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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Why Lee Should Go, and Washington Should Stay

By Jon Meacham

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Nashville — I grew up on Missionary Ridge, a Civil War battlefield overlooking Chattanooga, Tenn. In my childhood we could still find minie balls from the battle in which a young Union soldier, Arthur MacArthur, the father of Douglas, received the Medal of Honor. The war's relics were real and tangible — I still have a few on my desk as I write — and so were the war's perennial and tragic consequences.

I remember the smoke rising from downtown riots in 1980 after an all-white jury acquitted two Ku Klux Klansmen in the drive-by shotgun shootings of four black women. (A third Klan defendant was convicted only of reduced charges.) It was a stunning verdict. "Good God," my grandfather, a retired judge, remarked of the jurors. "They didn't let the facts get in the way."

Facts, as John Adams said, are stubborn things — and, for Southerners, they are also often uncomfortable. If we don't face them forthrightly, we risk living in worlds of fantasy and fable, subject not to reason, the greatest of gifts, but susceptible to passion, the most dangerous of forces. In such alternative realities, the Civil War was not about slavery but about what neo-Confederates refer to as "heritage."

So let's talk facts. From Baltimore to New Orleans, cities across the South are removing statues of Confederate figures from public property — memorials often built as emblems of defiance to federal authority in the post-Reconstruction period and in the Warren Court years of the 1950s and '60s. The white-supremacist and neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Va., this month was occasioned by the city's decision to take down a Robert E. Lee statue.

In the ensuing chaos, President Trump spoke of the "many sides" of the debate and defended the neo-Confederate view. "I wonder," Mr. Trump said, "is it George Washington next week, and is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You know, you really have to ask yourself, where does it stop?"

To me, the answer to Mr. Trump's question begins with a straightforward test: Was the person to whom a monument is erected on public property devoted to the American experiment in liberty and self-government? Washington and Jefferson and Andrew Jackson were. Each owned slaves; each was largely a creature of his time and place on matters of race. Yet each also believed in the transcendent significance of the nation, and each was committed to the journey toward "a more perfect Union."

By definition, the Confederate hierarchy fails that test. Those who took up arms against the Union were explicitly attempting to stop the American odyssey. While we should judge each individual on the totality of their lives (defenders of Lee, for instance, point to his attempts to be a figure of reconciliation after the war), the forces of hate and of exclusion long ago made Confederate imagery their own. Monuments in public places of veneration to those who believed it their duty to fight the Union have no place in the Union of the 21st century — a view with which Lee himself might have agreed. "I think it wiser," he wrote in 1866, "not to keep open the sores of war."

Of course, Lee lost that struggle, too, and my home state is dealing with just this issue at the moment. In 1973, the Sons of Confederate Veterans raised money to install a bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Southern cavalry commander and early leader of the Klan, in the state capitol.

It's ahistoric to judge figures from the past by our own moral standards. Yet we need not contort ourselves to find Forrest wanting as an object of veneration. He was condemned for outrages and atrocities in his own time. One example: the massacre at Fort Pillow in April 1864, in western Tennessee, where Forrest's men "cruelly butchered every colored soldier they could lay hands upon," according to a report in The Chicago Tribune not long after.

More than a century and a half on, the battle over Forrest's memory here may offer lessons for others. Taken as a whole, my state was always ambivalent about the Confederacy. In February 1861 a majority of its voters opposed a proposed secession convention, with pro-Union sentiment particularly strong in the more mountainous eastern region of the state. Then came Fort Sumter and the federal call to fight the secessionists, and secession carried the day at last.

By the end of the war, 120,000 Tennesseans had fought for the Confederacy, but a significant number, 31,000, took up arms for the Union. As historians have noted, that meant Tennessee alone provided the federal forces with more soldiers than all other seceded states combined.

Given its history during the Confederate era, then, Tennessee has the capacity to be more reasonable in the neo-Confederate one. According to a 2016 law, the removal of a monument like the one to Forrest requires either an act of the General Assembly or a two-thirds vote of the state's historical commission, most of whom are appointed by the governor. And the position of Gov. Bill Haslam, a popular Republican, is clear: It's time for the Forrest bust to go. "I don't believe Nathan Bedford Forrest should be one of the individuals we honor at the Capitol," he said. "That history should be put in a museum, not in a place of honor."

"There will never be peace in Tennessee," Union Gen. William T. Sherman once said, "until Forrest is dead." Like his more celebrated remark that war is hell, Sherman was onto something. The good news in this grim period of 2017 is that reasonable Southerners may be ready to give peace a chance.

Jon Meacham, a distinguished visiting professor at Vanderbilt University, is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of biographies of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson.