

## Debate: Memorializing People Who Did Terrible Things (Friday, 9/27)

On August 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and members of the KKK [rallied](#) in Charlottesville, Virginia, where events culminated in the tragic death of protestor, Heather Heyer. Officially, the purpose of the rally was to protest the removal of a [statue of Robert E. Lee](#) (commander of the Confederate army during the Civil War) near the University of Virginia.

Since then, there has been an [ongoing push](#) to remove Confederate statues and monuments. For instance, protestors toppled a Confederate statue in [Durham, NC](#); the city of [Baltimore, MD](#) removed its Confederate statues in the middle of the night; and [many others](#) (see [here](#) as well). This may seem like a new issue, but this controversy has actually been brewing for many years.<sup>1</sup>

In response to the events of those two days, president [Donald Trump defended the protest](#) against the statue's removal. He cited a slippery slope argument in defense, stating, "This week it's Robert E. Lee. ... I wonder, is it George Washington next week? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? ... George Washington was a slave owner." Trump's critics scoffed at this claim as ridiculous. But, is it? ***Should Thomas Jefferson be next?*** This is the topic of your debate.

So, rather than discussing emblems, statues, etc., related to the Confederacy, I would instead like to focus our attention on individuals such as Thomas Jefferson and Christopher Columbus.

First, consider Columbus. Most of us owe him a great debt. For, without his famous journey to America, it is likely that you and I would never have existed. In honor of his great voyage, we erect statues of him, name buildings after him, and so on.

Yet, some object that such memorials cannot isolate only the *good* qualities about someone in order to honor them. Rather, they imply that we endorse the person as a *whole*—both the good and the bad. And, in Columbus's case, that means endorsing [a murderer and a rapist](#).

For this reason, Columbus statues across the nation have been vandalized in protest. For instance, this one (right) in Buffalo, NY, doused in red paint, representing blood and guilt. ([Here](#) is another example.)



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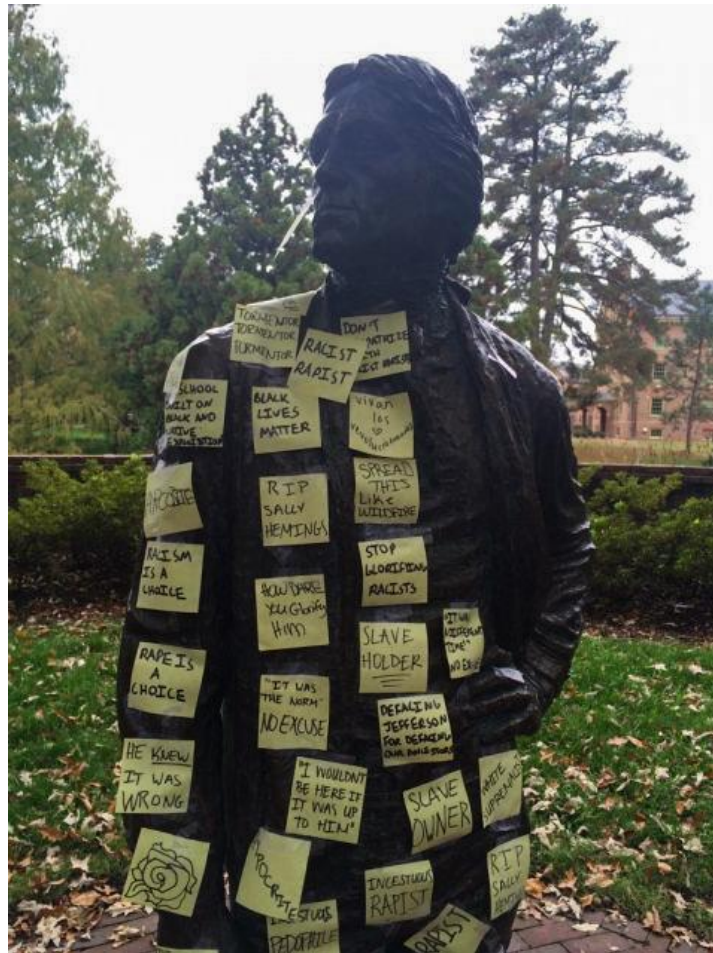
<sup>1</sup> I've actually been assigning some form of this debate topic for several years now. Here is an excerpt from an older assignment sheet: Prior to statues taking center stage, there was controversy over displays of the Confederate flag—especially on government property—see, e.g., a protestor's [removal of the Confederate flag](#) from the grounds of South Carolina's state capitol in July 2014 (in the wake of the [Charleston shootings](#)). Since then, there has been much public debate, largely taking place on university campuses across the country. For instance:

