

Today, this 4th of July 2019, marks 243 years from the publication of a seminal statement of human equality: the American Declaration of Independence.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

As summarized by political scientist Danielle Allen (“Our Declaration”), this revolutionary sentence contains three claims.

- 1. All people are equal in being endowed by their creator with the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, among others;*
- 2. Humans build governments to secure these rights and political legitimacy rests on the consent of the governed;*
- 3. When governments fail to protect these rights, people have a right to revolt.*

This, Allen rightly points out, was, and in many respects still is, a bold argument.

But it is not an argument that the Confederate leaders celebrated on Richmond’s Monument Avenue accepted.

The founding Confederate leaders were enemies of the Declaration of Independence. They did not believe in human equality, even as an ideal. They believed in white supremacy. They believed in slavery. And they were willing to secede from the union and enter into a bloody civil war in support of their convictions. They fought for a Confederate Constitution which declared, quote: “4. No bill of attainder, ex post facto law, or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed.” Richmond became the capital of this rebellion, this attempt to establish a permanent slave society and slave economy.

Slavery was a system of economic exploitation. But it was also system of dehumanization. A system of cruelly separating families, parents from children. A system predicated on violence and force. A system that inculcated a deeply racist ideology. A system that corrupted utterly the morality of all whites in the South even as it dehumanized, exploited, and terrorized African-Americans. It was a system predicated on cruelty. It is a system that truth, honesty, and respect for our predecessors demands we never romanticize or minimize.

That system was ultimately defeated on the battlefield. But the end of slavery did not mean the end of white supremacy. Reversing the tenuous gains of the Reconstruction period, which included significant black participation in local politics, the Jim Crow era sought to enshrine in law, custom, ideology and belief the economic and legal supremacy of white people as well as the political domination of white people. It is in that context that these monuments on

Monument Avenue were constructed. They were intended to send the message that the South had lost the war but won the peace. They were intended to intimidate and humiliate African-Americans and anyone who would challenge the Jim Crow regime. And they were intended not only to slow but to halt and reverse the achievement of human equality promised by the Declaration of Independence.

Yet it is a testament to the courage of African-Americans in Richmond and the strength of the democratic idea that despite this legal, political and economic subjugation, African-Americans continued to fight for economic and political empowerment, throughout the 20th century. But these triumphs, including the formal desegregation of City schools, black majority political empowerment in the 1970s, always have come at steep cost.

For the truth is, white supremacy in Richmond and central Virginia have never been fully repealed. Instead, white supremacy has taken on new forms.

Richmond remains a city that is hampered by its past in so many ways.

We are hemmed in by a ban on annexation of land.

We until very recently have had a public transportation system designed to deny access to suburban jobs to urban residents, and which despite recent progress is still deeply inadequate.

We have an extraordinary concentration of poverty, centered in but hardly limited to public housing communities.

We have a criminal justice system in which mass incarceration is enshrined as public policy.

And we continue to have, in regional terms, segregated schools, as well as significant disparities within Richmond city schools.

The cumulative results of these systemic, institutionalized, structural inequities are manifested in our 25% poverty rate, the 25% of our kids who don't graduate high school on time, the 40% of our children living in poverty, the massive life expectancy gaps between neighborhoods and racial groups, our extraordinarily high eviction rates, and on and on. Our elected officials struggle to grapple with these systemic inequalities, many of which are ultimately rooted in state policy and practice.

Sadly, one cannot help but believe this was the intent of the people who put these monuments up: to stall, frustrate, deny progress towards human and racial equality.

But this is not simply about what people a hundred or more years ago thought they were doing when they constructed giant monuments to Confederate leaders. It's about how these very same monuments and symbols are being used today, by the enemies of equality and of democracy.

The truth is, we are living in a historical moment where white supremacy and political democracy are in direct conflict, and only one can triumph. Demographically our nation is fast on course to becoming a nation in which no single racial group has the majority of residents. We will soon be a so-called "majority minority" nation. And that fact has huge ramifications for the continuance of white privilege, if demographic trend translates, as it should, into political muscle. This is why we see the concerted effort to deny, frustrate, dilute democracy, the rush to

construct new barriers to voting, to gerrymander districts so that some voters' voice counts for very little, even the willingness to turn a blind eye to foreign intervention in our elections.

