

Column:

No, in fact, removing the statue of Robert E. Lee doesn't put us on a slippery slope



[Eric Zorn](#) **Contact Reporter** Change of Subject

“George Washington was a slave-owner,” said President Donald Trump, unspooling Tuesday afternoon a popular but tired argument in defense of Confederate statuary. “So, will George Washington now lose his status? Are we going to take down statues to George Washington?”

He rambled on. “How about Thomas Jefferson?” he asked. “Are we going to take down the statue? Because he was a major slave owner.”

Many readers responded to [my Wednesday column](#) calling for the removal of all public honors to the Confederacy with variations of this slippery-slope argument.

What else should be destroyed or banned in the name of moral failings, asked my correspondents triumphantly: The Roman Coliseum? Fulbright scholarships? The Declaration of Independence? The song “Dixie”? Wrigley Field? “Gone With The Wind”?

The what-nexters are a tedious and predictable lot, either possessing or feigning utter opacity when it comes to history in a disquieting effort to defend iconography that celebrates the enslavement of black people.

The implicit question behind all such taunts is, where do we draw the line?

Washington, Jefferson and other flawed founders built this country. Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and other rebels tried to tear it apart.

Given that all people exhibit moral failings, some rather pronounced, how should we determine when it's appropriate to honor them with statues or slap their names on schools, buildings, holidays, currency, roads and geographical features?

It can be an interesting and difficult debate — think of Christopher Columbus, Henry Ford, Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson and other historical figures whose great accomplishments are tainted by words or deeds that horrify those with modern sensibilities.

It's not, however, a particularly interesting or difficult debate when it comes to those who took up arms against the United States for the purpose of preserving human slavery.

Where do we draw the line? Gee, I dunno, but somewhere well this side of the leaders of the Confederacy — the politicians and generals known almost exclusively for their prominent roles in a murderous, doomed act of mass treason.

It's an easy distinction. Washington, Jefferson and other flawed founders built this country. Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and other rebels tried to tear it apart. Unlike Washington and Jefferson, they have no significant compensating virtues or accomplishments to counterbalance their treachery and justify the numerous honors and tributes bestowed on them as symbols of Southern "heritage."

Southerners erected many statues and monuments to such men decades after the Civil War as de facto middle fingers to those who battled segregation and demanded equal rights and opportunities for blacks.

To compare these propagandistic installations to the Washington Monument or the Jefferson Memorial is either profoundly ignorant or deviously brazen.

Now, sure, there's much for southerners to be proud of and for northerners to admire about the South. The arts. The hospitality. The folklore. The cuisine. The natural beauty. The delightfully passive-aggressive expression, "Bless your heart."

And the long-term effort to conflate those virtues with Confederate symbolism was such a success that many liberal, open-minded southerners didn't think twice about the battle flags and salutes to soldiers in gray that are so common in their culture.

They should have, sure. And now, with the events last weekend when neo-Nazis, Klan members and white supremacists oozed into Charlottesville, Va., to protest the removal of a 26-foot high statue of Lee from a public park, they can't avoid it.

This doesn't mean, as one piously aggrieved reader wrote, that we must purge our personal libraries of accounts of the Civil War. It doesn't mean we have to sanitize our museums, pave over our battlegrounds or write the Confederacy out of history textbooks. It doesn't even mean that good ol' boys and girls can't put rebel-flag stickers on their cars or build shrines to losing generals on their property.

It means we all have to stop pretending. It means we have to acknowledge Robert E. Lee isn't an anodyne mascot for sweet tea, stock car races and Faulkner novels, particularly for African Americans, whose continued bondage he fought for.

Removing his statue no more puts us on a slippery slope toward ousting far more nuanced figures from the public square than building the statue in the first place put us on a slippery slope toward, say, putting up statues of Hitler outside of Holocaust museums or of Ho Chi Minh at Vietnam War memorials.

Charlottesville and the many other cities now removing or considering removing their public monuments to the Confederacy are, in fact, on solid ground. It's ground that forms a path toward finally and fully acknowledging the searing legacy of slavery and the atrocity of secession in its name. Removal underscores a commitment to pluralism and renunciation of bigotry.

That's why the alt-right opposes it. Mr. President and gentle readers, what's your excuse?

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