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Removing Racism or Erasing History? The Modern Confederate Conversation

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Should Americans continue to honor the symbols and leaders of a group who rebelled against their country and fought to preserve the enslavement of African Americans on the basis of preserving heritage? In this paper, I look through American history and identify how the Confederate symbols in question have been connected with racism throughout the past. I then debunk some of the misconceptions commonly associated with Southern history and the Confederate symbols. I conclude with the outcomes of the recent removals of monuments in New Orleans and Dallas and address how this debate connects to the larger issue of racial injustice.

Word Count: 3155

June 17, 2015 was supposed to be an ordinary Monday. Ordinary people like eighty-seven-year-old Susie Jackson, college student Tywanza Sanders, and others had gathered together at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Susie, Tywanza, and their Christian brothers and sisters were enjoying the tranquility that came from their weekly Bible study. What made this Monday unordinary, however, was when forty- five minutes into the service a man pulled out a Glock 41 .45 caliber handgun and open fired, killing innocent Susie, Tywanza, and seven others (Inwood and Alderman 2016). After fleeing to North Carolina, the authorities caught and arrested Dylann Roof, the man responsible for the deaths of these nine African Americans. Roof admitted after his arrest that his motives in these assassinations were "in hopes of igniting a broader race war" (Inwood and Alderman 2016). Later photos and videos would go viral of Roof undeniably participating in hate speech and racist activities in the past, in particular using the Confederate Battle Flag as a symbol to embody his hate toward African Americans.

In reaction to this travesty, the South Carolina legislature voted to remove the Confederate Battle Flag from display on the state's capitol grounds. This decision sparked a controversy that spread to cover the entire nation. While it is easy for the victims of the Charleston massacre and those of other similar hate crimes to understand, many Americans still refuse to believe that the Confederate Battle Flag or Confederate monuments stand for anything inherently racist. Many still hold the flag as a symbol that embodies the aspects of living a Southern life. A survey done by CNN following the travesty in Charleston suggested that 66% of white respondents believed that Confederate symbols do not represent racist ideas, in contrast to the 72% of black respondents who considered the symbols to be intrinsically racist (Gale 2017a).

The entire situation provokes a question: Should Americans continue to honor the symbols and leaders of a group who rebelled against their country and fought to preserve the enslavement of African Americans on the basis of preserving heritage? As of 2016, there were 718 monuments dedicated to the Confederacy or to Confederate leaders across 24 states–13 of which were not members of the Confederate States of America or were not even states during the Civil War (Gale

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This manuscript won 2nd place in the 2018 BYU Writing 150 Contest.

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FIGURE 1. The Confederate Battle Flag flying beside South Carolina's capitol building.[a]

[a]"Time for confederate flag to go, Ernst agrees." *The Gazette*, July 09, 2015. https://www.thegazette.com/subject/news/ government/ time-for-confederate-flag-to-go-ernst-agrees-20150709.

2017c). In response to the Charleston massacre and following South Carolina's example, many city and state politicians are pushing for the further removal of these symbols and monuments from their public spaces across the country. Those against removal of these monuments claim it as an attack on their Southern heritage, or as an attempt to rewrite history.

In this paper, I look through American history and identify how the Confederate symbols in question have been connected with racism throughout the past. I then debunk some of the misconceptions commonly associated with Southern history and the Confederate symbols. I conclude with the outcomes of the recent removals of monuments in New Orleans and Dallas and address how this debate connects to the larger issue of racial injustice.

History of Hate

To uncover the original motives of the flags and monuments that are under controversy, we must look back at their history by observing how these symbols have been used over time. Most history buffs could tell you that the "Southern Cross," the familiar flag that features a blue 'X' with thirteen stars, highlighted in white across a red background, was never the official flag of the Confederacy. Between 1861 and 1865, the Confederate States of America (CSA) actually had three official flags, but because of the short lifespan of these three designs, many Confederate states and their armies adopted the Southern Cross as their battle flags for the duration of the Civil War. The adoption and use of this flag by the Confederate armies ensured that the symbol would go down in history as being associated with the CSA and everything it stood for (Webster and Leib 2001). The flag embodied rebellion against the United States in the fight to preserve enslavement of African Americans, and would continue to embody these ideas until today.

