



**THE AMERICAN  
SPECTATOR**  
EDITED BY R. EMMETT TYRRELL, JR.

## **If the President Vetoes the Defense Bill, It Shouldn't Be to Preserve Confederate Base Names**

*There are intelligent ways to deal with our history and the passage of time.*

November 22, 2020

Doug Bandow

The president is threatening to veto the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Currently set for conference committee to resolve differences between the Senate and House, the \$740 billion legislation deserves rejection because it authorizes too much for the military to enforce a counterproductive foreign policy of intervention everywhere all the time for every reason.

That would be a bad idea even in the best of times. However, the blowback of endless wars in the Middle East should be evident to all. And when the American government is essentially bankrupt — the national debt already exceeds the annual GDP and continues to rocket upward — the U.S. can't afford to continue subsidizing prosperous, populous allies, remaking failed nation states, solving other people's civil wars, and doing so much more.

However, that's not why President Donald Trump opposes the legislation. He is upset because it mandates renaming bases named after Confederate notables. The bill targets 10 Army installations: Camp Beauregard and Forts A.P. Hill, Benning, Bragg, Gordon, Hood, Lee, Pickett, Polk, and Rucker.

The first nine are named after Confederate generals. The 10th honors a Confederate colonel. Many of the namesakes are largely forgotten by anyone but a Civil War buff, but some of the names, such as Fort Bragg, are seared into the memories of millions of military men and women over the years.

The U.S. Navy named a few ships after Confederate military figures, but most of these vessels have been decommissioned. The Marines Corps has no name problem, but earlier this year decided to remove Confederate paraphernalia from its bases. Perhaps no surprise, the U.S. Army long had a closer symbolic connection to the South's military.

After all, it was the Confederate army that fought so long and well against long odds during the Civil War. Moreover, a disproportionate share of military recruits even today come from the South, and many of them identify with their ancestors. The appeal typically is not slavery or racism, but the Confederacy's heroic imagery of mounting a desperate defense, at overwhelming odds, against a brutal invader threatening home and family.

Until this year changing such historic and recognizable names was not on Washington's political agenda. However, the explosion of public protests after the tragic killing of George Floyd carried all before it. Alongside peaceful political demonstrations, violent mobs tore down statues, vandalized buildings, harassed bystanders, and burned down neighborhoods. Even celebrated Monument Avenue in Richmond, made famous as the capital of the Confederate States of America, was precipitously transformed, with the threat of more violence the excuse to short-circuit the democratic process.

While the mindless mob mentality that dominated the summer of 2020 posed a greater threat than the offending statues and names that became targets across America, rethinking who is honored where and how is eminently reasonable. Historical events are complex, populations change, popular values shift, and understandings of national developments evolve.

Yet judging yesterday's people by today's standards is neither fair nor illuminating. In 1860 Americans both north and south were mostly thoroughgoing racists and accepting of, if not necessarily enthusiastic about, the institution of slavery. Not too many years before, almost everyone on the planet embraced or at least accepted imperialist ambitions, persistent war, mass murder, pervasive slavery, and routine oppression. Europe is filled with monuments to (mostly) white men of the past who would be uniformly execrated if evaluated by today's standards, yet they created a world that ultimately enshrined liberal democracy. What is striking is not that so many people embraced the worst of human nature, but that a few always transcended their time and led the way forward.

But the idea of thinking before acting — considering how to best address the controversial and tragic elements of history that continue to shape America — was dismissed by baying mobs and wokish intellectuals. In their view, only a certified racist and white supremacist would hesitate doing whatever was demanded by the latest version of the progressive catechism. Seeking to thoughtfully provide historical context rather than ruthlessly eradicate every mention of America's complex and difficult history was conclusive proof of most vile character.

When the question of military bases arose amid the mid-summer madness, Congress, naturally, headed for the exits, and voted for the name change in pending legislation. However, the president rejected demands to rename Army facilities and now is threatening to veto the NDAA. He's right about PC warriors and wokish authoritarians. But he is still wrong about updating the names of military properties.

Until recently the Civil War was a historical experience that could be enjoyed without worrying about the latest political currents. There are plenty of Civil War groupies, from hardcore reenactors to the more intellectual aficionados like me. Many celebrate the extraordinary heroism of so many on behalf of the doomed South, the long-romanticized story of the Confederate States of America. They are not racists spending their spare time donning white hoods and promoting white supremacy. They typically have been sucked into a fascinating story of extraordinary social, economic, and political forces that divided families, separated peoples, tore the nation apart, and spawned the worst war in American history.

However, the Civil War now has become a political third rail pulled out of its historical context. The woke legions tend to reduce the CSA to slavery and treat everyone in the South's military like a Nazi. Opposed to America's current wars, the progressive pugilists nevertheless celebrate killing three-quarters of a million people and ravaging an entire section of America to prevent former countrymen from changing their political allegiance. For today's ascendant Left the conflict is a convenient symbol disconnected from its reality.

Slavery accompanied America's birth as the colonists separated from Great Britain. The most influential Founders — George Washington, James Madison, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and others — understood the terrible contradiction between their professed ideals and preserving an institution by which men and women owned men and women. However, it took a few more decades before the contradiction became too great to contain.

