

## THOSE DARN MONUMENTS

Sam Davis is honored and commemorated by a statue on the lawn of the state capitol, a statue on the courthouse lawn in Pulaski, a statue on the grounds of Montgomery Bell Academy, a shrine on the spot where his life was taken from him, and by the Sam Davis Plantation & Historic Home in Smyrna. Many honors for a young man who never rose above the rank of private. Does Sam Davis deserve these memorials?

Loud and persistent voices in our society scream “NO”, these voices want to destroy all such memorials and to eradicate all such memories. If the War Between the States is to be remembered at all, they insist, it must be on their terms, terms which create Yankee Saints and Rebel Sinners, terms which are based on the Myth of the Holy Cause.

Our presence here says to those voices, “Hold on! There is more than one side to this story.

Every war which has ever been fought has at work two sets of motives: those which bring nations to the point of war and those which impel men to go fight.

In answer to the question, “What caused the Civil War?” today slavery is the usual answer, and we see that as a moral issue as well as an issue which involves human rights. This is the way we see the issue, but how did

the people of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century view the matter? The vast majority of Caucasians, North & South, saw slavery as a political and economic issue on which there could be compromise.

To demonstrate, if no Southerner states had left the Union there would have been no war. The United States would have continued to be what it had always been, a slave holding republic. The nation was not ready to go to war over the issue of slavery, John Brown had tried to start a national conflict over slavery and he had failed.

The minority who had moral objections to slavery would have been in the same condition as are those today who hold moral objections to abortion or same-sex marriage----they could voice their objections, they could try to restrict the practice, but the fundamental law of the land was against them.

The Supreme Court, in the Dred Scott decision, had ruled that slavery was protected by the Constitution and that “neither the president nor the congress” could end the practice; that could be done only by the states.

President Lincoln, in his first inaugural address, said he had no intention of interfering with slavery where it already existed, and he could do nothing to stop the spread of slavery into the new territories because of the ruling of the Court. Obviously, Lincoln was ready to compromise on slavery because he had no other option. Even when Lincoln issued the Emancipation

Proclamation he said that if the Southern states returned to the Union within ninety days slavery would remain intact. So the Civil War cannot be viewed as a moral crusade against slavery.

Slavery was an issue which caused festering dissent but it was a political issue and not a moral one for most Americans and, as a political issue, it was open to compromise.

James McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*, notes that 10% of Confederates said they fought for slavery; 5% of U.S. soldiers said they fought to end slavery. The rest, on both sides, said they fought to protect their homes.

I have seen thousands of Civil War monuments. I have never seen any U.S. monument which says the unit honored fought to end slavery; they all say the unit fought to preserve the Union. C.S. monuments focus on defense of home.

If a person viewing a monument looks at the events which brought the nation to war, using the point of view of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, that person will think “slavery”; if the viewer looks at the motives which caused men to enlist, using the evidence of the men themselves, they will see “defense of home and family.”

What you see in these monuments depends on what question you ask, and whether your viewpoint is 21<sup>st</sup> Century values or 19<sup>th</sup> Century evidence.

A related argument used against these monuments is that they were put up during the “Era of Jim Crow.”

**True.** Most of these monuments were put up between 1880 and 1920. This was the time when segregation began to be practiced, both *de jure* and *de facto*. Keep in mind, however, that this was a national practice, approved by the U.S. Supreme Court. Seven justices voted in favor of the decision in *Plesy v. Ferguson*, including all from the North; the lone dissenting vote was from a Southerner. This ruling was upheld by the Court six times over the next 55 years and 35 states enacted segregation laws.

What were the racial conditions in the North during this period? During this time the “Great Migration” of African Americans began as people left the South to seek better jobs and economic conditions in the North. On arriving in the North these migrants found segregated neighborhoods, segregated schools, and limits on the types of employment open to them. As the African American population in the North grew the resurgent Klan gained membership in the North; indeed, the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Klan was much more powerful in the North than it was in the South. The number of lynchings and race riots in the North increased dramatically.

Jim Crow did not have a “southern drawl.” He had a home on the west coast, in the plains states, in the mid-west and in New England.

During this “Era of Jim Crow” Civil War monuments were going up all over the nation, and they were being erected at a faster rate in the North than in the South, the North had more money. In Washington, D.C., there are 16 Union memorials and most of them were dedicated between 1880 and 1920. Columbus, Ohio; Springfield, Illinois; Indianapolis, Indiana” and Des Moines, Iowa, all erected civil monuments during this period as did scores of counties in the North.

Why so many monuments all over the nation during this period? The veterans of the war were growing old and wanted to see that their deeds were remembered. 1890 was the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war, 1915 was the 50<sup>th</sup>. The United States had been involved in two wars, Spanish-American and World War I, which aroused national patriotism and a desire to memorialize the past. So many memorials were erected during this time that the number of companies producing them rose from four to sixty-three.

So, Civil War monuments were not, are not, “a Southern thing” but a national one. The statement that the timing of the erection of these monuments reflects a racial view is at best an oversimplification and at worst

a gross distortion of the facts.

An additional argument used against these monuments are that the people who erected them believed in “White Supremacy.” The 19<sup>th</sup> Century & early 20<sup>th</sup> Century term is “Anglo-Saxon Superiority.” “White Supremacy” was not a common phrase until the Supreme Court used it in the *Brown, et al, v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.

Most likely this is true. Almost all Caucasians in this time period believed they were superior to all other races. This belief was prevalent in Europe, where it was used to justify the colonization of Africa, the Pacific, India, and parts of Asia.

This belief was just as prevalent in the North as it was in the South. Examples include Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge who advocated immigration restrictions of all non-whites to prevent the “dilution of the traits which have made this nation great.” His statue stands on the Statehouse lawn in Boston. The Morrill Land-grant Act of 1863, commonly called “The Homestead Act”, opened for settlement all public lands from Iowa to the Pacific Ocean, but the promise of 160 acres of free land was limited to Caucasians. The U.S. Government put up “whites only” signs in front of The Little House on the Prairie. Theodore Roosevelt encouraged war against Spain so the U.S. could take control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the

Philippines for the uplifting and civilization of “lesser people.”

If you would like to know more about this matter I recommend C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, and David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Both these men are associated with Yale University.

Woodward points out that segregation began in the North, specifically in Boston, and that it spread from there to the rest of the country. Blight observes that within fifteen years the Union veterans and the Confederate veterans had agreed that “the South fought for states rights without slavery and the North fought for Union without freedom.”

It is difficult to assess the motives of people who lived a century and more ago. It is easy to read into their actions our views, but doing so distorts history and only reveals our personal biases.

BUT---if this arguments of segregation and white supremacy is accepted regarding Confederate monuments, then ALL Civil War monuments, CS and US, must be pulled down because the people who erected them shared the same racial views. They all believed the same thing.

It seems to me that the furor to remove Confederate statues and memorials is yet another chapter in the long story of “blame the South.” The United States does have a racial problem, and has had for a long time. But

the nation has never admitted that this was so. The solution for dealing with race has always been “blame the South.” By doing so the rest of the nation can be relieved of the burden of looking into its own local problems and issues while placing all the blame on one section.

Today this is quite clear. No national voices are raised saying Union soldiers did not like black people, even though this is true. No national voice is asking about reminders of “white supremacy” in Northern and Western states, though they are there. All attention is centered on the South because that is so much easier than “sweeping around you own back door.”

So we return to the original question, “Does Sam Davis deserve these honors?” If courage, integrity, honor, and courage mean anything, he does. And since these qualities always will mean something, the memorials to Sam, and his Southern colleagues, should stand as long as the world turns.