

Written in Stone: A Critical Look at the Nation's Dealings with Racial Discussion in 2017

Beckie Jaeckels

Dr. Berkley Hudson

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“In memory of the men of the Federal and Confederate armies who took part in the Battle of Tupelo or Harrisburg July 14-15, 1864 which resulted in a victory for the Federal forces under Major General Andrew J. Smith.”

-Tupelo National Battlefield, Tupelo, Mississippi, 1929

There are few moments in which history aligns with present discourse in an uncannily beautiful fashion. Dr. Berkley Hudson at the University of Missouri – Columbia School of Journalism can testify to this stumble of fate. Hudson is presently on research leave, working on a project to which he has been dedicated for the entirety of his academic life: the photography of O.N. Pruitt, a jack-of-all-trades photographer from Mississippi. I have been working with him since August 2016 as a research assistant and Discovery Fellow. Over those many months, I have become immersed in the setting of 20th century Mississippi. I thought I knew the extent of Pruitt’s documentary photography. But paging through a rough copy of a collection of Pruitt’s work, there was cause to stop: the word “Confederate” stood out strikingly clear on the glossed page. Only days prior, the alt-right and white nationalists had gathered under the pretense of protesting the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. Since then, discussion about where Confederate statues and memorials belonged had been reinvigorated. On this page sat a photograph taken by O.N. Pruitt of a monument commemorating the lives of those who fought in the Battle of Tupelo – both Confederate and Union.

The one-acre commemorative site lies along Main Street in Tupelo, Mississippi. The monument is large but simple, adorned with an eagle and a shield in a wreath. The battle that the monument commemorates took place in 1864. Union forces, including men from the United States Colored Troops, fought to protect supply line railroads in Tennessee from the Confederate Army. Although neither side could claim a definitive victory, the Union troops were able to succeed in

this main goal.¹ The monument has stood in Tupelo for nearly nine decades. War monuments are protected under state law in Mississippi. But there have been no public attempts to remove the Tupelo National Monument. Other monuments in the state have been threatened with removal, but Tupelo has remained untouched. Tupelo is the largest city in the largely conservative Lee County. The county, established in 1866, was named for General Robert E. Lee of the Confederate Army. The monument was placed at the battleground in 1929 as a result of legislation in the town. In 1933, control transferred to the National Parks Service.



Figure 1: Tupelo National Battlefield Monument, Photographed by O. N. Pruitt – Tupelo, Mississippi

In contrast to the Tupelo National Battlefield Monument stand Robert E. Lee and Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson in the city of Charlottesville, Virginia. Like the monument in Tupelo, they stand as a daily reminder of a war that rocked the moral foundation of the United States. On August 11, however, there was a stark difference between the statues commemorating these men and that which honored the fallen in battle: one was not lit by the flames of tiki torches. The Unite the Right rally attracted a swarm of pre-rally marchers on Friday evening. Among them walked self-proclaimed alt-right members, white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and white nationalists.

Calls of “Jews will not replace us” and “Whose streets? Our streets” rang through Charlottesville.² Images of these protestors – primarily white men – circulated social media shortly afterward in an attempt to identify them. The Twitter account @YesYoureRacist successfully identified several rally participants, including a young man by the name of Peter Tefft, who was publicly disowned by his family in an open letter following his identification. Another protestor, Cole White, was fired from his job at Top Dog restaurant in Berkeley, California because of his participation. Backlash on social media didn’t deter the masses. Confederate and Nazi flags waved side by side the following morning.

VICE reporter Elle Reeve spent the weekend following Christopher Cantwell and his companions through Charlottesville. When organizing the protest, the alt-right claimed it was intended to protest the removal of the statue of Lee. Cantwell told a different story, saying he was tired of “some little black asshole behaving like a savage” drawing attention as an innocent victim. Reeve said the alt-right was in Charlottesville “show that they’re more than an internet meme... that they’re a big real presence that can organize in a physical space.” Hundreds of people came to support the alt-right, and many of them shared Cantwell’s view. *Daily Stormer* reporter Robert “Azzmador” Ray declared that the things that are “degenerate in white countries will be removed.” The weekend was riddled with fights between protestors and counter-protestors. On Saturday, a woman was killed when counter-protestors were struck by a car – a death which Cantwell called “totally justified.” In fact, he called “the amount of restraint” shown by alt-right protestors “astounding.” Cantwell believed their viciousness was justified. “These people want violence, and the right is just meeting market demand,” he said. He argued that their actions were a response to violent efforts of the left, which he cited as a reason he wanted “an ethnostate.” If any doubt remained as to the intent of the alt-right groups in Charlottesville, former Grand Wizard of the Ku

