

CPOA Scholarship Essay Contest

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

As a Confederate statue of Robert E Lee came down in New Orleans, the nation reached the height of a divide over a fractured American past. For years, historians, politicians, and residents of the American South have struggled with how to contextualize the short-lived Confederate States. Monuments to Confederate generals and soldiers were erected at the time, and continued to be christened for decades after. Despite the want to remember these historical figures, their divisive actions have not proven worthy of accolade over time; as such, these public remembrances warrant no memorial in the United States.

By their very nature, monuments are dedicated to recognize a notable figure, usually one whose actions are worth cause for celebration or remembrance. That such monuments exist to commemorate, for example, a white supremacist uprising speak volumes about the version of American history that was allowed to persist in the south. In the heat of the debate, many have simply dismissed these monuments as a “product of their time”. And yet, 2016 data from the Southern Poverty Law Center detailed around 700 remaining Confederate monuments and statues, 10% of which were dedicated after the 1960’s. That the monuments were built “during the Jim Crow era—in response to the civil rights movement”—certainly seems far more intent on reinforcing white supremacist ideals than in remembering Confederate soldiers.

In addition, at least a quarter of public schools named after Confederate soldiers had majority African-American populations. These Confederate men, who temporarily succeeded in dividing the nation over the issues of slavery and the rights of African Americans, were now commemorated on schools that educated the very populations they would have liked to see “kept in their place”. Others assert that the monuments represent the fight for states rights, and not the ideals of white supremacy and the preservation of slavery. But the Civil War erupted over states rights in the context of slavery: Louisiana Commissioner George Williamson highlighted secession to the Confederacy as a “necessity...to preserve African slavery.” And while states’ rights are a worthy ideal to uphold, doing so through the narrow-minded context of the Confederacy delegitimizes the sentiment.

Statue supporters, and even our current president, argue that to remove these statues is to “change our history”. But the Confederate States of America were expressly created as separate from the United States; they sought different ideals, and seeing no way to compromise within the law, created their own, separate government. By nature, the existence of the Confederacy is part of American history, but its leaders and ideals were—even for their time—distinctly un-American. Furthermore, the arguments are simply against the memorializations of these figures, not against their place in history. The lessons of these mistakes are vital ones to learn if our country is to continue forward as “one nation...for all.” By removing these monuments, America can move toward reckoning with past ills, placing these men squarely in history without presenting their actions as worthy of celebrating.