

Resolving a Monumental Problem

Confederate statues should be repurposed, not removed.

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Late last month the National Trust for Historic Preservation issued a “Statement on Confederate Monuments.” The Trust’s mission is “to save America’s historic sites” and “tell the full American story.”

Not this time. Because “most Confederate monuments were intended to serve as a celebration of Lost Cause mythology and to advance the ideas of white supremacy,” the statement read, “the National Trust supports their removal from our public spaces when they continue to serve the purposes for which many were built—to glorify, promote, and reinforce white supremacy, overtly or implicitly.”

Leave aside the troubling precedent of a cultural heritage conservancy suddenly making exceptions. How is “implicitly” to be defined—and by whom? George Washington owned slaves. Does this mean that monuments to the first U.S. president “implicitly” celebrate white supremacy? A mob in Portland, Ore., on June 18 thought so. It toppled a Washington statue.

I am instinctively opposed to removing or destroying public monuments. Civilized societies protect cultural heritage, they don’t erase it. And many of these statues are part of the story of American art. Are we to erase that history, too?

Nor is relocation to a museum a viable option. In some cases, their site is integral to their meaning, it being where the event in question occurred. Moving them would transform them from historical markers into purely aesthetic objects. And it would violate the principle that works of cultural heritage should be moved only when physically endangered.

Still, we have to recognize that if monuments exist to celebrate our ideals and values, those dedicated to the Confederacy are inimical to them and deeply offensive to large numbers of Americans. Take Stone Mountain. Purchased by the state of Georgia in 1958 expressly to commemorate the Confederacy, it bears a Mount Rushmore-scale relief of Jefferson Davis, Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson and Robert E. Lee. And the eponymous park in which it sits officially opened on April 14, 1965, 100 years to the day after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination.

How, then, to proceed? The Trust’s statement contains a reference to communities whose Confederate monuments have been “contextualized with educational markers or other monuments designed to counter the false narrative and racist ideology that they represent, providing a deeper understanding of their message and their purpose.”

Exactly. Don’t remove—repurpose. Transform those structures from odious emblems into teaching tools. It’s a solution broad enough to accommodate contested monuments of all types.

To understand how contextualization might work, look to the city of Atlanta. In 2016 the Atlanta History Center published the “Confederate Monument Interpretation Guide” on its web site, an “online toolkit” designed “to help communities address Confederate monuments in their midst.”

The toolkit begins by delineating the parameters: monuments created during the Jim Crow era beginning in the 1890s, those of the preceding decades being legitimate memorials to the Confederate dead. It then explains the Lost Cause mythology, contrasting its states' rights rationale for the Civil War with an unequivocal assertion of historical fact: "Slavery was the central cause" of the war.

It goes on to offer a metric: In each case communities should "examine what was said about the causes of the Civil War prior to Confederate secession and after United States victory." The Lost Cause mythology "ignores the overwhelming historical evidence linking secession directly to slavery. By examining this evidence, the meaning of Confederate monuments as symbols of Lost Cause mythology and thus, the doctrine of white supremacy as manifested by Jim Crow segregation, become clear." Over time the toolkit has been expanded to include case studies and other resources.

Then in August 2017, following violence in Charlottesville, Va., Atlanta's then-Mayor Kasim Reed formed an advisory committee to address the issue of Confederate memorials and street names. According to Claire Haley, special adviser to AHC CEO Sheffield Hale, "The research process and resources from the toolkit were used to inform some of the research conducted on monuments for the advisory committee."

While the committee regrettably opted for removal of some monuments, in cases where the law prevented removal its approach to contextualization has been exemplary, a model for communities nationwide. Interpretive "exhibition panels" are placed at the sites, their content developed by a process of extensive research followed by inputs from elected officials, members of the public, the relevant historical societies and outside academics, with a vote on the final wording by the City Council.

The process is broad-based, transparent and deliberate, so it can take several months to get from initial research to installing the display. If that sounds too cumbersome or unequal to the moment in other ways, consider an example from a different context: Auschwitz. The analogy isn't perfect—the concentration camp is a historical artifact, not an after-the-fact commemorative structure. And, of course, the Confederacy wasn't the Third Reich. Still, it offers useful lessons.

If any "monument" ever deserved bulldozing into oblivion it was Auschwitz, whose name has become synonymous with every evil of the Final Solution. Yet after World War II, the decision was made to leave it standing, and in the years since, preserved and with a museum, archive and interpretive programming, it has taken on a second life: as a solemn memorial to its victims; as a symbol of the singularity of the Holocaust—and as an instrument for confronting, understanding and learning from a monstrous episode in human history.

As such, it stands as an object lesson in the wisdom—even necessity—of preserving the past. Think how much easier life would have been for the Holocaust deniers without the presence of Auschwitz to bear witness to the Nazis' crimes.

This last is perhaps the strongest argument for contextualization. Want to delegitimize the Lost Cause and other hateful ideologies? Then leave those monuments standing and debunk their messages point by point with accompanying displays. Erase them, and you allow those ideas to lurk, unchallenged, in the fever swamps of collective memory.

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