Klux Klan, David Duke, cleared it up with his call for ethnic cleansing in America.³ President Donald J. Trump made a statement regarding violence “on both sides” at Charlottesville, saying that there were “very fine people” among the alt-right crowd. Lawmakers and public figures alike were outraged at his failure and eventual refusal to outright condemn alt-right, neo-Nazi, white nationalist, and white supremacist organizations. When later asked if he regretted his statement, he said there were “some pretty bad dudes on the other side,” meaning the counter-protestors.⁴ On October 7, alt-right leader Richard Spencer and others demonstrators returned to Charlottesville and marched with torches once more in a show of resilience.

Since the events in Charlottesville in August, monuments honoring the Confederacy have been removed across the country. Those in Charlottesville were covered out of respect for the woman, Heather Heyer, who lost her life protesting white supremacy. Those shrouds have since been repeatedly removed by citizens, but the city is unclear if removal constitutes a crime.⁵ The following states removed some statues, plaques, or monuments shortly after Charlottesville: Florida, North Carolina, California, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Wisconsin, Montana, and Texas. Many of these states were Union states during the war, but monuments honoring Confederate forces or soldiers had been erected in their cities and towns. Officials shared that just because their states had not belonged to the Confederacy, they had not earned a “free pass.”⁶ These states still thought themselves responsible for removing symbols that ignited and fed racial tension in the United States. The events in Charlottesville served as a catalyst for removal conversations that had long been in the works across the country. A congregation in Lexington is working to remove Robert E. Lee’s name from their church, two years after the idea was proposed.⁷ Joe Straus, Republican speaker of the Texas House, has called for a plaque commemorating the Children of the Confederacy to be removed from the capitol building.⁸ The Washington National Cathedral is

removing windows that commemorate Lee and Jackson specifically.⁹ Across the nation, landscapes are being altered.

“We’re not offended by your heritage,” said State Representative Justin T. Bamberg of South Carolina. “We’re offended that states and local governments, by erecting these monuments on public property that belongs to everybody, are paying homage to people who wanted to keep part of the population in slavery.”¹⁰ Candidates for the 2018 election season in Maryland, Florida, Georgia, New Mexico, and Tennessee have all called for Confederate statues and icons to be removed. North Carolina governor, Roy Cooper, echoed this sentiment, calling for the removal of such monuments around the state. The governor of Montana, Steve Bullock, shared similar sentiments regarding the removal of a Confederate fountain from Helena. Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York took to Twitter to announce his dedication to seeing these monuments and symbols of the Confederacy removed from his state.



Figure 2: New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s tweets following the events in Charlottesville.

Social media was not a platform for calls of removal alone. Five days after the events in Charlottesville, President Donald J. Trump tweeted his thoughts, calling the removal of the “beautiful” monuments sad. President Trump’s statement is reflective of the sentiment of many Americans who wish to see these statues left where they are. Supporters of the monuments argue that they are reflective of the nation’s history and that removing them would erase that history and

heritage. For others, these monuments honor ancestors that fought in the Confederate armies, so there is a familial bond tying them to these controversial objects. Still others continue to argue that the Civil War was not fought over slavery, and therefore people of color in the United States should not be so blatantly offended. But like the protestors at the Unite the Right rally, some Americans still believe in the ideas the perpetuated the Confederacy and look up to the men commemorated by these statues as heroes and role models. Whatever their reasoning, a vocal portion of the population wants these statues and monuments to stay.



Figure 3: President Donald J. Trump's tweets following the events in Charlottesville.

Primarily, the erasure of history is the cited argument. There is a fear that those wanting to remove these monuments are attempting to “obliterate ... history and its symbols.”¹¹ However, the history that coincides with these monuments is “a constructed and contested reality.”¹² It was reflective of a region that could not deal with its defeat, and so memorialized and idealized its moral ground and representatives. While it is a considerable factor in what has led the United States to its current state, this does not equate to being reflective of true history. These monuments memorialize an ideology that gave life to hateful movements post-Civil War. Remembering the past does not have to equate to celebrating it.¹³ There is a difference between documenting our

history and glorifying it, and there are practices relegated to both.¹⁴ The suggested alternative, then, is removing the statues and monuments from common spaces and placing them instead in museums so that they can be viewed, but not looked up to. Lisa Richardson, a black daughter of the Confederacy, agreed with this sentiment.

