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Politics

Monuments Across the United States Re-Emerged as Targets of Rage Over a Weekend of Widespread Protest

From Denver to Philadelphia to San Antonio to Washington, DC, public art has been swept up in the protests in spectacular ways.

Ben Davis, June 1, 2020



A man tapes himself to the Colorado Soldiers Monument in front of the Colorado State Capitol during the fourth day of protests in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd on May 31, 2020 in Denver, Colorado. Photo by Michael Ciaglo/Getty Images.

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Amid the [breathtaking wave of protests](#) over police violence shaking the United States, public monuments of all kinds have become symbolic flash points. For decades, Confederate statues and other memorials honoring figures associated with racism have been the target of campaigns for removal. The subject has been a near continuous source of [protest and debate](#) since the arrival of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013. It was kicked into an [even more intense phase](#) after activist Bree Newsome's [direct action](#) to remove the Confederate Battle flag from the South Carolina capitol in 2015, in the wake of the white supremacist terrorist attack at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

And yet it is fair to say that, in the shadow of the historic protests convulsing public space, more dramatic action has been taken in just the last few momentous days than in those long years. Below, I've tried to give a sense of the different ways monuments became sites of struggle.

Richmond

In Richmond, Virginia, as riot police and protesters faced off on Sunday, memorials to Confederate grandees Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and J.E.B. Stuart stood covered in protest graffiti. "At one point," the *Commonwealth Times* [reported](#) of the demonstrations, "a protester climbed the Jefferson Davis statue, hung a noose around its neck and rallied other protesters to pull the statue down, which was unsuccessful."



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Nearby, the headquarters of the [United Daughters of the Confederacy](#), the organization historically responsible for many of the monuments to the Confederacy, was also covered with graffiti, including phrases like “fucking racists,” “police are creepy,” “stole from us,” and “abolition,” according to the [Richmond Times-Dispatch](#). It was set ablaze in the early hours of Sunday.

Nearby stands *Rumors of War*, a sculpture by artist Kehinde Wiley depicting a contemporary black male figure atop a rearing horse. The work [was seen in Times Square last year](#) before being installed in Richmond as an artistic reply to the nearby Confederate monuments. On Sunday, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) that it remained untouched by graffiti.

Nine fire trucks were called in to fight the blaze at the institution, which is located between the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Virginia Museum of History & Culture.

Birmingham

In Birmingham, Alabama, following a “[Birmingham, the World Is Watching](#)” rally on Sunday night, protesters toppled a brass sculpture of Charles Linn, a captain in the Confederate navy. [According to WBRC](#), the Linn sculpture was pulled to the ground with a rope.

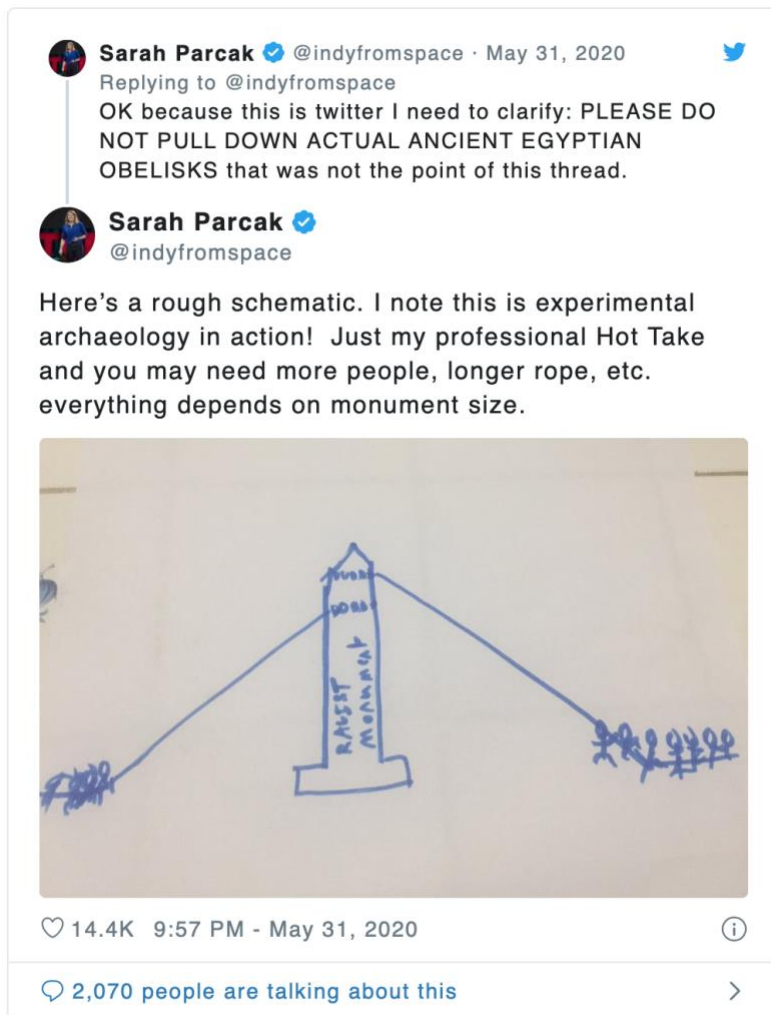
Nearby, a 52-foot-tall obelisk known as the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument was also targeted, though not brought down.



