush is among the Republican presidential contenders who did not weigh in on what South Carolina should do about the flag after the shootings. He merely said state leaders would "do the right thing." Once Haley made her decision, he and other rivals praised it.

Bush said he attributes such mass killings to people who "feel disconnected" from the rest of society and, in "many cases," suffer from mental illness. He opposes new gun restrictions.

South Carolina plays a key role in the presidential nomination contest because it's the first southern state to hold a primary.

- AP