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# Should we Banish Robert E. Lee & his Confederate Friends? Let's Talk.

## **Abstract**

After 152 years, Robert E. Lee is back in the headlines. But not in any way he could have imagined.

The “Unite the Right” forces descended on Charlottesville, Va., to protest calls for the removal of an equestrian statue of Lee that has been sitting in a city park since 1924. The larger question, however, was about whether the famous Confederate general was also a symbol of white supremacy.

The same issues were in play in May when a statue of Lee was removed from Lee Circle in New Orleans. There are also more than two dozen streets and schools named for Lee that have become debating points about symbols of white nationalism. One Army installation in Petersburg, Va., bears Lee’s name; another, Fort Hamilton in New York City, names a driveway for him. (*excerpt*)

## **Keywords**

Robert E. Lee, Confederate States of America, monuments, Civil War, slavery

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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## Should we banish Robert E. Lee & his Confederate friends? Let's talk.

Allen Guelzo, Opinion contributor  
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*Here are some guideposts to get us past name-calling and confrontation. Maybe they will allow Lee, and us, to enjoy some peace.*



(Photo: Steve Helber, AP)

After [152 years](#), Robert E. Lee is back in the headlines. But not in any way he could have imagined.

The “[Unite the Right](#)” forces descended on Charlottesville, Va., to protest calls for the removal of an equestrian statue of Lee that has been sitting in a city park [since 1924](#). The larger question, however, was about whether the famous Confederate general was also a symbol of white supremacy.

The same issues were in play in May when a statue of Lee was removed from [Lee Circle in New Orleans](#). There are also more than two dozen streets and schools named for Lee that have become debating points about symbols of white nationalism. One [Army installation](#) in Petersburg, Va., bears Lee’s name; another, [Fort Hamilton](#) in New York City, names a driveway for him.

Why are there statues of Robert E. Lee in the first place? After all, he lost — he [surrendered the main Confederate army](#) at Appomattox Court House in 1865, which effectively ended the American Civil War. American culture, which

worships success, does not usually erect statues to losers. Still less often do we erect monuments to people who, at least by the constitutional definition, committed treason.

What gives these monuments an even more bitter edge is that the Confederate South accepted its defeat with embarrassing reluctance, especially concerning the [3.9 million African-American slaves](#) freed by the war, and thus perpetuated a century of toxic racial relations whose ill effects we live with yet. Monuments to Confederate leaders act as little more than a constant poke in the eye to modern African Americans.

But Lee is not quite so simple a symbol. He was gracious to the point of chivalry in accepting defeat and, once peace had been declared, he was one of the [clearer voices urging reconciliation](#). During his postwar years as president of Washington College, he [publicly rebuked students](#) who attempted to harass or bully freed slaves at their schools and churches.

New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu characterized the Confederate statues as symbols of an ideology that must be confronted. These “statues were not erected just to honor these men,” Landrieu explained, “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.” And in a very important sense, Landrieu is right.

But that argument has frequently been deflected by an appeal to an individual’s “place in history.” No one’s name is daubed in more blood over the past 150 years than that of Karl Marx. Yet, to this day, there remains a [Karl Marx Allee](#) in Berlin. When the Chinese government proposed to donate a statue of Marx to Trier, his German birthplace, the mayor responded with the dubious argument that “Karl Marx is one of the most important citizens of this city, and [we should not hide him](#).” Demands in 2015 that Oxford University’s Oriel College remove a statue of the avowedly colonialist and imperialist Cecil Rhodes collapsed in the face of resistance, which replied (in the words of historian Mary Beard) that it is “not the job of the present to [tick the past off](#).”

Perhaps. And yet, even among Lee’s latter-day admirers, who would stand in the way of [removing statues](#) of Josef Stalin (there are still a few) or KGB founder Felix Dzerzhinsky (there is still one)? Why isn’t there a protest movement against Seattle’s statue of [Vladimir Lenin](#), whose murderous ideas and deeds dwarf any of Lee’s sins?

We need a set of guideposts to get us past name-calling and confrontation, a set of questions that can allow a reasoned discussion. For instance, does the statue commemorate an individual who inflicted harms on a living person that would be actionable in a federal court? If so, remove the statue. Did the individual order the commission of treason, capital crimes, slavery, genocide or terrorism (as defined by the International Court of Justice)? If so, no statue.

Less cut and dried but worth thinking hard about: Did the individual have a specific connection to the location of the statue? Lee never lived in New Orleans or Charlottesville, but he did [rent a home](#) in Richmond. Is the statue used as an active venue for promoting treason, capital crimes, slavery, genocide or terrorism? The police data should tell us.

Finally, did the individual undertake specific acts to mitigate the historical harms done? If so, put them on a plaque on the base.

There are no obvious or easy answers in most cases. But these questions will allow us to discuss the real historical issues, not the emotional and political ones, and in a sober and directed fashion. And maybe they can allow Robert E. Lee — and us — to enjoy some peace.

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