

# Monumental Disagreement

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*[This is a slightly revised version of the remarks delivered at the 11th Mencken Graveside Memorial, Funeral Home parking lot, Loudon Park, Baltimore, MD, 2016-01-31 14:05-14:15]*

On January 28, 2006, Society member Phil Hildebrandt and I visited the Mencken family grave site as part of the preparations for the Memorial service marking the 50th anniversary of Mr Mencken's death which was to be held the following day. We found that three headstones had been overturned: pushed backwards were the larger stones of Caroline Mencken, HLM's grandmother and Burkhard L. Mencken, his grandfather; pushed forward was the smaller headstone of Arthur R. Mencken, a cousin who died in 1912. Mencken's ashes are buried under a ledger-style grave marker which lies flat and cannot be pushed over.

The headstones are twenty-five feet from road, face away from it, and are on level bases. The two larger stones each weighs about 900 pounds. Clearly, the overturning was not due to a whim of vandals passing by. Those responsible had to go to the effort of finding where the Mencken family was inhumed, going there, and substantially exerting themselves to push over very heavy stones.

Can this iconoclasm have been driven by anything but a lunatic animus toward a man who had been dead for half-a-century? What fanatical motivation to go through all the trouble of committing an act the results of which no one would see as it was highly unlikely that anyone would ever go to the trouble of visiting Mr Mencken's last place of rest?

The destruction of things connected with out-of-favor individuals in order to elide them from human memory is as ancient as human Civilization. The Roman practice of this was given the name *Damnatio memoriae*, "condemnation of memory", in 1689 by German scholars Christoph Schreier and Johannes Heinrichs Gerlach. A modern scholar describes what was done: "The Romans ... realized that it was possible to alter posterity's perception of the past especially as embodied in the visual and epigraphic record. Sanctions passed by the Senate could mandate the destruction of the monuments and inscriptions commemorating ... the official enemies of the Roman state." (1) Books written by the condemned were collected and burned, their property was seized, their wills annulled, houses belonging to them were razed, statues of them were disfigured (often a new head replaced the old).

We are witnessing *Damnatio memoriae*, in a milder form fortunately, in Baltimore with the question of how best to dispose of four monuments (2) which likely not one person in 5,000 took notice of until a coterie of sanctimonious, monomaniacal nuisances bawled that the presence of these monuments to the Confederacy was intolerable. These spoilers do not have, or should I say, do not yet have, the power to obliterate monuments but they can cause craven politicians to have them dispersed, warehoused, or relocated to places so remote that one would need the help of a Sherpa to find them.

In a city where more than 300 residents are murdered annually (sample headlines in recent years: "16 month Old Maryland Baby Shot In Attack On Father's Car" (3), "McKenzie Elliott, 3-year-old girl, Killed In Drive-by Shooting" (4), "Mother and 7-year-old son are city's latest homicide victims" (5) the most important task for the municipal government is to assemble a "blue-ribbon panel" to decide how best to punish white men, dead for over a century, who held opinions not consonant with modern thought and who heroically defended

what today no one would defend intellectually or by force of arms.

Justice Roger B. Taney, “the most conspicuously eminent of all Maryland lawyers”, as Mencken described him, receives plenty of name-calling by distinguished professors of law for his decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857), but can we ever read an honest assessment of the soundness of his interpretation? (How could one tell that the assessment was honest?). I note that Justice Taney freed the slaves that he had inherited but, under his understanding of the Constitution, they had no rights.

“The charm of the Confederates”, wrote Mencken, “lies in the fact that they fought against heavy odds and carried on for four long years a war that was hopeless before the end of its first. They were the only Americans since the Revolution to show such gallantry and pertinacity.” (6; *Item 167*) Further, “The men who fought for self-determination at Gettysburg were not the Federals but the Confederates.” One can passionately oppose slavery while simultaneously allowing secession, an argument advanced by Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, in *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men* (7).

Mr Mencken condemned the South as a cultural desert in his essay *The Sahara of the Bozart* (1917) yet he proclaimed in 1921 that “in so far as I am an American at all, I am a Southerner, and have a high veneration for the character of General Robert E. Lee” (8) and speculated that America might have been better off with a Confederate victory in his essay “The Calamity of Appomattox” (9).

The Sage was also critical of the “Lost Cause” mythos, writing that “[w]hat ails the South is a very simple thing: it is still suffering from the débâcle of fifty-six years ago. That débâcle almost obliterated civilization in the whole region, and so the surviving Confederates took to sentimentalizing the civilization that had collapsed and departed. That sentimentalization, in the end, became a sort of sacred duty, a benevolent mania, a furious and unintelligible cult, and the Southerner himself a walking sarcophagus of dead ideas. To question any article of the Confederate code, however trivial, came to be regarded as a sin against the Holy Ghost. Any man who refused to swallow the whole mess of balderdash was a scoundrel. Such habits of wholesale and uncritical assent, of course, are extremely dangerous.” (8).

