

The monuments: They're not worth it anymore

These days, it's almost as though Appomattox never happened at all.

Part of my job as a newspaper editor is to comb the AP wire each day and select for publication the best and most interesting stories from the state, nation, world and beyond. I generally like to give our readers a good selection, but since the weekend atrocities in Charlottesville that saw an emboldened white supremacist movement rear its shaved head and killed local activist Heather Heyer, it's been all Confederates, all the time. Only a matter of time, I suppose. Ever since a minority (not even a plurality) of my fellow citizens placed a bigoted, reprehensible cockroach masquerading as a human being into the highest office in the land, we were just counting the days until the worst of his supporters decided to rise up and take what they (incorrectly) believed to be theirs.

The impetus for the white nationalist rising in Charlottesville was the impending removal of that city's statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee (ostensibly; if it hadn't been that, it'd have been something else in some other unsuspecting town), and so a fair number of stories dealt with statues:

"Baltimore mayor calls for Confederate statues' removal" (this happened early Wednesday, four days after the violence).

"Lexington (Ky.) mayor looks to accelerate statues' removal."

"N.C. protesters rip down statue outside courthouse." This last one happened over in Durham, an event I watched in nearly real time with mixed emotions, wondering if they were going to come after Silent Sam (the memorial to Confederate veterans at my beloved alma mater, UNC) next.

It didn't start with Charlottesville; the debate over Confederate monuments in the public sphere has been raging for years. New Orleans removed four large statues (including Lee and Confederate President Jefferson Davis) earlier this year; Richmond is still deciding what to do with theirs; the massive monument "To the Confederate Defenders of Charleston" in that city's Battery Park is still there.

Before I talk any more about Confederate statues, though, let me start with the first one I ever saw.

I grew up just outside the small town of Lexington, N.C., known for its barbecue, its love of NASCAR and its impressive, neoclassical-style historic courthouse, which dominates the downtown square. The courthouse isn't the only piece of history there, though; also on the square is a large statue of a prototypical Confederate infantryman, complete with boots, rifle and slouch hat, standing atop a tall stone pedestal adorned with a carving of a Confederate flag and several inscriptions. The legend "OUR CONFEDERATE DEAD" isn't all that awful, I suppose – one suspects the people who erected the statue in 1905, 40 years after the Civil War ended, may have (at least in part) wanted to honor their fallen friends and neighbors.

A bit of doggerel on the other side of the stone base, though, is somewhat more revealing: "SLEEP SWEETLY IN YOUR HUMBLE GRAVES / SLEEP MARTYRS OF A FALLEN CAUSE." More on this in a moment.

As a boy I looked at that statue just about every time we went into town, wondering why it was there and what it meant. Like most kids who want to know something, I asked questions; my father, as a history teacher, was better equipped than most parents to answer them. Bit by bit, I learned about what

had happened; that the United States had not always been united; that there had been a terrible war between North and South; that far too many people had died before it was over; that men had once owned other people as slaves; and that somehow, at its root, slavery was the cause of the war.

Then one day I asked Dad something he couldn't answer:

"So which side did North Carolina fight for?"

"The South."

By this time I knew the South had been the slaveholding side. "Why'd we fight for that side?"

A long silence. I guess Dad, as an educator, was trying to figure out how to explain to his 10-year-old son the realities of the Southern agrarian economy in the 19th century; the fact that South Carolina, Georgia and Virginia had already seceded, leaving North Carolina geographically isolated from the rest of the Union; the concept of going along with the crowd even when you know something's wrong; and the enormous lies one can tell oneself to justify looking the other way.

Finally he said: "I don't know, son. I don't know."

I tell that story because it was that statue, and many others like it throughout our state (Graham has one; so does Pittsboro; Durham's was quite similar) that led me to start thinking about history, to consider what happened in the past and why, and to examine how that history influenced the present and how it might affect our future. For this reason I have, for years, defended the retention of these memorials to a defeated, reprehensible cause: that, rather than glorify the Old South, they might serve as starting points for education and a more enlightened citizenry, fully aware of its past and able to see that past in the context of how we evolved into something better.

That is a position that, in the light of present realities, I can no longer endorse. Because, as the snarling, torch-wielding mob in Charlottesville (egged on by our freely elected Fuhrer-in-Chief) has demonstrated, we haven't evolved into something better. Sure, progress has been made and millions of Americans have embraced the beauty of a multicultural society, living together in harmony. But as Charlottesville (and Charleston, and Overland Park, and Jasper, Texas, and on, and on) showed, the right-wing, racist cockroaches never went away. These days they're getting bolder. And I doubt they're in the mood to stop.

As a Southern white man (and, conservative, centrist or liberal, there are few things more stubborn than a Southern white man), I have not arrived at this change of view lightly. But it's occurred to me over the last few days that, as much history as I've read and as strongly as I believe in education, I have never taken the trouble to try and get outside my own two eyes and view this issue in another way. I have assumed that most reasonable people could look at a statue and view it in the context of its times. But in fact many of these statues scattered in Southern cities and small towns were erected generations after the war, during the first decades of the 20th century, at a time when the Klan was reforming, race relations were at a national nadir and Jim Crow was being codified throughout the Old Confederacy. Sleep ye martyrs to a fallen cause, indeed. The cause never died. It simply laid down its arms at Appomattox and withdrew to regroup. The resentment remained.

These are not the actions of a people interested in reconciliation. And they left monuments behind for a reason. To this young man they may have planted a seed of questioning, of learning; but I was naïve to

assume the same should have been true across the board. To others they have clearly become a rallying point for a return to the old ways, with a double espresso jolt of 20th century right-wing nationalism and racism to make things even uglier.

So we need to talk seriously about getting these things down, for one simple reason: They're not worth it anymore. A distinction might be made between the giant, glorified monuments to Lee, Davis, Stonewall Jackson and the others that organized and executed the Confederate cause, and the small-town statues to the ordinary soldier who never owned a slave, but simply found himself caught up in circumstances beyond his control. But that's splitting hairs. We can remember these ordinary guys without forcing blacks to drive by them every day. That's what history books are for.

Will it hurt when they get rid of Silent Sam? Sure. (I hope they can at least find a place for him in the old cemetery on campus, where the dead can, and should, rest.) Will it sting when they haul away the old statue in my hometown? Oh yes. He's a piece of our past, part of my growth as an emotionally mature man and someone who reveres history. But no statue is worth any black American feeling like they're second-class citizens. They're not worth a rejuvenated coalition of Nazis and Klan. And they were never worth Heather Heyer's life.

It won't happen overnight. But we need to move, before the white nationalists think they've got something going here. New Orleans and Baltimore were a start. Maybe Lexington, N.C. can be next. And eventually the fellow at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, who (if nothing else) has certainly proven himself a monument to the stupidity and arrogance we, as a people, are all too capable of.

R.J. Beatty

Hillsborough, N.C.

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