

Office of the President

875 Perimeter Drive MS 3151
Moscow, ID 83844-3151

president@uidaho.edu
www.uidaho.edu/president
(208) 885-6365

TO: University of Idaho Faculty, Staff and Students
FROM: Chuck Staben, President
DATE: August 25, 2017
SUBJECT: Further Reflections on Charlottesville

The recent rally in Charlottesville, and the violence and death that resulted, have sparked a national conversation. As president of UI, I have endorsed the [recent statement made by our student government](#) about the incident, and I offered some further comments in an email to faculty, staff and students. That said, I have struggled with what I could add to this discussion. But with continued reflection, as we begin the academic year I think taking a larger, more comprehensive, view is appropriate.

One of the difficulties in reacting to the Charlottesville march and subsequent violence is that they highlight many issues to which higher education is connected. If we speak to just one issue, we ignore the complexity of the overall situation and lessen the impact of our thoughts. So I will try to capture and connect a few important threads.

First, we have the issue of white supremacy and neo-Naziism. Many times in the world's history, one group of people has decided they are superior to another. Examples include the enslavement of Africans in the Americas, the oppression and displacement of Native Americans, and more recently episodes such as the Holocaust, the Rape of Nanking and the Rwandan genocide. A comprehensive list is not necessary to know that when we hate or lessen our fellow man, tragedy ensues. Tragedy results in the degradation and even killing of the oppressed; furthermore, it lessens the humanity of all who participate, and even of those who spectate. There are not two sides to issues of hate, supremacy or degradation. We must abhor them and work to stop them.

Paradoxically, some of our greatest weapons against hate and tyranny in the United States are the freedoms ensured by the First Amendment: freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition. These freedoms are consonant with values found in higher education settings: free speech, free inquiry, and shared governance. First Amendment freedoms also are consistent with UI values of respect and integrity. So while hate speech or Nazi assemblies are abhorrent, we must protect the rights of our fellow citizens to assemble and to speak freely – though never to incite violence.

The Charlottesville incident was motivated most directly by the removal of Confederate statues. The removal of such statues is part of a much larger question of how we consider and honor our history.

History holds important lessons; academics especially feel strongly about remembering and understanding history. Nevertheless, remembering history does not mean glorifying those whose primary role was abhorrent. In the case of Robert E. Lee, a generous interpretation is that he thought that states' rights, including the right to enslave others, were more important than the government of and the freedoms ensured by the United States. He led the military of a treasonous rebellion in a campaign that maimed and killed over 1,000,000 Americans (Union and Confederate). The error of Lee's ways should be remembered, but should such a person's statue be displayed in a place of honor?

African-Americans can personalize this situation in a way that I cannot. Slavery was a horrific institution that degraded individuals and destroyed families. How should a descendant of a slave view a statue of a man who fought to preserve slavery? Does that statue neutrally note history, or does it do something else? If remembering and instructing upon history is the purpose - especially to recognize the moral error of the cause and the humans behind it - is public statuary the way to achieve that purpose? Would you want the statue of a person who fought for the right to degrade your great-grandparents in a place of honor in your town square? As we strive to be the best institution we can be, we should recognize that our understanding of who "we" are and what the past teaches "us" may mean different things to different people. An inclusive and diverse campus demands we engage our capacity for empathy.

Many have pointed out that we continue to honor other slave owners, so can we distinguish Robert E. Lee from George Washington? Should we pull down the statues of every slaveholder? Of every public figure with a demonstrable fault? Yes, other men, like Washington, owned slaves - clearly a moral fault. Yet I believe we remember and justly honor them primarily for establishing the United States, which has evolved past their own personal faults and stood the test of time. One of the challenges we all face is to draw such moral distinctions. I sincerely hope that a University of Idaho education provides our students the critical environment, the context, and the moral clarity to make such distinctions.

As a university community, we are not necessarily immune to challenges of the kind faced by the University of Virginia and others. We have an open campus where many views may find expression. I state very clearly that we will assure basic freedoms such as speech and assembly while building an inclusive and respectful community to the best of our abilities. My administration will continue to have dialogue with student groups and all those interested in this topic, so that we can continue to have a strong, united University of Idaho.