

Commemoration and Disavowal

Sanford Levinson is "highly uncertain that there are any useful general norms that offer much help" in deciding whether or how a state should preserve public monuments that were erected to express sentiments it now rejects. Clearly, the decision depends to a large extent on how odious those sentiments now appear, and on how hurtful they are to members of the present-day community. But the complexity of Levinson's examples suggests that these may not be the only considerations. A state may have reasons other than a fetishistic devotion to its past for preserving, or at least declining to destroy, a public monument whose original sentiments are contrary to present-day "philosophy and beliefs." The events or person memorialized may have come to be valued for different, less objectionable reasons. Or the history of the monument itself may be worthier of commemoration than the events or person it was erected to honor.

Even if a monument has not acquired a meaning or history worthy of commemoration, its destruction may not be the most felicitous way of disavowing the sentiments it expresses. The state's complicity or acquiescence in the evils glorified by the monument may make its destruction an act of hypocrisy or bad faith; the state may do better to leave the monument standing as a reminder or reproach. And even if the state is not complicit in those evils, it may have less melodramatic ways of distancing itself from them.

These are general considerations, in the sense that they can be applied to many or most controversial public monuments. But their application requires highly specific knowledge, both of the past that a given monument commemorates and of the monument's own history. This will become apparent if we return to the case on which Levinson focuses: the controversy over New Orleans' Liberty Monument.

The city administration which erected the monument in 1891 intended it to celebrate the restoration of white supremacy to New Orleans and the conquered South. Clearly this was still its dominant meaning in 1934, when an inscription to that effect was added. But with the passing years, the monument may have come to symbolize something more—not the restoration of white supremacy, but the sadness and singularity of a region that for generations identified itself with lost causes that were rarely worthy of its extravagant devotion. The gradual disappearance of the South's

distinctive, poignant character evokes bittersweet feelings even in Southern liberals, feelings that the monument, with all its misdirected grandiosity, may appropriately express. (Anyone who doubts that such regret is possible should listen to Livingston Taylor's rendition of "Dixie," which turns a brash anthem of secession into a haunting lament for an unrecoverable past.)

But while a symbol like a monument or anthem can undergo a significant shift in meaning, the passage of time is not always sufficient to redeem it. The obvious example is the Confederate flag. Defenders of the flag's continuing display at Southern statehouses insist that it no longer symbolizes white supremacy, but rather the defiant particularity of the region; that it has become a symbol of resistance to the oppressive norms of a homogeneous national culture. This defense fails, however, and not merely because of an unfavorable balance of negative to positive associations. It is not only that the flag continues to remind African-Americans of their subordination, but that their subordination has always been justified by a perverse appeal to liberty—by those who called for state nullification of federal law in 1835, by those who fired on Fort Sumter in 1861, and by those who seized power in New Orleans in 1874. It is the liberty of the oppressor that the Confederate flag continues to celebrate.

Is this also true of the Liberty Monument? I suspect so, for several reasons. Certainly it is hard to see in the 1874 uprising any virtues a decent society would wish to honor. Unlike, say, the charge of the VMI cadets against the Union batteries at New Market in 1864, this was no display of reckless courage against formidable odds. The insurrectionists significantly outnumbered the state militia and local police, and they laid down their arms as soon as federal troops arrived in force. McEnery, whom the insurrectionists "duly installed" as Governor, left New Orleans before the uprising to avoid arrest if it failed and surrendered to federal officials the day after he returned. The White League, which organized the insurrection, had recently been implicated in the massacre of unarmed prisoners.

More broadly, while the Civil War and its aftermath were the occasions for heroic resistance in much of the South, they were experienced more as farce than tragedy in New Orleans. The city surrendered early in the war after a brief naval assault; its resistance consisted of little more than angry editorials and rude ges-

tures by society ladies toward passing Union troops (a form of defiance which prompted General Benjamin Butler's famous order that any woman caught engaging in such incivilities was to be treated as a common prostitute).

For better or worse, the secessionist struggle did not provide the defining moments for New Orleans that it did for so much of the South. The character of New

While the city can repudiate the racist ideology expressed by the monument, it cannot so easily undo the harm inflicted by that ideology.

Orleans owes less to what it shares with the region at large than to what distinguishes it: its exuberant affirmation of French and Caribbean influence long after the Louisiana Purchase. A city that can celebrate its disdain for conventional norms with a monument to Jean Lafitte, or to Storyville, hardly needs to commemorate a bloody putsch by white supremacists.

Although the 1891 monument celebrates events that should be a subject of municipal shame, it might be argued that the monument itself has acquired a history worth preserving. The protracted public controversy over its fate may, ironically, have enhanced its symbolic value. The accretions of meaning have been literal as well as symbolic: since 1891, the monument has acquired inscriptions at its base, granite slabs covering those inscriptions, and an explanatory plaque at its side. (The additions make the position of the preservationists ambiguous. Do they want to preserve only the 1891 monument, the 1934 inscriptions, exposed or covered, or the 1989 plaque?) These additions memorialize a struggle no less interesting than the one the monument was erected to commemorate. But this second Battle of Liberty Place lacks the epic character or moral clarity required to transform the monument into something besides a symbol of racist militancy.

For similar reasons, it would be premature for the city to relegate the Liberty Monument to a museum. Over time, a monument may become less a transparent symbol of past events than an historic artifact in its own right. This transformation from symbol to artifact may be hastened by social and political changes that attenuate its symbolism. In the case of the Liberty Monument, however, these changes have not been sufficiently profound to bring about such attenuation. The sentiments behind the monument are still too powerful, and the wounds they have inflicted too fresh, for the government to treat it as an inert artifact.

So, what should the city do? It has already taken an appropriate step in declining to restore the monu-

ment to its previous place of prominence. The official disclaimer put up by the Landrieu administration is fitting, if stilted. The question is whether the city should take the further step of destroying the monument, or at least removing it from public view.

A more modest alternative might be to end public upkeep. A sign could be posted like those placed along country roads that turn from pavement to dirt: No State Maintenance. A policy of official neglect would preserve a painful reminder of a shameful legacy, without seeming to express approval or even qualified admiration of that legacy. What it would express is a shared determination not to forget. The monument would remind an only recently desegregated city of how fragile and incomplete the liberation and empowerment of African-Americans has been.

But a policy of official neglect is not without risk. The city would have to decide whether it would permit private groups to maintain the monument, and what, if anything, it would do to prevent private individuals from destroying it. On one hand, to permit private maintenance of the monument is to risk giving inspiration to the moral heirs of the White League. On the other hand, continuing the public display of a decaying monument while preventing its maintenance by private groups might be even more of an affront to those who value the monument as an historic artifact than simply hauling it off to a warehouse or junkyard.

Perhaps, then, the monument should simply come down. But if so, it should not be removed in a triumphal spirit. For while the city can repudiate the racist ideology expressed by the monument, it cannot so easily undo the harm inflicted by that ideology. There is a disturbing but unmistakable connection between the oppression of African-Americans in 1874 and their impoverishment in 1996. A community that daily confronts the enduring legacy of white supremacy should treat the removal of the monument as a somber, not a festive, occasion.

—David Wasserman

Sources: Joseph G. Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction: Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Rufus P. Browning, et al., *Racial Politics in American Cities* (Longman, 1990).