**Opinion: Don't Take Down Confederate Monuments. Here's Why.**

A great Nation does not hide its history. Let that sink in for a moment.

Truer words were never spoken than those offered at the grand opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture last September, by the man who signed the legislation authorizing the Museum, George W. Bush. Remembering is powerful. Remembering, forces us to become wiser.

We think of the words Never Forget and we instantly remember 9-11 or the Holocaust. We connect because we remember. We look. We learn. We discover. And hopefully, with a little faith, self-discovery and humility we grow into better, more loving human beings. We do not learn when we run from our wrongs. We learn when we face them.

This is why I, as a black woman, who is a direct lineal descendant of African slaves in my maternal family tree (my grandmother “Viney” was brought to America in the hull of a slave ship in the early 1800s, around 1803 we believe from Africa and was sold to the Henry plantation in Georgia), am opposed to the removal of Confederate statues in the south whether it be here in Richmond, Virginia or deeper south in Alabama.

Although I agree with the powerful words and sentiments expressed by Mayor Landrieu of New Orleans last week about why he thinks Confederate statutes and symbols should come down, I do not think it reflects the great first amendment freedoms America was founded upon.

Let me be clear: I felt very differently about the Confederate flag because it was a waving symbol of hate, rebellion and division flying over modern day state capitols throughout the south. However, I am not opposed to people wearing the confederate flag on their hats or flying it in their yards. That’s called “free expression” and in America it is sacred.

Just as we cannot tell people not to buy Nazi paraphernalia or collect it in their homes (no matter how abhorrent we may find it), we likewise cannot tell people they are not allowed to honor family members who fought for the confederacy or that their forbears could not raise monuments to southern heroes like Robert E. Lee or Stonewall Jackson—both of whom were decorated and beloved West Point graduates and union officers before the south seceded from the union in rebellion.

In July 2015 when former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, now UN Ambassador Haley, ordered confederate flags down after the horrific shootings of nine black church members in the historic AME church in downtown Charleston, she was 100% correct.

The symbol was used by Dylan Roof to stoke his murderous rage one night after a Bible study where he killed nine God-fearing black church members. After that incident, the public sentiment shifted and the flag had to come down. More powerfully, South Carolinians taught us all a profound lesson of love, compassion and reconciliation as tens of thousands of them marched together on the famed Arthur J. Ravenel Bridge.

But here is my point: In America, we pride ourselves on free thought. Free expression. Freedom to worship as we believe. Freedom to speak our minds without terrorizing or harassing others (hate speech is not free speech as defined by the US Supreme Court). Freedom to associate with groups and have ideas that may differ from each other, even if they are the “wrong” ideas. At the end of the day, I don’t want statutes of Robert E. Lee to come down.

I attended Washington & Lee University in Lexington Virginia as a first-year law student. It was an experience I will never forget. We had racial threats made against us as the largest black class of law students in the schools storied history, (which I wrote about in a 1998 Washington Post article entitled, “A Black Law Students First Trials”). But our white classmates were as outraged as us, and the Dean reacted swiftly and firmly to handle the perpetrators. We endured.

The people who hated having black classmates at their school didn’t hate us because there were statues of Robert E. Lee or George Washington (our nation’s first President and a slave owner) on campus. It wasn’t because of a Gen. Stonewall Jackson monument VMI or downtown. They didn’t like having black classmates because they had racist hearts. They honored racial prejudice. They harbored cultural bias. That, my friends, is what we must work toward eradicating.

And we won’t do it by hiding from our racist, slave owning, segregated past. If we start taking statues down, well, we better go for old Thomas Jefferson (master of a slave who was his mistress and mother of at least four of his children). And let’s not forget President Trump’s favorite president, Old Hickory—Andrew Jackson. Another slave-holding Indian-killing president of our nation. Get my point?

Keep the statues where they are so that people can explain history to their kids. Keep them so that we can have a constructive dialogue at places like Montpelier (the home of President James Madison, who is considered the father of the Constitution).

Montpelier has a series called The Mere Distinction of Colour, a provocative new exhibition examining the institution of slavery and its legacy. Mount Vernon has done something similar with its new slave exhibit as of last year. Monticello announced earlier this year a new wing about Sally Hemings and of course, the new National Museum of African American History and Culture (which was the victim of yet another hateful racial act yesterday) is the place that every American family should go and take their kids, and their grandkids. And teach them, so that they do not repeat our mistakes.

America is different because we value freedom. Freedom of thought. Of Speech. Of Heritage. Of celebration.

I don’t fear 150-year-old statues of old dead white men. What I fear is the hatred we are seeing in real time in 2017 on social media, on our college campuses, in our workplaces and in our political rhetoric (i.e.: Kathy Griffin).

America is advanced citizenship. You have to want it, work at it, and trust that it ultimately works for us all.

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