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Let's Discuss the Power, Problems of Symbols

Two recent events with links to my past have got me thinking about the potential impact of community attitudes towards cultural symbols such as statues, memorials, markers, and names of streets and buildings located throughout Guam.

On July 27th, the Virginia Fairfax County School Board voted to change the name of my public high school, J.E.B. Stuart High School. James Ewell Brown Stuart, a native son of Virginia and slave owner, rose to the rank of Major General in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. He was killed on May 12, 1864 during the Battle of Yellow Tavern.

The school was built in 1958, only four years after the Supreme Court handed down its landmark desegregation decision of *Brown vs Board of Education*. Fairfax County fought hard against integrating its public schools. In fact, the Board of Education chose to name my school after the Confederate general as a display of defiance against federal efforts to desegregate the schools. The full integration of the Fairfax County public schools took over a decade.

Two years ago, Oscar winners Julianne Moore and Bruce Cohen, also J.E.B. Stuart alumni, joined ranks with a student-led campaign to change the school's name. Together, they circulated an online petition that garnered 35,000 signatures. In their email of support, Moore and Cohen wrote, "Today, this school is attended by a diverse group of students who should not have to attend a school that bears the name of a man who fought to keep African Americans enslaved. . . No one should have to apologize for the name of the public high school you attended and the history of racism it represents, as we and so many alumni of Stuart have felt the need to do our whole lives."

The matter simmered for many months before the 12-member Board of Education, none of whom is Black, took action. Arguments on both sides of the issue were vocal and adamant. Board members were uneasy with the mounting pressure to reach a decision. An attempt to again delay the matter was thwarted and the Board was forced to vote during their July meeting. Although they voted for a new name, a new one has yet to be chosen and won't be officially implemented until the 2019/20 school year.

Then on August 11th, a group of several hundred torch-bearing White Supremacists marched around a statue of Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia. The group chanted, "You will not replace us." The following day, a demonstration against removing the statue of Robert E. Lee located in a Charlottesville city park erupted into violence, resulting in the death of one of the bystanders. The racial and political tension was intense.

These events did not surprise me. In 1973, I transferred to the University of Virginia from Arizona as a college sophomore. This was shortly after the university had finally achieved full racial and gender integration. The racial tension was palpable on campus. I felt that I had suddenly been transplanted to the Deep South. Disliking the toxic atmosphere, I left UVA and returned to Arizona after only one semester. Obviously, based on these recent events, racial tensions persist to this day, highlighting the fact that scars left behind by the Civil War remain unhealed.

In both these incidents, tempers flared over cultural and social icons. In the first example, it was a name; in the other, it was a statue. Their symbolic nature varies greatly between the opposing sides. One side argues they symbolize racism and oppression. The other side argues they preserve history against censorship, revisionism, and political correctness.

This got me thinking about Guam's various government buildings and streets named after specific individuals and the variety of public statues, memorials, and markers on island. Do any of these cause cultural or social concerns to any particular group of people? A few possibilities come to mind.

One obvious candidate might be Umatac's Magellan monument. After all, Spanish colonization ended Guam's independence, resulted in the death of many Chamorros, and undermined much of the indigenous culture. Does the monument celebrate Spanish conquest or merely note the reality of the situation?

How about the Governor's complex that bears the name and a statue of Ricardo J. Bordallo? Are we paying homage to a disgraced governor who committed suicide hours before he was to be flown to a U.S. prison following his convictions for financial improprieties, or does the complex symbolize just defiance by a Chamorro leader against American aggression and arrogance?

We have public schools named after U.S. presidents George Washington and John F. Kennedy. Guam still grapples with its relationship to the U.S. Do these schools represent obvious reminders of U.S. dominance, or leadership traits we hope to promote?

Then, there are the statues of Pope John Paul II and Bishop Flores placed prominently in the middle of a public roads. Do these violate the Constitutional mandate to separate church and state, or simply reflect the fact that the vast majority of Guamanians are Catholic and hold the Church in high esteem? Do the pending civil sexual assault cases against several priests shake the community's confidence in the Church to the point that removal of the statues may be appropriate?

Let's be honest – symbols matter. As we look around the island at the scores of statues, markers, memorials, and road and building names, we should ask ourselves, what do these symbolize? What message were we trying to make? Was it

a worthy message then, is it a worthy message now? Should any of these symbols be taken down, relocated, or renamed? Most importantly, let's keep the discussion civil and respectful. That's the best legacy we can leave our children.