Confederate Monuments Tell Wrong Story About History

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The removal of monuments dedicated to the Confederate States has generated fierce comments on both sides of the debate. Many people express strongly held views on this topic but viewpoints are often not based on a true examination of the historical record.

As a professor who teaches Legal Issues of the American Civil War at Widener University Delaware Law School, I offer the following thoughts to put in perspective some of the issues we should consider when deciding what should be done with monuments whose presence causes such divisiveness between Americans.

Confederate monuments depict people who had both strengths and flaws reflecting beliefs widely held during their lifetime.

For example, Robert E. Lee was by most accounts a charismatic leader with admirable personal traits. However, he also chose to fight against the U.S., thereby violating the oath he swore as an Army officer to “bear true allegiance to the United States of America, and to serve honestly and faithfully, against all (U.S.) enemies or opposers whatsoever.”

To make informed decisions on these monuments, we need to understand the actual historical record. The issues that led us to Civil War and the subsequent Jim Crow Era are incredibly complicated and not subject to easy judgments.

The years that most Confederate monuments were erected were during periods of retrenchment of white supremacy. As such, the monuments are manifestations of the intolerant attitudes of the people who erected them.

It benefits our society to understand these motivations and it does not profit us to ignore or falsify why they were created.

During our history that led to Civil War, the historical record clearly shows that Northern States and the Federal Government were often complicit with Southern States in instituting and protecting slavery. After the Civil War, much of the nation was also complicit in permitting racial policies that supported the social and political atmosphere that resulted in honoring Confederate leaders not only with monuments, but also with military posts and school names, highway designations and so forth.

Unfortunately, our true history concerning race and discrimination is often shameful. When we refuse to understand, confront and learn from our past actions we trap ourselves into thinking based on myth rather than reality.

There is a high price to pay for not knowing or ignoring historic facts; leading to misinterpretations that allow hatred to grow and fester. If we are to move past our history of intolerance, we must as a people reject false narratives.

To do this, we must start teaching our people the genuine history of what occurred during the pre and post-Civil War Era including the true reasons why Confederate monuments were created.

By removing monuments from public spaces we are not “erasing history,” but are instead publicly affirming that retaining Confederate monuments is incongruous with our modern belief that respect for diversity and tolerance of differences is now our true belief.

A successful democracy must be based on respect for all of our citizens. Although some wish to continue to honor heritage by retaining statues honoring the leaders of the Confederacy; the real and understandable offense these public monuments represent to many Americans is too great a price for our society to tolerate.

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