

Regarding Confederate Statues on the Public Landscape
(Testimony for H.R. 970, H.R. 4135)
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To Members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the need to inventory and assess Confederate statues, symbols, monuments and other ephemera in and on Federal property. I'm deeply honored for the opportunity and I hope my commentary provides you with information needed to make decisions in the best interests of all of the American people.

In 2011, the Pew Research Center found that more than 48% of survey respondents believed the primary cause of the American Civil War was state's rights (tariffs, nullification debates, etc.) compared to only 38% noting slavery as its root cause. Public and academic historians have long attested that the states' rights argument was and is deeply intertwined with slavery and the protection of it as evidenced from a plethora of primary sources. Yet translating this scholarship to the general populace proves challenging. From the turn of the 20th century, curricula were set by states and localities. For children raised in the South, the United Daughters of the Confederacy issued detailed guidelines for the rejection of any book or text that-among other things- "calls the confederate soldier a traitor or rebel and the war a rebellion; that's says the south fought to keep her slaves, that speaks of the slaveholder of the South as cruel and unjust to his slaves."

The earliest Civil War monuments and markers were placed in the immediate aftermath of the War to honor the dead. The federal government oversaw reburial of its 300,000 plus

dead in 73 national cemeteries established for that purpose. Some were also established on battlefields which now are a part of the National Park Service. The largest federal cemetery was established at Arlington, the plantation home of Robert E. Lee. When Federal Troops seized the property after the Lee's abandoned it in 1861, it was officially designated a cemetery in 1864. Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs' intent was to humiliate Lee. Meigs' wanted Arlington to serve as a permanent reminder to Lee of the carnage wrought upon the nation by his decision to wage war against the nation he swore an oath to defend against all enemies foreign and domestic. Of course, Lee never returned to Arlington.

Conversely, the Confederate States of America had no system for adequate burial of its dead. Dead bodies were often left in shallow graves or on the field where men fell in battle. Outraged by what they perceived as the Union's disregard for their dead, memorial societies led by middle to upper class white women organized to rectify the situation. Throughout the South, the soldiers' aid societies oversaw the gruesome task of locating and transporting tens of thousands of soldiers' bodies from numerous battlefields by deploying enslaved men. They also established cemeteries for Confederate dead or designated areas within existing burial grounds. They initially built modest monuments to serve as reminders of the sacrifices of their dead like their counterparts in the North, but the scale would grow considerably once Reconstruction was abandoned after 1877.

The construction of statuary, monuments, and other symbols grew after the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson (Separate but Equal SCOTUS ruling) through the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan

in 1915. The next significant rise in Confederate monument building occurred between 1940s and 1960s coinciding with southern resistance to the US Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling. It was during that period that the majority of schools, roads, and public buildings were renamed for Confederate political and military figures. It is also during this time that what has become known as the Confederate Flag re-emerged as symbols of terror and white supremacy. We also cannot dismiss the fact the Lost Cause narrative gained greater validation in WWII when the US War Department named military bases for Confederates. To get the land needed to build the bases, the federal government positioned the naming of these bases as a gesture of reconciliation. Unfortunately, it had the effect of legitimizing a rebellion against the United States. With each statue erected, school or road named and symbols displayed, the message was and is clear. As much as some would like to assign more benign meaning to these things, the historical record proves otherwise.

To be clear, the rejection of this reframing is not a new phenomenon. Public figures and scholars at the time railed against what was happening. Among the most eloquent on the subject was Ambassador Frederick Douglass when he said at an 1877 speech in New York City in honor of Decoration Day, "...We must not be asked to say that the South was right in the rebellion, or to say the North was wrong. We must not be asked to put no difference between those who fought for the Union and those who fought against it, or between loyalty and treason." In his seminal *Black Reconstruction in America* written in 1935, W.E.B. Dubois wrote, "...endless sympathy with the white South . . . ridicule, contempt or silence for the Negro [and] a judicial attitude towards the North." was "a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history that the story will make pleasant reading for [white] Americans."

Societal upheavals in the 1950s and 1960s challenged this status quo interpretation of the Civil War and the enduring legacies used to subjugate and disenfranchise millions of American Citizens. Scrupulous scholarship challenged standing interpretations of the War heavily influenced by the Lost Cause. Meanwhile segregationists entrenched using rhetoric of states' along with the reemergence of the "Confederate battle flag" as a symbol of their resistance to integration and equal rights. For African Americans, religious and other ethnic minorities that flag had long been and continues to be associated with violence inflicted upon them and their allies.

Throughout the current discussion, one refrain has been repeated- you shouldn't erase this history by removing these items from the public landscape. It can be successfully argued that history was already erased when these items were erected. Subsequently, how the American Civil War is remembered and interpreted for the entire nation has been skewed. The outlier is the National Park Service yet for decades, NPS avoided controversy by simply focusing on military actions and leaders. Unfortunately, that approach provided little in terms of context or meaning about why the war is important to the American narrative beyond casualty counts. It was not until the 1990s that the historical, political and social issues became a consistent part of NPS battlefield interpretation and at museums around the nation... and we are better for it.

Thank you for allowing me time to discuss a subject upon which volumes have been written.

