

NATIONAL REVIEW

Bronze Plaques Matter

Americans should embrace the good, the bad, and the ugly of U.S. history — rather than shove statues down the memory hole.

By Deroy Murdock — May 20, 2017

New Orleans — Robert E. Lee lost again.

The statue of the Confederate Army's general in chief vanished Friday from atop a 60-foot-tall column in the middle of Lee Circle. This work is the fourth of four Confederate-oriented statues that the city of New Orleans has removed in recent weeks, amid considerable and well-deserved controversy.

During my annual pilgrimage to the Crescent City early this month, I saw Lee rise above well-tended grounds, including grass and flowers, although the concrete at his monument's base was badly broken. Interestingly enough, the man who led one side of the Civil War to defeat stood just two blocks north of the spectacular [National WWII Museum](#), which chronicles a unified America's triumph in that mammoth struggle.

Along the landmark's side, a graffito demanded: "TAKE IT DOWN NOW." That ultimately victorious sentiment was popular around here, but not unanimous.

"They should leave it," said Marquis, a black man in a white T-shirt. A couple of weeks back, he sat at the statute's base and listened to music on a small speaker wirelessly connected to his cell phone. He breathed a whiff of disgust at those who wanted Lee toppled. "As someone said, 'Ain't no blood in him.'"

Marquis took a drag off of his cigarette and continued. "He's just standing there. So, they're going to take him down. And who are they going to put up there? Donald Trump?"

Even then, Lee was not long for the circle that bears his name.

In what seems like a major act of virtue signaling, New Orleans' Democratic mayor Mitch Landrieu led the effort to purify the Big Easy of these four Confederate-era artworks. The first honored a bloody white rebellion against the city's biracial government during Reconstruction. Workers then swept a depiction of Confederate president Jefferson Davis from a pedestal on

Jefferson Davis Highway. Tuesday saw General P. G. T. Beauregard's retreat. And now, Lee has achieved his rendezvous with obscurity.

This exercise is reminiscent of former Governor George Elmer Pataki (R., N.Y.). In his own massive act of virtue signaling, he secured federal funds from G. W. Bush's EPA to dredge up and remove PCBs that had sat quietly for decades at the bottom of the Hudson River. This noxious industrial runoff was from General Electric factories in upstate New York. Rather than let sleeping toxins lie, Pataki had the riverbed vacuumed. The result? PCB levels shot up, and the Hudson's relatively clean waters were befouled anew.

Likewise, this episode has stirred up the relative tranquility in New Orleans, with long-healed wounds being scratched open. Just blocks from the ever-delightful New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, which I savored for the 23rd consecutive time a few weeks ago, a group of Confederate sympathizers waved the South's Battle Flag beside Beauregard's striking statue at City Park. A year ago, Beauregard sat in splendor beneath the sun, all alone. Confederate flags were nowhere in sight. This year's display of Rebel sympathies and banners did not signal progress. And now, Beauregard has been scraped from his pedestal and whisked to an undisclosed location.

Say what you will about these statues, they tend to be excellent works of art. Despite the horrors at their roots, they beautifully capture the human physique and, very often, the equestrian form. If nothing else, they added vivid, dramatic images to this lovely city.

This effort to — ahem — whitewash history is chilling and, indeed, Orwellian. It echoes Winston Smith, the protagonist of *1984*, as he sits at his desk in the Ministry of Truth, clips politically incorrect articles from old newspapers, and stuffs them down the memory hole — never to be seen again.

Likewise, removing these figures snatches them and all that they did from public view and, eventually, from the collective recollection of the people. Out of sight, out of mind.

“You can't sanitize history,” a white man in a black shirt at Lee Circle lamented to CBS affiliate WWL-TV last night. “Our history is not all good. And it's not all bad. But it's all true.”

So, who's next?

Once those who fought to maintain slavery have been erased, what about those who owned slaves? Why should their tributes be spared?

American slave owners included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and even Ulysses Grant. Why not remove all of the landmarks to Washington and Jefferson, starting with the Washington Monument and the Jefferson memorial on the National Mall? Grant's Tomb? Who needs it? Manhattan's Upper West Side really could use a new parking lot.

The recently celebrated Alexander Hamilton also owned slaves. The Annapolis-based *Maryland Gazette's* April 10, 1783, edition announced the sale of "a number of valuable slaves; consisting of men, women, and children; late the property of Alexander Hamilton." Perhaps it's time to wind down *Hamilton's* smash-hit Broadway run.

Cities and thoroughfares also bear the names of slave owners and other evildoers. Take Washington, D.C. Let's just call it the District of Columbia. Oops! Columbia refers to Christopher Columbus, the white imperialist who first injected the virus of Western Civilization into this hemisphere. So, we better call it District. As for Columbus, let's yank him down from high above Columbus Circle. We can re-name that part of Manhattan simply Circle.

Here is a better idea:

Let's stop this Stalinesque historical airbrushing and leave the damn statues in place.

Instead, where controversial statues still exist, organize contests for high-school students to compose the best 250-word essays that sum up the good, the bad, and the ugly about these historical figures. This 250-word limit parallels America's 250th birthday — July 4, 2026. These competitions could preview that momentous occasion.

There already is talk about excising the magnificent statue of Andrew Jackson that dominates Jackson Square, in the heart of this city's world-famous French Quarter. Before that outrage ensues, this contest should reward the best 250 words about him. It likely would cite the good: Jackson stymied British invaders at the War of 1812's Battle of New Orleans. The bad: He owned slaves. The ugly: His Trail of Tears forcibly relocated some 100,000 American Indians from their homes in the South in the 1830s. An estimated 15,000 died in the process.

Before another statue of Robert E. Lee disappears elsewhere, a winning essay on him might mention that he commanded the Confederate military, defended the ownership of slaves (of which he was guilty), but also served as president of what is now Washington and Lee University. In a spirit of post-war reconciliation, he welcomed students from the North. Lee also expelled white students from his school who attacked local black men and successfully promoted state-funded schools for black students.

A panel of historians would judge these essays for their accuracy, thoroughness, and give the winning high-school students generous college scholarships. At \$10 per word, \$2,500 per winning entry would be a decent starting point.

More important, each such essay would be cast in bronze and placed adjacent to its corresponding statue. Visitors could weigh the pros and cons of these individuals while viewing their statues in their greater (if summarized) context.

Eventually, a coffee-table book of these works could present a color photograph of each monument on one page with its attendant essay on the page opposite. Sales of these books could finance additional scholarships for students of American history, particularly slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Proceeds and donations would help send copies of this book to high-school and college libraries across America.

And the name for this initiative? Bronze Plaques Matter.

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