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DAILY COMMENT

# THE BATTLE OVER CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS IN NEW ORLEANS

By Jelani Cobb 05:00 A.M.

*Protesters who defend Confederate-era monuments wish to maintain an à-la-carte relationship with history.*

The adage holds that history is written by the victors, but, as the masked, bulletproof-vested municipal workers who assembled in New Orleans at three o'clock in the morning on Confederate Memorial Day might attest, the most indelible version of the American past was authored by those who lost the Civil War. The workers were there to remove an obelisk dedicated to the Crescent City White League and the Battle of Liberty Place, in 1874. Clashes over American history are typically fought with duelling sets of footnotes and the subjective shade of historiographic essays. This one, which involved death threats issued to the mayor and the contractors bidding on the project, risked being fought using tools with considerably higher stopping power.

Four monuments in all, including those memorializing Robert E. Lee, P. G. T. Beauregard, and Jefferson Davis, were slated to be removed, and on Sunday protests and counter-protests broke out over the removal. In the dark early morning hours of Thursday, the statue of Davis was removed, as duelling demonstrations cheered and denounced the action. But the obelisk carried particularly fraught implications. The cause of the Confederacy, even before its participants were all dead, was edited into a more palatable abstraction—"states' rights," a phrase whose meaning was ambiguous enough that it might actually pass for virtue. In his memoirs, Davis, the President of

the Confederacy, wrote that slavery was “in no wise the cause of the conflict.” This was a breathtaking act of self-absolution and deception. Consider the language of South Carolina’s declaration of secession from the Union. Speaking of Lincoln’s Republican government, the state wrote:

On the 4th day of March next, this party will take possession of the Government. It has announced that the South shall be excluded from the common territory, that the judicial tribunals shall be made sectional, and that a war must be waged against slavery until it shall cease throughout the United States. . . . We, therefore, the People of South Carolina, by our delegates in Convention assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, have solemnly declared that the Union heretofore existing between this State and the other States of North America, is dissolved.

Yet the denial of slavery’s role allowed for the South’s actors and their motives to be thought of as “complex.” This became the first line of defense for their apologists. Still, no such complexity, manufactured or otherwise, extends to the Crescent City White League. In September, 1874, the group revolted against the interracial Reconstruction government of Louisiana, killing eleven police officers in what came to be known as the Battle of Liberty Place. In 1932, a plaque was added to the base of the monument recognizing the revolt explicitly as a noble act in support of what it unabashedly called “white supremacy,” referring to Reconstructionist officials as “usurpers.”

If the history of the Civil War and its causes remains strikingly unfamiliar to certain Americans, the story of Reconstruction is virtually an enigma. This is not an accident. The story of Reconstruction is that of interracial government and white terrorism that brought it to an end. It sits awkwardly in the narrative of an America defined by continual progress and the inevitable triumph of good over evil. The Civil War is the central axis of American history, cleaving the past between that of a fledgling union and that of a scarred but mature nation that understood the notion of tragedy. Reconstruction, however, has largely been disparaged as a failure, though for wildly divergent reasons.

During the eleven-year period between the end of the Civil War and the disputed election of 1876, the United States inaugurated a bold experiment in actual democracy. Between 1865 and 1870, the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments successively abolished slavery, established black citizenship and equal

protection of laws, and extended the vote to African-American men, resulting in the election of more than six hundred black local, state, and federal officeholders, many of whom were themselves former slaves. Even before the period ended, however, a body of literature was being created to disparage it as the calamitous era of “Negro rule” in the South. In 1909, when the historian W. E. B. Du Bois delivered a paper to the American Historical Association on the benefits of Reconstruction, he was swimming against the tide of an entire body of scholarship proclaiming the period as a uniquely disastrous experiment that had proved the folly of racial equality. Six years later, that perspective was cemented in popular perception by D. W. Griffith’s white-supremacist melodrama “The Birth of a Nation.” In 1935, when Du Bois published “Black Reconstruction,” a seven-hundred-and-forty-six-page tome in defense of the interracial governments of the South, he identified the true disaster as the political horse-trading that had ended Reconstruction and left emancipated blacks at the mercy of their former enslavers. Thus, to one set of eyes, Reconstruction failed at the moment it was abandoned; to another, the failure lay in it ever being undertaken in the first place.

This has everything to do with the tumult that emerged in New Orleans last week, and which will likely persist as the city maintains its secret schedule of removals. When I spoke to Mayor Mitch Landrieu and mentioned that there was a lot going on in New Orleans, he replied, “Well, it’s been going on for three hundred years.” The New Orleans City Council voted to remove the monuments in the wake of Dylann Roof’s murderous assault on the Emanuel A.M.E. Church, in June of 2015—an act he tied to the Confederate cause. In response, South Carolina removed the Confederate flag from the grounds of the state capitol; other monuments to the Confederacy have been removed since then.

The Southern Poverty Law Center noted last year that there are more than seven hundred Confederate monuments throughout the South and as far away as Arizona and Massachusetts. The Union cause is sequestered in textbooks; the cause of insurrection, of states’ rights, of the unalloyed brutality of human enslavement—that cause still towers in the region where the war was fought.

As with much else in Trump’s version of America, the protesters who lined up to defend the monument wish to maintain an à-la-carte relationship with history. They

have cloaked their defense of the monuments by presenting it as a recognition of the valor of the men who fought for the Confederate cause. But that excuse falls flat when recognizing, for instance, that there is no monument in New Orleans to the mass slave revolt that took place in 1811, when some two hundred men who had endured the brutality of bondage marched on the city, killing two white men and burning plantations as they went. This is not the version of valor recognized by the crowd before the Lee memorial, or those phoning in death threats to Landrieu's office.

At the same time, there is a valid, if lesser, risk in removing the Confederate monuments: the possibility that their absence is too neatly exculpatory—that future generations may know little about the acts of inhumanity that took place in the South, and even less about the misguided impulse that glorified those incidents for more than a century. The monuments are not relics of a bygone era; they're indicators of the one we're still living in.

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