

Good afternoon. Thank you all for coming.

Monument Avenue is one of Richmond's most beautiful streets. Along with Jackson Ward, it is one of only two National Historic Landmark Districts in the City.

Every year, thousands of tourists flock to it, thousands of Richmonders run down it, and still more travel its leafy, cobblestoned lanes on the way to work and home every day.

It's been described as one of the most picturesque grand boulevards and urban residential neighborhoods in the world.

But my fellow Richmonders, something is wrong with this picture. It's the story told by the Confederate monuments that give the street its famous name and have defined its landscape for more than a century.

That story is, at best, an incomplete story – equal parts myth and deception. It was written in stone and bronze more than 100 years ago – not only to distort history by lionizing the architects and defenders of slavery, but also to perpetuate the tyranny and terror of Jim Crow and usher in a new era of white supremacy.

These inanimate objects were designed to do what the Confederate generals and the racist ideologues they depict could not – keep the free African people of Virginia in bondage.

The Lost Cause was their story – and they stuck to it.

But it was not *history*.

Monument Avenue was a real estate development that began with the Lee Statue in 1890, and it succeeded -- as a development venture AND in fabricating the "Lost Cause" ideology as truth.

In fact, it was nostalgia masquerading as history. But over decades this nostalgia became embedded and subsequently a part of our history, part of the false narrative – the alternative facts, if you will -- that we will begin to fact check, starting today.

I got into politics and government to give a voice to the voiceless and right wrongs. When I was running for office, I said that these Confederate statues require context – that is, an explanation of what they actually are – who built them, why they were built and how they came to preside over the culture of this city.

Ladies and gentlemen this is our time, and it's our responsibility, to set the historical record straight.

These will be difficult discussions, but we need to have them.

It is my belief that without telling the WHOLE story, these monuments constitute a default endorsement of a shameful period in our nation and in our city – one that does a disservice to the principles of racial equality, tolerance and unity we celebrate as values in One Richmond today.

And that is why I am pleased to announce the creation of the **Monument Avenue Commission**.

The job of this commission will be to solicit public input and make recommendations to the Mayor's Office on how to best tell the real story of these Monuments.

We have assembled a distinguished and experienced team of experts – a number of them who are here with us today. Historians, artists, authors and community leaders who will guide this process.

I am honored to announce that Christy Coleman, CEO of the American Civil War Museum, and Greg Kimball, Director of Education and Outreach for the Library of Virginia, have agreed to serve as Commission co-chairs.

The City is also fortunate to have as commission members: Councilman Andreas Addison, Ed Ayers, Stacy Burrs, Sarah Driggs, Councilwoman Kim Gray, Julian Hayter, Lauranett Lee, and Coleen A. Butler-Rodriguez.

And I am grateful for the leadership and willingness of David Ruth, Superintendent for the National Parks Service in Central Virginia, and Julie Langan, Director of the State Historic Preservation Office at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, to serve as ad hoc advisors to the Commission.

The commission will hold two public meetings before the end of September, and dates, times and locations will be announced in the coming days. Residents will also be able to offer suggestions and input on a web site that has been created: That site is: www.monumentavenuecommission.org

In addition to taking on the responsibility of explaining the monuments that currently exist, I have also asked the commission to look into and solicit public opinion on changing the face of Monument Avenue by adding new monuments that would reflect a broader, more inclusive story of our city. That is our goal.

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I know there is pain in the history of our city. For many African Americans, that pain is personal. As an African American and the Mayor of this City, I am keenly aware that the past walks with us every day.

William Faulkner said: “The past isn’t dead. It’s not even past.”

This is about our future. And if we want to redefine our city’s future, we must correct the mistakes of its past in the present.

Sheffield Hale, the President and CEO of the Atlanta History Center, said: “The past has much to teach us about who we are, and where we are – if we let it.”

We have a chance to advance the truth, the complete truth, by using these symbols not for celebration, but as tools to educate. I wish these monuments had never been built, but whether we like it or not, they are part of the history of this city. *And removal would never wash away that stain.*

And the need to educate and explain our history has never been more important than it is today. We live in an age of alternative facts and fake news, Holocaust deniers and 9/11 conspiracy theorists, spouting manipulative and misguided narratives designed to build walls between us, not bridges.

