

## **Testimony regarding Arlington National Cemetery Confederate Memorial submitted to the Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery Open Session**

by Alexander Adams (British art critic, historian, author)

7-8 November 2022

### **Standing of submitter**

I am a British cultural critic and art historian, who has written six books and over 1,000 articles over the course of a 20-year career. I have frequently written on the areas of free speech and historical preservation. In the course of researching my book *Iconoclasm, Identity Politics and the Erasure of History* (2020, Imprint Academic) I encountered many examples of politically motivated intolerance that manifested itself in the historical suppression of defeated groups. In that book, I extensively discussed and catalogued the recent destruction of Confederate heritage. Although I have not seen the Arlington National Cemetery Confederate Memorial in person – I am rarely able to visit Washington DC, sadly – I have seen photographs and read descriptions. I have often reviewed sculpture of the same period and style at this memorial.

### **General response to the Final Report of the Naming Commission**

I was alarmed by the Naming Commission's Final Report, particularly with regard to Arlington National Cemetery Confederate Memorial (the Memorial). The Memorial marks a reconciliation of sorts between the sides, both the few living veterans and their descendants. Such serious and dignified memorial work, consecrated by the nation as a whole, is a tribute to American and Christian virtues of charity and hope. By removing such a symbol of reconciliation, the implication is that there can be no end to the Civil War, that the future must see that eradication of a historical legacy and that includes unending humiliation of the legatees of the defeated side.

When I consider the Naming Commission's recommendations, I am reminded of the words of your President Lincoln: *"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."* That is, it is the duty of the victors to extend charity and compassion to the defeated side's veterans, widows and orphans – and their descendants – by allowing them to honour their dead as they see fit and (incidentally) as the Union victors saw fit to allow them.

### **Legal objections**

On legal grounds, it seems that the Naming Commission has exceeded its authority by making a recommendation about the destruction of the Memorial, as it is a grave marker. According the page 4 of the Final Report (part III), one of the renaming criteria given to the commission (as stipulated in Section 370) is "Asset is not a grave marker." According to the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (dated 24 February 2014, pp. 25-6) four soldiers are buried at its base. These include Civil War soldier and sculptor Corporal

Moses Ezekiel, whose work the memorial is. The Memorial is an actual grave marker, marking the burial site of dead soldiers, and is located in the National Cemetery, making it a functional or symbolic grave marker. It is therefore outside the remit of the Naming Commission.

### **Artistic significance**

Having viewed a large amount of public statuary from the beaux-arts era (1850-1914), it is my professional opinion that the Memorial is a serious, iconographically complex and technically accomplished piece of art. In my view, it is a handsome sculpture and an entirely appropriate funerary monument. I consider it an internationally significant piece of art of its type and era. Any nation should be proud to host such a magnanimous and dignified monument.

The inscription *“And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks”* provides a Biblical guidance to turning from war to peace. This is echoed by the personification of the South, which holds the wreath of glory and touches the plough of peaceful prosperity. The frieze below the inscription depicts the contributions of those who supported the war effort.

It was made for its specific site with a specific purpose in mind by the artist and commissioners, so that relocating it would do its meaning great damage. Relocating it would remove a major part of the effect and distort its integrity as surely as cutting away a figure or effacing an inscription would.

### **Historical significance**

It is worth noting that it is rare for a nation to mark the losses and sacrifices of the losing side in a civil war. This makes the Memorial internationally significant, as an example of the exceptional history of the USA and the efforts to reconcile the sides after the Civil War. It shows black and white soldiers working together, overturning expectations and putting the record the complexity of historical fact, which it is not our generation’s place to suppress.

The fact that Presidents McKinley, Taft, Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson (of both Democrat and Republican Parties) supported the erection and dedication of the Memorial gives former presidential support a non-partisan character. On 4 June 1914, President Wilson dedicated the Memorial with these words: *“And, now, it has fallen to my lot to accept in the name of the great Government which I am privileged for the time to represent this emblem of a reunited people. I am not so much happy as proud to participate in this capacity on such an occasion,—proud that I should represent such a people. Am I mistaken, ladies and gentlemen, in supposing that nothing of this sort could have occurred in anything but a democracy? The people of democracy are not related to their rulers as subjects are related to a government. They are themselves the sovereign authority, and as they are neighbors of each other, quickened by the same influences and moved by the same motives, they can understand each other. They are shot through with some of the deepest and profoundest instincts of human sympathy. They choose their governments; they select their rulers; they live their own life, and they will not have that life disturbed and discolored by fraternal misunderstandings.”*

Wilson's consideration of democracy healing wounds and allowing fractured populations to express fraternal sympathy is a lesson to those who seek to maintain democracy as an American civic value. When we look at other countries, we do not find similar generosity extended to the defeated. This makes the Memorial rare. Regardless of one's own views on the Civil War, it is a duty to preserve monuments constructed by those who had direct first-hand experience of the war and its veterans.

### **Response of Jewish groups**

The fact that commissioners chose a sculptor who was Jewish is significant, as it shows generosity towards a group considered marginal at the time. The artist recognised the seriousness of his task and considered it an honour, as witnessed by his letter of 11 February 1911 (**Exhibit A**). The destruction of the Memorial – which is what any removal would amount to – would be an insult to the artist and reduce the cultural breadth of the nation. A Jewish writer has explained his objects eloquently in a letter I received, submitted as **Exhibit B**. The author concludes, “We would urge you to leave the Arlington Confederate Memorial exactly as our forefathers intended it.”

### **Recommendation of submitter**

**My professional advice is that I strongly recommend that the Arlington National Cemetery Confederate Memorial remains unaltered, for reasons of historical and artistic integrity.**

Alexander Adams

7/8 November 2022

**[Exhibit A: Extract of letter from Moses Ezekiel, 2 February 1911, published in *Confederate Veteran*, April 1911, vol. XIX, no. 4, Nashville, Tennessee, p. 1]**

tion from them.

