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*On the Removal of Four Confederate Monuments in New Orleans*

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Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you all for joining me today.

To my lovely wife, my first lady -- couple of days, we're going to be married 30 years.

To the City Council members; to Sergeant Kimera Woods -- that was a beautiful rendition, didn't you think? Really nice.

Representing the men and women of the New Orleans Police Department, Homeland Security, EMS -- all of the individuals who have done really hard work over the last month under very difficult circumstances, and so Chief Harrison and Tim McConnell, and our entire team at City Hall who are here today; and particularly Glenda and Mary, who are sitting at the front desk of City Hall that has received all the warm blessings. I think they're watching right now but before I came over here I asked Mary how we were doing. She said, "Well chief," she said, "they called you everything but a child of God."



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To Matt Bailey and to U.S. Marine Corps retired Lieutenant Colonel Richard Westmoreland, who have been there every step of the way on behalf of the United States of America. Thank you for being strong.

Pastor Anglim, and to all the ministers who prayed and gave us strength.

To Keith Plessy, from the Plessy family, who brings a history from where it was to where it is today, and along with the Ferguson family who are not here but have demonstrated what reconciliation really looks like.<sup>1</sup>

The descendants of Georgetown slaves.

And to the New Orleans Freedom Riders -- Diane Nash couldn't make it today, but Claude Reese is here, who was -- give him a round of applause.

I thank you all for coming today.

The soul of our beloved city is rooted in a history that has evolved over thousands of years; rooted in a diverse people who have been here together every step of the way through good and through bad.

It is the history, our history, that holds in its heart the stories of Native Americans -- the Choctaw, the Nation, the Chitimacha; Hernando de Soto, Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, the Acadians, the Islenos, the enslaved people of Senegambia, free people of color, the Haitians, the Germans, both empires of France and Spain; the Italian[s], the Irish, the Cubans, the south and central Americans, the Vietnamese, and so many more.

You see, New Orleans is truly a city of many nations, a melting pot, a bubbling cauldron of many cultures. There is no other place quite like it in the world that so eloquently exemplifies the uniquely American motto: E pluribus unum -- Out of many we are one.

But there are also other truths about our city that we must confront. New Orleans was one of America's largest slave markets, a port where hundreds of thousands of souls were bought, sold, and shipped up the Mississippi River to lives of forced labor, of misery, of rape, and of torture.



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America was a place where nearly 4,000 of our fellow American citizens were lynched, 540 in Louisiana alone; where our courts enshrined "separate but equal," where Freedom Riders were beaten to a bloody pulp.

So when people say to me that the monuments in question are history, well what I just described to you is our history as well, and it is a searing truth. And it immediately begs the question, why there are no slave ship monuments, no prominent markers on public land to remember the lynchings or the slave blocks; nothing to remember this long chapter of our lives of the pain, of sacrifice, of shame -- all of it happening on the soil of New Orleans.

So for those self-appointed defenders of history and the monuments, they are eerily silent on what amounts to historical malfeasance, a lie by omission. There is a difference, you see, between remembrance of history and the reverence of it. For America [and] New Orleans, it has been a long and winding road, marked by tragedy and triumph. But we cannot be afraid of the truth. As President George W. Bush said at the -- at the dedication ceremony for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (and I quote): "A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and" it "corrects them."

So today I want to speak about why we chose to remove these four monuments to the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, but also how and why this process can move us towards healing and understanding each other.

So, let's start with the facts.

The historic record is clear: Robert E. Lee, Jeff[erson] Davis, P.G.T. Beauregard statu[es] were not erected to just honor these men, but as part of the movement which became known as The Cult of the Lost Cause. This "cult" had one goal and one goal only: through monuments and through other means to rewrite history, to hide the truth, which is that the Confederacy was on the wrong side of humanity. First erected 166 years after the founding of our city, 19 years after the Civil War, these monuments that we took down were meant to rebrand the history of our city and the ideals of the Confederacy.

It is self-evident that these men did not fight for the United States of America; they fought against it. They may have been warriors, but in this cause they were not patriots.



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These statu[es] are not just stone and metal. They're not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy: ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, ignoring the terror that it actually stood for. And after the Civil War, these monuments were part of that terrorism as much as burning cross on someone's lawn. They were erected purposefully to send a strong message to all who walked in their shadows about who was still in charge in this city.

Now, should you have any doubt about the true goals of the Confederacy, in the very weeks before the war broke out, the Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, made it very clear that the Confederate cause was about maintaining slavery and white supremacy.

