

## How Confederate Monuments Fuel the Current Resurgence of White Supremacy in the United States

In August of 2017, the city of Baltimore saw the removal of two confederate monuments – one of Robert E. Lee, and the other of Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. Although the trend of removing confederate monuments was not unique to Baltimore throughout the entirety of 2017, the case of Baltimore stood out solely because of the peculiarity of its situation. The question in the air was why a city in state that refrained from participation in the Civil War would erect such monuments – *in 1948* (Dailey, 2017)? Jane Dailey (2017), an Associate Professor of History at the University of Chicago, claims that “[those statues were] designed to intimidate African Americans and to reassure white Americans in a moment of rising black power”. This claim seems evident when considering that not only did three times as many Marylanders fight for the Union than for the Confederacy, but also that Maryland has a high African American presence with a strong NAACP chapter centered in Baltimore (Dailey, 2017). Even so, the removal of the statues of Robert E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson in Baltimore was met with an outrage by many inhabitants – namely those who were white. These white citizens who likely have no ties to the Confederate figures, find themselves outraged by the removal of *their* “history”. With current increased partisanship among citizens of the United States regarding these monuments, a trend of increased violence and hate speech follows closely behind. Thus, the symbolic implications of Confederate monuments, and the insistence that they are fundamentally United States’ history by not only citizens, but also the President, himself, has fueled the recent resurgence of prominent white supremacy in the United States which most recently has been seen in the form of violent protests.

Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson are the representative figures of the Confederate cause in the United States’ Civil War. Consequently, as put by Craig Friend (2009) the Director of Public History at North Carolina State University, “[f]ollowing the end of the Civil War, these men came to represent two archetypes of Anglo-southern masculinity and nationalism: the honorable Christian gentlemen (Lee) and the disciplined Christian soldier (Jackson)” (as cited in Bohland, 2013, p. 268). As these two individuals became the standard to strive for, an increased attachment between Confederate culture and white southerners began to take off in the United States. With this attachment came the erection of several Confederate monuments throughout the United States. Before 1890, Confederate monuments were placed primarily in southern cemeteries (Hague, 2011, p. 284), but, as the late Geographer John Winberry (1983) describes, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Confederate monuments took on a different meaning and were built in town centers and courthouse squares (as cited in Hague, 2011, p. 284) where many individuals were exposed to them each day. Although Neo-Confederates claim that these Confederate monuments represent nothing but a history of events, with no racial relevance, the entire foundation of the Confederacy was established on the necessity of slavery for economic prosperity. The former Confederate President, Jefferson Davis (1850), refused to renounce this very tenant stating in the 1<sup>st</sup> session of the 31<sup>st</sup> Congress that “the domestic servitude of African slavery... is essential” (as cited in Hague, 2011, p. 297). For a nation which relied solely upon African enslavement, there is no room to argue that that race does not contribute to Confederate symbolism because race, in fact, was the key to the south’s structural distinctiveness (Griffin, 2010, p. 768). The south not only dealt with race differently than those in other regions of the United States, but it also enacted legislation which was unique to its own isolated region which essentially made it illegal to be a minority in a white man’s land.

Neo-Confederates openly proclaim their belief in the superiority of this traditional, patriarchal, Old South society where white, Christian men governed over women and minorities quite harmoniously (Holden, 2010, p. 1086). Considering these concepts, when cities across the United States proudly display a bronze statue of the revered Robert E. Lee, they are also revering the tenants of the Confederacy which he fought to preserve – agrarian economic success based on the reliance upon African enslavement.

The President of the United States is arguably the most influential position in the entirety of the world. In this position now is President Donald Trump, a man who is extremely vocal on his personal twitter, a phenomenon not seen by previous presidents, about current issues in the United States. On his personal twitter, he frequently discusses the removal of Confederate monuments as “sad” and that the “history and culture” of the United States is “being ripped apart” (Trump, 2017). While President Trump is pushing out these electronic messages of disdain regarding the removal of Confederate monuments, he is simultaneously fueling the partisanship surrounding the issue. Despite it being the President’s role to act as a nonpartisan leader over all citizens of the United States, Trump’s words directly relate to the viewpoint of one specific group in the debate on Confederate monuments – those who desire to keep them standing. Those who agree with President Trump rally together willingly with each supportive tweet he posts, generating an increased group-think mentality being “well the President of the United States agrees, so this idea must be right”. In addition, Trump appeals to this group in a separate thread of tweets where the removal of the statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson is linked to possibly removing statues of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. In these tweets, Trump adopts the “what next” mentality, claiming that monuments commemorating Confederate statues are equal to those of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson (Trump,

2017). This thread of tweets from President Trump is troubling due to its implications that Confederate symbols which rebelled from the United States altogether are equal to United States' history than those of the Founding Fathers. Despite this reasoning, those that are firm believers that Confederate monuments are history take Trump's reasoning in with arms open wide – and they are willing to fight to make sure what they believe in is kept true in the United States.

