

Statues in Defeat: The Confederacy, Treason and History

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Statues of historical weight tend to represent heroism – of sorts. It might be of the doomed variety, and often is. Rebellious causes assume the visage of a stony form, to gaze soullessly across promenades or parks, often ignored by many who have long lost a sense of their meaning.

In history, their removal is an act that flies directly into the wrinkled face of memory. Sometimes, as happened in the case of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn commemorating the Soviet “liberation” of Estonia in 2007, the figure is relocated. The statue must change with the times.

Others, such as the defiant figure of the Hapsburg Croatian official, Ban Josip Jelačić, return to their place of erection, in his case, to a post-civil war Zagreb. (He had been, in 1947, placed in a socialist deep freeze, an uncomfortable reminder of Croatian nationalism in Titoist Yugoslavia.)

The whole nasty business in Charlottesville, Virginia that unfolded on August 12 started with a gathering of neo-Nazis and white supremacists over a statue of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

The figure of the distinguished general was set for removal by agreement of the municipality, a point the protesters disagreed with. Counter-protestors demurred. It turned bloody, with the death of Heather Heyer, and two Virginia State Police officers, Trooper-Pilot Berke M. M. Bates and Pilot Lt. H. Jay Cullen, who perished in their helicopter after monitoring the protests.

The subsequent and desperate effort to identify some ground of equivalence between protestors (Nazis or anti-Nazis) and the premise of protest (White Supremacists or pro-Unionists), is only understandable in the context of civil war, one which forever reminds the states of the Confederacy of defeat.

That failure entails a vigorous jostle over the still smoking remains of an era where the defeated cry for some recognition, be it in their military achievements against the industrial might of the north, or the various war time heroes who did much with little. The other, more venal element, is that of slavery, codified and structured, a so-called peculiar institution that also went with the Confederacy’s effort to secede.

The effort to mark that period with a coating of equivalence resounded with US President Donald Trump, never a history boffin, and more of its mugger. If you were to remove General Lee from his podium, “are we going to take down statues to George Washington?”

Trump's personal lawyer also got busy in the equivalence business:

"You cannot be against General Lee and be for General Washington (because) there literally is no difference between the two men." [1]

Hardly very sharp observations. For one, Washington was Lee's shadow in terms of military prowess, and fortunate to be facing forces more incompetent than his own. (To measure achievement against an adversary such as Lord Cornwallis is setting the bar low.) But he was saved by one point: founding father patriotism.

Some of the Confederate figures, it is true, dazzle in their competence. To Lee's own exploits could be added the able Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. But both men were marked by a common cause of perfidy, that bit of treason against the Union that would have seen slavery, not merely retained, but expanded. Brilliant they have been, but they fought for that institution, a world of plantations, cotton and pre-industrial tradition.

The modern pro-Confederate protestor finds succour in these seemingly fallen figures, suffering a perverse variant of what W.E.B. Du Bois discerned as a "double consciousness". [2] But this is not the consciousness of the "black soul" of Du Bois' analysis, one where white eyes mediate a black identity. This is, rather, the plantation identity, an anachronistic, ostracised, alienated awareness that was firstly defeated in 1865, subjected to the trauma of slave emancipation and Reconstruction, then given over to the efforts of desegregation and the civil rights movement. Theirs is a consciousness of contrived victimhood, a grand failure.

For such figures, these white folk of torment, the punishment merely continued, and they, being part of the union, endured a punishment by being forced into accommodation, accord and settlement. With Trump's victory in November last year, the waters stirred. That forced, imposed consensus of what might be deemed wrong, inappropriate and outrageous, the views of the defeated from the Civil War, could now gradually bubble to the surface, to again be reclaimed in a public fashion.

Such reclamation has been boisterous, noisy, and ugly. It has taken the form, not of genteel Southern manners and tableside grace, but the virulence of KKK protest and neo-Nazi enthusiasts. It manifested in the form of a neo-Nazi who decided to drive into a group of countering protestors in Charlottesville on August 12, resulting in Heyer's death and injuries to 19 others.

History is often a messy ordeal. Reconstruction was the belt taken to the back of the southern states, and the response was one of memorial retribution. We might have lost those pre-war institutions, went this sentiment, but we shall damn well make every effort to frustrate change. You took away our slaves, but you won't take away our monuments. Jim Crow laws transmogrified into stone and reminders of heroic exploits, what might have been if only the Confederacy could have held out.

The Charlottesville echo is reverberating in other states concerned that the Confederacy matter may become a contagion. University of Texas President Gregory L. Fennes announced late Sunday night that he would remove four Confederate statues from the Austin campus. The statues, in light of the violence in Virginia, had become "symbols of modern white supremacy and neo-Nazism."

For Fenves, the statues depicting General Robert E. Lee, Albert Sidney Johnston, John Reagan and former Texas governor James Stephen Hogg, were reminders that had to be done away with.

“Erected during the period of Jim Crow laws and segregation, the statues represent the subjugation of African Americans. That remains true for today for white supremacists who use them to symbolize hatred and bigotry.”[3]

University of Houston student Mark Petersen, saw it differently. This was an erasure, one of history one directed at his people, those “of European descent who built this country.”[4] A history of gore, but also a history of treason.

The removal of such monuments, accompanied by such statements as those of Fenves, is the sound of the victor’s narrative favouring that side of memory. It is the victory of the Union, with its all binding mysticism, reaffirmed, and the memory of the Confederacy revived to only remind all of what went wrong.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-george-washington-lee-slavery-20170820-story.html>

[2] <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>

[3] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/08/21/university-of-texas-takes-down-four-confederate-statues-overnight/>

[4] <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/university-texas-removes-four-confederate-statues-overnight-n794411>

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