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Controlling the present; controlling the past

By REV. STEPHEN EDINGTON
Guest Columnist

In 2004, the Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti (now in his 102nd year!) published a series of verses titled *Americus*.

These are a few lines from one of the verses:

*And journalism as rough draft
of history
written by billions of scribes
and revised later to suit
by victors and owners of everything*

*For who controls the present
controls the past. (Emphasis added)*

Couple these words of Ferlinghetti's with those well-known ones of William Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even the past." Together they provide some insight into the struggle currently taking place – in the midst of a racial reawakening

following the killings of George Floyd and others – as to how we attempt to come to terms with the racist components of our nation's history.

As I witness the efforts to remove statues and names, and even brand names like "Aunt Jemima" and "Uncle Ben", Mr. Ferlinghetti's words come to mind. We are in the midst of a rebellion, an uprising, against those who control the present in such a way that allows for the past to be controlled by them as well. Yet, as Faulkner reminds us, "The past is never dead."

My words "those who" do not necessarily refer to specific persons. They refer instead to a societal and cultural mind-set that has more or less unquestioningly accepted the way the past has been controlled because of the ways in which the present is also controlled. Or, citing Ferlinghetti again, ours is a past that has largely been recounted to "suit (the) owners of everything."

No more. We are now in a moment, at a point in time, where control of the past is being taken from the hands of those whom Ferlinghetti calls the "owners of everything." And not a moment too soon. In fact, it's way too late. But, still, better late than never. Statues of so-called Confederate "heroes" come down. Confederate flags are furled – by NASCAR no less.

I've long wondered about the whys and wherefores when it comes to the glorification of the Confederacy – particularly in certain parts of our country, but not limited to the South. Reality check: The Confederacy was a rebellion against the United States of America. It was a rebellion that took the lives of over 360,000 American, or Union, soldiers before it was put down. To erect statues to the leaders of this rebellion, or to name United States Military Bases – as well as numerous other sites – after them is a cruel insult to

the memory of those 360,000+ Americans who lost their mostly young lives on Civil War battlefields.

It's not just a reckoning with the Confederacy, of course, when it comes to determining who controls the past. Over the past several weeks we have seen a reawakening of the meaning of Juneteenth. We have been brought to a much fuller awareness of the horror of the Tulsa Race Massacre in June of 1921 when white mobs destroyed 35 square blocks of Tulsa's African American Greenwood District.

It's not that the existence of such events has been outright denied. But in the name of controlling history, things like Juneteenth, the Tulsa Massacre, the widespread terrors of racial lynchings, and the like are largely relegated to the back of white minds; as things we – we white people that is – don't really need to think about or talk about.

Except that now we do. It's

is not an easy conversation. Control of the present does yield easily. I do not like seeing statues brought down without some kind of due process and deliberation taking place first as to which ones should stand and which ones should not. But the unfortunate means by which some statues are being pulled down should not be allowed to distract us from the crucial conversation we need to have with regard to how we come to terms with those aspects of our history we have largely ignored; and how we now face up to those largely ignored parts.

This conversation will take place; and in the end we will be a better nation for it.

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