One cannot travel across Louisiana, or any of the South for that matter, and not run into some reminder of the Confederacy. Maybe it is a county name, a road, a university, or a statue in the city park; ghosts of the Confederacy are ubiquitous. My high school football team played more than its fair share of teams called “the Rebels.” I grew up in the shadows of the memorials to the Confederacy all around me.

The memory and the myth of the Confederacy run deep in the South, far deeper than the foundation of any monument in New Orleans. With the decision to remove the monuments to Liberty Place, Jefferson Davis, P.G.T. Beauregard, and Robert E. Lee from public view, the unquiet ghosts of the Confederacy and the racial divergence in the South’s collective memory have risen again. This current conflict is far larger than a simple clash of historical interpretation. The current monument issue is a clash of civilizations between the old White supremacist America and the emergent intersectional America; and it is happening in one of the cradles of the American concept of race: New Orleans.

White supremacy should not be viewed as a phenomenon but rather as a major political movement. White supremacy as a political ideology has been one of the most powerful forces influencing world affairs and domestic politics for the last three centuries. In America, its presentation is simple: White people rule; minorities are ruled. The Americanized version of White supremacy was not born in the South; but it came of age in the South, and from there it spread across the country as the de facto state of American culture. Removing the Confederate monuments in a southern metropolis such as New Orleans represents an attack on the foundations of the centuries-old dominant American political and policy concern by an emerging America that is pluralistic in ways that the old establishment finds abhorrent.

While the causes of the Civil War are germane to this current debate concerning the appropriateness of Confederate monuments, this ignores the context of the monuments themselves and the circumstances in which they were raised. The Confederacy became a powerful symbol to southern Whites in the resistance against the
Reconstructed governments that governed in the South for 14 years from 1863 to 1877. The White resistance to the Reconstructed governments was based solely on a fear and resentment of Black people having the right to vote and exercising that vote to elect other Black people to the Louisiana Legislature and to Congress. Louisiana and New Orleans specifically were a nightmare to the White South of what would happen if Black people were allowed to participate in all aspects of life.

In her landmark work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt wrote,

“Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it—the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted not to murder, not to rob, not to let their neighbors go off to their doom (for that the Jews were transported to their doom they knew, of course, even though many of them may not have known the gruesome details), and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation.”

Men like Davis, Beauregard, Lee, and all who took up arms for the Confederacy were active participants in the preservation of a crime against humanity...

As it was in 1930’s Germany, brutality was normalized and legal in the antebellum and segregation-era South. To embrace social justice was to embrace a deviant temptation. The people we remember as heroes, such as Harriett Tubman, Fredrick Douglass, and members of the Underground Railroad, were criminals in their own time. For something as massive as slavery and later segregation society to exist for as long as they did, the complicity of a critical mass of White southern society was required. Men like Davis, Beauregard, Lee, and all who took up arms for the Confederacy were active participants in the preservation of a crime against humanity by the standards of the day as evidenced by elimination of slavery in the British empire by 1843 and the sectarian tensions over the issue within the United States itself. But they were all law-abiding men.

The monuments in question are not sanctifiers of the Civil War. They are symbols that commemorate the victory of southern White people over the racially mixed Reconstruction governments and a promise to future generations that the South would fight to keep racially diverse government and society from ever existing again. They did fight against the Civil Rights Movement through the Ku Klux Klan and the state governments. The White South lost the war against the Civil Rights Movement, but not without claiming the lives of thousands of Black people in riots, terrorist attacks, and state sanctioned murders in the name of preserving White supremacy as the de facto state of the government and everyday life in the South. According to the Equal Justice Initiative report *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, between 1877 and 1950, 4,075 people were lynched, including 559 people in Louisiana alone. This is only a fraction of the racial violence perpetuated against Black people in the interests of preserving White supremacy. These monuments enshrine this historical violence and the ongoing violence done in the name of White supremacy that exists even today.

Will this movement to rid ourselves of the spectacles of Confederate flags and monuments solve our problems of racism? No. That is a debate and project for another day. It is clear that 140 years after the end of Reconstruction, the clash of civilizations initiated during that time still lingers in the humid air of the South and the nation as a whole. What is happening in New Orleans is not solely a flash point in the history of the city but an omen of things to come for the United States. We would be wise to pay attention because when the winds of change blow hard enough, even the tallest monuments can fall.

**ENDNOTES**
