



Spain Banished Its Franco Monuments, Can We Do the Same for Lee?

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Spanish authorities remove a statue of General Franco

As Americans debate whether to remove Confederate war statues, some historians have pointed to Germany as a model for dealing with monuments of a shameful era. But Spain's treatment of its many statues of General Franco presents a more relevant example for us.

Within months of the end of World War II, the Allies had destroyed virtually all the monuments of the Hitler era in Germany. The new West German government soon banned all display of Hitler and the swastika, but few existing Nazi monuments remained intact.

When General Francisco Franco died in 1974, his forty-year long repressive dictatorship came to a peaceful end. Franco was gone, but hardly forgotten, the regime having installed more than 350 statues of the dictator and named countless streets, parks and public buildings after him. For the next thirty years, Spain's political parties maintained a "pact of forgetting" (pacto del olvido), an

informal agreement to avoid trials and recriminations, keep Franco memorials intact and leave untouched the concealed mass graves containing some 100,000 victims of the regime.

In 2007, a Socialist majority in Spain's parliament passed the "Historical Memory Law." It required that all Franco regime symbols be removed from public spaces and it provided government support for identifying and exhuming Franco regime victims buried in the mass graves.

The Historical Memory Law was the product of several citizen-based efforts to come to terms with the repression and terror of the Franco regime. One leading group, The Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) was formed in 2000 by some fifty archeologists and forensic scientists who had the basic goal of gaining access to mass graves and identifying the remains of victims.

After passage of the national law, the removal of all the Franco statues took almost a decade to complete, delayed by a national economic slump and scattered local opposition. The effort to identify victims, chronically underfunded, is moving forward slowly: some 2,000 individuals have been positively identified, exhumed from mass graves and reburied.

What, if anything, can Americans opposed to Confederate monuments learn from Spain's struggle with the legacy of a fascist dictator?

Skeptics can point to the fact that the United States has a Constitution with a First Amendment. While many European countries have banned all displays of Hitler and the swastika, that is simply not possible in the United States. The federal government cannot and should not ban outright the display of the Confederate monuments and symbols (including the rebel flag).

Note that the Congress can remove the half-dozen statues of Confederate leaders that now stand in the U.S. Capitol building. Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Oakland) and Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) have introduced a bill to require their replacement.

We could use an American version of Spain's "Historic Memory Law" to encourage archeology and memorialization of the institution of black slavery, which dates to the Virginia Colony in 1660.

Our government did take a small step in this direction when it authorized the creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The concept for the museum first emerged in the 1970s. It took thirty years and a dozen separate Congressional proposals before a final agreement to build a museum was reached. In December 2001, President George W. Bush signed a bill creating a commission to identify a site and funding sources for the museum.

The museum finally opened in September 2016 and has been a great success, more than three million people have visited it. Within the six floors of the building, the exhibits skillfully educate visitors about the cruel facts of slavery and the four-hundred-year struggle of African Americans to achieve equality.

However, it is just one museum in one city. Slavery was a part of both Northern and Southern life; black slaves toiled in all 13 American colonies. In varying degrees and forms, the stain of racism is spread across all 50 states.

It is important to note that the successful initiative to remove the Franco memorials began with a simple request by scientists to access the mass graves, identify the victims and bring peace to grieving families. It did not begin with a demand from a political group to condemn the Franco regime or to initiate trials of alleged perpetrators.

The citizens of the United States can act on their own to put an end to our “pact of forgetting” about the true meaning of the cult of the Confederacy and the legacy of 250 years of black slavery.

I am not suggesting that Lee himself engaged in torture of political prisoners or committed mass murder like the generals in the Franco regime. The Confederate leadership, including President Jefferson Davis and his war cabinet, did not order any mass executions of political prisoners. It was hardly necessary, given the scant internal opposition facing the Confederate government.

That said, the two regimes do have several historical parallels. Both General Franco and General Lee led the forces of rebel insurgencies that sought to overthrow a democratically elected government. They both represented the forces of reaction, fighting to restore a conservative hierarchy that had been under threat from a government committed to significant social change. Both men were ruthless military leaders, overseeing huge battlefields and willing to accept massive casualties to achieve victory.

Their legacy, in the form of bronze equestrian statues, also serves a similar purpose: to intimidate their political opponents. Their depiction, as mounted generals in battlefield regalia, staring cold-eyed over an imaginary battlefield, is meant to warn, not welcome.

The kind of government they fought to establish, a single-party state founded on mass violence against its citizens and repression of dissent, should no longer be honored in either Spain or the United States.

The Spanish people have put an end to their “pact of forgetting” and they are actively engaged in confronting a shameful era of their nation’s past. One key step was the removal of the Franco statues that dominated many public spaces. It’s time we in the United States followed their example.