Whether they are cast in concrete or birthed in the cyber soup of social media, the hate that built them will not go away just because you tear it down, turn it off or unfollow it. That is especially true when it comes to issues of race in our country.

Recent surveys on our monuments and recent demonstrations in other parts of the country tell a story of division, and affirm the idea that racism doesn’t start, nor will it end, because of some statues on a tree lined street – it resides in hearts and minds.

And the way to change hearts is to educate minds.

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Right now many people probably drive past these statutes and are impressed by their scale and grandeur.

But they don’t realize that at the same time the statues on Monument Avenue were being erected between 1890 and 1919, the rights of African-Americans were being systematically removed.

In 1867, roughly 106,000 African American men were registered to vote in Virginia. By the time of the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1902 there were 147,000 African American men registered.

By 1905 there were fewer than 10,000.

Between 1867 and 1895, nearly 100 black Virginians served in the two houses of the General Assembly or in the Constitutional Convention of 1867–1868. By 1889, there were four black legislators left.

By the early 1890's, as Jim Crow took hold, there were no more black legislators in Virginia... until 1968.

Right now, you won't find that on any monument on Monument Avenue.

But the legacy of the long retreat from democracy that these Monuments commemorate lingers in our City to this very day.

See, having a complete history is important.

My recent visit to Montpelier, the home of our 4th president, James Madison, has set an example that is worthy of mention.

With the help of a generous benefactor, they just completed a massive renovation of the grounds that included restoration of the South Yard of the estate, where 281 slaves once toiled and suffered.

The people behind the restoration, and Montpelier's important new exhibit, the "Mere Distinction of Colour" believe that telling the complete story of our past is the bridge to a more enlightened future.

So, aside from telling the truth to what already exists, what does a "complete story" look like?

Well, I think we should consider what Monument Avenue would look like with a little more diversity.

Right now, Arthur Ashe stands alone as the only true champion on that street.

Nevertheless, Richmond's history includes other champions, of course – like the United States Colored Troops – who marched into this city on April 3, 1865 and raised the American flag.

And there are champions in modern times, like Oliver Hill, a defender of equality, who led and won one of the most important civil rights battles in our nation's history.

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Richmond is unique among cities in many respects in how it has handled its complex and conflicted Civil War and Civil Rights history.

We WERE the Capital of the Confederacy and ARE the city of the first African-American Governor elected in the United States – L. Douglas Wilder.

We have expanded the conversation and understanding of history and erected a Reconciliation statue acknowledging this city's role in the Triangle Slave Trade in Shockoe Bottom.

And we are moving forward developing a plan to commemorate the Devil's Half Acre and Richmond's African Burial Ground along Shockoe Creek.

We have a statue of Abraham Lincoln and his son Tadd next to the American Civil War Museum, the only museum dedicated to telling the story of the Civil War from multiple perspectives: Union and Confederate, enslaved and free African Americans, soldiers and civilians.

Next month we will dedicate a new statue of Richmond's own Maggie Walker on Broad Street, and next year, an Emancipation statute will be commemorated on Brown's Island.

These are all important projects, and symbols that help educate and build a bridge to understanding by offering a more complete history.

But let me suggest another strategy to balancing the historical ledger in our City through.

Let's make our next monument a new school.

A new community center.

An alternative to public housing that restores dignity and pride of place.

America's history has been written and rewritten; and our struggle with race in this country persists – not because public monuments rise or fall, but because privately, fear makes people falter.

But what lasts, the legacy that will endure, are the people we build, the minds we enlighten and the hearts we open on both sides.

When we do that, we will not just have a few new monuments. We will have *thousands* – LIVING monuments to understanding, inclusiveness, equality and promise.

They are the ones who will know the difference between myth and fact. They will know the difference between history and nostalgia.

They will embrace just causes -- not lost causes, and write the next chapter in the history of our city.

That is the opportunity before us. Telling the complete story of Monument Avenue is one very important step on the road to building One Richmond.

So, let's get to work and Make It Happen.

Thank you.