

Student Reading: Confederate Monuments & “the Searing Truth”

Introduction

Reporters said the air was “muggy and tense” in downtown New Orleans on May 19, 2017, the day city workers removed a 16-foot-tall bronze statue of Confederate General and slaveowner Robert E. Lee.

The statue had stood on a prominent pedestal in downtown New Orleans since 1884, 19 years after the U.S. Union army defeated the Confederate States of America army in the Civil War.

The Civil War began in 1861 after seven Southern states seceded from the U.S., asserting the “right” of their citizens to own other human beings as slaves. Eventually 11 states joined the Confederacy. Whites in both the North and South had been profiting from the stolen labor of slaves since 1607, when the first of millions of Africans were kidnapped, enslaved, and shipped across the Atlantic to the Americas. The end of the Civil War in 1865 led to passage of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments abolishing slavery and, on paper at least, guaranteeing equal protection under the law and voting rights for all men.

As Robert E. Lee’s statue was lifted by a crane from its pedestal, many in the crowd cheered. “I never thought I would see this day!” shouted one onlooker. But others were there to protest the removal of what they maintained was a monument to “Southern heritage” and “Southern pride.” Some waved Confederate flags.

This was the fourth Confederate monument to be removed in New Orleans since April, and it was the only one of the four to be removed in broad daylight. The other three were taken down in the dark of night by workers wearing bulletproof vests and masks to keep from being identified by white supremacists who had threatened violence.

Activists in New Orleans’ African American community had been protesting the statues for decades, arguing that they were symbols of hatred and a celebration of slavery. The momentum turned their way in 2015, after Dylann Roof, a white supremacist, massacred nine black churchgoers in Charleston, S.C. Internet photos featured Roof posing with the Confederate flag and visiting Confederate history sites.

The massacre touched off a national outcry and reignited national debate over the prominent presence of Confederate flags, monuments, and other symbols of white supremacy in cities and towns, particularly in the South. In New Orleans, a group called Take 'Em Down NOLA organized to challenge the presence of over 100 statues and street names.

New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu joined a number of other politicians across the South in finally taking action.

After a series of contentious meetings and hearings, the New Orleans City Council voted 6-1 in support of Landrieu’s proposal to remove four iconic Confederate monuments:

- the statue of General Robert E. Lee
- a statue of Confederate President Jefferson Davis
- a statue of Confederate General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard
- an an obelisk commemorating the Battle of Liberty Place, a deadly fight after the Civil War between the state militia and the Crescent City White League, a group opposed to the city's racially integrated police force

Two New Orleans leaders – Councilmember Nadine Ramsey and Mayor Mitch Landrieu – made powerful arguments for why symbols and history matter, and why these monuments needed to be removed.

New Orleans Councilmember NADINE RAMSEY

Ramsey made this statement after her vote to support removal of the statues in December 2015.

This discussion did not create a divide; it only cast light on issues that have festered for many decades. These statutes represent a dark moment in this great nation's history. We must never forget the past so that we are not doomed to repeat it, but we need not honor those individuals and moments from the past that do not meet our standards of human decency, equality and non-discrimination.

During this debate, we have heard the great pain that the African American community has suffered. Empathy is an important part of the human experience and this conversation. Our compassion for our fellow human beings should motivate us to attempt to identify with the hurts and pains of others. When one hurts, all should hurt. So, as an elected official I hurt with the constituents I have been elected to represent. These statues are offensive and representative of a plethora of racial injustices that are contrary to everything this historic city stands for. As a human being with empathy and compassion, I cannot understand how anyone can justify retaining symbols of oppression that cause real pain.

Removing monuments to Robert E. Lee, Beauregard and Jefferson Davis is not an attempt to rewrite history. No one is saying they are not who they were or did what they did. This vote is simply a message that as a city, we no longer want to exalt those who fought for the confederate ideology of a state's right to retain slavery. If that is what these monuments represent to a significant part of our population, there is no question that they should be removed.