- (1) [Princeton University](#) (re: removing the name of President Woodrow Wilson, a vocal proponent of segregation, from various buildings)
- (2) Washington & Lee University (re: Renaming the school itself, named in part after General Robert E. Lee, who led the Confederate army (see [here](#) and [here](#)).
- (3) [Yale University](#) (re: removing the name of John Calhoun, a proponent of slavery, from several buildings)
- (4) [Georgetown University](#) (re: renaming 2 buildings named after slave owners)
- (5) [University of Maryland](#) (re: removing the name of H.C. Byrd, a pro-segregationist, from the football stadium)
- (6) [University of Texas](#) (re: removing statues of various Confederates—e.g., Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee)
- (7) And [many others](#).

Philosophers have taken an interest in this debate. See [here](#) (the comments on that article are especially helpful). Even Peter Singer has weighed in on the issue, [here](#).

# The W&M Thomas Jefferson Statue Controversy

In November 2015, this happened to the Thomas Jefferson statue next to the Sunken Gardens on the College of William & Mary campus:



As seen here, Thomas Jefferson, noted alumnus of the College of William & Mary, third president of the United States, and author of the Declaration of Independence, is covered with notes that say things like ‘slave holder’, ‘racist’, and ‘rapist’. This occurred about a month after a [similar event took place](#) on the University of Missouri campus, image here:



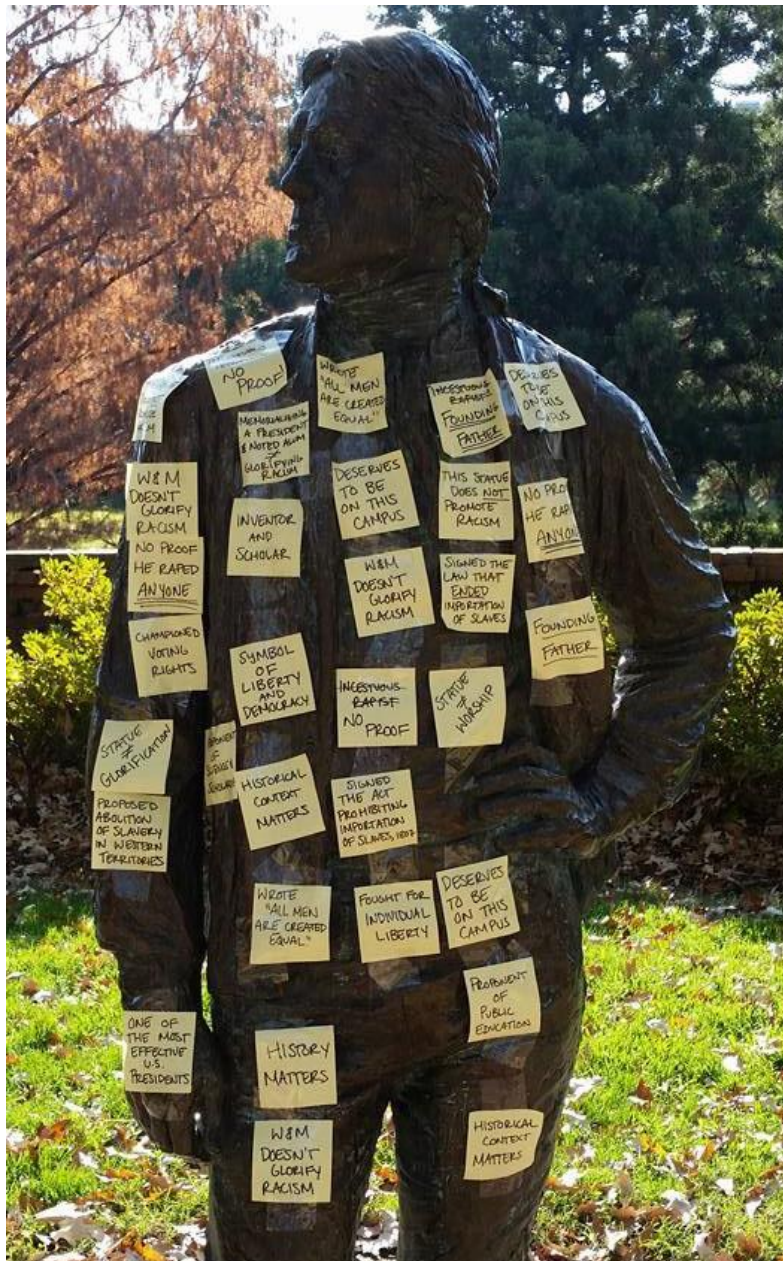
In February, 2017, the W&M statue was [vandalized again](#)—this time, Jefferson’s hands were covered in red paint, the words “slave owner” spray-painted at his feet. ([Flat Hat reports here](#))



