

## **History and Heritage, Memory and Memorialization: Confederate Monuments After Charlottesville**

**What follows is not a single article or excerpt from a book. It is not even officially a “scholarly” text. However this collection of articles, interviews, and statements made by historians in the wake of the events in Charlottesville, VA give important insight into the work of historians and the relationship we navigate between past and present. When reading these, you’ll discover the opinions in the collection are conflicting, I have done this intentionally because the debate over these monuments and the history they represent is just that, a debate, and you should hear a variety of perspectives before you determine your own. Consider as you read the question at hand in this moment: whether Confederate monuments and symbols should remain, be reinterpreted, or be removed. But also reflect upon the larger questions about how we understand history and heritage, what it means to have historical memory, and whether memory is different from memorialization.**

**Gregory S. Bucher, “Quis Furor, O Cives? A Plea for Preserving Historical Monuments”**  
*National Review* (August 2017)

*Gregory S. Bucher was formerly a professor of classical and Near Eastern studies at Creighton University.*

We should learn from the ancient Romans, who had ample experience with civil war. Some years ago, before we as a nation started punching ourselves in the face by moving to excise Confederate monuments from our public spaces and thereby destroy a part of our cultural patrimony, I studied a marble Roman portrait of the first emperor, Augustus, in the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha. At least it looked like Augustus, but it fell short of his classic good looks. It turned out it was him: He’d been recut from an earlier portrait of Nero, whose features were faintly visible through those of his great-great-grandfather. Nero had been declared a public enemy and deposed, and the portrait’s owner, eager to get with the anti-Nero program, repurposed it. He could have taken a mallet to it and destroyed it, of course, a method that might be endorsed by haters of Confederate statues today. Certainly the Romans gave in often enough to the primal urge to remove, de-face, or smash portraits of the losers in their civil wars. At their best, the Romans were capable of following a third way, consciously pursuing a paradoxical strategy of allowing the viewers to figure out who, like Nero under the Joslyn portrait, they were to “remember to forget.” Having spent much of my career studying Roman monuments, I am appalled by the destruction of our own, and I gladly join the thin chorus calling for a more sophisticated way of dealing with Confederate statues. I prefer one that leaves them in place and does not prevent our descendants from considering them in their own right. If you wish to erect another monument nearby, one that would enumerate Confederate sins, that seems to me both useful and responsible. The Romans’ experience with civil war can contribute something new to this debate, and we should learn from them. We rarely have the luxury of studying an ancient statue where and as it was originally erected. Even working with the scanty remains we have, we quickly see how everything about a monument, including how it was assembled, erected, and oriented, and even how it has weathered over time, is important evidence. The unpromising scattered rubble in the Roman Forum, carefully studied, has led to better understanding. Nothing is beneath study. Powered by To take a current example, it might be hard for you or me to imagine what we could learn from the nearly identical Civil War common-soldier monuments

like the one recently felled in Durham. Still, we should recognize that this doesn't mean that others with greater insight won't discover in them what we can't. When we destroy a statue, we ensure that they can't. Archaeology is full of cases where people studied what to the untrained eye might look like crud and found in it the gold of new knowledge. The Romans could be quite apt at repurposing their civil-war generals to serve a public purpose. Augustus inherited an empire socially and economically devastated by the wars ending with Antony and Cleopatra. In an attempt to foster national unity, he built a great public plaza, the Forum of Augustus. Besides directly glorifying him, it had statue galleries of civic saints, the "greatest men," whose lives had led up to his in a crescendo. We sometimes see Robert E. Lee depicted as a sort of civic saint. In this guise he takes part in an American attempt at civically constructive repurposing. Into these galleries Augustus stuck relatives, the ancient kings, and the mythic founders Aeneas and Romulus. But he also had to deal with the ugly era of civil wars that had brought down the republic. He therefore included statues of the long-dead generals Marius and Sulla, men at least as hard as Nathan Bedford Forrest, men who had not scrupled to openly murder their enemies, men who had trashed their otherwise good military or political reputations. Now, the better part of those reputations served the cause of national unity and Augustan rule, even though no one ever forgot that they had marched in civil war against Rome. — ADVERTISEMENT — We sometimes see Robert E. Lee depicted as a sort of civic saint, as formerly in the Duke Chapel, or enshrined in the United States Capitol. In this guise he takes part in an American attempt at civically constructive repurposing, which marked the great age of reconciliation during the dotage of the Civil War veterans. If the Confederate heroes now seemed washed of their sins, that was a price of reconciliation. As in the case of Augustus's Forum, such dedications could be breathtakingly self-serving: The people who put them up were not fashioned of unalloyed good. Lee and the other Confederates weren't either, and they are now falling victim to our human weakness for toppling monuments to people who fall short of the virtue suggested by the pedestals they're on. "Show me a hero and I'll show you a bum," Pappy Boyington said. That's the problem with monuments: You can't control how people think about them. But if you eliminate them, you try to force others how to think. That's bad civic stewardship, and hardly a fitting tribute to the slaves and their descendants. Nor is it becoming of anyone for whom decency and the Gettysburg Address might be taken as guides for behavior.

