

In Defense of American History and Heroes

by Daniel Mallock (September 2017)



50th Anniversary, Battle of Gettysburg, Union and Confederate Veterans Greet Each Other at the Scene of Pickett's Charge, 1913

What does a nation without heroes look like?

When a nation's heroes are all re-assessed based only on their flaws and not on their accomplishments and sacrifices, what can be the consequence? Can there be any American heroes at all now worthy of statuary and memorials when the standard for "hero" appears to be, for many extremists, nothing short of perfection?

There are those among us who demand that our heroes must be stainless, and anyone who falls short of the as-yet-unpublished standards of what a hero is must be expunged from the public landscape and therefore finally from the national memory.

This is not new to history though it is for Americans. You can see them on Egyptian pharaonic temple walls the name glyphs of leaders out of favor with the then living generation chipped away. You can see them obliterated from obelisks, and the smashed ruins of their statues. The purpose of the destruction of public records and public memorials is to remove people and events from history, for the benefit of the present generation's peccadillos only. Stalin did not stop at obliterating just statues from history.

There is no consideration of honor to the past or obligation to the future among the people who destroy our history—it is nothing short of the tyranny of the living. Destruction of the past is an act of theft and thoughtlessness against the future, and worse.



Destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban, Afghanistan. ([Source](#))

The Taliban [famously did this](#) to the Bamiyan Buddhist statues in Afghanistan several months before the 9/11 Islamist terror mass murder atrocities in the United States. The Taliban used explosives to blow

up those famous world-significant statues to the horror and chagrin of the entire civilized world. The history of history destroyers is long and ugly.



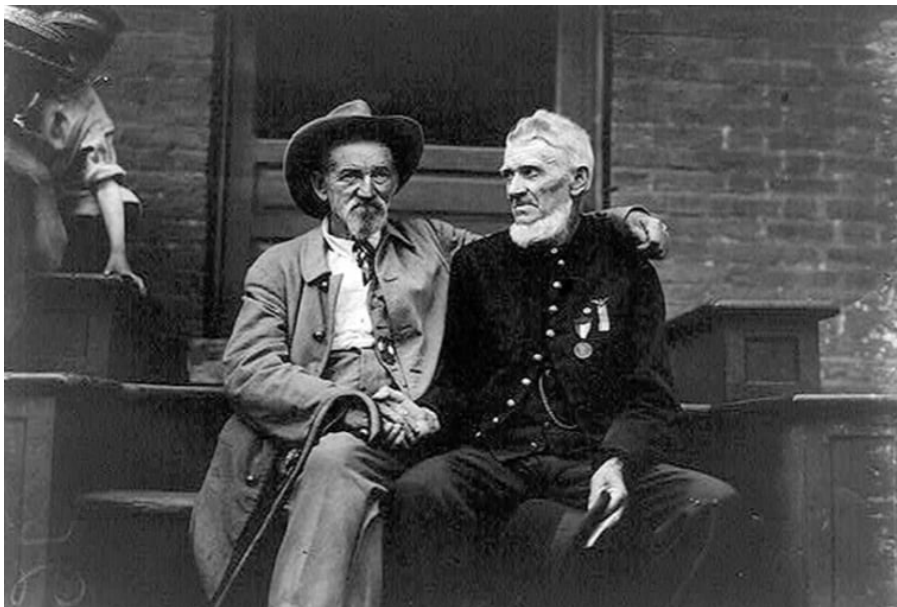
Still from: [Youtube video of the mob destruction of the Confederate memorial, Durham, N.C., August 14, 2017.](#)

Recently, an angry mob attacked and [ripped down a statue](#) of a Confederate soldier in Durham, North Carolina as if the American soldier were an effigy of Stalin, Hitler, or Lenin. The scenes were disturbingly similar, an angry mob destroying a public monument. But there is a difference Confederate soldiers were not Stalinists, Leninists, or Nazis and we are now only in a revolutionary situation in the view of the revolutionary extremists who commit these acts (and those who cheer them on).

These were Americans fighting and dying in a now long dead but not at all forgotten war between the states. Durham is certainly [not the only city](#) affected by the revisionist mob destruction of American history whose subtleties, nuances, complexities, and contradictions, disturbing though they sometimes are, are neither appreciated nor understood by them. The Confederate soldiers were Americans, they are our forebears, whatever your view of the Confederacy or of the Civil

War. Civil War history is American history. We are proud of our Civil War boys in blue and gray, disturbed by them, in awe of their accomplishments and sacrifices, and inspired by what they did.

