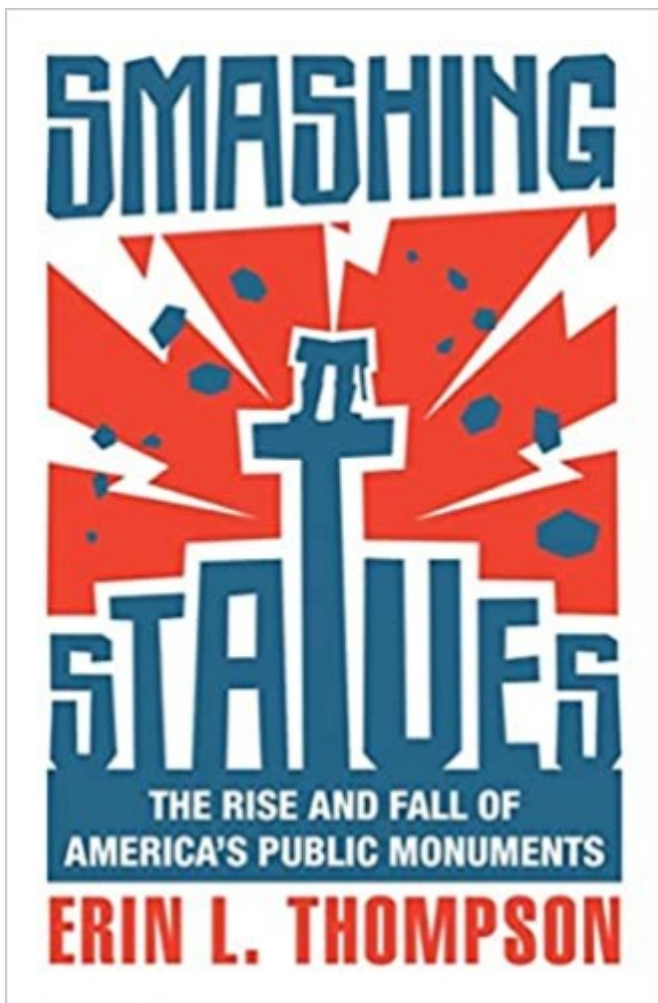


The American tradition of tearing down statues

Public monuments hold power. So does their destruction, says historian Erin Thompson.

by [Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue

In Review



Smashing Statues

The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments

By Erin L. Thompson

W. W. Norton

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In summer 2020, the United States experienced a nationwide reckoning with its racist past, ignited by the police murder of George Floyd and often centered on the symbols enshrined in our memorial landscape. Across the country, activists tore down about 35 monuments to controversial figures, including Confederate leaders and soldiers. Another 130 monuments were taken down through official channels. President Donald Trump retaliated by signing Executive Order 13933, instructing federal law enforcement to prosecute anyone caught damaging federal monuments or statues. “Long prison terms for these lawless acts against our Great Country!” Trump tweeted shortly after the signing.

To judge by the former president’s fuming response, one might conclude that tearing down statues is a deeply un-American deed, an act of treason against public memory. However, legal scholar and art historian Erin L. Thompson thoughtfully and astutely discredits that notion. In fact, according to Thompson, the nation was forged in the destruction of historical symbols.

Smashing Statues opens during another sweltering summer: 1776, just days after the Second Continental Congress ratified the Declaration of Independence. Following a public reading of the document in New York City, a crowd of average citizens and Continental Army volunteers, buoyed by their discovery of their “inalienable Rights” to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” tore down a gilded statue of England’s King George III. After yanking the figure from its base, the crowd chopped it apart with axes. One protester even put a bullet through the downed monarch’s head.

For Thompson, this scene is emblematic of colonists’ desire “to abolish British rule by destroying its most prominent symbol on the island.” It is also instructive for our present moment. Statues, she writes, are symbols of power. They are designed not merely to remember the past but to use the past to enforce particular ways of thinking and acting in the present. The statue of King George III was designed by the Crown to remind British colonists who held the political power; when colonists claimed self-determination and toppled the king’s regime, they also tore down this symbol of his authority.

