American Studies in Scandinavia, 52:1 (2020), pp. 121-142.
Published by the Nordic Association for American Studies (NAAS).

Bidding Farewell to Confederate Statues: Landscape, Politics, and American History

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Abstract: *In 2015 there emerged a nationwide campaign to remove all Confederate memorials commemorating white supremacy of "the old South" from public parks and city centers in the United States. Given that fighting racism and fascism is not equivalent to fighting monuments, one can ask if an attack on dead slaveholders and famous American Confederate generals is worth a large-scale cleansing of the American cultural landscape. Questioning some of the rationales of the campaign is not about defending these statues. If people democratically so decide, they may well get rid of any historical memorials they find ethically offensive. This essay deals with the issue as it pertains to the American cultural landscape.*

Keywords: *Confederate statues, Historical memorials, Civil War, Cultural History, Southern history, American history*

Introducing the Problem

A famous, nationwide campaign for cleansing towns, cities, and municipalities of the statues of Confederate officers throughout the American South began in 2015 and gained more steam after the Trump election in 2016. At least the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), one of the key advocates of the campaign, appeared to insist on removing all those "more than 700 Confederate monuments and statues on public property throughout the country" and renaming roads, public sites, and even military bases

named after Confederate leaders.[1] In addition, there have been several local campaigns of the same kind to rename educational institutions and public sites, beginning with dozens of Jefferson high schools and Madison avenues throughout the country.

Questioning some of the rationales of these campaigns is not to defend Confederate generals or "the lost cause" on the grounds of historical significance against many Americans' recent opposition to certain relics of the past in their own neighborhoods. If democratic decision-making does not pertain to one's cultural landscape it no longer embodies the principle of popular sovereignty. Democracy itself is a moral compromise in which the majority is to rule, provided that everyone preserves the right to disagree with the majority opinion. If the majority so decides, the statues must go. It is, nevertheless, worth questioning the ultimate wisdom of the general enthusiasm by such a huge majority of American historians, who have been backing this campaign and others like it. Let me note that I do not have any particular personal interest in the Confederate statues or in any other statues. During the three years I lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, I never even heard about the Lee statue there. I am only arguing for the principle of keeping politics and historical thinking as far apart as possible and for the general aim to preserve the American cultural landscape.

Politically speaking, one may well argue that with its characteristically moralistic campaigning the American liberal left has made the Alt-Right and other extreme right-wing groups, often openly racist and even fascist, appear much more important than they deserve. In reality these right-wing groups as still remain a nationally marginal phenomena. Ignoring their absurd arguments might be the best policy. The terrible death of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, Virginia, is worth honoring by every American, given that every American has a right (and duty) to oppose any openly fascist political activity on American streets and public sites. By the same token, however, an opponent of fascism and racism may see it politically futile (if not simply mistaken as an attempt to win the minds of the American people) to war against some one-hundred-year old statues—mere stone and metal. While these statues symbolize the lost cause, they also carry a myriad of

1 "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy" by SPLC (Southern Poverty Law Center), April 21, 2016 (accessed Dec. 30, 2017 at https://www.splcenter.org/20160421/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy (Notably, in their updated version of the same, as accessed on July 20, 2018, it is noted that "the SPLC identifies 110 Confederate symbols that have been removed since the Charleston attack – and 1,728 that still stand.")

other meanings, given that any piece of art and any historical relic can be interpreted in multiple ways. I beg the reader not to misread my position. Were I still a resident of Charlottesville, I would probably advocate the removal of the Lee statue there, given the abominable 2017 march of white supremacy groups through the town and the tragic events that followed from that.

From the scholarly point of view, however, at stake here is not so much American history or politics or nation-building, but the value we see in American cultural landscapes. The problem lies not in individual decisions in individual municipalities reacting to popular political pressure to remove this or that particular statue. The problem lies in the too widely accepted general argument for a large-scale general attack on any historical relics, which someone finds somehow offensive, given that each and every such relic can also be interpreted in dozens of ways. Years ago, two African Americans acted as the initiators in erecting a historical marker of a slave auction site in downtown Lexington, Kentucky. When the campaign against all the "monuments of white supremacy" began in earnest, this historical marker was vandalized along with two old statues of Confederate officers.[2] We are dealing with a complicated issue of remembrance and commemoration linked to a similarly complicated American past.

Let me illustrate the complexity of it all by first considering our current political culture of taking personal offense at phenomena that occurred more than one hundred years ago. Then will follow a short account of the concepts of collective memory and historical thinking. After that I will offer a reading of the American Historical Association's statement on the Confederate statues campaign. This is particularly important regarding the alleged slippery slope the iconoclasts are in danger of creating by implicitly denouncing the entire pre-Civil War era of American history.

Interpreting the Relics of the Lost Cause

The campaigns to remove the Confederate statues and other offensive relics of the past are politically flammable because of the currently extremely divided political atmosphere in the country. I can personally think of a dozen of reasons to side with the campaigners' larger goals, presumably aim-

2 "Slavery marker in Lexington vandalized" by Rebecca Smith, July 31, 2015 (Updated Nov 09, 2015) at WKYT (CBS) Lexington news website (accessed July 21, 2018) at http://www.wkyt.com/home/headlines/Slavery-marker-in-Lexington-vandalized-320294891.html

ing to stem the constantly increasing disparity of wealth. Millions of poor American families are currently struggling to survive with their underpaid, part-time, temporary, sometime illegal jobs. The currently low overall unemployment figures tell little of this larger problem.