**Kyle Smith, "Destroying Symbols: Where Does It End?" *National Review* (August 2017)**

*Kyle Smith is National Review's critic-at-large.*

The orgiastic glee with which protesters tore down, then beat up, a century-old monument to a generic Confederate soldier in Durham, N.C., this week was alarming. The mob seemed to have lost control of itself. Who wears out his foot kicking a lump of metal? The urge to destroy could get out of hand very quickly, especially given the mixed signals sent by authorities: Durham police stood by and did nothing. Only the following day, after an outcry, did the sheriff announce he intended to seek charges. Where does this end? Some wise conservative thinkers are calling to put the disputes over Civil War relics behind us. My esteemed former colleague Seth Mandel, op-ed editor of the *New York Post* and a man of deep probity, tweeted "Take down the monuments" on Sunday. My esteemed current colleague and boss Rich Lowry tweeted over the weekend, "If these monuments are going to become rallying points for neo-Nazis, maybe they do

have to go.” Then he expanded on the thought in a column. Rich seems to think that this is a good time to issue group punishment to neo-Nazi white-supremacist scum. I share the urge. Also I have no fondness whatsoever for Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, the Confederacy, or any of its symbols, and I have no emotional or other connection to the South. I find it utterly baffling that there is a statue of Roger Taney, author of the Dred Scott decision, in Baltimore. Moreover, some Confederate statues were erected specifically to antagonize black citizens during the civil-rights era. Powered by But it is a characteristic of leftists that they are always pushing the culture wars into new territory, even territory that the Left itself would have called absurd overreach a few years previously. On Monday, the mayor of Baltimore agreed to take down its Civil War statues. By later Monday, that wasn’t good enough: The city council unanimously voted not only to remove but also to destroy the statues. One resident, Keith Scott, was skeptical about what is being accomplished here: “If you were prejudiced when it was up, you’re going to be prejudiced when it goes down,” he told the ABC affiliate in Baltimore. Prejudice hurts people. Statues just stand there, mostly unnoticed. Seth says, “Take down the monuments.” Let’s consider what that might mean to the Left. At Pepperdine University, a Christopher Columbus statue was taken down after a protest. There are statues of Columbus all over the country, including one in Central Park. If an angry mob surrounds that one and starts pulling it down, how will police react? A statue of Teddy Roosevelt at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City drew an angry crowd demanding its removal (and for Columbus Day to be renamed) last October. If TR doesn’t belong on the Upper West Side, how does he belong on Mount Rushmore? Up in Boston, a writer hints that the city should remove local statues of historian Samuel Eliot Morison (who “used language in his writings on slavery that chafed readers”), Henry Cabot Lodge (“a staunch believer in American imperialism”), and even, I kid you not, Abraham Lincoln. (Thomas Ball, who sculpted the latter, wouldn’t let a black man into the house to pose for the statue, which depicts a freed slave kneeling at the president’s feet.) This argument isn’t on the fringe: It was contained in a column written by Pulitzer-shortlisted critic Ty Burr and published in one of the most prestigious newspapers in the country, the Boston Globe. My longtime colleague at the New York Post, film critic Lou Lumenick, carried the logic of Confederate-flag removal through to Confederate-film removal and called for *Gone with the Wind* to be placed in a museum. Listen to the way the Left talks about the statues: “The truth is that the desperation to preserve this particular ‘heritage’ and ‘past’ is a facade for something more malignant,” wrote Christine Emba in the Washington Post. “It’s privileged status, not history, that’s being protected.” If this is a war on symbols of “privileged status,” it can never end. We are reaching the point where, if the Washington Monument were to be blown up tomorrow, it would be anyone’s guess whether jihadists or the ‘anti-fascist’ Left did it. Once every Confederate monument in the country is down, what then? How is a statue of an ordinary rebel soldier in Durham, N.C., more offensive than a gorgeous building-sized tribute to slave-owning racist Thomas Jefferson on the Tidal Basin? We are reaching the point where, if the Washington Monument were to be blown up tomorrow, it would be anyone’s guess whether jihadists or the “anti-fascist” Left did it. Among northern sophisticates and intellectuals, there is, I think, a persistent condescension toward all things southern. Call it Northism: the need to erect a kind of moral and mental barrier at the Mason Dixon Line. Yet slavery’s evil infected the North as well. Slavery wasn’t fully illegal in New York until 1827. The very capital of our country is named for a slaveholder. When it comes

