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Dusting Off the Old Heroes of the Republic: The Newest Civil Rights Movement in Washington, D.C.

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Abstract

When I decided to attend the Women’s March on Washington this past January, I tried desperately to keep the Civil War out of my mind. I didn’t want to court disaster. Whatever their politics, anyone who knows anything about the Civil War can hear the familiar wails of a nation groaning under the weight of paralyzing political factionalism, deep sectional divides, and a potential constitutional crisis—in the works long before the Drumpf presidency—surrounding the proper limit and application of executive power in our democracy, amongst other threats. But I just couldn’t allow myself to envision the worst. It made me physically sick to have to wonder, honestly, whether my home was on the verge of throwing away the sacrifices of millions of selfless patriots over the years simply because we could no longer see our neighbors, our family members, as human. Because we had so lost faith in the “unfinished work” that we would surrender liberty for safety, virtue for ambition, and love for power. That we would think ourselves so vulnerable, so small, that we would betray our friends and forsake the world. That we would stop being leaders because the job was no longer easy.

Keywords

Matt LaRoche, Monuments, Ulysses S. Grant, Washington DC, Women's History

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Dusting Off the Old Heroes of the Republic: The Newest Civil Rights Movement in Washington, D.C.

By [Matt LaRoche '17](#)

When I decided to attend the Women’s March on Washington this past January, I tried desperately to keep the Civil War out of my mind. I didn’t want to court disaster. Whatever their politics, anyone who knows anything about the Civil War can hear the familiar wails of a nation groaning under the weight of paralyzing political factionalism, deep sectional divides, and a potential constitutional crisis—in the works long before the Drumpf presidency—surrounding the proper limit and application of executive power in our democracy, amongst other threats. But I just couldn’t allow myself to envision the worst. It made me physically sick to have to wonder, honestly, whether my home was on the verge of throwing away the sacrifices of millions of selfless patriots over the years simply because we could no longer see our neighbors, our family members, as human. Because we had so lost faith in the “unfinished work” that we would surrender liberty for safety, virtue for ambition, and love for power. That we would think ourselves so vulnerable, so small, that we would betray our friends and forsake the world. That we would stop being leaders because the job was no longer easy.



View of Women’s March from Grant Memorial. Photo by the author.

As I stepped out of the terminal at Union Station, into the grey and misting morning, I couldn’t escape these thoughts. Yes, I was thrilled, even energized as I fell into the crowd and somehow we found an irrepressible rhythm that drove us towards the Mall. But I was still scared. This was no battle, but I was bearing witness to a struggle for the nation’s future, and that was too close for comfort for me.

I turned around to look back on the classic façade of Union Station, still draped with the beautiful, big banners of my country. Now, I'm from Baltimore—we take the Star Spangled Banner seriously, just as we take the title of “Defender” seriously. But as I looked back on the marble-and-granite masterpiece that was completed while Abraham Lincoln's son, Robert, was still alive, it looked eerily like a muster ground. I could almost imagine the thronging demonstrators as soldiers in blue, being presented with their regimental standards by the women and wise men of the community, before being waved up into freight cars and sent off to kill other young men, doing the same just a hundred miles away.

That thought didn't linger long, of course—Union Station was a post-war creation, after all. I honestly found it almost silly—the U.S. is at peace now, thank God, and we live in a very different place and time than our ancestors. It didn't make sense that the whole scene stank so heavily of black powder and blood to me. That is, until I'd walked on another block or two towards the Mall.

It'd been a great many years since I'd spent any real time in D.C. My family fled the city after middle school, and my mental road map of the place was no longer that sharp. But every block reminded me more and more of just how strongly the Civil War had carved itself into D.C.'s flesh. Without even really looking for them, statues of Union generals appeared in postage-stamp parks that survive, distinct from the sprawling city that has morphed around them with the passing years.

I was sure happy to see, for example, General Grant keeping watch before the Capitol steps. But, then again, I'm weird. The Civil War has shaped who I am since that first visit to Gettysburg I made at the age of five. I honestly did not expect that anyone else on the march would care whose statue they were passing, much less who the man was, or what he'd done in his life. I was so very, pleasantly wrong.

We spent all of five minutes by the Grant memorial. There was something stirring about seeing the old general up on his horse, still keeping his long watch across the reflecting pool towards the Lincoln Memorial. The hundreds of thousands of concerned, unbowed citizens spread before him as far as the eye could see drove home the site's sanctity. Generations of Americans, facing their darkest hour, had known to come here.



The Grant Memorial. Photo by the author.

The real Grant had watched the Republic's victorious, exhausted armies in their Grand Review along Pennsylvania Avenue. They proceeded from the Capitol building, passing through the spot where, a decade later, the Peace Memorial would hold up Grief as she weeps on the shoulder of History. History's tablet reads, "They died that their country might live."

Seventy-four years later, Marion Anderson, a black contralto and one of the most celebrated singers of the twentieth century, was barred from singing to an integrated audience in Constitution Hall—by the Daughters of the American Revolution, no less. She worked with the NAACP, as well as President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt to organize an open-air concert in response. On Easter Sunday, 1939, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, she sang before a crowd of 75,000. She opened with a passionate rendition of "My Country 'Tis of Thee," and the radio broadcasted her refutation of hate and tyranny into millions of American homes. Grant watched it all from atop his pedestal.

In 1963, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. drew as many as 300,000 marchers to D.C. for the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." With his iconic speech, given to celebrate the centennial anniversary of Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, King rededicated the country to the dream of an America strong, confident, and virtuous enough to judge all humans "by the content of their characters," and not by their color, or their creed, or dare I say, by the caricatures that are so often used to damn or disregard an average person without that messy, in-between step of actually meeting them in the flesh.

To the best of my knowledge, the crowds did not quite reach Grant's statue that day. But still he bore witness to history in the making, as did the rest of D.C. If his ears were real, he would have dimly heard "I have a dream..." echoing its way across the reflecting pool.

Just after 11 o'clock, the crowd had already reached Grant's memorial. My parents and I stood to the right of the general's pillar, flanked by a bronze relief of marching

infantrymen to my left, and a soaring sculpture of charging cavalrymen to my right. Dozens of marchers stood with us. They formed up like a company on the steps of the memorial, where the water met the shore, wherever there was room. They came dressed in all sorts of clothes—button-ups, sweats, sneakers, boots. Some wore designer coats and some were dressed in hand-me-downs. Some wore [pink pussyhats](#) and some ball caps. There were Muslims, Methodists, Catholics—I even saw some Canadians, if you can believe it. But above all, all were there to defend the Republic, and the example it sets when at its best. And in their darkest hour, they had gathered here in the presence of the old heroes to keep a sacred trust with the multitudes who had come before. They took up the unfinished work of America in a big way.

And best of all?

When a young woman asked who the man on the horse was, I was nowhere near the first to answer.