Although the Confederacy lost the Civil War in 1865, many would argue that its convictions remained alive. These convictions were voiced through the hoisting of the Battle Flag and erection of monuments dedicated to Confederate leaders. During the Reconstruction era, the Battle Flag was flown over private residences across the South to voice opposition against the occupying federal soldiers (Webster and Leib 2001). As Reconstruction ended, these federal troops withdrew from the South and brought their racially progressive laws and politicians home with them (Curtis 2017). White Southerners once again rose to political power and quickly began to disenfranchise African Americans. As discriminatory laws became a more common occurrence, some would say that it is not coincidental that this time also brought the erection of hundreds of monuments honoring Confederate leaders (Gibson 2017). The first Confederate monument built in New Orleans was dedicated to General Robert E. Lee in 1884, 19 years after the defeat of the Confederacy (Curtis 2017). The timing of the construction of these monuments help us see that they were likely built due to Southern bitterness toward the Federal Government and primed racial prejudice, rather than as symbols of Southern heritage. The flags and monuments were instruments played by racist Southerners that vocalized a reminder that African Americans would remain on the bottom of the social ladder.

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Opposition to the Civil Rights movement in the South saw a second revitalization of Confederate remembrance. The flag quickly returned to the public eye due to events surrounding the Democratic Party's national presidential nomination convention in 1948, when numerous proposals regarding the civil rights of African Americans were added to the party's official platforms. In response to the party's shift, multiple delegates from the South stormed out of the convention while waving the Southern Cross (Webster and Leib 2001). Later in August that year, these Southern delegates held their own so-called "Dixiecrat" convention in Birmingham, Alabama in an effort to display to the Democratic party that the South was not in favor of the emerging Civil Rights movement (Webster and Leib 2001). It was at this convention that the Battle Flag was readopted as an emblem for white supremacy and racial prejudice in the 20th century.

As the Civil Rights movement gained more ground, the Confederate flag and further erection of monuments progressively became more associated with protest against African Americans' newly gained freedom. Following the pivotal *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling, white citizen councils, supported by the imagery of the Battle Flag, formed in Mississippi to speak publicly against the desegregation of schools. It is at this time that states like Georgia and South Carolina voted to fly the flag over their state capitol domes (Webster and Leib 2001). Hate crimes toward African Americans were commonly seen alongside the Battle Flag; there were even reports of peaceful black protesters in Alabama being pelted with urine filled balloons thrown from cars decorated with Southern Crosses (Inwood and Alderman 2016). All of these incidents specifically sprung as a reaction to more liberties being given to African Americans, not as a celebration of Southern pride. As the fight for civil rights continued, the use of Confederate names and symbols in public places skyrocketed; culminating in over seven hundred statues and monuments, one hundred schools, ten US military bases, and eighty counties and cities named after Confederate figures (Gale 2017b). Once again, the timing of these incidents makes apparent that these symbols served a larger purpose than simply honoring the South's heritage. Rather, it can be concluded that they were specific reactionary symbols, sparked by the original convictions of the Confederacy, to voice a pro-discrimination and white supremacy agenda.

While African Americans may have won the fight for civil rights, Confederate symbols continue to ignite racial passions like no other symbol in the United States to this day. This is apparent by the aforementioned tragedy at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. Dylann Roof was driven by hate toward African Americans which he voiced, in part, by the use of the Confederate Battle Flag. Many Americans view this tragedy as a wake-up call to remove these symbols and monuments from public spaces, on the belief that the government should no longer sponsor symbols that embody a history of prejudice and racial violence. But despite an apparent history of hate, some refuse to let go of what they assert to be a part of their heritage.

