

Our nation experienced an insurrection. Our monuments to treason must go.

[Michael Paul Williams](#)

The legal debate over the fate of the Lee monument, already protracted, should have ended on Jan. 6.

We might have hoped that Richmond plaintiffs, in a precarious moment of national reckoning, would have dropped their lawsuit to keep Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee on his Monument Avenue perch. Then again, we might have expected Republican congressional members, hours after their workplace was stormed by insurrectionists, to drop their craven attempt to subvert the will of the voters.

Shortly after the 1890 dedication of Richmond's Lee monument, John Mitchell Jr., the newspaper editor and city councilman, was prophetic in writing that the statue and the sentiment it embodied "will ultimately result in handing down to generations unborn a legacy of treason and blood."

We are living that legacy today through a new lost cause centered around a demented former president.

With so many white nationalists, militia members and far-right extremists spoiling for a new civil war, we must be clear-eyed about the original one. The impulse to lionize treason in service of white supremacy will be the death of our democracy if we don't wake up.

The confusing message projected by Richmond's Confederate monuments was hard to reconcile *before* we watched the American Experiment teeter on the precipice.

“[Robert E.] Lee himself fought against keeping the union together,” said historian Laurant Lee. “Isn’t that treason?”

“We cannot check this off and move on,” Lee, who served on the Monument Avenue Commission, said of the insurrection. “This is another egregious affront not just to democracy but to our very lives. To let this lawlessness go unchecked. ... is more than we can bear really.

“It does not speak to what we should be focused on, which is truly bringing about equity in our society.”

On Monday, the state installed a fence around the Lee monument circle as part of its plan to remove the statue. But that barrier, at this moment, sends a conflicting message.

Fences perform multiple functions: They enclose, they protect and they exclude. Local activists who’d reclaimed the space this past summer are feeling the latter.

Plans to remove the statue were delayed in July when five residents near the statue filed a lawsuit. In October, Richmond Circuit Court Judge W. Reilly Marchant ruled against the plaintiffs, but he suspended lifting an injunction barring the statue’s removal while an appeal is pending.

With no removal date in sight, the state’s action Monday represents less the impending removal of Lee from his pedestal than the clearance of a popular circle informally renamed after Marcus-David Peters, who was killed by Richmond police in 2018.

As quickly as that fence went up, it’s clear that the state could have waited until it had the court’s OK to remove the statue.

In the meantime, the plaintiffs' doubling down in court to keep Lee on his perch is ill-considered in a nation at war with itself. But it represents an unfortunate consistency.

Historically, this nation has fashioned virtue out of treason, heroism out of Black subjugation, patriotism out of sedition. We swapped out historical integrity in favor of revisionism and romanticism.

America sold out its Black citizens by purchasing a phony reconciliation with the counterfeit currency of appeasement. We indulged grievance.

The damage is here for all to see.

In the Civil War, brother might have fought brother, but the battle lines clearly were drawn, Today, our military is having to purge itself of white supremacists within its ranks — a terrifying reality to consider as we contemplate national security.

Meanwhile, veterans sworn to uphold the U.S. Constitution played a disturbingly high-profile role in a Capitol mob whose ranks included white supremacists and far-right extremists. This insurrection demonstrates that you can't swear an oath of loyalty to both the Constitution and white supremacy.

The Memorial Day killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police — a horrifying episode typifying police abuse of Black bodies — sparked a national uprising. But the storming of the U.S. Capitol, and the lingering divide, represents a clear and present danger to our nation moving forward.

As a nation, we no longer can afford mixed messages about freedom, equality, what constitutes patriotism and what it means to be an

American. To the extent our fellow citizens are confused, the nation is imperiled.

Lauranett Lee hopes the removal of the Robert E. Lee monument would create an opportunity “to present other forms of art that speak more universally to who we are not only as a nation, but a people grappling with its history.”

For too long, this nation has built protective fences around white supremacy, and even glorified it. We now are paying the price.

If we can't remove its symbols from our public landscape, we've no hope of eradicating the real thing.

(Dr. Lauranett Lee, founding curator of African-American history at the Virginia Historical Society, was one of the speakers at the dedication of the Virginia Women's Monument inside Capitol Square in Richmond, VA Monday, Oct. 14, 2019. A total of seven statues of Virginia women were unveiled.)

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https://richmond.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/williams-our-nation-experienced-an-insurrection-our-monuments-to-treason-must-go/article_2def0ba6-1860-5b5d-9723-e0f5ec52d700.html?utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=user-share&fbclid=IwARoK2FvasEbMzcmfQGjVKRDkfbfoRgTVAJN_V8N2ZAU6jYCat6gtoP5Rofg