



Shifting Perspectives on Confederate Statues: The Need for More Representative Monuments

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The removal of Confederate monuments in the United States has emerged as a focal point of ongoing discussions about race, history, and cultural identity. Recognizing the deep division surrounding these monuments, the paper emphasizes the importance of balancing historical memory with social justice to prompt a more equitable society. The brief will examine the arguments for and against preserving such statues, exploring their historical context, societal implications, and potential alternatives.

II. OVERVIEW

The debate surrounding such Confederate monuments has intensified in the face of evolving societal values and heightened awareness of systemic racism in the United States. With high-profile incidents such as the Unite the Right rally in 2017, and the murder of George Floyd in 2020 fueling the Black Lives Matter movement, these protests prompted a national examination of issues of racism and historical representation. The removal of Confederate statues has emerged as a focal point amidst this controversy. What began as a call for police reform and racial justice quickly expanded to include critical re-evaluations of historical narratives that have marginalized African Americans,

particularly as reflected in public monuments.

A. Relevance

This debate is deeply intertwined with ongoing issues of racial inequality and historic representation. These monuments often glorify figures associated with slavery and racist ideologies, perpetuating harmful narratives and psychological trauma for marginalized communities. As movements like Black Lives Matter have gained prominence, public consciousness has shifted towards deconstructing symbols of oppression and promoting social justice. The removal or replacement of Confederate statues offers an opportunity to challenge historical revisionism, foster inclusivity, and promote a more accurate and equitable understanding of American history. Recognizing the importance of diverse representation in public monuments is essential for building a society that values racial equity and collective memory.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Historically, Confederate statues were erected during periods of racial tension, with 75% of statues being erected during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coinciding with the implementation of Jim Crow laws and a

resurgence of white supremacy. These monuments were strategically placed in public spaces to resist social progress, assert dominance and distort the legacy of the Civil War, with 1700 Confederate symbols still existing today. More specifically, the erection of many Confederate statues has reinforced the “Lost Cause” myth during the Civil War, which romanticized Confederacy and misrepresented slavery as a benevolent institution instead of grappling with the historical rampage of white supremacy. This pseudo-historical ideology continues to be entrenched in the Deep South today through public commemoration, creating a false narrative that denies painful realities of inherent racism.

Following the self-avowed white supremacist’s massacre of nine African American churchgoers in Charleston in June 2015, political tensions and historical obstructionism will only be furthered without correcting historical inaccuracies or reflecting on their usage as tools of political manipulation and racial oppression. Recent movements such as the June 2020 incident in Portland, Oregon, where protestors infamously toppled a bronze statue of George Washington and set it ablaze, have led to the defacement of numerous statues of Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and other prominent historical figures. The Southern Poverty Law Center reported that over 160 Confederate monuments were removed or renamed in 2020 after Floyd’s death alone . With the January 2021 Make America Great Again (MAGA) riot in the U.S. Capital and other subsequent civil disturbances, there has been sharpened public attention surrounding the public display of all things “Confederate” leading to 75% of Americans supporting monument removal.

This surge in monumental removals reveals deeply seated civil divisions that have persisted for centuries, suggesting that these statues are more than mere historical artifacts but articulate complex cultural narratives of a romanticized past versus marginalized voices. This trend reflects a larger societal reckoning with systemic racism and historical injustices, as the public becomes increasingly aware of historical wrongs. As communities grapple with the implications of these historical narratives, there has been an intensifying debate between the continued upkeep of historically-problematic statues that allegedly further colonialist attitudes in the Deep South, leading to an increasing demand to replace them with more representative monuments.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

Primary stakeholders include marginalized communities, particularly African Americans who, already victims of redlining and segregation in society, view these monuments as reminders of structural inequalities and historical traumas. More than 65% of African Americans surveyed in 11 former Confederate states with the highest rates of lynching, identified exposure to Confederate monuments as a source of stress and visual evidence of their powerless position or lack of belonging in society. With Confederate figures serving as symbolic masters instead of impartial historical artifacts, these communities seek recognition, justice, and healing through the removal or recontextualization of oppressive monuments. Local governments and civic authorities are also key stakeholders, responsible for managing public spaces and balancing

historical preservation with social equity. Additionally, advocacy groups, historians, and cultural organizations have vested interests in shaping how history is represented and commemorated. Businesses and tourism sectors may also be affected by the visibility of controversial monuments, influencing local economic and social dynamics.

B. Risks of Indifference

Ignoring the presence of Confederate symbols perpetuates systemic racial inequalities and hampers societal progress toward racial reconciliation. Inaction risks reinforcing harmful narratives, causing ongoing trauma, and alienating marginalized communities. Moreover, failure to address these symbols can damage community cohesion, spark social unrest, and diminish public trust in institutions. The economic costs of maintaining and defending these monuments during protests or vandalism are significant, diverting resources from community development initiatives. Overall, indifference to this issue risks entrenching divisions and obstructing efforts to build an inclusive, equitable society.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because Confederate monuments influence societal values and impact community cohesion, nonpartisan intervention is essential.

- 1) Promotion of social cohesion and national unity: Removing or recontextualizing these monuments can help foster a more inclusive national identity that respects diversity and encourages reconciliation among different communities. Such

actions do not erase history but acknowledge the need for multiple perspectives, which can promote mutual understanding, reduce racial tensions, and strengthen social bonds across racial and cultural divides. These steps are vital for building a more cohesive and resilient society.