Nancy Pelosi's father understood this well. During his tenure as mayor of Baltimore, her father [spoke these words](#) at the dedication of the Lee-Jackson memorial in that city in 1948. From father to daughter or son, [welcomed back](#) into the fold of our country; they want to stoke the flames of race divisions and hatreds for their own purposes.



[50th Gettysburg Reunion, 1913](#)

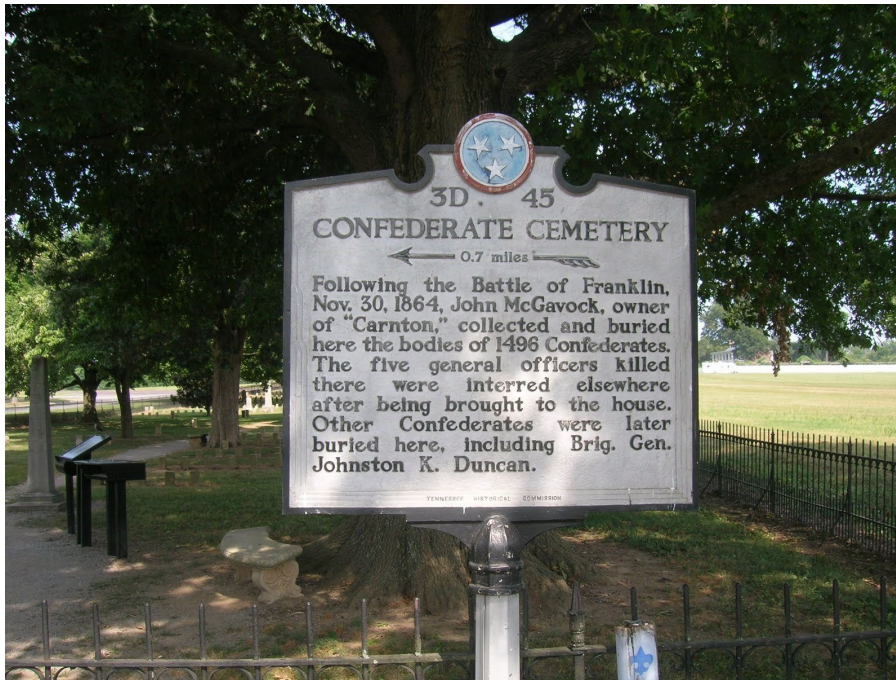
In a [famous letter](#) to James Madison of September 6, 1789, Thomas Jefferson set out a radically new viewpoint of how he believed the living generation should relate to those who preceded them.

I set out on this ground which I suppose to be self-evident, that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living; that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it.

Jefferson's central concern in this letter was that monetary debt should not be passed down to future generations and that the living should not be burdened by debts created in the past. This letter was not greeted favorably by Madison who thought it far too extreme.

This notion of Jefferson's that the living should not be burdened by the dead is an attractive one to every living generation. However, Jefferson used the legal term "usufruct" to convey the obligation that always rests with the living to keep safe the world and the memories of the past. "Usufruct" means that the living are caretakers of the country and that changes are allowed so long as essential truths are respected and retained, and the country passed intact and relatively unchanged to the next generation. The term places the burden of self-control upon the living as they relate to their country and their relationship with its history. The Jeffersonian idea of freeing the living from the burdens of debt created by the dead now is twisted all up so that the living feel little or no obligation to the past.

John Adams, Edmund Burke, and James Madison all rebelled against this idea of abandoning their duties and connections to the past, disconnecting themselves from their forebears. Continuity of generations within a nation is fundamental to national identity and national health. This was Adams's and Burke's fundamental complaint with the nightmare that would become the Jacobin revolution in France; and they were right.



Confederate Cemetery, Carnton, Battle of Franklin, Tennessee ([source](#))



Confederate Cemetery, Carnton, Battle of Franklin, Tennessee ([source](#))



Death site of General Patrick Cleburne, Battle of Franklin, Tennessee (Dan Mallock)

The decoupling of the living generation from the past, the abandonment of all obligations to the past, to history and to the truth of what history is and means, is at the foundation of the failure of the Jacobins during the French Revolution. When the living feel no obligations to the past, the nation is adrift in dangerous waters.

This radical decoupling of the living generation from the past was at the core of the failure of their utopian, idealistic revolt against monarchy in France which devolved to mass political murder, civil and international war. After the guillotines, after the implosion of the revolution there, the monarchy in France was restored.

