

Protesters topple statue of Confederate president in Virginia

Monument of Jefferson Davis torn down in Richmond as anti-racism protests continue in US



Police stand beside the toppled statue of Jefferson Davis on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia.

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Protesters have pulled down a statue of Jefferson Davis, the Civil War-era president of the Confederacy, amid continuing protests triggered by the police killing of George Floyd and the wider issue of racism in the US.

The statue of Jefferson, a Mississippi Democrat who served as the president of the Confederate states from 1861 until 1865, was toppled shortly before 11pm in Richmond, Virginia, the place Davis set up as his capital.

Police were on the scene in Monument Avenue and videos on social media showed the statue being towed away as a crowd cheered.

There are escalating efforts worldwide to remove statues associated with slavery and racial oppression, which have resulted in the toppling of the statue of the prominent slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, UK, and the removal of monuments to Belgium's King Leopold II.

In Barcelona on Thursday afternoon the statue of Christopher Columbus that has stood at the foot of La Rambla since 1888 appeared on Google and Google Maps as the “statue of Columbus the enslaver and colonizer” after someone tweaked the pages. In 2016 a group of councillors in the city called for the statue to be removed on the grounds that it glorified the conquest of America and said it should be replaced with a memorial reflecting “American resistance to imperialism, oppression and indigenous and African-American segregation”.

The toppling of the Davis statue in Virginia came a day after protesters tore down a Christopher Columbus in Richmond which was set on fire before being dumped in a nearby lake. A second statue of Columbus was torn down in Minnesota, while other Columbus statues in Houston and Miami were splattered with red paint.

The statues have been targeted by campaigners, including Black Lives Matter and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the US, as an offensive reminder of slavery and racial oppression.

Other statues on Richmond’s tree-lined mall include monuments to the Confederate military figures JEB Stuart, Stonewall Jackson, Matthew Fontaine Maury and Gen Robert E Lee, all of which have been graffitied in recent days, as well as a bronze statue of the black American tennis player Arthur Ashe put up in the 1990s amid resistance from some so-called “heritage” groups.

Among graffiti painted on the Davis monument was the question: “How much more blood?”

In a comment piece in Politico reflecting on the removal of Davis’s statue John F Harris who lived in Richmond in the 1990s described the dynamic that saw the statues pushed to the forefront of debate.

“Why did I tolerate, and even, at times, take friends to see the statues?” wrote Harris. “It wasn’t that the legacy of the Confederacy didn’t offend me. It was that the statues depicted a history that seemed functionally dead. They also seemed like a joke—and the joke was on the very racists who had erected them in the first place.

“What has become steadily more clear over the years—and crystallized dramatically in the national reckoning over the murder of George Floyd—is that the history the statues depict is not dead. The throngs of protesters on Monument Avenue in recent days gathered precisely because they know the symbolism of the statues is very much alive—toxic and radiant.”

Calls for the removal of Confederate statues and symbols had become a prominent area of contention even before the protests triggered by Floyd's death.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has urged Congress to take steps to remove from the US Capitol 11 statues representing Confederate leaders and soldiers from the civil war. "Their statues pay homage to hate, not heritage. They must be removed," Pelosi said in a letter to leaders of a congressional committee in charge of managing the statues in the Capitol.

After Floyd's killing US military leaders expressed a willingness to rename bases associated with Confederate figures – such as forts Bragg, Benning, AP Hill and Lee – a move, however, that was firmly rejected in a tweet by Donald Trump on Tuesday.

"My Administration will not even consider the renaming of these Magnificent and Fabled Military Installations," Trump tweeted. "Our history as the Greatest Nation in the World will not be tampered with. Respect our Military!"

Along with Lee and the distinctive rebel flag, Davis has long been one of the most prominent symbols of the pro-slavery Confederacy and the target for removal.

The statue was knocked down, and then removed by police, just a week after the mayor of Richmond, Levar Stoney, said he planned to push legislation to remove all four of the prominent Confederate monuments on Monument Avenue.

"Richmond is no longer the capital of the Confederacy – it is filled with diversity and love for all – and we need to demonstrate that," Stoney said in a statement at the time.

But amid the outrage over the death of Floyd in Minneapolis, which has triggered nationwide and international protests over systemic racism against black people, including against statues seen as symbols of racial oppression, protesters took matters into their own hands.

Like many other civil war-era monuments, the Richmond statue of Davis – regarded as a weak and divisive leader even within the Confederacy he led – was put up decades after the conclusion of the conflict, in 1907, amid a revisionist romanticisation of the "Lost Cause".

Virginia's governor, Ralph Northam, had already said he planned to order the removal of the Gen Robert E Lee statue from Monument Avenue a move now blocked by a court ruling.

The toppling of Davis's statue, which depicted him at the moment of his resignation speech, is one of 10 controversial statues to have been removed in recent days. Branches of the US military and the Nascar stock car racing association said they would ban Confederate symbols, including flags.

In Richmond there has also been pressure from the local branch of the NAACP to rename the city's Jefferson Davis Highway.

Unpopular even among many of his own generals, Davis was arrested and imprisoned at the conclusion of the war before being pardoned by President Andrew Johnson in 1868.

Protesters in Portsmouth, about 80 miles from Richmond, beheaded and then pulled down four other statues that were part of a Confederate monument on Wednesday, according to media outlets.