



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Statue of Limitations

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For the past few days, I have been reading news articles and watching TV reports about the efforts of some citizens to remove the statues of several American historical figures. These protests, if successful, would dismantle aspects of this nation's history and culture. The proponents of these removals state their absence would help heal the humility and degradation of blacks and Native Americans who have suffered throughout the history of this country.

This current movement started with these citizens' claims that the statues of confederate war heroes should be removed from public properties, then evolved to proclaim that other kinds of statues must be removed in locales throughout America.

With the exception of racial bigots, most people do not want a statue of a proslavery Civil War general posing in front of their public buildings.

However, the debate of which statue should be removed seems to have taken the shape that the statue of any person who was remotely associated with slavery is up for grabs.

Many of the men whose statues are subject to removal, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, are present in scores of places around America. These men and many others risked their well-being---their family, their property; for some, their lives---for the creation of this country.

There is no debate that Washington and Jefferson had slaves. These slaves were regarded as their property. From some peoples' judgmental platform of 2020, their positions about this issue in the Revolutionary War days (the 1770s) and Civil War times (1860s) are that these men and others performed abhorrent acts by their being slaveholders.

It's been said, "Only in the present are we humans wise to our unwise past." That saying sums up the present situation. We are aware of our past, antiquated and unwise behavior toward race in comparison to our present, unantiquated and (so-called) wise conduct.

It has also been said, "Humans are the product of their times." Certainly, some men and women in our history have been able to rise above their cultural, political, and social constraints.

But those people are rare. For this report, a white person who should be brought to mind is Abraham Lincoln. Against great odds, his *singularly initiated* acts often resulted in threats to his safety, even his life (Ford's theater). However, with his solitary conscience and belief, he instituted actions to abolish slavery.

If this man had not come to the fore, I think it safe to say the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment would not exist, at least in their present forms.

The Repugnance of Racism

From my modern perspective, I find repugnant many sentiments and statements made by some of the founders of this country and those who lived in the Civil War era. They are condescending and demeaning. I read them with a sense of regret, even dread.

But my 2020 perspective affords me 2020 vision of the 1770s and 1860s. In those past days, it was the norm to consider the black person one of less ability and mentality; one deemed helpless if released into the cruel world of freedom.

¹ Thanks to Google for the photos in this article.

Yet Washington and Jefferson were against slavery. Their problem was in not knowing how to break this cultural and societal practice; one that was deeply ingrained in many parts of America. Especially the South, which was not settled in the early days of our Republic with slave-abhorrent Puritans. The Puritan folks came from Europe and settled in the northern part of the fledging country.²

If not for Several Slave Holders, the Constitution and America might not Exist

In addition, other men who participated in the writing of our Constitution knew that anti-slavery clauses in this document would result in its not being ratified. Perhaps it would never have come to exist. This idea is not idle speculation. Most southern colonies let it be known there could be nothing in this document that threatened their slave-based way of earning money and their slave-based lifestyle.

Jefferson said slavery was a “moral depravity” and a “hideous blot” that presented a great threat to a newly formed nation. Yes, but he kept slaves, as did Washington. But what were they to do with these nearly illiterate and ill-trained individuals if they were set free? Refer to the Jim Crow era, a disgraceful part of our nation’s history.

If you consider my answer too simple, consider the harrowing existence many pre-Civil War freed blacks faced in trying to make their living in---not just in the south---but in many parts of America. On paper, they were free. In reality, many of these blacks were treated as human chattel.

Yet one of Jefferson’s relatives does not agree with me. A direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson has called for the memorial in the Washington, DC Tidal Basin to be removed.

As quoted in *The New York Times*, “The memorial is a shrine to a man who during his lifetime owned more than 600 slaves and had at least six children with one of them, Sally Hemings,” Truscott writes. “It’s a shrine to a man who famously wrote that ‘all men are created equal’ in the Declaration of Independence that founded this nation — and yet never did much to make those words come true. Upon his death, he did not free the people he enslaved, other than those in the Hemings family, some of whom were his own children. He sold everyone else to pay off his debts.”

Truscott writes, “...it reveals [Jefferson] with his moral failings in full, an imperfect man, a flawed founder. The use of the word “flawed” does a disservice to Jefferson. This man said, “I prefer dangerous freedom over peaceful slavery.” Ah, this “flawed founder” only risked his regal life-style in Monticello and the State of Virginia by his defiance of England.

Credentials: Black, a Pro-Black

For a risky period in my life, while working my way through college, I was employed as a debt collector in Watts, California, just a few years before the Watts riots took place. I saw first-hand the almost unfathomable injustices meted out to black citizens. Contrary to the supposed mind-set of a debt collector in a black ghetto, I came to empathize with a number of my “clients,” I eventually lost my job for not re-possessing enough cars and household goods. Those images of the blacks’ dismal lives remain with me today.

² Nonetheless, neither Washington nor Jefferson were blameless. Both relied on slaves for their well-being. Washington held on to his slaves until he and his wife had died. Jefferson sold his slaves because of indebtedness and freed only those who were his children or his bedmate.

With another Dose of Reality

But those images and current experiences have not swayed me. Even the legacy of the slavery of Washington and Jefferson have not influenced my belief that this current short-sightedness to take down the statues of, yet another example, Teddy Roosevelt is demeaning to our country and to its history.

Roosevelt, who after the war with Spain over Cuba, posed with black soldiers for pictures and had this to say, “It was my good fortune at Santiago to serve beside colored troops. A man who is good enough to shed his blood for the country is good enough to be given a square deal afterward.” Keep in mind that Roosevelt’s comments, before he became president, were not the mainstream of American thought.



Yet, there is a movement to take down the statue shown to the left. It depicts Roosevelt, a black, and a Native American. The protesters state Roosevelt, by virtue of his being on a horse and the other two men on foot portrays the exploitation of the dignity of the two standing men by the former President.

I disagree. I discern no humiliation or loss of dignity on the faces of these men. Yes, they are not on a horse, as is Roosevelt. But the pose reflected the reality of the times.

A few days ago, I watched a television newscast covering a demonstration on the Capitol grounds in Washington, DC. The purpose of the rally was to pressure the government to remove the statue of Abraham Lincoln and a slave, as shown in the figure on the left.



I lived in the Washington, DC area (Arlington and Falls Church, Virginia) for about twenty years. For ten more years, I lived nearby in the Shenandoah Valley. I cannot count the number of times I visited this statue, often during my acting as tour guide for visiting friends and relatives.

While standing before this statue, I always paused and reflected about what Lincoln had done to abolish slavery and the dignity shown on the face of the black man, even though he was kneeling before Lincoln. To me, the man kneels, not in servitude, but with noble resolve and perhaps well-founded gratitude.

Notice the word “EMANCIPATION” at the base of the statue. Just consider that Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Prior to 1863, many citizens thought the war was up for grabs. Only in July, 1863 (at Gettysburg) did the North began to gain the upper hand for certain.

Nonetheless, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 while the war was still a see-saw battle with many northerners in favor of negotiating its ending.³ The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." (Lincoln was wise enough not to try to free slaves from all states, at least, not at this time.)

To gain a sense of the effect this statue had during those times, here is a quote from the *Washington Post*.

More than 25,000 people attended the statue's dedication on April 14, 1876, the 11th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination, including President Ulysses S. Grant. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass delivered the keynote address to the crowd, which included many black Washingtonians. In that famous speech, Douglass captured the contradictions that defined Lincoln's work on behalf of black Americans.

"He was preeminently the white man's president, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men," Douglass said, while adding that for African Americans "the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln" and "under his wise and beneficent rule we saw ourselves gradually lifted from the depths of slavery to the heights of liberty and manhood."

Those thoughts came from one of America's most esteemed citizens. Fredrick Douglass accurately described the timbre of those times.

Quoting a Google article, "After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued thousands of slaves were freed from ten Confederate states that were in rebellion. The Proclamation also allowed African Americans to join the Union army and help fight the Confederates which increased the Union's numbers by about 200,000.

As for the 13th Amendment? Risking repetition to nail-down a point: I believe the bill in Congress would not have become law if not for Lincoln. He assumed a very aggressive stand, lobbying, politically bribing, and mentally arm-twisting members of Congress. The result, as stated in the Amendment: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."



The controversy surrounding this statue represents the tip of an iceberg. Thousands of statues exist in America that honor men who had dealings with slavery. It is an emotional issue, as seen in the picture to the left, and I do not see the two sides of this debate backing down.

Twelve men who once held the office of the presidency were slaveholders. Yet this

³ The more astute citizens, both from the North and South, knew the Confederacy, with its lack of industrial might, could not win the war. Nonetheless, many naysayers abounded.

memorial, one about the most passionate and *effective* opponent of slavery in America, has been singled out, as shown in the picture above.

How about the twelve presidents who were slaveholders? Remove their statues? What to do with another of the North's national hero, Ulysses S. Grant. Grant and his wife owned five slaves. Yes, they set them free, but so did Washington and Jefferson.⁴ Shall we 2020-sighted



Americans tear-down Grant's Tomb? Will it ever end? Where do we draw the line? What's next, Mount Rushmore?

Alternatives

I would like to offer alternatives to eradicating a part of America's history.

Place a statue of William Douglass next to Lincoln, with his speech (cited above). Erect similar statues and plaques at other sites.

Granted, some statues of unequivocal racists could be taken down, or better yet, have additional information at the statue about the negative aspects of the views and practices of the person represented by the statue.

This writer casts his vote for offering alternatives to the statues of Andrew Jackson, infamous for his injuries and deaths of thousands of Native Americans based on his being a leader in the expulsion of these people to west of the Mississippi. Yet to many Americans, Jackson, with his War of 1812 exploits, is a hero and considered another American who was influential in preserving this country. Again, I ask you, where...or how does it stop?

As said, perhaps we Americans can erect another statue (or some other edifice) that is in contrast to the first statue and have them set side-by-side. My point is that alternatives exist besides misrepresenting our past, be that past positive or negative.

Nonetheless, statues of men such as Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln should stay intact and be revered by us citizens...all of us.

Jefferson was the principle creator of the Declaration of Independence. Have him treated in the same manner as a pro-slavery southern army general is taking America down a slippery slope.

If this writer, a passionate advocate of blacks' right is upset about the movement to remove the statues of Lincoln and like heroes of America, I fear the reaction of many Americans is going to setback the "Black lives matter" cause.

One of my friends wrote me about this subject and said, "The destruction of history doesn't change history, it just hides it from people." Removing statues is indeed destroying history and covering-up many aspects of this nation's history and culture.

Offensive or not, what right have Americans, any Americans, to remove the resonance of those past times? William Douglass did not think so. Nor do I. The statue itself is a piece of history. Concealing it or destroying it will not change America's history.

⁴ As asserted earlier, belatedly.

One Effect of Jim Crow

America has yet to recover from the effects of the Civil War, as well as the post-Civil War period, even up to modern times. The assassination of Lincoln, a tragedy unto itself, resulted in even more tragic consequences with then racial bigot Vice-President Andrew Johnson, ascended to the presidency. He gave the south renewed vigor and influence. The effect of Jim Crow discrimination and repression is vividly described by author Ezra Klein:

Within three years of Civil War's end, (quoting Robert Mickey⁵) "black voter registration ranged from 85 to 94 percent in the Deep South (that is: Alabama, south Georgia), and almost one million freedmen were voting throughout the region" By the end of WWII, in this Deep South, only 5 percent of blacks were registered to vote. Some counties in Alabama had no black voters at all.⁶

In 2017, a statue in New Orleans erected in 1891 commemorating those times and the Jim Crow days was pulled down. In this writer's view, the removal of this statue (and others like it) are salutary actions that should be lauded by all Americans.

Nonetheless, there is a limit to the understanding of and empathy for a movement to remove the statues of men such as Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln.

"Black lives matter." Absolutely, but apply this credo with acknowledgment of those who were slaveholders, but spoke-out against it and in many instances put their very lives at stake so that you and I can safely declare, "Black lives do indeed matter" without dread of assault.

⁵ Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944-1972* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015) np.

⁶ Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020) 24-25.