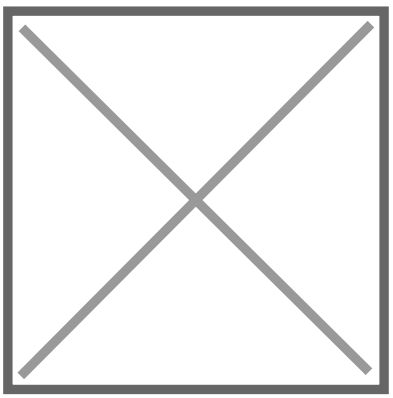

Making Sense of Santa Feâ??s Soldiersâ?? Monument: Part Six

Description

Part Six: What next for the Obelisk?

What then should be done with remains of Santa Feâ??s half-destroyed obelisk, hidden behind a plywood box in the center of the plaza? Should it be restored, or should it be removed altogether, once and for all?

Answering this question should not depend on what any individual, or even a majority of individuals thinks, feels, or wants. The answer should instead be based on objective standards that all can agree on. The most important such standards that apply here are set forth in Santa Feâ??s Municipal Charter, which recognizes that Santa Fe is â??a capital city of four centuries, [and] a community with rich and lasting multi-cultural traditions and a history of tolerance towards all peoples, cultures, traditions, and lifestylesâ?•; that no city action can be condoned â??which discriminates on the basis of ethnicity, race, age, religion, creed, color, national origin, [or] ancestryâ?•; and that the governing body has a duty to â??preserve, protect and promote human rights and human dignity.â?• Together, these provisions require the city to protect Santa Feâ??s historical heritage while also ensuring that every resident and every visitor is treated equally and that prejudice, discrimination and bigotry are not tolerated. Everyone can agree on the application of these standards to resolve this dispute because they are neutral on their face and give equal consideration to everyoneâ??s interests in being treated fairly.

Applying these standards to the Soldiersâ?? Monument, the first factor to be considered is the monumentâ??s historical status. The Soldiersâ?? Monument has occupied a prominent place on the Santa Fe Plaza for over 150 years. It marks the very center of the city of Santa Fe as granted by the United States Congress in 1900. It features in innumerable photographs, paintings, events, songs, and commemorations spanning Santa Feâ??s history from the territorial period through the present. It is the centerpiece of the plaza that was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1960. This factor thus weighs in favor of restoration.

Also relevant here is the historical reality that the monument was originally conceived to honor those who died fighting for the Union in the Civil War. Unlike the Confederate monuments that were toppled in 2020, the Soldiersâ?? Monument is not a memorial to the Confederacy but in fact the opposite: the original intention was to honor the soldiers and volunteers who died *fighting* the Confederacy. It honors (in part) those who were on the right side of our history, a number of whom were native New Mexicans. Honoring this legacy is especially important in these times when the spirit of the Confederacy has become a significant threat to our continuation as a democracy.

On the other hand, for the entire time the obelisk has stood on the Plaza, it has also displayed a message that valorizes as heroes those who waged a violent war to conquer New Mexicoâ??s native inhabitants. That â??savageâ?• may have been at one time a term of art to refer to Navajos, Apaches, Comanches and Utes, and not Pueblos, in no way softens this objectively racist language. Moreover, few if any would understand the word â??savageâ?• to be so limited. When John Gaw Meem said that the monument â??is a reminder of our history, just as the Indians have reminders of theirs,â?•[1] he inadvertently expressed the unavoidable truth that the monument conveys the message that â??Indiansâ?• are not true members of â??ourâ?• community. This message of exclusion is contrary to Santa Feâ??s commitment to ensuring a community that is inclusive, safe, and welcoming to all its residents and visitors. It is indisputable that it would be a violation of our most fundamental values and democratic principles to erect such a message in the very heart of the city â?? literally the public square â?? if a monument with this message were to be proposed today. This factor, then, weighs strongly against restoration.

