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By Al Martinich and Tom Palaima

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Commentary

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The removal of Jefferson Davis's statue from its prominent location on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin this week may appear to end the university's difficult struggle to shake off its historical embrace of racist values and practices. It does not.

Removing the statue is a serious moral and ethical mistake. Remembering our lamentable behavior in the past is an important part of helping to ensure that a similar behavior does not recur, especially if that remembering does what colleges, particularly public colleges, were created to do: produce educated citizens who can make sound ethical decisions.

"Remember the reason the statue of Jefferson Davis was erected in the first place and what it symbolized for over eight decades" is not as pithy as "Remember the Alamo." But it is just as important. Remembering the long and inglorious success of racism in our institution and our society is as important as remembering a glorious defeat in battle.

The controversy about this and other Confederate statues on campus is nothing new. People of conscience who understood what they symbolized created enough of a stir that the university's two immediate past presidents appointed committees to study what to do with the statues. The presidents decided to do nothing.

Recent troubling events in our country gave UT-Austin and its current president, Gregory L. Fenves, a third chance to do the right thing. He came up with a solution that is arguably worse than the original problem.

The statue controversy should not be viewed as a provincial squabble. It is an instance of the general failure of many public

institutions of higher education to own up to their own histories. Remembering those histories offers moral and political lessons for our society as a whole.

For more than 80 years, Jefferson Davis and three other Confederate heroes were honored conspicuously on the campus's main mall. Fenves justified removing the Davis statue alone among them because, he said, Davis has no connection with the university. But the presence of his statue *is* the connection. The more than symbolic embrace of Davis's values explains why African-Americans were not admitted to UT-Austin, which was founded in 1881, until the 1950s, and why the university vigorously resisted integration during the civil-rights era.

Instead of finally speaking out against Confederate values, the three other statues of Confederate heroes — Gen. Robert E. Lee; Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, who was Lee's commanding officer before the war in charge of suppressing American Indians; and John H. Reagan, postmaster general of the Confederacy and first chairman of the Railroad Commission of Texas — will remain in place.

Fenves's reasoning contains many statements that have little force. For example, the argument that Davis has no connection with the University of Texas is true insofar as he was never a student, professor, regent, or donor there. Yet that is irrelevant, since the same is true of Lee, who was in Texas for a few years as an Army officer keeping American Indian populations in check.

Lee's more significant association is his toleration of slavery. He spent time away from Texas to settle the estate of his father-in-law, who owned hundreds of slaves. He first hired an overseer who would "make them [the slaves] do their duty." His desire to be "considerate and kind to the negroes" did not stop him from exploiting them as animate tools, whipping, jailing and selling to slave traders those who insisted on their freedom. He did not hesitate to break up families of slaves who had been together for generations.

The only connection that General Johnston and John H. Reagan have to the University of Texas is that their statues, too, stand for

the values of the Old South.

Saving the face of Jefferson Davis by removing his statue comes at an additional cost. In addition to the tens of thousands of dollars to be spent on its new housing, the statue of Woodrow Wilson that long stood opposite Davis's was also removed, because leaving it in place would have created an asymmetry that would have invited questions: "Why is nothing here?" "If something used to be here, why is it gone?"

The university's leaders do not want these questions asked. But a university should be a safe place for free and open thought, discussion, and exploration. It should invite these very questions. It also should answer them.

UT-Austin should unequivocally acknowledge its history and assert its commitment to do better. We should have retained all the statues. As it is now, we should put plaques on the remaining statues and on Davis's when it gets to its final, high-dollar place of honor. The plaques should have texts such as this: "The University of Texas at Austin regrets its long association with people who supported the system of segregation that denied equality to African-Americans and other oppressed minorities as if it were an acceptable part of civilized life."

The university's decision in the case of the Confederate statues runs counter to the core values it has long promoted. Carved in large letters prominently across the façade of the south entrance of the UT Tower are the liberating words of John 8:32: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." The motto on the official seal of the university reads *Disciplina Praesidium Civitatis*: "A cultivated mind is the guardian genius of democracy." The recent decision is not faithful to those values, nor is it in keeping with our university motto: "What starts here changes the world."

All human lives matter, including historical lives. For over a century, people of color in Texas were treated as unworthy of the full rights and privileges of American citizens. We should not segregate any part of our past in a moral skeleton closet. Keeping, contextualizing, and explaining the Confederate statues and their history would convert those artworks into tools of historical

witness to wrongs done and too long tolerated. And they would serve as conspicuous examples of how to change moral direction within our society.

Al Martinich is a professor of philosophy and Tom Palaima is a professor of classics at the University of Texas at Austin.

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DrJoeS 6 days ago
Agreed. Well written.
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GerardHarbison 6 days ago
A thoughtful piece.
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alsotps 6 days ago
I agree.
As a historian, I think the worst thing to do is to segregate the reality of the past from the present. In Albuquerque, the city council has removed the Confederate political flag (as opposed to the battle flag) from its place among the flags of the political entities that controlled the city...despite the fact that confederate troops occupied the city. they too are going to relegate it to a museum. In the words of Dylan: "Inside the museums, infinity goes up on trial" but forgotten on the outside.
By self-selecting what is remembered, we create a national narrative devoid of the complexities, then moral choices made or not made. Perhaps another plaque by the statue might lay out those choices with an understanding that those choices were made by real people facing real complexities in real time, with no recourse to outcomes.
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marshallcollins 6 days ago
I still don't understand why Fenves also ordered the removal of the Woodrow Wilson statue that was near Davis. What's the connection with Wilson and the Confederacy?
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referee101 → marshallcollins 6 days ago
A thoughtful article, indeed. Thanks to the authors.
As I understand the rationale outlined in the article, the statue of Wilson was not removed because of a connection but rather to balance the effect of the space created by the removal of the statue of Davis.
I will offer that there are practical considerations at work here--the damage to statuary and buildings that are associated with the CSA and slavery will continue. One may argue that at some point it becomes a cost saving decision to remove a statue and place it in a museum.
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Lisa Kirch → marshallcollins 6 days ago
The short answer lies the interaction of the artist, Pompeo Coppini, with the patron of the statues, George Littlefield. Maj. Littlefield, a Confederate veteran and former UT regent, wanted a Confederate monument as his gift to the university. Coppini talked him into a monument that symbolized the reconciliation of North and South. This was supposed to have taken place during World War One. That, of course, is where Wilson comes in. Unless it's been erased, there's an inscription in a retaining wall that focuses on this connection. The inscription's near Littlefield Fountain, which bears the dates of US involvement in WWI and which belongs to the same complex of monuments. UT has indeed lost a wonderful opportunity to help its students discuss history and its interpretation.
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