Even a few years ago, it was possible to think of the Confederate monuments as a kind of archaic relic from a bygone era, possibly offensive but of no real consequences compared to our "real problems." That is no longer the case today. Just as law and practice allowed slave owners to separate parents from children at auction, today we have a presidential administration that has made separation of parents from children—a cruel form of child brutality—a matter of policy. At the same time, supporters of this president in turn have enlisted these symbols of the Confederate era and weaponized them as symbols of hate.

The continued presence of these monuments in their current form are a threat to public safety, as well as a threat to our future as a democratic society. They send the message that Richmond and Virginia value venerating the false narrative and claim of white supremacy over affirming the values of democracy and equality.

It's easy to say that the issue of Confederate monuments pales in comparison to these structural issues. We hear that we should not waste time on symbolic battles, when we have so many practical challenges.

But it's become clear that this is not an either/or proposition. The existence of these monuments in their current form are a flagrant, visible show of disrespect to African-Americans and to the ideals of democracy and equality that we celebrate on the 4th of July. We can hardly expect to achieve racial equality in educational, housing, and economic outcomes when our most visible public spaces romanticize, even celebrate white supremacy. We cannot claim to be committed to trauma-informed social policy practices while continuing to accept the presence of statues that are themselves traumatizing to many African-Americans. And we can hardly expect 21st century democracy to triumph over those who would limit or dismantle it when we continue to celebrate the enemies of democracy in our most visible thoroughfare.

We cannot become the City of Richmond we need to become, a city based on racial equity and justice, a city in which every child has the opportunity to reach her full potential, if we do not write a new script, a new narrative for our City.

The act of writing a new script involves concrete actions, some of which of our City has taken, even in the last few years, to challenge poverty, to begin breaking down regional transportation barriers, to honor our African-American heroes in appropriate ways.

But it also involves actions to tear down the old narratives, to peel away the false understandings of the past.

I have stated on several occasions that my hope for Richmond is we move, permanently, from being the capital of the Confederacy to the capital of community wealth building, the capital of racial equity.

And after numerous years of working to fight poverty, to establish the Office of Community Wealth Building, to enhance support for our children, I have concluded that we can't have it both ways. We can't claim to be for a bold vision of social justice and tolerate

monuments to racism in the midst of our most prominent thoroughfare. We must change the narrative root and branch.

We must bring these Confederate monuments down.

I issue this statement today in many roles: as a scholar, as a son of the South whose ancestors fought for the Confederacy and owned enslaved people, as a beneficiary of white privilege; as a citizen of 14 years in this city and as someone who has tried to move our City's policy in the direction of economic and racial justice; and also as a candidate for Richmond City Council in the special election for the 5th District Seat.

I cannot let this 4th of July pass and not address the contradiction between celebrating a founding document of human equality in the modern world and our veneration and honoring of the mortal enemies of that idea.

I am committed to working for the removal of these monuments, in a legal and responsible process, as rapidly as possible. I strongly support legislative action at the General Assembly level to give the citizens of Richmond the right to decide what to do with these monuments. It is imperative as a matter of civic identity and basic justice that the residents of Richmond determine which symbols we choose to allow represent us to the world. And once we win that power, I will vote for the removal of Confederate monuments, whether it's as a Council member in a council vote or as an ordinary citizen casting a ballot in a referendum.

We need a Monument Avenue that reflects the true triumphs of our city's history and points the way to a just future. For me, right now the real Monument Avenue begins and ends with Arthur Ashe. But there are so many more stories of resistance and triumph that are not being told, that remain marginalized. And they must be told not only on Monument Avenue, but in Shockoe Bottom, and throughout our city.

We are no longer a City that believes in the Lost Cause. We are instead a City that believes in telling the truth about the past wants to do the hard work to become a more equitable city. And in this regard, there is no difference, no divide between our need to demand the General Assembly give us the right to tell our own story unhampered by the myths of the past and our demand for more educational funding and more resources to confront the legacies of racism and poverty. It is the same struggle, and victory and progress in one area only reinforces the other.

That's what it means to write a new script for our City: one finally freed from the crippling and false ideology of white supremacy, and one firmly committed to inclusive democracy. We must have the courage to live into the promise of the Declaration of Independence, the hope of enslaved people, the example of the freedom fighters in our city and our nation's history.

These monuments must come down, and a new legacy based on justice and inclusion, inscribed in the laws on our books, the dollars in our budgets, and yes the monuments in our public spaces, must go up.

--Thad Williamson