

Our Missing Monuments

Published in the *Martinsburg Journal*, July 19, 2020

In the debate over the display of statues and monuments on public property, rather than remove the ones that glorify Confederate generals and Slave-owning politicians, we could merely modify the existing ones. Or even better--- we could build sculptures and plaques that instead deliver a message based on our principles. “Learning From History” isn’t accomplished by enshrining a warrior, because wars aren’t the only events that change the course of history; by far, it’s often accomplished by a court, a law, and people voting.

But first, to see if monuments are truly educational, we’d have to test people to see if the objective of the teaching is being met, since that’s how learning is measured in academia. And learning from history is only useful if you’re going to change your behavior because of what it teaches you. First, though, we would need to do some fact-checking; whose version of history do we use on those plaques? Unfortunately, the size of most monuments doesn’t leave room for much historical information. We should change the ratio by reducing the likeness of the man to miniature scale, with the text chiseled onto a colossal base, rather than the other way around.

In place of a thousand Confederate souvenirs, we’d erect memorials to the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. And since most people don’t remember what those are, we could post them on massive stone walls in every plaza, city square, and National Park.

Supreme Court cases like *Brown vs. Board of Education* have arguably done as much to change this country as the Civil War did, with far less bloodshed, of course. But I don’t see any sculptures to honor that decision, or any carved models of the National Guardsmen who were called up to enforce it in Little Rock, Arkansas. Brass tablets engraved with its text should be bolted to the walls of every schoolhouse door, over every water fountain, and in all public restrooms, and in front of every restaurant.

There should be as many figurines of Sherman in Georgia as there are of Confederates in Northern states (it would only take one or two). After all, teaching people that “war is hell” was Sherman’s specific lesson plan. His “scorched earth” campaign exemplifies why winning the war rarely settles the underlying conflict. Oddly, there are no military bases named for him—two small forts in his memory in Panama and Idaho were deactivated long ago. Yet we still have major installations named for forgettable figures who were on the losing side, not to mention the wrong side, of history. Sherman’s own documented prejudice towards Native Americans and Blacks would be an excellent learning tool for us all.

And that’s one of the unfortunate assumptions in the debate over these Confederate memorials; they subtly insinuate that White Supremacy is only a Southern phenomenon.

Instead, let’s build tributes dedicated to ideas and ideals, not to people who achieved glory because they were wealthy, well-educated, and lucky. That’s true of three of the four

THE BYSTANDER



presidents on Mount Rushmore, most of the White House occupants, and those on the currency we pass. That's also true of nearly every Confederate general and politician. No need for bootstrap-pulling with this crowd. They cleverly convinced their working-class neighbors to join their crusade to preserve their giant Plantations, to protect their ownership rights to human beings--- not the rights of states.

But another option to resolve the issue of whose image educates us as a nation might also be the most economical. At shrines to Confederate leaders --- men who benefited from the "Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787" allowing slaveholding states to maintain a majority in Congress --- we should preserve only three-fifths of their statue. The local population could decide on which portion to keep; the view of the front, or the view of the rear.

These men secured their legislative power through this one Constitutional clause, which assessed the value of one enslaved African as 60% of a white person for census purposes. Obviously, slaves had no rights to representation nor were they ever considered citizens, but their owners desperately needed to count them as part of the South's population so their state could earn more Congressional representatives. The more slaves they had, the more power they had in Congress. And that's how they blocked all legislative efforts to end their vast, profitable supply of free labor, forcing the country into a war 75 years later.

For that, I'd say even half a statue is more than they deserve.

But lastly, I wonder why we need statues at all. If people spent as much time self-actualizing as they do hero-worshipping, we'd have a far healthier, happier world. And why use marble and granite? If they were constructed of something biodegradable, it would teach us that reputations tarnish over time, opinions evolve, realism replaces mythology, and no man lives forever, even one on a statue.

That lesson would be one worth learning.