

Attacking the Past: The Removal of the Confederate Monuments

by Daniel Mallock



The recent [removal of Confederate memorials](#) from the City of New Orleans was greeted with applause by some and tears from others. Many Confederate monuments across the country are at risk. It is important to examine why this is happening, determine the logical conclusion, and ascertain whether or not the erasure and whitewashing of our history is the best path for our troubled but great country.

The [Lost Cause concept](#) which was entrenched in American historical memory by Confederate memoirists, sympathetic historians, and apologists for over one hundred years has collapsed. This idea held that slavery was not the essential cause of the Civil War and that the South's "peculiar institution" played a small role, if any, in the coming of the

war. The delegitimization and fall of the Lost Cause idea is the most significant consequence of the recent Civil War sesquicentennial

It is incontrovertible that slavery was the essential cause of the war. This was affirmed by Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens in his famous "Cornerstone" speech of March 21, 1861. Referring to the new Confederate Constitution, Stephens said:

"The new constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution – African slavery as it exists amongst us – the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this, as the 'rock upon which the old Union would split.' He was right. What was conjecture with him, is now a realized fact."

Almost all of the Ordinances of Secession cite the protection of slavery as one of numerous reasons justifying secession of the state.

Just after the sesquicentennial, June 17, 2015, a psychotic racist killer committed an atrocity at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina during which nine innocent people were murdered. The killer's social media posts showed him posing with the Confederate battle flag.

Horried and shocked at the barbaric crime in Charleston, the country turned in grief and anger against Confederate symbolism and monuments.

In December, 2015, the mayor of New Orleans declared that three Confederate monuments, including the statue of Robert E. Lee prominently displayed on a 100-foot pedestal in Lee Circle near the National World War II museum would all be removed. [The City of New Orleans Ordinance of Removal](#) dated December 1,

2015 accurately asserts that the Confederate monuments “...honor, praise, or foster ideologies which are in conflict with the requirements of equal protection for citizens as provided by the constitution and laws of the United States, the state, or the laws of the city and suggests the supremacy of one ethnic, religious, or racial group over another.”

That Lee, Beauregard, and Jefferson Davis were slaveholders and defenders of slavery, not that they were secessionists and rebels, are the issues cited by the New Orleans removal order.

As the Lee statue was taken off its pedestal on the 19th of May, 2017, this growing movement to hold those associated with slavery accountable has not abated. That slavery was ubiquitous in the South and protected by the Constitution until the Civil War presents a dangerous problem, and puts us as a country on a dark road of revisionism and the eradication of important though unpleasant aspects of our history.

Thomas Jefferson owned slaves at Monticello, Washington at Mount Vernon, Jackson at the Hermitage; many more are also guilty. The New Orleans Order of Removal has a logical conclusion that should alarm all Americans. If Lee must go because of his association with slavery, so then must Andrew Jackson's statue in Jackson square in New Orleans' French Quarter. Then, attention must fall on Jefferson, and Washington and many others.

Will Monticello and Mount Vernon and the Hermitage be shuttered as mere monuments to slavery? It is a disturbing thought and logically not inconsistent with the road of history destruction, denialism, ignorance, and generational tyranny that we are on as a nation.

Jefferson believed that “the earth belongs in usufruct to the living” and that the living generation owed little or nothing to the past. This is an extraordinarily radical view, rejected by James Madison and John Adams (and many others) and one that

now provides a justification to the present generation to remake society in whatever way they wish. It is a kind of generational tyranny.

That Jefferson's conflicted and troubling legacy would be completely overturned and deconstructed so that he becomes now only a slaveholder requiring just retribution and accountability from the current politically correct generation would be an ultimate irony.

Refighting the Civil War, and eliminating the complexities from our conflicted and sometimes unpleasant national history is a terrible mistake whose consequences for us and the future will be catastrophic.

After the Civil War there was a period of reconciliation and forgiveness. Robert E. Lee himself was finally restored to citizenship in 1975 (his application for reinstatement had been unknown and lost since 1865). To officially mark the fact that the country was properly reunited, and that former Confederates were forgiven and back in the national fold, the U.S. Army named numerous posts after Confederate generals including: Forts Benning, Bragg, Gordon, A.P. Hill, Hood, Lee, Pickett, and Polk.

Jefferson's view of the (temporary) authority of the present living generation must be answered. While it is so that the living generation "owns" the world by default – there are checks and balances on what it can or should do, some of them written and designed by Jefferson himself.

There must be no tyranny of the living so that our past, difficult as it is sometimes to understand and accept, will not be expunged and lost. We owe this to our forebears and to ourselves to face our past not delete it; and we owe this to the future so that all can learn the lessons of history.

In September, 1870 shortly before his death, Robert E Lee wrote this in a letter:

“The truth is this: The march of Providence is so slow, and our desires so impatient; the work of progress is so immense and our means of aiding it so feeble; the life of humanity is so long, that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope.”

Our troubled history requires that we become expert at uniting contradictions. The war is over, the country is reunited, and Confederate history is American history. We can be ashamed and proud at the same time – we have no alternative. We are obligated to learn as best we can the sometimes painful lessons of our history. This is the only response that is honest, honorable, and accurate to our past and to ourselves.

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