

## Monuments and Their Messages

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Today there is much controversy surrounding monuments to historical figures with problematic histories. This problem has been best exemplified with monuments established to honor Southern civil war “heroes.” Somewhat less controversial are monuments to former slave owners such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, and explorers such as Christopher Columbus who helped bring about many deaths to First Nation Peoples.

In the former case, with the Southern so-called war heroes, the purpose of the monuments is clear: to save face in a lost and unjust cause and to defend White supremacy. Many of these monuments were established and embraced during Reconstruction and when Jim Crow was in full effect. The Civil War was all about chattel slavery and a bold and ultimately successful attempt to end it.

However, the latter case is not so clear. When people seek to honor individuals like Jefferson or Washington, it is not to justify slavery or any form of oppression. On the contrary, it is to focus on their admittedly paradoxical defense of liberty, which eventually filtered down – though imperfectly – to the Black masses.

Jefferson, for example, promoted secularism, religious freedom, freedom of thought, constitutional democracy, and so forth. These ideals are imperative for liberty and human flourishing. Moreover, freedom-loving people drew upon the Constitution to fight against slavery and racism, and even brought forth important constitutional amendments to this end.

Jefferson was a (rich, White) man of his time. Many rich people owned slaves and thought little or nothing of it. Most heterosexual men from all classes and races were sexist and homophobic. However, is it fair to judge them by the standards of today? Is it fair to assume that had they been born in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, they would still want to own slaves and women, and that all of them would be homophobic? We should give them some leeway yet never forget their faults.

Columbus is more difficult still. When I edited the *AAH Examiner*, the international newsletter of African Americans for Humanism, we published an

excellent two-part article on the damage that Columbus wrought upon Native Americans. Bartolome de las Casas issued a first-hand report noting that Columbus commanded his men to “cut off the legs of children who ran from them, to test the sharpness of their blades.”

However, whenever people have erected monuments to Columbus, they have not done so to justify the decimation of Native Americans. Moreover, many people are unaware of Columbus’s bad side. He was a great and courageous explorer that accidentally helped to transform the Americas. During his day, explorers were envied and admired just as rappers, rock stars, movie stars and professional athletes are looked up to in modern times.

This is a good segue into the topic of ideas for monuments in the future. People in Minnesota have proposed a monument to the late musical genius Prince and people in Virginia have proposed a monument to the rapper Missy Elliott.

Many people have stated that there should be no monuments to Columbus because he is a poor role model. However, Prince and Missy were/are consistently deemed poor role models because of their sexually explicit lyrics. Should one have to be a perfect role model to be worthy of a monument? *Is there a perfect role model? Who is to determine the criteria to make such judgements? One person’s hero is often another person’s villain.*

Again drawing upon my experience as editor of the *AAH Examiner*, we once ran an article by Indian humanist G.B. Singh. Singh is the author of *Gandhi: Behind the Mask of Divinity*. In the book and the aforementioned article, Singh produced strong evidence to support his claim that Mahatma Gandhi was a racist. The article and the book helped spark a movement to have a statue of Gandhi removed from the grounds of the University of Ghana in West Africa. A group of professors started a petition calling for the statue’s removal. They collected over 1,000 signatures and the statue was removed in October 2016.

The previous year saw the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the grounds of the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Rhodes was a White supremacist who caused much suffering to African people. (In 2003 South Africa established a monument to Gandhi despite much protest, but that monument still stands.)

There are monuments to the famed Buffalo Soldiers of the U.S. 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment of the U.S. Army. They fought in the so-called Indian Wars, and are the pride and joy of many African Americans. However, those were unjust wars against a historically oppressed people. Could it not be argued that *these* monuments should be removed, and that the Buffalo Soldiers were not fit role models?

As one pundit observed, taking away monuments does not equate to the erasing of history. History is best preserved in books, articles, journals, and so forth. However, monuments are erected to honor and preserve the memory of individuals and what they represented. The problem is that values differ and/or often clash.

After all is said and done, we must understand that we are all a mixture of good and bad. Some people, like Martin Luther King, are far greater than their faults. Others, like Hitler, are not. But for those in between, more often than not, we should give some leeway. We are all products of our culture, history, environment and time, and should be judged and valued accordingly. That is only fair and reasonable.