There are also worthy reasons for the Americans to shift the collective memory of the Civil War from one perceived as a nationally celebrated common tragedy into one also counting for the South's unjustifiable attempt to save the institution of slavery. Indeed, the Civil War was turned into a kind of unifying national tragedy among white Americans soon after its ending. This political goal was shared by the ex-Union and the ex-Confederate veteran organizations. For example, the (in)famous Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, was originally planned by a sculptor who had shortly before finished a celebrated Grant monument in Washington, D.C.[3]

It is also true that much of the later commemoration of the tragedy was clearly linked to the rising segregation policies throughout the South. But it is equally worth keeping in mind that public expressions of racial prejudice have never been a local or exclusively Southern phenomena in American history. It was the federal Supreme Court that ruled in 1896 that racial equality could be achieved through the principle of "separate, but equal." Hence it was the American nation that committed itself to systematic racial segregation as a valid interpretation of the Constitution. This is why most African American politicians and civil rights organizations before the landmark 1954 Brown v. Topeka Board of Education decision aimed only at providing black people as good public railroad cars, waiting rooms, public restrooms, and theater entrances as those reserved for white people.

Nevertheless, one may wonder what is the inherent logic in the current refusal to read the Confederate statues as representing famous American generals (as apparently most Americans thus far had read them), or read-

3 See on Henry Merwin Shrady as the original sculptor, for example, Holland Cotter "We Need to Move, Not Destroy, Confederate Monuments," The New York Times, Aug. 20, 2017 (accessed July 12, 2018) at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/arts/design/we-need-to-move-not-destroy-confederate-monuments.html. On half of all Southern delegates to Congress still in the 1890s being "rebel" veterans, see Thomas J. Brown, The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford / St. Martins, 2004), 4. On "Blue-Gray Veterans reunions in the 1880s" and on the 1895 monument for Confederate soldiers in Chicago, see ibid, 8. Notably, a part of the Arlington cemetery was reserved for Confederate soldiers in 1901 and a Confederate Memorial was erected there in 1914. Lee Mansion National Memorial was established in the 1920s, and a commemorative coin for Lee and "Stonewall" Jackson was minted in 1925 by the federal treasury. See ibid., passim, esp., 102.

ing in them an entire medley of long Southern traditions. How would one grasp Southern history without thinking of the Civil War? Is it possible to understand anything of Faulkner without that legacy in mind? Neither do we have any reason to deny our decent respect toward the perished, which is the unifying rationale for, say, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.—another lost war in which a great many Southerners suffered and lost their lives.

Much of the politics related to the statues debate has to do with current racial injustices and drastic inequalities in American society. But such issues are of a magnitude that no American municipality can resolve alone. As for the real or imagined linkage of today's racial injustices to the Confederate statues, it is high time for the Americans to find some more recent political figures than the dead slaveholders of the antebellum era to answer for the current situation. Mass incarceration, police violence, and the current sociopolitical problems result from much more recent historical developments than American slavery or the rise of segregation in the South at the turn of the twentieth century.

As indicated, the problem with the statues campaigns arises in the inconsistency of the argument to attack historical relics as simply offensive and hence worthless as such. In essence, our cultural landscapes always function as common memory lanes or honored cemeteries of our common past, and in this sense enhance our historical thinking regarding ourselves and our predecessors. Unlike old buildings, memorials of those landscapes were erected because something was not supposed to be forgotten.

In considering the campaigns' rationale one may always draw on such concepts as collective memory and identity. Add to these the current overemphasis on everyone's personal and communal right to take offense on the basis of one's own authentic experience of the world, and there are no limits as to how many things in the murky American past one may perceive as offensive. This is easy to achieve, which explains its popularity: First one takes offense at the past phenomenon and, then, proclaims any monument memorializing or commemorating that phenomenon offensive and in need of immediate removal from sight. This appears to have been the prevalent logic of iconoclasts throughout the statues debate.

As for the general aim of restricting the campaign to genuinely racist monuments, it is difficult to see how those would be distinguished from other conceivably offensive memorials and monuments. In New York, for example, a group of enthusiasts insisted on removing Theodore Roosevelt's

statue in front of the Museum of Natural History.[4] True, Roosevelt represented early twentieth-century American imperialism in many of its darkest aspects, if one cares to remember his policies with the Panama Canal and in Latin America in general. Or consider his statement on developing East Africa: "progress and development in this kind of new land depend exclusively upon the masterful leadership of the whites."[5]

By the same token, Woodrow Wilson spoke of the Reconstruction era in the South as a devastating time for Southern civilization. President Truman made himself guilty of being the only national leader in the world ever to use nuclear weapons. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe were all slaveholders. So was Ulysses S. Grant for a short period of his life. So were Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Andrew Jackson—alongside many later American presidents. What is pure enough in the American past to truly pass the test of a genuine moralist?