to slavery, there is no expunging the moral stain. There is no expiating the sin. Two miles from our offices at National Review, there is an 18-foot statue of Vladimir Lenin. (The real-estate website Curbed calls it “quirky.” It was commissioned by the Soviet Union and discovered in a junkyard in Moscow.) You will not doubt my sincerity when I say everyone at NR despises Lenin and everything he stands for. So will Kevin Williamson be putting on a balaclava and leading a band of self-appointed historical-correctness commissioners down to 178 Norfolk Street on a commando raid to pull it down? No. If a statue that has been standing in your city for years suddenly sends you into paroxysms of destructive rage, you are really determined to create a problem for yourself, and you’ll create another problem when it’s gone. Even if taking down the statues is a good idea, this isn’t the moment to do it. Emotions are running hot. When a mob is in a frenzy, maintain order until tempers cool. Don’t give it space to destroy. Rich believes that the statues need to go because they are becoming “rallying points for neo-Nazis,” but I can’t believe that the white supremacists, small and feeble as their movement is, would disappear if all of the old Confederate statues were taken down. If anything, that would give them a fillip of energy, a recruitment tool. The best response to white supremacists is to let them march and let them speak — then ridicule and marginalize them. This isn’t hard: They’re already ridiculous and marginal. Civil War statues may be beloved by white supremacists, but they are a kind of speech, and the antidote to bad speech is more speech. Don’t care for a statue of Robert E. Lee? Fine. I don’t either. Let’s recontextualize it. Let’s put up a statue of Harriet Tubman next to it. History is an ongoing discussion.

**Rich Lowry, “Mothball the Confederate Monuments” *National Review* (August 2017)**

*Rich Lowry is the editor of National Review*

Robert E. Lee wasn’t a Nazi, and surely would have had no sympathy for the white-supremacist goons who made his statue a rallying point in Charlottesville, Va., last weekend. That doesn’t change the fact that his statue is now associated with a campaign of racist violence against the picturesque town where Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia. The statue of Lee was already slated for removal by the city, but the Battle of Charlottesville should be an inflection point in the broader debate over Confederate statuary. The monuments should go. Some of them simply should be trashed; others transmitted to museums, battlefields, and cemeteries. The heroism and losses of Confederate soldiers should be commemorated, but not in everyday public spaces where the monuments are flashpoints in poisonous racial contention, with white nationalists often mustering in their defense. Some discrimination is in order. There’s no reason to honor Jefferson Davis, the blessedly incompetent president of the Confederacy. New Orleans just sent a statue of him to storage — good riddance. Amazingly enough, Baltimore has a statue of Chief Justice Roger Taney, the author of the monstrous Dred Scott decision, which helped precipitate the war. A city commission has, rightly, recommended its destruction. Powered by Robert E. Lee, on the other hand, is a more complicated case. He was no great friend of slavery. He wrote in a letter to his wife “that slavery as an institution, is a moral & political evil in any Country” (he added, shamefully, that it was good for blacks — “the painful discipline they are undergoing, is necessary for their instruction as a race”). After the war, he accepted defeat and did his part to promote national healing. Yet, faced with a momentous choice at the start of the war, he decided he was a Virginia patriot rather than an American nationalist. He told

one of President Abraham Lincoln's advisers: "I look upon secession as anarchy. If I owned the four million slaves in the South I would sacrifice them all to the Union; but how can I draw my sword upon Virginia, my native state?" He betrayed the U.S. government and fought on the side devoted to preserving chattel slavery. The heroism and losses of Confederate soldiers should be commemorated, but not in everyday public spaces where the monuments are flashpoints in poisonous racial contention. That is a grievous political sin, although he obviously wasn't the only one guilty of it. The Civil War was an American conflict, with Americans on both sides. An honorable soldier, Lee is an apt symbol for the Confederate rank and file whose sacrifices in the war's charnel house shouldn't be flushed down the memory hole. The Baltimore commission has called for moving a striking dual statue of Lee and Stonewall Jackson to the Chancellorsville, Va., battlefield where the two last met before Jackson's death. This would be appropriate, and would take a page from the Gettysburg battlefield. A statue of Lee commemorates Virginia's losses and overlooks the field where General George Pickett undertook his doomed charge. If you can't honor Robert E. Lee there, you can't honor him anywhere. For some of the Left, that's the right answer, but this unsparing attitude rejects the generosity of spirit of the two great heroes of the war, Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant. Notably, Grant vehemently opposed trying Lee for treason. For supporters of the Confederate monuments, removing them from parks and avenues will be a blow against their heritage and historical memory. But the statues have often been part of an effort to whitewash the Confederacy. And it's one thing for a statue to be merely a resting place for pigeons; it's another for it to be a fighting cause for neo-Nazis. Lee himself opposed building Confederate monuments in the immediate aftermath of the war. "I think it wiser," he said, "not to keep open the sores of war, but to follow the examples of those nations who endeavoured to obliterate the marks of civil strife and to commit to oblivion the feelings it engendered." After Charlottesville, it's time to revisit his advice.

**James Grossman, Whose Memory? Whose Monuments? History, Commemoration, and the Struggle for an Ethical Past Perspectives On History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association (February 2016)**

*James Grossman is executive director of the American Historical Association.*

Jesse Washington was lynched—burned to death—on May 15, 1916. It happened in Waco, Texas. I first read of this act of domestic terrorism more than three decades ago while doing research on my doctoral dissertation. I came across it again in December while working on my introduction to the plenary session at the recent annual meeting of the AHA, which took place in downtown Atlanta, a 15-minute walk from the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. The center's collections include an image of Jesse Washington's corpse reproduced on a postcard that carries a message from its sender to his parents: "This is the Barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left with a cross over it."