In his now famous "Cornerstone speech," he said that the Confederacy's:

*corner-stone rests, upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery -- subordination to a superior race -- is his natural and his normal condition. This, our new government --*

he said,

*-- is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.*

Now, with these shocking words still ringing in your ears, I want to try to gently peel your hands from the grip on this false narrative of our history that I think weakens us and make straight a wrong turn that we made many years ago, so we can more closely connect with the integrity to the founding principles of our nation and forge a clearer, straighter path towards a better city and towards a more perfect union.

Now, last year President Barack Obama echoed these sentiments about the need to contextualize and to remember all of our history. He recalled a single piece of stone, a slave auction block engraved with a marker commemorating a single moment in 1830 when Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay stood and spoke from it.



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President Obama said,

*Consider what this artifact tells us about history....On a stone where day after day, for years, men and women... bound and bought and sold, and bid like cattle; on a stone worn down by the tragedy of over a thousand bare feet.*

And,

*For a long time the only thing we considered important, the singular thing we chose to commemorate as "history" with a plaque were the unmemorable speeches of two powerful men.*

A piece of stone -- one stone. Both stories, history. One story told, one story forgotten -- or maybe even purposefully ignored.

Now, as clear as it is for me today, for a long time, even though I grew up in one of New Orleans' most diverse neighborhoods, even with my family's proud history of fighting for civil rights, I must have passed by these monuments thousands of times without giving them a second thought.

So I'm not judging anybody. I am not judging people. We all take our own journey on race. I just hope people listen like I did when my dear friend Wynton Marsalis helped me see the truth. He asked me to think about all the people who have left New Orleans because of our exclusionary attitudes.

Another friend asked me to consider these four monuments from the perspective of an African American mother or father trying to explain to their fifth grade daughter why Robert E. Lee sat atop of our city. Can you do it? Can you do it? Can you look into the eyes of this young girl and convince her that Robert E. Lee is there to encourage her? Do you think she feels inspired and hopeful by that story? Do these monuments help her see her future with limitless potential? Have you ever thought, have you every thought that if her potential is limited, yours and my potential [is limited] as well?



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We all know the answers to these very simple questions.

When you look into this child's eyes is the moment when the searing truth comes into focus. This is the moment when we know what we must do, when we know what is right. We can not walk away from this truth.

Now, I knew that taking down the monuments was going to be tough, but you elected me to do the right thing, not the easy thing, and this is what that looks like. So relocating these monuments is not about taking something away from someone else. This is not about politics. It's not about blame. It's not about retaliation. This is not about a naïve quest to solve all of our problems at once.

This is, however, about showing the whole world that we as a city, that we as a people are able to acknowledge, to understand, to reconcile, and more importantly, choose a better future for ourselves, making straight what has been crooked and making right what was wrong. Otherwise, we will continue to pay a price with discord, with division, and yeah, violence.

To literally put the Confederacy on a pedestal in our mo[st] prominent places [of] honor is an inaccurate recitation of our full past. It is an affront to our present. And it is a bad prescription for our future.

History cannot be changed. It cannot be moved like a statue. What is done is done. The Civil War is over. The Confederacy lost -- and we're better for it. Surely we are far enough removed from this dark time to acknowledge that the cause of the Confederacy was wrong. And in the second decade of the 21st century, asking African Americans -- or anyone else for that matter -- to drive by property that they own; occupied by reverential statu[es] of men who fought to destroy the country and deny that person's humanity seems perverse. It seems absurd. Century-old wounds are still raw because, you see, they never healed right in the first place.

So here is the essential truth: We are better together than we are apart. Indivisibility is our essence. Isn't this the gift that we, the people of New Orleans, have given to the world?



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We radiate beauty and grace -- in our food, in our music, in our architecture, in our joy of life, in our celebration of death; in everything that we do. We gave the world this funky thing called jazz. It is the most uniquely American art form that is developed across the ages and from different cultures. Think about second lines; think about Mardi Gras; think about muffaletta; think about the Saints; think about gumbo; think about red beans and rice. By God, just think: All we hold dear is created by throwing everything in the pot -- creating, producing something better; everything, everything a product of our historic diversity.

We are proof that out of many we are one -- and better for it. Out of many we are one -- and we really do love it.

And yet, and yet we still seem to find so many excuses to not do the right thing. President Bush's words once again: "A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and corrects them." We forget, we deny how much we really depend on each other, how much we really need each other. We justify our silence and inaction by manufacturing noble causes that marinate in historic denial. We still find a way to say "wait, wait, wait, not so fast." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "wait has almost always meant never."<sup>2</sup>

We can not wait any longer. We need to change. And we need to change now. No more waiting. This is not just about statu[es], this is about attitudes; and it's about behaviors as well. If we take down these statu[es] and don't change to become a more open and inclusive society, then all of this would have all been in vain.