The problem with the campaigns is not that historians need to be the gatekeepers for the right form of national or individual remembering of this or that historical event or phenomenon. Rather the problem from the perspective of historical thinking is the exact opposite. Historians should always stand for more rather than for less history, no matter how disappointing and occasionally abhorrent it appears. The problem has to do with any censorship in dealing with the American past, regardless of the topic. That even the equestrian statues of (in)famous Confederate generals are historical relics has rarely been refuted even among those demanding their removal. Let me repeat that people have the right to decide upon what to spare and what to discard in their cultural landscapes. The problem is only that in most cases the once destroyed cannot be reconstructed. This is why the rule of thumb is to preserve one's landscape, even if modifying it according to current needs. Like any rule, this allows exceptions. But why not, for example, erect another statue as a comment on the previous one if it needs reinterpreting? Reinterpreting here, after all, concerns not his-

4 See, for example, Colin Moynihan, "Protesters Deface Roosevelt Statue Outside Natural History Museum," The New York Times website, Oct. 26, 2017 (accessed Dec. 29, 2017) at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/arts/protesters-deface-roosevelt-statue-outside-natural-history-museum.html and the article, "Take down 'racist' Theodore Roosevelt statue, activists tell New York museum," The Guardian, Oct. 16, 2017 (accessed Dec. 29, 2017) at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/11/museum-natural-history-theodore-roosevelt-statue-protest

5 Theodore Roosevelt, African Game Trails: An Account of the African Wanderings of an American Hunter-Naturalist (org. 1910 by Scribner / New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 9.

tory but the way we read our memorials as an integral part of our cultural landscapes.

Indeed, at stake here is the cultural landscape throughout the United States. And a cultural landscape without its historical relics is a contradiction in terms. Much of any landscape consists in such relics—all of them reflecting past ideas of decency and common sense that were often astonishingly different from ours. In his famous *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward in the early 1960s warned his countrymen of the typically American (not typically Southern, given their lost war) arrogance about history as "something unpleasant that happens to other people."[6] Names of such places as Massachusetts, Connecticut, Mississippi, and the like speak of history. Anyone can identify city buildings from the 1980s due to their now odd architecture. The cultural landscape changes all the time, but memorials have been built there because someone wished to remember something.

Years before turning into an adamant advocate of the removal campaign geographer Richard Schein wrote a beautiful article on how any given landscape is also supposed to function as a facilitator or "mediator of particular political, social, economic, and cultural intention or debate."[7] The article praised the earlier mentioned Lexington slave auction marker without any indication of condemning the old Confederate statues in the same historical downtown, of which the article even included photographs. Instead Schein spoke of the ideal of a "particular landscape" articulating a whole "series of discourses."[8] In our private conversations on the issue he never commented on the 2015 public meetings in Lexington to decide whether even the slave auction marker deserves to be preserved, regardless that its very erection was initiated by the African American community.[9]

Executive Director of American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina,

6 C. Vann Woodward, The Burden of Southern History (org. 1960, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 214.

7 Richard Schein, "A Methodological Framework for Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes: Lexington, Kentucky's Courthouse Square." The Geographical Review, Vol. 99 (3, 2009), 377-402, esp., 383.

8 Richard H. Schein, "A Methodological Framework for Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes," 383.

9 "Slavery marker in Lexington vandalized" by Rebecca Smith, July 31, 2015 (Updated: Mon 10:25 AM, Nov 09, 2015) at WKYT (CBS) Lexington news website (accessed July 21, 2018) at http://www.wkyt.com/home/headlines/Slavery-marker-in-Lexington-vandalized-320294891.html; Apparently this marker has now been reinstalled, see "Two years after it was vandalized, marker about slave auctions returns to downtown" by Beth Musgrave, March 06, 2018 & Sept. 19, 2018, Lexington Herald (accessed May 11, 2019) at: https://www.kentucky.com/news/local/ counties/fayette-county/article203765519.html

Karen Anderson, opined that Confederate statues are nothing but "shrines to white supremacy and racial violence" and "denigrate my existence."[10] Such a statement is purely subjective, considering all the other things those unfortunate monuments could be seen to represent. Given that Anderson feels herself to be treated as a second-rate citizen today, does that not have more to do with societal developments of recent decades than with the Civil War (1861-65), the Reconstruction-era white terror (1865-1877), or the rise of Jim Crow legislation (1877-1900)—all of them occurrences of well over 110 years ago.

Removing the old Confederate memorials and statues has very little to do with Anderson's valuable goal of "rooting out racial injustice throughout the land."[11] Racial injustice is either past or present. If it is present it must be confronted by politics, and if it is in the past by embracing a historical understanding of the facts of the past; unjust and even abominable as they occasionally were. Anderson's call for a fight against past wrongs is simply too close to the opposing camp in its totalitarian tone. On the opposite side, there are a lot of people who genuinely think that changing the name of the Custer Battlefield to the Little Bighorn Battlefield offends their white identity or that such values as "sharing and cooperation" are too "socialist" to be included in kindergarten civics curricula.[12]

Remolding the American landscape does not amount to reinterpreting American history. It reflects the current common understanding of what is worth public commemoration or perhaps only preservation, and what not. Attempts to legally control remembrance and memorializing of the past have been made in some European countries, but usually to little positive effect. Moreover, such legal action can well be seen as intruding on individual freedom of conscience, which is one of the key values of our entire Western civilization. An attempt at an "official" history of the United States would be similarly opposed to our core value of seeking the truth (not claiming to know it all already). Who would select an official committee to decide on what is proper and decent to let people know about their past? Neither does the removal of the Confederate statues represent any genuine

10 Karen Anderson, "We Must Remove Shrines to White Supremacy From Public Property" at Speak Freely blog at ACLU website (accessed Dec. 30, 2017) at: https://www.aclu.org/blog/racial-justice/we-must-remove-shrines-white-supremacy-public-property

11 Ibid.

12 Sara Evans and Lisa Norling, "What happened in Minnesota?" in OAH Newsletter, Vol. 32, (4, 2004).

reinterpretation of the past: even school children should already know about slavery, the 1863 emancipation, the rise of systematic segregation policies, and about the Civil Rights Movement. Very few sane Americans would not agree which one of those represented positive developments and which not.

