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POLI 2056

12/10/22

Final Exam

Former Mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu, uses his book, “In the Shadow of Statues,” as a platform to comment on the historical reasoning and context behind his decision to, in May of 2017, remove specific pieces of Confederate memorials/ monuments from city property. These large Confederate monuments often displayed stone statues of Southern Civil War leaders and a large pro-secession inscription to go along with the actual memorial portion of the monument. Mitch begins to explain the genesis behind his decision to initiate the process of removing these segregation era historical memorials through descriptions of his various encounters and interactions throughout his life and during his time as mayor with real people from communities in the deep South. These recounts often describe the personal past of these various people regarding the tangible effects of modern racism and their opinions on the removal/ displaying of the Confederate statues. He follows and intertwines the stories of these conversations with facts and historical evidence that strongly suggests that the statues could have only been built to represent hateful and oppressive ideals. This context also serves to disprove or debunk the opposing argument of the statues representing any sort of long-standing tradition or pride of the South due to things such as a lack of any kind of real connection to the city. Although he describes the long, arduous process of jumping through legal hoops that he and his team faced throughout the process, Mayor Landrieu makes it very clear that his tone toward this action was one of unwavering moral responsibility.

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Being from out of state, I did not know how high the level of racism has been in Louisiana in modern times. I was shocked to hear Mitch's stories of being yelled at by an adult as an 8th grader and when he had to be escorted to another part of his school due to the staff receiving a call from someone who made a threat on his life. All of this was simply because his father was a progressive Mayor of New Orleans that supported civil rights. I also learned, from this biography, that these controversial statue removals that I had seen on the news were about statues that were genuinely offensive to many people and had very little historically representational value toward the city, or even the state for that matter. Given all the context of these events, I have learned many lessons from Mitch Landrieu's book about the people in the South. Specifically, I learned about the lengths that the people in these areas will go to just to reject change and not break away from the hive mind. I also learned about just how stubbornly long that local resistance to change can be and about how it can exist in the form of things like deep rooted racism. All these realizations particularly shocked me on account of it occurring in such a large city like New Orleans that has a large African American population with a long-standing, deep-rooted connection to the city. I learned a lot about how extensively race was used in politics even since segregation ended.

As previously mentioned, I learned a lot about the southern mentality from the resolve of many southern citizens to go out of their way to fervently protest a change being made to something that they know very little about. The smaller, but more delusional, portion of dissenters that opposed the mayor's decision to remove the statues purely based on motives of hate are the group that try to perpetuate the cultish ideals of 'the Lost Cause' of the Civil War. These people and this movement attempt to whitewash the historical background and context of slavery during the Civil War by trying to claim that they and their predecessors simply believed

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in the ideals of a harmonious, agrarian society. This group tends to underestimate the impact that slavery and racism, that has largely been perpetuated by the group's members, have had on society before, during, and since the civil war. Pitting populations against one another with racial tension for the sole purpose of gaining a political advantage has also helped perpetuate these spiteful ideas. Mitch goes on to describe this very topic in his book by describing an early form of this political tool's use in Louisiana through the lens of David Duke's political career. He outlines how racial beliefs and segregation were key tools of political actors in uncomfortably recent times and examples of it maintaining its lingering presence all the way from then to present day.

I believe that my generation of young adults has a real opportunity to take strides in the right direction in terms of equal rights, opportunities, and treatment of African Americans and all other minorities in not only Louisiana, but the entire United States. However, our degree of success depends heavily on our ability to educate the communities that need it most on the issues that face human beings in our very own society today. Once we understand this, it will be much easier to understand where everyone is coming from regarding their opinion on publicly supported and advertised material. I believe that we are also potentially headed in the right direction as a society as we have gradually improved over time at guaranteeing more and more rights for more and more citizens who, frankly, are entitled to them. Every generation along the way has faced their own obstacles and, for the most part, each one of them have left it marginally better than the last. Our generation's obstacle is clearing up the last bits of overt racism and start the final phase of killing covert racism with education and reform. I remain optimistically hopeful that we will leave the world and its affairs in a better place than we found it for the ones that come after us.