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The Monumental Question

One of the most fiercely debated topics in the news and media over the last several months is the removal of Confederate monuments and statues from public display. Recently, this issue has come under the spotlight as many cities across the United States have decided to remove their statues. The debate can basically be divided into two camps: those in support of the removal of the statues, on the basis that the statues were erected to pledge allegiance to the defeated Confederacy and that their presence only increases racial tensions, and those opposed to the removal, who claim that these monuments represent a part of history that must be preserved, and that taking them down will not solve the deeper issues of racial tensions today and will in fact only make them worse. Both sides certainly do make a point. However, after researching the issue and giving the matter some thought, it seems pretty clear that while the first group definitely has a valid argument, their demanded results do not necessarily have to be (and therefore should not be) implemented. States and cities that currently have Confederate statues and/or monuments should not remove them from public display, because doing so would be trying to hide an integral part of American history. Rather, they should look to other methods such as contextualizing the monuments so that it is clear that there is no so-called loyalty to the Confederacy and so there is less means to cause aggravation among the African-American community and others who take issue with the monuments.

The first reason why Southern states and cities should not remove their Confederate monuments is simply because many Confederate soldiers were actually upstanding, noble people who fought a war because they had to, and not because they personally wanted to defend the institution of slavery. This does not mean to say that slavery wasn't the main issue that caused the war. Such a theory was heavily acknowledged by Southerners in the late 19th century-early 20th century, and is infamously referred to as the "Lost Cause." However, this ideology has been rejected by all historians and is today known only because the Lost Cause era "gave political cover for the worst and most violent period of segregation" (Gilbert 38). Nevertheless, on an individual basis, there were many officers in the Confederate Army that were not necessarily fighting to defend the enslavement of African-Americans, and yet were immensely successful military leaders whose contributions to military history should be remembered.

Perhaps the greatest of example of an individual of this sort is also ironically the figure whose monuments are at the forefront of the issue: Confederate General Robert E. Lee. In the article titled "Robert E. Lee: Answering His Critics," Steve Byas provides a few biographical sketches of General Lee. Among other things, he mentions repeatedly that Lee was personally opposed to the institution of slavery, and although he did inherit slaves from his father-in-law, he treated them decently and released them immediately after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect (as did Union General Ulysses S. Grant, for the record). In fact, Lee himself wrote in a letter to his wife on December 27, 1856 that "in this enlightened age, there are few who will not acknowledge that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil" (qtd. in Byas 35). At the same time, Lee was a spectacular military leader whose strategic skills allowed him

to lead many successful defeats of the Union Army. In fact, Lee's strategies have been studied at West Point and US forces used a version of his battle plans from the infamously successful Battle of Chancellorsville during the First Persian Gulf War to defeat the Iraqi army (Byas 33). These facts all indicate quite clearly that if nothing else, Lee was a spectacular military leader who made serious contributions to the world of military history. However, it is also known that Gen. Lee was an exceptionally devout Christian and as such an exceedingly kind and noble person who never drank, smoked or used profanity. On one occasion, after a Union veteran who had wounded his leg tried to disgrace the Confederacy after the war, Lee humbly dismounted his horse and wished the soldier well (Byas 36). When you add these two aspects of Gen. Lee's life, it appears that he was in reality not only an influential military leader, but also a distinguished man of faith and character.

We can now refer back to the issue of removing Confederate statues on the basis that their presence in public display promotes racist and pro-slavery sentiments that run counter to what is today considered morally acceptable. After you look at the facts about who these individuals really were, it becomes strikingly clear that they must be remembered for their tremendous contributions to American History. Firstly, we find that even generals such as Robert E. Lee who commanded an army on behalf of the Confederacy that seceded from the Union because the Union was not enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act (Gilbert 38) were not necessarily pro-slavery. Additionally, it is very hard to argue with the facts that Lee and his Confederate forces exercised extremely successful strategies against the North. Erecting a monument in commemoration of figures such as Gen. Lee makes perfect sense: we want to preserve the history of great American military leaders and men of great faith and nobility.

Removing statues of Confederate generals such as Lee seems to say that these are individuals whom we don't want to remember – even though the contrary is true.