Contemporary statue smashing in the United States, Thompson argues, is also about casting off the symbols of an old regime, one of White supremacy and racial subjugation. “In reality, monuments go up whenever a society changes and they fall whenever a society changes again,” she writes. “Anyone who has ever taken a snapshot of an ex off their refrigerator after a breakup can understand the urge to remove a monument that celebrates a vision of power or society that no longer holds true.”

Thompson’s book introduces readers to the ways in which statues were used, starting in the 19th century, to enshrine a particular vision of American power—one predicated on a racial, gender, and class hierarchy that presumed the supremacy of White male elites. She tells of Horatio Greenough, “the father of monuments” in the United States, who sculpted a popular 1851 monument called *Rescue* that depicted a “superior” White settler triumphing over an “inferior” Native American. *Rescue* was installed in front of the US Capitol, where its portrayal of America’s violent subjugation of Indigenous peoples stood for all to see until 1958, when it was removed not because of protest but to make way for needed repair work on the building’s facade.

She likewise describes the hundreds of Confederate monuments built across the South in the 1880s and 1890s that portray average soldiers in “parade rest,” a pose for demonstrating obedience to military superiors. Contrary to what boosters and architects claimed, these statues did not celebrate Confederate rank and file for their bravery or skill. Instead, as Thompson ably reveals through a compelling reading of historical records and statuary forms, the politicians and civic leaders who designed, erected, and paid for these statues did so because they hoped that putting parade-rest soldiers in public spaces would remind everyday southerners of the importance of “deference to their social superiors.” Thompson thus concludes that these earliest appeals to “Confederate heritage” were about asserting power, not venerating a fabled, bygone past.

Thompson also invites readers to meet the present-day community leaders leading the charge to remove our outdated symbols, including Mike Forcia, a Bad River Anishinaabe activist who orchestrated the removal of a statue of Christopher Columbus in his native St. Paul, Minnesota, in 2020.

In addition, Thompson brings light to legislative efforts—largely, though not exclusively, by conservative lawmakers—to prevent the legal removal of statues and

monuments from public spaces, such as the 2017 Alabama Memorial Preservation Act, which prohibits “removing or altering public monuments over forty years old” and offers no provisions for taking down statues deemed unacceptable by the community in which they are located. Calling these bills “some of America’s least democratic uses of power,” Thompson notes that 18 states have proposed similar legislation just since 2020.

Religious communities do not play a particularly prominent role in Thompson’s narrative, but they are present. For instance, Thompson details the design and creation of the 90-foot-tall Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial, a colossal celebration of southern heroes etched into the side of a mountain near Atlanta, but she does not mention that its second sculptor, Henry Augustus Lukeman, came to Stone Mountain fresh off the creation of a bronze statue of Francis Asbury, installed in Washington, DC, in 1924 and funded by donations from hundreds of thousands of American Methodists. Without a doubt, America’s Protestants were involved in creating, funding, and sustaining many of the statues and monuments that litter the nation’s memorial landscape. How should we reckon with our complicity?

Thompson offers one possible answer. In her closing chapter, she describes the work of Reverend Levi Coombs III and the members of his First Refuge Progressive Baptist Church in Camden, New Jersey. For years they had been working toward the removal of the city’s statue of Columbus, an effort that culminated in June 2020 when officials agreed to take it down. Rather than let the symbol just disappear, Coombs and his parishioners planned a public march from the church to the park as well as a series of speeches that explained what the statue symbolized and why they wanted to remove it.

Thompson sees this effort, led by a church community, as emblematic of the work that all Americans should be doing: not just smashing statues but also smashing the ideas that led to their erection. “Removing a monument alone does nothing to change our future,” she writes:

Change happens through the conversations we have when we talk about monuments and the history they embody. A removal without a conversation hides the problem. We need to acknowledge how and why our monuments were created. We need to reveal their secrets in order to take away this power.

Churches, especially predominantly White ones, ought to be centers for this kind of discussion and dismantling. We should use our pulpits and our Sunday school classrooms to make confession, to seek repentance, and to enshrine justice and equality at the center of our public memory. We have had the power to put up these symbols; now we can use our power to take them down.