The Civil War was a great tragedy. Most northerners and southerners thought the conflict would be short and sweet and had no idea into what they were blundering. Some 750,000 people were killed. That would be roughly eight million people today. The number boggles the mind. If California led the West Coast to secede to create a progressive utopia founded on wokedom at its most pure, who elsewhere in America would advocate war if they knew that the cost of holding those states in the union would be eight million deaths?

Consider the human price paid in the conflict's bloody battles. The 1864 Overland Campaign, in which Ulysses S. Grant relied on relentless combat in his attempt to destroy Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and capture Richmond, generated some 85,000 casualties — which would be more than *900,000 in terms of today's population*. Imagine a summer military assault to capture California's Bay Area from Berkeley-led Marxist secessionists in which almost a million Americans were killed and wounded.

Was union worth that kind of price in 1860? After all, political arrangements are supposed to be both practical and consensual. Some early exponents of federal coercion came to doubt their cause. After seeing the endless casualty lists of 1864, Sen. Henry Wilson of Massachusetts said, "If that scene could have been presented to me before the war, anxious as I was for the preservation of the Union, I should have said: 'The cost is too great; erring sisters, go in peace.' "

The Civil War began as a political, not moral, cause. The deep seven Southern states seceded over slavery. Although the national government vowed to stop them, it did not plan to eliminate slavery, which was to remain undisturbed as the recalcitrant states were forced back into the union. President Abraham Lincoln initially blocked orders by his army commanders to free slaves in occupied areas. Even the Emancipation Proclamation was promulgated as an emergency military measure and applied only to regions still under Confederate control — beyond Washington's reach. Slaves in conquered territories who could have been freed were left in bondage. Lincoln made his position clear: "My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery."

Moreover, only after he called for troops to wage war against the seceding states did the outer four slave states secede. In essence, they fought for a voluntary union, not slavery. With Virginia went Lee. He opposed slavery and secession. He also rejected invasion and conquest of the

seceding states, famously writing, “a Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets, and in which strife and civil war are to take the place of brotherly love and kindness, has no charm for me.” Which makes a lot of sense, even 160 years later. If you announce that you intend to end our partnership, why should I respond by imprisoning or killing you?

One of the factors making the Civil War so poignant was the tension created by the dual loyalty felt by so many southerners. It is something that means nothing to most Americans today. Indeed, Confederate military officers have been denounced as traitors. Of course, so were George Washington and his soldiers, only they ended up on the winning side and thus wrote the history.

States initially entered the union as sovereign entities retaining the most substantial domestic powers. For many leading southerners, turning against the national government was the lesser treason. To have gone with Washington would have made them traitors against their country, properly understood: their states, which contained their homes, communities, families, and histories. It was a time when place was almost everything, especially in the South. Hence Lee’s tragically unfulfilled desire: “Save in defense of my native State, I never desire again to draw my sword.” However, Virginia became the North’s principal military target, forcing Lee, in his view, to come to its defense.

It is factors such as these that make the conflict so interesting, the Confederacy’s cause so complex, and Lee’s trajectory so tragic. And it’s why I find it endlessly fascinating even today, a half century after my father took me on a battlefield tour in the East as a birthday present. I can simultaneously loathe slavery and dislike coercion, admire Lee and hate the society he defended. For me, America’s violent division over what the nation was and would be should be commemorated, with the objective of helping Americans understand their history.

And still, I say, rename the bases. The simplest reason is that several of the named 10 were more famous than competent. The Confederacy would have done better if Braxton Bragg and Leonidas Polk had gone north. George Pickett gave his name to the doomed attack at the battle of Gettysburg but did little else for the CSA. John Bell Hood was a fine division commander but wrecked his army when in independent command. P.G.T. Beauregard was talented but given to fantasy and histrionics and was unable to get along with Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Henry Benning and Edmund Rucker were brave but obscure officers.

Only three of those named would even seem to deserve that a base be named after them. A.P. Hill was a corps commander and John Gordon a division commander. Both served with distinction under Lee. And there was Lee, the war’s finest tactician and Confederacy’s most successful commander who spent the conflict tied to the defense of Richmond until the war’s end. He came to represent the tragedy of divided loyalty that afflicted so many Americans at the time.

More seriously, the name dispute divides us at a time when we should focus on what unites us. For most white Americans the Civil War is mostly of theoretical interest. Not, however, for black Americans. And not for African-American men and women who serve in the armed services. Although the Confederacy was much more than slavery, for someone whose ancestors toiled in

bondage its most important association remains slavery. The new country would not have existed without slavery. Had the CSA survived many black Americans would have spent their lives in servitude. Untold numbers of African-Americans today would have had very different lives. The military should choose names that unite rather than divide.

Indeed, as the Civil War further recedes into the mists of time for most Americans, why not use the opportunity to honor brave soldiers and important commanders from later wars, ones more likely to resonate with Americans today? Surely World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and even the Vietnam War should have suggested some names worthy of consideration. There must be some unconventional and unexpected figures who might deserve recognition as well. Alvin York and Desmond Doss come to mind. There are many more.

Wokeness for wokeness' sake has become a public scourge. Ensuring that public institutions consider the good and bad of U.S. history and welcome all Americans is a public necessity. There is much that should be debated in the latest defense bill. But changing names that needlessly offend many Americans should not be controversial.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. He is a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan and author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*