

Testimony

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I want to thank the Members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands for inviting me to participate in today's hearing.

I think what is happening here in this room is how we, in our local communities, should approach the debate over America's monuments: through a peaceful, democratic process.

The sins of slavery and racism have left some deep scars on our nation, as they have in many other nations throughout history.

In the protests that we have witnessed around the country, there are, no doubt, many people involved whose intentions are good—whose aim, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, is “to bind up the nation's wounds.”

That is a noble goal.

But there is nothing noble about the unlawful assaults on our historic monuments. There is nothing admirable about violent mobs taking over city streets, destroying businesses, and terrorizing civilian populations.

This is not the way to bind up the nation's wounds.

Americans are not only debating our history. We are locked in a struggle to define the meaning of our democratic republic.

A line from George Orwell's *1984* comes to mind, a warning about the abuse of history and the will to power: "He who controls the present controls the past, and he who controls the past controls the future."

He who controls the past controls the future.

There are forces in this country—in the mob mentality on our streets, in the media, in the academy—that seek to erase, to distort, and pervert our history.

They want to manipulate the past so that they can bring about a future in line with their radical political vision.

Every day we are seeing more clearly what that vision looks like on the ground in real time: It represents not only a breakdown in law and order. It is an assault on the ideals and the institutions that have sustained our democracy, and our civilization, over the centuries.

It is the rush of the mob over rational, democratic debate.

How else do we explain the attacks on the statues of Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglas, and the Emancipation Statue just down the street in Lincoln Park?

I am an historian, and the job of the historian is not to manipulate the past for some partisan, political purpose.

My job is to try to understand it—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

To the mob, virtually everything in our past is ugly: the product of oppression and racism.

To them, virtually all of our heroes were villains, all of our institutions were simply a “social construction” to protect the people in power.

The problem with this outlook is not only that it’s cynical and conspiratorial, but that it cuts us off from our cultural inheritance.

That is why the “cancel culture” is so inherently destructive. In its rage, it robs us of what Lincoln called “the mystic cords of memory.”

It keeps us learning about the tragedies and the *triumphs* of our civilization: our remarkable *achievements* in bringing about a more just and democratic society.

The mob mentality prevents us from developing the quality of character we most desperately need: gratitude.

There is a lot to be thankful for when we consider the history of the United States in its fullness.

As someone who has studied Western civilization, I can tell you that when the United States emerged onto the world stage, we introduced—like no one had ever attempted—the concepts of human freedom, equality, and government by consent of the governed.

And no nation has done more to advance these democratic ideas, both at home and abroad. With all of our faults and failures, that is a profound part of our history—and we need to remember it.

The Roman historian, Titus Livius (59 BC–17 AD), put it this way:

The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have the record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things rotten through and through, to avoid.

We study the past in order for this history to speak its truths and warnings and lessons into our present reality.

History is the act of remembering, and remembering is one of the most important modes of human thinking. It can be a gateway to gratitude, to renewal, to faith, and to the recovery of a living tradition.

The story of our nation, and our civilization, will continue to reveal itself as a tale of tragedy and triumph, of war and peacemaking, of slavery and freedom, of moral depravity and moral beauty.

The mob mentality sees only one thing.

It does not see a City on a Hill. It sees the dark Kingdom of Mordor.

How do we bind up the nation's wounds?

We could begin by remembering, with honesty and integrity, our past.

The American Declaration of Independence, for the first time in history, proclaimed that a nation was coming into existence as the sworn *enemy* of human slavery.

The hypocrisy of some of the men making that proclamation—as the owners of slaves—does not change this stunning reality.

The American Revolution put the institution of slavery on notice all over the world: its days would be numbered. No other political revolution in the history of mankind ever made such a claim.

Perhaps no civil rights leader understood this fact better than the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

Before arriving at The Heritage Foundation, I taught history for 10 years at the King's College in New York City.

Every semester I assigned Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

Let me read a few lines:

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

You have to admire a man who endured what Dr. King endured and yet refused to become embittered and cynical about America's past and what she stood for.

Dr. King refused to join the mob.

"We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation," he said, "because the goal of America is freedom."

The goal of America is freedom.

In the history of the world, that is quite a story—a story worth remembering and defending.