Memory and Historical Thinking

As noted, reinterpreting any past phenomenon should draw on historical thinking instead of current political reasons or on the needs of identity-building, whether individual or national. What is, then, meant by historical thinking? It consists in our always already interpreted, but constantly malleable image of our common past. History as an academic field is not equivalent to historical thinking, but is based on it. We will all eventually belong to the past of humankind, no matter whether our personal lives ever enter any history books. Historical understanding recognizes this. True, even our best informed image of the past cannot remain stable, because we constantly reinterpret that past. Yet, the crucial issue for attaining historical understanding of any given subject—be it American nationalism, Finnish nationalism, eighteenth-century female education in China, or the distinction between patricians and plebeians in ancient Rome—is not its usefulness for our current political, ethical, or aesthetic needs. Remembering our past both in its glory and in its terror is part of being a modern, civilized human being. Historical understanding is a value in itself. It simply belongs to human civilization as the term has been understood in the Western world for over two hundred years.

Let us, then, consider the justifications for destroying or removing such items as memorials and statues from our common cultural landscape in the name of the lately renowned "collective memory." In this field of study, Allan Megill, in his deservedly classic article "History, memory, identity" from 1998, points out that, first, one's identity must already be in place prior to remembering something (p. 44). Hence, remembering and memorializing do not amount to identity-building, which is a hugely more complicated process than that.[13] Second, memory itself is by definition "an image of the past constructed by subjectivity in the present" (p. 56). Third, remembering hence differs from historical thinking, which one should never approach

13 A good introduction would be, for example, Charles Taylor, Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition, ed. by Amy Guzman (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

with traumas in the forefront (p. 53). The reason is that historical thinking, properly understood, is also the very basis for history as an academic field of research, and this discipline has an "obligation to be unified, orderly, and justified" (p. 56). Historical thinking is therefore distinguishable from both memory and identity-building on both a communal and individual level. History itself is nothing but knowledge of the past. Eventually, as Megill warns us, "unless there are checks on desire the past envisaged becomes merely a projection of the subjectivity envisaging it" (p. 51).[14] Moreover, it is worth keeping in mind that no identity can be built on an ideal of never forgetting anything. Traumas are something to which one rarely can respond except by forgiving and forgetting (even when the apology is omitted). This is what one can personally do with so much of our often terrifying past as well.

Ethical issues are of vital importance, but all ethical dilemmas call for deliberation, and as Aristotle once stated, no one deliberates the past, because that cannot be mended. Historians, of course, are in a different situation to the extent that we constantly attempt to understand how a given moral dilemma appeared to contemporaries, in no matter how distant a past. To give an example, many historians still treat Jefferson's and Madison's antislavery political positions as if their own slaveholding must have appeared to these "hypocrites" as nothing but an innocent pastime next to their "more important" statesman duties. One might, for example, compare their dodging with the problem to that of us who, in the face of climate change, are reluctant to give up their own car, carnivorous diet, and perhaps their deep passion for a big family—particularly given that every American consumes ten times the amount of our global natural resources that an African consumes.[15] Let me add that, even in this respect, I do not share

14 Allan Megill, "History, memory, identity" History of the Human Sciences, Vol. 11 (3, 1998), 37-62. (Perhaps needless to mention, even Allan Megill defends the destruction or the removal of the Confederate statues in Charlottesville.)

15 There are even worse estimates as to the proportion of American consumption of natural resources, but see, for example, the International Resource Panel (IRP) report summarized by Alex Kirby from July 25, 2016. Kirby notes, for example, that the "richest countries consume on average 10 times as much of the available resources as the poorest and twice as much as the world average" and that "Europe and North America, which had annual per capita material footprints of 20 and 25 tons in 2010, are at the top of the table. China's footprint was 14 tons and Brazil's 13. The annual per-capita material footprint for Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and West Asia was 9-10 tons, and Africa's was below 3 tons." Alex Kirby, "Human Consumption of Earth's Natural Resources Has Tripled in 40 Years," July 25, 2016,

the current megatrend of seeking only "biographic solutions to systemic contradictions."[16]

Historically speaking, both Jefferson and Madison appear to have been desperately seeking the political space to solve the problem of slavery in their home state of Virginia, more or less following the model of many northern states' gradual emancipation programs. They just failed. This was no doubt partly due to personal weaknesses, but most importantly to their shared reading of the Constitution as asserting that every state should resolve any such a problem on its own—a fully legitimate, prevailing reading of the Constitution at the time. They were racist and afraid of a race war should emancipation ever be realized without the general expatriation of slave children, which is why they both insisted that such a program must be part of the solution throughout the South. But neither one of them ever suggested that such benevolence could be attained without a democratic majority, which they were never even close to attaining after the Revolution. Neither did they advocate individual manumissions.[17] To be sure, none of their personal pains in attempting to maintain their moral integrity as anti-slavery slaveholders is even distantly comparable to the sufferings of their own slaves.

