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Should Confederate Monuments be Removed?

By Aaron Getman-Pickering

YES. YES they should. But before I explain why, I feel compelled to mention that I am from New York, an area to which I have never felt any real emotional connection; I have never reveled in my Union ancestry (partially because most of my family arrived after the Civil War), nor do I feel pangs of sectional allegiance. I am not, by any means, attempting to portray myself as possessing some requisite level of disinterestedness. I say this all by way of saying that I understand that I am lacking a certain perspective. That, for some readers of true southern heritage — to whom this issue may be deeply personal — I may not be bona fide. I do feel, however, that as an American and a faux-southerner (studying at a southern University), I do have the right to opine.

While I do support the removal of statues, I would rather proceed by starting with what I find worrying about the opposing arguments. To the pro-monument crowd, to take down statues of Confederate leaders is to rewrite history. They feel that to remove statues would cause a distortion in Confederate history — that perhaps the citizens of their states might forget the valor with which their ancestors served. I disagree. This argument is premised on the belief that history is static. History, by its very nature, is not sentient, solitary, or inert. History is what we write, and the revision of history is done constantly, and generally, to the benefit of the growing body of human knowledge. Inherently, there is nothing wrong with rewriting history; powerful historical writing challenges an accepted understanding by way of intensive study and scholarship. Historical revision becomes dangerous when it is used purposefully to alter what people understand as the nature of events. It becomes dangerous when historians seek to legitimize a presupposed viewpoint under fallacious evidence and selective reading. Ironically, this is exactly what has happened in the American South following the Civil War with the erection of numerous statues and monuments to the illegitimate Confederacy.

I would argue that the monuments themselves are an attempt to rewrite history, and that their removal is only an attempt to set the record straight. The South has attempted to rewrite history by saying that: a) the cause of secession was both noble and philosophical (the so-called lost cause); b) the implication of a), that slavery played little part in the war; and c) that slavery was not nearly as brutal as we know it was. These monuments almost always convey the heroism of the Confederacy in fighting what was, at its base, a violent, treasonous campaign in an attempt to preserve a system of chattel slavery. Indeed many men of the Confederacy fought valiantly, and the great majority of their soldiers did not own slaves — this is a fact not to be controverted. However, the statues of the great Confederate generals make public heroes of men whose underlying cause was to fight a war against their own country in order to keep an economic system that necessitated abuse of an entire population. This fact also cannot be escaped. Let's say we grant the fact that there should not be confederate flags hanging on statehouses (and that South Carolina made the obviously correct decision). Low hanging fruit it would seem. But, confederate monuments are not fundamentally different. What monuments display, most manifestly, are people, events, or ideas that we as a public deem positive (a vague term to be sure). Both are established in *public* spaces, generally parks or municipal, city, or state grounds. For the capital's State to erect a

monument to the famed Robert Lee, for example, is saying that said State endorses the causes he fought for. Private peoples should be able to do as they wish, but public monuments are different. They represent our civil society, and as such actively defend a racist institution. To cover these monuments and to leave them standing is only further feeding the lost-cause myth.

Those worrying about the vigor of historical education would be better suited to look into the vast, nebulous field of education and educational reform. If we wanted citizens to be properly educated on American history, it would seem more appropriate to change the way history is taught, especially in the South (I mean here primary education not University education). While it is not the purpose of this essay, there are some fascinating arguments as to how the South has managed to rewrite history and ways in which they have purposefully distorted the truth. Removing statues does nothing to change history, only the way in which the public views that history. And to remove confederate monuments would not remove confederate history, it would only serve as a reminder that the state does not sanction the celebration of men who fought a war to preserve slavery. I do not think people in the South will forget about their confederate history any time soon — and they should not have to. But that is not what this argument is really about.

The United States is still struggling to deal with the painful legacy of the American South and the wound the Confederacy inflicted on American unity. African Americans, in particular, have and continue to live a nightmarish situation: Two hundred fifty years of slavery; ninety years of Jim Crow; sixty years of separate but equal; thirty-five years of racist housing. The extension of the carceral state, i.e. the “New Jim Crow.” And there was never an attempt to heal these wounds. South Africa, for example, held the Truth and Reconciliation Council after the fall of apartheid in an attempt to nurse the festering wound of systematic racism. America, and the South in particular, has gone in the opposite directions to maintain and extend white dominance. The constant reminder of the Confederacy and the veneration of its leaders only aggravate the pain left by the Civil War. Conflated stories and mixed messages need to be swept away and the monuments removed. We cannot move on as a country until we accept these realities at their face. For while these statutes continue to stand in the heart of Dixie, the heart of Dixie will never heal.
