

# Removing Confederate Monuments

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The Confederacy (1861-1865) consisted of eleven secessionist states that fought against the United States in the American Civil War in order to try to preserve slavery.

Since the Civil War, Confederate monuments have been erected across America.[1] Confederate monuments were most frequently erected during the Jim Crow era between the 1900s and 1920s and the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s to intimidate and oppress African Americans.[2]

Currently, around 780 Confederate monuments remain.[3] Many people, including various politicians, want them removed: they see the monuments as racist and harmful and want to do something recognizably anti-racist. They argue that Confederate monuments inflict unavoidable harm on undeserving persons by serving as a constant reminder of America's racism.[4]

This is the basis of a harm-based argument against Confederate monuments.[5] This essay introduces this type of argument.[6]



Monument to Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate States Army.

## 1. A Moral Argument for Removing Confederate Monuments in Two Parts

Part 1:

- (1) If some monument(s) unavoidably harms undeserving people, then there is moral reason to remove that monument.
  - (2) Public Confederate monuments unavoidably harm at least (i) those who suffer as a result of knowing the racist motivation behind the existence of most Confederate monuments *and* having those motivations made obvious by public Confederate monuments, *and/or* (ii) those who suffer as a result of being reminded of the horrors of the Civil War and the United States' racist history by public Confederate monuments.
  - (3) Therefore, there is strong moral reason to remove public Confederate monuments.
- If premises (1)-(2) are true, then the truth of (3) is logically guaranteed.
- (1) should be uncontroversial since it follows from the more general claim that we have moral reason to avoid harming innocent people.

Part (i) of (2) is supported by the ample testimony of the groups fighting to remove Confederate monuments. Many know the history behind them, and are constantly reminded of the racist motivation for their creation, and suffer as a consequence.[7]

In support of part (ii) of (2), consider someone unaware of the racist motivations for creating (most) Confederate monuments and who has a cursory knowledge of the Civil War. Confederate monuments, even ones made for supposedly innocuous reasons, can be harmful by making obvious one of the darkest periods in American history: being non-voluntarily reminded of these facts can make people suffer. This is true *even if* we believe that the monument *itself* isn't racist.

Here is Part 2 of the argument.

(4) If there is moral reason to remove some monument(s), then people are morally obligated to remove the monument(s) unless there is equally strong or stronger reason to preserve them.

(5) There isn't equally strong or stronger reason to preserve public Confederate monuments than to remove them.

(6) Therefore, people are morally obligated to remove public Confederate monuments.

If (1)-(5) are true, then the truth of (6) is logically guaranteed.

(4) is obviously true.[8] This only leaves (5), which is perhaps the most controversial premise. But (5) cannot be rejected unless one can identify a more important reason to preserve the monuments than to remove them.

Let's now consider the best objections to (5), and the best responses to those objections.

## 2. Objections

2.1. 'Confederate monuments have a great deal of aesthetic and historical value.'

In response, it's worth noting that any aesthetic or historical value worth preserving in Confederate monuments can be done harmlessly by, for instance, placing them in a museum and contextualizing them. Monuments are reverential in nature, so if they're placed in a museum they'll cease to be *monuments* but will maintain their aesthetic and historical value.[9] They also won't unavoidably make harmful facts obvious since they won't be prominently displayed in public. However, many Confederate monuments were cheaply made and mass produced so they likely contain little, if any, aesthetic or historical value.[10]

2.2. 'Removing Confederate monuments erases history.'

In response, one may reasonably doubt that Confederate monuments themselves impart much in the way of historical knowledge. They may even distort the historical record.[11] More importantly, there doesn't need to be a net decrease in historical knowledge since whatever knowledge would be lost by removing the monuments could be compensated for by the creation of additional educational resources[12] that would harmlessly impart the relevant knowledge.

2.3. 'We can continue to preserve Confederate monuments solely to honor the noble accomplishments of the people they valorize.'

The basic idea behind this objection is that there is moral reason to honor people's noble accomplishments, and Confederate monuments can do that, and doing that is at least as important as preventing the harm they cause.

In reply, it's first worth questioning what the supposedly noble accomplishments of those depicted in Confederate monuments are. Fighting for an oppressive cause, even at great personal sacrifice, is hardly a noble accomplishment. Second, not all preservationists wish to preserve Confederate monuments to honor anyone's "noble accomplishments," as the Charlottesville protest demonstrated.[13] Third, it's plausibly more important to prevent the harm such monuments cause than to honor any accomplishments of the Confederacy, since that is what will most likely minimize unavoidable harm.

2.4. 'Removing Confederate monuments because they honor people who acted in ways that were gravely morally wrong means we'd have to remove almost all monuments, and that's absurd.'

This doesn't follow. There is a morally relevant difference between people like Thomas Jefferson or Mahatma Gandhi and people like Robert E. Lee or Nathan Bedford Forrest. While all of them committed grave moral wrongs,[14] only the former group also accomplished a great deal of good and were, with respect to some issues, morally prescient. Indeed, Jefferson and Gandhi are known primarily because of other accomplishments, while Confederate soldiers are known primarily because of their behavior in the Civil War, which means that monuments of the former people tend not to remind people of painful facts while monuments of the latter do.

