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A Confederacy of Confusion: The North, The South, Race and Remembrance

When a young man, nearly two decades ago, my great desire was to see and understand America. As a political theory major at Georgetown University, I interned for writers Michael Novak and Robert Novak. I edited the conservative magazine on campus, *The Georgetown Academy* and wrote a column for the official student newspaper, *The Hoya*. My early political views were certainly conservative.

Upon graduation, I accepted a position as an assistant editor for a magazine called *Policy Review* at the right wing Heritage Foundation. I soon was restless and feeling quite sick of Washington DC. I quit the position after a couple weeks and embarked on a great quest to visit every congressional district and Insular Territory in America. I didn't just want to read about America, I wanted to really see her. I didn't want to learn about my nation from a think tank or ivory tower, I wanted to experience her people and places, her ghettos and gated estates. There was no better way to understand America than taking to the road with my two favorite books at the time, Michael Barone's *Almanac of American Politics* and *The Rand McNally Road Atlas*.

My great adventure, my personal graduate school in American Studies, lasted more than half a decade. I never received any formal funding for the adventure so I worked various jobs and set up hosts along the way. I was obsessed with the journey. Rolling into a new town, often in the dead of night, gave me a rush as I saw a new part of America. A giant jigsaw puzzle, each new congressional district made the whole of America become more clear.

Throughout my journey I was fascinated by monuments. I stopped at cemeteries and battlefields every chance I got. I made it to every state capitol building in America with the exception of Juneau, Alaska and found the statehouses of America to be full of history and monuments. Courthouses, universities, churches and parks were also full of monuments. I read and visited hundreds if not thousands during my journey. Every state has them. As a student of America, my love of visiting monuments came from a desire to learn. It also came from a personal need to understand how people commemorate tragedy.

Early on in my journey, one year after I graduated from college, my mother, who long suffered from the mental illness of schizophrenia, committed suicide. My journey was a great adventure for a young man, an amazing education for a student of America and a way of healing a deep personal wound. My fascination with monuments was as much personal as political. There is an innate need to commemorate our dead, a private as well as public cathartic ritual to remember who and what we have lost.

As I traveled and studied America I soon learned that the South commemorated the Civil War more than the North did. There were plenty of monuments to the Grand Army of the Republic but it seemed every small Southern town and civic space had a marker to those lost in The War Between the States. This made sense to me. We remember our tragedies more than our victories. That is why the Vietnam War memorial was built before the World War Two memorial, that is why the anniversaries of the deaths of young children are far more important to commemorate than the death of elderly grandparents. The South lost more than the North in the Civil War, both in human toll and in the end of the antebellum Southern culture. The need to commemorate the dead and leaders of the Confederacy was greater because the South paid a greater price.

Many advocates for tearing down Confederate memorials point out that many of these statues were erected decades after the end of the Civil War. Their argument is that these monuments were put up as

Jim Crow symbols to segregation and were meant as visible signs of opposition to civil rights progress. There is some truth to this but it is also much too simplistic. For decades after the Civil War, Southern states were subject to the era of Reconstruction policies set by the North. To the victor goes the spoils, and the Radical Republicans as they were called were not interested in celebrating the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. Southerners were not allowed to build monuments to the Confederacy in many places. This changed when local communities regained control of their politics and yes, many Southerners did want to erect statues of Southern pride after decades of what they viewed as harsh Reconstruction policies set by Northerners.

There is another very obvious reason many Confederate monuments were put up decades after the cessation of the conflict: huge numbers of veterans were starting to die. Like most wars, many of the soldiers who fought in it were young men in their twenties. Four, five, six decades later these veterans started to die. Family, friends and communities wanted to commemorate their passing. Thus, many communities erected memorials to celebrate the passing and memory of these loved ones and community members. If this seems foreign, remember the World War Two Memorial in Washington DC was finally finished many decades after World War Two ended. This grand monument was not constructed to begrudge the progress of Germans and Japanese. It was erected because so many of the Greatest Generation were dying. It is simplistic and wrong to constantly assert that Confederate monuments were erected simply out of racism and opposition to integration. Like most war monuments, many were put up to remember real people: fathers, brothers and sons, who bled and died in a conflict they believed in. As a Northerner, I don't like seeing these monuments torn down because they represent real history and real memories to many of my fellow Americans even if I disagree with what they fought for.

