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Monuments of The Confederacy in Today's Context: Inflammatory or Commemorative?

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Introduction

The Civil War was fought 153 years ago. Current social issues illustrate that the divisiveness of that period has never completely resolved itself. This can be attributed to a host of fairly subjective reasons. The adage *time heals all wounds* has revealed itself to be demonstrably untrue within the current social fabric of our country – the house divided continues to be divided. The very same social and legal discourses enveloping the country after the war's resolution have found themselves periodically perpetuated ever since, in clockwork fashion.

This current flashpoint of social friction is focused on the ethical legitimacy of Confederate Civil War statues residing in parks, town-squares, and the cemeteries of cities all throughout the country. Ironically, this topical debate has been waged many, many times over, much to the surprise of most of its participants I am sure. While public, social, and legal debates are beneficial – evolution cannot happen within a vacuum – it has turned violent in some cases currently, and has further divided the house that needed no further separation.

There are several factions inherent to this conflict. Some are antagonists that need no introduction or explanation as to the root of their Machiavellian motivations, i.e., white supremacists. Truthfully though, other players do not possess such outwardly racist enthusiasms. The impetuses for their positions are as benign as not wanting to see history misrepresented, beloved landscapes altered, or a past forgotten. In opposition are those, especially within the African-American community, amongst others, that feel that these representations seek to further oppress a people that have been historically subjugated and persecuted, all within the guise of celebrating history via marble and bronze effigies.

It is truly a complex issue with no clear moral delineation. I, myself, have changed positions on this issue several times despite the fact that I avidly have consumed the news coverage concerning this topic long before the events of Charlottesville made it a popularized political tool of the more radical factions of populism. Complex social issues can only be understood within context – one dimensional headlines do not convey understanding. This context must address historical actions and their social implications to relate understanding. This research paper will attempt to convey a holistic understanding of this context so that the reader may decide for themselves if Confederate statues are inflammatory or commemorative in society today.

Reconstruction

The turbulent years following the Civil War are known as the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877), and may be the most politically dynamic period in American history. “For decades, these years were widely seen as the nadir in the saga of American democracy” (Foner, 2017). Union political entities and an angry public sought to punish the South for their “treachery” and years of

suffering under the hands of a hard-fought war. Confederate States felt the bitter sting of a lost war, and what they perceived to be the actions of an imperialistic federal government overstepping its authority. Caught in the middle were the newly freed African-Americans of the South who had been forbidden from receiving any education previously, owned little more than the clothes on their backs, and were residing in a geo-economy relying on a labor force requiring nominal operating costs. In this climate, the South, still under occupation by the Army of the North, rejoined the Federal Government, which wasted no time in becoming wrought with duplicity.

Under these fragile times, in an effort to prevent another conflict, the Federal Government was conciliatory towards the South and some of its controversial acts meant to “preserve” or “revere” its history. Some of the acts referenced are the flying of Confederate flags, though not within the realm of official state buildings as would come to pass later. Also, the playing of *Dixie*, the Confederate anthem, in parades and political gatherings was tolerated with little protest. Lastly, the building of monuments was seen by both sides immediately following the war as a part of a healing process that was to be naturally expected. This historical phenomenon is confirmed by Brundage (2017); “As part of the process of national reconciliation, white Northerners agreed to tolerate the commemoration of Confederates, and they contributed both moral support and funds to the veneration of a few Confederate figures in particular, especially Robert E. Lee.”

As the Union was engaged in the same process of finding ways to memorialize the dead, it could hardly rebuke Confederate efforts to do the same, especially when, as noted, a fragile peace existed simultaneously with a pacifying Federal Government. Examples of the manifestations of these efforts, according to (Beetham & Clinton, 2016), were the following: “Memorials were erected in cemeteries as well as civic settings such as parks, and they took the form of obelisks, columns, triumphal arches, single figures and many other models.”

At this point historical selective memory becomes reality, depending on the origin of bias. Truths can be manipulated or obscured in the absence of details. The resultant leaves two diametrically opposed groups that may form opinions solely based on the inclusion or exclusion of details. For the purposes of objectivity it is important to consider both. One perspective is the following: “In the years immediately after the Civil War, North Carolina Confederates understandably mourned their dead, yet the state erected fewer than 30 memorials between 1865 and 1890. Then, during the next half century, they dedicated more than 130” (Brundage, 2017). The overtone in the above text is that differing impetuses exist for erecting statues respective of each period. The author implies that racial motivations were responsible for those statues erected in the 20th century.

