

On the Mortality of Statues: A Consideration of The Great Bronze Massacre of 2020

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ABSTRACT: In its birth year the United States of America shook off symbols of its former fidelity to the British crown in a number of ways, one of which was the pulling down of an equestrian six-year-old statue of the young king George III in New York City. History buffs delighted in relating that historical fact as statues of long dead "racists" were vandalized one after another in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. BLM was protesting the suffocation death of George Floyd at the hands of an overzealous and possibly racist Minneapolis police officer who was white and male.

The first problem with this is that the statues were not always removed in keeping with any kind of community consensus. The second is that the righteous energies of the mob did not seem even to know or care exactly whose statue it was they were lassoing for the scrap pile.

This paper argues that despite the superficial similarities with the legendary vandalism of the Revolution, the damage inflicted on public statuary in 2020 may be interpreted as an uninformed assault on Western civilization itself.

Key Words: statues, vandalism, Black Lives Matter, George Floyd, George III

INTRODUCTION: A PAST INSIDE A PAST

I remember the picture in a history book about the American Revolution. The scene was a crowd of jubilant Americans gathered on a New York City street. The address was Bowling Green, a name suggesting community, recreation and the wafting scent of freshly cut grass. The artist did not paint much verdure into his depiction of the rollick, placing the shadowy grandeur of several deciduous trees in the far distance. Ohio-born William Walcutt wasn't painting from memory as he was a child of the next century. The occasion for his subject was the public reading of the Declaration of Independence, initially intended for the troops gathered at New York's parade grounds on orders of General George Washington, 6 pm, 9 July 1776. Shortly thereafter "patriots" - both civilian and military - descended on Walcutt's scene where there stood an equestrian statue of one King George III.

The image features the centrally placed statue surrounded in blue sky at the end of two taut ropes. It is a classical pyramid style composition. The crown atop the 1,800 kilogram object is the tip of that pyramid, teetering toward the crowd below that pulls it mightily, with long crowbars lifting the base of the leaden monarch on his horse for the imminent topple and crash. The agitated gathering is portrayed as a swirl of celebrants: overdressed ladies laughing and pointing, cheering gentlemen holding high their three-cornered hats. In the middle a young black man, quite possibly a slave, is as delighted as anyone to witness the demise of this symbol of perceived oppression. Once it smashed into the hard ground, goes the story, the "king" was decapitated and patriots competed with the Tories (loyalists) for statue fragments, metal which Tories well knew would be melted down into thousands of bullets intended for the king's soldiers.

Washington was reportedly upset at all this, writing in his diary that it didn't have to happen that way. There was, of course, a more orderly means of removal, but one bereft of cathartic satisfaction and the adrenaline surges that come with being a member of a mob. Vandalism of this sort was unlike anything in our own age; George III

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William Walcutt, *Pulling Down the Statue of George III at Bowling Green, July 9, 1776*. 1857, oil on canvas, 51-5/8 x 77-5/8 inches, Lafayette College Art Collection.

still had 44 years of life left in him. He was not completely "history" yet.

Pulling Down the Statue of George III was painted in 1857. That year the United States Supreme Court ruled that a slave could not sue for freedom in a federal court and that blacks had no rights "the white man was bound to respect," though members of Indian tribes were welcome "without doubt" to naturalize (Taney). The Kansas Territory, future breadbasket for the American masses, was embroiled in recurrent guerilla battles between proponents of slavery and Free-soilers - a blood-stained precursor to the Civil War. Nevertheless, the propagandist Walcutt must have looked back upon the revolutionary past with affection and longing. The figures gathered at Bowling Green were experiencing the thrill of rebirth, from British subject to American citizen, and the wreckage they made of a statue was an inevitability as palpable as that of a hatchling breaking out of the confinement of its shell. As an Ohioan and a northerner, he would not likely be supportive of the "new country" about to carve itself out of his cherished republic in the few short years to come. Only an exclusive club still breathing in 1857 had experienced the War of Independence, and in their very early twenties at that. The rest of the veterans had been mere boys like the one in the middle of Walcutt's picture, his back to the viewer, arms extended in an embrace of unbridled iconoclasm.