The history of human bondage is a complex one and Mr Mencken recognized “[t]he relativity of moral ideas”. Suffice it to say that slavery was the norm in the Civilized and uncivilized regions of the world for thousands of years. A brief list includes Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, Europe, The Americas, China, Japan, Africa, India, the Middle East, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire; and this is far from an exhaustive listing. No doubt the slaves regretted not the institution of slavery but that they were not born masters. It took centuries, say from the time of the establishment of Christianity, in its various forms, as the dominant religion in Europe, and, later, the Enlightenment, for the idea that slavery was not only morally objectionable but impermissible as well to become part of the fabric of the unquestioned assumptions of civil society. The American Southern States were latecomers in the transition to this new ethical norm in the English-speaking world.

Of slavery in America, Mencken wrote that “[t]he gentlefolk of Virginia, perhaps the most genuinely civilized Americans ever heard of, owned slaves to within the day of men still living, and fought a long and bloody war in defense of the practice. By that time it was at

least as obnoxious to the rest of Christendom as, say, embezzlement or adultery, yet the Virginians defended it by arguments based upon Holy Writ, and were sufficiently convinced of its virtue to risk their lives and property for it.” (6; *Item 91*)

Mr Mencken always enjoyed a swipe at religion and it is true that slave-owners in the United States encouraged slaves to accept Christianity because of its acceptance of slavery and its teaching, in the phrase associated with the Church of England, “My Station and Its Duties”. However, there was the counter idea that a Christian, in good conscience, ought not enslave another Christian. Religion implanted cognitive dissonance in the minds of the faithful.

In the Americas, the institution of slavery did not end in 1865. Slavery in Cuba was abolished twenty-one years later, by royal decree, on October 7, 1886. Brazil, which imported 40% of the African slaves brought to the New World, more than any other country, was the last in the Western world to abolish slavery, doing so by a legal act promulgated on May 13, 1888. I note that the laws governing slaves in Cuba and Brazil were far less restrictive than those in the United States. (10)

Jeff Riggerbach, a libertarian author, reminds us that “For what Americans know and understand about the history of the society in which they live will determine the degree of their willingness to honor and preserve its ideals and traditions. More than that: it will determine what they regard as the ideals and traditions of their society. It will determine nothing less than the kind of society they will seek to strengthen and perpetuate.” (11, p. 15)

To know and understand history one must understand that honest men, even good men, held beliefs and opinions that we today would rather they did not hold; that they were as certain in the rightness of those beliefs as we are in ours. How can we, with certainty, know what are the right beliefs to hold? That we hold these beliefs and they don't is insufficient reason. What if altruistic beliefs result in our extinction? How can one best be moral in an amoral world? What if immorality is an optimal survival strategy? I am not making a pitch for moral relativism in raising these questions but those inclined to self-righteousness should at least have good answers to these question.

Given the intellectual temper of our times, the intellectual conformity of our academic class (12), and the general cowardice of the intelligent American, explanatory signs attached to these monuments will not be informative but will, instead, instruct the reader as to the correct opinion to hold, the correct degree of vehemence to exhibit when repeating it, and the proper hostility to show to those who disagree. Read the comments to any on-line story regarding the Confederate monuments and you will see in action what George Orwell called “Crimestop”, that is, “protective stupidity.” Lastly, given the contentious nature of the topics touched upon by the question of honoring the men who died for “The Lost Cause”, one would need a sign an acre in expanse to deal with matters honestly and an honest accounting is what few want.

Unchecked, this extripative mania against what is ideologically non-conformant will grow to be a consuming madness with all destructive actions permissible anyplace.

Begin by opposing expurgation of public spaces or else be prepared to roll-up your sleeves and do some pushing.

## References

1. Varner, Eric R. *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture* (Monumenta Graeca et Romana) (No. 10). Brill Academic Publishers, 2004.
2. (1) Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument, W Mount Royal Ave between Mosher St and W Lafayette Ave, dedicated May 2, 1903; (2) Confederate Women of Maryland Monument at N Charles and University Parkway, dedicated November 2, 1918; (3) the Lee-Jackson double equestrian statue, Wyman Park Dell, dedicated May 1, 1948. (4) The bronze of Roger B. Taney, North garden of Mount Vernon Place, was dedicated November 12, 1887 and is a copy of a bronze which was dedicated in Annapolis November 10, 1872
3. On May 24, 2013, Baby Carter Scott was shot and while sitting in a child's car seat in the back seat of his father's automobile at the 1100 block of Cherry Hill Road. He was pronounced dead at Johns Hopkins Hospital an hour after the shooting. Eddie Tarver, 20, of the 200 block of Cherry Hill Road was charged with first- and second-degree murder.
4. On August 1, 2014, McKenzie Elliott, aged 3, who lived in the 3600 block of Old York Road, was killed by a stray bullet.
5. On May 28, 2015, Jennifer Jeffrey-Browne, 31, and Kester "Tony" Browne, 7, were found shot to death in their home in the 100 block of Upmanor Road.
6. Mencken, H. L. *Minority Report* (1956).
7. Hummel, Jeffrey Rogers. *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men*. Open Court, 1996, 2013.
8. Mencken, H. L. "The South Begins to Mutter", *Smart Set* 65(4): 138-144 (1921-08).
9. Mencken, H. L. "The Calamity of Appomattox", *American Mercury*, 21(1):29-34 (September 1930).
10. Bergad, Laird. *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
11. Rikkenbach, Jeff. *Why American History Is Not What They Say: An Introduction To Revisionism*. Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2009.
12. Williams, Joanna. *Academic Freedom In An Age Of Conformity*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2016.