I am working on our monument every day till dusk, and I have given up every other commission in order to devote myself exclusively to this work, which occupies my thoughts all the time. I do not receive any visitors in my studio, as I do not want to be disturbed; nor do I want my work seen and discussed before it is completed. \* \* \*

I hope that I shall do justice to the faith placed in me and my ability. I am devoting myself to a subject that I have more at heart than any work I have ever done before.

**[Exhibit B: Letter from Jack Schewel, November 2022, unedited]**

On March 19, 1841, at the consecration of its new synagogue in Charleston, Rabbi Gustavus Poznanski of the Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim congregation rose to speak to a throng of temple members and Charlestonians of many faiths who were invited to witness the important occasion. For centuries Jews all over the world had sought a return to the Promised Land, and generations of families had vowed as much at their annual Passover Seder: “*Next year in Jerusalem!*” In a remarkable display of chutzpah, Rabbi Poznanski proclaimed, “...*this synagogue is our temple, this city our Jerusalem, this happy land our Palestine.*” The Jews had finally found a home.

In his book, *American Jewry and the Civil War*, Bertram Korn, the recognized expert in the field, seems quite emphatic that during the antebellum period, Jews experienced a cultural and religious renaissance in the South that was unrivaled. The vast majority of Jews who lived in the region adopted the Southern way of life with all its peculiarities, including slavery, because for the first time in modern history, they were treated with dignity and respect, and flourished culturally, politically, and economically on par with their Christian neighbors. And while we condemn the evils of slavery, we cannot pass judgement on our ancestors as viewed through the 21<sup>st</sup> century lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion. No previous generation of Americans can survive such scrutiny.

Francis Salvador of South Carolina was the first Jew elected to public office in the colonies when chosen for the Provincial Congress in 1774. David Yulee and Judah Benjamin were chosen by their State Legislators, as was the practice then, to represent Florida and Louisiana in the U.S. Senate. They were the only Jewish Senators during that period. After the war, Isaac “Ike” Hermann, a private in the 1st Georgia Infantry proclaimed, “*I found in [the South] an ideal and harmonious people; they treated me as one of their own; in fact, for me, it was the land of Canaan where milk and honey flowed.*” Testifying that Southern Jewry in the antebellum period had found in the South the haven from prejudice they had been looking for. “*Nowhere else in the United States had Jews been as fully accepted into the mainstream of society. Nowhere else in the United States had Jews become as fully integrated into the political and economic fabric of everyday life.*”

No doubt this was on the mind of Moses Ezekiel when he designed and created the memorial at Arlington Cemetery. Arlington Monument is an important piece of American history, Jewish-American history, and a significant work of art.

Arlington itself is property originally seized from Confederate General Robert E. Lee's family, in an act of retribution, a deliberate attempt to prevent Lee or his descendants from ever being able to see their cherished home again. But in an ironic twist, the Lee home at Arlington has become sacred ground, universally revered by all Americans.

In the aftermath of the terror and hardship of war, Americans greatly desired to be done with the division and bitter sectional strife they had so recently endured. They wanted to reunite the country in a spirit of harmony.

To that noble end, it was, appropriate that in 1900, less than 40 years from Lee's surrender, Congress authorized the internment of the corporeal remains of Confederate soldiers in the hallowed earth of Arlington, and in 1914, permission was gladly given to erect a prominent memorial to the Confederate dead in the midst of Arlington.

This inspiring monument was erected to acknowledge the heroic manhood of Southern men who fought bravely against overwhelming odds, and to acknowledge a former foe in a spirit of renewed friendship and kindred national sentiment.

After all, in just a few years after the dedication of this beautiful monument, America would call on her sons to join the expedition to Europe, to fight in World War I; Americans answered that call, and fought side by side — Northerners and Southerners together, united in a common purpose.

As President William McKinley offered Southerners in 1898: *"[We] should share with you in the care of the graves of Confederate soldiers.... Sectional feeling no longer holds back the love we feel for each other. The old flag again waves over us in peace with new glories."*

Have we not seen in so many other places around the world that political disagreements have inflamed into civil wars which have carried on for generations costing many unnecessary lives?

We believe your committee — far removed from the actual conflict — should not assume the role of arbiter in this matter. Now, more than 100 years since its unveiling, you make pronouncements with no appreciation or regard for those who came before you and those who will follow. You cannot comprehend the hardships, the misery and the motivations of the men and women, on both sides of the conflict, who lived through this generational tsunami. Why must you call for these symbols of unity and reconciliation to be destroyed...Forever? Why must you insert your personal political ideologies of the moment for the time-honored traditions cultivated by generations of Americans?

We ought to respect the decision of those men who were far closer to the conflict than we are and honor their efforts to set aside the horrors of war in the name of peace.

Regardless of the political considerations, destroying or relocating this beautiful memorial would be the worst kind of vandalism and iconoclasm. Ezekiel is also buried there, and Jewish Law sharply condemns the excavation and removal of corpses from their gravesites even when they will be reburied elsewhere.

Designed by Moses Ezekiel, America's first great Jewish sculptor and a veteran himself, the Arlington Confederate Monument is a true masterpiece. To remove, damage, or alter this great achievement by one of America's noblest sons would be a crime against history, against art, and against the spirit of reunification that led to its creation. Judaism teaches us that loved ones never die as long as there is someone left to remember them. This monument is a testament to the memory of thousands who died and brings comfort and solace to their ancestors.

We would urge you to leave the Arlington Confederate Memorial exactly as our forefathers intended.