



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on September 18, 2017

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Cultural Cleansing

The ugly series of events that transpired in Charlottesville had as its direct cause the left-wing movement to stamp out history by forcing the removal, or inciting the vandalism, of monuments related to the Southern states' Confederate history, specifically, the notion that the "traitorous" South rebelled to protect the odious institution of slavery.

As with almost everything promulgated by the leftist totalitarians, actual history is not so cleanly demarcated as they like to portray, nor are their preferred correctives typically consistent in application. The causes of the war fought between the states, for example, were not solely to be found in the issue of slavery, prominent though this issue was. As for the application of corrective action today, the extremists of left-wing persuasion would destroy monuments to Southern history, but make no mention, for example, of renaming the city of Charlottesville itself, despite the fact that that city's namesake was a British monarch whose empire permitted slavery during her reign.

The inconsistency of application and the historical blindness that underscores the movement behind the removal and destruction of historical monuments is not the point, however, to those participating in the effort. Instead, only two goals matter: the incitement to violence among the movement's opponents that can then be used to marginalize and discredit the opposition and, most importantly, the erasure of any symbols of history and culture that run counter to the socialist totalitarian's worldview and aims.

Ironically, though today's socialist totalitarians are eager to erase history by removing and destroying monuments and statues and by restricting freedom of speech in general, they certainly have learned from certain lessons of history. Their present efforts at cultural vandalism are in keeping with a long, ancient tradition of totalitarian state power being used to destroy cultural artifacts and rewrite history that became inconvenient.

Destroy Like an Egyptian

In many ways the ancient Egyptians were great innovators. The pyramids are but the most obvious examples of their industry and technical mastery. Just as astonishing are the great temples of Seti I and





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of Hatshepsut, as well as those at Abu Simbel, and, of course, at Karnak, where one finds the incredible Hypostyle Hall among other archaeological amazements.

What's missing from the environs around Karnak is the Temple of Amenhotep IV. The reason? It was destroyed in an early example of cultural vandalism.

Amenhotep IV (Amenophis IV in Greek) was born to his father, Amenhotep III, and his mother, the powerful Queen Tiye, during a highpoint of the 18th Dynasty. Egypt was wealthy and powerful, and the reign of Amenhotep III was marked by a period of relative peace, opulence, and building. The great Egyptologist Alan Gardiner, in his well-respected *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, notes of this pharaoh's reign that its first half "was an era of prosperity such as Thebes had never previously enjoyed. The most costly products of Nubia and Asia flowed to the Southern City in an uninterrupted stream, to which Crete and even Mycenae seem to have added contributions."

It was also during this time that a noteworthy expansion of wealth and power occurred among the priests of the traditional pagan sects. The pharaoh was well-known for his generosity, not the least with regard to the priests. "Long inscriptions recount his benefactions at Karnak and at Luxor," Gardiner writes, "and one dedicatory text even furnishes details of the gold and semiprecious stones which he devoted to their adornment.... The wealth of the temple of Amen-Rē must have been enormous, and its high priest Ptahmose was the first to be able to add to his sacerdotal authority that inherent in the rank of vizier."

Photo: AP Images

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Upon the death of Amenhotep III, his son, Amenhotep IV, ascended to the throne and for a time, continued as his father. Correspondence with the Hittite King Suppiluliumas early in the new pharaoh's reign shows that the ruling court remained in Thebes. But this was not to last.

There was, as Gardiner relates, "a powerful urge towards monotheism," despite the otherwise predominant traditional polytheism. Out of this arose the worship of the disc of the sun, known as "the Aten." This was something considerably new, a monotheistic concept, rather than the gods of the animalistic paganism that had held sway for so long in Egypt.

Whether because the new pharaoh was a true convert to the burgeoning worship of Aten or because, as sometimes has been speculated, the new monotheism offered a chance for the pharaoh to break the power of the traditional priesthood, the son of Amenhotep III undertook a breathtaking revolution. He changed his name to that which is now famous, becoming Akhenaten in the fifth year of his reign and moving his capital to a new city, Akhetaten (now known as Amarna).

From this revolution came a transformation of incredibly stark character, most notably visible in the art from the period. The stiff, formulaic depictions of past Egyptian art disappeared, replaced with the flowing, organic lines of the Amarna period. Describing the new approach as it applied to depictions of the human body, Helen Gardner in her *Art Through the Ages* pointed to "the effeminate body" of the statue of Akhenaten from Karnak: "Its curving contours, and long, full-lipped face, heavy-lidded eyes, and dreaming expression are a far cry indeed from the heroically proportioned figures of Akhenaten's predecessors." From this period comes to us also perhaps the most sublime of all portraits, save perhaps for Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, the incredible bust of Akhenaten's royal wife, Nefertiti. Prepared by



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the sculptor Thutmose, it exemplifies the revolution in art that accompanied the religious revolution.