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The obelisk's foundation was laid in 1894 at a Confederate veterans reunion, and dedicated in 1905 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Since the 2017 wave of protests against Confederate memorials, it has been surrounded by plywood barriers to keep it from public view—though supporters of the monument have sought to protect it using the Alabama Heritage Preservation Act, [according to Citylab](#).

On Sunday night, Sarah Parcak, a renowned [professor](#) of Egyptology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, posted step-by-step instructions on Twitter for how to tear down an obelisk, clearly referring to the Birmingham protests.



Parcak's Tweets [inflamed right-wing Twitter](#), and [made the Daily Mail](#). In a sign of how quickly context collapses on the internet, a [large number of conservative voices](#) including [Ryan Fournier](#), co-founder of Students for Trump, accused Parcak of advocating the destruction of the Washington Monument and called for her firing.

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Things are moving fast: on Monday, in the wake of the toppling of the Linn statue, Birmingham mayor Randall Woodfin moved to have the 115-year-old Soldiers and Sailors Monument removed from the park. Crews arrived to begin removing it in three sections.



“In order to prevent more civil unrest, it is very imperative that we remove this statue in Linn Park. That has a cost to it,” Woodfin said, [according to AL.com](#), referring to a law passed by the Alabama legislature that forbids the removal of Confederate monuments. “I understand the AG’s office can bring a civil suit against the city and if there’s a judgement rendered from a judge, then we should be held accountable and I am willing to accept that because that is a lower cost than civil unrest in our city.”

Charleston

In Charleston, South Carolina, a gathering of more than 200 Black Lives Matter protesters on Sunday faced off peacefully with a handful of Sons of Confederate Soldiers activists.

The latter members were out to clean the “To the Confederate Defenders of Charleston” monument, which had [been vandalized](#) the previous night. The Sons of Confederate Soldiers have held a weekly celebration of the Confederate flag in the park since 2015, in response to demands that it be taken down. The monument [has been a frequent site of protest](#) by Black Lives Matter groups.

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1The Daughters of the Confederacy monument in Charleston, South Carolina, located in Battery Park. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Meanwhile, the founder of the Confederate flag meet-up, James Bessenger, issued [a statement](#) on Sunday calling for an end to the weekly rallies, according to the [Post and Courier](#). (Bessenger was also the founder of the North Carolina Successionist Party, a [group he has also renounced](#).)

“While I cannot undo the hurt, grief, fear, and apprehension that the weekly flaggings at the battery have caused countless passersby, I pray that I can play a part in putting an end to this unnecessary, unproductive legacy,” Bessenger added.

Salisbury

Three and a half hours north of Charleston in Salisbury, North Carolina, a confrontation between several dozen Black Lives Matters protesters and a group of pro-Confederate activists at a local Confederate monument took a more alarming turn on Saturday night.

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WBTV [reported](#) that police arrested 49-year-old Jeffrey Allan Long, who was among the pro-Confederate counter-protesters, for firing a gun twice into the air after the two groups got into a “very loud face-to-face argument.”



A second man, Brandon Walker, was also arrested and charged with one count of carrying a concealed weapon.

Salisbury’s so-called “[Fame](#)” monument depicts an angel cradling a wounded Confederate soldier who is clutching his gun. Cast in bronze, it was erected by the Daughters of Confederate Soldiers in 1905.

Philadelphia

A variety of other types of monuments were targeted by the explosion of protest, usually ones that were already symbols of local struggles over racism.

In Philadelphia on Saturday, a 10-foot sculpture of Frank Rizzo dating from 1999 was defaced, with protesters attempting to pull it down and set it on fire. Rizzo, a former police commissioner-turned-mayor whose nickname was “Supercop,” is [bitterly remembered](#) by the city’s black community for abusive and racist tactics.

In a press conference on Sunday, mayor Jim Kenney [declared](#) that he “never liked that statue,” which had been set to remain on the steps of the Municipal Services Building until 2021 despite much public criticism. Kenney suggested it

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would now be moved in the next several months. "We're going to accelerate its movement," he said.

Striking images on Sunday afternoon showed the Rizzo statue guarded by a solid wall of armed police.



