

# ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ПРАКТИКИ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ ПРОШЛОГО

УДК 316.653 + 374.7 + 316.346.36:159.953

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## **Evaluating the Legitimacy of the American Foundation Myth**

This article aims to discuss the reasons and consequences of the recent historical monuments' destruction in the United States. The author uses the concept of Foundation myths as well as opinion polls' results and cases from modern history to provide argumentation for the idea of ongoing polarization in American society. The results show that, although the political elites are relatively united on the issue of historical memory, there is a certain division among ordinary citizens. The causes for the recent attacks on the monuments and the historical figures they represent lies in the crisis, caused by the COVID-pandemic, economic downturn and protests over racism. However, the fundamental reason lies in the chronic socio-economic, cultural, and political difficulties, particularly income inequality, political polarization of elites and mass publics of American society. In the conclusion of the article, the author discusses how the discourse over historical figures and foundation myths shaped 2020 Presidential elections in the US and how specific agenda related to Founding Fathers was used by the US President Donald Trump during his campaign.

**Key words:** foundation myth, memory, legitimacy, monument, society, commemoration

**For citation:** Sherlock, T. (2020). Evaluating the Legitimacy of the American Foundation Myth. *Tempus et Memoria*, 1, 1–2, 76–81.

*Submitted: 30.10.2020*

*Accepted: 02.12.2020*

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## Оценка легитимности американского «мифа основания»

Цель этой статьи — обсудить причины и последствия недавнего разрушения исторических памятников в США. Автор использует концепцию «мифа основания», а также результаты опросов общественного мнения и случаи из современной истории для аргументации идеи продолжающейся поляризации в американском обществе. Результаты показывают, что хотя политические элиты относительно едины в вопросе исторической памяти, есть определенное разделение среди простых граждан. Причины недавних нападений на памятники кроются в кризисе, вызванном пандемией, экономическим спадом и протестами против расизма. Однако основная причина — в хронических социально-экономических, культурных и политических трудностях, в частности, в неравенстве доходов, политической поляризации элит и массовизации американского общества. В заключение автор рассказывает о том, как дискурс об исторических личностях и мифах основания повлиял на президентские выборы 2020 г. в США и как конкретная повестка дня, связанная с отцами-основателями, использовалась президентом США Дональдом Трампом во время его предвыборной кампании.

**Ключевые слова:** миф основания, память, легитимность, памятник, общество, коммеморация

**Для цитирования:** Шерлок Т. Оценка легитимности американского «мифа основания» // Tempus et Memoria. 2020. Т. 1. № 1–2. С. 76–81.

Поступила в редакцию: 30.10.2020

Принята к печати: 02.12.2020

How can we make sense of the recent destruction of historical monuments in the United States which commemorate individuals as different as Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson? How widespread is this phenomenon? Does it herald a “critical juncture” in US politics that will generate fundamental disputes over the legitimacy of the American Republic?

The causes for the current attacks on core American symbols and myths are diverse but often mutually reinforcing. The COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent severe economic downturn, and protests over racism sparked by the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman have intensified chronic socio-economic, cultural, and political difficulties, particularly income inequality, political polarization of elites and mass publics, and ideological battles over how to define American identity. This perfect political storm has led to the destruction or removal of statues and monuments associated with contested views of the American past.

This political behavior has emerged from above and below in the American polity. While some

statues have been toppled due to spontaneous or planned action by societal groups, others have been removed in an orderly fashion by incumbent political and cultural elites. How and whether such action occurs often depends on the local political landscape.

For example, in the wake of the death of George Floyd (May 25, 2020) and nationwide demonstrations held on June 19 or “Juneteenth” (marking the date the last slaves were freed at the end of the Civil War), the American Museum of Natural History in New York City announced it would remove a well-known equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt that had stood at the museum’s entrance since 1940. The sculpture, with a commanding image of Roosevelt flanked by likenesses of a Native American and an African American on foot, had been criticized by activists for years as a bigoted representation. The head of the museum now assessed the work as racist in its “hierarchical composition.” The mayor of New York supported the decision to remove the statue.

By contrast, a bust of Ulysses S. Grant and other statues located in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park were toppled by indignant multi-racial

crowds on “Juneteenth” 2020. Although Americans widely respect Grant for his pivotal role in defeating the Confederate rebellion, he is also criticized by some for briefly owning a slave and for decisions when he was president that led to the gross abuse of the Native American Lakota tribe. President Trump used the controversies over American history in the final months of the 2020 election campaign to accuse the Democratic Party of promoting or shielding such behavior. In his Executive Order issued on June 26, 2020, Trump singled out for condemnation the destruction of the statue of Grant.

