

Opening Statement of
Deputy Ranking Republican John Curtis
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests,
and Public Lands

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 970, H.R. 4135, and H.R. 7550

July 21, 2020

Thank you for your remarks, Chair Haaland, and thank you to the witnesses joining us today. The Subcommittee has before it today three bills related to monuments and memorials which include symbols or depict figures associated with the Confederacy. The first, H.R. 970, offered by Congressman Brown of Maryland, would remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from Antietam National Battlefield. The statue, which was placed on private property in 2003, was purchased by the National Park Service in 2005. Next, we have H.R. 4135 offered by Congresswoman Holmes Norton of D.C., which would remove the statue of Albert Pike. That statue, though intended to honor Pike's service as a freemason rather than his service as a Confederate General, has been the source of controversy since before it was erected in 1901. Recently, the statue was torn down from its pedestal and set ablaze. Finally, we have H.R. 7550 offered by Congressman McEachin of

Virginia, which would require a multi-agency study to inventory Confederate symbols and monuments located on federal lands.

I commend the authors of the legislation before us today. The legislative process, which will provide a variety of diverse opinions through elected representation, is the appropriate avenue to make the decisions about which statues should be on public property. I believe this hearing can serve as an opportunity to hear a variety of views, and I am particularly interested to learn the underlying principles that determine what should, or should not, be put on public display.

I hope we all agree that vandalism is never the answer, especially when there is a legal route to change. While there have been some high-profile vandalism of Confederate statues and memorials, other acts of vandalism have targeted more broadly supported statues. For example, unknown vandals in New York tore down a statue of the abolitionist icon, Frederick Douglass. Other vandals in Wisconsin tore down the statue of Hans Christian Heg and decapitated it. Heg fought for the Union during the Civil War, was a fierce opponent of slavery, and an early member of the anti-slavery Free Soil Party. A statue and memorial to George Washington in Baltimore was graffitied with paint, and in San Francisco protestors defaced and toppled a statue of former President Grant, who led the Union Army during the Civil War.

Replacing our country's legal framework with mob rule is a threat to our representative democracy. We are lucky to live in a country where it is even possible to petition our leaders through a deliberative process, and the day we no longer have that right America will cease to exist. The United States is the leader of the free world and no nation in history has done more to defend the principles of liberty and freedom.

That said, our Founding Fathers understood that our nation was imperfect from its conception. The Preamble to the Constitution states: "in Order to form a more perfect Union." We remain an imperfect union today. The American experiment in representative democracy is and always will be a work in progress. Our Founding Fathers were not perfect people, none of us are, but despite their flaws, we should continue to honor them for the monumental feat they undertook of successfully fighting for freedom, then setting up a system to sustain that freedom. We should be able to discuss these historical figures and their admirable traits, as well as traits less than admiral.

I believe that one-hundred years from now, our great-grandchildren will look back at us with disappointment for some of our actions that may seem and feel acceptable today. Despite earnestly trying our best, history has shown that judgment uses a different paradigm many years down the road.

I hope we in Congress can work together to elevate our public discourse and have nuanced and thoughtful debate on these important topics.

The best part of my job as a member of Congress, and I wish I could give every American a day in my shoes, is getting to hear and learn from diverse perspectives from across the country. Despite my best efforts earlier this year to stay 59, I am now a 60-year-old white guy from Utah, coming from a state without direct ties to the Confederacy. I am excited to listen and learn, and hope that these conversations can unite us in a way that we can bring back home.

Therefore, one of my primary goals of this hearing is to understand what my colleagues, on both sides of the aisle, feel should be the underlying framework determining if a statue should remain or be removed.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and I yield back.