

2018 ESSAY TOPIC

“Recently, Confederate monuments have been removed in New Orleans. Should these monuments be removed nationwide? Why or why not, please support your position.”

The myths of the Confederate States of America have had an outsized impact on American culture. State governments’ endorsements of the Confederate flag, Confederate figures, and a search for “southern identity” has perpetuated a divide in American culture. Recently, monuments to the Confederacy in New Orleans and other areas of the South have come under fire. These monuments should be removed because they were created as a fear tactic, they fail to tell the entire truth, and they contribute to a white supremacist mindset.

Most Confederate monuments were not erected immediately following the Civil War. It was not until Jim Crow laws appeared that monuments dedicated to Confederate figures became widespread.¹ Production peaked during the Civil Rights movement. As African Americans struggled to gain equal rights, many Southern legislatures attempted to put black Americans “in their place” by building monuments dedicated to figures who had committed treason against the United States and fought for the right to own black Americans just a hundred years prior. These monuments have never been about memorializing history. They were about keeping black people out of government, schools, and “white society.” There is no reason to keep policies or monuments in place that were designed to remind those descended from enslaved people that they still would be treated by their government as second-class citizens.

¹ Miles Parks. “Confederate Statues Were Built to Further a ‘White Supremacist Future.’” August 20, 2017. March 20, 2018.
<https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544266880/confederate-statues-were-built-to-further-a-white-supremacist-future>

Furthermore, these monuments aren't historically accurate. They seek to glorify, romanticize, and make noble historical figures who fought to support the enslavement of African Americans. These monuments entirely overlook the gruesome truth of slavery: how it pulled families apart and how it enabled the murder, torture, and rape of innocent people. Mitch Landrieu, the mayor of New Orleans, describes these monuments as a "lie by omission;"² a willful disregard of the facts. These statues sought to celebrate a Southern identity that is a fabrication based on the "Lost Cause" of the Civil War. The real identity being celebrated was built on slavery, and, afterwards, on segregation, lynching, and hate-mongering.

After the Charleston attack at a black church in 2015, South Carolina removed the Confederate flag from its state capital.³ The governor understood the hate that symbols of the confederacy perpetuates. We learned that one person's pride in a manufactured history can easily be twisted into a justification for killing. If these statues were more historically accurate; if they did not paint leaders of the Confederacy as heroes, perhaps there would be value in them as a teaching tool. However, all these monuments have really done is help normalize white supremacy. The message of these monuments is essentially, "That guy up on the hill believed in this, and they memorialized him; so he must have been right." We have to find ways to teach people about the Confederacy that do not revel in its myths and that do not paper over the cruelty and inhumanity it was built on. We have to make sure people know that what the Confederacy fought for is not not what we are still fighting for today.

² Jennifer Speights-Binet, Rebecca Sheehan. "Confederate Monument Controversy in New Orleans." January 1, 2018. March 20, 2018.

<http://news.aag.org/2018/01/confederate-monument-controversy-in-new-orleans/>

³ Tegan Wendland. "With Lee Statue's Removal, Another Battle of New Orleans Comes to a Close." May 20, 2017. March 20, 2018.

<https://www.npr.org/2017/05/20/529232823/with-lee-statues-removal-another-battle-of-new-orleans-comes-to-a-close>

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