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## An unpardonable insult in Richmond

BY JEFFREY BOUTWELL

In the coming weeks, the Virginia Supreme Court will make known its decision regarding the fate of the most prominent Confederate memorial still standing in the nation: the 60-foot-tall equestrian statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee overlooking Monument Avenue in Richmond, former capital of the Confederacy.

Unveiled in 1890, the Lee statue has stood supreme among the hundreds of memorials and monuments throughout the South honoring the Confederacy and its rebellion against the Union. By 1920, it had been joined on Monument Avenue by memorials to Confederate Gens. Stonewall Jackson and J.E.B. Stuart and President Jefferson Davis, making the street a pantheon to Confederate war heroes.

The dedication of the Lee statue occurred, ironically, on May 29, just days before Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day to honor the hundreds of thousands of Union troops who died in the Civil War. In a ceremony described by one Virginia newspaper as “the greatest day” in Richmond history, more than 150,000 people celebrated with parades, cannons, fireworks and the singing of “Dixie” and “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia.”

Up north, the Boston Daily Globe provided extensive coverage of the event under the headline, “Immortal Lee.” In an accompanying editorial, the paper echoed the dominant theme of North-South reconciliation then common in the country, noting how “the gaping wounds of civil strife have now healed ... [and] the past has lost its power to sting and wound.”

This would have been news to the nearly 4 million Blacks then living in the South and subject to increasingly harsh Jim Crow laws, lynchings and white supremacist violence. For them, “the gaping wounds” of slavery and the Civil War had not healed and the past had not “lost its power to sting and wound.”



JULIA RENDLEMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The Robert E. Lee Monument on Jan. 20 in Richmond.

The Boston Daily Traveler saw things quite differently. In an editorial entitled “An Unpardonable Insult,” the paper criticized the ceremony in Richmond for seeking to elevate Lee to “the same pedestal of honor and greatness” as George Washington. In blunt language, the paper contrasted the actions of these two native sons of Virginia, declaring that Washington would never “have engaged in a war for the destruction of the American Union in obedience to the action of Virginia,” as Lee did.

The Daily Traveler also noted an incident that was a premonition of things to come. At the ceremony, someone in the crowd placed a Confederate flag in the hands of a nearby statue of George Washington and “there it remained during the day” — similar to the “unpardonable insult” of a Confederate flag being carried into the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol building on Jan. 6 by supporters of President Donald Trump seeking to violently prevent Congress from certifying the results of the 2020 election.

I discovered an original of the 131-year-old Daily Traveler editorial among the papers of George S. Boutwell, a Massachusetts congressman who helped enact the 14th and 15th amendments in the 1860s guaranteeing political and civil equality to Blacks. After serving as treasury secretary for President Ulysses S. Grant, Boutwell was elected to the Senate, where he led an investigation of white supremacist violence in Mississippi. It’s little wonder that Boutwell would greatly sympathize with the sentiments of the Daily Traveler editorial.

By the time of the Lee statue dedication in 1890, it was apparent to Boutwell and the Daily Traveler that the proliferation of Confederate memorials was but a symbol of the victory of the Lost Cause campaign of the South in rehabilitating notions of white supremacy. The next several decades saw the spread of Jim Crow laws and the institutional racism, South and North, that has crippled our society well into the 21st century. Only now, sparked by the George

Floyd murder and Black Lives Matter protests, is the United States beginning to seriously reckon with that legacy.

To give Richmond due credit, its city council made the decision in 2020 to remove and relocate all those Confederate memorials on Monument Avenue that were on city property. As the Lee statue is on property deeded by private citizens to the Commonwealth of Virginia, it is up to the state Supreme Court to decide its ultimate fate.

Whatever that decision may be, our national debate over the potency of white supremacist symbols will continue. Though it is certainly appropriate that Americans remember and respect all who fought and died in our great and terrible Civil War, had Lee and his Confederate flag been victorious, the United States today would be a very different place — if it existed at all.

The writer, a former resident of Spotsylvania County, Va., is a distant cousin of George S. Boutwell.