

PRO/CON: Should cities be allowed to take down Confederate monuments?

By Mitch Landrieu, Washington Post, and Alfred L. Brophy, The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.16.17

Word Count **1,623**

Level **1100L**



Workers prepare to take down the Jefferson Davis statue in New Orleans, Louisiana, May 11, 2017. This was the second of four Confederate monuments slated for removal in a contentious process that has sparked protests from both sides. Davis served as president of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War. AP Photo

PRO: These monuments should be removed because they honor slavery and segregation

Last month, New Orleans began the long-overdue process of removing four statues honoring the lost, and immoral, Confederate cause. This week, we continue the job.

Getting here wasn't easy. It took a two-year review process, a City Council vote and victories over multiple legal challenges. The original firm we'd hired to remove the monuments backed out after receiving death threats and having one employee's car set ablaze. Nearly every heavy-crane company in southern Louisiana has received threats from opponents.

Some have compared these monuments to other monuments around the world from bygone eras. They say that taxes would be better spent trying to educate the public about the history behind the monuments. Respectfully, that's not the point. As mayor, I must consider their impact on our entire city. It's my job to look forward, not simply to worship the past.

More than almost any other city in the world, New Orleans is truly a city of many nations. Our city is an intersection of humanity in all its colors and cultures: we have the native Choctaw, Houma Nation and Chitimacha tribes, and we have the Acadians, the Haitians, the Senegambians and other African nations. We also have the French and Spanish Empires, and ultimately the United States. In recent decades, our Vietnamese and Latino communities have flourished. We are a melting pot, a gumbo, and that is our strength.

No Need To Exalt The Ugliest Chapters Of History

But New Orleans was also 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 misery and torture. Our history is forever intertwined with that of our great nation — including its most terrible sins. We must always remember our history and learn from it. However, that doesn't mean we must exalt the ugliest chapters, as we do when we raise the Confederacy up on a pedestal — literally — in our most prominent public places.

New Orleans' statues of Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and P.G.T. Beauregard — all Confederate leaders during the Civil War — were built with the goal of rewriting history. They hoped to glorify the Confederacy and maintain the idea that whites are superior to other races.

These monuments could be used as places to mourn of our past of slavery and segregation. Instead, they honor it. They are an inaccurate representation of our past, an insult to our present and a poor prescription for our future.

The right way, then, is to do away with these symbols of injustice.

Monument Honoring Killers Was Taken Down

The Battle of Liberty Place monument was built here to honor the Crescent City White League. In 1874, the league's members killed many New Orleans law enforcement officers and state militia members, who came from many different races and backgrounds. Instead of honoring the officers, it honored the killers. That kind of "honor" has no place in an American city. So, last month, we took the monument down.

This week, we began the removal of a statue honoring Davis, and Lee and Beauregard soon after. It won't erase history. But it can begin a new chapter of New Orleans' history by placing these monuments, and the history of cruel treatment they represent, in museums and other spaces where they can be viewed in an appropriate educational setting.

Great nations become lost, isolated and ultimately extinct by refusing to confront the sins of the past. They must evolve to meet the demands of a changing world. If we don't want to be forever held back by our crushing history of institutional racism, it's time to put these monuments in their proper place.

Block Was Commemorated For The Wrong Reason

Last year, President Barack Obama opened the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. He spoke of the need to remember our history through one of the museum's most telling artifacts: a slave auction block, a stage where people once used to bid on slaves and purchase them. The block has a marker noting that famed American leaders Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay had once spoken on it.

"For a long time, the singular thing we once chose to commemorate as history, with a plaque," Obama said, "were the unmemorable speeches of two powerful men," he said. The plaque did not remember the families "sold and bid like cattle" on that same spot.

Just like the decision to publicly recognize the tragic significance of that stone, removing New Orleans' Confederate monuments from places of prominence is an acknowledgment that it is time to absorb, and then move past, a painful part of our history. Doing anything less would wash away generations of courageous struggle and soul-searching.