“I would move them into museums and there tell the story of their lives. I would end their utility as flashpoints for racism and division, and, once and for all, allow them to retire from their long service as sentries over a whitewashed history.”¹⁵

Disagreement exists in public discussion over whether Confederate symbols are racist. Southern Americans claim them as symbols of their heritage and that “20th century yahoos made the flag racist.”¹⁶ They insist that there is more to Confederate history than slavery and racial discrimination. Intent, however, does not determine impact. Though they may see no fault in symbols of their heritage, black Americans see the flag of a nation that enslaved and oppressed their ancestors. Richardson asks how “a patriot (could) be confused with a traitor” or how “leading a war to bring forth a new country (could) be confused with leading a rebellion to tear it in two.”¹⁷ To her, and to others, the Confederate flag and symbols represented a people who wanted to be removed from the America we know and continue oppressive practices. Motivation for the continuation of Confederate symbols likewise supports the notion that they are, in fact, racist symbols with political and societal intent.

Most Confederate monuments were not erected in the aftermath of the Civil War to honor lost lives, but decades later. Following the war, many veterans sought an alternative to monuments reminiscent of the modern-day museum discussion: facilities to display relics from battles and to have meetings.¹⁸ The nation disagreed. In the years between 1863 and 1919, the majority of erected monuments were installed close to 1900.¹⁹ This first spike of installation coincides with the Jim Crow Era in the South, when white southerners attempted to reassert racial superiority. In the early

20th century, a massive monument movement swept across the southern United States as an effort to confirm the South's selective memory of the Civil War. This was, in large part, a result of the "Lost Cause" narrative, which describes the Confederate cause as one of heroic effort against great odds despite their eventual defeat. It largely ignores the role of slavery in the conflict, choosing to focus instead on unifying southern whites around their honorability.²⁰ These monuments supplied a permanent visual of their historic visions. This results in "a constructed view of a certain version of the past, rather than a factual depiction of some historical truth."²¹ Members of the Confederacy died on a morally superior plane because of their constructed history. Southerners actually involved in the war, however, claimed no confusion as to what their purpose was in fighting. Confederate sympathizer and journalist Edward Pollard argued that the war "did not decide negro equality.... This new cause — or rather the true question of the war revived — is the supremacy of the white race."²² Richardson confirmed this notion, challenging the continuance of these monuments in the public sphere at the expense of those who suffered.

"Most of the statues, as has been widely discussed, were erected long after Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. They were hoisted into view to assert white dominance at specific points in time when African Americans gained a measure of political influence — during Reconstruction and the civil rights era. With the bronzes came domestic terrorism, lynchings, bombings and cross burnings."²³

It was this same Lost Cause narrative that prevented Southerners from using their defeat as a conduit for constructive action. Civic celebrations became a means for "practicing partisan politics and racial discourse" after the war, instead of tools for healing.²⁴ Rather than moving forward with the Union, the South adhered to the values their soldiers had died for. This is evident in their choice of men to commemorate with monuments and statues. Men like James Longstreet, a former Confederate general who urged for support of the federal government and rebuilding on racial equality, were villainized by this narrative rather than praised by it.²⁵ There are no statues of

Longstreet. His goal of racial equality was far from prioritized by the South. Robert E. Lee is not commemorated for his efforts to heal the Union but rather his perceived bravery in fighting against it. Black soldiers who had fought for the Confederacy were not permitted to partake in many aspects of commemoration. In Virginia in 1875, they petitioned the governor to march in the parade for the unveiling of Stonewall Jackson's statue; they were denied.²⁶ Confederate monuments praised the purity southern motives without stating what those motives were.²⁷ The Lost Cause narrative allowed them to do so. They could omit this history and quell acts in opposition of it without thinking themselves immoral. These symbols of Southern pride remained. The next large spike of monument installations came during the Civil Rights Movement. Statues were mass produced in an effort to reaffirm racial dominance – hence their tendency to crumple like paper when ripped from their pedestals. Those monuments which were not supplied immediately following the Civil War were used as a vehicle for reassertion of racial superiority.