In the *Civil War Times*, Sarah Beetham (2016) provides a different perspective: “And this mass commemorative project happened on a grand scale, with more than 2,500 Union monuments and 500 Confederate monuments appearing in town squares and cemeteries in decades after the war.” In the same article the following is stated, “As a southern historian, I wonder how all this will end. When we have scrubbed the likeness of a slaveholder, George Washington, off the \$1 bill? The second statement hints to the personal feelings of the author(s). I have included it here because, at face value, the article provides a rational and understandable counter-argument to the quote by Brundage included in the preceding paragraph. As per usual, the devil is in the details – both authors, Beetham and Brundage, use careful wording to support their historically-based claims. The vague, operative word *decades* is used to describe the

timeframe in which Confederate statues were raised, which leaves the reader to assume no ostensive circumstances exist as motivation for the establishment of these monuments – *decades* could include any number less than a hundred years. Historical record delineates this apparent grey area. Mark Elliot, a professor at the University of North Carolina, is quoted as stating, “Eventually they started to build [Confederate] monuments. The vast majority of them were built between the 1890s and 1950s, which matches up exactly with the era of Jim Crow segregation” (Foner, 2017).

To some extent there is a logical reason other than racial subversion for the delay in the raising of these monuments. The war ravished South was simply not in a place economically to be in the business of buying statues. The period of Reconstruction was marked by the need for actual construction – e.g., Sherman’s devastating march to the sea, etc. – just as much as the tacit need for the Country to come together and heal itself politically, economically, and geographically. This fact is reflected in Sarah Beetham’s writings:

Northern cities began constructing memorials almost immediately after the war ended, but Southerners began erecting them in earnest about a decade later. That delay happened for a few reasons: Many Southern towns and cities had been destroyed during the fighting, and Southerners initially put their limited resources toward rebuilding their war-torn land. Delaying commemoration of the Confederacy was also politically expedient, as Southern men who had fought for the Confederate Army had to swear an oath of loyalty to the United States in order to vote or hold political office. In this climate, an emphasis on Confederate commemoration might have proved risky. (Beetham & Clinton, 2016)

In this light, discerning the motivations behind these monuments becomes more muddled, further exemplifying the concept that complex issues require involved examination. It must also be remembered that Arlington National Cemetery is actually built on the land of General Lee’s plantation. Should that also be cause for concern, that our nation’s most hallowed ground for service members that have died for their country resides in the land of the most prominent General of an entity that sought to remove itself from the United States (State Turmoil. 2007)? How does that ethically equate to Confederate statues built just after the Civil War or to memorials built in the 20th centuries? Full objectivity, removed of all bias, is difficult. Should a memorial dedicated to a regiment of North Carolina Volunteers that have fallen in battle be equated to a statue of Jefferson Davis erected in 1920?

Many Confederate monuments were essentially “mail order” sculptures mass produced by Northern and Southern foundries during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Whatever value they have as historical artifacts, they were not the work of some latter-day Michelangelo. (Brundage, 2017)

Obviously, these statues embody meaning beyond their artistic nature, so how do we assign legitimate cultural or communal value while remaining within the peripheries of ethical guidelines?

United Daughters of the Confederacy

While the public debate continues regarding the issues discussed, few people acknowledge the group that is almost universally responsible for the creation and dedication of these monuments;

The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). Created in September of 1894, the UDC was the “largest voluntary organization of women in the U.S. South” (Whites, 2015). Their generalized intent was admirable; to preserve the memory of fallen soldiers, raise money for the widows of fallen soldiers, ensure the upkeep of Confederate cemeteries, volunteerism within their communities, and to raise funds for the creation of Confederate monuments (Levin, 2016). By World War I the UDC had well over 100,000 members and constituted a large civil force wielding political power. In their minds, the UDC did “what their fathers, brothers, and husbands failed to do during the Civil War: they won the war for the South” (Whites, 2015).

These noble aims were not the only intentions of the UDC, however. They also endeavored, using their political sway, to rewrite history using a narrative that better suited their interests and depicted the South in a more favorable light. In addition to memorializing the fallen, the UDC:

monitored the region’s school textbooks to ensure that children imbibed what they saw as the true interpretation of the Civil War, and pressured state governments to take greater responsibility for preserving and disseminating an exclusive white memory of the late unpleasantness. (Cook, 2017)

Textbooks containing notions that any causality of the Civil War originated, to some degree, around the subject of slavery were removed. They attempted to perpetuate an idea that Southern plantation owners desired to free their slaves before the war erupted, and that the actual treatment of slaves was civil and amicable (Levin, 2016). “Any book that suggested that the Confederacy fought to protect slavery was rejected. This also held for any book that characterized slaveholders of the South as cruel and unjust to their chattel” (Levin 2016).

