

JEFFERSON STATUE REMOVED FROM NYC OFFICE

On October 18, New York City officials voted unanimously to remove a 7-foot-tall statue of Thomas Jefferson from the chambers of the New York City Council in City Hall. Perversely, the person most responsible for declaring Jefferson a racist is himself a racist, New York State Assemblyman Charles Barron. What should they do with the Jefferson statue? "I think it should be put in storage or destroyed or whatever," he said.

Barron started his activist career as a member of the Black Panthers, a racist organization. The ADL, which tracks anti-Semitism, says he "has associated with anti-Semitic hate groups and promoted extreme anti-Israel positions intended to demonize the Jewish state since his election [to the City Council] in 2001."

The ADL does not exaggerate. Barron said in 2009, "Gaza is a virtual death camp, the same kind of conditions the Nazis imposed on the Jews." He also defended Louis Farrakhan, the vicious anti-Semite, claiming he is not a racist.

Barron's loathing of white people once provoked him to do more than just get in their face. "You know some days I get so frustrated I just want to go up to the closest white person and say, 'You can't understand this, it's a black thing,' and then slap him, just for my mental health."

Though Barron argues that Jefferson oppressed people, he himself has embraced some of the most notorious oppressors on earth. At a ceremony honoring Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi, a known terrorist, he called him his "hero" and an "African freedom fighter." Similarly, he supported Robert Mugabe, the Zimbabwean president who was accused of atrocities

in his home country.

Barron has also worked against his own people by opposing charter public schools for blacks. His opposition to raising academic standards at the City University of New York also belied a conviction that blacks could not compete with whites. Worse, in 2011, when 12 failing public schools were slated to close, he showed up at a hearing not to protest the schools, but the decision to shut them down.

As to be expected, Barron refuses to salute the American flag and is opposed to the Pledge of Allegiance.

If Barron knew anything about history, he would know that when Jefferson owned slaves, slavery was commonplace all over the world. While slavery was made illegal in the U.S. in 1865, it was not made illegal in Africa until 1981, and it still exists there in some countries.

No one put in motion the end to slavery in the United States more than Jefferson. He wrote the Declaration of Independence, detailing the principles by which the cause for civil rights could proceed.

When the Declaration and the Constitution were written, there would have been no union had there not been a compromise with the slave states. Most students today do not know that it was written into the Constitution that the international slave trade would end on January 1, 1808. The president who made good on that pledge was Thomas Jefferson.

Indeed, two years earlier, in his annual address to Congress, our third president called for the "criminalization of international slave trade" on the first possible date. The following year he signed into law the provision that no new slaves were permitted to be imported into the U.S.

Some have said that Jefferson fathered slave children with Sally Hemings. The fact is there is no existing DNA of

Jefferson available. The DNA that was used in tests to settle this controversy came from descendants of Field Jefferson, his uncle. Any one of two dozen Jeffersons could have been the father of Hemings' 5th child.

Perhaps the most insulting aspect of this assault on Jefferson is the fact that had it not been for him, Martin Luther King would have gotten nowhere. King called the Declaration a "promissory note," one that black folks could use to leverage their rights. No, all men in the late 18th century were not treated as equals, but thanks to Jefferson, they knew they were "created" equal, and could therefore pursue their rights.

Nowhere in the world at that time had any country had anything like the Declaration, which is why slavery was considered unobjectionable. Not to acknowledge this is pure ignorance.

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King quotes Jefferson's phrase, "all men are created equal." That was his inspiration. He called on blacks to continue "standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence."

King succeeded because he had a mature understanding of history. He also knew how to mobilize his people to achieve freedom, leaning on the principles of liberty encoded in the Declaration.

Jefferson had his failings. But without his contribution, the progress that has been made in realizing freedom for everyone would not have been made. That is his true legacy. Shame on those too myopic, and too saddled with their own bigoted lens, not to see it.