As of August 2017, approximately 23 cities across the United States have seen the removal of Confederate statues (Bidgood, Bloch, McCarthy, Stack, & Andrews, 2017). Among these cities, one stands out due to the violence surrounding the removal of Confederate monuments – Charlottesville, Virginia. In Charlottesville residents voted to rename Lee and Jackson parks into Emancipation and Justice Parks, respectively (Gobar, 2017). With these decisions, the removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee was also decided. When the statue was erected in 1924, the Ku Klux Klan was in attendance, and even donated \$1,000 to the University of Virginia (Gobar, 2017). The statue itself was created during a time of increased racial violence, and during its erection was celebrated by one of the leading white supremacy groups in all of United States history. And when the statue was being threatened with removal, a protest – turned riot – ensued. Wes Gobar (2017), a fourth year student at the University of Virginia and the President of the university's Black Student Alliance, describes the events of this riot as “stepp[ing] into a war zone”. Gobar (2017) claims that all one could hear was the whirling of helicopters above, and that white supremacist protesters were throwing pepper bombs and releasing tear gas toward the counter-protesters. Additionally, Gobar (2017) describes having to use signs as shields from the white supremacists and that many “were dressed in military gear and were heavily armed with assault weapons”. As reported by Virginia's Secretary of Public

Safety, Brian Moran, he nodded to men clad in full military gear, and when he took a second look realized that who he thought were members of his force, were, in fact, white supremacist protestors (Davis, Heim, Vozzella, 2017). Similarly, a white nationalist wearing a bulletproof vest was documented firing a gun shot into a congestion of protestors (Robles, 2017). What was intended to be a protest on both sides, regarding each side's respective opinion on the removal of the Confederate monument, turned into a full-scale riot. In the case of Charlottesville, white supremacists were captured on camera beating counter-protestors, and in a specific instance killing a protestor. Even despite the events of Charlottesville, President Donald Trump was not vocal about condemning the acts of white supremacists. Instead, in an interview with reporters at Trump Tower, President Trump stated "I think there's blame on both sides" (Trump, personal communication, August 12, 2017). Rather than addressing the issue of white supremacy in the United States, President Trump successfully pointed blame at not one specific group, but two groups – the "alt-right" and the "alt-left". Even if his claims may be true, the implications of his statements meant that it wasn't the white supremacists fault – it was everyone's fault. Such evasion of specific blame allowed those in favor of objecting the removal of Confederate monuments to rally behind Trump's statements – "well look at what the "alt-left" did". With the executive leaders finding no one to blame for the violence during the Charlottesville riot, there was no closure to the situation, and thus the statue of Robert E. Lee still remains. And consequently, in October of 2017, two months following the initial Charlottesville riot, white supremacists held a torch-lit riot in downtown Charlottesville ("White Nationalists", 2017). CBS News (2017) claims that marchers were heard chanting "you will not replace us" and "we will be back". In this situation, the white supremacists threatened their return, despite never being

officially ejected nor blamed by the government in the first place, insinuating that they plan on taking part in another riot which may be equal in caliber to the original.

Rather than rioting violently over the destruction of Confederate monuments, the United States' government should move the memorials into museums where they can be interpreted as history, and even art if deemed worthy, not in the plaza of a court house where they can only be interpreted as an ode to racism and slavery. Kevin Waite, an Assistant Professor of History at Durham University in the United Kingdom, proposes to collect these monuments and place them in a vast, outdoor museum space so that they can be contextualized with historical meaning as they are surrounded with other monuments of like sentiments (Waite, 2017). If such a task was taken up, it would be of great importance for the curators to carefully select biographical and historical information regarding each of the selected monuments to be displayed for the sake of history. In conjunction, these statements may often have to be blunt with the information regarding each of the monuments. It is necessary to explain that the statues glorifying the Confederacy are of men who owned large plantations and made their fortunes off of slave labor (Waite, 2017). In order to display these monuments as history, as many individuals insist they are, it is necessary for the true history of each monument be revealed so that the motive of erection being racism can be stripped from the monument. In addition to compiling currently standing statues, it may also be worth the time of the curators to collect the remains of monuments already removed by protestors (Waite, 2017). By including a mixture of historical relevance of the monuments and the current relevance, a true museum of United States' history can be created. In one aspect the monuments can display the history which caused the schism in the American people and lands, but in another aspect the monuments, or the remains of them,

show a more recent struggle for social justice in the United States – a struggle worth adding to the books of history.

The United States has not forgotten the Civil War. The Civil War is taught in any standard high school history course path, yet even so the true implications of monuments commemorating Confederates remain hidden behind neo-Confederate sentiments. The true meaning behind the bronze statue of Robert E. Lee, or of the ordinary southern male who went to fight for the Confederacy, and the repeated insistence by not only citizens, but the President as well, that these statues are core to United States' history has worked to fuel the current resurgence of white supremacy – which has taken the route of violence. Having a statue of Stonewall Jackson does no more to commemorate the heroes of the United States any better than erecting a statue of King George III would have following the Revolutionary War. Confederate monuments are not United States' history at all, yet they were erected to commemorate those lost fighting for what they believed in – that idea being the necessity of slavery which created the Confederate States in the first place. Even if the statues do represent a portion of history, placing them in the open insists that the land is not of the United States, but of the Confederacy.

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