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As Monuments to War Generals Come Down, Let's Replace Them with Monuments to Peace

The monuments to Confederate generals and to those who fought to maintain slavery are coming down. That's a good thing and long overdue. It cannot stop there, however, as we move not only to eradicate their symbolism, but the very real systemic racism they represent, and which sadly persists in this country.

But should some of these statues be replaced? And if so, with what?

Our parks and squares are filled with monuments to wars. Yet while these memorials reinforce the notion that war efforts are highly valued and rewarded by our society, and honor those who sacrificed for their cause, it is a profoundly lopsided representation of American values.

These include standing for peace, justice, and civil and human rights, all of which are under-represented in our public spaces. Washington DC's Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, a relatively recent addition, is one of the few representatives of this side of the equation at the national level.

Why not, therefore, replace at least some of the statues memorializing war with tributes to Americans who have courageously opposed war and racial injustice and promoted peaceful alternatives to violence and aggression?

We could start in our nation's capital by building a US Peace Memorial, a national monument to peace and an idea first proposed in 2005 by the US Peace Memorial Foundation. Such a memorial would recognize peace leadership and display antiwar

statements from hundreds of famous Americans from all walks of life — views that history has often ignored.

The US Peace Memorial would send a clear message to our citizens that advocating for peaceful solutions to international problems, and opposing war, are honorable and socially acceptable activities in our democracy.

By extension, we should also consider honoring those whose acts of heroism have saved rather than destroyed lives. For example, many of our courageous healthcare workers have taken enormous personal risks and even given their lives as they tended to the sick during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent months have served up countless heroes whose selfless acts should be as worthy of statues and monuments as are warriors. Theirs is also a cause for peace.

More than a half-century ago, President John F. Kennedy wrote, “War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige that a warrior does today”.

Building the US Peace Memorial in our nation’s capital, and similar monuments to peacemakers in other cities, would be a good beginning.

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Note: Reference for Kennedy quote: John F. Kennedy, “Letter to a Navy friend.” A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House. Schlesinger, Arthur M. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 88. Print.

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