In the United States now some among us, loud, bitter, denialist, and angry have taken up the Jacobin cudgel of absolutism, intolerance, and utopianism.

The logic of the destruction of Civil War Confederate monuments for their association with the despicable slave system (all people of decency agree that the slave institution was despicable) must lead to Jefferson and Washington and many others. It has already [borne the battle](#)," were leading the charge to re-unify and rebuild the country after the horrors of the war and the defeat of the Confederacy.

These lessons of forgiveness and reunification are now forgotten to the detriment of all Americans living and dead and those yet born.



Memorial to Union officer and mortally wounded Confederate General Lewis Armistead on the field of Gettysburg. ([source](#))

The great challenge to Americans is that we have no choice but to embrace the contradictions of our history, of our heroes, and accept the simple and obvious truth that they were not perfect. There can be no standard of perfection demanded of anyone by anyone, there can only be an openness to learn the lessons of the past and give honor and remembrance to those who paid staggeringly high costs fighting and dying for what they believed in.



Monument to [Sergeant Richard Kirkland](#) (CSA), giving wounded Union soldiers water and aid on the battlefield after the Battle of Fredericksburg, 1862. ([Source](#))

We might say that our founders succeeded and failed, we might say that our Confederate ancestors chose poorly; though these points are controversial and open to discussion and argument we can say this with certainty: we, the living generation, are failing now.

The greatness of our people and of our heroes resides in the fact that we **can** learn and we **do** learn. We have come a long way since 1861.

The monuments of the boys in blue and gray are stark reminders to us of sacrifices, bravery, courage, honor, error, and bitter, painful lessons learned. These were all left by the then living generation of Americans as a reminder to us and those who follow us of the lessons they learned so that we who followed them would never forget.

Can there be now any American heroes at all when the standard is perfection? Are there any humans living or dead who can meet this standard? There are none.

Every American statue and memorial is now at risk because none represent perfection.

What does a country look like without heroes? A country without heroes is a building without foundations, a house with a shattered middle that cannot stand.

Our heroes tell our national story—they illustrate our victories, our defeats, and the sacrifices that our people are willing to make for their friends, their fellow citizens, and for our country.

The great contradiction that the United States was founded by slave holders is now an impossible one for many on the political left to accept. That this is the painful truth of our country's founding is irrelevant to them.

Our obligation as the present living generation is to forever appreciate where we have been and how far we have come, the sacrifices made and the lessons learned. This is the demand that history places upon us, and upon those who will follow us.

The Hippocratic oath is to "do no harm;" our oath ought to be

something like this: we are caretakers of the present and the past and we will pass down to our descendants the painful lessons learned, the stories of sacrifice, courage, and character; we will protect our history and our heroes so that they remain forever as an inspiration for us, our children, and for the world.



Recumbent Robert E. Lee, Lee Chapel, Washington and Lee University (Dan Mallock)

All American heroes of the past are now at risk from the absolutist mobs of angry history destroyers and denialists who obstinately refuse to resolve the contradictions of American history.

What will happen when the mob marches up the slopes of Jefferson's mountain and stands before [Monticello](#) with their torches and pitchforks?



Monticello (Kendra Mallock)



Jefferson Memorial (Dan Mallock)

What will happen when the mob marches to Mount Vernon and stands before Washington's home screaming, burn it down!



Mount Vernon (Dan Mallock)

When do we retreat from the precipice of the destruction of our foundations and admit the truth—that our forebears were not perfect and neither are we, and that our temporary status of the “living generation” does not give us the right to obliterate what we owe to the future, that is, our heritage and national story.

These places, these people, their mistakes and their accomplishments are all part of our history and our heritage. Their destruction is an irreparable loss to the nation now and to the future, it is a national disaster.

What does a country look like that has no heroes? What does a country look like that can have no heroes? These are rhetorical questions.

“Those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it” so goes the famous saying. More pertinent to us now: those who destroy their own history do not know of what they are made and condemn the future to ignorance.

A country without heroes, a country that cannot accept its own greatness built upon tragedy, sacrifice, courage and compassion, and the painful lessons they learned for us; a country that cannot fulfill its promise of lasting appreciation and remembrance to its history and its heroes is a country falling.



Gettysburg Peace Memorial ([source](#))



[Peace Monument/Civil War Sailor Monument](#), Washington, DC ([source](#))



Battle of Nashville Peace Monument ([source](#))

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