Racism Is Not a Teaching Tool

By Ibram X. Kendi | MAY 30, 2016

Black lives in the United States are surrounded by memorials to people who did not think that black lives mattered. That is a fact of black life in America. That is a fact of black life in American academe.

I have walked past these statues, breathed inside these buildings. Growing up in New York, I would, from time to time, pass the stately statue in Central Park of Dr. J. Marion Sims, who pioneered American gynecology through experimenting — save the anesthesia — on the genitalia of enslaved women writhing in pain. After moving to Manassas, Va., I attended Stonewall Jackson High School and recoiled at being indelibly connected to the famous Confederate general who warred for the slavery he thought God had ordained. While attending graduate school in Philadelphia, I paced by Thomas Jefferson University several times, remembering his other declaration: of "never" finding "that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration."

These days, I park in the shadow of a sports arena named after Stephen C. O’Connell, who as a Florida Supreme Court justice in 1957 concurred in a decision to keep University of Florida’s law school segregated and whose intransigence as the university’s sixth president led to a mass exodus of black students in 1971. At least I do not have to go anywhere near the hall at Middle Tennessee State University named after the first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan: Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

All over the Western world, campaigns are afoot to rid institutions and communities of memorials to racist historical figures. These antiracist campaigns have matured and mobilized supporters at institutions as varied as Middle Tennessee State University, the
University of Missouri, the University of Oregon, the University of Oxford, Princeton University, and Yale University, and so have defenses of these racist memorials.

None of those defenses were more persuasive and apparently progressive, and none seemingly attracted more people across the ideological spectrum, than the teaching-tool defense. It is a tactic that will be increasingly used in the coming years, because student activism and these racist memorials do not appear to be going away.

The teaching-tool defense crystallized last month when Yale defied the wishes of student activists and kept John C. Calhoun’s name on a residential college. In his political positions before his death, in 1850, including vice president of the United States and senator from South Carolina, Calhoun was the "champion of hell-born slavery," to quote the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Calhoun defended slavery as a "positive good," proclaiming blacks inferior and better suited for picking cotton than studying at Yale, his alma mater.

In writing to the Yale community, President Peter Salovey emphasized that "erasing Calhoun’s name from a much-beloved residential college risks masking this past, downplaying the lasting effects of slavery, and substituting a false and misleading narrative.... Retaining the name forces us to learn anew and confront one of the most disturbing aspects of Yale’s and our nation’s past. I believe this is our obligation as an educational institution."

Recently the University of Oregon’s president, Michael Schill, employed the teaching-tool defense in the university’s reconsideration of the naming of a campus hall for one of its founders, a racist, proslavery federal judge, Matthew Deady. "Do we serve the purpose of an educational institution by hiding it — and taking the person’s name off of the building so no one will ask the question?" asked Schill, a Yale Law alumnus. "You don’t want to hide history."

At first I did not appreciate the significance of the teaching-tool defense. It seemed well-meaning, logical, sound, and antiracist. I have probably articulated it at some point. As a teacher of American history, as a scholar who just published a book on the history of racist ideas, I find it difficult not to be attracted to this argument. Its appeal is seductive. Don’t we adore subjects and objects that pique the interests of learners, compel questions, and incite critical thought? Doesn’t the teaching-tool defense flatter the academic consensus that we must learn from history?
But the more I thought about it, and the more I saw it invoked, questions arose in my mind. I started seeing the teaching-tool defense from the reverse perspective. I can find museums and plaques but I am struggling to find prominent buildings and institutions, on or off college campuses, named after people whom white Americans commonly consider their enemies. I am struggling to find buildings named for those who terrorized white people on the scale that slaveholders, Confederates, and Klansmen terrorized black people. I started imagining these memorials and the teaching-tool defense. And the more I imagined the defense from the standpoint of white Americans, the more inconceivable this defense became.

Can you imagine New York University having a building named after Osama bin Laden? Can you imagine NYU officials arguing that retaining bin Laden Hall allows us to learn anew about 9/11? Isn’t bin Laden Hall unthinkable — and rightfully so?

Can you imagine Boston College having a building named after the anti-Catholic politician Nathaniel P. Banks? Can you imagine BC officials arguing that retaining Banks Hall ensures that we don’t downplay the withering persecution of Irish Catholics in the 1840s and 1850s, especially in Boston? Isn’t Banks Hall unthinkable?

Can you imagine Yeshiva University having a building named after the anti-Semitic radio preacher in the 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin? Can you imagine Yeshiva officials arguing that retaining Coughlin Hall prevents us from hiding the history of attacks against Jews that Coughlin and so many other anti-Semites incited? Isn’t Coughlin Hall unthinkable?

And in Princeton’s "complex legacy" defense of Woodrow Wilson, the teaching-tool defense lurks in the background.

Each of these historical figures did something worth celebrating. So we can learn from them and memorialize them. NYU’s bin Laden Hall could memorialize bin Laden and other Afghans who fought Soviet invaders in the 1980s. BC’s Banks Hall could memorialize Banks’s abolitionism. Yeshiva’s Coughlin Hall could memorialize Coughlin’s defense of labor during the Depression. Would not those campus halls still be unthinkable at these institutions?

There are two ways to confront history through naming as memorialization (assuming that campus officials are not keeping these names to keep certain donations flowing). We can name buildings after history’s heroes or villains — the abolitionists or slaveholders, the
egalitarians or eugenicists, the civil-rights activists or segregationists, the first responders or terrorists. White Americans customarily eschew the villains and name their buildings after their heroes. Black people have expressed the same human desire.

When we peel back its progressive pedagogical covering, the teaching-tool defense is embodied in unequal reasoning. It is embodied in racist logic: our national inability to value the same, to reason the same, to think the same for different racial groups.

To name campus buildings after their enemies as a teaching tool is unthinkable for white Americans. At Yale, Oxford, and Oregon, and on campuses across the Western world, antiracist activists are simply asking for equal logic.

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