Thomas Jefferson did in fact own ([hundreds](#) of) slaves, and there is a [general consensus](#) among historians that Jefferson fathered six children through one of his slaves (Sally Hemings). Furthermore, he raised these illegitimate children (or, the four of them who survived beyond infancy) as slaves rather than as sons and daughters—two of them running away at the ages of 21 and 24, and the other two being freed in Jefferson's will after his death (at the ages of 18 and 21). Sally Hemings remained a slave even after Jefferson's death (he did not free her in his will).

**The message of these notes was clear: We should not honor or memorialize a historical figure who did such morally terrible things.**

William and Mary's Flat Hat newspaper featured a number of responses to this event (e.g., [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), & [here](#)). In December 2015, the W&M statue was covered once again, this time with messages such as 'statue ≠ worship' and 'deserves to be on this campus', image here:



**The message was, again, loud and clear: It is permissible to honor or memorialize historical figures who did great things—even if they also did some terrible things.**

So, what is the right thing to do? Should we:

- (a) Remove all statues, plaques, names on buildings, etc., of all those individuals who did or endorsed morally terrible things? Perhaps leaving such things in place implies an endorsement or glorification of morally abhorrent practices; or perhaps it honors/makes heroes of people who should not be honored or made heroes of; or perhaps it sends the wrong message of approval/endorsement to those who would spread certain types of violence and hate.
- (b) Or, rather, should we leave them be? Perhaps it is possible to honor or glorify certain traits of past individuals (e.g., the beauty of Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence) without implying that *all* of that person's traits were worthy of honoring or memorializing (e.g., his owning of slaves). Or, perhaps memorials bestow no honor or glory at all, but merely *history*. The purpose of a *memorial* is, strictly speaking, to retain a *memory*; to remind us of something. But, perhaps we *should* be reminded of both good *and* bad things in history. If so, then such memorials should be left in place for all to see so that we will be constantly reminded of them, and never forget the shameful legacy of America's past wrongdoings (since, as the saying goes, those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it). According to critics, to do otherwise is to "whitewash" history.

## Your Task

Question: Is it permissible to memorialize a historical figure who did morally terrible things?

You have been divided you into two groups. One group will argue that the answer to the above questions is "yes" (this group will argue that such memorials *are* permissible; i.e., your team would sympathize with answer b, above). The other group will argue that the answer is "no" (this group will argue that such memorials are *not* permissible; your team would be sympathetic to answer a, above).

## Getting Started

Now that you have met your teammates, I encourage you to continue to email one another, exchange phone numbers, arrange to meet, etc.

You may want to do some further research before you begin, in order to familiarize yourself with some of the common reasons that each side gives in defense of their position.

## What To Do

Opening statement: Please elect one or more spokespersons from your group to give an opening statement of 3-5 minutes. During this opening statement, you will present some argument or reasons for believing that your group has the correct answer to the questions above.

Response statement: After both teams give their opening statements, each group will be given a couple of minutes to brainstorm quietly, to agree on what your group will say in response to your opponents. Please elect one or more spokespersons from your group to give a 3 minute response statement. During this response statement, you will provide some reason or justification for believing that what the opposing group has just said is mistaken.

Open discussion: At the end, the two teams will be allowed some time to discuss the issue with one another informally, before I open discussion to the entire class for Q&A.

## Format

Event	Time Allotment
Team “NO” opening statement	3-5 minutes
Team “YES” opening statement	3-5 minutes
Team “NO” brainstorm session	2 minutes
Team “NO” response statement	2-3 minutes
Team “YES” brainstorm session	2 minutes
Team “YES” response statement	2-3 minutes
Informal open discussion between teams	5 minutes

## Grading

This assignment is worth 10% of your grade. Half of this grade will be assigned by myself based on the performance of your team during the class debate. The other half of this grade will be based on peer assessment. You will be graded by the other members of your team in an anonymous survey following the debate. Here are some things I'll be looking for:

- Are the arguments that you present clear, carefully stated, and persuasive?
- Do you handle questions, criticisms, etc., clearly, carefully, and persuasively?
- Is it apparent that your team has put some careful thought and consideration into this issue?
- Do you function well as a *team*? (e.g., avoid contradicting, bickering with, or talking over your own teammates)