

Should Christopher Columbus, and some other historical figures, still be standing tall?

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Highlight: Rutgers history professor Erica Armstrong Dunbar has dedicated much of her career to telling the story of Ona Judge, one of the more than three hundred Black people enslaved by President George Washington and his wife, Martha. Ona Judge managed to escape when the couple was living here in Philadelphia, the nation's capital, during the 1790s. She was never captured not that the Washingtons didn't try. And for Dunbar, that reckoning may mean taking Washington down from his pedestal, literally.

Body

JANE PAULEY: Not everyone will be celebrating Christopher Columbus on the holiday tomorrow. In fact, critics question whether he or some other historical figures should be standing tall at all. It's a list that Mo Rocca tells us seems to be growing.

(Begin VT)

MO ROCCA: What do you think when you look at that statue?

ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR: It's George Washington. It is the first President of the United States. It's the leader of the American Revolution, but I also see a slaveholder.

MO ROCCA: Rutgers history professor Erica Armstrong Dunbar has dedicated much of her career to telling the story of Ona Judge, one of the more than three hundred Black people enslaved by President George Washington and his wife, Martha.

ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR: George Washington walked up and down this corridor, this area.

MO ROCCA: Ona Judge managed to escape when the couple was living here in Philadelphia, the nation's capital, during the 1790s. She was never captured--not that the Washingtons didn't try.

ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR: The Washingtons were very adamant that they wanted Ona Judge to return. And what's so very interesting is to think about George and Martha Washington relentlessly pursuing Ona Judge. He was using slave-catching agents to collect Martha

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Washington`s, and his property. And we have to reckon that there was that side of Washington alongside of his contributions to the creation of the nation.

MO ROCCA: And for Dunbar, that reckoning may mean taking Washington down from his pedestal, literally.

Should some monuments to George Washington be removed?

ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR: I think it makes sense to have monuments of remembrance for George Washington in spaces where there`s a direct connection to him. But do I need to see George Washington`s face in every park or in places throughout cities? No, not necessarily, because for some people he`s a reminder of the trauma of slavery.

MO ROCCA: The long-running battle over America`s monuments came to a head in 2015 after a White supremacist murdered nine African-Americans at Charleston, South Carolina`s Mother Emanuel Church. Since then, around one hundred Confederate statues have been dishonorably discharged. But since the death of George Floyd, the range of figures targeted as racist or oppressive has expanded well beyond the Civil War South.

WOMAN #1: Take it down.

CROWD (in unison): Black lives matter.

ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR: Monuments are literally elevated above the people, right? This is a wrestle over power; this is a wrestle over who gets to tell the nation`s history, who gets to be at the top of that history.

MO ROCCA: But the power politics behind memorials aren`t always obvious. Christopher Columbus has long been controversial--a brilliant navigator and a brutal colonialist.

MAN #1: That`s telling me my people are less than human, my people are brown-skinned beasts.

MO ROCCA: But many Columbus statues were erected in the early twentieth century as symbols of pride for Italian-Americans, a group that had faced fierce prejudice, even lynchings, in the 1890s.

MAN #2: Slapping every Italian-American in the face with this BS that`s going on here.

LONNIE BUNCH: For many Italian-Americans, this was a way to demonstrate that they contributed to making America, a way to say that they were equal.

MO ROCCA: As Secretary of the Smithsonian, Lonnie Bunch may be the closest thing America has to a national curator. He believes monuments should reflect today`s values.

LONNIE BUNCH: I think that what the Columbus statue tells us is that it`s a challenge to take something that was done seventy years ago and help it evolve. So, my notion is that some of these statues can be pruned.

MAN #3: We have to get rid of every racist monument in this country.

WOMAN #2: It`s history. It is part of history, and it should stay here.

MO ROCCA: In general, are you heartened by all of these debates?

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LONNIE BUNCH: Any time people talk about history, I'm a happy guy. And I think there's something powerful about a country periodically debating who it is, and who it wants to become.