The Lost Cause

Many Southerners could easily defend their pride toward the flag as a piece their heritage by pointing to examples from pop culture. The 1930's film Gone with the Wind displays the Battle Flag and idealized the perfection of the Southern life, disconnected from racism (Webster and Leib 2001). *Dukes of Hazard* fans will associate the flag with the television show from the '80s, which featured a car named after Robert E. Lee embellished with the Southern Cross. Prominent musical groups like Lynyrd Skynyrd, Pantera, and Hank Williams Jr. have all famously flown the flag alongside their fans to proudly show their Southern pride (Gale 2017b). All of these examples could easily portray how Confederate symbols are not connected with hate, rather with an idea of their regional glory. The symbols bring out the best of the South: barbeques, football, charm, courtesy, and extravagant or rebellious lifestyles. Simply because certain groups have used the flag to personify their racism

in the past, their actions do not represent the view of all Southerners, they could argue. This argument, however, has difficulty holding strong when the original motives of the Confederacy are examined, or when put into the perspective of black Southerners.

"The Lost Cause" is a term used by many historians describing the cultural phenomenon that occurred in the South following the Civil War. Social scientist Mary Tompkins Gibson describes the Lost Cause as a, "...narrative, debunked by scholars, that cast the Civil War as a noble, but unwinnable battle between Southern gentlemen who fought for liberty and self- determination against Yankee aggression" (Gibson 2017). She argues that Southerners who pushed forward the Lost Cause narrative attempted to remove the guilt from white Southerners surrounding the enslavement of millions of African Americans and for causing America's bloodiest war (Gibson 2017). Major tenants of the Lost Cause ideology include the insistence that the Confederacy left the Union over state's rights, not over slavery, and that slavery was a divine institution that benefited both the slave and the master (Curtis 2017). It is basically a detachment of all things unpleasant from the Confederacy or its history, and the attachment of all things praiseworthy. This ideology entrenched incorrect perceptions in the minds of many white Southerners regarding the reality of slavery, and these perceptions have continued to endure over generations. It could be argued that the Lost Cause ideology is what caused many to view Confederate leaders and flags with skewed perceptions as virtuous pieces of their heritage, even to this day.

If these statues and flags truly do stand for Southern heritage, why do Southern African Americans typically not share the same viewpoint? As evident from the examples aforementioned, black Americans were typically on the losing side of Southern history. The heritage that many are trying to protect is not one that black and white Southerners share. New Orleans' Mayor Landrieu (2017) provided perspective when he spoke at his city's removal of four Confederate monuments, he expressed:

FIGURE 2. Robert E. Lee's monument being removed in New Orleans[a]

[a] "confederate-soldier-statue." Associated Press. https://longreads.com/confederate-soldier-statue/

> "Another friend asked me to consider these four monuments from the perspective of an African American mother or father trying to explain to their fifth-grade daughter who Robert E. Lee is and why he stands atop of our beautiful city. Can you do it? Can you look into that young girl's eyes and convince her that Robert E. Lee is there to encourage her? Do you think she will feel inspired and hopeful by that story? Do these monuments help her see a future with limitless potential? Have you ever thought that if her potential is limited, yours and mine are too? We all know the answer to these very simple questions. When you look into this child's eyes is the moment when the searing truth comes into focus for us. This is the moment when we know what is right and what we must do. We can't walk away from this truth."

His rhetorical inquiry sheds light on what effect these monuments and symbols have on the African American community: constantly reminding them of a past where they were treated less than human. The monuments lie to white Southerners, tricking them to believe a false narrative that establish horrible things like slavery and discrimination as praiseworthy. Black Southerners are also lied to, deceiving them to accept a history that lowers their potential and self-worth. To African Americans, this is not heritage, it is horror.

