

Richmond mayor vows to confront tributes to Southern Civil War figures

By [Laura Vozzella](#) June 22, 2017

RICHMOND — The young African American mayor of the onetime capital of the Confederacy vowed Thursday to confront his city's towering tributes to Southern Civil War figures with words instead of wrecking balls. Mayor Levar Stoney said he would not seek to remove the monuments lining the city's most famous boulevard. Instead, he announced the formation of a commission to find other ways — new signage and perhaps additional monuments — to correct the "false narrative" conveyed by the statues that give Monument Avenue its name.

"Equal parts myth and deception, they were the 'alternative facts' of their time — a false narrative etched in stone and bronze more than 100 years ago — not only to lionize the architects and defenders of slavery, but to perpetuate the tyranny and terror of Jim Crow and reassert a new era of white supremacy," Stoney said in a news conference at City Hall.

Stoney's approach could set Richmond apart from other Southern cities grappling with their treatment of Confederate symbols, a long-nagging issue that took on greater import after a white supremacist who had posed with the Confederate flag gunned down nine black churchgoers in Charleston, S.C., in June 2015.

In St. Louis, the city's decision to remove a Confederate monument prompted scuffles last month between supporters and opponents of the plan. A judge approved a restraining order to block the city from removing the statue after questions were raised about its ownership.

In New Orleans last month, city workers excavated four statues, including those memorializing Robert E. Lee, P.G.T. Beauregard and Jefferson Davis, but did so in the dead of night to try to minimize violent clashes between supporters and opponents. And in Charlottesville, torch-bearing protesters — in an echo of the Ku Klux Klan — marched through downtown last month to angrily denounce plans to remove a statue of Lee from a city park. The Klan itself plans to hold a rally at the statue in July. [this is the town where a protestor was later run over and killed by a white supremacist].

Stoney's more moderate course might help Richmond escape similar strife while still addressing complaints that the five memorials are, as critic Phil Wilayto has put it, "a virtual shrine to the slavery-defending Confederacy."

But Wilayto, who unsuccessfully pressed the city to change the route of an international bike race in 2015 so racers would not pedal past the monuments, was hugely disappointed.

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Comment [1]: How do people's different perspectives on an issue affect a community?

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Comment [2]: What impact do historical monuments have on people? Have on people's perceptions of the past?

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Comment [3]: How do people use knowledge to negatively affect others?

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Comment [4]: KQ: How does learning about an event through a primary source affect you differently than learning about it through a secondary source?

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Comment [5]: People have very strong emotional reactions about these monuments. Much of the conversation is guided by emotion rather than reason. Also can apply to intuition.

KQ: How do people's emotions affect their decisions?

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Comment [6]: Sense perception, intuition, emotion. Seeing something gives people a stronger reaction because it gives you a personal connection to an event rather than reading about it. Not showing it shows more respect.

KQ: To what extent is experiencing an event with your senses different from reading about it?

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Comment [7]: Language. How you describe these monuments has an effect on what you think about.

“He’s taking an approach that is unlike any other city that we’re aware of in the South. It is dodging the issue completely,” said Wilayto, an organizer with the Defenders for Freedom, Justice and Equality. “You can’t hang a sign on a statue of Adolf Hitler and say, ‘Oh, by the way, he was really a bad guy.’ You can’t do that. It tells you what you think of the man that you have a statue.”

Frank Earnest, heritage defense coordinator for the Virginia division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, said his group would likely challenge any new signage, which he said would amount to “defacing” the monuments.

“What the mayor is proposing is opinion. Can I put a sign right next to his that says, ‘His sign is wrong?’” said Earnest, who lives in Virginia Beach. “It’s like you’re looking at a work of art — which, indeed, they are. But they speak for themselves.” The issue proved surprisingly potent in the June 13 GOP primary for Virginia governor when Corey Stewart, who had made the state’s preservation of Confederate monuments the rallying cry for his bid, narrowly lost to Ed Gillespie, a far-better-funded rival.

Wilayto acknowledges that Stoney would face “a hornet’s nest” if he had tried to remove the monuments, which are city property except for the Lee statue, which belongs to the state. Virginia law prohibits the removal of monuments to war veterans, although a Danville Circuit Court judge ruled in 2015 that the statute does not apply to monuments built before 1997.

Removing the statues from Monument Avenue would be logistically challenging. The entire 14-block district has been designated a national historic landmark, and the monuments enjoy a prominent place in the city’s landscape.

These memorials are not tucked inside a public park; they stand, block after block, as architectural anchors for Richmond’s most stately stretch of tree-lined real estate. The avenue was the city’s historic parade route. It is a place where runners — Stoney among them — compete in the annual Monument 10K. And the boulevard still plays host to an old-fashioned Easter parade.

The five monuments, many of them planted in traffic circles, rose up between 1890 and 1929. A sixth monument added to the avenue in 1996 stands as a rebuke. It honors Arthur Ashe, the Richmond native and African American tennis star. The addition sparked an uproar. They will study the issue, hold public meetings and make recommendations to Stoney by November.

“One of the things that separates Richmond from a lot of the country is it has been actively changing the monument landscape here, and I think that helps ease it a little bit,” Coleman said. “There is no doubt that there are individuals who would love to blow them up right now. But as a historian, I think there’s an opportunity to talk about them more deeply.”