Even if historical thinking cannot teach us much about our future, learning how much harder people once fought for so much less than we have ever had to, might restrain our vain self-importance about our own ethical attitude to the world around us. As for political aspects of all this: Let us avoid turning our policies and political correctness into what the political scientists call soft despotism. Political correctness is one thing, the demand for a puritan authenticity of another person's inner life and identity-building process another, it represents soft despotism.

One method of imposing soft despotism is assessing people by their learning curve in building their own identity—whether sexual, political, work-related or otherwise—instead by the results. Children and youngsters behave differently from adults, because their identity-building is in such a

EcoWatch website (accessed on Feb. 25, 2019) at https://www.ecowatch.com/humans-consumption-of-earths-natural-resources-tripled-in-40-years-1943126747.html

16 On this megatrend, see Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Modernity (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 38.

17 In Jefferson's case, it is highly questionable whether he could have freed his slaves without his creditors intervening with demands to instead sell them to clear his huge personal debts. That is exactly what happened after Jefferson's death in 1826.

precarious and intensive phase throughout their development into adults. A typical incident exemplifying the current trend of arrogant authenticity was the panic reaction of suspending the job contract of an African American school teacher, Wes Bellamy, due to a few racist and sexist tweets posted approximately a decade earlier—when he was still a college student. He later married, had children, and among his other pursuits became vice mayor of his home town, Charlottesville, Virginia. The case was politically flammable, because Bellamy was also a known figure-head behind the initiative to remove the Lee statue in Charlottesville.[18] The ideal of authenticity never aimed at turning us all exactly alike. At its worst, the ideal of absolute commitment to absolute values for everyone to embrace risks turning our commitment to individualism into the communitarian dream of an absolute universal neighborhood—an ideal of which Terry Eagleton sarcastically notes that "instead of being tyrannized by a universal rationality, one is now hounded by one's next-door neighbours."[19]

Genuine historical thinking is not about moralizing the past, but remembering it all, and remembering it as fully as possible and as truly as possible. It is, hence, of little consequence to historical understanding whether Confederate generals are commemorated in the American cultural landscape. But opening the gates for an argument that this or that individual's personal feeling of offense at this or that memorial, historical marker, or public building would justify their removal or destruction is dangerous. It equates to opening the gates to purely subjective remembrance of history as a whole. This is a vital danger. Following the logic that a particular historical topic or a particular historical relic is offensive to one's personal identity, what would prevent any group of people so feeling from extending their demands to overall removal of any books, films, pieces of art, and the like from our surroundings? Consider, for example, Henry F. Pringle's 1931 Theodore Roosevelt biography. There one can find such paragraphs as this: "Naturally, then, the Rough Riders supplied the principal motif at the inauguration in 1905. They made the streets echo with their yippings, roped an occasional Negro with their lariats as they thundered over the asphalt...".[20]

18 "Homophobic, sexist, anti-white language abundant in Charlottesville vice mayor's tweets" by Anna Higgins and Tim Dodson, Cavalier Daily, Nov. 11, 2016 (accessed July 20, 2018) at http://www.cavalierdaily.com/article/2016/11/wes-bellamy-charlottesville-twitter

19 Terry Eagleton, The Idea of Culture (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 42-43.

20 See the 1932 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Biography, Henry F. Pringle, Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography

This is how the demeaning image of African American people was once customarily and off-handedly created and maintained in history books with no particular contemporary political agenda. The book won the Pulitzer Prize. But should we now remove it from all public libraries?

Art critic Holland Cotter, writing in *The New York Times* about the Lee statue mayhem in Charlottesville, offers a cautionary example of extremely bad argumentation in favor of a wholesale cleansing of the Southern cultural landscape. He even mentions the Taliban's destruction of the 1,500-years-old Buddha statues in the Bamiyan valley as a precedent to what the Americans would now perform in removing the Confederate statues. A couple of years earlier *The New York Times* had written about "a silent cry at the terrible destruction wrought on this fabled valley" in reference to the destruction of the Buddha statues.[21]

Cotter's purpose is to avoid arguing that Taliban's religious feelings about their landscape count for nothing compared to the Americans' feelings about theirs. He could have chosen to speak of the comparative cultural value of a Lee statue in Charlottesville in relation to something 1,500 years old, but then the argument would need to be about the evaluation of both kinds of statues as cultural relics. Instead, Cotter states only that his reasoning is "pragmatic" and resolves the entire issue by stating that "I see in Lee a traitor who waged war against the United States."[22]

How could George Washington not have been a traitor in the eyes of the British? Long after Lee's treason against his country Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Geronimo, each in turn, "waged war against the United States." Should we leave the historical context out of the picture, the modern neo-Nazis could well embrace young Abraham Lincoln as their true predecessor. In 1858 he held that:

> I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races [and] I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of mak-

(New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931, 1956), 255.

