

## Toppling Statues

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***In the wake of George Floyd's death, protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement have reignited the debate over controversial statues. In this opinion piece published in 2017, France-Amérique explored the complex connection between remembrance and history through an American example, Robert E. Lee, and a French one, Marshal Pétain***

The French will not be surprised by the American controversy surrounding statues to be taken down or not depending on whether they represent pro-slavery figures. In Charlottesville,

Virginia, violence broke out on the occasion of a march of white supremacists who came to protest the plan to remove a statue of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee, which led to one death among the counter-demonstrators. Austin, Texas, has already removed a Robert E. Lee statue, as well as one of another Confederate soldier, Albert Sidney Johnston; in Alabama, the mayor of Birmingham hid the Confederate monument behind large plywood walls; and Tennessee is preparing to topple Nathan Bedford Forrest, one of the founders of the Ku Klux Klan.

In France we experienced the same discomfort with the case of Marshal Pétain, which is more complicated still, since he was in turn the heroic victor of the Battle of Verdun in 1916 and the abominable leader of the Vichy government. In his first role he was covered with honors until 1940, and had a plaque dedicated to him in Manhattan, which the current mayor of New York has decided to remove. Pétain was celebrated in 1931 with a parade on Broadway. It was a time of glory for the Marshal in France and the United States, when many streets were named Pétain in both countries. All these street names disappeared in 1945 in France, but many survive in the United States, in cities like Milltown (New Jersey), Dallas (Texas), Yuma (Arizona), and Manchester (Maine). They have probably lasted this long by indifference: No one understands the name Pétain in these places anymore; it's an address like any other.

The New Yorkers who acclaimed Pétain in 1931 could not have guessed what he would become, and neither could the French. But today, only the far right still honors Pétain, not the man of Verdun but the one of Vichy, precisely because they share his nationalist and xenophobic ideology.

The racism of the Confederates and of the Vichy regime, carried on by the supremacists in America and by the Front National party in France, still brings suffering to Black and Jewish people in both countries. Taking down Pétain and Lee is thus not to revise history; it is to avoid harming those who might become victims of murderous ideologies. It was therefore justified to remove the monument to Pétain's memory, since the marshal's name still inflicts real suffering on the victims of Vichy and their descendants who reside in or visit New York.

The theoretical argument according to which all traces of history, even hateful traces, must be preserved intact holds little weight for me in the face of the suffering of our contemporaries. The same question holds for the public images of leaders of the Confederacy. In the name of history, conservatives demand that these monuments, statues, and nameplates remain where they are. But most of these monuments were erected after the Civil War by those who refused to accept its outcome: They are more political than historical monuments, and the argument of memory seems to me to disguise dark feelings. In the same way as Pétain, a statue of Lee is not only a monument; it is also an offense against those who suffered to bring about the abolishment of slavery. The historical excuse for keeping these monuments where they were erected is thus not worth much.

As for the statues, we have museums for this purpose; there are some in Moscow where those of Lenin and Stalin have been put in storage. In China, on the other hand, the statues of Mao Zedong have not been toppled; this is because the communist dictatorship has not been overthrown. In France, as far as I know, Vichy belongs to the past. The same will have to apply to segregation and slavery, of which Robert E. Lee and his companions unfortunately remain a symbol. On the other hand, nothing prevents the teaching of history, which is the indispensable remedy for any ill-conceived quarrel.



Protesters gather peacefully one evening at Robert E. Lee Circle on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. "BLM" for Black Lives Matter is projected on Lee's horse, while a photograph of Marcus David Peters, a 24-year-old Black man killed by a Richmond police officer, is projected onto the pedestal, which is covered with graffiti.