## 3. Conclusion

The above argument is but one possible point of entry into this complex debate. If successful, it shows that we're obligated to continue removing public Confederate monuments.[15]

## Notes

[1] Monuments are any physical structures meant to honor or memorialize a person, group, event, and so on. The many sources cited in the References and Further Readings discuss some important aspects of Confederate monuments, such as their history, their intended meanings, and the many objections, as well as defenses of, these monuments.

[2] During the late 19th century and early 20th century, Jim Crow voting laws were passed to disenfranchise African-American voters. A number of advocates in Southern towns erected Confederate statues because the Confederate mythologies seemingly helped justify the Jim Crow laws. As historian Jane Dailey argued, erecting public Confederate monuments near government buildings (e.g. in front of courthouses) was a “power play” aimed at intimidating African-Americans. See Parks (2017). Segregationists used the same power play tactics in the Civil Rights era.

[3] See the (2019) Southern Poverty Law Center Report for information on the current number of Confederate monuments.

[4] Baltimore mayor Catherine Pugh raises this type of consideration when discussing her decision to remove four Confederate statues. See Nevins (2017). In an interview with Trevor Noah, Mitch Landrieu discusses how Wynton Marsalis raised this point to him, which served as a catalyst for Landrieu to change his mind about whether the statues should be removed. See also Landrieu’s (2018) book *In the Shadows of Statues: A White Southerner Confronts History*. See also Marsalis’s moving (2017) article on why New Orleans should remove their Robert E. Lee statue. Multiple people raise this concern in episode “Re-Righting History” on the documentary series *America Inside Out*. Countless more examples can be found by listening to interviews of counter-protesters who oppose preserving Confederate monuments.

[5] Harm-based arguments are not the only arguments that have been leveled against Confederate monuments. One might argue that Confederate monuments morally ought to be removed for rights-based reasons. See Frowe (2019). One may also argue that they morally ought to be removed for justice-based considerations. See Burch-Brown (2017). It’s worth noting that these arguments are broadly compatible with each other. One may also defend the preservation of Confederate monuments for rights-based reasons. See Demetriou (2020).

Our discussion concerns the ethics of removing monuments, but there are legal questions about whether public Confederate monuments should be legal and whether such monuments are constitutional. For a short work on these questions, see Brophy (2015). Alfred Brophy has surprisingly argued that preserving Confederate monuments ought to be illegal because they supposedly violate the equal protection clause of the 14th amendment.

[6] An original, more detailed and more robustly defended, version of this argument is in Timmerman (2020). Again, this is but one argument in the Confederate monument debate. Various other positions, and the basis of competing arguments, will be addressed in the next section. However, space constraints make it impossible to consider every possible approach and position concerning this complex issue in any kind of detail. Those looking to explore this issue beyond this short article should first read the articles mentioned in the previous note. If one is interested in a more historical defense of Confederate monuments, they may want to read Shedler’s (1998). That should be paired with Adler’s detailed (2000) book review/reply. One may also be interested in Knight’s (2017) and Cotter’s (2017), each of whom argue for preserving Confederate monuments in museums.

[7] See the (2019) Southern Poverty Law Center Report and Parks (2017). For a helpful discussion of what it might mean for a monument to be racist, see Demetriou and Wingo (2018).

[8] Premise (4) just follows from a necessarily true general claim about how reasons weigh against one another, at least if the reasons in question are understood to have “requiring force.”

[9] To be clear, presentations of statues (and the like) in museums could be reverential too, depending on the display, but they needn’t be. Confederate monuments that are placed in museums and properly contextualized can be presented as an important relic of history or work of art without valorizing the Confederacy itself. They also won’t make people remember painful facts about America’s racist history without warning or consent, since they won’t be prominently displayed in public.

[10] See, for example, Fischer (2017).

[11] Perhaps a better version of this objection requires a metaphorical reading of the worry (cf. Abrahams 2020). For a discussion of the worry that Confederate monuments can distort history, see Landrieu (2018).

[12] This may include, for example, certain requirements in history classes in primary schools, funding documentaries and television series focusing on the Civil War, creating a Civil War museum, as well as a plethora of other options.

[13] The majority of those protesting the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville were part of the “Unite the Right” rally, which consisted of white supremacists and white nationalists who were clearly motivated to preserve the Lee statue for racist reasons. For more information, see Coaston’s (2019) account of the rally.

[14] It’s widely known that Thomas Jefferson was a vicious slave holder, though his moral shortcomings extend far beyond that fact. The young Mahatma Gandhi notoriously expressed racist attitudes toward black people and was an unrepentant misogynist. See, for instance, Connellan (2010) and Lakshmi (2015). Robert E. Lee and Nathan Bedford Forrest, of course, were Confederate generals who fought hard to preserve slavery. Though their moral shortcomings also extend far beyond that fact and are too numerous to detail here.

[15] I would like to thank Chelsea Haramia, Dan Lowe, Thomas Metcalf, Nathan Nobis, Felipe Pereira, and Amanda Timmerman for very helpful and detailed comments on earlier versions of this entry.

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