It was Akhenaten, though, who was one of the first to attempt to cleanse the prevailing culture of its monuments to the past. "He blotted out the name of Amen from all inscriptions.... He emptied the great temples [and] enraged the priests," Gardner wrote. Our other Gardiner, Alan the Egyptologist, recounted the affair in more detail. Akhenaten's new "true faith could not be spread without the suppression of the countless gods and goddesses hitherto worshipped. Accordingly he despatched his workmen throughout the entire length of the land to cut out their names wherever they were found engraved or written."

Nonetheless, the new faith championed by Akhenaten was not to last beyond his death in the 17th year of his reign. Presently, his son, Tutankhaten, ascended the throne, and the fact that this young pharaoh is better known as Tutankhamun today points to the reversal of Akhenaten's revolution.

The boy king, as his name suggests, quickly ended the worship of Aten. At Karnak, an inscription on a stele reveals the reason for the young ruler's change of heart:

When his majesty arose as king, the temples of the gods and goddesses, beginning from Elephantinē down to the marshes of the Delta, had fallen into decay, their shrines had fallen into desolation and become ruins overgrown with weeds, their chapels as though they had never been and their halls serving as footpaths. The land was topsy-turvy and the gods turned their backs on this land. If messengers were sent to Djahi (Syria) to extend the boundaries of Egypt, they had no success. If one humbled himself to a god to ask a thing from him, he did not come, and if prayer was made to a goddess, likewise she never came.... But after many days My Majesty arose upon the seat of his father and ruled over the territories of Horus, the Black Land and the Red Land being under his supervision.

And so Tutankhamun began the reversal of his father's embrace of monotheism. But it would not be completed until the rise to power of the final pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty, Horemheb, who would not only revitalize the traditional religion of Egypt, but cleanse the land of the monuments and temples erected by Akhenaten.

Horemheb had been a high official under both Akhenaten and Tutankhamun. On the latter's untimely passing, he ultimately ascended to the rank of pharaoh even though he was a mere commoner by birth. It's safe to say that Horemheb was a tyrant, far different in his policies than Amenhotep III, or Akhenaten. Where the former were renowned for diplomacy and prosperity, and art and religion respectively, Horemheb comes down to us as a far harsher ruler. "A sadly defective stele at Karnak describes the measures that he took to establish justice," Alan Gardiner writes. "Arbitrary exactions had resulted in ordinary citizens being deprived of their boats with their cargoes, or again being beaten and robbed of the valuable hides of their cattle. The penalties imposed were of great severity, the malefactors in the worst cases being docked of their noses and banished ... and in the lesser cases punished with a hundred strokes and five open wounds." Not escaping his notice were the structures built by Akhenaten. As part of a dedicated effort to wipe out memory of what we now call the Amarna period, the monotheistic pharaoh's Aten temples were demolished. Much of their substance was reused in new temple building projects, notably at Luxor.

A fitting description of the cultural cleansing of the Amarna period comes from the historian Paul Johnson. In his *Art: A New History*, he writes, "The hammer men — agents of that grim Egyptian



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injunction: ‘Wipe Out His Name’ — got to work. The model heads of Amarna dignitaries, left behind as unsaleable now that they were thrown out of office or killed, were also found in the rubbish. Nefertiti’s famous head was left, literally, on the shelf. When the shelf, centuries later, collapsed, the head fell safely onto a soft pile of mud rubble from the walls, and so was preserved, minus one eye.”

History Repeats

This sad retelling of the fall of the great civilization that was the 18th Dynasty in ancient Egypt, unfortunately, is something of a template for later eruptions of much similar character.

Images, as the Egyptians of the 18th Dynasty understood, and as the antagonists and protagonists of today’s Confederate monument crisis understand, carry with them the meanings and messages of the past, something the ancient Romans would have called the *memoria* of the subject depicted.

The Romans, in fact, made something of a regular practice of what has come to be called *damnatio memoriae*, the “condemnation of memory,” especially of deceased emperors judged to have reigned poorly. A well-known example of this is the emperor Domitian.

In the first years of his rule, Domitian was an able emperor, “surprisingly puritan and competent,” in the description of historian Will Durant. He attempted to end child prostitution, enforced laws against adultery, and ended the castration of eunuchs, who had been in increasing demand. “He was honorable, liberal, and free from avarice,” Durant says.