Of course, there is always the option of restoring the obelisk with an explanation of the offending text, or even complete removal of the offensive tablet. However, simply adding explanatory language in an attempt to place this racist language in historical perspective fails to neutralize the harm, as made clear by the previous ill-fated attempt made in 1974. Removal of the offending tablet is somewhat more defensible, as what would be left would be something close to the original intent of the monument: a memorial to the Union soldiers who died fighting the

Confederate army in the territory of New Mexico. As reviewed in Part Three, however, that original purpose was superseded even before the monument was completed. As a historical artifact, the obelisk has always stood as a memorial to those soldiers who died in the Indian wars just as much as in the Civil War; moreover, as we have seen, the soldiers of the Union Army, the Colorado volunteers and the New Mexico volunteers were simultaneously engaged in all sides of this â??three-corneredâ?• war. Indeed, the four Civil War engagements between February and April of 1862 were no more than a brief interlude in a decades-long war against Native Americans fought by the very same soldiers. It is therefore impossible to disentangle the memorialization of those U.S. Army soldiers and volunteers who died fighting the Confederates, and those U.S. Army soldiers and volunteers who died in the concurrent war to divest Native peoples of the Southwest from their homelands, destroy their economies, and forcibly remove them to distant reservations.

For the first hundred years of the monumentâ??s existence this aspect of the monument was not even questioned. As surveyed in Part Five, the only controversies over the monument during that time related to the use of the term â??rebel,â?• not the term â??savage Indiansâ?• or the honoring of those who died fighting a war to subdue them. Then when controversy erupted in the 1970s over this racist messaging on Santa Feâ??s Plaza, the monument was vociferously defended and neither the monument nor the offensive plaque was removed or altered. Only recently, after the toppling of the obelisk, is it conceded that the plaque should no longer adorn the monument. This belated acknowledgement, however, is too little, too late. Five decades of continuous toleration and even militant defense of the plaque extolling the heroes who died fighting â??the savage Indiansâ?• has resulted in the obelisk becoming more associated with that message than with the other message relating to the battles of the Civil War. Moreover, selectively editing the past in this way would result in the unacceptable falsification of history so long denounced by the monumentâ??s defenders.

The alternative to restoration is to remove the vestiges of the monument altogether. Deference to the past does not absolve us of our moral and civic obligation to guarantee equal respect and consideration to every citizen and visitor to this city. The National Trust for Historical Preservation, the leading national organization dedicated to the preservation of Americaâ??s historic places, supports the removal of historic monuments from public spaces â??when they continue to serve the purposes for which many were built â?? to glorify, promote, and reinforce white supremacy, overtly or implicitly.â?•[3] This same principle, which is consistent with the standards set forth in Santa Feâ??s charter, would justify the removal of historic monuments like the Soldiersâ?? Monument, which convey a message of ethnic inferiority and exclusion. In addition, demonstrable and serious public safety concerns (usually relating to unstable structures) can justify the removal, through demolition, of historic properties. Here, the presence of the Soldierâ??s Monument on the Santa Fe Plaza may raise analogous public safety concerns, given the violence that has erupted there and at nearby public monuments.

On the other hand, it is also important to determine whether the neutral standards we are applying would *prohibit* removal of the monument. In particular, it must be determined whether removal of the monument would convey a message of bias and exclusion towards those who consider the monumentâ??s presence in the plaza an important aspect of their heritage, specifically their Hispanic heritage. In addressing this question, it must first be noted that this monument was not erected to specifically honor New Mexican soldiers, but rather to honor all federal soldiers who lost their lives in the battles fought in the territory during that era. As set forth in Part Two, the vast majority of these soldiers were Colorado Volunteers and U.S. Army regulars from other parts of the country. Of the four Civil War battles inscribed on the monument, no New Mexicans are recorded as having died in the battles of Glorieta, Apache Canyon, or Peralta. The single Civil War battle that recorded deaths of New Mexico volunteers was the Battle of Valverde, which took place 100 miles south of Albuquerque. Thus, while New Mexicans rightfully and justifiably take pride in the role their forebears played in the Civil War, this particular monument is much more a memorial to soldiers from Colorado and elsewhere than it is to New Mexicans in general, or to Santa Feans in particular.