Some may argue that the entire erection of Confederate monuments and statues was preposterous from the outset. After all, the South did lose the war when Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox – and since when do losing officers get their monuments erected for public display?! Those who feel this way point the original placement of these statues back to the Lost Cause era, the post-war period in which many Southerners attempted to claim that they had actually achieved victory – in an ethical sense – in order to save face. Because the construction of these monuments stems from this flawed revisionist mindset, it only makes sense to take these statues down. The term “Lost Cause” was coined in 1866 by Southern historian Edward A. Pollard who authored a book under that title, in which he attempted to construe the real reason behind the war as being the North's jealousy of the South's landed gentry society, and this philosophy gave birth to movement known as the Lost Cause (Wayne). Most Confederate monuments were set up in the late 19th century-early 20th century by this movement to glorify the former Confederacy (Gilbert 38). “Monuments served not only to freeze that sentiment but to establish Southern white supremacy as a distinct cultural force destined to rise again” (McDaniel). Hence, because these statues were put up for the sole purpose of restoring Confederate values, they should most certainly be removed from public display in today's society, where the Confederacy is a thing of the past. Some may even go as far as to say that “reassessing the placement of Confederate monuments has nothing to do with changing history and everything to do with making sure we're on the right side of it” (McDaniel).

It is certainly true that many if not most Confederate monuments were erected with the initial intention of promoting Southern ideals. However, this does not necessarily mean that therefore the statues should be taken down. While modern historians will all agree that the Lost Cause was a fabrication, this does not mean that it wasn't a part of our history. No matter how you slice it, it is a fact that the overwhelming sentiment in the post-war South was that of the Lost Cause. While no one is saying that they were right, it is still necessary to preserve this time in American History for future generations to learn about. We see no problem in teaching our children about the Ancient Incas of Peru, who worshipped the sun and offered human sacrifices, even though it is fair to say every single sane American citizen living in today's society will admit that both of these things are absurd and inhumane. So too, we should teach our children about the unfortunate reality that was the Lost Cause: when thousands of Americans deluded themselves into believing they had achieved victory in the face of defeat. When you factor in a compromise such as plaques that put the monuments in their proper context, it is very hard to hear why these statutes should still be removed. The Lost Cause era "is part of our collective history, but one that we need to acknowledge for both its propaganda and cruelty" (Gilbert 39). Dealing with it honestly allows us to reflect on the history of racism in general, especially today, when countless hate groups use Confederate symbols to promote their causes. Therefore, it seems that leaving the monuments in place while also contextualizing them is simply a better option than removing them, because by leaving them in public display we do not forget the injustices that were committed in our country's past.

In his article titled "Confederate monuments reopen old racial wounds," Rick Hampson cites the example of a particular Confederate memorial fountain in Montana that was erected

by the United Daughters of the Confederacy – a group that definitely promoted Lost Cause ideals. However, he also describes that 1) the initial erection of the fountain aroused no opposition, and 2) the sculptor of the fountain was the child of a Union soldier. Thus, Hampson remarks that the fountain not only helped to beautify the park it was placed in, but it was also an act of national unity. He closes his article by describing how after some city officials were worried about how the memorial might affect the city's reputation, the issue was resolved by placing a sign that properly described the significance of the fountain and how it came to be. Once again, it seems quite clear that the issue is better resolved by contextualizing the monuments rather than removing them. While the initial intention for their placement may have been wrong, this does not mean that we today must take them down. Rather, we can preserve the important history behind the monuments and their erection while also making it clear that the Lost Cause was a fabrication simply by reaching a compromise.

Another reason why Southern states and cities should not remove their Confederate statues is purely practical: taking down mega-sized statues and moving them to another location is extremely expensive. It does not seem very compelling to say that thousands of taxpayers' dollars should be spent on something that does not provide a single individual with any tangible benefits. In his article, Hampson relates that on one occasion, a city's decision to move its Confederate memorial cost \$400,000. Had the city opted to leave the memorial in its then-current location, those \$400k could have been used for arguably far more important things, such as updating public healthcare facilities or providing meals for the homeless. While this reason does not speak directly to the philosophical importance of preserving history, it does reinforce the suggestion that states/cities look for alternative methods to subdue racist

sentiments. Erecting a plaque that explains the significance of the individual while also maintaining accepted moral standards and eradicating any alleged support for the Confederacy would have been a whole lot cheaper than \$400k.

In conclusion, the arguments we have shown should lead us to rethink what has happened in several Southern cities over the last few months. Unfortunately, many people still feel these monuments must come down. Unless we make an effort to do something fast, we risk losing important links in the chain of our history. As stated above, the best solution that should logically leave everyone satisfied would seem to be to contextualize the monuments by erecting signs or plaques that properly describe how each statue came to be and what it represents. In this manner, cities can eliminate racist sentiments while also saving thousands of dollars and preserving these statues for future generations to learn from.

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