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Testimony of Eli Lehrer
President, The R Street Institute

Before the House Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch for Fiscal Year
2022

Dear Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Herrera Beutler and members of the Committee:

My name is Eli Lehrer and I am president of the R Street Institute, a right-of-center think tank located in Washington, D.C. I am a conservative and a member of the Republican Party. Prior to co-founding R Street, I spent much of my career in the conservative movement. I worked at places like the Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute and I served in an executive role at the Heartland Institute. In the mid-00s, I worked for the Republican majority leader of the United States Senate and had an office inside the United States Capitol where I saw portions of the building's statutory collection every day at work. I write to you, however, not as representative of any of these organizations but as a citizen and a conservative. I ask, respectfully, that you take all necessary steps to include appropriations language that will remove the statues of any person who held a position of importance in the government of the Confederate States of America from public display in the Capitol. Putting such statues in any place of honor is inconsistent with an accurate understanding of history, American values and the purposes for which civilizations erect monuments.

Any claim that the statues of leading people who served the Confederacy—in particular those of Joseph Wheeler (Alabama), Uriah Milton Rose (Arkansas), Edmund Kirby Smith (Florida), Alexander Hamilton Stephens (Georgia), Jefferson Davis (Mississippi), James Zachariah George (Mississippi), Zebulon Baird Vance (North Carolina) and Wade Hampton III (South Carolina)—commemorate “history” or “heritage” are false. These confederate traitors started the bloodiest war in American history because they were afraid that they might lose their “right” to own other human beings. As our first Republican President, Abraham Lincoln, said in his second inaugural address: “All knew that [slavery] was, somehow, the cause of the war.”¹ Likewise, of the states that left the union as a prelude to declaring war on the United States, all of those which described reasons for doing so cited their desire to retain or even expand slavery. Stephens, the confederate Vice President whose statue disgracefully continues to besmirch the statutory collection in the Capitol, made it even clearer in his Cornerstone Speech of March 21, 1861. In speaking about the Confederate government, he said: “Its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and normal condition.”²

Honoring traitors who fought for slavery at the center of our legislative branch is simply inconsistent with American values. We must also consider that these statues were erected by Southern Jim Crow governments that egregiously violated the Constitution and American principles in order to maintain segregation, deny political power to Black citizens and exclude African-Americans from most high-status careers. If we are to live up to any of the aspirations stated by revolutionaries like Thomas Jefferson, women’s rights activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Civil Rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—the ideals we teach in our schools—honoring traitors who fought for slavery is simply inconsistent. These men did not believe that all people “are created equal” nor did they wish to “live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”³ They not only wanted the opposite of these things, but started a bloody war in service of their twisted beliefs. Granting any place of honor to such people disgraces the values for which the Capitol ought to stand.

Let me conclude with this: In establishing the national statuary collection, Congressman Justin S. Morrill called on states to select people “deserving” of “this lasting commemoration.”⁴ Any state that believes a traitor who fought for slavery ought to receive lasting commemoration gravely misunderstands the purpose of the collection or the values for which America stands. There is room in the collection for deeply flawed individuals and, indeed, I personally oppose efforts by any body other than a state legislature to remove other statues in the collection: law-abiding people who questioned, contradicted or challenged American values are far different from those who served an enemy country that intentionally killed more than 350,000 members of the United States Armed Forces on the field of battle. The truth about these men is simple: None achieved glory. All fought for a deplorable cause. And none ought to stand in a place of honor.

Eli Lehrer
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Eli Lehrer is the president of the R Street Institute. He oversees all R Street operations, makes major strategic decisions, works closely with R Street’s supporters and is ultimately responsible for all of R Street’s products. Having previously served as vice president for Washington, D.C. operations at the Heartland Institute, overseeing its D.C. office, Lehrer co-founded R Street in June 2012. Earlier in his career, he worked as a speechwriter to then-Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.); as a project manager for the Unisys Corp.; as senior editor of *The American Enterprise* magazine; and as a fellow at the Heritage Foundation. Lehrer started his career as a reporter at *The Washington Times*. He is a widely published writer whose work has appeared in places like *The Washington Post* and *USA Today*, among other publications. He also serves as a contributing editor of *National Affairs*. Lehrer graduated *cum laude* from Cornell University with a bachelor’s in medieval studies. He received his master’s in government with honors from The Johns Hopkins University.

¹ Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1865.

² Alexander H. Stephens, "Cornerstone Speech," March 21, 1861.

³ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream: Full Text March on Washington Speech," NAACP, Aug. 28, 1963. <https://www.naacp.org/i-have-a-dream-speech-full-march-on-washington>.

⁴ "About the National Statuary Hall Collection," Architect of the Capitol, last accessed March 19, 2021. <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/about-national-statuary-hall-collection>.