The modern movement for the removal of Confederate monuments is not unprompted. Shootings of unarmed black men and other racially-motivated incidents have excited opposition across the United States, beginning in large part with the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. In 2017, 813 people have been shot and killed by police.²⁸ Although more white people are shot and killed by police each year, the number of black people shot and killed represents a higher proportion of their respective population.²⁹ At American University, 10 posters featuring Confederate flags accompanied by cotton were placed on campus the same night as a presentation for the new Antiracist Research and Policy Center.³⁰ At Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, two men placed Confederate flags in what was deemed a “terrorist act meant to intimidate.”³¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. once led the congregation in question. Dylann Roof, the white supremacist who performed the mass shooting at a Charleston church in 2015, was a proud waver of the Confederate

flag. Confederate symbols have long been linked to white supremacist and white nationalist ideologies, making monuments that honor a society which promoted these ideals a fitting center point for national conversation. However, calls for removal of Confederate monuments are far from the only form of protest regarding race relations in the United States.

Protest efforts outside of the monument debate have been met with equal opposition. On September 1, 2016, Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem for the first time at a San Francisco 49ers game. The player had previously been sitting on the bench during the anthem, but this was his first moment of deliberately public protest. He has since been blacklisted by the league and is suing the teams for colluding to keep him from playing. Fueled by the disapproval of President Trump, who said that any “son of a bitch” who kneeled should be fired, players across the NFL began kneeling before or during the anthem. ESPN anchor Jemele Hill faced extreme scrutiny after she tweeted about President Trump from her personal account.³² The White House called for her to be fired from the network. Though she was not dismissed for these tweets, ESPN did release a statement saying that her personal views were not representative of the network. Several weeks later, she was suspended for additional tweets regarding the Dallas Cowboys and NFL sponsors. Although the world of sports has become a major vehicle for protest, this started in the streets. Following the events in Ferguson, the Black Lives Matter movement and other protestors filled streets in major cities. This repeated each time an unarmed black male was shot and killed by police. Protestors were met with resistance from law enforcement, and protests often turned violent. Protestors were met with rubber bullets, tear gas, and other counter-protest artillery. The message was loud and clear: protesting in the streets was not welcome. Heather Heyer’s death was a sobering confirmation of this fact. *The Daily Show*’s Trevor Noah summarized what he recognized as American opposition to black protest:

“It’s wrong to do it in the streets. It’s wrong to do it in the tweets. You cannot do it on the field. You cannot do it if you’ve kneeled. And don’t do it if you’re rich, you ungrateful son of a bitch. Because there’s one thing that’s a fact: you cannot protest if you’re Black.”³³

When black Americans protest, the political sphere (and largely the media) focus on the vehicles of protest rather than the reason for it. When Kaepernick, and subsequently other football players, kneeled, attention was given to their evident disrespect for the national anthem, the flag, and the troops of the United States military. Their reason for kneeling – the killing of unarmed black men by police – was overshadowed. When people protested in Ferguson, their disrespect for the city was cited; conversation turned away from the killing of Michael Brown. In a 2016 segment on *The Daily Show*, Noah sat down with conservative pundit Tomi Lahren.³⁴ Lahren is known for her work on *Final Thoughts* and her critique of protests around the country. Noah asked Lahren what she saw as the right way for black people to protest in the United States, since marching and kneeling did not seem to be appropriate. Lahren defended her views, but would not give Noah an answer to his question. This lack of answers extends beyond a single conservative pundit. The vast swaths of the United States who have spoken out against the forms of protest used thus far fail to provide a tangible alternative.

Where this differs is with Confederate monuments. Opponents to their removal have a solution: leave them where they are and respect that they represent someone’s heritage. What this argument misses, however, is that one of the men that they are putting on a pedestal wanted to remain on the ground. Following the Civil War, Robert E. Lee distanced himself from Confederate ideologies. He became recognized as a person of “virtue and honor and as among the leading reconcilers of (the) fractured land.”³⁵ In 1866, Lee was approached by General Thomas Rosser about building a monument to honor the Confederacy, and responded as such:

“My conviction is that however grateful it would be to the feelings of the South, the attempt in the present condition of the Country, would have the effect of retarding, instead of accelerating its accomplishment; & of continuing, if not adding to, the difficulties under which the Southern people labour.”³⁶

This is from one of two letters written by Lee that have reentered the national spotlight after the events in Charlottesville. The other, declining an invitation from the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association to mark battlefields with monuments, relayed a similar ideology. He feared establishing monuments would “keep open the sores of war” and prove a regressive strategy for the healing of the nation.³⁷ Lee saw these monuments as problematic for the same reason that they are a source of discussion today: they were too controversial. Post-Civil War, the South’s priority should be healing and reconciling relationships with their Union counterparts – at least in Lee’s mind. Placing a bronze cast of him on a horse was counterproductive to that mission. Lee understood that it was not about himself, but about the ideas associated with him. Ideas can have a “power and life of their own.”³⁸ Continuing to cling to Confederate pride and ideologies would only contribute to the weakness of a deteriorated nation.