21 The New York Times, Dec. 6, 2006, Carlotta Gall, "From Ruins of Afghan Buddhas, a History Grows." She writes how the "empty niches that once held Bamiyan's colossal Buddhas now gape in the rock face—a silent cry at the terrible destruction wrought on this fabled valley and its 1,500-year-old treasures, once the largest standing Buddha statues in the world." (Accessed July 10, 2018) at: https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/06/world/asia/06budd.html

22 Holland Cotter "We Need to Move, Not Destroy, Confederate Monuments," The New York Times, Aug. 20, 2017 (accessed July 12, 2018) at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/arts/design/we-need-to-move-not-destroy-confederate-monuments.html

> ing voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people.[23]

Cotter's unfortunate argument goes on to call for museums to truly turn into "truth-telling institutions" where all Confederate monuments should be "presented as the propaganda they are."[24] He is the first person working with art history I have ever heard claiming that a given piece of art allows only one interpretation, without even a suggestion of its possibly absolute worthlessness as art. Other commentators have spoken of these unfortunate statues as historically valuable even when advocating their removal. Early on, there were suggestions of helping the public to reread one-hundred-year-old Confederate statues and monuments by, for example, attaching new plaques of explanation to them.

The "Slippery Slope" in the AHA Statement on the Statues

Indeed, most campaigners for the removal of the Confederate statues argued that their cause was not to extend the purge to all American historical relics but to restrict it to the offensive relics of white supremacy only. How this distinction was supposed to be achieved was left less clear. Whatever one thinks of President Trump as an intellectual, even a broken clock is right twice a day, and so was he when expressing his concern about the slippery slope which the statues campaign appeared to be creating. During the infamous 2017 neo-Nazi rally and riot in Charlottesville Trump tweeted that if the statues of General Lee and Stonewall Jackson are to be removed "who's next, Washington, Jefferson?"[25] The question was of vital importance, but was never effectively resolved.

The American Historical Association in their official statement on the removal of Confederate statues—dated August 28, 2017—reflected a deep conviction that concern about any such slippery slope was groundless. Unfortunately, even the AHA statement is far from being unequivocal about

23 For the quotation, see Abraham Lincoln, Douglas-Lincoln Debates, Charleston, Ill., Sept. 18, 1858 (accessed July 11, 2018) at Teaching American History site at: http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-lincoln-douglas-debates-4th-debate-part-i/

24 Holland Cotter "We Need to Move, Not Destroy, Confederate Monuments."

25 Jeremy Diamonds, "Trump calls removal of Confederate monuments 'so foolish'," CNN website (accessed Feb 27, 2019) at https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/17/politics/trump-tweet-confederate-statues/index.html

the standard for distinguishing between offensive relics and respectable relics of history. Their standard, moreover, brings to the surface other complicated aspects to be considered in the entire art of recounting the past, which are no less problematic than the original dilemma. The reason is that the standard consists solely of considering who has "truly" contributed to American nation-building and who not. Let me, hence, next offer a content analysis of the AHA statement.

The statement begins with a benign welcoming of a national discussion of the issue, albeit while taking a clear stand already in the second sentence:

> The American Historical Association welcomes the emerging national debate about Confederate monuments. Much of this public statuary was erected without such conversations, and without any public decision-making process. Across the country, communities face decisions about the disposition of monuments and memorials, and commemoration through naming of public spaces and buildings. These decisions require not only attention to historical facts, including the circumstances under which monuments were built and spaces named, but also an understanding of what history is and why it matters to public culture.

The "public culture" referred in the last sentence of the opening paragraph is a conspicuously vague term when linked to what people should think about historical facts, as if correct interpretations were achievable by determining a decent majority consensus and silencing the dissidents. Then follows a statement in which President Trump is quoted as if he would side with the AHA, while in fact, he did the exact opposite. To be sure, in politics the use of such rhetorical moves is fully acceptable, although a careful reader should recognize them as rhetoric:

> President Donald Trump was correct in his tweet of August 16: "You can't change history, but you can learn from it." That is a good beginning, because to learn from history, one must first learn what actually happened in the past. Debates over removal of monuments should consider chronology and other evidence that provide context for why an individual or event has been commemorated. Knowledge of such facts enables debate that learns "from history."

Apparently the AHA does not care to correct the president here on such a minor issue as to whether or not one can "change history." It changes continuously, which becomes evident once one distinguishes our image of the

past from the past itself. Even the idea of learning "from history" is a problematic conception given that interpretations are all historians will ever get out of the past alongside the collected factual material based on empirical evidence. The next paragraph is the soundest of them all in giving a fairly consistent argument on how every monument is only a reflection of its own time and location and hence becomes an object of interpretation of the past and very little else.

> Equally important is awareness of what we mean by "history." History comprises both facts and interpretations of those facts. To remove a monument, or to change the name of a school or street, is not to erase history, but rather to alter or call attention to a previous interpretation of history. A monument is not history itself; a monument commemorates an aspect of history, representing a moment in the past when a public or private decision defined who would be honored in a community's public spaces.

Here it is notable that even the particular "aspect of history" that any given monument commemorates is not settled, but dependent on one's reading of its meaning(s). Then follows a somewhat more problematic statement:

> Understanding the specific historical context of Confederate monuments in America is imperative to informed public debate. Historians who specialize in this period have done careful and nuanced research to understand and explain this context. Drawing on their expertise enables us to assess the original intentions of those who erected the monuments, and how the monuments have functioned as symbols over time.

