

**OTHERS SAY** AL MARTINICH AND TOM PALAIMA

Special Contributors

**UT should keep its six Confederate statues, add context with plaques**

The Task Force on Historical Representation of Statuary presented University of Texas President Gregory Fenves this week with five options for the controversial statues of Confederate leaders.

One option is to keep the statues but to add “explanatory plaques that would enhance the educational value of the six statues and provide historical context.” We think this is the best option. But it can be improved.

“Educational value” and “historical context” are too vague and evasive. An objection to that option is that it is “difficult to provide contextualizing statements that are strong enough to counteract the powerful message sent by bronze statues on high pedestals on our Main Mall, while not so strong or intemperate as to be simply inflammatory.” We think otherwise.

What if all six statues had a plaque with the same unequivocal message: “The University of Texas condemns slavery and regrets that its history is closely tied with slave owners who never recognized the equality of African-Americans and Hispanics.” Would this message be weak or inflammatory? No, it would forthrightly declare the true values of the university and the state of Texas.

In addition to the plaques, chains should be added at the ankles of the statues. The meaning would be clear and conspicuous. If anyone should be enslaved, even symbolically after the fact, slave owners should be. Slavery shackled the ideal of developing a society that treated all people equally.

The report also objects that adding plaques “would be like engag-

ing in vigorous self-criticism on the university’s homepage.” Yes indeed! And all for the good! This is no objection. It is a strong reason to do so. No human institution is perfect, as the statues themselves show. Self-criticism is crucial for a healthy democracy.

Universities, especially public universities like UT Austin, are special places. The values of the university should be expressed clearly and discussed. UT’s core values are generally cited as marketing tools that establish what in the present discussion is historically ironic, a “brand” that distinguishes UT Austin from other universities competing for students. The core values are learned by rote like the Ten Commandments: Once learned, they are rarely consciously put into practice. The values should be examined again and again in the context of what has happened in our society over time, what is happening now and what is likely to happen under the guidance of those few graduates who become our future leaders – and the many, many other students who become the day-to-day doers and the heart and soul of our country.

We have long been preoccupied at the University of Texas at Austin with maintaining a facade of high achievement. We focus on those who attain high distinction in the classrooms, out in service to the community and on athletic fields. We forget that our university, like our society as a whole, is made up of struggling human beings with varying talents and abilities. To have all passersby, students, their friends and families, and other outside

visitors be reminded on a regular basis of the fundamental questions – historical and contemporary – posed by race, ethnicity and other behaviors within society as whole will work to strengthen our democracy.

Socrates in 399 B.C. accepted a death sentence rather than go on living without questioning the moral and ethical values of his society. The one core value of our university that should trump all should be that the unexamined life is truly not worth living. It was a lack of strong commitment to imaginative self-criticism in Texas that enabled slavery and later promoted racial discrimination. Imagine yourself and your children as slaves. Feel the chains around your ankles. Would you support slavery?

The other four options presented to our president involve removing one or more of the statues to some other location. Keeping any of the statues unaltered is offensive. Removing all of the statues is a way of suppressing our history and missing an ongoing teaching opportunity.

Once more: No human institution is perfect. Self-criticism is crucial for a healthy democracy. Universities are special places where the values of our culture need to be discussed in the future much more than they have been. Let the Confederate statues lead the charge in what is always an uphill battle against human ignorance and prejudice and toward examined lives of dignity and respect for all of us and all our children.

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