It seems clear that while the UDC may have served their communities in altruistic capacities, the group metastasized into something with more ominous overtones via the use of their imperceptible political power. We often believe that victors are the ones that rewrite the history books, but in this case that was not necessarily true. Taking advantage of a federal government eager for reconciliation at all costs, and willing to turn a blind eye to acts memorializing a rebellious, geopolitical past of the South, the UDC was very much able to keep the ideal of the Confederacy alive.

They did this through a massive program of monument building, but as Cox astutely argues, they were even more effective in promoting a pro-Confederate interpretation of the Civil War. They transmitted this view to the younger generation of white southerners, thus assuring that the class and race politics that led to the Civil War would persist long into the twentieth century. (Whites, 2015)

Currently the UDC rejects the criticism of their organization’s actions committed in the group’s infancy. In some cases they have complied with public demands and voluntarily moved or removed statues. In other cases they remain quiet or defend the legitimacy of their relics.

It's sort of like we've been labeled racists,' said Tommie Phillips LaCavera, president general of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. ‘This is something our ancestors did over 100 years ago, and we're being punished for what they did. It has nothing to do with us. (Riley & Tarver, 1993)

The fear within the UDC seems to be that removing these statues will eradicate a sense of history and culture within the community; a history and culture that does, admittedly, have a darker

past. One member of the UDC is quoted as saying, "It's just important to remember those who came before us, and this is a way to remember our heritage" (Wray, 2012). It is hard to deny anybody the right to celebrate their heritage, and sometimes that is a delicate enterprise when that heritage also involves acts of cruelty. Another member of the UDC expressed her views in the following: "Our history is something we hold very dear and we try to keep that alive. Some people don't understand that, but if you come from here, you hold the past very dearly to your heart" (Wray, 2012).

For the record, the UDC has issued the following statement in the aftermath of the events in Charlottesville:

We are grieved that certain hate groups have taken the Confederate flag and other symbols as their own [...] The United Daughters of the Confederacy totally denounces any individual or group that promotes racial divisiveness or white supremacy. And we call on these people to cease using Confederate symbols for their abhorrent and reprehensible purposes. (Kutner, 2017)

Historical Bias

Due to a biased recollection of history, differing members of the populous will view monuments according to their already held views. Some of those that celebrate the long-defeated Confederacy will deny or attempt to distance themselves from connections of the Civil War to slavery. Subsequently, any attempt to celebrate it can be viewed as an insult to African-Americans. According to Walker (2008), prior to the Civil Rights Movement, much of the South's population attempted to retain a "version of the Civil War in which the Confederacy is pure." Within the context of a celebrated past, and one that removes any culpability of wrongdoing, it is easy to see how generationally people could be ignorant to that past having inflammatory overtones. This is especially true when those same people have historically "repudiated the link between slavery and the Confederacy by first denying that slavery caused the war and second, by sanitizing slavery with images of benevolent slave owners and contented slaves" (Walker, 2008). In this self-imposed vacuum, it is easy for some to deny any connection between Confederate symbology and racism. "Our culture is being eradicated," says Charles Lunsford, spokesman for the Sons of Confederate Veterans. "When somebody declares war against your culture," he adds, "they're either going to back off or they're going to have a war" (Riley & Traver, 1993).

Further examination into this culture reveals some interesting dichotomies through the juxtaposition of monuments erected to grieve or memorialize fallen soldiers to those that celebrated or even glorified Confederate heroes like General Lee or Jefferson Davis. While statues of Confederate soldiers were erected soon after the Civil War, the statues at the center of the current public debate were not. Uncannily, they were raised right in the midst of the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights Movement:

James Grossman, the executive director of the American Historical Association, says that the increase in statues and monuments was clearly meant to send a message. "These statues were meant to create legitimate garb for white supremacy," Grossman said. "Why would you put a statue of Robert E. Lee or Stonewall Jackson in 1948 in Baltimore?" (Parks, 2017)

Ironically, the very year that the NAACP was founded – 1909 – saw the largest spike in creation of Confederate monuments prior to that point or after – dramatically higher, in fact (Parks, 2017).

