

# The Washington Post

## Trump administration's spurning of Tubman opens a new front in the monument wars

James Hohman

May 23, 2019

For better or worse, there is no more important monument in any country than its money. Everyone who carries cash is constantly reminded of who their government chooses explicitly to celebrate and what their culture implicitly honors. It's so much more than a square inch on a piece of paper.

It was a cultural milestone when Barack Obama's treasury secretary, Jack Lew, announced in April 2016 after years of deliberations that abolitionist Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave who became a conductor on the Underground Railroad, would replace Andrew Jackson, a slaveholder who championed Indian removal and orchestrated the Trail of Tears, on the \$20 bill. Lew set in motion a process that would unveil the new design in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote.

Steven Mnuchin, who replaced Lew, disclosed on Wednesday that the Treasury Department no longer plans to unveil a redesigned \$20 bill so long as President Donald Trump holds office. The secretary said a redesigned \$20 bill will not come out until 2028 at the earliest, punting the decision to a future administration about whether to move ahead with a plan that was announced three years ago.

Trump has come to revere and, in some areas, emulate the seventh president. Jackson's portrait hangs prominently in the Oval Office. The president even made a pilgrimage to his estate outside Nashville.

A defining feature of Trump's reactionary approach to the presidency has been systematically undoing the most significant accomplishments of his predecessor. From wreaking havoc on the Affordable Care Act to withdrawing from the Iranian nuclear agreement, pulling out of the Paris climate accord and rolling back dozens of regulations, this president has eviscerated a significant share of his predecessor's legacy.

Alumni of the Obama administration say the symbolism of the Tubman decision is hugely significant. Dan Pfeiffer, Obama's White House communications director, told me last night: "It has all the hallmarks of Trumpism - racism, misogyny, pettiness and whatever the opposite of virtue signaling is."

"Not moving forward is an insult not just to the African American community, but to all Americans who believe we should honor an American who contributed so greatly to the nation's history," added former Obama senior adviser Valerie Jarrett.

Mnuchin is clearly sensitive to the optics of this move and the potential political headaches it could create. Appearing before the House Financial Services Committee, he did not say whether Trump himself played a role in the decision, and he declined to say whether he thinks Tubman belongs on the bill. "I've made no decision as it relates to that," Mnuchin maintained under questioning from Rep. Ayanna Pressley, D-Mass. Instead, he claimed that the Tubman change cannot happen next year because he's too focused on trying to make the \$10 and \$50 bills harder to counterfeit. He said he'll roll out updated \$10 and \$50 currency, which will still feature Alexander Hamilton and Ulysses Grant.

But the Tubman snub is not happening in a vacuum. As a candidate in 2016, Trump called Lew's announcement "pure political correctness" run amok. He said that maybe Tubman should grace a lesser bill like the \$2, which is not in wide circulation, instead of the commonly used \$20. "Andrew Jackson had a great history, and I think it's very rough when you take somebody off the bill," he said on NBC's "Today" show as a candidate. "Andrew Jackson had a history of tremendous success for the country."

Mnuchin's announcement also foreshadows a fight over Jackson's legacy, specifically in 2020. Republicans have been attacking Pete Buttigieg since Friday for saying during a radio interview that Democrats are right to rename their Jefferson-Jackson dinners for politicians who didn't hold slaves. The mayor of South Bend, Ind., drew a distinction between Jackson and Jefferson that's been lost in the coverage on right-wing cable and talk radio.

"Over time, you develop and evolve on the things you choose to honor," Buttigieg told Hugh Hewitt. "And I think we know enough, especially about Jackson. You just look at what basically amounts to genocide that happened here. Jefferson's more problematic. There's a lot, of course, to admire in his thinking and his philosophy. Then again, as you plunge into his writings, especially the 'Notes on the State of Virginia,' you know that he knew that slavery was wrong."

For his part, Trump has "offered garbled and revisionist views on the struggle over slavery and abolition," as Isaac Stanley-Becker notes in his story on Mnuchin's announcement: "Most recently, the president reportedly implied in a conversation with Red Sox chairman Tom Werner that President Abraham Lincoln had lost the Civil War, as the sports executive recalled to reporters following a White House tour earlier this month. Two years ago, the descendants of Frederick Douglass offered the president a history lesson after he used language that appeared to imply that the abolitionist and orator, who died in 1895, was still alive. More disturbing to some was Trump's defense last month of Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Confederate States of America, as a 'great general.'

"So, too, some of the president's staunchest allies in Congress and in governor's mansions share his view of Confederate iconography. Rep. Steve King, the Iowa Republican whom Trump has not condemned for a series of statements embracing white nationalism, used to display a Confederate battle flag in his office, even though more than 76,000 Iowans fought for the Union

Army. Instead of seeking to scrub her state of its associations with the Confederacy, Sen. Cyndy Hyde-Smith, the Mississippi Republican who prevailed in a special election last year, introduced legislation as a state lawmaker to rename a stretch of highway 'Jefferson Davis Memorial Highway.' . . . And Georgia's Republican governor, Brian Kemp, last month signed a bill into law setting out severe penalties for desecrating Confederate monuments."

The libertarian Cato Institute think tank weighed in via Twitter Wednesday night on Tubman's behalf: "Harriet Tubman fought enormous injustice and promoted human liberty. She exhibited courage in fighting and breaking unjust laws, and took the lead in putting her views into action. She deserves to be on the \$20 bill."

The tweet links to a piece that Cato senior fellow Doug Bandow, who served as a special assistant to the president in Ronald Reagan's White House, wrote when Obama was considering the move in 2015. "She represents the best of America," Bandow said. "She never saw her work as done, but constantly joined anew the battle for freedom."

He observed an additional irony: "Replacing Andrew Jackson makes a certain sense since he resolutely opposed a federal central bank. He likely would be horrified if he returned and found his visage gracing paper money for a system far more malign than the Bank of the United States, which he battled ferociously and ultimately killed."

If Mnuchin or Trump want to learn more about Tubman, they could take a 125-mile self-guided driving tour around the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The Harriet Tubman Byway takes you to 36 sites that follow Tubman's remarkable life story. The folks who maintain this project expressed disappointment that Tubman may not be on the \$20 bill for almost a decade, even in the best-case scenario. "We are sad to hear this," they wrote on Facebook, "but in the meantime we will continue to share her story and celebrate her courage in other ways."

Tubman was known in her day as the "Moses of her people." But, really, she was America's Moses. She couldn't see well, but she had vision. "Whether she's on the \$20 bill or not, Harriet Tubman made men pay for underestimating her," the Post's DeNeen Brown wrote in a beautiful piece. "Tubman never waited for a man to affirm her. Tubman reveled in defying men, defying governments, defying slavery, defying Confederate armies and slave catchers who put a \$40,000 bounty on her head. This black woman who stood 5 feet tall was utterly and completely fearless. 'I had reasoned this out in my mind,' Tubman once said, 'there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other.'"

William Faulkner's observation is truer than ever: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."