MISPLACED AGGRESSION

In the wake of the 25 May death of George Floyd in 2020, a black resident of Minneapolis, who appeared to have been suffocated to death under the knee of a white policeman, statues conforming to the dead white male trope were toppled and destroyed; a significant difference with 1776, however, was a lack of regard sometimes for what historical figures were being honored - and, of course, the fact that the personalities honored were long dead. Efforts at removal of cheap "white bronze" statues of Confederate war heroes and pro-slavery advocates across the South are nothing new, though the fever pitch of anger in 2020 sparked an unprecedented momentum in their removal. They have long been argued to be deliberate intimidation in symbol of black populations by white citizens, but controversies relating to statue removal in the years before 2015 hardly rose to national prominence (Raymond).

In the pandemic-afflicted America of 2020, however, even the back of the iconic Shaw Memorial sculpted by Augustus Saint-Gaudens in Boston was vandalized with spray painted phrases such as "Black Lives Matter" and "ACAB" (All Cops Are Bastards). Robert Gould Shaw was the son of abolitionists and raised the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment of free black troops during the Civil War, a moving and dramatic episode in the saga of that struggle that was made into the successful 1989 motion picture "Glory" (O'Neill).

A statue of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, outside the Houses of Parliament in London was vandalized, as was a statue of a lesser known critic of slavery, Matthias Baldwin, placed outside Philadelphia City Hall.

In Wisconsin a statue of abolitionist and Norwegian immigrant Hans Christian Heg was toppled, beheaded and tossed into a nearby lake. Students of Civil War history who have read a biography or two about Ulysses S. Grant will know that he "married into slavery" and for a period in his life supervised slaves, even "owning" one William Jones, probably a gift, who was freed after a year (Fling). Grant is far better known for leading the Union army against the rebelling slave South, and was decisive as virtually no other in eradicating the "peculiar institution" from the nation.

Grant's rival, the "marble man" of the Confederacy, was General Robert E. Lee, whose equestrian statue in a city park was the focus of a local controversy in Charlottesville, Virginia. The cause for retaining the statue was showcased by white supremacists who descended upon the city in August 2017. The resulting clash with leftists was responsible for one young woman's death. (The statue remains standing as of this writing.) Still, this reputation of Grant as a crusader for civil rights, the 18th president no less, and noted foe of the Ku Klux Klan, did not prevent his statue from being pulled down in a park in San Francisco as part of a celebration of Juneteenth, or Emancipation Day.

A brand new statue of black abolitionist Frederick Douglass in a park in Rochester, New York, was found knocked off its base. Speculation naturally follows that this was an act of retaliation for what has been done to statues memorializing prominent Confederates, but the nature of the assaults on statuary has been so scattershot that no one can be sure of a motive.

In a news conference where he was asked to comment about the tragic death of the woman in the Charlottesville protest where a white supremacist plowed his car into a crowd, President Donald Trump showed support for retaining the Lee monument by offering a slippery slope argument: "George Washington was a slave owner. Are we gonna take down statues of George Washington?" (Levine). Just short of three years after posing that question a statue of George Washington was indeed toppled in Portland, Oregon, with other Washington statues defaced in cities like New York, Baltimore and Chicago. A statue of another slave owner president and author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, was knocked over. This, too, happened in Portland, taking place in the wake of a protest outside Portland's Jefferson High School where it sat undisturbed for years. "Slave owner" and "George Floyd" were spray painted on its base (Allen).

THE QUIET ONLOOKERS

From toppling George III in 1776 to toppling George Washington in 2020: we are not quite at the vantage point of hindsight that the artist Walcutt occupied in his apparent reverie over declaring independence from England eight decades before. We can only speculate how digital images of the "peaceful protests" over "systemic racism" will be interpreted that may survive to the year 2100. The incident at Bowling Green and the ravaging of American urban centers in the wake of the Floyd killings have almost nothing in common save for the primitive pleasure of destroying or defacing with impunity longstanding reminders of authority figures fallen out of favor.