While some have driven by these statu[es] every day and either revered their beauty or failed to see them at all, many of our neighbors and our fellow Americans see them very, very clearly. Many are painfully aware of their long shadows, their presence cast not only literally but figuratively. And they clearly receive the message that the Confederacy and the cult of the Lost Cause intended to deliver.

Earlier this week, as the cult of the Lost Cause statu[e] P.G.T Beauregard came down, world renowned musician Terence Blanchard, who's with us, stood watch with his wife Robin and their two beautiful daughters at their side. You see, Terence went to school on the edge of City Park, at a school named after one of America's great heroes and patriots, John F. Kennedy. But to get there he had to pass by the monument to a man who fought to deny his humanity.



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And he said (quote):

*I've never looked at them as a source of pride. It always made me feel as if they were put there by people who don't respect us. This is something I never thought I'd see in my lifetime. It's a sign that the world is changing.*

Yes, Terence, it is, and it is long overdue. Now is the time to send a new message to the next generation of New Orleanians, a message about the future, about the next 300 years and beyond: Let us not miss this opportunity New Orleans and let us help the rest of the America do the same, because now -- see, now -- is the time for choosing. Now is the time to actually make this city the city we should have always been had we gotten it right the first time.

But, this is a good place to stop for a moment and ask ourselves at this point in our history -- after Katrina, after Rita, after Ike, after Gustav, after the national recession, after the BP oil spill catastrophe, after the tornado -- if presented with an opportunity to build monuments that told our story or curate these particular spaces ... would these be the monuments that we want the world to see? Is this really our story?

You see, we have not erased history. We're becoming part of the city's history by righting the wrong image these monuments represent and crafting a better, more complete future for all of our children, and for future generations. And unlike when these Confederate monuments were erected as symbols of white supremacy, we now have a chance to create not only new symbols, but to do it together, as one people. In our blessed land, we come to the table of democracy as equals.

We have to reaffirm our commitment to a future where each citizen is guaranteed the uniquely American gifts of "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of happiness."<sup>3</sup> That is what really makes America great and today it's more important than ever to hold fast to these values and together say a self-evident truth that out of many we are one. That is why we reclaim these spaces for the United States of America, because we are one nation, not two; indivisible with liberty and justice for all, not some. We all are part of one nation and pledge allegiance to one flag, the flag of the United States of America.





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And here -- And here's the kicker: New Orleanians are in it all of the way. It is in this union, it is in this truth that real patriotism is rooted and it flourishes. Instead of revering a four-year brief historical aberration that was called the Confederacy, we can celebrate all 300 years of our rich, diverse history as a place named New Orleans and set the tone for the next 300 years.

After decades of public debate, of anger, of anxiety, of anticipation, of humiliation and of frustration; after public hearings and approvals from three separate community boards and commissions; after two robust public hearings and a 6-1 vote by our duly-elected City Council; after review by 13 different federal and state judges: The full weight of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government has been brought to bear and that is why these monuments are coming down in accordance with the law and will be removed.

So, now is the time to come together to heal and to focus on our larger task -- not only building new symbols, but making this city a beautiful manifestation of what is possible and what we as a people can become. And so, let us remember the once-exiled, imprisoned, and universally loved now Nelson Mandela and what he said after apartheid:

*If the pain has often been unbearable and the revelations shocking to all of us, it is because they indeed bring us the beginnings of a common understanding of what happened and a steady restoration of th[e] nation's humanity.*

So before we part let us again state clearly for all to hear: The Confederacy was on the wrong side of history and humanity. It sought to tear apart our nation and subjugate our fellow Americans to slavery. This is a history we should never forget and one that we should never, ever again put on a pedestal to be revered.

As a community, we must recognize the significance of removing New Orleans' Confederate monuments. It is our acknowledgment that now is a time to take stock of, and then move past, a painful part of our history. Anything less would render generations of courageous struggle and soul-searching a truly lost cause. Anything less would fall short of the immortal words of our greatest President, Abraham Lincoln, who, with an open heart and a clarity of purpose, calls on us today across the ages to unite as one people when he said:



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*With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in [the] right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds...to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.<sup>4</sup>*

God bless you all.

God bless New Orleans.

And God bless the United States of America.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Plessy v Ferguson for some legal/political/cultural context

<sup>2</sup> King, M.L. (1963). Letter From a Birmingham Jail.

<sup>3</sup> Quotation from the United States Declaration of Independence

<sup>4</sup> Very close approximation of official quotation