It became obvious to me early in my travels that the South remembered the Civil War more than the North did. To switch the famous mantra from Game of Thrones, The South Remembers. It also became apparent to me quite early in my roaming America that The North was more segregated than The South. What? Yes, I believe it is true. Remember, I come from the North. There are no Confederate memorials I know of in Minnesota. The War Between the States here is the Vikings versus the Packers. My bias, like that of many Northerners was that the South was more racist and segregated than my native North. My travels dispelled this notion.

There are some empirical ways to measure segregation. School statistics are quite accurate on measuring the racial makeup of neighborhoods. Zip code data and the values of homes can tell you important information on race and poverty as can census data. But answering a loaded question like which state is the most racist or which region of the country is most hostile to minorities is very difficult.

I traveled throughout every major city in America. Yes, there were far more Confederate flags in the South and Confederate memorials, but I found less interaction between whites and blacks in the North than I observed in the South. I remember being told the axiom that in the North they love the race but hate the person whereas in the South they hate the race but love the person. I found that in the North many whites just moved away from inner cities when different races moved into their neighborhood. Visit the major cities of Michigan, Illinois, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Go and visit every congressional district in America. You will find large urban black populations and large white populations the minute you hit the suburbs. Especially in the North. You see enough of America, you come to some conclusions.

Northerners like to get on their moral high horse about race. They use issues like Confederate flags and memorials to beat up on Southerners. Their moral smugness is ill founded. I have three words for Northerners who think the South has greater racial problems than the North: Detroit, Gary, Camden. We could add Chicago, Milwaukee, Philadelphia and Newark. I believe it is a little stated fact in American society that The North really is more segregated than The South. In my personal travels I found New Jersey to be the most segregated state in America. That's right, New Jersey. I would go from an all black to an all white neighborhood in every major and midsize city I visited in the Garden State. I found Alabama far more integrated than Jersey.

Veteran NBA players often said Boston was the most racially hostile city they played in. Good old liberal

Massachusetts. Boston, not Atlanta. I saw much more interaction between blacks and whites in Mississippi and Georgia than I did in Michigan and Connecticut. Now, it is important to acknowledge that these are all personal observations. Someone else might certainly have a different firsthand point of view. Yet, I really believe it is one of the great lies in popular American culture that the South is more racist and segregated than the North. Go and visit every part of the nation and come to your own conclusions. I believe mine are accurate.

Because of the two huge historical realities of the Civil War and slavery, Americans tend to think about race in terms of North and South and black and white. Most of this essay has done just that. However, my travels and the reality of current America demonstrates this is antiquated thinking. Western states have a historical legacy from the Mexican American War and a Hispanic population that in many states like New Mexico, Arizona and Nevada dwarfs the African American population. I lived in New Mexico for awhile and found that racial politics there had little to do with blacks and whites. Relationships and conflicts between new and old Hispanics (many Hispanic families in New Mexico can trace their families back to generations before New Mexico became a territory let alone a state) and illegal immigrants and Native American tribes far out number conflicts between blacks and whites. In Southern California, I found numerous neighborhoods that appeared to be majority Latino, black or Asian and Korean. Quite frankly, there were a number of areas in Los Angeles where I saw almost no whites or very few.

