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## STATUES

# Divisive figures

*Donald Trump argues that removing Confederate statues is 'ripping apart' US history – yet the intent and context behind their construction is as much part of their past as what they commemorate*

BY ADAM IP SMITH

Saudi Arabia is also, of course, the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and home to Islam's holiest sites, and the king serves as Khadim al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn – guardian of the Holy Places. Because Qatar is the only Arab Gulf State to practice the same brand of Wahhabi Islam as Saudi Arabia, this adds a religious component to their relations that dates back centuries. However, Qatar also supports the Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Islamic social and religious movement that is in direct competition with Saudi Arabia's brand of conservative Islam.

Iran, the Arab Gulf's nemesis, is likely to benefit most from this state of affairs. For decades Iran has sided with Qatar in its disputes with its neighbours. Until now it has never succeeded in breaking the bonds of language, religion and history, as well as deep familial ties, that have sustained Qatar's turbulent relations with its Sunni Arab brothers in Arabia.

Now, this may change. The severity of the Saudi-led attack on Qatar has underscored the extent to which ancient feuds and tribal hierarchies continue to play their role in keeping the Sunni Arab Gulf divided, unstable and weak. 🌐



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**T**he whole point of a pedestal is to elevate whatever's on it. That's the thing about statues: they demand not just attention but reverence. And because they're sited in prominent public places, the intention is always to make a statement. That statement is not always the same to all viewers, of course. Most people probably don't give them a second thought. But sometimes they do – and then there's a fight. From the ancient Romans on, for as long as men have set up effigies to themselves, the fall of regimes has always been symbolically marked by the fall of statues.

It happened in New York in 1776. Having heard a reading of the Declaration of Independence, a mob in Bowling Green toppled a statue of the British king. Years later the scene was reimagined by painter Johannes Oertel in an image that could be the template for scores of iconic news photos of falling Stalins, Lenins or Saddam Husseins. Try to imagine for a moment a parallel universe in which the royal statues of colonial America had stood: it is hard to do so without imagining a very different United States.

Keep that idea in your mind as you recall the position taken by the current president of the United States, an elderly white man, on the prospect of removing statues to the leaders of a huge slaveholders' rebellion against the US in the 1860s. In August, he declared there were some "very fine people" among the fascists and Confederate sympathisers who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, with the

ostensible aim of protesting the removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E Lee. If Lee's statue comes down, asked the president, then who next? Thomas Jefferson? George Washington?

There are currently more than 700 statues commemorating Confederate leaders in public places in the US, and it seems interventions, both by fascists and the president, are likely to accelerate, rather than halt, their removal. If fascists want to keep them up, reasonable people are more likely to want to take them down. Compromise solutions – changing the wording of the plaques, perhaps? – seem rather inadequate when the battle is polarised and one side includes angry white men with swastikas.

To Trump, toppling statues to Confederate leaders would change the nation's character for the worse: "the history and culture of our great country [is] being ripped apart," he tweeted. No doubt cowering royalists felt the same when King George came down.

**Interventions, both by fascists and the president, seem likely to accelerate rather than halt the statues' removal** →

Professional historians have been remarkably united in supporting calls to remove these statues. These were not monuments put up in the immediate aftermath of the war but some half a century later, just as laws were being bolstered that systematically discriminated against and dehumanised black people. The valourisation of Confederate leaders was part of a deliberate and concerted effort to enshrine for ever (or so they hoped) the self-serving myth of the 'Lost Cause'. Sometimes public funds were appropriated for these monuments, approved by an all-white electorate. They were a marking of territory. Placed in town squares and in front of public buildings, they were deliberately intended to symbolise white domination. Speakers at the unveiling ceremonies said so. Black people knew so. And the benign approval of white Northerners was part of the story, too. Confederate generals even appeared in Northern states. By elevating Confederates to plinths, white Americans whitewashed both the history of slavery and the ongoing reality of racial injustice.

The removal of this often mass-produced Lost Cause statuary would not, as the president thinks, obliterate history. On the contrary, it would remove a monumental obstacle to the proper understanding of American history. The white Southerners who put up those statues intended them to stand the test of time, but no generation has the right to impose its version of the past on the future. The mob in revolutionary New York knew this, as do Americans now. Only a society with no historical consciousness – and which therefore assumes the prevailing power structure to be permanent and inalienable – would leave its statues in place forever. 🌐



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## HISTORICAL SCIENCE

# Your discipline needs you

*A pioneering project digitising a vast swathe of history could revolutionise scientific analysis of competing theories – but needs more specialist hands to help*

**BY LAURA SPINNEY & PETER TURCHIN**

**C**alling experts from across the humanities: you are invited to collaborate in a scientific project revisiting some of the big questions about the past. What caused the rise and fall of sophisticated societies such as the Maya or the Roman empire? What role did agriculture play in shaping their fortunes? Or military prowess? Or religion?

Plenty of theories speak to such questions, but there is currently no satisfactory way of choosing between them. A basic axiom of the scientific method is that a theory must make a testable prediction, but the body of available historical and archaeological information is now so large that testing a prediction against all of it is beyond the capacities of the human brain.

The temptation to cherry-pick the evidence that supports a pet theory is strong, with the result that every theory has its champions, and no theory ever dies. In addition, research into the past has splintered into specialist subdisciplines that have less and less contact with each other. The insights emerging from these knowledge 'silos' are invaluable, but a counterweight is needed: an overarching, multidisciplinary approach that weaves them into a coherent tapestry, enabling us to ask – and hopefully, answer – those big questions.

This data overload can be addressed, in part, by computers. Not only can computers stock large amounts of data, they also allow predictions to be tested

against them. Theories purporting to explain the same historical phenomena can thus be pitted against each other, until a winner emerges that explains the evidence better than its rivals.

One such computer-based project is Seshat – named for the ancient Egyptian goddess of knowledge – a databank of global historical information covering 10,000-odd years from the introduction of agriculture to the year 1900. Though only six years old, it is also an example of a successful collaboration between scientists and historians.

A database is nothing without data, and those data have to be collected, entered into a computer and verified. Verification, in this context, means that

**Armed with the new Seshat databank, researchers are in a position to chart the evolution of social complexity and to probe the factors shaping that evolution**