

## EYE ON THE NEWS

### Chicago's Monumental Mistake

#### A committee to "review" the city's public shrines shows contempt for American history.

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Last summer, Chicago, like many cities, was engulfed by riots and looting. For several nights, crowds, including professional anarchists, surrounded the statue of Christopher Columbus in Grant Park, the city's central meeting place. They repeatedly tried to topple Columbus from his pedestal. The police deployed to protect the statue; violent clashes resulted. In the dead of night, without notice or consultation, Chicago's mayor, Lori Lightfoot, ordered the statue, along with another Columbus statue located in Chicago's Little Italy, removed.

Not surprisingly, Lightfoot's action sparked intense criticism. Many Chicagoans, particularly those of Italian descent, were furious. Others, including members of the city council, feared that Lightfoot was giving in to intimidation and encouraging further unrest. Lightfoot tried to tamp down the controversy by saying that the removal was temporary, but few believe that these statues will ever return.

Because Lightfoot needs cover to get rid of them permanently, she appointed a committee to review all public monuments in Chicago. And because we live in a time of rapidly advancing wokeness, it is no surprise that the committee consists largely of self-described artists, identity-group activists, left-wing professors, and museum bureaucrats.

The committee has come up with a hit list, identifying 41 monuments that might be eliminated after a period for public comment ends this spring. It has not been shy about including figures at the commanding heights of American history: George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Benjamin Franklin. It also lists lesser figures, such as William McKinley; some of more local interest, such as explorers Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet; and plaques honoring groups, such as pioneers. Notwithstanding the heavy presence of artists on the committee, some works on the list of the possibly proscribed are artistically distinguished, such as Augustus Saint-Gaudens's statue of Abraham Lincoln in Lincoln Park.

So far, the process has been a travesty of governmental deliberation. The committee provides no specific reasons for including any particular monument. Its broad principles for listing a monument include "presenting selective, overly simplified views of history"—as if a monument can ever provide a comprehensive distillation of the past.

The committee's focus is not confined to pruning a few monuments of secondary figures whom recent discoveries have shown unworthy of celebration. George Washington and

Abraham Lincoln regularly rank first and second on the list of our greatest presidents. No general was more responsible for the Union's victory in the Civil War than was Grant. Benjamin Franklin is surely one of the greatest Americans who was never president. Detractors have pointed to these figures' flaws, but few historical figures of any importance were flawless. In any event, their virtues far outweigh their offenses, and they are celebrated not for their errors but for their outstanding accomplishments.

To eliminate or denigrate monuments to these figures is to denounce the core of what America has been. Without these great men, who brought the country into being and sustained it in difficult times, the U.S. would not have attracted the ancestors of many of those who sit on the committee. America remains the most popular destination for immigrants because of the polity that these predecessors helped create. Monuments exist, in part, to express gratitude for our present circumstances. In challenging these memorials, the committee instead treats America's past as a cause for collective shame.

It also engages in cherry-picking. For example, the committee has declined to list statues of Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet in the era of the #MeToo movement, it has become clear that his treatment of women was far from exemplary. His comments on North Vietnamese Communists reveal a blind spot toward the totalitarianism that continues to affect many Vietnamese and billions of others. Of course, these defects, like those of Washington and Lincoln, are no reason not to celebrate King's great contributions with monuments—as Chicago has rightly done.

In response to criticism of its list, the committee said that it did not necessarily favor eliminating the monuments. Instead, it suggested, the city could add proper context to them. But what would this mean? Any "context" for George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or, indeed, Martin Luther King that was not merely casting aspersions would run for pages and require a deep immersion in the past. Such an immersion might well be worthwhile, but it is not what most monuments are created to provide.

Liberal societies allow people to pursue their own projects (and, increasingly, identities). And yet even a liberal society needs some shared ties of national memory to hold people together despite their differences. The Chicago committee suggests that monuments to such a memory should either be removed entirely or be transformed into screens on which we can project contemporary grievances. In attacking the best of our forebears, Lightfoot and her committee not only make our common past a casualty of our divided present. They also threaten the foundation on which our future would be built.

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