

The Jan. 6 insurrection shows why the Robert E. Lee statue had to go

James Hohmann, *The Washington Post*

Required Annotations	Student-Created Annotations	Summary / Questions / Reflection
Student-created		Required (bold)

Imagine a magnificent statue being erected 30 years from now to honor the supporters of President Donald Trump who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6. Think about how insulting it would feel if the organizers behind this monument, on state-owned property, insisted those insurrectionists were actually quite brave, even brilliant, for how they went about trying to overturn the 2020 election.

Because this is how we should collectively understand the Robert E. Lee statue that was finally removed from its pedestal in Richmond on Wednesday after 15 months of litigation. I was once hesitant about toppling the monument — but Trump’s rage **underscores** how wrong that position is.

The Lee statue went up in 1890, part of Confederate iconography that grew from “Lost Cause” mythmaking, a revisionist propaganda campaign to rehabilitate the images of the secessionists with big lies about their supposedly noble motives.

Trump’s refusal to accept the results of the 2020 election has become the Lost Cause of our time. Trump’s **unfounded** claims that fraud cost him the election have grown only louder, and polls have shown half of Republicans embracing his lies. Eight months after Jan. 6, efforts to recast the worst attack on the Capitol since the war of 1812 are well underway.

The historically illiterate ex-president has espoused Lost Cause rhetoric before. A low point of his presidency came in 2017 when Trump said there were some “very fine people on both sides” of a deadly clash that stemmed from a rally against the removal of a Lee statue in Charlottesville. Just as he did again this week, Trump praised the Confederate general as worthy of recognition.

Until a white supremacist rammed his car into a crowd that included Heather Heyer, I saw the debate over statues in **abstract**, almost academic, terms. If the remedy for bad speech is more speech, it seemed that the right compromise to avoid erasing the past would be to add signage with extra context and to erect additional statues of people who were on the right side of history.

Charlottesville led me to reconsider. I didn’t fully appreciate the pain these memorials caused many African Americans every time they walked by. I didn’t realize how many Confederate memorials across the South went up during the 1960s as part of massive resistance to the civil rights movement. I also didn’t understand the extent to which misperceptions of Lee in the popular imagination can be tied directly back to Lost Cause mythmaking.

What gave me the greatest pause about taking down Confederate statues

was a fear of the slippery slope. If Lee statues came down, activists might come after memorials to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other brilliant Founding Fathers because, as Southern planters, they also owned slaves. Is it only a matter of time before society tries to take down statues of, say, Franklin D. Roosevelt because he ordered the **internment** of U.S. citizens and noncitizens of Japanese descent during World War II?

No. This is a logical fallacy. Ultimately, intent is the critical test to **gauge** whether statues should go: Why was the monument erected? What was the person originally being honored for? No reasonable person can argue that memorials to Washington, Jefferson and Roosevelt were constructed to celebrate the worst things they did.

On the other hand, **voluminous** evidence demonstrates that memorials to Confederate leaders were built because of, not despite, their sedition and treachery. The larger-than-life monument to Lee in Richmond was widely understood at the time it was erected as a symbol of white supremacy. John Mitchell, an African American member of Richmond's city council and editor of a Black newspaper, condemned the statue for celebrating Lee's "legacy of treason and blood."

Another window into original intent comes from a time capsule placed inside the 40-foot stone plinth underneath the bronze statue of Lee on his horse. Media accounts say the box included an image of Abraham Lincoln lying in his coffin; a speaker at the installation ceremony blamed the Civil War on the dead president and claimed he freed the slaves only so the North could win the war. The capsule also included Confederate bullets, buttons and a battle flag.

On Jan. 6, one of the insurrectionists waved that flag as he paraded around the Capitol. He got farther than the Confederate soldiers in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, who tried to break through Union defenses around Washington during the Battle of Fort Stevens in 1864.

One hundred and fifty-seven years later, when the Capitol and democracy itself again came under attack, it was Virginia that sent reinforcements. After Lee's statue was trucked away to an undisclosed location, a new time capsule was inserted on Thursday into the graffiti-covered stone. Among the objects included by Gov. Ralph Northam (D) is a photo from Jan. 6 of Virginia state troopers who scrambled into Washington to help secure the city amid the insurrection.

Required Questions

1. Who is the intended audience of this piece? How do you know?

2. Write a summary of the article on a separate sheet of paper.