MO ROCCA: But what many have found jarring is the lack of debate. Missionary Junipero Serra, torched; Augustus Saint-Saudens' tribute to an all-Black Union regiment, graffitied; Thomas Jefferson, toppled; Ulysses S. Grant, fallen; even Gandhi has been bloodied.

As a historian, do you start to wonder, I wonder if all these people know their history?

ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR: Well, actually no, I don't wonder. I know that they don't. I know that the vast majority of Americans don't know their history.

MO ROCCA: Does that bother you?

ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR: It horrifies me. I also understand that there's-- there's anger. There's rage. And sometimes there's collateral damage.

RICHARD BROOKHISER: There is a big element of anti-Americanism in this. Not only anti the bad things, but anti the good things, because there are no good things, right? The whole history is corrupt. And I think that's wrong.

MO ROCCA: Writer Richard Brookhiser thinks a little bit of humility is in order.

RICHARD BROOKHISER: I mean, if you're only going to have statues of perfect people, you're going to be left with Jesus Christ. You're not going to have a lot of other statues. People are complicated. We have to realize that about ourselves and about the dead.

MO ROCCA: Brookhiser is the biographer of several founding fathers, including Washington.

RICHARD BROOKHISER: Washington was a hero in the struggle for self-rule. And the struggle for self-rule is the big story of the last two hundred and fifty years. It includes all the other stories. It includes anti-colonialism, it includes the struggle against racism. The American Revolution was the greatest experiment in human political history, and it's crazy to throw that in the garbage can.

LONNIE BUNCH: I do not think you erase Washington and Jefferson and, of course, obviously, now everybody loves Hamilton.

MO ROCCA: Lonnie Bunch sees in Washington and our other slave-holding founding fathers contradictions we should strive to understand.

LONNIE BUNCH: And it's almost like saying: how do you understand your parents if you only know a little bit about them? The more you know about them, the more you better understand who they were, and then who you are. And that's what I'd like us to see with some of the founding fathers. Help people understand a little better who they once were, and who they can be.

MO ROCCA: It's a big moment in anyone's life when they realize their parents aren't perfect people.

LONNIE BUNCH: You're right. And then as you get older, you realize they were more perfect than you thought initially.

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MO ROCCA: Perhaps the best way to bring peace to our memorial landscape is to add statues. In 2017 Philadelphia dedicated this statue of Octavius Catto, a nineteenth century African-American civil rights activist who was murdered on his way to vote. It's right outside City Hall, which is where we bumped into Philly resident Les Starkey and his daughter, Summer.

LES STARKEY: This gentleman finally got his due.

MO ROCCA: Seeing this statue gives you a feeling of--

LES STARKEY: Pride. I lift my chest up a little bit more. I do, man. I mean, it's one of us. I can do something great like him. He was a great man, Summer. We're going to read more about him, okay? I promise.

CROWD (in unison): Black lives matter.

MO ROCCA: Passions may continue flaring in the short term.

MAN #4: Are you angry?

CROWD (in unison): Yes.

MAN #4: Are you angry?

CROWD (in unison): Yes.

MAN #4: I'm mad. We're mad.

MO ROCCA: But as in all things historical, it's important to consider the long view.

This isn't the first time in history that statues have been toppled.

RICHARD BROOKHISER: No. There was-- there was a statue toppled in New York City in 1776, a gilded statue of George III, which had been put up when we all thought he was a good guy.

MO ROCCA: The British monarch.

RICHARD BROOKHISER: The British monarch. We were fighting a revolution against him. The statue was torn down. And the story is it was made of lead, and the lead was melted into bullets.

MO ROCCA: Are any of these things permanent?

RICHARD BROOKHISER: Nothing is permanent. You know, we're all going to die. There'll come a time when the United States doesn't exist anymore.

MO ROCCA: Some things last longer than others.

RICHARD BROOKHISER: Well, some things last longer than others, and let's hope the good things last longest.

(End VT)

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

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