Statues are the easy part, of course. They are targeted for the theater they afford as protest, but the iconic imagery of the violent past can be enlisted for serving the causes of the turbulent present.

The overall cost to insurance companies in the spring and summer of 2020 due to looting, arson and property damage as of this writing approaches \$2 billion. Granted that independence meant destruction arising in the conventional form of a seven-year war in revolutionary times, property to Americans then was nevertheless sacred.

The 1773 incident remembered as the Boston Tea Party was a protest by smugglers against cheaper tea "dumped" on the market by the East India Company; the equivalent of what would amount in today's money to \$1.7 million worth of tea was rendered worthless by being hurled into the harbor. A meme circulating in SNS asking "When is looting justified?" juxtaposes a hand-colored lithograph of the vandals dressed as Indians



opening crates of tea with a photo of a shirtless looter holding as many bottles of wine as he can as he steals out of a disheveled convenience store. Under one image "Boston" is written, while under the other "Ferguson" appears - Ferguson being a city in Missouri where multiple eruptions of rioting over the shooting death of one Michael Brown by a white police officer occurred in the Obama years. The message suggests righteous violence vindicated by a well-known precedent studied in every history class as a seminal event in securing America's liberty. Missing in this manipulative brevity is how the tea and only the tea was targeted for destruction. The Boston Tea Party Museum takes pains on its website to state that the single item of personal property that was ruined was a padlock belonging to a ship's captain; it was quickly replaced. One would-be looter wanting to keep some of the tea for himself was given a good tongue-lashing by his cohorts. The convenience store depicted in the meme was likely to have been minority-owned given two-thirds of Ferguson's population is black ("Quick Facts"). Whatever responsibility it bore in the tragedy that sparked the unrest is unexplained. Losses to Ferguson business owners ran in the millions of dollars due to the misplaced aggressions of looting and arson.

The condoning of violence by those who would not partake in it themselves is another feature of the new iconoclasm. Martin Luther King's characterization of rioting as "the language of the unheard" was circulated across social media as a way of making sense of something that was glaringly counter-productive, particularly given the optic of communities setting themselves ablaze in open defiance of pandemic lockdowns. Such lockdowns had been violated previously by unmasked protesters at Michigan's state capitol, for example, who brandished (legally) firearms and the single most recognizable flag from the Confederate South. (They also were carrying swastikas, though they were used as a propaganda ploy for satirizing the governor as a Nazi-like authoritarian.)

Mainstream political parties faced with the reality of widespread destruction will obsess about the extremists allegedly causing destruction on the opposing side. They may even claim, with some credibility, that the opposition is disguising itself, such as a white nationalist group setting up a fake "antifa" account on Twitter. National Public Radio, which tilts toward liberal, lent a platform to author Vicky Osterweill whose book *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* sparked a predictable controversy. NPR rushed to reframe the context of the interview as a flurry of commentary on the relation of property rights to human rights sprang from the right (that occasionally calls for suspension of public funds from the media group's budget).

As for the statues, *Popular Mechanics*, a magazine whose name bears no hint of political engagement, published a shirtsleeve guide to their removal entitled "How to Topple a Statue Using Science" (with fine print safety disclaimer). Dated 16 June, this was an apparent response to a wave of unprofessional statue removal attempts across the globe and specifically the critical injury several days earlier that occurred in Portsmouth, Virginia, where a portion of a monument to the Confederate dead fell on a bystander's head in the process of

being pulled down. The article fulfills the promise of the title with the necessary science, but not without injecting playful partisan support for would-be vandals and their cause:

Should you happen to find yourself near a statue that you no longer like, we asked scientists for the best, safest ways to bring it to the ground without anyone getting hurt - except, of course, for the inanimate racist who's been dead for a century anyway (Stout).

