

UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY BEHIND CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS AND HOW WE (MIS)REMEMBER THE CONFEDERACY

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On August 12, a protest by various white supremacist groups against the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia turned deadly. That murder was part of yet another confrontation over how we as a nation ought to treat Confederate monuments and displays of the Confederate battle flag. And of course, these confrontations are really conversations about how we ought to remember the Civil War and the Confederacy itself. This particular on-going round of national debates began a little over two years ago when a white supremacist murdered nine African-American Christians in Charleston, South Carolina. It might surprise you to know, however, that questions about how to remember the Civil War and the Confederacy began right about the moment the last guns fell silent.

In short, the United States has never fully stopped fighting a war that ended 150 years ago. As Southern writer William Faulkner once penned, “The past is never dead. It isn’t even past.”

ASKING THE RIGHT HISTORICAL QUESTION

There is a great episode of a TV show called “The Office” that features the main character, Michael Scott, making a video for a diversity workshop. If you’re familiar with the show, it goes about as well as you might expect. In fact, Michael doesn’t get any further than an opening monologue in which he declares, “Abraham Lincoln once said, ‘If you are a racist, I will attack you with the North’.”

I laugh extra hard at this joke as a historian because, like many of you, I know that this is a gross oversimplification of the past. Those of us who know our history know that the North wasn’t exactly a paradise of racial equality in the 1860s (or the 1960s – or, even 2010s, for that matter). Those of us who know our history also know that the abolition of slavery did not become a war aim for the North until the war was already underway. While

the question of whether slavery could expand into the new Western territories was very important to Northerners (for a variety of reasons), few Northerners harbored any pressing passion for ending the institution of slavery where it already existed. Many, including Lincoln in 1861, were not convinced the Constitution even gave the government that power.

In response to these historical realities, I often hear the following line of logic: since the North did not (initially) go to war to end slavery, you can't say that Confederate monuments (or the Confederate battle flag) are about slavery. The problem with this line of logic is that it puts the cart before the horse, so to speak. The Confederacy did not form as a response to the Civil War, so asking why the North went to war gives us no insight into why the Confederacy existed in the first place. The right starting question for our conversation about Confederate monuments, then, is this: why did the South secede? This question is actually very easy to answer.

SLAVERY AND SECESSION

As one of my professors in graduate school was fond of saying, the South was not just a society that had slaves; it was a slave society. Slavery – perpetual, inheritable, race-based slavery, in particular -- was the political, social, cultural, and economic foundation of the Old South. It was more than an economic model; it was the chief guarantor of a regional way of life. Yes, the Confederate states firmly believed that their rights under the Constitution were being violated (see the excerpt from the famous “Cornerstone Speech” below), but the right in question was the right to practice slavery and to extend that practice into new US territories. In short, without slavery, there could be no South.

Mid-nineteenth century Southerners understood this reality. You can read it in their speeches, letters, and journals. Perhaps more importantly, you can read it in the various states' declarations of secession. (Take a gander at some of them [here](#).) The motivation for secession is quite easy to pinpoint in these declarations of secession: the South seceded to protect the institution of slavery.

Lincoln won the election of 1861 without carrying a single Southern state. The first seven states to secede did so within months after his victory. Why? It seemed like the writing was on the wall. The Republican Party, formed primarily to oppose the expansion of slavery into new areas of the United States, now controlled the White House without so much as a foothold in the South. The North, a region increasingly hostile to the institution of slavery, now had sufficient population to carry any future election. How long could slavery survive in such an environment?

And so, seven states left. Others eventually joined them. Again, you can read the “why” of slavery in the official declarations of secession. You can read it in the wartime letters and journals of Confederate soldiers who willingly fought to defend an institution from which most did not directly benefit, economically. Slavery was more than an economic system. It was the foundation of an entire way of life built upon the assumption of unquestioned white supremacy, in which anyone who was white benefitted. Without race-based slavery, the system fell apart. (If you want to read more, [here](#) is an excellent book that explores how soldiers on both sides of the war understood what they were fighting for.)

I wish there was space here for us to work through multiple examples from the various types of documents I mentioned above. Instead, however, I’ll have you read some of the words of CSA Vice President, Alexander Stephens, in his famous “Cornerstone Speech,” delivered in an effort to define and defend the new nation (you can read the full text [here](#)):

[...] [Thomas] Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this [slavery], as the “rock upon which the old Union would split.” He was right. What was conjecture with him, is now a realized fact. But whether he fully comprehended the great truth upon which that rock stood and stands, may be doubted. The prevailing ideas entertained by him and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with, but the general opinion of the men of that day was that,

somehow or other in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away. This idea, though not incorporated in the constitution, was the prevailing idea at that time. The constitution, it is true, secured every essential guarantee to the institution while it should last, and hence no argument can be justly urged against the constitutional guarantees thus secured, because of the common sentiment of the day. Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the “storm came and the wind blew.”

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner- stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.