Chris Brennan ✓

@ByChrisBrennan



The statue of Frank Rizzo is guarded by mounted Pennsylvania state troopers and Philadelphia police officers



727 4:30 PM - May 31, 2020 · Philadelphia City Hall



678 people are talking about this



San Antonio

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In San Antonio, the Alamo Cenotaph was [hit with graffiti](#) on Thursday night reading “[Down with] white supremacy / [down with] profit over people / [down with] the ALAMO.”

Reports of the graffiti led members of the militia [known](#) as This Is Texas Freedom Force (TITFF) to stand guard at the Cenotaph, sporting rifles and shotguns. Then on Sunday, Alamo Plaza exploded in conflict between the militia and the ongoing protests against police brutality, [KSTX reported](#).

Police formed a circle to shield the Alamo Cenotaph and the armed militia members from the anti-police-violence demonstrators. As the evening unfolded, fights broke out between protesters, militia, police, and Alamo security, according to KSTX. Militia members were eventually individually escorted from the plaza by SAPD.

Afterwards, police moved in with tear gas as storefronts along East Houston Street were attacked.



Denver

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In Denver, the Colorado Soldiers Monument, which honors the state's past military leaders, was defaced during [intense protests](#) that involved [clashes with police and tear gas](#). A traffic cone was hung over the sculpture's gun. Press photos show a poster placed at its base with the faces of black victims of police violence.

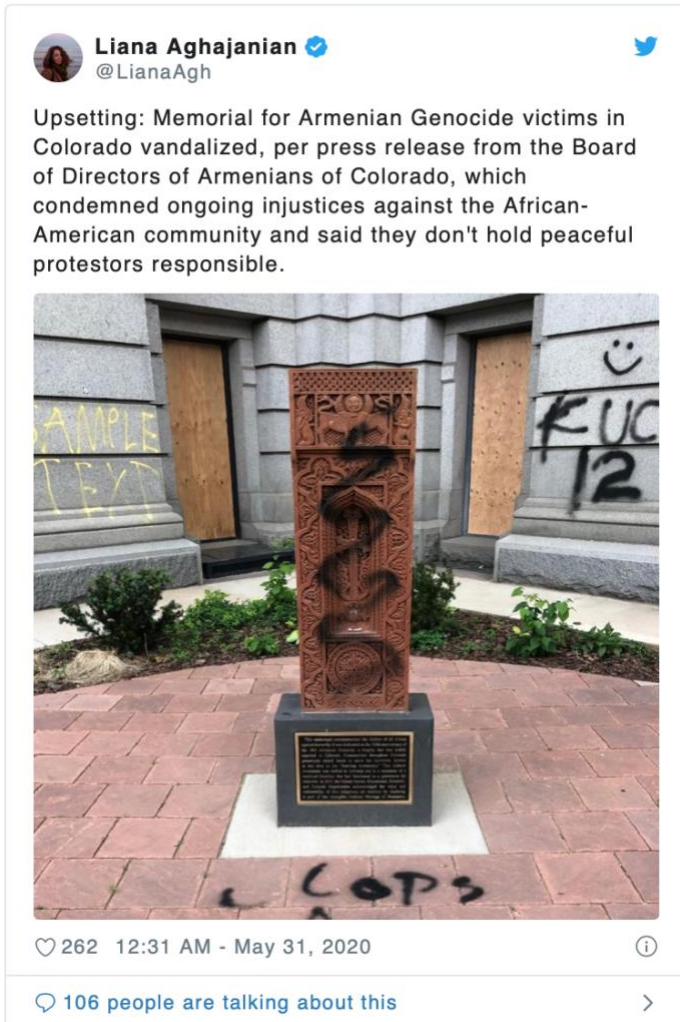
"The statue honors past military leaders in Colorado," Denverite [explained](#). "It includes the name of the colonel who led the Sand Creek massacre that killed an estimated 500 Arapaho and Cheyenne in 1864. The statue lists the massacre as a 'battle.'"

Nearby, a memorial to the Armenian Genocide, dedicated in 2015, was also vandalized with black spray paint. The ground in front of it was scrawled with the words "Cops Are the Evil."

The graffiti led to [a statement](#) from the group behind the memorial, Armenians of Colorado, saying members were "heartbroken."

"Protest leaders have repeatedly denounced violence and vandalism," the statement continued. "We do not hold the peaceful protesters responsible for the behavior of violent individuals. As Armenian Americans, a community that has survived genocide and centuries of oppression, we recognize and condemn the ongoing injustices against our African American community and we join them in calling for justice for George Floyd."

