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Black Caucus blasts vote on monument bill

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Debate over a bill that protects Confederate monuments has scratched open a raw nerve for many Louisiana lawmakers.

House Bill 71, which would make it more difficult to remove Confederate statues, has exposed “a deep-rooted belief in white supremacy” among many members, said state Rep. Joseph Bouie, the New Orleans Democrat who heads the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus.

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Gov. John Bel Edwards said the debate has created unnecessary divisions and animosity in the Legislature that he’d never seen before.

“I understand passion runs high, and while it is certainly a part of our history, can we say it’s the best part?” he said, when asked his personal opinion about the removal of Confederate monuments in New Orleans.

Even as he criticized the legislation as impractical, the governor wouldn’t say he would veto the measure.

On a largely party-line vote, the House late Monday approved legislation that would forbid the removal, renaming or alteration of any military monument on public property of any war, including what is referred to in the legislation as the “War Between the States,” unless a majority of the voters in the municipality or parish approve. All major wars are included in the measure, but the move comes amid New Orleans’ high-profile removal of several Confederate memorials.

“This bill is nothing but a Trojan horse designed to supersede the decision-making authority of local municipalities regarding the use of public space,” Bouie said at news conference Tuesday morning attended by all the House members of the Black Caucus.

“We were and are wounded because the bill attempts to rewrite history by honoring those who not only rebelled against the United States, but who fought to maintain man’s greatest inhumanity to man,” Bouie said. “The system of slavery, where our ancestors were considered property, less than human, unworthy and abused, men slaughtered at will and systems implemented to facilitate cultural genocide.”

Bouie and other members of the Black Caucus walked out of the House chamber after the vote Monday to show their displeasure.

The legislation was expected to be delivered to the Senate leadership Tuesday and will be assigned to a committee that will vet the bill before deciding whether it should proceed to the Senate floor for a vote.

A bill seeking a similar goal already is assigned in the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee, which last year killed a measure that dealt with preserving Confederate monuments.

The panel is chaired by New Orleans Sen. Karen Carter Peterson, who also chairs the Louisiana Democratic Party and stood alongside her colleagues Tuesday morning. She said she and other senators would try to educate members of the upper chamber before HB71 is taken up there.

Senate President John Alario, R-Westwego, said he has been inundated with calls about where the bill will be assigned and plans to decide Wednesday.

“I would like to see a fair and open debate,” Alario said. “But I would hate to see anything that would divide the state and make us appear racist.”

House Rep. C. Denise Marcelle, a Baton Rouge Democrat who opposed the legislation, said she hopes it will be killed in committee, “so they don’t have to have a blood war on the floor like we did.”

“Is it clear what the emerging discord could mean for the Legislature, which has less than a month left until the regular session ends?”

Rep. Rodney Lyons, a black Democrat from Harvey, said the disagreement should not spill over into other House debates on legislation championed by HB71 supporters.

“We’re here to do the people’s business,” he said. “All this was an unnecessary and divisive distraction.”

Rep. Edmond Jordan, D-Port Allen, and several other Black Caucus members, insisted there would be no retribution for those voting in favor of the legislation.

Democrat Rep. Malinda White, of Bogalusa, isn’t so sure.

She voted twice for the Confederate monuments bill — once in committee, once on the House floor. She said she received more than 300 emails and letters plus so many phone calls her assistant couldn’t take a break. All asked her to back House Bill 71.

On Tuesday, her House-passed legislation to transfer surplus money from one fund to another in order to help the criminal court in Washington Parish was squashed in Senate Judiciary B committee. Usually such bills that deal with specific local issues are approved without much talk.

Members of the committee who voted down White’s measure had no comment beyond saying they opposed the bill.

White said she “very definitely” believes the action was to punish her votes.

Seven Democrats voted for protecting Confederate monuments, six others weren’t in the House Chamber when the vote was called. Like White, most are from rural districts who said their constituents aggressively lobbied them to support the legislation. Had all 13 of those Democrats voted against the bill, HB71 would have been defeated.

Three Republicans also voted against the measure.

“It’s a bad bill,” House Majority Leader Lance Harris, R-Alexandria, said in explaining why he voted against the legislation. “We’d be setting policy for many years over this one thing.”

Republican state Rep. Jim Morris, R-Oil City, said he voted no because he opposes the state

mandating actions on behalf of local government.

On Monday, state Rep. Thom Kean Jr., a Mandeville Republican who sponsored HB71, said the issue was purely political.

He said he wants to give people a say in whether statues should be removed, but also noted his concern for protecting Southern history and heritage.

Several members of the Black Caucus, however, argued that they are deeply offended by memorials to luminaries of a group that fought a war to keep their ancestors enslaved.

The statues were erected more than a quarter century after the Civil War ended and at a time when Louisiana government passed laws to segregate the races and restrict African-American access to voting, employment and housing.

Baton Rouge Rep. Ted James, a Democrat, said he was hurt by the lighthearted nature of supporters of the bill during the emotional debate.

To see the humor and hear some of the comments as I was walking across the House floor and see the comments online, it’s extremely personal to me,” he said. “Sometimes, I don’t even think my colleagues realize how their words affect us.”

Rep. Gary Carter, D-New Orleans, said he still has a difficult time understanding why people don’t understand the monuments are offensive.

“I raise my children to believe they can be anything they want to be,” he said. “I don’t want them to grow up in a place where they see this sort of stuff that’s offensive to the core of what we’re fighting for.”

Several reporters of The Advocate Capitol news bureau continued to report. Follow Rebekah Allen on Twitter, @rebekahallen.