

Why universities should be on the front lines of the monument wars

Scholars know historical actions can — and should — be judged.



Supporters of Confederate monuments are escorted by police Aug. 30 during a rally regarding the recently toppled statue known as Silent Sam at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (AP) (Gerry Broome/AP)

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After years of protest, students and activists finally toppled the statue of a Confederate soldier prominently displayed on the University of North Carolina's Chapel Hill campus. University leaders immediately vowed to restore the statue, while others on campus, including the [history department](#), have urged its permanent removal. Meanwhile, UNC-Chapel Hill [has become a battleground](#) for a larger fight, as a local group dedicated to defending Confederate statues marched across campus with a large Confederate flag and signs saying, "Save our monuments. Preserve our history."

Colleges and universities have become flash points for the debates over the meanings of monuments and in the larger question of how the past shapes the present and the future. Rather than a problem to be overcome, these "monument wars" should be seen as an opportunity for students, faculty and administrators to think about how

universities can lead a conversation about the darkest parts of our past that is nuanced rather than simplistic, honest rather than whitewashed. Contemporary politics too often devolves into talking points, focus-group-tested slogans or even propaganda. What better place to have difficult, but critically important, conversations than university campuses?

Many institutions have taken seriously the challenges posed by their history. For some, including [Brown](#), [Georgetown](#) and [Princeton](#), answering these questions has meant unearthing and acknowledging the universities' long-hidden historical ties to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. For [others](#), it has meant addressing public memorials, including chapels, statues and buildings, honoring the Confederacy and the Lost Cause. Our own Washington and Lee University, which owes its survival to Robert E. Lee and the pernicious "Lost Cause" mythology, has also struggled to address [its own troubled past](#).

This historical investigation is an opportunity to expose the difference between history and commemoration and show that monuments are not neutral historical artifacts. Defenders of Confederate memorials say they are simply preserving history by protecting spaces or statues from the excesses of contemporary political correctness. In reality, they are making their own political statements and promoting a distorted and often whitewashed version of the past.

That position does not honor history but ignores it. For thousands of years, monuments have served not to educate but to honor a particular vision of the past and in so doing shape the present and the future — and who that future is for.

And far from being a product of "woke" college campuses, monument wars are a tradition older than the American republic itself. On [July 9, 1776](#), after hearing the Declaration of Independence publicly proclaimed, a group of American soldiers and sailors tore down a statue of George III. The act did not remove George III from history, but it simply removed his image from a place of honor in the public square.

The same groups that often claim the mantle of history's defenders also insist that we cannot judge historical figures according to contemporary moral codes. Such concerns have no place on university campuses whose mission is to promote complex critical thinking and honest engagement.

Understanding history requires us to make judgments about the past. In our courses, we teach students to identify and evaluate historical sources but also to understand how these sources might be biased toward one group or another. We ask how other viewpoints — from marginalized or disempowered groups, for example — might be obscured by these sources.

Memorials also make judgments. Who or what gets memorialized tells us less about the past than about the present, and too often silences dissident voices. It speaks volumes, for example, that [Confederate Gen. James Longstreet is nowhere memorialized in the South](#). A remarkable soldier, once referred to as "Lee's Old War Horse," Longstreet was also an agent of Reconstruction and of black civil rights. For this, he has been all but erased not from history but from a Southern landscape pockmarked by memorials to the "heroes" and "martyrs" of the "Lost Cause."

Not all historical judgments require moral pronouncements. But they sometimes do. Done right, such judgments do not hamper historical understanding but, rather, help to get the story straight. In teaching about 16th- and 17th-century witch hunts, for example, we can seek to understand pre-modern modes of thought while still lamenting such miscarriages of justice and paying closer attention to the voices of the (mostly female) victims. We can understand the democratic ideas that inspired the French Revolution while also recognizing that its leaders committed gross human rights violations in pursuit of these ideals. Judging individuals by modern standards doesn't impede historical understanding. It adds to it.

Claims that we should not judge historical figures also ignore the contemporaries who understood well the evils of their time. At any moment of systemic oppression, there were members of the dominant class — to say nothing of victimized or marginalized groups — who chose to resist. From the white Southerners who were also

emancipationists to members of the French civil service who worked for the Resistance during the Vichy era, there have always been people who made hard choices, some at the cost of their own lives.

Understanding people in their own contexts therefore does not, and should not, mean excusing morally reprehensible actions. Recognizing the human tragedies of the past, and actively condemning those who did wrong, mourning for their victims and celebrating those who made righteous but difficult decisions does not mean that we don't understand history in its context. It means that we understand fully not only what happened, but also how that past continues to shape the present and the future.

In the end, how an institution does or does not present its history always, always entails judgments. Equivocation and continued condoning of past evils because of "context" are, in fact, judgments, too — ones that speak loudly and clearly. We expect students to understand this; it is not too much to expect leaders to do so, as well.