

These Black Americans see a statue memorializing Lincoln in different ways

Jul 10, 2020 6:30 PM EDT

Over the past few weeks, there has been extensive debate across the U.S. about statues depicting the Confederacy and other troubled aspects of American history. In the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington, D.C., the Emancipation Memorial – also known as the Freedman's Memorial -- is one such symbol. Jeffrey Brown talks to four Black Americans to gauge differing views on the structure.

Read the Full Transcript

Judy Woodruff:

There has been considerable conversation in this country about the taking down of Confederate statues. And there are many more debates brewing over the messages other memorials and statues send and how many people — and how people may perceive them differently.

In the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington, D.C., stands the Emancipation Memorial, which has been a flash point in recent weeks.

Jeffrey Brown talked to four Black Americans on their varied views on it.

It's part of our ongoing arts and culture series, Canvas.

Jeffrey Brown:

A hot afternoon in Washington, D.C.

Man:

I am reminded every single day that I am less than a white person, whether I want to admit it or not.

Jeffrey Brown:

A heated exchange over a statue of Abraham Lincoln standing above a kneeling newly freed African American man.

Last month, protesters gathered to demand the statue be taken down. The National Park Service, which oversees the site, erected a fence as protection.

Man:

This statue represents the oppression of Black people.

Jeffrey Brown:

Twenty-year-old Harvard University student Glenn Foster helped organize the call to take down the statue. He sees one man shirtless, with broken shackles, at the feet of another man in a position of power.

Glenn Foster:

How are you going to represent Black people looking free when you have them kneeling before a white man? What imagery does that teach our young children about our history?

And what does it teach them moving forward in terms of achieving their liberation and freedom on their own terms? A lot of older people believe that this statue is fine because of the context of where they have learned why it came to be, instead of understanding the imagery of what it stands for.

Jeffrey Brown:

Set in Lincoln Park, the bronze statue, called the Emancipation or Freedman's Memorial, dates to 1876. It was intended to honor the slain president and commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation, the document signed by Lincoln to end slavery in the Confederacy.

Marcia Cole:

Let's not negate what happened. You need physical evidence that proved what happened, so that we don't all have to go back to it again. That is the Black story.

Jeffrey Brown:

And even now, instead of a symbol of subservience, Marcia Cole sees one of liberation.

Marcia Cole:

I see an African American male figure on one knee, and he's in the process of rising. His head was up. He was looking forward to a life of freedom. And that's what I saw.

Jeffrey Brown:

At the recent protests, Cole picked up a bullhorn, debated with activists, and made her case for keeping the statue.

For her, there's more to the story. She's studied and reenacts the life of Charlotte Scott, a freed African American woman who raised funds to build the memorial after Lincoln's assassination.

Marcia Cole:

She could be my — one of my direct ancestors. So, I want people to know that they were individuals who had individual stories.

Jeffrey Brown:

And for you, that story, her story, is intrinsically tied to the statue, and, therefore, keep the statue?

Marcia Cole:

Exactly. It honors her generosity of heart.

I would like to see it remain as a teaching moment. Without artifacts, visual artifacts, people tend to forget. And this statue there, while it may provoke some discomfort, discomfort is good, because it would inspire inquiry.

Jeffrey Brown:

The complications and complexities were there from the start, a memorial paid for by Blacks, but designed by a white sculptor, Thomas Ball, in a process controlled by a white-run organization.

The famed abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass delivered an historic speech at the 1876 dedication, but also took the opportunity to point to Lincoln's shortcomings.

And now those complexities have burst anew, as the nation confronts the continuing racism of today and the legacy it was built upon.

Marcus Goodwin:

It's not Lincoln that's at issue. I'm fine with us memorializing him. He was a monumental president. But it's this depiction, specifically, that's the issue.

Jeffrey Brown:

Last month, 30-year-old Marcus Goodwin, a Washington, D.C., real estate developer and now candidate for the D.C. Council, climbed atop the memorial, in public contrast to the kneeling man below.

He then launched a petition drive to remove and relocate the statute.

Marcus Goodwin:

There's no such thing as erasing the past.

My solution is to bring this into a museum, where it can be properly contextualized, where a docent can walk you through and tell you the history and the intentionality behind the art, because it doesn't achieve its intended goal. People see it. They see demeaning imagery.

And maybe it's a generational divide, but we don't see the type of fair and equitable representation that's inherent in the American dream.

Jeffrey Brown:

If you take down or change the symbols or the monuments, is that not changing the past in some way?

Marcus Goodwin:

No. In fact, you're changing the future. And you're doing it for the better, I would say.

Jeffrey Brown:

Goodwin says he got the idea of relocating the statue after seeing reports of a similar demand in Boston, home to a replica of the same monument.

And in recent days, the Boston Art Commission voted unanimously to take it down, without yet deciding where it should go.

It's a debate, says Smithsonian secretary Lonnie Bunch, with many layers.

Lonnie Bunch:

It is about history, but it's about who we are as a nation and who we want to be going forward.

Jeffrey Brown:

One of the nation's preeminent historians, Bunch was also founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

He told us he's for keeping the Emancipation Memorial, but perhaps adding another statue next to it of Frederick Douglass, for example, creating, in a sense, more history.

Lonnie Bunch:

What I want to see is a reasoned process that allows us to discuss, that allows us to bring history before we make decisions of pulling things down.

I think that, yes, we could take that statue down. We could replace it with a statue that just talks about the enslaved. And I think what we'd do is, while, on the one hand, we enrich our understanding, on the other hand, I think we lose the opportunity to help people understand more about Lincoln and who he was and what he did.

Jeffrey Brown:

Bunch thinks these memorials will have to be considered case by case, local decisions by commissions that move with care, but relatively quickly.

Does that surprise you, how kind of deep this has gone?

Lonnie Bunch:

It has surprised me both how deep it's gone and how rapid it's gone, because the challenge is, the statue itself doesn't give us any sense of complexity, nuance or ambiguity. But that's what history does.

Jeffrey Brown:

That may be a lot to ask in an America so greatly divided, seemingly not in a mood for complexity and nuance, now fighting over its past and future one statue at a time.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown.

By – **Jeffrey Brown**

Jeffrey Brown is a senior correspondent and chief arts correspondent for the PBS NewsHour.

By – **Anne Azzi Davenport**

Anne Azzi Davenport is the Senior Coordinating Producer of Canvas.

 **@Annedavenport**