To put on my teacher hat for a moment, I would want my students to notice several important things in this passage. First, Stephens believes that it is the issue of slavery that has torn the country apart. He credits Jefferson’s prescience in realizing the potential for slavery to do exactly this. Second, Stephens rightly understands that most of the leaders of the founding generation understood slavery to be a sort of temporarily necessary evil that would work itself out over time. Third, he says the feelings of these founders regarding slavery was wrong – that the reason the American experiment failed in his day is because it was built on the naïve assumption of equality of the races. We might disagree with his assertion that most people believed in racial equality in 1776, but what matters here is that Stephens is explicitly rejecting racial equality as a solid foundation for any nation. Fourth, he says that the “cornerstone” – the most critical stone in the foundation of a building – of the Confederacy is two assumptions: namely, that whites and blacks are not equal, and that slavery is the “natural and normal” condition for African-Americans.

(MIS)REMEMBERING AND RECONCILING

One of the biggest issues facing the nation following the Civil War was the fate of the former slaves. From a legal perspective, about four million pieces of property had just become people! But what exactly did this newly affirmed humanity mean in practice? What rights did African-Americans have now?

Before the war even ended, the executive and legislative branches were already engaged in a heated political prizefight over who would control Reconstruction. By 1867, the legislature had dealt a knockout blow, and the agenda for the rest of Reconstruction would be set by the Radical Republicans and their moderate allies in Congress (Quick note: political regional loyalties essentially flip flopped in the mid-twentieth century. During Reconstruction, and for decades after, the North was a Republican stronghold, while the South was a Democratic stronghold). In response to attempts by Southern states to recreate something as close to slavery as possible in the early days of Reconstruction, Congress doubled down on an agenda to radically transform the region -- rebuilding the war-torn South on a new foundation of free labor, universal education, and civil rights for African-Americans.

While it did achieve some impressive results early on, most of the Radical Republican agenda was dead by 1877. Some of this was due to a mixture of political opposition and flat-out domestic terrorism that coalesced into a campaign that Southerners referred to as the "Redemption of the South." By 1877, every former Confederate state was back under Democratic control. The other major factor in the destruction of the Radical Republican agenda for Reconstruction was the waning commitment in the North to the struggle for African-American civil rights. Radical Republicans had never been a majority in Congress; they had relied on their moderate allies to help carry the day. By the late 1870s, however, moderates had discovered other things to worry about. The Second Industrial Revolution was in full swing. The American economy was in seemingly constant flux. Meanwhile, corruption and scandal within the Republican Party itself seemed to erode whatever moral high ground the party might need to draw upon in its efforts to radically

transform the South. A growing number of Republicans came to believe that they had accomplished what they could for the former slaves; it was time to focus on other issues.

And so, Reconstruction ended in 1877 via a compromise that left the South in complete control of itself. The South set about reinforcing the white supremacy it had slowly reestablished during the latter part of Reconstruction. Jim Crow segregation, de facto disenfranchisement for African-Americans, and appalling economic inequality between the races would become the law of the land. Mob violence and lynchings would become a normal part of life for African-Americans in the region, as well – including a public lynching right here in Springfield in 1906. Though slavery had been officially abolished and African-Americans were officially US citizens, the daily experience of African-Americans in the South before and after the war was not that fundamentally different. This is why historians sometimes refer to the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century as a “Second Reconstruction.” Civil rights for African-Americans in the South would have to wait.

Meanwhile, Northerners and Southerners alike looked for ways to publicly remember the Civil War that would allow the nation to heal and reconcile. ([Here](#) is an excellent book that discusses this topic in detail). Words like “home,” and “heritage” began to dominate the way Southerners talked about why the war had been fought and what it had sought to preserve. Milder “states’ rights” language replaced “slavery” as the Southern explanation for secession (we’ve seen earlier how the “state right” in question was slavery). Confederate veterans became heroes who had fought and died for love of country – something any American could get behind, right? Some prominent Confederate leaders began to find public redemption, as well – even among northerners. One of those, of course, was Robert E. Lee, who came to be remembered as a devout Christian, reluctant secessionist (quasi-abolitionist?), and a brilliant general. (Unknown to many Americans, it seems, Lee was actually a slaveholder who was capable of great cruelty toward his slaves, and who held complicated views on slavery. He ultimately opposed slavery because of what it did to whites; he felt it was good for blacks—a fairly common assertion for Southerners during his era.)

As you might expect, some Confederate monuments began to pop up fairly soon after the war; however, this is not when the majority were erected. It was in this post – Reconstruction era of reinforcing white supremacy and (mis)remembering the legacy of the Civil War that the greatest flurry of Confederate monument building took place. Please do not miss this: the vast majority of these monuments were raised to preserve Jim Crow-era historical fiction created to whitewash (no pun intended) the legacy of the Confederacy, its soldiers, and its leaders. For some, it was about helping a conflict-weary nation move on without having to do the difficult work of confronting the fullness of slavery’s ugly legacy. For, others, it was about affirming how noble and natural white supremacy truly was. Interestingly, some Confederate monuments also began to pop up in the North during this era, as some Northerners grew uneasy about the large wave of “undesirable” immigrants who entered the United States during the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. People who had fought to preserve white supremacy suddenly seemed a bit more heroic.

