

A REPLY TO *THE WASHINGTON POST* OP-ED BY PROFESSORS BROCK, HOROWITZ,
AND MICHELMORE BY JAMES I. GREENE, '60

I have read the September 6, 2018, op-ed, published in *The Washington Post*, written by three Washington & Lee University history professors. As a result, I have some pointed questions, and since the professors claim to be open to discussion, let's discuss.

My questions occur, first, because I am a proud graduate of W&L, and second, because I am a teacher of adult education at SMU.

I understand that the purpose of the op-ed was to explain that judgments can and should be made about historical events.

But the underlying question remains: Who's to make those judgments--the professors or the students? The article implies it is the obligation of the professor to assess moral judgments about past events.

But is it?

What happened to just teaching history, without imposing the teacher's moral judgment? If an American college student reads about Germany during WWII and doesn't realize that something was obviously wrong with the Germans' moral decisions, then something has been left out of the lesson.

Why is it that these three professors—and many others--feel they not only have to "have a conversation about the darkest parts of our past," but must also add their personal judgments?

How do I know that is exactly what these—no doubt well-meaning—professors are doing? Because they tell us: "Defenders of Confederate memorials say they are simply preserving history by protecting spaces or statues from the excess of contemporary political correctness. In reality, they are making their own political statements and promoting a distorted and often whitewashed version of the past."

What's disturbing to me is that the professors don't recognize that their statement does not open up a conversation; it's a closed-end opinion. What if their students disagree with their conclusions about a "distorted and often whitewashed version of the past"?

Let's say, for the sake of discussion, that my great-grandfather was a Virginian who fought for the South during the Civil War. Let's further say that he was a small farmer who kept no slaves, but was asked to fight for his home, his family, and his livelihood. Is that a distortion? Is that whitewashing the past? Do students understand that many—probably most—of the Confederate soldiers were not slave-holders?

If you are willing—as you say you are—to deal with the facts, then your opinions about the past are irrelevant. Superimposing today's leftwing ideology and defending it as a moral imperative is, at least, one-sided and, at worst, dangerous to a liberal arts education, in which the facts should speak for themselves.

Students should be taught to think for themselves, not to act as a mob tearing down anything they don't like—or think is not fitting for their eyes or their moral standards to behold. In fact, the hypocrisy of their illegal actions belies their so-called high ideals.

The article's reference to American soldiers and sailors tearing down a statue of King George III, after hearing a reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 9, 1776, is a false analogy. It's as if that insurrection is a justification for tearing down statues of Confederate soldiers, including those of Robert E. Lee. What's so terribly wrong is that the professors don't recognize the difference between a country's affirmation of independence and a war between Americans. What these professors obviously think is that Americans are either southern or northern. They are imbued with the concept of identity politics.

Wrong or right, we are all Americans. That's a fact. Too many Civil War soldiers died because they thought they were doing the right thing. Were only northerners virtuous? Or did they just happen to live above the Mason-Dixon line?

Slavery was an evil, but tearing down a statue of Robert E. Lee is also an evil. Robert E. Lee was an American soldier, who not only graduated from West Point, but became superintendent of West Point. He fought in the American army and only led the Northern Army of Virginia in the Civil War because he could not disassociate himself from what he considered his homeland.

It seems to me that the first requirement of teaching is teach the facts. Not facts, shaded by professorial opinion, but facts laid down by historical events. What is obvious about many of today's educators is that they think it's their place to indoctrinate students, rather than teach them. It's a very dangerous path that has led many students from the most select universities and colleges to take issue with American history and to, instead, grant questionable virtues to other cultures. This would account for the demise of once obligatory courses in Western Civilization.

This is not to defend Western Civilization as faultless; it is rather to defend knowledge of one's own civilization as essential. One of the best courses I ever took at W&L was Dr. Leyburn's course on the enduring legacies of Ancient Greek culture.

Reading and understanding our past, which stems from Western Civilization, is more vital to Americans than, say, narrow specializations, such as Gender Studies or African-American Studies. After all, we are all Americans, not hyphenated identities.

No history professor needs to excuse "morally reprehensible actions" of any culture--and virtually every culture is guilty of such actions--but it does mean teaching why the United States is such an admirable country and why we owe so much to so many who made it so. If today's students state—as many do—that they prefer socialism to capitalism, why is this so, when capitalism has proven its worth for so many American citizens for over 240 years? One must ask: Why can't today's students defend the economic system that provides an exemplary lifestyle for most American citizens?

The writers of the op-ed are quick to praise such schools as Brown, Georgetown, and Princeton for "unearthing and acknowledging the universities' long-hidden historical ties to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade." Acknowledging their

shady past associations is one thing, making a fetish out of it is another. Making it a fetish leads to condemning slave-owners like Thomas Jefferson, an imperfect man who is, nevertheless, a great American for his contributions to American history.

The simple fact is, most of us are imperfect human beings, sinners all, in one way or another. That's why most religions practice some form of atonement.

What the op-ed reveals most about today's educators is how easy it is to condemn the past, while neatly sidestepping the present.

There are plenty of injustices in the present. And many of them are being committed by the same universities most inclined to condemn the past. One of the major problems of all this self-righteous, self-obsessive confession of past sins is that it leads to moral confusion, which includes compounding one evil with another, e.g., affirmative action and reparations for blacks.

What blacks and other minority groups need is to be treated as equals and be granted the same rights as everyone else. Why should there be quotas for any gender, race, or religion? That's the definition of prejudice. If you're equal to the requirements of getting into Harvard or getting a job with IBM or a New York City law firm, then you only have to prove your worth.

But, you say, what if you're disadvantaged and went to a substandard high school? Well, scholarships are widely available, especially to the disadvantaged and indigent. Community colleges, too, are widely available to those beginning college education and a good place to start getting an advanced education.

What I valued most about my education at Washington & Lee in the 50's was being exposed to professors who cared, not only about what they taught, but how they taught. And what they taught most was how to think for yourself--the most valuable lesson I ever learned.

How's that for starting a conversation?