This is an important part of the American past. The moment bears no monument, no memorial other than this gruesome testimonial to a perverse form of popular entertainment (attendance estimates run as high as 15,000). Memorials to lynching are few and far between, despite its frequency during the half century following Emancipation, despite its clear significance to the

history of the United States. But no shortage of monuments exists to Confederate soldiers, the last (as far as I know) erected in Sierra Vista, Arizona, on April 17, 2010. Of particular interest to our meeting was Stone Mountain, a half-hour drive away, and the site of the largest Confederate monument in the world: a bas-relief carved into the mountain depicting Stonewall Jackson, Robert Lee, and Jefferson Davis on horseback. Completed in 1972, more than half a century after work commenced, the monument marks the site of the founding of the modern Ku Klux Klan (1915) and provided a reference for Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963: “Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain in Georgia.”

That which is memorialized and that which is left to popular memory are not accidental. Choices are made about what gets built, displayed, and given plaques. Memorials are public commemorations that legitimate what comes to be called “heritage.” We intended to explore these choices in our plenary, inspired by the controversies surrounding the Confederate flag that followed in the wake of a more recent act of domestic terrorism: the murder of nine African Americans during a prayer service at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17, 2015. Our panel focused on the meaning, use, and implications of Confederate memorials, and the debates that have emerged over commemoration through naming.

This debate has thrust historians into the center of public culture. Many AHA members are faculty at institutions where students have mounted protests directed at removing the names of individuals tainted by discredited ideas or identified with discredited policies, most often relating to race and racism. Others have engaged the issues as historians should: as experts on “what actually happened” and how public culture has created new or imagined histories through memorialization based on popular narratives, sometimes narratives carefully crafted by economic and political interests for particular purposes. “What is the historian’s role in this moment?” asked panelist Daina Berry: “To provide the context in which people can understand the very complex issues of the past and the present.”

How do we do that? Do we rename thousands of highways, buildings, and institutions across the nation? Perhaps. Panelist David Blight suggested that as historians we have the expertise—perhaps even the professional responsibility—to think about the possibility of what he called a “line.” One could draw that line at people who took up arms—indeed, committed treason—to defend the rights of some human beings to own, buy, and sell other human beings. Lee. Stonewall Jackson. Davis. But what about Woodrow Wilson or Lord Jeffrey Amherst? Where does our line fall with regard to innumerable others who are part and parcel of the long and complex history of American racism?

We cannot erase these histories simply by taking down the reminders. As Earl Lewis, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, cogently reminds us, “We cannot exorcise the past without confronting it fully.”<sup>1</sup> This is the work of historians. Our colleagues who work in museums, national parks, and other sites of historical memory will have to wrestle with the question posed by panelist and museum curator John Coski: “You can’t really erase history. You can erase the presentation of it, you can erase the memory of it, you can erase a particular spin of it, but is it really erasing history?”



Georgia's Stone Mountain monument depicts Confederate leaders Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis. Jim Bowen/Wikimedia Commons

Of course not. What happened, happened. So on college campuses we have a unique opportunity: to teach students how to figure out what happened in the past, and to provide them with an opportunity to keep that past in direct conversation with the present—including the commemorative objects they find problematic, if not downright offensive. We can even be a little bit imaginative, offering opportunities to develop skills and habits that employers tell us our students need, that are collaborative and cross-disciplinary. Undergraduate history students, for instance, could work with design and architecture students to create historical markers—maybe even small monuments—that reside alongside and speak to a named campus building or statue, both historically and aesthetically. The students would be required to do the necessary research, write text, collaborate with colleagues in appropriate disciplines to prepare and submit proposals for construction, and perhaps use digital media to disseminate their work beyond the campus. Students are interested in these issues; let's harness that engagement to fulfill the educational missions of our colleges and universities.

If we cannot erase the past, we can't erase memories of the past, either—they too are an important part of our history. Everything has a history: slavery itself, the defense of slavery, the myth of the Lost Cause, and the resurrection of that myth for political purposes in response to the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century. As historians, we know that this is the purpose of revisionism. If that term implies invention and untruth for some readers, then it is our job to explain the term and the process better.

And as historians, we will need to confront our own part in the evolution of a national memory that produced textbooks complimenting slaveholders for civilizing their chattel and justifying the removal and killing of generations of Native Americans. The AHA's hands are by no means clean. We still have a Dunning Prize, neatly matching the now discredited (and "revised") "Dunning school" of Reconstruction historiography. Our journal is complicit in the legitimation of histories that have done harm. These histories have been revised, generally discarded from our syllabi and narratives. But they reigned for a half century or more, and still command substantial respect in popular culture. This reconsideration will require humility and persistence both. Our teachers got some things wrong. Their teachers got some things wrong. And yes, we are no doubt getting some things wrong. Without sinking into the morass of whiggery, I hope we're getting better.