The Southern Poverty Law Center devotes itself to monitoring hate groups, violent or otherwise, that target people "based on race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity." To its credit it approaches the statue issue as a community task requiring enlistment of proper channels (as slave owner white man George Washington would have wished back in the summer of 1776). The SPLC is mainly concerned with Confederate statuary, counting how many have yet to be taken down while urging supporters of social justice to do appropriate research on the suspicious monument first, check with government authorities and then organize awareness by engaging the media in the cause. Petitions and rallies would follow from that, hopefully arousing the interest of major influencers in the public sphere. A manual of talking points for anticipated resistance is also provided.

The peaceful removal of statues in an official sense seems to have occurred mainly through mayoral orders. In Richmond, Virginia, several were ordered to be taken down by the mayor, including one of Stonewall Jackson, though demonstrators managed to take down a statue of Confederate president Jefferson Davis on their own. Former vice president and ardent states' rights advocate John C. Calhoun's statue was removed peacefully by a crew in Charleston, South Carolina. In Norfolk, Virginia, the top of a Confederate memorial was removed without incident by a crew that was skilled at the job. The mayor of Louisville, Kentucky, had a Confederate monument relocated. Crews took down monuments in southern cities such as Jacksonville, Florida, Birmingham, Alabama, Alexandria, Virginia, Mobile, Alabama, Frankfurt, Kentucky, Decatur, Georgia, and Raleigh, North Carolina. The action was quick, perhaps out of safety concerns more than anything else. Reluctance to act would only generate further anger and resentment. Not since white supremacist Dylan Roof murdered nine black parishioners in an historic African American church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015, had the continuing use of Confederate imagery in public venues come under such heavy condemnation.

COLUMBUS, LINCOLN AND GANDHI

Since the Black Lives Matter protests of spring 2020, some 33 statues of Christopher Columbus have either been removed or are likely to be removed. Columbus is accused of being responsible for unspeakable brutalities inflicted on indigenous peoples, a "genocide" as it is often described in 20th-century terms, although the lack of immunity to diseases such as smallpox played a clear and significant hand in reducing native populations. The bloody encounters with the conquistadors were horrific, but smallpox was no part of any plot to destroy a people, and histories that ignore that fact will serve up statistics unexplained to maximize the scale of the West's evil intent. Columbus had managed to navigate five centuries as hero, some of that unsung, as a vanguard heralding western civilization's reach to the Americas, even if he ultimately was not the one to "discover" them.

Gutenberg's innovation has not grown obsolete, but the means of dispersing information in the digital age has taken the form of controlled lightning, challenging convention with a ruthless tenacity. The telegraph had been around for four decades and the first commercial telephone for fifteen years in 1892. Newsprint media then were still singing glowing praises of the indigenous youngsters who marched in the Columbus Day parades held in major cities such as Chicago and New York, a sign of their liberation from "savagery" (Hauptmann). The destruction of his statues in 2020 with its hyperconnectivity is an obvious assertion of a new sense of empowerment that seeks to replace the traditional controlled narrative with a view of history that highlights the victimization of non-whites as a major driving force in the creation of the American republic.

While Christopher Columbus is the go-to bogeyman for indigenous grievances, Abraham Lincoln is a far lesser known and surprising suspect for participating in a perceived extermination campaign. On the night before the federal holiday devoted to Christopher Columbus, Monday October 12, an organization calling itself Generational Resistance called for a "Day of Rage" that included toppling a statue of Abraham Lincoln among its events for the "decolonizing" of society and the eradicating of racism (DeMarche). The largest public execution in American history occurred on Lincoln's watch: 38 Sioux men were hanged the day after Christmas in 1862 in Minnesota. There had been a great deal of suffering due to loss of tribal land and hunger that triggered the worst

massacre against white settlers by "Indians" in the history of the nation. Initially, 303 had been condemned to die, but Lincoln, ever the trial lawyer, carefully examined each case to determine who should live and who should hang (Donald 394). Lincoln did not cave to the call for revenge against a far greater number of Sioux from the white population, but this level of circumspection did not count for the Generational Resistance who made quick work of the three-meter bronze Lincoln statue that had been standing in the same spot since 1928.