Although little violence had occurred during the protests against monuments deemed supportive of racism and bigotry, Trump characterized the protestors as violent extremists motivated by radical ideologies “that call for the destruction of the United States system of government” [5]. According to Trump, “their selection of targets reveals a deep ignorance of our history, and is indicative of a desire to indiscriminately destroy anything that honors our past and to erase from the public mind any suggestion that our past may be worth honoring, cherishing, remembering, or understanding”. Speaking the following month at July 4 celebrations held at Mount Rushmore, Trump praised Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt, telling the audience that “No movement that seeks to dismantle these treasured American legacies can possibly have a love of America at its heart... No person who remains quiet at the destruction of this resplendent heritage can possibly lead us to a better future” [12]. Trump understood that his manipulation and exploitation of existing historical controversies would appeal to patriotic sentiment and generate political support, particularly during the highly partisan presidential race of 2020. For many Americans, the largely peaceful but confrontational protests against racism in Seattle during this period lent credibility to Trump’s narrative.

Although the treatment of the sculptures of Grant and Roosevelt reflect different modes of historical contestation, these and similar acts are part of a broader debate on the political and ideological legacies of America’s leading historical figures, with an increasing focus on the Founding Fathers. Long-standing among academics and activists, this dispute over the legitimacy of the American Pantheon commanded little national attention until recently. It gradually extended into national politics due in large part to growing public criticism

of statues and flags associated with the American Confederacy. Over the past decade, Americans have increasingly evaluated these objects as symbols of slavery and contemporary white supremacy, not simply as politically neutral artifacts of regional history and culture.

Activist groups, such as Black Lives Matter, as well as establishment politicians at the local level, have mobilized public opinion against Confederate monuments. After the Democratic Party won control of the state legislature in Virginia in 2019 elections, statues and busts of Confederate leaders in legislative buildings in Richmond, the capital, were ordered removed by the new Party leadership. The legislature also empowered local authorities (and their constituencies) to determine the status of other Confederate monuments, enabling the mayor of Richmond to begin the removal of controversial Confederate statues along its Monument Avenue.

As the debate over the symbols of the Confederacy grew to national proportions, it broadened to include criticism of revolutionary Founders, particularly those who were slave-owners. This process intensified with the killing of George Floyd which intersected with the unsettling factors noted above, including long-term political polarization and the social and economic distress of the COVID-19 pandemic which disproportionately affected some minorities, including Black Americans. With increased frequency in 2020, Donald Trump attempted to exploit this political tumult by serving as the defender of a heroic image of the American Founding that was highly traditional and one-dimensional.

How does the American public evaluate the current controversy over monuments to the Confederacy and the revolutionary Founders? Public opinion surveys offer useful data in support of preliminary assessments. Popular approval among white Americans of the Black Lives Matter movement has increased in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. Yet American society is far from united on whether to take down Confederate monuments even though advocates for their removal condemn them as powerful symbols of racism and reminders of slavery.

In a June 2020 Quinnipiac University survey [1], 52 % of respondents (who were registered voters) supported the removal of Confederate statues from public spaces, marking a 13-point

increase from an August 2017 poll. But 44 % of respondents overall opposed taking any action. The controversy over Confederate “places of memory” has also exposed important political and racial fault lines: 80 % of Republican respondents opposed the removal of Confederate statues while 85 % of Democrats supported the measure (as reflected in the decisions of Virginia’s legislature). At the same time, 84 % of African-Americans were in favor of removal while 44 % of white Americans were not<sup>1</sup>.

Public opinion is also divided, but not as deeply, over the race-based activism of the Black Lives Matter movement. While 68 % of respondents thought that discrimination against Blacks was a serious problem and 67 % supported the mass demonstrations sparked by the death of George Floyd, only 51 % overall had a favorable view of the BLM movement as opposed to 83 % of Black Americans. In terms of political affiliation, only 19 % of Republicans supported BLM while 89 % of Democrats expressed their approval. However, for every demographic category (gender, race, age, region, urban-rural) with the exception of “political affiliation/Republican,” a majority or at least plurality of respondents had a favorable view of BLM, from 71 % of the 18–34 age group to 42 % of rural inhabitants (40 % had an unfavorable view).

How vulnerable are the core myths of the United States amid these history-based quarrels?

Foundation myths are vital resources, providing a sense of common purpose and meaning to a polity. Theorists maintain that the legitimacy of a government or a state may decay or be swept away, and its stability endangered, if basic myths and beliefs are rejected by a sufficient number of elites and mass publics. The collapse of the Soviet Union was an example of this phenomenon<sup>2</sup>.

In a survey conducted in June 2020, Black Americans expressed the strongest negative opinions of the American Founders. For example, 39 % of Black respondents favored the removal of statues honoring George Washington while

19 % of white respondents shared this opinion. Significant divisions by race also exist in the Democratic Party on the legitimacy of the Founders. Thomas Jefferson, like Washington, was a slave-owner. 62 % of white Democrats favor preserving memorials to Jefferson while only 33 % of Black Democrats endorse this position [8]. Republicans exhibit the strongest support for the American Pantheon. 80 % of Republicans as a whole oppose the removal of statues honoring Jefferson, while 52 % of all Democrats share this perspective.

