

## Redemption Versus Revolution at a College in the South

By Cameron Smith

Names are inextricably tied to the character of the institutions or individuals carrying them. In the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, a Southern university named in part for Robert E. Lee is considering whether its name should be changed to reflect modern sensibilities about race. The answer carries implications for the founding ideals of America itself.

In 1870, Washington College trustees renamed the school to reflect the contributions of Lee, who served as both commander of the Confederate States Army and president of the college.

In 2020, Washington and Lee University's trustees must decide whether Lee's influence merits continued recognition.

While myriad reasons exist for the Civil War, the social, political and economic consequences of slavery drove the division of our nation. By design, slavery dehumanizes and reduces enslaved people into units of economic production to be traded and exploited.

I am the descendant of men who not only supported such an institution, but were also willing to kill their fellow Americans to keep the advantages it offered. The discomfort of that acknowledgment pales radically in comparison to the destructive impact of slavery on Black families across the South.

As I've watched monuments to the Confederacy come down, my response has been simple. I will not support vandalism and mob destruction of any property. We elect officials fully capable of taking down or erecting monuments. We make our preferences known, and then we toss out politicians who think they know better. That's how our representative democracy works.

But that's the easy answer.

It's the kind of answer that prompted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to write his Letter

from a Birmingham Jail to white clergymen. It's easy for me to say, "Trust the process." I've never had reason not to do so. Grave injustices have never been meted out against me because of the color of my skin.

One answer is to remove, expunge or delete any reference to anyone morally stained by benighted racial perspectives. Regrettably, that list is quite long. Even Abraham Lincoln, when accused by Sen. Stephen Douglas of supporting Black equality, noted, "I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and Black races." To borrow from Southern author Flannery O'Connor, "a good man is hard to find."

We should absolutely and publicly acknowledge the deep moral failings of those who came before us, but we must also carefully consider the context for which individuals and ideas were recognized.

For example, the Lincoln Memorial doesn't honor Lincoln's racial prejudice; it lauds his efforts to end slavery and keep America whole. The Washington Monument celebrates George Washington's leadership in the American Revolution and his willingness to lay down political power instead of becoming a king. We don't celebrate his owning enslaved people.

While Lee could easily have become governor of Virginia, he chose to become an educator rather than a political leader. In accepting the presidency of Washington College, Lee was both aware of the controversy his past would bring and sanguine about his hope for the future. "Life is indeed gliding away, and I have nothing good to show for mine that is past," he wrote. "I pray I may be spared to accomplish something for the benefit of mankind and the honour of God."

His tenure at Washington & Lee suggests his objective was sincere.

Unlike some Confederate monuments and naming honors designed to buttress Jim Crow laws or react to civil rights movements, Washington & Lee's posthumous recognition of Lee wasn't and isn't designed to intimidate or deter people of color. It was truly an appreciation of his work to stabilize the university and create a unique student-led honor system that remains in place to this day.

Where monuments and names mark virtues, ideas and institutions of merit, we shouldn't rename or destroy them simply because the men and women associated with them bore deep flaws. When erectors of memorials and icons crafted and installed them to intimidate, divide or reinforce racist sentiment, we should absolutely remove them.

The Confederate Battle Flag, for example, does nothing but buttress the notion that the failed Confederacy carries weight in today's society. We have plenty of other ways to identify with Southern culture. If Mississippi is on track to dispose of this particular symbol, the rest of us can as well.

I recognize those in our society who believe that American ideals, institutions and even the nation itself are so tainted by the moral failures of the past that they must be cast aside by nothing short of a revolution.

The moral arc of American history is bending toward justice. We're engaging issues of race more today than I've witnessed at any point in my life. We've always had the choice between redemption and revolution. At times, both have been warranted. My sincere hope is that the former remains the preferred path for both Washington & Lee and the country I love.

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