

Why Confederate monuments are coming down

New Orleans is the latest city to start taking down historical but controversial monuments that many say celebrate slavery and the Confederacy¹. Angry opponents see the move as suppressing or rewriting history in the service of political correctness. William Brangham talks to Walter Isaacson of the Aspen Institute and Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative.

Transcript:

JUDY WOODRUFF: But first: how we continue to wrestle with American history.

New Orleans is just the latest city to start taking down historical, but controversial monuments that many say celebrate slavery and the Confederacy.

William Brangham is back with that.

5 **WILLIAM BRANGHAM:** In downtown New Orleans today, workers began removing the historic Robert E. Lee² statue from his nearly 70-foot pedestal.

New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu:

10 **MAYOR MITCH LANDRIEU:** And in the second decade of the 21st century, asking African-Americans, or anyone else, for that matter, to drive by property that they own, occupied by reverential³ statues of men who fought to destroy the country and deny that person's humanity seems perverse⁴.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: The city dismantled this statue in the broad light of day, but three others were recently taken down under cover of night with no advanced notice. Because of threats of violence, city contractors⁵ wore masks and bulletproof vests, and were guarded by police snipers.

15 **MAN:** It's cheap. It's low. It's cowardly. If there ever was cowardice, this is an act of cowardice and treachery, right here. This is American history, whether you like it or not.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: This all goes back to a December 2015 city council vote to take down these monuments, following an op-ed⁶ by city native and jazz musician Wynton Marsalis urging the removal of the monuments.

20 Many have argued it was an appropriate response to the killing of nine black church parishioners that year in Charleston, South Carolina, by avowed white supremacist Dylann Roof.

¹ Konføderationen (1861-65; 13 sydstater)

² Robert E. Lee: (1807-1870) general for Sydstatene under den amerikanske borgerkrig

³ (her) hændrende

⁴ (her) urimeligt

⁵ (her) bygningsarbejdere

⁶ (her) artikel

Weeks after that attack, South Carolina removed the Confederate battle flag from its state capitol. Back to today, New Orleans plans to store the statues until it finds an appropriate location for them. But their removal has angered opponents, who see this as suppressing or rewriting history in the service of political correctness.

25 **WOMAN:** Many years later, when historians or politicians declare a war unjust or immoral, does that negate⁷ the ultimate price these soldiers and families paid? Soldiers do not make policy; elected leaders do.

WOMAN: A lot of this of – people are – against it are either not from here, originally, and don't understand, you know, our culture. And a lot of people even from here don't know their history.

30 **WILLIAM BRANGHAM:** Last week in Baton Rouge, the Louisiana Statehouse passed HB-71⁸, which would require a referendum before any military monument could be renamed or removed. In a show of defiance, black caucus⁹ members walked out after the vote.

Meanwhile last weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia, torch-bearing protesters, including white nationalist Richard Spencer, marched against the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue there.

35 The Southern Poverty Law Center counts more than 700 Confederate monuments and statues on public lands across the country. The vast majority of those are in the South.

So, is this the right approach for dealing with the darker sides of U.S. history?

40 I'm joined now by two men who've wrestled with this very question. Bryan Stevenson is founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative. He's helping build a national monument to the victims of lynching in Montgomery, Alabama. And Walter Isaacson is a historian and writer and president of the Aspen Institute.

Welcome to you both.

Walter, I would like to start with you first.

You are a native of New Orleans. You were there when they're bringing Robert E. Lee down off his pedestal today. What do you make of the city's moves?

45 **WALTER ISAACSON:** I think it's very, very good.

As you say, these Confederate monument statues were put up not to honor the nobility¹⁰ of any of these people. It was put up in the 1880s, 1890s as a way to try to reassert white supremacy¹¹.

⁷ (her) gøre mindre betydningsfuld

⁸ House Bill-71: lovforslag

⁹ black caucus: gruppe af afro-amerikanske politikere i parlamentet i delstaten Louisiana

¹⁰ (her) storhed

¹¹ reassert white supremacy: styrke det hvide overherredømme

50 New Orleans has had a 300-year history. We have just gone through a hurricane. If you're going to name the people we should have monuments to, it's not Confederate generals. So, I think there is a big sigh of relief today as the last of these comes down.

WILLIAM BRANGHAM: Bryan Stevenson, what is your reaction to this? How does this sit with you¹²?

BRYAN STEVENSON: Well, I think it's also very long overdue and a really important step for one of America's great cities that wants to be open and inviting to all the people of the world.

55 And I think this legacy of racial inequality and segregation has really put a cloud over New Orleans. And these statues and monuments have reflected that cloud more powerfully than anything.

These totems¹³ are made of concrete and steel and bronze, but they have been screaming at African-Americans for decades. And what they have been screaming is this narrative of racial difference, this history of white supremacy.

60 So, I think this is long overdue. And part of that has to do with the legacy. I don't think the great evil of American slavery was involuntary servitude¹⁴ and forced labor. I think the real evil of American slavery was this narrative of racial difference we created, the ideology of white supremacy that we made up. We said black people are different than white people. They're not fully human. Our courts held that black people were only three-fifths human. And our 13th Amendment¹⁵ dealt with involuntary servitude and forced labor, but it didn't deal with this ideology of white supremacy.

(2017)

¹² *How does this sit with you:* (her) Hvad siger du til det?

¹³ (her) symboler

¹⁴ slaveri

¹⁵ *13th Amendment:* forfatningstilføjelse, der ophævede slaveriet 1865