It is wrong in an increasingly diverse America to focus solely on the conflicts of blacks and whites when the current and future racial makeup of America is drastically changing. It is also important to note that many cities have large immigrant populations from Africa that have vastly different experiences than traditional African American populations. My local Catholic Church has a large group of Francophone Catholics from countries in Africa like Togo and the Congo. Their experience, history and culture is very different than native born African American blacks. Minneapolis, my hometown, is also home to the largest group of Somali immigrants in the world. There have been many conflicts between Somalis and African Americans here, especially in the schools. Cities with large populations of Ethiopians and West Indians also have experienced conflict between traditional communities of color and new immigrants of color. Racial conflict in America is not just between blacks and whites. It is also found amongst new immigrant groups and old ones often competing for the same jobs, social services and in many urban areas limited public housing.

Where does it all lead?

I have reached a few conclusions. One, don't listen to self righteous Northerners when it comes to race. Instead of complaining about Southern monuments, Northerners should work on racial relations in their own cities. One can start in Detroit, or Chicago or Philadelphia. Or the entire state of New Jersey. They can come to my wonderful liberal hometown of Minneapolis, where the achievement gap between white students and students of color in the local schools is one of the highest in the nation. Race relations is not just a Southern problem. It is a national problem. I would even argue it is more a problem in the North than the South.

Second, there is a real problem of segregation in America, in our neighborhoods and our schools. While de jure (legal) segregation has been long outlawed, de facto (factual or actual) segregation is very strong in our cities and unfortunately in many of our churches. It might be noted also that most of the suburban white neighborhoods I saw were affluent while many of the majority urban black neighborhoods were often poor and downtrodden. I started my journey throughout America as a conservative who believed people's lot in life was determined by personal choices. While somewhat true, I came to see that there really is a historical legacy of slavery which negatively affects African Americans to this day. How we solve that is a topic for another essay, but it is a very real problem.

Third, while acknowledging America's racial problems and the evil legacy of slavery, I do not believe we should tear down Confederate memorials. Erasing monuments from the past does not create a better future. Understanding and learning from those monuments does. The slippery slope of removing monuments erected long ago to please current political correctness is superficial and petty. My late Grandfather was a Marine in World War Two. He fought and killed Japanese in the bloody Pacific

theater. He believed America was on the right side after Pearl Harbor and he believed dropping the atomic bomb might very well have saved his young life. That said, he would never want the Japanese to tear down monuments to their war dead. Those young men were sons and brothers and fathers too. Many Vietnamese and Americans take issue with America's foreign and military policy during the Vietnam era....that doesn't mean we should tear down the Vietnam Memorial Wall! We can be on different sides of a conflict and still respect the other sides' desire and need to mourn and honor their dead.

Finally, I firmly believe racial relations are best improved by increased positive interactions between people from different backgrounds. I remember years ago stopping at a soul food restaurant outside of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I was the only white customer. The lovely female owner told me they never get white customers from the South let alone some foreign land like Minnesota. We had a wonderful conversation and she loaded me up with an extra side of peach cobbler. Positive personal encounters do more to heal racial animus than any government program. Go out and visit a new neighborhood, stop in an ethnic restaurant and make a new friend. That can help heal America's racial wounds more than any political stance. I started my travels as a conservative, now I think of myself as an independent who sees America less through political eyes and more through the lenses of a patriot who wants real progress for all our people not more partisanship.

The great long American highway stretches out over a distant horizon. Like our lives, that mighty road twists and turns. There is excitement and joy. There are potholes and crashes. There is adventure and there is fear. There are national triumphs and personal tragedies marked by mighty stone monuments like Mount Rushmore and the small marker where my mother lies buried in south Minneapolis. Like that winding road, our lives and our nation are headed somewhere. We get there by staying the course. I do not believe we are made better by tearing down our monuments, disregarding our past or rewriting our history. I do not believe we better America by self righteous name calling and degrading different regions of our country. I believe we are made whole by honestly confronting our past and working together to achieve a more perfect union. I believe we are made whole by living and working and building together our cities and our rural communities. And, I believe, each American learns and grows by seeing and learning the history of the amazing and diverse parts of our great land.....so go out and see America!