Yet there were signs of problems. “He was excessively lustful,” Suetonius claims, stating that “he swam with common prostitutes” and went on to seduce his niece and “even became the cause of her death by compelling her to get rid of a child of his by abortion.”

The Senate grew increasingly angry with him as his power grew. Declaring himself to be a god, he persecuted those who refused to worship him, expelling philosophers and executing Christians. He grew paranoid and fearful of conspiracies, and, ironically, fell victim to one at last. The conspiracy was orchestrated by his own household personnel, along with the assistance of his wife, no less, whose servant struck first. Despite the emperor’s struggles, five assailants delivered seven wounds, according to the account relayed by Suetonius, and, overcome, Domitian expired at the age of 45.

The Senate quickly pronounced a *damnatio memoriae*, and Suetonius relates: “The senators ... were so overjoyed, that they raced to fill the House, where they did not refrain from assailing the dead emperor with the most insulting and stinging kind of outcries. They even had ladders brought and his shields and images torn down before their eyes and dashed upon the ground; finally they passed a decree that his inscriptions should everywhere be erased, and all record of him obliterated.”

Commenting on the extent of this iconoclasm in the Roman Empire, Oxford art historian Jas’ Elsner noted in the journal *The Art Bulletin* in 2012:

By the time the Principate was in full swing after Augustus, a discourse of image destruction and memory erasure for those who were rivals or former favorites of emperors, including women, became normal, rising to special and comprehensive treatment in the destruction, demolition, and recutting of portraits in the cases of disgraced former emperors. Such destruction ... involved all kinds of monuments and inscriptions but centered on statues, which might be demolished, or have their heads recut, or simply have new inscriptions added to replace those of the disgraced (or a combination of the last two).



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Shame and Censorship

Each instance of iconoclasm has as twin aims the goals of shame and censorship, sometimes in greater proportion of shame and sometimes of censorship. Both characteristics, however, are typically present. In the Egyptian case of the 18th Dynasty, censorship of the past was predominant in the efforts of Akhenaten, while shame was the dominant goal of the reaction that followed. Likewise, the *damnatio memoriae* against Domitian tilted toward shaming the name of the fallen emperor for his behavior, though certainly the Senate, jealous of the burgeoning power of the emperor, would have been eager to destroy the symbols of that power.

As there is nothing new under sun, more-modern iconoclasts have exactly the same twin aims as their ancient forebears.

Writing for the *Yale Journal of International Law* in 2003, Kanchana Wangkeo recounted numerous examples. Noting that iconoclasm continues to be concerned with “the destruction of icons due to the belief that the images are imbued with an unacceptable symbolic influence,” he points to the French Revolution, during which “the revolutionaries tried to destroy all artwork and monuments connected with the king in order to delegitimize the Ancien Régime.”

For further examples, he continues: “When the Bolsheviks took control of Russia in 1917, they ordered the demolition of all pre-revolutionary monuments. During the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao tried to eliminate the Four Olds: Old Culture, Old Thinking, Old Habits, and Old Ideas.”

Wangkeo examines several episodes of cultural destruction at length, including Nicolae Ceaușescu’s “systemization program” in Romania. This program was the effort of the Romanian Communist Party to collectivize farms and implement communal living in alignment with Marxist thought. “In the process,” Wangkeo notes, “the government gutted Bucharest and destroyed numerous villages.”

Though the communists claimed that they were merely implementing Marxism with no ulterior motives of cultural destruction, Wangkeo makes a strong case that the motivating factor was indeed an effort to destroy the cultural heritage of those who opposed communism.

“Iconoclasm,” Wangkeo points out, “is the annihilation of icons as a means of destroying the messages behind them. In the Romanian case, the government destroyed rural villages and historic districts not only to enable communal living but also to eliminate the independent spirit of rural villagers and ethnic minorities. In other words, the destruction was iconoclastic because it purposefully targeted symbols of difference as a threat to the collective adoption of socialism.”

More recently, in 2001 the Taliban in Afghanistan destroyed the colossal statues of the Bamiyan Buddhas in an act of wanton cultural terrorism that outraged the world. The stated reasons for this destruction, coming from the Taliban leadership, were that Islamic law dictated that the statues be destroyed, and, second, that the West was more inclined to fund restoration efforts at Bamiyan than to help the poor and suffering people of Afghanistan.

But there was more to the destruction of the Buddhas than these first appearances indicate, and, in fact, consideration of other factors puts the Taliban iconoclasm into line with the events of Egypt’s 18th Dynasty, with Rome’s *damnatio memoriae*, and with Ceaușescu’s systemization.

Writing in the *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* in 2008, Pierre Centlivres, professor emeritus and former director of the *Institut d’ethnologie, Université de Neuchâtel* (Switzerland),



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described the iconoclastic motivation of the Taliban in destroying the Buddhas.

