



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on December 2, 2019

Law Students Petition for Removal of George Washington, Robert E. Lee Portraits From Diplomas

Students at Virginia's venerable Washington  and Lee University School of Law are demanding that they be allowed the option of receiving diplomas un-graced with images of the university's namesakes, America's first president, George Washington, who was an early financial backer of the university, and Confederate General Robert E. Lee, who served as president of the university from 1865 to 1870 (then called Washington College), and who is buried in a chapel on the campus of the school.

A petition signed by around 175 students, alumni, and faculty of the law school is calling on "the administration of Washington and Lee University and President William Dudley" to offer graduating law students the option to receive diplomas without the images of the two historic figures, explaining that the goal is to "create a diploma" of which alumni can be proud.

As reported by CBN News, the petition specifically references the infamous 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, "where white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and Antifa fascists violently clashed. Among them were marchers whose goal was to stop the destruction of a statue of Robert E. Lee. One young woman was run over and killed by a white nationalist."

Given the aftermath of that rally "and the heightened awareness of making Washington & Lee an inclusive and compassionate environment to all students," reads the petition, "we believe this request provides alumni the ability to honor their alma mater without the presence of the portraits that some may find controversial or offensive."

Organizers argue that Lee's role as the leader of Confederate forces during the War Between the States supposedly connects his memory to racism and white supremacy, while Washington's use of slaves on his Mount Vernon estate taints his memory as well. "I'm white, I'm from the South, and it still makes me uncomfortable," one of the organizers, Chandler Gray, told the [Washington Post](#). She insisted that she would never display a diploma in her law office if it includes the image of Lee, saying it might make some clients uncomfortable. "That's the opposite of what we want to do as lawyers," she said.

The petition notes that "Washington & Lee's diploma structure has changed over the years to reflect student requests, such as the transition from sheepskin diplomas to paper diplomas. The goal of establishing this option is to create a diploma that alumni are proud to prominently display in their homes and places of work."

The petition has been met with significant pushback from many Washington and Lee alumni, who see the campaign as an effort to denigrate the history and traditions of the school. One such group, calling itself the [Generals Redoubt](#), released a statement saying it "strongly disagrees" with the petition, warning that it is symptomatic of "strong undercurrents ... to dismantle the traditions, values, and



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history of Washington and Lee.”

Reads the statement: “The removal of the likeness of George Washington and Robert E. Lee, which adorns the offices and homes of many of our alumni, is a severe affront to the generous and loyal alumni who respect the character and values of our namesakes. This petition represents a clear demonstration of why the Generals Redoubt is necessary to bring sanity to W&L on behalf of the many very loyal alumni, parents, students and friends of W&L.”

Tom Rideout, a 1963 graduate and a founder of the Generals Redoubt, told the *Washington Post* that were the petition to succeed, it would add momentum to the agenda of some connected with the school “to have both Washington and Lee removed from the university” completely. He added that such an effort is part of an overall cultural goal by some to redefine historical figures such as Washington and Lee by contemporary values.

In response to the controversy, officials at Washington and Lee released their own statement saying that they “fully support the right of all members of our community to express their opinions, and we commend those, including the student petitioners, who do so in a civil manner.” The statement added that “although the petition has not been formally delivered, any decision regarding such a request would rest with the Board of Trustees, which has sole authority to confer degrees.”



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