

THE BYSTANDER —★—

What I Learned from History

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Last month, six African-American women in Charles Town, West Virginia, requested that a plaque honoring Confederate soldiers be removed from the front door of the Jefferson County Courthouse. The Commissioners then held an open meeting to discuss that request, which included suggestions such as relocating it or adding plaques that include other aspects of Civil War history.

Their request was unanimously voted down, with not one citizen supporting them, and at least a dozen speaking to disagree. It was a rout, not just a win, with the overwhelming consensus claiming that the plaque is "part of our history." Without addressing the merit of removing the plaque, it's the logical fallacy of that argument that needs to be exposed.

All academic standards for learning require a process to measure if it actually occurred over time. Based on that criteria, where is the evidence that we have learned from our history? If one of the most important lessons of our Civil War is that discrimination and unequal application of the law are unconstitutional, then there is plenty of evidence that neither side of the fight made that point very clearly.

American history has taught us that majorities, left to their own self-government, put Black people on auction blocks, native Americans onto reservations, gay people into closets, and dark-skinned or non-Christian immigrants behind fences and walls. It taught us that men have kept women from voting, preventing pregnancies, and owning property. History has taught us that our own presidents, from both political parties, have distorted facts that sent us into extended wars, twice in my own lifetime.

History has taught people of all colors, genders and cultures that they have been treated unfairly by those in power. Our conflicting interpretations of

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history have allowed us to cite contorted, disputed facts in an effort to prove conclusions that provide no closure.

And history has sometimes taught us to hate.

If the Civil War wasn't about slavery, its legacy is certainly about race. The only part of that history we seem recall involves a battle and a battle flag, not the social, political, legal and economic aftermath we still live with today. The Supreme Court cases that dragged us into, and out of, *separate but equal* apartheid have been seemingly forgotten; those are the parts of history we need to learn from. But no study of history will teach us what we really need to know, which is how to get along with each other. That's something we can only learn from ourselves. It's hard to begin that discussion when people are holding on to *that* flag, standing in front of *that* statue, or clinging to *that* memorial plaque.

It's easy to say "keep things the way they are, so we can learn from history." It's much more difficult to ask, exactly what did history teach us, and are we heeding those lessons? In the years since that plaque was placed by the Daughters of the Confederacy in 1986, has anyone measured the learning that it achieved, and by what standards? From those who defended the plaque, I did not hear any examples of learning that has been accomplished, or an answer as to how, or when, it might actually occur; or if honoring the Confederacy is even a tool of learning, and for whom.

I did not hear anyone say that their hope is that we view that plaque as the true reminder of what it took for us to be a country that gives respect and equality to all, and that this plaque---this small sign attached to a Courthouse doorway---can serve as an omen of what could happen if we forget that lesson.