**Sarah Fenton, “The Confederacy, Its Symbols, and the Politics of Public Culture,” AHA Today (January 7, 2016)**

*Sarah Fenton has taught American history and literature at Lake Forest College, the Newberry Library, and Northwestern University*

Commemoration is complicated, communal work. Americans first confronted that work at Gettysburg, with the terrible task of identifying fallen soldiers. “After great pain,” Emily Dickinson had written a year prior, in 1862, “a formal feeling comes.” Formalizing the Civil War dead, panelist and George Mason University professor Jane Turner Censer reminded us, was quite often women’s work—“civic housekeeping” intended to impose “order and tranquility to a landscape” strewn with dead bodies. That modest commemoration was less problematic by Censer’s reading than the grand, celebratory statues that came later. “Societies find different ways to remember the dead,” said Censer, and Civil War commemoration changed over time from a process of “gathering the dead in cemeteries, to glorifying the heroes of the confederacy”—turning private grief into public provocation.

Consensus that some of that statuary now “needs to go” is easier established than consensus on what, specifically, *should* go. UNC Chapel Hill’s Fitzhugh Brundage put it this way: there are statues “we should remove. And then there are those that we would perhaps want to reinterpret. And then there are those that we will probably end up deciding that we have to tolerate.” Take Stone Mountain, a half hour’s drive north of our annual meeting: the world’s largest piece of exposed granite, into which massive carvings of Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis on horseback were completed in 1972. Brundage called it an “elaborate shrine to white supremacy” but couldn’t see a viable way to either demolish or transform it. Still: small steps matter. If Brundage once believed that we should “concentrate on more important things” than memorials, he has come to see “the effort to revise the commemorative landscape of the south as part of a much larger project to create a more pluralist south.”

Those difficult choices about what to add (the Arthur Ashe statue on Richmond’s Monument Avenue, for instance), what to move, and what to rename were the specific tasks charged to a panel convened recently at UT Austin about its own campus statuary. Daina Ramey Berry, a professor at UT and a member of that panel as well as the plenary, came away from the experience asking, “what is the historian’s charge?” Berry brought photos of the University’s Jefferson Davis statue taken two months before it was moved across campus (from the South Mall to the Briscoe Center for American History—or, as center Director Don Carleton put it, “from a commemorative context on campus to an educational one”), with the phrase “Black Lives Matter” spray-painted across its base. “If we don’t want to deal with this,” Berry cautioned a room full of historians, “activists will.”

**David A Bell, “Is it still okay to venerate George Washington and Thomas Jefferson?” The Washington Post (August 17 2017)**

*David A. Bell is a professor of French history at Princeton.*



George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. No less a figure than Abraham Lincoln said: “I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which, in my judgment, will probably forever forbid their living together on the footing of perfect equality.” Woodrow Wilson was a staunch segregationist. All of them held the highest office in a nation that denied women the right to vote until 1920 and denied gays and lesbians the right to marry until 2015. Should we, as a country, still be honoring these men today?

That’s the question that we’ve grappled with, anew, since Saturday’s tragic events in Charlottesville and President Trump’s subsequent response, but it’s not a new one. Two years ago, students at Princeton University, where I teach, occupied the college president’s office to demand that the name of Wilson — our most famous alumnus and a former Princeton president — be removed from our school of public policy and international relations and an undergraduate housing complex. This year, Yale University announced that it would rename a residential college named for Vice President John C. Calhoun, a fervent defender of slavery.

It is easy to take the position that Trump did, effectively, on Wednesday, when he tweeted, “Can’t change history, but you can learn from it. Robert E Lee, Stonewall Jackson — who’s next, Washington, Jefferson? So foolish!” After all, the argument goes, weren’t these iconic figures simply men of their time? Weren’t their opinions and practices entirely ordinary for their social and political milieus? By the same logic, Trump implies, we should still respect the memory of figures like Gen. Robert E. Lee, the statue of whom the Charlottesville City Council recently voted to remove. Indeed, in an NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist poll released Wednesday, 62 percent of respondents said statues honoring leaders of the Confederacy should remain as historical symbols.

But Trump’s rationale falls short for two reasons.

First, while slavery may have been utterly ordinary in Washington’s time, and overt racial discrimination equally commonplace in Lincoln’s and Wilson’s, neither was universally defended at the time. Even in the 18th century, for those with ears to hear, numerous voices were making reasoned, impassioned cases against slavery. If a prominent American revolutionary like Benjamin Rush — friend of John Adams and signer of the Declaration of Independence — could conclude that slavery was a direct violation of the laws of nature and religion, why not Washington or Jefferson?

Second, the argument that these men were just men of their time is an example of something that political conservatives otherwise generally profess to loathe: moral relativism. The idea that different standards of truth and morality may obtain in different times and places. Few people in the United States today would defend the practice of female circumcision, for instance, even though it is entirely ordinary in some parts of the world. Most people would say that no matter how customary, or perhaps even virtuous, this practice may seem to its adherents, it is, in fact, an affront to human dignity and human rights. Was slavery any less of an affront? No.

