

## Deception on a Pedestal

Kate Drum

A statue made of bronze, a cement plaque as you enter a school, a sign with the name of a local highway - these items might appear innocuous, heirlooms or artifacts from a distant time, but do not be deceived. In the United States, memorials to the Confederacy remain eulogizing monuments that fundamentally bypass and sanitize the narrative of American history. To this day, approximately 1500 of these memorials stand, paying homage to a slave-owning society and romanticizing the era as a whole. Confederate memorials were erected with the intrinsic purpose of disenfranchisement, serve as mechanisms for damaging government speech, and misuse taxpayer funds.

To accurately evaluate the issues surrounding Confederate memorials today, it is imperative to look back through history to a time prior to their creation. In the months leading up to the Civil War, political and social discrepancies were primarily split by region. Ultimately, disagreements regarding slavery boiled over into the succession of eleven states and the subsequent formation of the Confederate States of America. This newly established country fought aggressively with the remaining United States until the eventual surrender of the Confederacy.

Following the close of the Civil War, relatively few monuments to the Confederacy were erected. Yet decades later, in the height of Jim Crow Laws, states began obstructing the rights of newly freed Black Americans. It is in this social climate that states began production of Confederate memorials, erected in direct response to civil rights movements, primarily in the late 1960s. Construction of these memorials substantially increased under the guise of the “Lost

Cause” ideology, the belief that states’ rights, and not slavery, was the Confederacy’s principal cause. Supporters of the Lost Cause portrayed the Confederacy as a moral, civil actor dedicated to protecting individual states’ rights. This illustration remains a highly fictionalized account of the Civil War, with those who championed this belief desiring to alter the accurate historical narrative through the erection of memorials venerating notorious Confederate leaders.

By allowing memorials to the Confederacy to persist on government land, however, both government figures and their electoral bases have made the conscious decision to place value on a false historical narrative, pragmatically and symbolically endorsing the monuments and the cause they represent. And, by celebrating figures who had a direct hand in oppressing the state’s people, the government violates its intrinsic obligation and ethical responsibility to uphold the wellbeing of all citizens. Perhaps more importantly, the government is choosing to elevate the oppressors of this time period in history rather than the oppressed. A prime example of this is illustrated by the 215 celebratory memorials dedicated to Confederate General and slave owner Robert E. Lee compared to the mere 11 monuments dedicated to revolutionary Harriet Tubman, a woman who both pushed the boundaries of her status quo and advocated for the human rights of others.

Not only do Confederate memorials fundamentally misrepresent the narrative of history, but today’s government continues to promote this narrative by utilizing taxpayer money to maintain these monuments. Smithsonian researchers found that taxpayers directed at least \$40 million to maintain Confederate monuments, just within the past decade, funds that many argue should be utilized more effectively.

After World War II, Germany was able to successfully rehabilitate its internal structure primarily as a result of its ability to confront, condemn, and remove harmful memorabilia of

times past, like the swastika. In turn, the country was able to heal. After the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests, the United States is at a cultural turning point and must take measurable steps to begin the healing process. Black Americans and all allies are refusing to allow the government to continue to uphold the status quo. Unfortunately, not all Americans are in agreement regarding Confederate monuments. In fact, several states still maintain laws to protect memorials and even the White House recently issued an executive order stating that the targeting of Confederate memorials suggested a “deep ignorance of our history.” However, what this order fails to recognize is that the memorials themselves perpetuate a false historical narrative.

Removing memorials to the Confederacy will not suddenly alter the racism and oppression embedded in American society. However, by removing these memorials, our society promotes a standard that indecent behavior should not be revered. And, ultimately, removing the memorials embodies the notion that the most effective way to move forward from a destructive past is through tangible rehabilitative action and by legitimizing the voices of the oppressed rather than the oppressors.