Should Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy, have an exhaustive list of monuments throughout the country? Is it coincidence that statues commemorating a man that sought to take up arms against the United States, and in defense of slavery, had many effigies raised commemorating him during the very timeframe that African-Americans were seeking truly equal status within America, 45 years after the conclusion of the Civil War? Should we overlook this same action occurring again during the Civil Rights Movement, 85 years after the Civil War? Lisa Richardson is an African-American member of the UDC. In response to the question of whether the removal of statues commemorating General Lee will lead to condemnation of other historical figures, such as Thomas Jefferson or George Washington, she had this to say: “I would ask, how could a patriot be confused with a traitor? How can leading a war to bring forth a new country be confused with leading a rebellion to tear it in two” (Richardson, 2017)?

Civil War Monuments in Savannah

I currently live in Savannah; a city full of historical implication to the Civil War. Grant’s headquarters resided in a still standing house a half-mile from my apartment. Locals love to perpetuate the fable that Sherman refrained from burning Savannah to dust on his infamous march to the sea because he found it too beautiful. There are also enumerable tours in which a visitor may partake that will reveal what life was like for a rich plantation owner, while simultaneously detailing the nature of the lives of his slaves. In such a place, why is the city devoid of the controversy consuming the rest of the country, especially when that city is filled with Civil War monuments?

Perhaps the difference lies in the period in which these statues were erected and their impetus. Raised in the ten years following the war, they were explicitly meant to honor the dead. The funding was easier to procure as Savannah, unlike other Southern cities, had the financial means – the city was not razed like Atlanta and did not endure the same economic hardships that other cities burdened. The City’s most prominent statues reside within Forsyth Park, where many local soldiers of Savannah trained before heading off to war. Dr. Stan Deaton of the Georgia Historical Society is quoted in Merrigan (2017) as stating:

This was to mark their loss and I think it’s why you don’t see an emphasis, in fact, no emphasis – on any Confederate memorial statue – on the reasons or causes for the creation of the Confederacy. I don’t think it was important to them, I don’t think it was something they wanted to emphasize.

This is dissimilar to other Southern cities that erected monuments much later and for reasons other than advertised; cities which have now been thrust into the limelight of controversy such as Charlottesville and Baltimore. This helps to explain the uproar in those localities and peace in others, regardless of proximity. “Deaton says in the 20th Century, some Southern cities that never had monuments erected them. ‘This was done during the Jim Crow era as a way to sort of reconfirm White Supremacy,’” (Merrigan, 2016). Ironically, the city also passed a law in 2016,

in which it absolves itself of any authority to “move or remove” monuments of military personnel on the City grounds.

Conclusion

The context in which statues of the Confederacy are viewed is a highly subjective one. Some of that subjectivity is derived from cultural backgrounds, political motivations, or historical concerns. In a world where access to information is instant, it is all too easy to disregard any side of an issue with ease based on the headlines and manipulations of others. In the absence of holistic understanding it is impossible to fully draw objective conclusions. I fully believe that the loudest voice in the room is usually the least informed, the most biased, and typically severely obstinate. The resultant in this case are two warring sides possessing little understanding of the history of the topic at hand and the opinions of those they oppose.

The process of analysis usually involves comparison. In a vacuum, if one process works and another does not, what is the operative variable? I believe that in this social debate, that variable is clear. It is exposed by examining the context in which some Confederate monuments were erected and some were not. If immediately following World War II, German citizens wished to erect a statue remembering the local townsmen that died during the war, I believe that occupationary force would have had little objection. If Germany decided today to erect a monument to Joseph Goebbels, perhaps public outcry would differ.

As an Army Officer and history enthusiast, I was shocked at first at the notion that we would denigrate our historical roots, and the soldiers that they involved, by removing statues, regardless of whether they fought for the North or South. Long before I started writing this paper, that opinion changed. I tried to remain objective, as that's what a writer should do – as well as a citizen of this country trying to educate themselves on a topic. I am now more firmly entrenched in my position. As a child, I frequently took trips to Gettysburg. I enjoyed biking around the historic battlegrounds and perusing monuments dedicated to all men who fought there. Is there a difference between those statues and a memorial to Jefferson Davis standing outside of a courthouse that was dedicated during the Civil Rights era? I think there is.

I will reiterate the words of Lisa Richardson in response to the President's question regarding where will the controversy end; calls of outcry towards Thomas Jefferson or George Washington? “I would ask, How could a patriot be confused with a traitor? How can leading a war to bring forth a new country be confused with leading a rebellion to tear it in two” (Richardson, 2017)?

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