In the end, if we are to have any confidence in our own moral standards, we must believe that these standards are universally applicable, across time and space. And so, we must be ready to

criticize figures in the past for attitudes and practices we consider abhorrent. If our moral standards are to have any meaning, then they don't simply apply because we believe in them. They apply because they are right.

Yes, we also need to acknowledge that an overly rigid application of this principle would soon leave us with very little history to honor and celebrate, because few, if any, prominent figures of the past lived up to the moral standards of 21st-century Americans. Taken to the extreme, it would, indeed, mean tearing down the Washington Monument, and perhaps even the Lincoln Memorial.

But countries need their history. They need heroes and leaders to venerate, to inspire new generations, and to act as a source of unity. National unity can be a very fragile thing, as Americans today know all too well. Revolutionary movements have sometimes tried to consign their national pasts to the dustbin of history and to start over. The French revolutionaries famously introduced a new calendar, numbering the years from the birth of the French republic in 1792 and condemning nearly all of what came before as darkness, feudalism and superstition, unworthy of veneration. It didn't work. Such attempts at erasure go against the deeply human need to feel a connection with the past.

The conflict, then, is one between two principles. On one hand, we should not honor people who did things and held beliefs that were morally objectionable. On the other, we need a common history we can take pride in as a nation. It is a conflict that cannot be resolved with cheap sound bites of the sort uttered by the president and his backers this week. They can be resolved only with careful, reasoned judgments, backed up by logic and evidence.

When it comes to particular figures in the past, such judgments involve, above all, looking carefully at their entire historical record. In the case of Washington, it involves weighing his role as a slave owner against his role as a heroic commander in chief, as an immensely popular political leader who resisted the temptation to become anything more than a republican chief executive, and who brought the country together around the new Constitution. Calhoun, by contrast, devoted his political career above all to the defense of slavery. The distinction between the two is not difficult to make.

Lee's case is clear-cut. Whatever admirable personal qualities he may have had, he was also a man who took up arms against his country in defense of an evil institution. In my view, he doesn't deserve to be honored in any fashion.

There are many historical figures in the American past whose overall record is complex, difficult and deeply ambiguous — Wilson comes to mind. But reasonable people can come to different judgments about them. Accepting the need for a past we can take pride in also imposes on us the duty to take history seriously.

We must always be ready to go back to the sources, to read, think and discuss. Our history is neither a monstrosity to be exorcised nor an altar to worship at. It is the record of the actions of millions of imperfect human beings. Deciding whom to honor and whom to condemn in this

record requires more than 140 characters. It requires serious thought and discussion. As citizens today, that's what we owe to the past.

**JENNIFER SCHUESSLER, “Historians Question Trump’s Comments on Confederate Monuments” *The New York Times* (August 15, 2017)**

*Jennifer Schuessler is a culture reporter covering intellectual life and the world of ideas.*

President Trump is not generally known as a student of history. But on Tuesday, during a combative exchange with reporters at Trump Tower in New York, he unwittingly waded into a complex debate about history and memory that has roiled college campuses and numerous cities over the past several years.

Asked about the white nationalist rally that ended in violence last weekend in Charlottesville, Va., Mr. Trump defended some who had gathered to protect a statue of Robert E. Lee, and criticized the “alt-left” counterprotesters who had confronted them.

“Many of those people were there to protest the taking down of the statue of Robert E. Lee,” Mr. Trump said. “So this week, it is Robert E. Lee. I noticed that Stonewall Jackson is coming down.”

“You know, you really do have to ask yourself, where does it stop?” he added, comparing the removal of statues to “changing history.”

Mr. Trump’s comments drew strongly negative reactions on Twitter from many historians, who condemned his “false equivalence” between the white nationalists and the counterprotesters.

But “where does it stop?” — and what counts as erasing history — is a question scholars and others have asked, in much more nuanced ways, as calls have come to remove monuments not just to the Confederacy, but to erstwhile liberal heroes and pillars of the Democratic Party like Andrew Jackson (a slave owner who, as president, carried out Native American removal) and Woodrow Wilson (who as president oversaw the segregation of the federal bureaucracy).

“The debates that started two or three years ago have saturated the culture so much that even the president is now talking about them,” said John Fabian Witt, a professor of history at Yale, which earlier this year announced that it would remove John C. Calhoun’s name from a residential college.

Mr. Witt called Mr. Trump’s warning of a slippery slope a “red herring.” There have been, after all, no calls to tear down the Washington Monument.

Annette Gordon-Reed, a professor of history and law at Harvard who is credited with breaking down the wall of resistance among historians to the idea that Jefferson had a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings, said that the answer to Mr. Trump’s hypothetical question about whether

getting rid of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson also meant junking Washington and Jefferson was a simple “no.”

There is a crucial difference between leaders like Washington and Jefferson, imperfect men who helped create the United States, Ms. Gordon-Reed said, and Confederate generals like Jackson and Lee, whose main historical significance is that they took up arms against it. The comparison, she added, also “misapprehends the moral problem with the Confederacy.”

