

H.R. 970, H.R. 4135, and H.R. 7550  
Confederate Statues and Symbols on Public Lands

Testimony before  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

Committee on Natural Resources

United States House of Representatives

July 21 2020

Mitchell J. Landrieu  
Founder and President, E Pluribus Unum  
Former Mayor, City of New Orleans (2010-2018)

I want to thank Chair Haaland, Ranking Member Young, and the other Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to discuss the important matter of Confederate symbols.

It is a pleasure to be with you this morning.

My name is Mitch Landrieu. I am the president and founder of a social impact organization called E Pluribus Unum, named after our nation's founding motto. Our goal is to help advance racial and economic equity in the South. I also served as mayor of the city of New Orleans from 2010 to 2018 and Louisiana's Lieutenant Governor from 2004 to 2010.

As many of you know, as mayor of New Orleans, I removed four Confederate statues from public land, with a process that started in 2015 and ended in May of 2017, with the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue from the city's most prominent circle.

That process helped reintroduce historical facts and a more proper telling of the history of how and why many of these statues or monuments were put up in the first place.

The historic record is clear, most statues of Confederate leaders were erected not just to honor these men, but as part of the movement which became known as The Cult of the Lost Cause.

The Lost Cause had one goal - through monuments and other means - rewrite history to hide the truth, which is that the Confederacy was on the wrong side of humanity. It sought to continue to oppress Black Americans.

James W. Loewen, a retired University of Vermont professor, and the author of *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, put it succinctly in a Washington Post oped: "The Confederates won with the pen (and the noose) what they could not win on the battlefield: the cause of white supremacy and the dominant understanding of what the war was all about. We are still digging ourselves out from under the misinformation they spread, which has manifested in our public monuments and our history books."<sup>1</sup>

According to the work of the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are some 700 Confederate memorial monuments and statues erected well after the Civil War. There are over 1000 streets, buildings and other markers named after Confederate leaders. According to their research, "two distinct periods saw a significant rise in the dedication of monuments and other symbols. The first began around 1900, amid the period in which states were enacting Jim Crow laws to disenfranchise the newly freed African Americans and re-segregate society. This spike lasted well into the 1920s, a period that saw a dramatic resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, which had been born in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. The second spike began in the early 1950s and lasted through the 1960s, as the civil rights movement led to a backlash among segregationists. These two periods also coincided with the 50th and 100th anniversaries of the Civil War."<sup>2</sup>

In summary, the South lost the war and a group of people got together and decided that they were going to adorn the country with monuments that revered those who fought on behalf of a

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/07/01/why-do-people-believe-myths-about-the-confederacy-because-our-textbooks-and-monuments-are-wrong/>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy>

cause that was lost, which they wanted to make seem noble. It was a propaganda campaign of epic proportions.

You see, these statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposefully celebrate and perpetuate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for.

The truth is they were fighting for the right to own and sell black human beings.

History cannot be changed. It cannot be moved like a statue. What is done is done. The Civil War is over, and the Confederacy lost. We are all the better for it.

But in this, the 20th year of the 21st century, we should not debate whether the United States of America should revere the Confederacy. It is self-evident that these men did not fight for the United States of America. They fought to destroy it. They may have been warriors, but they were not patriots.

Ultimately, as a country, we must grapple with a simple notion-- there is a difference between remembrance of history and reverence of it.

To literally put the Confederacy on a pedestal is an inaccurate recitation of our full past, it is an affront to our present, and it is a bad prescription for our future. It ensures that all that our fellow brothers and sisters once fought to end will still continue.

As President George W. Bush said at the dedication ceremony for the National Museum of African American History & Culture, "A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and corrects them."

Members, you now have an opportunity to do your part correct this past. This is an important first step.

Let me close with a plea to your humanity.

I noted in a speech upon removing the monuments that a friend asked me to consider these monuments from the perspective of an African American mother or father trying to explain to their fifth grade daughter who Robert E. Lee is and why he is revered with a statue.

Can any of you look into her eyes and convince her that Robert E. Lee is there to encourage her? Do you think she will feel inspired and hopeful? Do these monuments help her see a future with limitless potential? Have you ever thought that if her potential is limited, yours is too?

We all know the answer to these very simple questions. When you look into this child's eyes is the moment when the searing truth comes into focus. This is the moment when we know what is right and what we must do.

We cannot continue to walk away from this truth. We must remove these Confederate symbols that dirty the soil of our beloved country. Once that is done, we can better confront the racist systems that have divided us by design for generations and get us closer to that more perfect union we all aspire to be.

Thank you.