The problem here arises with the idea "to assess the original intentions." Distinguishing one historical context from another is totally different from assessing anyone's "original intentions." The original intent doctrine as used by some Supreme Court justices has been openly, and for good historical reasons, constantly ridiculed. The reason is that the original intentions of the founders have been used even for assessing Arizona state immigration laws, although the founders had very dim ideas about any kind of multicultural social ordering, let alone a place called Arizona. The founders themselves had different intentions, as Hamilton's and Madison's bitter enmities during Washington's presidency well verify.

Then there follows a rather weak argument about the apparently merely racist political rationale for these monuments, given that no mention is

made of simultaneous building of dozens of Union soldiers' memorials all over the country. One should not forget that the Civil War itself was, at the time, created as a common historical heritage for all (white) Americans:

> The bulk of the monument building took place not in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War but from the close of the 19th century into the second decade of the 20th. Commemorating not just the Confederacy but also the "Redemption" of the South after Reconstruction, this enterprise was part and parcel of the initiation of legally mandated segregation and widespread disenfranchisement across the South. Memorials to the Confederacy were intended, in part, to obscure the terrorism required to overthrow Reconstruction, and to intimidate African Americans politically and isolate them from the mainstream of public life. A reprise of commemoration during the mid-20th century coincided with the Civil Rights Movement and included a wave of renaming and the popularization of the Confederate flag as a political symbol. Events in Charlottesville and elsewhere indicate that these symbols of white supremacy are still being invoked for similar purposes.

The events in Charlottesville, Virginia, mentioned above, refer to the killing of counterdemonstrator Heather Heyer in the city center by a representative of neo-Nazi groups gathered there in August 2017. In terms of historical references, the neo-Nazis' choice of the Lee Statue as a symbol for their cultural legacy was perhaps less symptomatic of their ideals than their formation of marching in the dark in long rows with fire lanterns on the evening previous to the killing, closely reminiscent of the German Nazi Party gatherings in the 1930s. Then follows a paragraph on political self-determination, which unfortunately links it to an apparently clear-cut idea of civil honor:

> To remove such monuments is neither to "change" history nor "erase" it. What changes with such removals is what American communities decide is worthy of civic honor. Historians and others will continue to disagree about the meanings and implications of events and the appropriate commemoration of those events. The AHA encourages such discussions in publications, in other venues of scholarship and teaching, and more broadly in public culture; historical scholarship itself is a conversation rooted in evidence and disciplinary standards. We urge communities faced with decisions about monuments to draw on the expertise of historians both for understanding the facts and chronology underlying such monuments and for deriving interpretive conclusions based on evidence. Indeed, any governmental unit, at any level, may request from the AHA a historian to provide consultation. We expect to be able to fill any such request.

The problem here occurs at the very beginning of the paragraph in the reference to "civic honor." Notably, the OAH (Organization of American Historians) endorsed the AHA statement with these additional notes (although most of them were made in the endorsed statement itself): "To remove a monument, or to change the name of a school or street, is not to erase history, but rather to alter or call attention to a previous interpretation of history, and to remove such monuments is neither to 'change' history nor 'erase' it. What changes with such removals is what American communities decide is worthy of civic honor."[26]

True, any community has a right to decide about its own cultural landscape. But proclaiming that city fathers are free to also decide on the contents of "civic honor" is an odd doctrine to hold for those who just lost the presidential elections (as the liberals definitely did when Trump was elected because of the liberals' poor campaigning), for it suggests that true civic honor would have something to do with silencing one's opponents, even if only on the decent interpretation of a piece of art, such as an equestrian statue. Moreover, one might always ask whether it makes America more true to its past or simply more ignorant of it to erase, say, all Jefferson high schools and Madison avenues from American civic consciousness. As a child I was initiated into the secrets of the American past by John Wayne westerns, but even if I was learning my history all wrong, I had a lifetime ahead to correct my understanding, because the spark to know had been planted.

Then follows the AHA's concession to the fact that the statues in question are culturally important. The careful documentation of their measurements and their original sites is strongly recommended before their final removal:

> We also encourage communities to remember that all memorials remain artifacts of their time and place. They should be preserved, just like any other historical document, whether in a museum or some other appropriate venue. Prior to removal they should be photographed and measured in their original contexts. These documents should accompany the memorials as part of the historical record. Americans can also learn from other countries' approaches to these difficult issues, such as Coronation Park in Delhi, India, and Memento Park in Budapest, Hungary.

26 See OAH Endorsing the AHA Statement on Confederate Monuments, Aug. 31, 2017 (accessed Dec. 30, 2017) at: http://www.oah.org/programs/news/oah-endorses-aha-statement-on-confederate-monuments/

Next one encounters the most important part of the entire statement referring to the worthiness of some historical events and figures as compared to others. The section begins with a commentary on President Trump's exact words of warning that no statue will be safe after this purge. Notably, any reference to the president's having said so is carefully omitted:

> Decisions to remove memorials to Confederate generals and officials who have no other major historical accomplishment does not necessarily create a slippery slope towards removing the nation's founders, former presidents, or other historical figures whose flaws have received substantial publicity in recent years. George Washington owned enslaved people, but the Washington Monument exists because of his contributions to the building of a nation. There is no logical equivalence between the builders and protectors of a nation—however imperfect—and the men who sought to sunder that nation in the name of slavery. There will be, and should be, debate about other people and events honored in our civic spaces. And precedents do matter. But so does historical specificity, and in this case the invocation of flawed analogies should not derail legitimate policy conversation.

