

Confederate Monuments

Across the United States, people are wrestling with questions about the appropriate place of Confederate monuments—including statues of notable Confederate soldiers such as Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson—in public spaces. To some, these monuments honor the horrific ideals that undergirded the slave trade in the United States and should therefore be removed. To others, they are reminders of an important chapter in American history and ought to remain where they are. In Charlottesville, Virginia, the decision by City Council to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee sparked a demonstration by white supremacists that became violent when a counter-protestor was killed by a car driven by a demonstrator. This sparked protests and civic action across the U.S. both for and against the removal of Confederate monuments.¹

Some polls show that a majority of Americans think that Confederate monuments should not be moved.² At the same time, many continue to organize around efforts to have them removed from places of honor throughout the American South. In numerous cases, state and local governments are heeding calls to remove these monuments while in others, Confederate statues are being brought down by community members without governmental approval.³

Mitch Landrieu, Mayor of New Orleans, articulated many of the reasons that motivate the removal of such monuments. For one thing, these monuments, many of which were erected soon after the Civil War, are seen as efforts to rewrite history through what is called the “Cult of the Lost Cause”, which aimed to sanitize the Confederacy—“ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for.”⁴ To maintain such monuments as they are would continue to honor the racist and pro-slavery views for which they were erected.

Those who advocate for Confederate monuments to remain as they are in public spaces emphasize the importance of free speech; people’s wishes to maintain ties to their own heritage;⁵ the commitment not to lose the historical significance of Confederate monuments, contested though it may be; and the fear that removal will whitewash U.S. history in public spaces.⁶

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What roles do public monuments or memorials play in society? When are monuments valuable? When can monuments be problematic?
2. What is the most morally pressing aspect of the debate over Confederate monuments?
3. What should happen to Confederate statues currently in public spaces and why? Should they remain? Be destroyed? Moved elsewhere? Or something else?

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/08/14/543471538/charlottesville-rally-aimed-to-defend-a-confederate-statue-it-may-have-doomed-ot>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/21/polls-shows-majority-of-americans-think-confederate-statues-should-remain>

³ <http://www.wral.com/durham-da-to-drop-felony-charges-in-toppling-of-confederate-statue/17250017/>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/opinion/mitch-landrieu-speech-transcript.html>

⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/news/opinion-why-i-feel-confederate-monuments-should-stay-ncna767221>

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/i-detest-our-confederate-monuments-but-they-should-remain/2017/08/18/13d25fe8-843c-11e7-902a-2a9f2d808496_story.html?utm_term=.ab3661375dfc

