

New York Times' Charles Blow demands the removal of monuments to Washington and other "amoral monsters"

Niles Niemuth
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An opinion piece by *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow appeared online Sunday under the headline, "Yes, Even George Washington," calling for the removal of all public monuments to the first President of the United States, whom Blow has judged to be among the "amoral monsters" who led the American Revolution and helped found the country 244 years ago.

"On the issue of American slavery, I am an absolutist: enslavers were amoral monsters," Blow declares. His argument is an extension of that advanced in the *Times*' racist 1619 Project, which claims that the aim of the American Revolution was to defend slavery against British plans for its abolition.

Blow writes: "Some people who are opposed to taking down monuments ask, 'If we start, where will we stop?' It might begin with Confederate generals, but all slave owners could easily become targets. Even George Washington himself."

Blow then proclaims, with the special elegance that distinguishes his columns, "To that I say, 'abso-fricking-lutely!'"

Early Monday morning, not long after Blow's column was published, the monument arch in Washington Square Park in New York City commemorating the centenary of Washington's inauguration was vandalized with red paint. The paint dripped down from the heads of two statues of Washington, one depicting him as the commander of the revolutionary Continental Army and the other as president.

This latest assault on a monument to Washington follows the pulling down last month of Washington and Jefferson monuments in Portland, Oregon, and the toppling of a bust of Civil War general and Reconstruction President Ulysses S. Grant in San Francisco, California. Monuments to Abraham Lincoln, who led the Second American revolution and destroyed slavery, as well as monuments to abolitionists such as Robert Gould Shaw and Hans Christian Heg, have come under attack as racist and "white supremacist."

The attack by the *Times* on Washington is a part of the effort by the Democratic Party and its operatives to derail the popular multiracial protests against police violence which erupted last month in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Capitalizing on the historical ignorance which they have fostered, Blow and the *Times* are working overtime to redirect popular opposition along racial lines and behind the Democratic Party.

There is nothing progressive in the destruction of statues and

monuments which memorialize the leaders of the American Revolution and the Civil War.

But for Blow, there is nothing to discuss about the contradictory yet progressive legacy of the men who led the first Revolution and set the ground for the annihilation of slavery less than nine decades later.

If one accepts Blow's definition of those who owned slaves as amoral monsters, beyond the pale, then even those who opposed slavery at the time, such as John Adams, Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin, cannot be judged innocent. After all, they collaborated with those evil beasts, Washington and Jefferson, in waging war against Great Britain and establishing a Constitution which protected slavery. The whole project to create "A government of laws and not of men," a precept laid out by Adams, must be thrown out, having been tainted by the irredeemable sin of slavery.

If indeed the American Revolution was made by "amoral monsters," how is it possible that these wicked creatures, beyond human compassion and unconstrained by any ethical considerations, came to produce such moral and epoch-shaping documents as the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights? How was it possible that Thomas Jefferson could claim, in a world dominated by monarchies and feudal relations, where birth meant everything and hierarchy dominated, that it is self-evident that all men were created equal? Or advance the conception that the people had a right to revolution, to overthrow an oppressive government and establish their own?

Prior to Jefferson the right to life, liberty and property had been clearly outlined, but in the Declaration of Independence he advanced a much more radical conception of the "right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness." Such a conception could only have been advanced at a time when questions were being raised about the very nature of property and what it meant to hold any form of property, particularly fellow human beings.

Despite Blow's contention, even Washington's relationship to slavery both in regards to the political as well as the personal was in fact quite complex and changed over time, from a position of taking the institution as a given, having inherited his first slaves from his father while still a boy, to questioning the institution among his closest correspondents and ultimately freeing his slaves

after his death.

As with society at large, it was the American Revolution, with its declaration of fundamental human equality, which placed for the first time a question mark over Washington's views on slavery. In 1774, he signed his name to the Fairfax Resolves, a document which included a denunciation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade as "wicked, cruel and unnatural," and called for its immediate end.

During the American Revolution nearly 5,000 blacks served under his command in the Continental Army and Washington approved the formation of all-black battalions with the guarantee of emancipation for those slaves who fought for American independence. He wrote to a friend in 1786 that he had no intention of buying another slave, "it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by [inserted: The Legislature by] which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, & imperceptible [sic] degrees."

While he signed the first Fugitive Slave Act as president in 1793, allowing for masters to reclaim runaway slaves, Washington also signed the renewed Northwest Ordinance in 1789 which banned slavery in the areas north of the Ohio river and east of the Mississippi and the 1794 Slave Trade Act, which prohibited American citizens and residents from engaging in the international slave trade. Despite efforts to appease the slave interests, the growing divisions between Southern slave states and Northern free states which would erupt in the Civil War were already becoming clear at this early point in US history.

Revolutions are studied and celebrated, with all their blemishes, because they are key moments in history in which humanity pushed forward into the unknown. Such were the advances made by the American Revolution and the Civil War; the French Revolution and Haitian Revolution; and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The inconsistencies of the revolutionaries, and the setbacks that followed the advances, testify to the complexity and contradictory character of the historical process. But the failures do not discredit the advances made.

Blow is oblivious to history. Instead he advances a religious conception of history, in which man is fundamentally evil, having fallen from the graces of God. Anything which pays tribute to anyone or anything complicit in the sin of slavery must be condemned and expunged.

This moral certitude, however, raises serious questions about this wrathful moralist's employment at the *New York Times*. How can Blow account for the fact that he works for a newspaper that defended slavery before the Civil War, and which inveighed mercilessly and ruthlessly against the abolitionists who fiercely agitated for the end of slavery in the 1850s? An editorial published by the paper on May 11, 1859, "The Abolitionists Again," denounced abolitionist writings as "trash" and slandered William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips as "stock actors of the troupe." The paper also carried a report that relished in the attempted lynching of an abolitionist in Mississippi in September 1857 who had a rope placed around his neck and was whipped 238 times by a pro-slavery mob.

Given the paper's history of spewing anti-Abolitionist rhetoric, Blow is certainly obligated to resign from the *Times* and call for its closure. Under Blow's rubric, there can be no excuse that these

articles were written more than 150 years ago.

The *New York Times* certainly is rotten, not because of what was published in its pages in 1859 but because of what is published in its pages today in defense of capitalism (wage slavery) and imperialism. But it is doubtful that Blow will go that far. After all, his moral absolutes end at the point when they might adversely affect his own professional and financial interests.

Writing in 1939, Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International, took the measure of the moralistic, i.e., hypocritical and cynical, approach to history taken by the likes of Blow and the *Times*:

These gentlemen forget with remarkable ease that man has been cutting his path from a semi-simian condition to a harmonious society without any guide; that the task is a difficult one, that for every step or two forward there follows half a step, a step, and sometimes even two steps back. They forget that the path is strewn with the greatest obstacles and that no one has invented or could have invented a secret method whereby an uninterrupted rise on the escalator of history would be rendered secure. Sad to say, Messrs. Rationalists were not invited to a consultation when man was in process of creation and when the conditions of man's development were first taking shape. But generally speaking, this matter is beyond repair.

For argument's sake, let us grant that all previous revolutionary history and, if you please, all history in general is nothing but a chain of mistakes. But what to do about present day reality? What about the colossal army of permanently unemployed, the pauperized farmers, the general decline of economic levels, the approaching war? The skeptical wiseacres promise us that sometime in the future they will catalogue all the banana peels on which the great revolutionary movements of the past have slipped. But will these gentlemen tell us what to do today, right now?

We would wait in vain for an answer.



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