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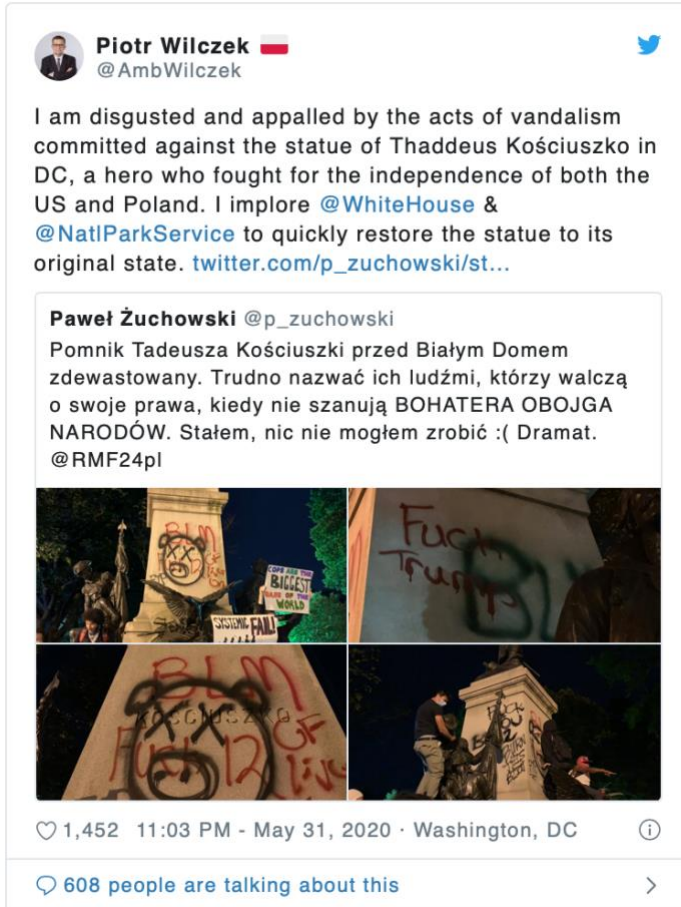
Washington, DC

In Washington, DC, the Lincoln Memorial and World War II Memorial were [both graffitied](#) amid the weekend's wide-ranging protests. St. John's Church, near the White House, was [set on fire](#).

The vandalism of one DC statue even threatened to become a minor diplomatic incident.

Polish ambassador [Piotr Wilczek](#) took to Twitter to profess himself "disgusted and appalled" that a statue commemorating Thaddeus Kosciuszko (1746-1817) was defaced. "I implore @WhiteHouse & @NatIParkService to quickly restore the statue to its original state."

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Kosciuszko, a hero of both the American and Polish independence movements, was an early abolitionist. He [famously](#) attempted to use his American estate to purchase the freedom of Thomas Jefferson’s slaves and provide for their education—a charge that Jefferson declined to honor.

Louisville

Given the sheer breadth of what is already probably the most intense wave of rebellion since the 1960s, many more examples could be listed. At the University of Mississippi, a Confederate monument [was branded](#) with the words “spiritual genocide.” In Nashville, a sculpture of racist politician and pundit Edward Carmack [was toppled](#).

One particularly symbolic incident took place in Louisville, Kentucky, a city at the epicenter of the protests due to the March [police killing of Breonna Taylor](#). During a protest on Thursday, a hand [was torn from](#) the city’s monumental marble statue of French king Louis XVI (for whom the city is named).

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A vandalized statue of Louis XVI stands in downtown as protests dwindle on May 29, 2020 in Louisville, Kentucky. Photo by Brett Carlsen/Getty Images.

The statue was originally made in 1829 for the Bourbon king's daughter Marie-Thérèse. It was presented to the City of Louisville in 1967 as a sign of friendship from its sister city Montpellier, France.

On Saturday, the incident briefly became the subject of [internet infamy](#) when the 44-year-old Louis de Bourbon, Duke of Anjou—[described](#) by the *Telegraph* as “a polo-playing financier with movie-star looks”—took to social media to use it to call attention to [his claim on the French throne](#).

“As the heir of Louis XVI, and attached to the defense of his memory, I do hope that the damage will be repaired and that the statue will be restored,” the Duke wrote. “I already thank the Authorities for the measures they will take for that.”

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 **Louis de Bourbon, Duc d'Anjou** @louisdudanjou

As the heir of #LouisXVI, and attached to the defense of his memory, I do hope that the damage will be repaired and that the statue will be restored. I already thank the Authorities for the measures they will take for that.
#Louisville #Louisvilleprotests #Kentucky
twitter.com/ericcrawford/s...

Eric Crawford @ericcrawford

A protestor (at an overwhelmingly peaceful protest) in downtown Louisville has made off with the hand of the King Louis XVI statue



9,138 11:51 PM - May 29, 2020

8,947 people are talking about this

Louis XVI is mainly associated with his lavish and dissolute lifestyle, and with being beheaded during the French Revolution.

This minor controversy already made de Bourbon seem grotesquely tone deaf. But his comment was rendered tragically and bitterly so by the force of events in the ensuing days.

On Sunday night, some 40 protesters [were arrested](#) in the fourth night of intense protests in Louisville. Early Monday morning, police shot and killed a black restaurant owner, [David McAtee](#).