

Background Reading: Charlottesville and the Events Leading Up to It

For years, pressure has been building for the U.S. to take down its Confederate monuments and flags – and for the nation to examine and confront its racist past and present. These demands accelerated after the killing of nine black parishioners at the historic black Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., by white supremacist Dylann Roof, who had a fondness for Confederate symbols.

In the wake of the massacre, South Carolina removed the Confederate flag from its prominent place on the statehouse grounds. The decision came after a 13-hour tense and highly emotional debate in the South Carolina House.

Clint Smith writes in the [New Republic](#) about the movement to take down monuments in New Orleans:

“For ... many young activists in New Orleans and around the country a painful confluence of events—Trayvon Martin’s death, Ferguson’s uprising, Dylann Roof’s massacre—created a storm of political outrage that has started to convene around enduring symbols of white supremacy, like the Confederate monuments. Dylann Roof’s 2015 attack on members of a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, which led to the removal of a Confederate flag at the South Carolina State House, may have been the final catalyst needed to push for the removal of the monuments in New Orleans. At the same time, to see the Charleston massacre as the sole cause would negate the work that activists in New Orleans have been doing for years.”

The group Take ‘Em Down NOLA demanded that New Orleans’ Mayor and City Council remove all monuments, school names, and street signs dedicated to white supremacists. They described the structures as littering the city “with visual reminders of the horrid legacy of slavery that terrorized so many of this city’s ancestors. They misrepresent our community. We demand the freedom to live in a city where we are not forced to pay taxes for the maintenance of public symbols that demean us and psychologically terrorize us. They misrepresent our community.” (#TakeEmDownNOLA)

On December 25, 2015, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu made a call for the removal of Confederate statues from public spaces around his city. Multiple court battles ensued, as monument supporters tried to block the removal of the city’s Confederate statues. But in April 2017, having been declared a public nuisance by the New Orleans City Council, four statues were removed in the dead of night by workers wearing flak jackets and scarves to conceal their identities.

The Liberty Monument, which paid tribute to vigilantes who sought to overthrow the city’s interracial Reconstruction-era government, was the first to be taken down, followed soon thereafter by three statues honoring Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee, P.G.T. Beauregard and Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

Several other Southern cities have taken similar measures. And debates have continued about the appropriateness of honoring Confederate legends with monuments, and/or buildings, streets and parks in their names.

The debate was underway in Charlottesville, Virginia, as well. By 2016, Wes Bellamy, a Charlottesville city counselor and the city's vice mayor, had become a champion of efforts to remove confederate monuments from the city. At a press conference in front of the statue of Robert E. Lee in March of that year, he announced the City Council would appoint a commission to look into the issue. "When I see the multitude of people here who are so passionate about correcting something that they feel should have been done a long time ago, I am encouraged," he said.

Around the same time, a high school student, Zyahna Bryant, petitioned the city council about removing the statue: "My peers and I feel strongly about the removal of the statue because it makes us feel uncomfortable and it is very offensive." She collected hundreds of signatures.

In February 2017, the Charlottesville City Council voted to take down the statue of Robert E. Lee and change the name of the park in which it resides from Lee Park to Emancipation Park. Opponents sued the city, arguing it did not have the authority under state law to take down the statue. With the lawsuit unresolved, the city council, in June, decided to change the park name to Emancipation Park anyway.

It was this move that appeared to have sparked the violent protests that erupted in Charlottesville in August 2017. White nationalists, white supremacists, Klansmen, and neo Nazis, mostly from out of town, descended on the city. Some came heavily armed and dressed in paramilitary attire.

The "Unite the Right" rally was organized by white nationalist blogger Jason Kessler, a relative newcomer to the white nationalist scene. But it was also attended by ex Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, who saw it as part of an effort to "take our country back."

On the evening of Friday, August 11, the night before the planned rally by white supremacists, a multi-faith group of counter protesters had gathered in a church nearby to prepare for nonviolent action the next day, and a group of about 30 students had assembled on campus to stand up against racism, intolerance, and white nationalism.

That night, a column of about 250 mostly young white males bearing torches marched onto the university campus chanting slogans including "you will not replace us," "Jews will not replace us," and "blood and soil" (a Nazi slogan). Some were seen giving Nazi salutes. It was a chilling sight that harkened back to the days of both Jim Crow and Nazi Germany. The marchers circled the student protesters, making monkey noises at the students of color and chanting "White lives matter!" Chaos erupted, there was shoving and punching, and many of the marchers threw their torches at the students.

It was clear why the white nationalists had come, and things were about to get worse.

On Saturday morning, the "Unite the Right" protesters arrived at Emancipation Park before the rally's scheduled start time. The counter-protesters showed up early as well. Some of them were armed with sticks and shields. They were joined by local residents, members of church groups, civil rights leaders and onlookers. By mid-morning, the friction was building and it was clear that police intervention would be needed. But the clashes continued, with "Unite the Right" protesters swinging sticks, using chemical sprays, and throwing bricks and bottles.

At 11:22 am, the police declared an "unlawful assembly," and the white nationalists retreated from the park. Relative calm returned to Charlottesville as the state's governor, Terry McAuliffe, declared a state

of emergency. Further violence seemed to have been averted. But then, in the early afternoon, a car plowed into a group of counter-protesters at a downtown mall, killing one woman and injuring 19. The driver, James Alex Fields, Jr. had been seen earlier in the day at the rally with symbols of Vanguard America, a white nationalist group that opposes multiculturalism and believes America is an exclusively white nation.

Later in the afternoon, a Virginia state police helicopter crashed, killing two troopers who'd been helping law enforcement officers monitor the white nationalist gathering in the area before the fatal crash. Around 6 p.m., Governor McAuliffe held a press conference condemning the white supremacists that came to town, their hatred and their violence. He told them "you're not wanted here" and "go home." As night fell, people around the nation watched what had happened in this otherwise quiet college town, as a 24-hour period of racial hatred and violence went viral.

Since the rally and protests in Charlottesville, much has happened: President Trump defended the Nazis and white nationalists, saying there were "very fine people" on both sides of the rally, and that both sides were responsible for the violence. Trump was roundly condemned for his comments by political leaders, including many Republicans, as well as by business leaders and the media.

The mother of Heather Heyer, the young woman who was killed by a white nationalist during the counter protest on Saturday, grieved publicly, and spoke up on behalf of the social justice causes Heather stood and fought for, and eventually gave her life for: "If I've got to give her up, we're gonna make it count" she said in a eulogy for her daughter.

There have been vigils and sermons, and solidarity protests across the country, and in Durham, NC, and Baltimore, MD, more Confederate statues have come down overnight. Late night talk show hosts have been searing in their critique of President Trump's performance over the past week.

The NAACP decried the "blatant racism on display in Charlottesville... It's hard to believe that in 2017 we are still plagued by so much race-based hatred." But as many black leaders and social justice advocates remind us, what we saw in Charlottesville should not come as too much of a surprise, given that the President campaigned on racism, bigotry and xenophobia, and promoted violence against people of color at many his rallies.