

## History and Statues By Dan Wolpert

My father, Dr. Stanley Wolpert, was a great historian. When he died, a little over a year ago, he was Professor Emeritus at UCLA where he had taught for over 50 years. An author of almost 20 books and numerous other publications, history was his great love and thus I have been hearing about history since literally before I was born. As I grew up, our house was filled with many other great historians from all over the world and I listened to numerous conversations about the importance and nature of history. These formational experiences gave me my love of history, something I seriously pursue as an essential aspect to all my work.

As I listen to the cries of ‘we will forget our history’ if we change statues in the public square, I know that my father is rolling in his grave. For you see we do not learn history from a statue. From classrooms in Los Angeles CA, he was able to teach thousands of students about South Asian history without one statue anywhere in sight. Because, of course, we learn history from books, and research, and conversation.

We must call this argument that connects history and statues what it is: absurd. The irony of such an argument in America is that Americans, on average, are perhaps the most historically ignorant people on earth. It seems that all of these statues have not helped us one iota to know even our own history, no less the history of the world.

This argument is purely a red herring, designed to distract and try to obscure the real issue at stake in changing public images. For this isn’t about history but rather it’s about the story we tell ourselves about history. It’s about the narrative frame, the mythology, a society adopts to keep some groups in power and others oppressed.

Statues of Columbus, Confederate leaders, generals, slave traders, and those who killed Native Americans do not teach us the history of these people, rather they tell us that these people are good and important. They tell us that what these people did was right and righteous and that our society is somehow better for them. In many ways they do the opposite of teaching real history, rather they teach us a false history; a story that our white majority can feel good about and comfortable living with.

America is so new that we don’t have an understanding that, in most of the world, public monuments change all the time. In Florence Italy, next to the great cathedral in the town center, there stands a museum that houses the second largest collection of Christian art in the world; and every single piece in the museum has come out of the cathedral; that is how much has changed over its almost 700 year history.

For its first 244 years as a country, America has lived with certain myths about itself, myths set in stone and bronze and hearts and minds. These are myths of perfection

and greatness, myths of rugged individuals who make it on their own and only do good and right. In these myths there are no millions of dead Africans or Native peoples slaughtered under the most immoral circumstances.

At this moment, we have yet another opportunity to reckon with our history and changing these public monuments is part of this process. Let us not be afraid to actually learn our history, to struggle with it, to face it head on honestly, to deconstruct our myths and come to a new, better, vision for America. That is a use of history that would make my father proud.