Mitch Landrieu is the mayor of New Orleans. He wrote this op-ed for the Washington Post.

CON: Confederate monuments should stay because they connect past racial crimes to current racial inequality

On April 24, New Orleans city employees began the process of removing four Confederate monuments. But there are downsides in eliminating memorials to the Confederacy — statues and monuments, along with the buildings, parks, schools and military bases named after Confederate soldiers. Mainly, we risk forgetting the connections of past racial crimes to current racial inequality.

Statues of Confederate soldiers are common in the South in a number of courthouse squares, and streets and parks bear the names of people or events associated with the Confederacy.

In Southampton, Virginia, Black Head Signpost Road is named for the head of a slave who was killed during the Nat Turner Rebellion. His head was put on a post along the road as a warning. Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway, which runs from Florida to California, was named in the 1920s.

In prior years, some cities and institutions have responded to the concerns of those who see these monuments as symbols of discrimination and oppression. In little towns throughout the South, Confederate statues have been moved from courthouse squares and town centers to less prominent places, like cemeteries. Meanwhile, buildings named after Confederate officers and members of the Ku Klux Klan group have been renamed.

Statues Removed And Buildings Renamed

In recent years, the call to remove or rename is getting even louder. In 2015, Senator Mitch McConnell said Kentucky should consider ridding the Kentucky State House of its Jefferson Davis statue. In Memphis, one City Council member drew up a law to remove the statue of Confederate officer and Ku Klux Klan member Nathan Bedford Forrest from a public park.

Some monuments may be so offensive to the local community that they'll need to be removed. And certainly, they can serve as rallying places for today's white supremacists. Others are particularly moving reminders of the days of slavery and Jim Crow.

Nathan Bedford Forrest Park, in an African-American section of Memphis, was renamed because the City Council thought it was an insult to the local population. In such cases, removing or renaming these monuments may serve to stop a continuing harm.

Four States Passed Heritage Protection Acts

This is a decision that should largely be made at the local level. However, the legislatures of four states — South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee — have passed Heritage Protection Acts that prohibit the removal of Confederate monuments from public property or renaming of public buildings.

This movement started in South Carolina in 2000, and the statues were pushed by supporters of Confederate heritage.

However, while I'm no supporter of the Confederacy, there are several reasons not to remove monuments or rename buildings.

As an aside: Confederate flags are entirely different. New flags have to be put up constantly because they can wear out quickly. Thus, flying a Confederate flag shows a continuing commitment to maintaining a symbol of white supremacy. Confederate monuments, on the other hand, were almost all erected decades ago.

An Important Part Of Our Nation's History

For this reason, they're part of our landscape. Yes, they're reminders of the days of slavery and secession. But they teach important lessons — they point to a Southern political system that, from the 1870s to the 1930s, continued to support the ideals of the Confederacy. They're visual reminders of Jim Crow, and the ways white supremacy was brought to life through laws,

social practices and stone. And they reveal the thinking, however wrong, of a time and people: the fact that white Southerners and their elected leaders believed in the goodness of their society.

Ultimately, removal of the monuments will, quite literally, erase an unsavory — but important — part of our nation’s history.

There’s a second reason to go slow on renaming. It’s important for individuals, as well as communities, to understand how our past is connected to the present.

A Connection Between Past And Present

The eras of slavery and Jim Crow left behind a legacy of violence and limited educational and job opportunities. Those times are past, but they are undeniably connected to the fact that one-third of African-American children today live in poverty.

Many people argue that the government should give more money to social welfare programs to lessen the problems of poverty. These people say that poverty is related not to mistakes an individual made, but to histories of racism that have lasted for generations. Confederate statues are real-world symbols of this history of cruel treatment.

They’re another reminder of the need to be careful in how we tell our nation’s history. In understanding how we got to where we are today, we need to acknowledge the good along with the bad — which means not tearing it down.

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