Some individuals have questioned why the City should dedicate time and resources to removing nuisance monuments when there are other pressing issues to address. There is crime, blight and infrastructure needs. Improvements need to be made to our education and criminal justice system. But there are also the needs of healing a city, a nation that at one time counted African people as property and subjected them to unspeakable and inhumane

treatment. Between 1525 and 1866, 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World; 10.7 million survived and were subjected to slavery. This is the legacy of the country.

Taking down these monuments will not change the past, but is an important and symbolic step for African-Americans and for all lovers of equality. Removal will not detract from the important work that still needs to be done. We are continually addressing the pernicious and systematic discrimination that still bars some groups from enjoying the full benefits of citizenship in this great nation. We recently took steps toward that by improving the rules for hiring local and hiring disadvantaged businesses. I am encouraged by the level of participation from young people, from diverse parts of the community. I hope that people on both sides will continue to stay engaged and let their voices be heard going forward to help us come up with solutions to address the City's issues. All the pressing issues need to be addressed. One of those is taking down these monuments.

New Orleans Mayor MITCH LANDRIEU

These are excerpts from a speech by Landrieu on May 19, 2017.

.... New Orleans was America's largest slave market: a port where hundreds of thousands of souls were brought, sold and shipped up the Mississippi River to lives of forced labor of misery, of rape, of torture.

America was the place where nearly 4,000 of our fellow citizens were lynched, 540 alone in Louisiana; where the courts enshrined 'separate but equal'; where Freedom riders coming to New Orleans were beaten to a bloody pulp.

So when people say to me that the monuments in question are history, well what I just described is real history as well, and it is the searing truth.

And it immediately begs the question: Why there are no slave ship monuments, no prominent markers on public land to remember the lynchings or the slave blocks; nothing to remember this long chapter of our lives; the pain, the sacrifice, the shame ... all of it happening on the soil of New Orleans?

So for those self-appointed defenders of history and the monuments, they are eerily silent on what amounts to this historical malfeasance, a lie by omission.

There is a difference between remembrance of history and reverence of it. For America and New Orleans, it has been a long, winding road, marked by great tragedy and great triumph. But we cannot be afraid of our truth.....

The historic record is clear: the Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and P.G.T. Beauregard statues were not erected just to honor these men, but as part of the movement which became known as

The Cult of the Lost Cause. This “cult” had one goal — through monuments and through other means — to rewrite history to hide the truth, which is that the Confederacy was on the wrong side of humanity.

First erected over 166 years after the founding of our city and 19 years after the end of the Civil War, the monuments that we took down were meant to rebrand the history of our city and the ideals of a defeated Confederacy.

It is self-evident that these men did not fight for the United States of America, They fought against it. They may have been warriors, but in this cause they were not patriots.

These statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for.

After the Civil War, these statues were a part of that terrorism as much as a burning cross on someone's lawn; they were erected purposefully to send a strong message to all who walked in their shadows about who was still in charge in this city.

Should you have further doubt about the true goals of the Confederacy, in the very weeks before the war broke out, the Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, made it clear that the Confederate cause was about maintaining slavery and white supremacy.

He said in his now famous 'Cornerstone speech' that the Confederacy's "cornerstone 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." ...

[A] friend asked me to consider these four monuments from the perspective of an African American mother or father trying to explain to their fifth grade daughter who Robert E. Lee is and why he stands atop of our beautiful city. Can you do it?

Can you look into that young girl's eyes and convince her that Robert E. Lee is there to encourage her? Do you think she will feel inspired and hopeful by that story? Do these monuments help her see a future with limitless potential? Have you ever thought that if her potential is limited, yours and mine are too?

We all know the answer to these very simple questions.

When you look into this child's eyes is the moment when the searing truth comes into focus for us. This is the moment when we know what is right and what we must do. We can't walk away from this truth.