Lee’s viewpoints have persevered to modern times, though on a less public scale than his Confederate legacy, through his descendant. Reverend Robert Wright Lee is a distant nephew of the Confederate general. Following the events in Charlottesville, he appeared with and introduced Heather Heyer’s mother at the VMAs. Together, the two presented the award in the “Best Fight Against the System” category. In their pre-award speech, Heyer’s mother announced she was establishing a scholarship for activists in her daughter’s name. Lee spoke out against those rallying around his ancestor, saying the modern movement had turned Robert E. Lee into “an idol of white supremacy, racism and hate.”³⁹ Shortly after, he and his church community received backlash and he left the congregation. His denouncement of white supremacy brought attention that the church called “undesired.”⁴⁰ Despite the opposition, Lee held fast in his beliefs. He understood that his

ancestor had come to represent much more than the Confederate forces during the Civil War. His statues were being used as a vehicle for white supremacy, oppression, and neo-Nazi ideologies. These are things Lee said should not “ever be celebrated or honored in any way, whether you believe you should honor legacy or ancestors or not.”⁴¹ These statues meant far more to some groups than a reminder of southern heritage. Those who defend these monuments on the basis of heritage allow those who use them for more hateful and divisive agendas to continue to rally around them. Lee and other activists understand this. The effects of these monuments extend beyond individual preference. Reverend Lee is not the only descendant of Robert E. Lee, but he has been the most vocal in the public eye. Others have expressed their distaste for the removal of statues of their ancestor, but the Lee clan as a whole seems to primarily agree with their reverend relative.

Let us not be mistaken. The discussion of these monuments, their meanings, and the ideologies associated with them are essential to a nation learning to deal with racial discord in its past and present. However, having these discussions by no means equates to granting both sides the equal benefit of the doubt. Doing so creates false equivalency, suggests that white supremacist ideologies are justifiable. The racial and social ideologies of the Confederate region and of today’s alt-right are not, in any sense of the word, okay. They lead to hateful speech and action, discriminatory policy, and often the death of people based solely on ethnic origin. Lynching and racial violence are not stories told to sensationalize the past. These horrors were real. They were common. And their full extent is still not understood. Scholars and writers have pointed to Germany as a comparison. After the Holocaust and World War II, the Nazi salute is banned. People will be arrested – or in one American’s case, tackled – if seen executing it in public. There are no monuments to Adolf Hitler. Rather, cities boast memorials to the dead. Germany has not erased this history – although living with its legacy is far from easy. But this nation has elected to

remember without reveling. They know what these ideologies lead to. It's time the United States recalled, as well.

In contrast to the streets of Charlottesville, those of Tupelo, Mississippi are comparatively empty. The monument that O.N. Pruitt photographed stands quietly and plainly. Its message honoring the lives of both Union and Confederate soldiers has not been featured in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or similar publications. This has to do with more than Tupelo's comparatively remote location. The monument boasts no towering figure on a horse or raising swords in victory. The plaque features no coded language romanticizing slavery or Southern moral high grounds. It presents basic information: a name, dates, the place, and the outcome. It documents and showcases a historical event without glorifying it. It is different than the mass-produced statues that inundated the nation during the Jim Crow Era and the Civil Rights Movement. It stands in a prominent location on Main Street – but its position is not without reason, given the location of the actual Battle of Tupelo.

There is a difference between monuments that recognize the history of the United States and those that glorify it. One set is about the events that occurred; the other is about the ideas associated with figures of the time. One is about commemorating deaths; the other is about giving regressive values life. As a nation that sanitizes its history – slavery, Columbus, treatment of Native Americans – the continuation of this standard is dangerous. The moral fabric of a nation is dependent in large part on how that nation chooses to deal with the dark portions of its history and how it embraces the heritage of which it is not proud. It does no good to enshrine that which stains a history, but it should not be forgotten either. Documentation, analysis, and evaluation of how Americans interact with American history is vital to the pursuit of a formative conversation.

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