

# In time of racial reckoning, Founding Fathers increasingly viewed through modern lens

By [Brian MacQuarrie](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 15, 2020, 8:17 a.m.



Playwright Miranda ADEkoje posed for a portrait at her home in Boston. She is working on a play about Crispus Attucks, a Black man killed during the Boston Massacre, which makes him among the first casualties of the American Revolution. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Toppling statues of Confederate generals and leaders — century-old symbols of brutal white dominance — feels long overdue for many Americans. Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis plunged the country into civil war to maintain the institution of slavery.

But statues of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson have been toppled in Oregon. A bust of Ulysses S. Grant, the Union general who crushed the Confederacy, came down in San Francisco. And a statue of Abraham Lincoln standing over a newly freed slave will be removed from Park Square in Boston.

Targeting Confederate symbols is one step, but a national groundswell for racial justice also has brought renewed scrutiny to Founding Fathers such as Jefferson and Washington, American icons who created a government of soaring democratic ideals but denied those rights to the Black people they and others held in bondage.

“The Revolution had very little regard for the lives of Africans and Native Americans,” said Miranda ADEkoje, a Roxbury woman who is completing a play on Crispus Attucks, a Black and Native American man who was killed by British troops at the Boston Massacre in 1770.

“White supremacy is just weaved into the fabric of this country. Not recognizing the humanity of everyone, especially those whose skins were not white, is so ingrained,” she said.

The debate about the contradictions between the Declaration of Independence and the nation’s legacy of discrimination is not new. The Founders’ links to slavery have been acknowledged in many US classrooms for decades, if not deeply explored, and Jefferson’s radical words that “all men are created equal” have long carried an asterisk.

It’s a complicated question of historical legacy, and a painful one for Black people and others who have been marginalized in the national dialogue. Should the Founders be judged by their contemporaries or by current standards? Why were the statues of them erected, and what do they mean? Is it better to learn from the past instead of erasing it?

“I think people confuse the past with history. The past is over and done with. History is about truth, or trying to find the truth,” said Catherine Allgor, president of the Massachusetts Historical Society, founded in 1791. “The questions change all the time, which is why people write history over and over again.”

“What were the assumptions that they had back then?” Allgor asked. “What were the questions and the issues that these monuments were an answer to? And then you have to say, is it useful for us? History *should* be something that we’re fighting about.”

Ancient Greeks and Romans often pulled down statues as a form of protest, she said. And during the American Revolution, statues of King George III were toppled from their pedestals.

“Maybe the answer is we don’t put up statues to people because the problem with people is they’re very complicated,” Allgor said. “We’re asked to venerate and adore this person, but this person is a person. There is good stuff and bad stuff.”

In the end, she said, “every community should have the art or monuments to history that they want.”

Robert Allison, a Suffolk University professor of American history, said any judgment on the Founders needs to consider the broad picture and the daring, aspirational nature of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, milestones in human history.

“The Founders are always fair game for reassessment — it’s what historians do,” Allison said. “But that is not what is happening now. We are watching a concerted effort to remove history, not to reinterpret it.”

Jefferson, the main author of the Declaration, was “a flawed human being,” Allison said. “But we also know he said these things, and it forces us to try to believe them.”

The words of Martin Luther King Jr. are instructive, Allison said. The great civil rights leader described the Declaration as “a promissory note” for the rights of all Americans, although King added that the country had defaulted on that note for citizens of color.

“You can’t really understand how far you have come, or where you are going, unless you understand where you have been,” Allison said.

Understanding, if not reconciling, the flaws and contradictions of the Founders has always been challenging. Instead of tearing down statues, Allison proposed erecting new ones.

“Where are the statues of Lewis Hayden, Harriet Hayden, and Prince Hall?” he asked, referring to Black abolitionists who lived in Boston. “Why haven’t we put up more monuments to those who have stood up? That’s been the missing step. It’s a lot easier to take something down than to put something up.”

Otherwise, he mused, “the only statue we’re going to be left with is the giant pear in Everett Square” in Dorchester.

“It does seem we have reached a moment where we want to remove historical figures because they do not live up to our high standards,” Allison said. “The Founders understood their own failings.”

Comparing virtues and vices from different eras also is difficult, perhaps more so when academic interest in American history is declining. Fewer college students are interested in the subject, looking instead toward majors with better job

prospects, Allison said. And in public schools, instruction in American history has dwindled.

Even the term Founding Fathers is being reassessed.

Nathaniel Sheidley, president of the organization that oversees the Old State House and Old South Meeting House, said that the term, long confined to the small group of white, propertied statesmen who created the United States, needs to be expanded.

“There were plenty of people who felt themselves on the outside looking in,” said Sheidley, whose organization, Revolutionary Spaces, commissioned ADEkoje’s play on Attucks. In their sweat and struggle, they were founders, too, he said.

“We should scrutinize those held up as the great shapers of our story and judge them as they were, but the most helpful thing is to add more voices,” Sheidley said.

Revolutionary Spaces had expected to amplify those voices this year — the 250th anniversary of the Boston Massacre — but then COVID-19 intervened.

“We intended to build our programming around the Massacre, and to use the Massacre as an invitation to reflect on the intersection of race, citizenship, and memory,” Sheidley said.

“We planned to use the figure of Crispus Attucks as a lens, a figure that is spot-on with the questions we’re grappling with today,” he added. “What was he fighting for when he was standing on King Street that night, and how does he speak to us today?”

The May 25 death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police brought

new, searing relevance to ADEkoje's play about Attucks, a two-person piece titled "I Am This Place."

"Suddenly, the first figure to fall in the Boston Massacre was trending on Twitter," ADEkoje said of the references to Attucks following Floyd's death. "The play is almost painfully significant, this idea of protest and the militarization of police."

The play will be presented at the Old South Meeting House at a date to be determined by safety and other logistics. In the interim, questions about monuments, statues, and the realities of America's past will continue.

For ADEkoje, that means putting the Revolutionary leaders in frank context rather than trying to erase them, and judging the bad with the good.

"Put these figures in a Museum of Painful History," ADEkoje said. "What will we put back in place of these statues? Fill that space with a balm of equity and empowerment."

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