



No Past, No Future

Douglas Murray

What kind of future do we have if we destroy our past?

Has anyone who has pulled down a statue of Churchill, Lincoln, or Columbus thought to ask themselves this question?

I doubt it.

The presumption that we can stand in perfect judgment over the lives of historical figures is not merely foolish and unfair; it's dangerous.

Consider what the statue destroyers are, in effect, saying: They are saying that people in history should have known what we know. That's tantamount to saying they should have known the future. This is, of course, absurd. Yet more and more people believe it. Why?

Simple: It's what they're taught.

It is the fruit of an education system that long ago prioritized "empathy" over facts; that believes the ultimate point of history is not to learn lessons from it, but to judge it from the pre-ordained left-wing conclusions about such ill-defined concepts as social justice, equity, and tolerance.

Apart from breeding ignorance, this kind of education invites the student—the child, really—to be judge, jury, and executioner over issues that they—and increasingly, their teachers—know little or nothing about. Because no one has bothered to teach them the nuance, complexity and context that is history.

It also breeds arrogance: "I know things these people did not know. Therefore, I am better than they were. They have nothing to teach me. In fact, I must teach them." And down comes the statue. A new, "better" history must take the place of the old one.

In America, this impulse has culminated in "The 1619 Project"—an initiative started by The New York Times and now in schools everywhere—which attempts to make the arrival of the first African slaves into the American colonies the foundational date of the American republic.

1776? The American Revolution? In the new history, that was just about protecting the Founders' slave interests. These men—some of the most remarkable humans to have lived at any time—are to be understood simply by their attitude towards this one issue. The 1619 Project seeks to portray America—the freest, most prosperous nation in world history—as

exceptional only in one respect: insofar as being exceptionally bad.

This is a purposefully destructive view of history. It is one intended to pull down rather than build up. A healthy, humane, and—in the truest sense—liberal mind does not view history as a mere playpen for our moral judgment. It recognizes that people in the past acted on the information they had, just as we do today.

Sure, it would have been nice if the founders of America had abolished slavery in its Constitution. Some, in fact, tried very hard to do so. But had they been unwilling to compromise, there would be no Constitution and no United States. All the sacrifices of the Revolution would have been lost. So a compromise balancing the interests of the northern states and the southern states was reached.

It would have been nice if the Japanese had surrendered before atom bombs were dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But they didn't. President Truman had to make his decision based on the information he had at the time—that an Allied invasion of the Japanese home island would cost at least a million lives, both American and Japanese.

Of course, the woke mind abhors these subtleties. It knows that it is right, and that everybody before our current age—year zero—should have known better. Anyway, they were all bigots. Why should we give them any benefit of the doubt, let alone admire them or learn from them?

Well, maybe because, like everyone else, the great figures of the past did the best they could under the circumstances in which they found themselves. That their efforts largely succeeded is why we are here.

When someone tried to give Sir Isaac Newton credit for his world-changing discoveries in physics, the great man demurred. He said he was only able to achieve what he did by standing on the shoulders of the “giants” who went before him.

Today's left rejects Newton's humility. It doesn't believe that we stand on anyone's shoulders. It imagines that if we could only liberate ourselves from the dusty, misguided, and misinformed ideas of the past, then we might see further; fly still higher.

This view is wrong. Divorced from our past, we would be utterly lost. We would not rise, but plummet. We would be forced to start again with far less insight, and with far poorer examples as our guides.

Ironically, thanks to the statue destroyers, the great figures of the past have never looked greater.

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