To date, *A People's History of the United States* by the late and heavily left-leaning historian Howard Zinn has sold an astounding 2.6 million copies, in part due to its popularity as a textbook. In a 1998 C-Span video he is addressing gathering of diners in the Fire and Ice Restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts. World War II veteran bombardier Zinn laments how America's public squares only use statuary to honor the uniformed heroes of wartime, and never the pacifists:

There was some little pacifist group that tried to set up a statue of Gandhi. Do you remember that? There was a great outcry. "My God! A statue of Gandhi! He's not even an American! We have laws against immigrant statues!"

The ever sarcastic Zinn places these words into the mouths of the xenophobic yokels he mocks. A wave of derisive laughter then ripples through his sympathetic audience.

Truth be told, Gandhi statues did not fare well in 2020 during the George Floyd protests. The Indian newspaper *The Hindu* was quick to call the vandals "unknown miscreants" who desecrated the statue in front of the Indian Embassy in Washington, D.C. US Ambassador Kenneth Juster offered an almost instant apology and President Trump condemned the deed. The statue vandalism included messages that were anti-Indian and specific to Gandhi's personality (PTI). Shortly thereafter, another statue of Gandhi in Parliament Square in London was similarly vandalized with white paint and the word "racist" during a Black Lives Matter protest. In the case of London the reason was reported by India's *Republic World* to be due to "a lack of understanding" given Gandhi is thought of as a world renowned advocate of social justice ("Mahatma"). Yet another Gandhi statue in a local park in California was defaced with spray paint, including the word "rapist" (Keene). An ultimately successful effort toward erecting a Gandhi statue in the U.K. city of Manchester last year was met with resistance due to his uncharitable characterizations of black Africans as "uncivilized" and "dirty," and his unusual sexual proclivities that involved enlisting naked women to sleep in his bed as a test of his resolve to resist them (Wolfe-Robinson). At least in Manchester there was public debate about the man's worthiness for memorializing, rather than a call to remove an existing monument.

CONCLUSION: SEARCHING FOR A MEANING

Visitors to the newly opened Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia (2017) can view high above them a shining replica of the gilded equestrian statue of George III that was toppled in Lower Manhattan in 1776. The figure of a sailor stands at the edge of the plinth. He holds the coiled rope in his left hand with all the confidence of a seasoned seaman as he prepares to hurl the other end downward to the willing hands of a museum visitor. The question posed: How eager are you to make history?

The history of statue removal is not only the story of the heated moment, but how that moment cools over time. What will be remembered in future decades about the pandemic year 2020 and the way one otherwise unremarkable citizen's life was ended by a Minneapolis police officer? Will Black Lives Matter continue to claim the same mantle of nobility that the civil rights marchers of the 1960s are cloaked in every Martin Luther King birthday, or might BLM be viewed as a radical means of undermining everything that is considered "white" and therefore "racist." A recently withdrawn exhibit at a museum as esteemed as the Smithsonian Institution labeled those values of "whiteness": "rugged individualism," "nuclear family," "hard work," "self-reliance," etc. (Watts). It would appear there is an attempt at removing something more than just graven images of dead racists.

What is certain is that a fair number of statues are currently conspicuous in their absence. Whatever can be salvaged may find new life in museums where the dents and the spray paint generate discussion not only of why they were erected in the first place, but why they came down the way they did. Whether those stories will make perfect sense to the vast majority of Americans is anyone's guess, but a proper education should not ignore the personal flaws and contradictions of any hero within his or her historical context, just as it seeks to illustrate that the dreams of one demographic group do not have to be the nightmares of another.

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