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# Monuments only have the power we convey to them

*Michael K. McMahan*



A statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee sits in Emancipation Park, in Charlottesville, Virginia. The deadly rally by white nationalists in Charlottesville on Aug. 12 is accelerating the removal of Confederate statues in cities across the nation. [AP PHOTO/JULIA RENDLEMAN, FILE]



If you are white and you grew up in the South like me, it is quite possible that you have good friends whose skin is darker than yours. For me they are James, Brenda, Jay, Stacie, Kirsten, Mel, Stephanie, Michael, Ty, Bernard, Paulette, Oyobode, Brenda, and my faithful doctor, Shawnya. When we meet, we greet one other with a smile and a hug. We talk about family and friends, children and grandchildren, sports and business, military funerals, church and faith, and why I should be eating fewer cheeseburgers and more broccoli. Race is not a barrier

between us. We are simply friends.

If you are white and you grew up in the South like me, it is probable that you know people who are openly prejudiced against others whose skin is darker than their own. These are sad people trapped in an aging culture of mistrust and outright bitterness. Their prejudice prevents them from experiencing the

kaleidoscope of life that is all around them. They are prisoners of another time and have been left behind by our country's diverse and dynamic present and future.

If you are white and you grew up in the South like me, your parents and grandparents may have had a different perspective on race. No person living today can understand nor adequately articulate the horror and devastation that was the American Civil War.

More people were killed in that war than all of our other wars combined, before or since. In the fall and early winter of 1864, after capturing and burning the southern city of Atlanta, General William T. Sherman marched 65,000 Union troops across the state of Georgia to the City of Savannah. The Army slashed a 60-mile wide swath of scorched earth across the state destroying virtually everything in its path. Chimneys of burned farmhouses became known as "Sherman's Sentinels." The army had no supply lines to the North, so they were forced to forage, i.e., take food and supplies from the southern civilian population. Following in the wake of the army, because they had nowhere to go and no way to survive, were thousands of freed African slaves who also foraged for food and essentials. Many poor white women and children did not survive in the wake of Sherman's march due to food deprivation.

My grandmother was born in 1907. Her grandparents, whom she knew, respected and loved, experienced the American Civil War. Many of the people I knew as a child had second hand memories of the war. Generally, they hated Yankees and, at best, kept themselves away from "colored people." My grandmother's attitude toward blacks changed late in life when she came to know and love Miss Ada Jackson, a friend of my parents. But she never got around to forgiving Yankees for what they did to the South.

It is both in this context and in the context of the racial segregation that followed that most war monuments in the South were erected. Those that were put in place more than 100 years ago were put there by people like my grandparents' parents. They honored the brave men who fought the Yankees and tried to preserve the South. Monuments that were commissioned in the middle part of the 20th Century were more likely established as a reminder to "colored people" that whites were in charge once again, though times were changing.

There is no doubt in my mind that General Robert E. Lee was a brave and honorable man. He graduated from West Point. He served with distinction in the Mexican War on behalf of his country, the United States of America. When the nation split he was faced with a gut-wrenching choice — fight for his country or defend his beloved state of Virginia. He chose Virginia. He did his duty, certainly knowing it was a losing cause from the start. After the war he was president of Washington and Lee University where he also served with distinction for 10 years. I know the father of a young Jewish woman who recently graduated from the W&L law school and passed the difficult Virginia bar this year.

Like my grandmother, General Robert E. Lee was a man of his times. His attitudes and perspective were shaped by the culture that brought him to adulthood. He lived an accomplished life and it is appropriate, in my mind, to honor his memory.

If you are white and you grew up in the South, like me, you more than likely have paid little or no attention to the many Civil War monuments that dot our courthouse squares and public places. They mean little to you. There may have been a time when they meant something to older generations; or, they may have been a statement of political power and intimidation. Regardless, they are cold, stone monuments, silent and frozen in time. They only have the power we convey to them.

So this is my opinion of monuments. Give them only the attention they deserve. For some they may have meaning, but it is more likely they only offer a platform for spewing hatred and prejudice toward others. If we give these few people, prisoners of a past that has no honor, the quiet disdain they deserve, our lives go forward and our future is bright. There will be a time when there are fewer people who need the past to validate their present. For my friends and me that time has long since arrived.

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