This is where all this was heading to begin with, to a discussion of "the nation's founders, former presidents, or other historical figures," all of them assessable according to their "contributions to the building of a nation."[27] In sum, the AHA here accedes to distinguishing between historical heroes and crooks on the sole qualification of their role in "the building" of the American nation.

As for the thinly disguised commentary on President Trump's warning that the removal movement is "not necessarily" creating "a slippery slope towards the nation's founders" and other significant historical figures, the crusaders eventually did exactly what their main opponent, Trump, had predicted they would attempt next. In September 2017 in Charlottesville, on the University of Virginia grounds, some unidentified individuals shrouded a Jefferson statue and labelled the founder of the university a "racist and a rapist," with additional statements including "Black Lives Matter" and "Fuck White Supremacy."[28]

27 Ibid. As for assessing genuine contributions to the country, where is the American monument for the Scottish inventor Alexander Cummings? His invention, the U-shaped water trap used in all flush toilets to prevent the stench getting back to the residence, has had more impact on our way of living throughout America (and the rest of the Western world) than any action of any Confederate (or Union) general.

28 Isaac Ariail Reed, "Statue Politics," EuropeNow website, Dispatches, Feb. 1, 2018: (accessed July 18,

This was not an isolated incident either. As noted, some iconoclasts had earlier insisted, for example, on the removal of the statue of Theodore Roosevelt in front of the Museum of Natural History in New York.[29] The slippery slope was indeed in danger of turning into a large-scale whitewashing of history throughout the American cultural landscape, potentially extending to everything that does not fit our current standards of decency. None of this is, of course, to diminish the sacrifice of Heather Heyer in peacefully opposing outright intimidation and the open celebration of a clear-cut fascist political agenda on American streets. She paid for that principle with her life in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017.

Indeed, the final paragraph of the AHA statement addresses the issue of democracy:

> Nearly all monuments to the Confederacy and its leaders were erected without anything resembling a democratic process. Regardless of their representation in the actual population in any given constituency, African Americans had no voice and no opportunity to raise questions about the purposes or likely impact of the honor accorded to the builders of the Confederate States of America. The American Historical Association recommends that it's time to reconsider these decisions.[30]

Regarding the right "time to reconsider" decisions made over a hundred years ago, it is no doubt everyone's duty in an open democracy to continuously reconsider our own decisions and the decisions of our predecessors as they truly affect us now. That is what politics is all about.

When it comes to historical thinking, however, the AHA criterion by which to assess decisions about memorials to historic leaders—although carefully hidden under the all-embracing rhetoric of common sense—con-

2018) at https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/01/31/jeffersons-two-bodies-interpretations-of-a-statue-at-the-university-of-virginia/

29 See, for example, Colin Moynihan, "Protesters Deface Roosevelt Statue Outside Natural History Museum," The New York Times website, Oct. 26, 2017 (accessed Dec. 29, 2017) at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/arts/protesters-deface-roosevelt-statue-outside-natural-history-museum.html and the article, "Take down 'racist' Theodore Roosevelt statue, activists tell New York museum," The Guardian, Oct. 16, 2017 (accessed Dec. 29, 2017) at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/11/museum-natural-history-theodore-roosevelt-statue-protest

30 The AHA Statement on Confederate Monuments (Approved by AHA Council August 28, 2017, accessed July 16, 2018) at: https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/statements-and-resolutions-of-support-and-protest/aha-statement-on-confederate-monuments

sists solely of a given figure's "contribution to the building of a nation." One should always ask if national unity, national mood, national decency, national developments, and the like count as criteria for any honest history writing or genuine historical consciousness. In sum, both the AHA and the OAH, the two largest professional associations of historians in the United States, view *historical thinking* as only a secondary concern compared to their primary concern, nation-building. The inherent complexity of such a stand should be evident to any professional historian, even if one is inclined to leave the public at large free to determine by their present needs what the past is good for.

Conclusion

There is a clear distinction between history written of the past (including its atrocities and setbacks as well as truly progressive developments) and the politics of the future. This distinction professional historians should embrace. Like people throughout the world, Americans carry the burden of history on their shoulders. Most of them still live on a land often robbed from Native Americans and Mexicans, built upon by slave labor, and expanded economically at the cost of defenseless colonized countries all over the world during the golden age of Euro-American imperialism. What should one do regarding this burden of history?

One simply must carry one's burden of history while disclaiming the wrongs one has never committed oneself. I have sinned enough on my own, I will not assume my father's sins in addition to those. And yet, each of us must admit the *common* burden of our history, which, therefore, should be turned into the *common* public politics of the future in the name of genuine decency and benevolence toward each other. If the people so decide, there is no reason for this not to turn into more effective affirmative action, gender-neutral pay for the same job, better pay for all menial jobs, more permanent jobs, effective policies against pollution, more effective aid to developing countries, and most of all, effective policies to stop climate change.

As noted, genuine historical thinking is not about moralizing the past, but remembering it all, and remembering it as fully as possible and as truly as possible. Let the now removed equestrian statues stay in a junk museum, even if the only message they can ever deliver there is that slavery and racism are wrong, as if we did not know that already. In terms of historical understanding, one might, however, reconsider before embarking on any

new large-scale purge of the American cultural landscape. They can be your political enemies who initiate that next campaign.