The decision to erect the monument on Santa Feâ??s historic plaza was not made by the townâ??s citizens; rather, the monument was imposed on Santa Fe by officials of the territorial government. At the time, the plaza was at the edge of the extensive Fort Marcy Military Reservation and that location for a generalized military monument to U.S. Army soldiers who served in the territory may have seemed logical. Today, with the territorial military presence long gone, there is no compelling reason why these soldiers should be memorialized at this specific location. Removal of this monument from the plaza would not preclude their commemoration elsewhere; indeed, there are already such memorials near the location of the Battle of Glorieta and in Colorado. And the Soldiersâ?? Monument itself could be relocated to a museum or other appropriate location where it could continue to serve the purpose of remembrance and education.

Given all these considerations, removal from the plaza of this specific monument, with its multiple meanings and connotations, would not be an expression of bias against those of Hispanic heritage or any other residents or visitors who are descendants of the memorialized soldiers. However, there are strong and compelling reasons to maintain a place of honor at the heart of the city for those Santa Feans and New Mexicans who served in one of the most noble causes in our history. Their sacrifice need not be erased from our public space and public consciousness. Their actions are an important part of Santa Feâ??s history and deserve to be remembered and honored. If the existing monument were to be removed, it would be appropriate for a new monument to be erected in a prominent location, dedicated solely to the honor of those New Mexicans who served, fought and died in defense of the United States of America during the Civil War and who helped defeat the Confederate invasion. These New Mexicans and their descendants deserve this homage and it should not be taken away from them due to having become entangled in the Soldiersâ?? Monumentâ??s complex messaging and history.

Additionally, relocation of the existing monument does not require that no vestige remain behind. In ancient Rome, monuments to disgraced public figures were removed and destroyed in a practice called â??*damnatio memoriae*â?• or â??condemnation of memory.â?•[4] These acts of destruction were not simply cathartic, but â??created a void which â??call[ed] attention to itself;â?? these manufactured absences became monuments to both the removed statue and the events that led to its removal.â?• The purpose was to â??reset the political landscape, not by drowning the peopleâ??s consciousness in Letheâ??s stream, but instead by reshaping the narrative of the past.â?•[5]

Just such a â??manufactured absenceâ?• could be established on the Santa Fe Plaza by marking the location of the obelisk on the ground with an inscription noting that this was the location of the Soldiersâ?? Monument from 1867 to the year of removal. Resetting the political landscape in this manner would accomplish the multiple purposes of removing a monument that contravenes fundamental values, reclaiming the center of the plaza for public activities and temporary installations, retaining an official marker for locating the geographical center of the city, and creating a site for historical memory.

What the long-standing controversies over the Soldiersâ?? Monument make clear is that symbols matter. The stone obelisk itself has become a symbol of what the text on its base explicitly conveys: the message that Indigenous people are inferior, that they are not included as full members of the community, and that they were righteously defeated in a war of extermination. Relocation of this problematic monument, and the erection of a new memorial dedicated solely to New Mexicans who served in the Civil War, would best serve the objective principles and standards of equality and inclusion embodied in Santa Feâ??s charter, which all Santa Feans accept and wish to uphold.

(Updated January 11, 2024)

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[1] Oliver La Farge, â??Meaning of monument often overlooked,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 27, 1973.

[2] Santa Fe City Code, Section 14-3.14(G)(1). A slightly different set of considerations governs the demolition of â??landmark structures,â?• which are historically significant structures located outside the historic districts, and thus not applicable to the Soldiersâ?? Monument.

[3] â??National Trust for Historic Preservation Statement on Confederate Monuments,â?• June 18, 2020, https://savingplaces.org/press-center/media-resources/national-trust-statement-on-confederate-memorials#.Ydsbv1llC70.

[4] Verity Platt, â??Why People Are Toppling Monuments to Racism,â?• *Scientific American* (July 3, 2020), https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-people-are-toppling-monuments-to-racism.

[5] Mati Davis and Sara Chopra, â??*Damnatio Memoriae*: On Facing, Not Forgetting, Our Past,â?• posted on August 21, 2020, https://web.sas.upenn.edu/discentes/2020/08/21/damnatio-memoriae-on-facing-not-forgetting-our-past/.