

# The Irrationality Of Destroying Civil War Monuments

Across the nation people driven by a mistaken sense of righteousness tear down monuments that remind us of American history, that depict Americans who sided with the Confederacy during the Civil War. The desire to bring the monuments down arises from an immaturity and political correctness that compels adherence to suppression over a robust exchange of ideas and information. Those who favor destruction of the monuments generally lack a sophisticated understanding of the underlying history and operate without a clear distinguishing principle. To them, any statue of a slave owner or apologist for slavery that exists should be destroyed, or at least, removed from public view. Theirs is an irrational hatred that superficially removes reminders of history, as if we ought to suppress the errors of our past rather than be reminded of them so as not to repeat them.

The institution of slavery is a horrendous evil, inconsistent with our founding principles and with humanity. To own a person, to force a person to perform labor against his or her will, and to subject a person to life dictated in every respect by another is an abomination, a robbery of the very reason for existence, of very nearly a person's soul. Slavery is so fundamental an offense that it defies credulity to distinguish between bondage and perpetual imprisonment and torture. Although contrary to the Lockean principles so beautifully expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and although controversial even among the families of those individuals who vehemently defended the institution preceding the Civil War, the peculiar institution of slavery grew in America like a cancer, at first thought benign and likely to disappear without need for abolition, but then by 1840

becoming a malignancy in the South, which Southerners dared not discontinue volitionally.

But while the institution of slavery is abhorrent, as was the Confederate States of America which intended to preserve it, individuals like Robert E. Lee, Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson, and Jubal Anderson Early, who believed their duties to their states first and foremost ought not be condemned with a broad brush stroke that aims to remove any mention of them from history or any image of them from the public square.

Those men helped define military tactics in the age and were possessed of many personal attributes that define greatness. To be sure, few of those who we revere in the world can be held to a standard of perfection. Indeed, it was Jesus Christ, who reminded us of the folly associated with self-righteous indignation that would justify condemnation of the whole person for the sake of a single sin: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone." John 8:7.

The same folly preoccupies those whose political correctness drives them to expunge from history and the public square every artifact or reference to the support for or the defense of the institution of slavery. There is from many of the great generals of the Civil War who fought on the side of the Confederacy much to be learned, not least of which is their deft use of war fighting to enable a force outnumbered and ill-equipped to defeat a Union foe repeatedly. We may justly abhor slavery but we should not erase history in the process. We need to understand slavery, and to understand it, we must not only discover what life was like under the institution of slavery but also what caused those who participated in it, defended it, and condoned it to do so. The search for knowledge and truth depends on the discovery of ignorance and falsehood. We learn from our mistakes, and we are bound to commit them again if we suppress the evidence of those mistakes.

The statues of confederate soldiers and generals are monuments

to individuals who share the complexities of us all. Those people are multi-faceted with lives defined by a loyalty to their States, torn apart by the conflict between Union and States, driven to defend their families, and distinguished by their conflicting beliefs (passionately committed to individual rights yet apologists for slavery; exceedingly faithful yet willing to defend man's inhumanity to man). None of those depicted in the statues is perfect, as indeed none of us is perfect. With hind sight we may see all too clearly the fallacy that is the institution of slavery (the repugnance of the notion that one people of one race should have a legal right to control the lives of another people of another race) but for many who fought for the confederacy (the vast majority of which never owned slaves; less than 2% of the Southern population were slave owners) the cause was just because the war they conceived to be against their states, their families, and their ways of life.

The American Civil War defines the nation precisely because it is a war of brother against brother, a Cain versus Able struggle, a conflict that we should endeavor to understand rather than write out of existence. It is instructive to reflect upon the mighty rhetoric in Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. A spirit of charity rises above the base fight of good versus evil and enables us to view the past with maturity without the need to suppress the historical record. Having lived the equivalent of more than a single lifetime in his struggle to preserve the Union and end the institution of slavery, Abraham Lincoln had what many viewed as just cause to obliterate the South. The victor had righteousness on his side and the sweep of abolitionism could have reduced to death and slavery the slaveholders, but Lincoln had no such intention because his was a commitment to charity; he offered grace instead of destruction.

Lincoln, like Robert E. Lee, viewed slavery in biblical terms. The Lord would abolish it from the face of the Earth

when the Lord was ready. If the Union won the war, it was due in no small measure to a Divine Providence that intended for the institution of slavery to be eradicated from the South. But while Lincoln meant for slavery to end, he did not view those responsible for the institution as worthy of total condemnation. Rather, he understood that as for their actions to sustain slavery, they would be appropriately judged by God and should not be judged by Lincoln. It was for the Union to end slavery but to forgive the sinner, to welcome back into the Union those whose sin it was to subject others to bondage.

Lincoln spoke of the illegitimacy of slavery but did not translate that view into a condemnation of those who enslaved others and of those who fought for a Confederacy dedicated to perpetuate slavery. "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces," Lincoln said, "but let us judge not, that we be not judged." For Lincoln, slavery was an offense that the Union fought to end, but whether the Union would be allowed to bring it to an end was a matter ultimately for God. "If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away . . ."

If he could end the scourge of slavery throughout the United States, Lincoln was, in that, contented. He did not want more destruction but, instead, wanted healing once the sin was removed. "With malice toward none," he said, "with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up

the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Those who would destroy monument after monument to rid the nation of a subset of ugly parts of history do us all a grave disservice. They ignore the truths contained in the closing admonition in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. They lack the maturity and wisdom that enables a person to deplore some aspects of an individual's life while simultaneously admiring other aspects; or, to recognize an individual's historic significance without having to agree with that person's political philosophy. It is that same lack of maturity and wisdom that leads youth on college campuses to rant and rave during a speaker's presentation because the speaker does not hold views identical to their own. In truth, these destructive and speech suppressive actions are the real scourge that burdens our nation today, certainly not the presence of inanimate statues that remind us of that great test of national endurance, the Civil War.

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