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Removing Monuments and Moving Forward

Inspired by the mass shooting in South Carolina, people's eyes are beginning to open regarding the true meanings of these Southern symbols. As previously mentioned, the city council of New Orleans, Louisiana approved the removal of its four Confederate monuments in 2017. Because of opposition, many of the monuments' removals took place late at night by crews wearing bulletproof gear, while being watched over by snipers surrounding the locations (Curtis 2017). At the removal of Robert E. Lee's monument, large groups advocating for and against the removal arrived earlier than 3:30 A.M. The streets were filled with signs reading "Take 'Em Down" and "Heritage, Not Hate" (Curtis 2017). As morning rolled around, Mayor Landrieu (2017) declared, "The Civil War is over, and the Confederacy lost and we are better for it" and encouraged the citizens to break free from the Lost Cause perspective that tainted the city (Landrieu 2017). The opposition conceded, and the evening saw streets filled with Mardi Gras-like celebrations featuring big brass bands and dancing. Lee was taken down from his pedestal, starting a brighter future for the city of New Orleans.

In Dallas, Texas, a particular group called the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) sought legal means from the federal courts to hinder the removal of their beloved Confederate monuments. Following New Orleans' example, the city of Dallas approved to get rid of multiple Confederate monuments and statues from public city locations. The SCV filed a lawsuit, *Patterson v. Rawlings*, against the city council and mayor on allegations that the SCV's constitutional rights of free speech were being violated due to the removal of the monuments (Kozlowski 2018). When brought to the court, the SCV argued that the planned removal, "infringed on their political viewpoint communicated by the monuments" (Kozlowski 2018). The city responded by claiming that removing a monument did not restrict any one person or group's ability to exercise free speech. The court acknowledged the following: "...in this instance, the federal district court found no suggestion that Patterson and SCV had been deprived of any First Amendment freedom for any period of time," and that, "the removal of Confederate monuments from City-owned property would in no way 'prevent [the SCV] from expressing [their] political viewpoint'" (Kozlowski 2018). The court's ruling added the stamp of approval to the removal of the monuments and specified that their removal in no way infringed on the rights or freedoms of those in favor of the monuments' preservation.

After South Carolina, New Orleans, and Dallas, opponents of the flag and symbols would seem to have plenty of reasons to celebrate. Many see these victories as dramatic advances toward social justice for African Americans. Social scientists and political geographers, Inwood and Alderman (2016), admit that the removal of the flags and statues are great places to start, but they are only the beginning to addressing the problem of structural inequality (2). They explain, "...while state legislatures from across the South should be applauded for taking down Confederate symbols, this is not the same as addressing the deeply entrenched social spatial conditions that allow white supremacy to permeate not just the Charleston AME church but wider swaths of American life" (Inwood and Alderman 2016). As evident from the innumerable events of historical and modern racial violence in the South, removing the flag and these monuments are only the beginning on a long path toward eventual racial justice. The recent removal of the flags and statues are victories, but that in no way implies that African Americans should stop fighting the greater war.

Conclusion

In the context of the Confederate flag and monuments, it is important to remember the difference between honoring and remembering something. Survivors of the holocaust and 9/11 encourage us to "never forget" these atrocities, yet we do not see monuments honoring Adolf Hitler or Osama Bin Laden. Many would argue that removing our Confederate monuments from the public scene would erase the Confederacy's history from the South.

Remembering history is in no doubt important and crucial to moving forward, but remembering and honoring are two very different things. It is crucial that as Americans remember the mistakes that have been made in our past, especially slavery and racial discrimination, for these will provide us the basis and judgment to make better decisions in the future. The preservation these symbols in public places as alleged virtuous pieces of history illustrates that as Americans, we are proud of the civil injustice committed against African Americans. By removing the monuments, we recognize the mistakes of our past, stripping away the blindfold of the Lost Cause that has impaired our view for too long. We hope not to forget these mistakes as we strive to move forward into a better future. We must always look back, not forgetting or altering the truth of what has occurred, and continue by looking forward and righting the wrongs done by those before us.

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