Those respondents who self-identify as “very liberal” supported the preservation of statues to Jefferson by a margin of 47 % to 36 %. For moderate liberals, the margin was 58 % to 30 %. Although the Democratic Party includes radical and moderate liberals (among both Blacks and whites), who favor the removal of statues to Founders who were slave owners, its leadership, including Joe Biden, the president-elect and Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, opposes such measures. Pelosi is a vocal advocate of removing statutes and memorials to Confederates on grounds of treason against the United States.

In another poll administered in July 2020, respondents were asked whether “monuments and statues of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson should be taken down or stay up” [2]. 46 % of Black respondents favored their removal (37 % were for their preservation). Clear majorities in all other demographic categories supported the status quo, including 83 % of white Americans; 59 % of liberals; 73 % of moderates; and 86 % of conservatives. 57 % of registered Democrats were in favor of preservation as well as 90 % of Republicans.

Significantly, a strong plurality of Hispanic Americans, a rapidly growing demographic category that often endures economic struggles and social discrimination, supported the traditional Pantheon: 44 % answered “heroes,” 26 % responded “villains,” and 21 % “It depends.” Among age groups, young Americans (under age 30) were the most critical of the Founders: 31 % saw them as “villains” while 39 % viewed the Founders as “heroes” (20 % selected “It depends”). Only 10 % of respondents over 45 years of age viewed Washington, Jefferson, and other founders as “villains”.

Any assessment of the legitimacy of the American foundation myth should emphasize that political elites are relatively united on the issue:

<sup>1</sup> For an insightful assessment of mounting political and socio-cultural divisions in the United States, see [11, 15].

<sup>2</sup> For classic scholarship on the political importance of foundation myths [9; 3, 372; 13, ch. 1].

the current leadership of the Democratic Party, and virtually all Republican Party leaders, do not back fundamental criticism of the Founders. As for American society, the survey data suggest that a solid majority of Americans overall remain committed to a positive image of the Founding Fathers. Despite the deep, often long-term, problems that now confront America, a robust majority of respondents in most demographic categories continue to find normative value in monuments and statues symbolizing the country's foundation myth.

Yet it is clear that positive representations of the American Founding do not enjoy unchallenged status, particularly among minorities of color. In a poll that asked separate questions about how respondents felt about Washington and Jefferson, Black Americans, who are most critical of the foundation myth, oppose the removal of statues honoring George Washington by only a narrow margin: 43 % in opposition and 39 % in favor (18 % "undecided") [8, 4]. Further, Black Democrats by a 43-to-33 % margin favored taking down statues to Thomas Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration of Independence. By contrast, white Democrats favored keeping them undisturbed by a 62-to-25 % margin [8].

Approaching the issue from a broader perspective, another survey asked whether "the founders of our country are better described as villains or heroes." 39 % of Black respondents selected "villains" and 31 % chose "heroes" (16 % selected "It depends"). Clear majorities or pluralities, but of varied strengths, chose "heroes" in all other demographic categories: 71 % of white Americans; 50 % of Democrats (23 % "villains," 18 % "It depends"); 79 % of Republicans; and 56 % of Independents (15 % "villains," 21 % "It depends"). By more than a 2-to-1 margin, respondents who self-identified as "liberal" chose "heroes" (50 % to 23 %; 19 % "It depends") [2, *questions 49, 51*].

At the same time, support for the foundation myth is visibly thin for some demographic groups apart from Black Americans. The generational divide is particularly noteworthy. In the same survey, only 39 % of younger Americans (under

30 years) saw the Founders as "heroes" while 31 % viewed them as "villains". Fully 30 % of responses were distributed across "It Depends" (20 %) and "Don't know" (10 %). This data helps explain the substantial presence of younger whites in demonstrations against racism after the death of George Floyd<sup>3</sup>. By contrast, 77 % of respondents over 65 years considered the Founders to be "heroes"; only 6 % saw them as "villains".

Also significant is the fact that only 39 % of non-whites (a group that combines Blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities) saw the Founders as "heroes," while 31 % found them to be "villains" (the same percentages as for respondents under 30). That only nine percentage points separates these very different evaluations within a group that comprises approximately 30 % of the U.S. population should be another source of concern for political elites, particularly given the importance of foundation myths for the maintenance of national political identity and stability<sup>4</sup>. A closely related problem is that almost 20 % of respondents in this group chose the response "It depends" as to whether the Founders were "heroes" or "villains." This suggests that their evaluation of the American foundation myth depends in large part on whether they believe their life chances in America reflect the promise of equality and prosperity inherent in the myth. Yet the life chances of this group ("non-whites") are often disproportionately affected — and the group increasingly disaffected — by the significant political and socio-economic problems that America will face for the foreseeable future.

This article does not reflect the views of the United States Government or the United States Military Academy.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars have recently focused on the political culture of youths in Western democracies to help explain the threat of "deconsolidation" of established democratic regimes. These assessments of the find youth attracted either to right-wing authoritarian populism or to radical liberalism [6, 10, 14].

<sup>4</sup> For a controversial examination of the failure of American elites to mediate successfully a founding myth or story [7].

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