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Monuments Ought to be Considered Case by Case

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Abstract

In a press conference last week President Donald Trump made this contribution to the escalating debate about monuments and memorials to American heroes who, by today's reckoning, failed a moral test.

The statue debate is inherently emotional and when it comes to keeping certain statues up or pulling them down, it riles people up—including Donald Trump. However, it is important to separate President Trump's intemperate and often factually inaccurate remarks at Tuesday's press conference from the statue controversy as it is currently playing out. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

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Michael J. Birkner

“George Washington was a slave owner. So will George Washington now lose his status? Are we going to take down statues of George Washington? How about Thomas Jefferson. What do you think of Thomas Jefferson? You like him? Are we gonna take down the statue, 'cause he was a major slave owner. So you know what, it's fine. You're changing history, you're changing culture.”

In a press conference last week President Donald Trump made this contribution to the escalating debate about monuments and memorials to American heroes who, by today's reckoning, failed a moral test.

The statue debate is inherently emotional and when it comes to keeping certain statues up or pulling them down, it riles people up—including Donald Trump. However, it is important to separate President Trump's intemperate and often factually inaccurate remarks at Tuesday's press conference from the statue controversy as it is currently playing out.

Although the president referred to Washington and Jefferson, both of them major figures in the American Revolution and the founding of the American republic, we must remember that the debate did not start with them. It has simply escalated sharply in wake of the terrible events in Charlottesville last weekend. Those events were pegged to the planned removal, sanctioned by city officials, of a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee in that city's Emancipation Park for relocation elsewhere.

Little did the white nationalists who stormed the site and wreaked havoc and violence there anticipate that their actions only would reinforce the views of those who believe statues of Lee and other Confederate leaders don't belong in the public square.

In a television interview after the chaos in Charlottesville, civil rights activist Al Sharpton went so far as to call for the federal government to disown — perhaps even dismantle — the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. Sharpton's rationale for this remarkable demand? He said Jefferson was a hypocrite who wrote that all men are created equal but never freed his many slaves and, by the best evidence, kept one of them — Sally Hemings — as his mistress for many years.

These are accurate statements about Jefferson. But at this point we need to pause and consider the implications of the “remove the monuments” movement.

Consider the context

Context matters. It's easy to argue for pulling down a statue of Josef Stalin in Moscow, given the enormity of his crimes against humanity. Moving the statue of Confederate Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest from a major square to an inconspicuous location makes sense, too, given Forrest's connection to the Fort Pillow Massacre in Tennessee, in which hundreds of black Union soldiers were brutally killed.

Beyond statues, there's an argument to be made for renaming certain college buildings because the individual honored was a racist. Combined with public pressure, this seems to have triggered Yale University's recent decision to rename Calhoun College, originally named in 1933 for South Carolina U.S. Senator and pro-slavery advocate John C. Calhoun.

But what do you do when a great historical figure — a Lincoln or a Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Washington or a Jefferson — failed a moral litmus test amid an overall record of major contributions to American democracy?

Flawed heroes

Washington and Jefferson owned slaves. In his famous debates with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln said that he did not believe in racial equality and would not want a black wife. Roosevelt sent Japanese-Americans to internment camps during World War II. Andrew Jackson forced Native Americans out of their homes in the American southeast and on to a “trail of tears” that cost thousands of lives.

The list of worthy leaders who in some ways don't measure up to past or contemporary ideals is practically endless.

The need to consider the full picture when it comes to flawed heroes seems only fair, much as any of us, in a reckoning of our lives, would want not to be judged solely by our worst attributes or behaviors.

In short, when it comes to de-memorialization, where would we stop?

Key question

In Lancaster's Buchanan Park stands a statue to James Buchanan, Pennsylvania's only president, who through a long political career directed his oratorical thunderbolts at opponents of slavery, not at slave-owners. Should Buchanan's statue be pulled down also, or removed to a less conspicuous site? Or might it be better to discuss what he believed and why he believed it, without letting him off the hook for his moral obtuseness on this subject?

This is the test: Are we going to erase painful history, or try to learn from it?

Pulling down and destroying statues because they offend some sensibilities contributes nothing to a national dialogue about race or any other fraught question that divides Americans today. It helps not at all to compare a president who owned slaves but enlarged our democratic promise to a Confederate general who was a great fighting man but turned his back on his country at a crucial moment.

Donald Trump to the contrary, our history is not changed when we debate these issues. Only our opportunity to learn from our disagreements is affected.

The options

When it comes to statues, options abound. By all means, move Lee's statue in Charlottesville out of a park commemorating emancipation. In other cases, providing historically meaningful information in a plaque or wayside marker makes sense. Erecting a statue of a previously unsung hero who would serve as a counterpoint to the individual whose statue offends some sensibilities is yet another option. There's no one right answer.

The historian David Blight has noted that "memory is always about the present." That's all the more reason why we need to struggle with the tough stuff of American history. The monuments are set in stone, but the lessons they can teach are part of democracy's ongoing dialogue.

In this sense, Trump's comments about Washington and Jefferson present a starting point for constructive conversation. How we respond to them will illuminate our willingness and capacity to engage one another's perspectives and do so without resorting to unseemly chants, torchlight parades, or violence.

What we have, if we are willing to embrace it, is a learning moment.

Michael J. Birkner is professor of history at Gettysburg College and immediate past president of the Pennsylvania Historical Association. He's also a former member of the Lancasterhistory.org board.

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