“This is not about the personality of an individual and his or her flaws,” she said. “This is about men who organized a system of government to maintain a system of slavery and to destroy the American union.”

As for the idea of erasing history, it’s a possibility most scholars do not take lightly. But James Grossman, the executive director of the American Historical Association, said that Mr. Trump’s comments failed to recognize the difference between history and memory, which is always shifting.

When you alter monuments, “you’re not changing history,” he said. “You’re changing how we remember history.”

Some critics of Confederate monuments have called for them to be moved to museums, rather than destroyed, or even left in place and reinterpreted, to explain the context in which they were created. Mr. Grossman noted that most Confederate monuments were constructed in two periods: the 1890s, as Jim Crow was being established, and in the 1950s, during a period of mass Southern resistance to the civil rights movement.

“We would not want to whitewash our history by pretending that Jim Crow and disenfranchisement or massive resistance to the civil rights movement never happened,” he said. “That is the part of our history that these monuments testify to.”

How the events in Charlottesville, and Mr. Trump’s comments, will affect the continuing debate over Confederate monuments remains to be seen. Mr. Witt, for one, suggested that white nationalist support might backfire.

He noted that it was the 2015 murder of nine African-American churchgoers in Charleston, S.C., by a white supremacist that led to the removal of the Confederate flag from statehouse grounds.

“The amazing thing is that the president is doing more to endanger historical monuments than most of the protesters,” he said. “The alt-right is producing a world where there is more pressure to remove monuments, rather than less.”

**Miles Parks, “Confederate Statues Were Built To Further A 'White Supremacist Future'”  
National Public Radio (August 20, 2017).**

*Miles Parks is a journalist based in Washington D.C., currently working as a producer for NPR's national mid-day news-magazine*

As President Trump doubled down on his defense of Confederate statues and monuments this week, he overlooked an important fact noted by historians: The majority of the memorials seem to have been built with the intention not to honor fallen soldiers, but specifically to further ideals of white supremacy.

More than 30 cities either have removed or are removing Confederate monuments, according to a list compiled by The New York Times, and the president said Thursday that in the process, the history and culture of the country was being "ripped apart."

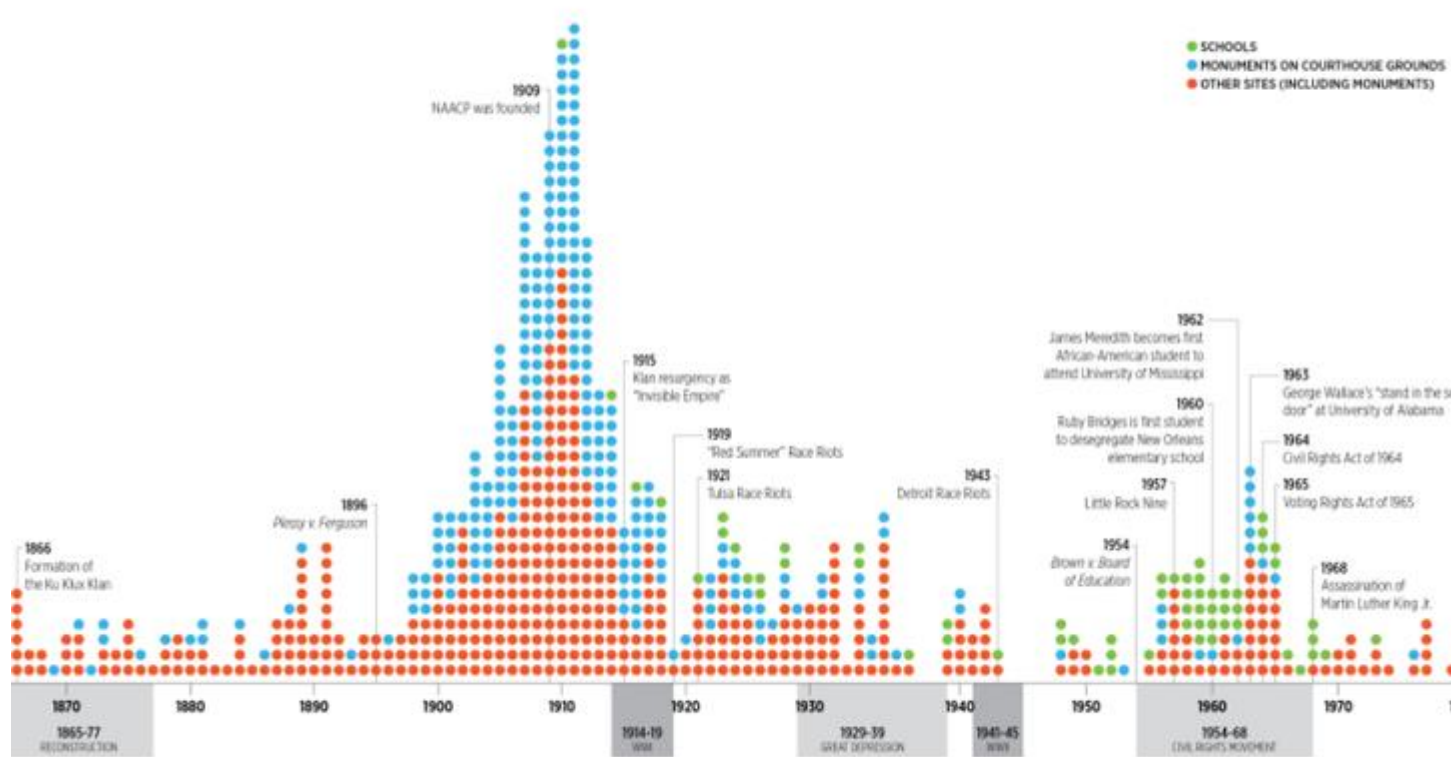
Groups like the Sons of Confederate Veterans defend the monuments, arguing they are an important part of history. One of the leaders of that group, Carl V. Jones, wrote a letter on Aug. 14 condemning the violence and "bigotry" displayed in Charlottesville, but he also denounced "the hatred being leveled against our glorious ancestors by radical leftists who seek to erase our history."

