

# Opening Our Eyes to History

by [Elianne del Campo](#)

On May 25, 2020, the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin caught the nation's attention. Floyd's murder, which followed the murders of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, served as a heartbreaking reminder of the horrific violence leveled against Black communities. Throughout the summer of 2020, masses of protestors marched against police brutality and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. As NPR journalist Rachel Treisman notes, Floyd's death "prompted waves of protests across the country . . . and a push to reexamine the legacy of racial injustice in the United States." Many also began demanding societal changes in order to address systemic racism in the US in hopes of making it a more equitable and hospitable place for Black communities.

Protestors also advocated for the removal of Confederate symbols – such as statues, buildings, and monuments – in Southern states across the US. According to a study by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), "780 monuments dedicated to the Confederacy" were located in twenty-three states as of 2019, not including other symbolic figures like statues (Aguilera). The removal of Confederate symbols is not a novel idea, however. The debate gained traction in 2015, when a white supremacist in Charleston, South Carolina, shot and killed nine Black churchgoers and, immediately after the murder, posed for pictures holding a Confederate flag (Raymond). In the four years following that attack, forty-eight Confederate monuments were removed (Shannon). In the wake of George Floyd's murder, the removal of Confederate symbols increased significantly: nearly twice as many symbols were taken down in 2020 as between 2015 and 2019 (Treisman). Still, according to another study by SPLC, "2,100

public Confederate symbols remain, 704 of them monuments” (Treisman). The push to remove Confederate symbols is far from over.

However, not everyone believes that Confederate symbols should be removed. As journalist Laura Itzkowitz asserts in her *Architectural Digest* article “What Should Happen to Confederate Statues in the U.S.,” some believe that “removing symbols of the Confederacy erases our history.” Those who oppose removing these symbols argue that they commemorate significant figures of the Civil War, and we should not run away from the history they represent. Author and journalist Sophia A. Nelson takes a similar stance, arguing that we should “Keep these statues where they are so that people can explain history to their kids” – in other words, they can be used as a lesson and reminder of our history. Those against the removal of Confederate symbols also regard this issue as a challenge to their freedom, a concept often believed to be uniquely and emphatically American. “America is different because we value freedom,” Nelson insists, and we should be free to express our ideas regardless of whether they are “the ‘wrong’ ideas” or not.

On the other hand, proponents of Confederate symbol removal argue that these symbols cannot be viewed as neutral: they do not simply commemorate historical figures but rather glorify white supremacy. Keeping these symbols up may “elicit support from white supremacists and exacerbate racial tensions” (Itzkowitz). Associate professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh Keisha N. Blain adds, “The failed Confederate States of America” have always “represented everything white slaveholders desired – a nation where black people would forever be in chains.” Seen through this lens, Confederate symbols only celebrate slavery and anti-blackness in the US. According to Lecia Brooks, outreach director at the SPLC in Montgomery, Alabama, the monuments are “a constant reminder of the dehumanization of African-Americans and the pushback against our civil and human rights” (qtd. in Ortiz and Diaz). Besides, many Confederate memorials were built during the 1920s and the 1950s, long after the

end of the Civil War (Aguilera). For some, then, Confederate statues and monuments glorify America's ongoing legacy of racism. Failing to criticize the history of racial oppression in the US allows those with privilege to negate history, thereby erasing what desperately needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

The practice of ignoring or rejecting unfavorable aspects of history is known as historical negationism. Participating in negationism causes people to overlook the implications of the nation's history and the symbols that represent it. As Professor Joan Ramon Resina of Stanford University notes, negationism "attempts to erase social awareness of crimes against humanity" and stifles meaningful conversations about the root of present-day prejudices (277). Many of those who claim to oppose the erasure of history by not removing Confederate symbols also disregard what they represent—racism. They cannot decide which parts of history to remember and which to ignore. According to Resina, "there is no greater hostility toward a victimized group than to deny its victimization," and, ultimately, "doing so naturalizes the history of abuse and allows the denigration to go unchecked by moral sentiment or positive law" (280). By refusing to acknowledge and analyze the darkest parts of our history, Americans tell the victims of our history that they are not important enough to be remembered. It is our job now to counteract the harmful effects of this ongoing negation by resisting the urge to focus solely on the most 'favorable' interpretations of history. Nevertheless, people in the US sometimes conflate acting against oppression with restricting freedom of expression.

Freedom of expression is a core value of American citizenship. Sophia A. Nelson observes, "In America, we pride ourselves on free thought. Free expression. Freedom to worship as we believe." When some Americans center their arguments only around what they deem worthy of discussion, however, they discredit others' freedom of expression. Ignoring a historical truth is not a form of expression; rather, as Resina argues, "Negationism . . . is not a matter of expression. Negationists do not opine about

or interpret past experience; they erase it" (278). Legal scholar Emanuela Fronza explains how many countries have penalized minimizing, negating, or justifying oppressive parts of history because of their "principle of nondiscrimination" (615). For example, "in Belgium and France the denial of the Holocaust constitutes an offense in any circumstance" (618). Fronza adds that some countries even punish "those who reinterpret or dispute . . . historical events" that involve oppression of a certain group (619). Freedom of expression should not be a vehicle for ignoring the discriminatory history of the US.

This desire of many citizens to ignore the oppressive aspects of US history may stem in part from their need to maintain a positive view of the nation. In his 2003 article "The Paradoxes of American Nationalism," political scientist Minxim Pei notes that "Polling organizations routinely find that Americans display the highest degree of national pride among Western democracies." At the same time, Pei also discussed how Americans have tended not to see themselves as nationalistic. Even today, some Americans continue to have difficulty thinking critically about the negative aspects of US history.

Although Pei never addresses it, the inability of many Americans to engage with the negative aspects of US history – particularly, the injustices faced by oppressed groups – also relates to a deeper blindness about their privilege. For instance, Taylor Phillips, a psychologist at New York University, argues, "Most whites are blind to the existence of racial privilege . . . They deny it exists" (qtd. in Begley). In addition, recent research by psychology professors Jessica C. Nelson, Glenn Adams, and Phia S. Salter at the University of Kansas and Texas A&M University confirms that "dominant-group minimization of racism is not an unbiased reflection of objective reality, but instead reflects identity-defensive motivations" (213). Robin DiAngelo, author of the 2018 book *White Fragility*), has similarly found that, instead of acknowledging their own prejudices or privilege, many white participants in her diversity-training workshops react with "anger, fear, and guilt" as well as "argumentation, silence, and withdrawal"

when confronted with the reality of America's systemic racism (qtd. in Begley). The painful dissonance between the realities of US history and the nationalist beliefs of many Americans – especially many white Americans – about their country's superiority can feel, to some, like a personal attack, preventing them from recognizing that criticizing the system enables us to improve society. However, if white Americans continue to dismiss the very notion of racial privilege, they will also continue to believe that there is nothing to fix.

This controversy extends far beyond Confederate monuments, then. Caring about our country means seeing it clearly rather than blindly justifying the US's past. When we insist on a more flattering version of history, we negate American wrongdoings and hinder progress. Justice and equity will benefit US citizens more than stubbornly protecting the shared delusions and privileges of some. To release ourselves from these delusions, Americans must accept their discomfort, criticism, and self-reflection as necessary for the improvement of society, something that benefits us all. If we want to enact meaningful change in society, we must first analyze ourselves.

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