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Push To Remove Confederate Monuments Opens Debate On Other Honored Historical Figures

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Heard on Morning Edition



MELISSA BLOCK

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Statues have been taken down. Names are being scrubbed from institutions. The national reckoning over race has led to closer scrutiny of which figures from history we honor, and how.

NOEL KING, HOST:

In Richmond, Va., there's a place called Monument Avenue. Until yesterday, when you visited Monument Avenue, you would find a statue of the Confederate General Stonewall Jackson. A giant crane removed that monument. Richmond is one of many places debating which historical figures we honor and how we honor them. Here's NPR's Melissa Block.

MELISSA BLOCK, BYLINE: Our 28th president, Woodrow Wilson, was the leading architect behind the League of Nations after World War I. He won the Nobel Peace Prize. His name is bestowed on boulevards, bridges and schools. But Wilson also resegregated the federal government. He screened the racist film "Birth Of A Nation" at the White House. He called Blacks an ignorant and inferior race.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ANNA PARRA-JORDAN: His legacy is racism. He hurt Black people. And when you hurt Black people, nothing else that you do matters.

BLOCK: That's Anna Parra-Jordan, who just graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in Washington, D.C., speaking at a rally last week. She's one of thousands of petitioners calling for Wilson's name to be scrubbed from the school. Last week, Princeton University, where Wilson served as president, did just that. The board voted to remove his name from its prestigious School of Public and International Affairs, citing what the trustees called Wilson's racist thinking and policies. And if you're a school whose name is entwined with the Confederacy, that raises even deeper questions about your core identity.

JAMES CASEY: Your name, whether you're Coca-Cola or Google or Washington and Lee, is a pronouncement of your values.

BLOCK: Economics Professor James Casey is spearheading a movement among faculty at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va., a school where Robert E. Lee served as president after the Civil War. They're asking the university to shed Lee's name, to dissociate from the Confederacy and all it stood for.

CASEY: Keeping the name is not neutral, it is sending a message. And in the context today, it does just seem to me - are we going to wait until everyone else has done this? Or will we be part of the movement? Or will we lead? And I think it's already too late for us to lead. I think we've already lost that ground.

BLOCK: But where do you stop? If you drop Lee, what about Washington, who owned hundreds of slaves himself? Casey says, of course, Washington's legacy is problematic. But he agrees with those who draw this line - Washington was a Founding Father. Lee was a traitor to his country.

CASEY: Lee took an oath to the Constitution. And he betrayed that oath to the Constitution of the United States for one reason and one reason only, to protect the institution of slavery.

BLOCK: In Boston, the debate over historic representation is focused lately on two figures cast in bronze.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

TORY BULLOCK: Hey, white people. Hey, once again, it's your Black friend here, Tory B., now, coming to you with...

BLOCK: This video was posted by local actor and activist Tory Bullock leading a campaign to remove the Emancipation Memorial in Boston. It's a copy of the original in Washington, D.C. Both have been the target of protests. The memorial shows Abraham Lincoln with his arm outstretched looking down at a freed Black man, who is kneeling at his feet with a loincloth draped around his waist and broken shackles around his wrists. Demeaning, say critics, like Bullock, who asks in the video, if he's free, why is he still on his knees?

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BULLOCK: This statue has been bothering me since I was a child. And I never really understood how messed up it was until recently when I see everybody tearing down all these statues across the world. And I'm sitting here scratching my head like, why is this still up?

BLOCK: Well, it won't be for long. On Tuesday, Boston's Art Commission voted unanimously to take the memorial down. But defenders of the memorial point out that the original work in Washington was paid for by freed slaves and that when the D.C. statue was dedicated in 1876, Frederick Douglass delivered what's considered one of the great speeches in American history. Poet and scholar Elizabeth Alexander says, absolutely, that context matters.

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER: I actually don't think it should be taken down.

BLOCK: Alexander grew up in the D.C. neighborhood where the original stands, saw this statue all the time. And she's wrestled with how to interpret the story the memorial is telling.

ALEXANDER: Was that slave rising of his own accord? Was he claiming his own freedom? Was he being put down? Was Lincoln being lifted up as the great white savior when, really, the end of slavery was a more complicated affair?

BLOCK: Alexander proposes, why not put up a statue of Frederick Douglass nearby? After all, these memorials offer a chance to contextualize and learn.

ALEXANDER: Every day, I think about the opportunities. Historians have a little joke where they say all history is revisionist history, you know? History is always responding to the history that was written before it.

BLOCK: Which means, Alexander says, this moment gives us the chance to ask crucial questions. What kind of democracy are we? And who did build the country?

ALEXANDER: We are revisiting the sacred cows. We're taking a moment to say, we don't value this. And, in fact, valuing this has, in part, led us to a place where our society is profoundly, profoundly fractured.

BLOCK: Now, she says, as more monuments come down, the question is, what will we put in their place?

Melissa Block, NPR News.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAKEY INSPIRED'S "STREET DREAMS")

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