- 2) Enhancement of community well-being and psychological safety: Monuments memorializing figures associated with racism and oppression can cause psychological distress and feelings of alienation, particularly among marginalized groups. Replacing or providing context for these symbols allows communities to create environments where all residents feel valued, respected, and safe. This approach supports mental health and cultivates a sense of belonging which are crucial components for healthy, thriving communities that can effectively address their social challenges.
- 3) Economic and educational development: Maintaining divisive monuments incurs significant costs, including expenses for protection, repairs, and defending them during protests instead of investing in more *representative* forms of public art. For example, the city of Richmond, Virginia, spent over half a million dollars restoring monuments damaged by protestors in 2017 alone. With 66% of municipalities reporting budget constraints that affect public art projects, redirecting these funds toward critical community services like education, infrastructure, public health

initiatives, community development projects, or the creation of new, inclusive monuments can promote a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of history. Additionally, when communities allocate their budgets to preserve divisive symbols, they risk fostering an environment where societal needs are systematically overlooked, thus contributing to a cycle of underinvestment in foundational community services.

Such investments in new, diverse monuments can stimulate local economies and enhance community identity. For example, the removal of a Confederate statue in Baltimore, Maryland coincided with an increase in the sales of nearby businesses. By eliminating racial exclusions and strategically investing in new public commemoration and creating new public art, it can catalyze economic progress and job creation within the arts and statue sector, attract tourism, encourage cultural engagement, foster residential bonds, and a shared cultural identity.

V. TRIED POLICY

Following the June 2020 Lafayette Square protests and the toppling of the Andrew Jackson statue, President Trump issued an Executive Order in June 2020 to establish a Task Force aimed at rebuilding and protecting monuments, asserting these statues serve as “silent teachers” of our national story. In his view, historical monuments, often erected during times of national reflection, serve as opportunities of education and critical engagement with history, markers of collective memory, and evidence of

vital historical content that vastly overshadows their oppressive significance.

Despite the pressure to adhere to government norms, rather than erasing history, monuments provide opportunities for education and critical engagement. For example, in Richmond, Virginia, the city installed interpretive plaques on Confederate statues in 2018 to acknowledge their divisive legacy and promote understanding. Other cities, such as Portland, Oregon, have established review committees like the 2023 Monument Evaluation Committee that recommended adding explanatory plaques to statues of figures like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, rather than removing them, fostering public dialogue and transparency. These policies exemplify approaches that preserve history while encouraging critical reflection.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Establishment of a Regional or National Commission on Educational Monuments

One promising policy option involves creating a regional or national commission tasked with reviewing existing monuments and education policies and recommending appropriate actions to remove, contextualize, or replace. This commission should include diverse community representatives, historians, cultural experts, and civil society stakeholders to ensure balanced and fair decision-making. Such a body would evaluate monuments based on their historical significance, community impact, and relevance to contemporary values. For example, similar commissions such as the North Carolina’s UNC Review Committee in 2017 that evaluated the “Silent Sam” confederate monument on Chapel Hill and New Orleans Mayor Advisory Commission on Confederate Monuments in

2017, have been used to address contentious symbols and Confederate statues, serving as a neutral, authoritative authority to guide public decision-making. This process would facilitate transparent, community-informed decisions that balance historical remembrance with social justice.

Educational Programs Using Digital Technologies

In addition to monument review, a second policy option involves investing in educational reforms that provide greater context about historical monuments. States, cities, and school officials should allocate funding to develop digital programs, such as augmented reality (AR) tools, that offer immersive narratives explaining the history and symbolism behind monuments. This would enhance student engagement and understanding, similar to how AR increases visitor interaction in museums. These technologies can turn public spaces into educational sites, fostering critical understanding of complex histories and encouraging dialogue. For instance, AR tours could show the original context of Confederate statues, including the social and political motives behind their erection, thus promoting awareness and reflection among viewers. This approach aims to reconcile history with contemporary values, fostering a more informed and inclusive collective memory.

Funding for Inclusive Monuments and Recontextualization Initiatives

A third policy option involves state legislatures and local municipalities directing or creating funds toward commissioning new, culturally representative monuments that honor diverse historical figures such as Black leaders, Indigenous

figures, or civil rights activists. Additionally, this financial support could reflect the broad spectrum of American history and values by *recontextualizing* existing statues. For example, in a protest piece, artist Pablo Machioli erected a statue honoring Madre Luz, a pregnant African American woman, in front of the Robert E. Lee statue, forcibly recontextualizing the Lee and Jackson commemoration, framing the Confederate generals as defenders of the institution of slavery. Similarly, the empty pedestal in Maryland's Wydman Park Dell rededicated to Harriet Tubman creates a more powerful social disruption, where the emptiness reshapes historical depictions and honors the marginalized communities. Additionally, existing Confederate statues could be supplemented with plaques, installations, or sculptures that provide historical critique and alternative narratives. These efforts would help reshape public spaces into sites of inclusivity and education, fostering community pride and unity.

Implementation and Oversight

To ensure these policies are effective, oversight mechanisms should be established to monitor progress, community feedback, and adherence to principles of inclusivity. Regular public consultations and community forums can help refine policies and ensure broad acceptance. Moreover, integrating these efforts with existing educational and cultural initiatives can maximize their impact, making the process of addressing Confederate monuments a sustained, inclusive effort rather than a one-time action.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The debate over Confederate monuments underscores the need to re-evaluate how history is commemorated in public spaces. Moving beyond static statues of oppressive figures toward inclusive representations can promote societal healing, social cohesion, and a more accurate collective memory. Implementing policies such as commissions for monument review, investing in educational initiatives, and funding new, diverse monuments can help bridge racial divides and foster a society rooted in justice and inclusion. While challenges such as public resistance, lack of internet and digital access, and funding limitations remain, strategic, inclusive approaches can lead to meaningful progress. Embracing these changes is essential for building a future where public spaces serve as platforms for healing, education, and unity.

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