As Professor Centlivres points out, the location of the Buddhas is the ancestral homeland of the Hazaras, “a name based on the ethnic myth of a homogenous Hazara and Shia community.” For leading thinkers of this region, Centlivres notes, “The giant figures represented the ancestors of the indigenous population.... In their view, the Taliban, who as Sunni and as Pashtuns are perceived as doubly hostile towards the Hazaras, could not admit this autochthonous [indigenous] symbol, this source of Hazara legitimacy.”

Back to Charlottesville

As with the Taliban, so go the leftist ruffians in America. The radical leftists assailing the Confederate statues and calling for their removal likewise cannot admit these autochthonous monuments. Though they are portrayed by today’s cultural vandals as representing only the Southern states’ slaveholding past, they symbolize a great deal more and therefore carry a much deeper and significant meaning that runs directly counter to the aims of the radical Left.

It is necessary to first understand the aims of the radical Left. These aims are essentially the aims of Ceauseşcu and Mao, of the Taliban, and of Pharaoh Horemheb. In each case these sought the centralization and expansion of state power, and sought to undermine and overturn any threat to that program, especially by destroying the symbols of the opposition. The leftist “anti-fascists” of today, and those who control them, want only to gain control of the state, to centralize its power, and use that power to order the world according to their radical Marxist program.

The Southern monuments now being removed stand opposed to this program. While there is an undeniable connection to the horrific institution of slavery, this is not at all what today’s leftists find objectionable, despite their rhetoric to the contrary. Indeed, their political ideology calls for the re-establishment of a new, and thorough, universal slavery.

The monuments to General Robert E. Lee and others of the Confederacy, in addition to slavery, point back to the very potent American and classical liberal traditions that form both the fundamental political bedrock of the nation and the philosophical framework of the very concepts of liberty, individualism, and state sovereignty. These are the things that our present socialist totalitarians, whether of the national socialist type or the Marxist variety, wish to overthrow.

General Lee, for instance, was not opposed to freeing the slaves he had inherited from his wife’s father, and in fact did so in accordance with their “owner’s” will. He also opposed slavery as an evil, though he accepted it as necessary at the time, something that seems ridiculous to the modern mind. He was the son of the famous “Light-Horse” Harry Lee, who was instrumental in the struggle of 1776 to win independence for the colonies.

Someone who can gaze upon the sculpture of Robert E. Lee might become motivated to learn about the man thus memorialized in bronze or stone, and to contemplate these facts. And in that contemplation may be led to learning more about the other Founding Fathers, especially the slave-holding Thomas Jefferson, who nonetheless was arguably the most important “thought leader” of the revolution in that he penned the immortal truth that all are created equal, with inalienable rights.

Additionally, the statues and monuments of the South embody and symbolize the idea of rebellion against a centralizing power. This is an even more powerful and visceral message for many Americans



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than the cerebral reflection upon the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the legal framework of limited government written into the Constitution. The emotional and visceral idea of rebellion in the cause of independence resonates deeply in the American psyche. Because the Confederate monuments inspire the individualist and rebellious spirit of many Americans, they represent a significant symbolic obstacle to leftist totalitarian program. Thus, they must be defeated symbolically, and removed from public view.

In all of this we see the very uncomfortable dichotomy of America, a nation founded on notions of individual freedom and limited government that nonetheless accepted and permitted the long and odious practice of slavery that it had inherited in some of its states. This is a history to reflect upon and learn from, especially considering the role that the philosophical and legal framework of the Constitution of 1787 played in setting the stage for the eventual abolition of the slave trade.

If this history starts to be hidden because the monuments are torn down, then we risk as a nation playing into the hands of demagogues and firebrands who seek nothing less than the institution of slavery anew.

In a column penned shortly after the events in Charlottesville, the great columnist Walter Williams aptly described the danger before us:

Many politicians, racists, hustlers and tyrants have an agenda that consists mostly of making the U.S. Constitution meaningless and giving government greater control over our lives, thereby destroying personal liberty. The alt-right and white supremacists seek to achieve their goals through racist propaganda. The leftists seek to achieve their goals by tricking Americans into believing that all they want are brotherhood and multiculturalism.

We can't erase history, and we shouldn't try to. Acceding to the demand to do so plays into the hands of the enemies of liberty described by Williams. Instead, to move forward constructively, we should engage critically with our history, learn from it, and thereby be better equipped, intellectually, to "form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility ... and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

This becomes much harder to do if the monuments come down, and that is something we should have learned, at least, from the thousands of years that separate us from Akhenaten.

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