REMEMBERING VS CELEBRATING VS ERASING

Hey, even if all this is true, it’s still our history, right? Some have expressed concern that in getting rid of Confederate monuments, we are erasing history. As a historian, any concerns about erasing history definitely have my attention! But let me respond with two thoughts: first, remembering and publicly celebrating history are not the same thing; and, second, we can do the former without doing the latter. To repeat: refusing to publicly celebrate something is not the same thing as erasing it from history.

The message of any public monument is far stronger than: “Hey, by the way, this thing happened.” While some public monuments are memorials to terrible tragedies, the message of most public monuments is, instead: “Hey, this is something worth honoring and celebrating! This is something great about our past!” We need to ask ourselves: are these the sort of things we want to say about the Confederacy or the efforts of those who fought to preserve it?

But other objections remain. I mean, these men weren’t *just* rebels and slave owners, right? And where does it stop? Washington and Jefferson were slave owners, too;

are they next? These are fair questions, but the concerns behind them are easily addressed, I think.

First, these monuments commemorate these men as Confederate leaders and soldiers, not as multi-faceted human beings. Only one thing is being celebrated: their participation in a rebellion launched to preserve the institution of slavery. In reality, no local, state, or national monuments honor human beings as human beings; we are honoring specific things about their legacy. As I mentioned above, the largest flurry of Confederate monument building happened during a time when the South (and some in the North) wanted to affirm white supremacy and/or downplay the lasting legacy of slavery. While we remember that Washington and Jefferson were slave owners, we publicly honor them as founders of our nation. That is their historical significance. The historical significance of men like Robert E. Lee is the attempted destruction of that very nation.

In addition, we can remember just fine without publicly celebrating. As an example, think about Benedict Arnold. To my knowledge, no public monument to Arnold exists, yet we all know the name, right? He still makes his way into my first-year history lectures, as well. Similarly, we don't need to publicly celebrate the Confederacy and its leaders to remember them well. We can study them fairly and honestly as people of their own time; I certainly don't train my students to hiss or cross themselves when I mention the Confederacy! But, we need not publicly celebrate such men or the cause for which they fought. We need not say to our children, our fellow citizens, and the watching world that the cornerstone values of the Confederacy – white supremacy and the natural slavery of blacks – are what we aspire to as a nation today.

Monuments do not simply remember. Most monuments, like the Confederate monuments under discussion here, celebrate and honor. To remove them, then, is not to erase history. It is to refuse to publicly celebrate and honor those portions of our history to which they were erected; it is to refuse to agree with the motivations that led to their erection in the first place. It is to say that we see no meaningful way to redeem such symbols, and

that there are far better ways to publicly express who we are as a nation in the early twenty-first century.

“THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS”

I sometimes hear fellow Southerners frustrated to see the Old South, and the Confederacy that grew out of it, being reduced to slavery and racism. It's a little disingenuous, they argue, to reduce an entire region and culture to its worst possible qualities. The Old South was about more than those things. It was about honor, regional loyalty, tradition, family values, etc. Look, they say, none of us wants to bring back slavery, okay? Sheesh.

Was there more to the South than slavery? Sure! But, as we discussed above, without race-based slavery, there would be no Old South. There would be no Confederacy. There would no Confederate monuments. And that's why so many people cannot help but associate the monuments with racism and the evils of slavery --not because of political correctness, but because those monument publicly celebrate the memory of a society that had to have those things to exist.

There's a very interesting short story called "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas." (You can read the text [here](#), if you're interested.) In this story, there is this seemingly perfect society. But that society holds a dark secret. Each generation, one child is chosen as a sort of sacrificial lamb for Omelas. That child is locked away in a dark room where it suffers the rest of its life. It lives in its own filth. It is not loved. It is never touched, nor allowed human interaction. Its very humanity is denied as it wails in the darkness, longing for what will never be given to it. But because that one child suffers, everyone else enjoys the paradise outside that hellish room.

Not everyone can stomach the exchange, and those who can't become "the ones who walk away." This story can be a helpful tool in thinking about the Old South and the Confederacy. The South was more than slavery, just like Omelas is more than that dark room. To reduce all of Southern society, culture, art, tradition, etc, to racism and slavery

would be no more fair than insinuating that Omelas only exists to make one child at a time miserable forever. But, like Omelas, the Confederacy could only exist as long as one portion of the population suffered inhuman depravity in perpetuity. Make no mistake: that was the trade-off. It's a trade-off that many cannot stomach memorializing or publicly celebrating.

Some people might respond to all I've said here, "Well, that's not what the monuments (or the flag) mean to me." I can understand that. But here's how I would respond: no matter what personal meaning we assign to symbols of the Confederacy, we cannot change – nor, do I think, can we overshadow – their historical meaning or the larger reason why such symbols have remained popular, even 150 years after the Confederacy's death.

Professional historians can be popular punching bags at times, but I assure you: we are not the "revisionists" in this case. The revisionists here are the ones who attempt the impossible surgery of separating slavery and white supremacy from the legacy of the Confederacy, its leaders, and its symbols – who want to argue that you can publicly honor the latter without publicly condoning the former.