That letter to "compatriots" was signed the day before Trump's raucous press conference, in which he also cast blame on what he called the "alt-left" — comments for which he faced criticism from business leaders, nonprofits and members of his own party, among others.

Yet many historians say the argument about preserving Southern history doesn't hold up when you consider the timing of when the "beautiful" statues, as Trump called them, went up.

"Most of the people who were involved in erecting the monuments were not necessarily erecting a monument to the past," said Jane Dailey, an associate professor of history at the University of Chicago. "But were rather, erecting them toward a white supremacist future."

The most recent comprehensive study of Confederate statues and monuments across the country was published by the Southern Poverty Law Center last year. A look at this chart shows huge spikes in construction twice during the 20th century: in the early 1900s, and then again in the 1950s and 60s. Both were times of extreme civil rights tension.



A portion of the Southern Poverty Law Center's graph showing when Confederate monuments and statues were erected across the country.

In the early 1900s, states were enacting Jim Crow laws to disenfranchise black Americans. In the middle part of the century, the civil rights movement pushed back against that segregation.

James Grossman, the executive director of the American Historical Association, says that the increase in statues and monuments was clearly meant to send a message.

"These statues were meant to create legitimate garb for white supremacy," Grossman said. "Why would you put a statue of Robert E. Lee or Stonewall Jackson in 1948 in Baltimore?"

Grossman was referencing the four statues that came down earlier this week in the city. After the violence in Charlottesville, Va., when a counterprotester was killed while demonstrating, and the action in Durham, N.C., where a crowd pulled down a Confederate statue themselves, the mayor of Baltimore ordered that city to remove its statues in the dead of night.

"They needed to come down," said Mayor Catherine Pugh, according to *The Baltimore Sun*. "My concern is for the safety and security of our people. We moved as quickly as we could."

Thousands of Marylanders fought in the Civil War, as NPR's Bill Chappell noted, but nearly three times as many fought for the Union as for the Confederacy.

Still, in 1948, the statues went up.

"Who erects a statue of former Confederate generals on the very heels of fighting and winning a war for democracy?" writes Dailey, in a piece for HuffPost, referencing the just-ended World War II. "People who want to send a message to black veterans, the Supreme Court, and the president of the United States, that's who."

Statues and monuments are often seen as long-standing, permanent fixtures, but such memorabilia take effort, planning and politics to get placed, especially on government property. In an interview with NPR, Dailey said it's impossible to separate symbols of the Confederacy from the values of white supremacy. In comparing Robert E. Lee to Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson on Tuesday, President Trump doesn't seem to feel the same.

Dailey pointed to an 1861 speech by Alexander Stephens, who would go on to become vice president of the Confederacy.

"[Our new government's] foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man," Stevens said, in Savannah, Ga. "That slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition."

To build Confederate statues, says Dailey, in public spaces, near government buildings, and especially in front of court houses, was a "power play" meant to intimidate those looking to come to the "seat of justice or the seat of the law."

"I think it's important to understand that one of the meanings of these monuments when they're put up, is to try to settle the meaning of the war" Dailey said. "But also the shape of the future, by saying that elite Southern whites are in control and are going to build monuments to themselves effectively."

### **NCPH Statement on Charlottesville**

The National Council on Public History deplores the violence and hate that descended on Charlottesville, VA this past week. NCPH is a diverse organization and we condemn racism, white supremacy, antisemitism, and white nationalism unequivocally. We reject any false equivalency drawn between the promoters of these hateful ideologies and the people mobilized against them. As professional public historians, we have studied how notions of heritage are distorted to support racism, white supremacy, antisemitism, and white nationalism. We understand and condemn the uses to which that selective history can be put by those who wish to misrepresent its meaning through either explicit articulation—as with avowed white supremacists—or through the implicit refusal to acknowledge the role that white supremacy played in the creation of the US. We are stewards of complex, nuanced, and evidence-based understandings of our past and we denounce twisted, inaccurate interpretations of history that, as we saw in Charlottesville, have real and fatal consequences.

