**Editorials by Chris Gentilviso**

**June 14, 2020**

**Editorial: Richmond’s 2020 monument debate is fueled by demographic change**

From the moment the Robert E. Lee statue was erected on Monument Avenue, it was “an object of public interest.” That was part of a front-page headline in the Richmond Dispatch on May 31, 1890, two days after the structure was unveiled.

“From sunrise to sunset the seats on the grand-stand were occupied by ladies and gentlemen, who, sheltered from the rays of the sun by umbrellas and parasols, made a calm survey and close study of the statue,” the article said. “The general comment was favorable,” and the scene included “visitors and residents of Richmond.”

Was the Dispatch the popular opinion at the time or just the most powerful? How did a Richmond Planet headline, rooted in the hearts and minds of former slaves, frame the statue’s arrival? “Thousands present — Confederate flags everywhere displayed.”

“The South may revere the memory of its chieftains,” the Planet’s front-page article said. “It takes the wrong steps in so doing, and proceeds to go too far in every similar celebration.”

We’re still litigating the divide between “favorable” and “wrong” on the monuments. But what made 2020 the tipping point? Consider the grueling coronavirus pandemic, the grisly murder of George Floyd — and critical layers of demographic change.

Since the turn of the century, new community voices have added a dimension to Richmond’s long-simmering debate over how to address its complex history. In 2015, the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service documented some trends that have shaped “Richmond’s Quiet Transformation.”

Consider the years leading up to the polarizing 2016 presidential race. Richmond’s white population jumped by 30% from 2005 to 2015, but through migration to the city, not just births. While the city’s black population fell from 57% in 2000, it steadily edged back toward 50%. From 2000 to 2015, more vertical building took place, as new construction in Richmond tripled. And so did the number of people who identify as more than one race, to around 9,000.

“This is likely in part due to Virginia having the highest rate of marriage between blacks and whites in the country, but also because as racial identity means increasingly less today, many people are identifying with more than one race, some even writing in their own race,” the Weldon Cooper Center said.

A 2017 study by the Urban Land Institute for Time Magazine identified Hampton Roads and Richmond as two top spots for millennial growth from 2010 to 2015. Hampton Roads added more than 7,000 residents, while Richmond added more than 5,000. And Virginia’s statewide growth — from 7 million people in 2000 to 8.5 million this past year — has led to fresh legislative voices.

Elections and legislation preceded violence as the desired mechanism to give localities a say in the placement of Confederate monuments. And the voices shaping that debate increasingly are new and nonnative. The 2020 General Assembly had a majority of members born out of state. Almost 40% of the House of Delegates was elected in 2017 or later, along with 20% of the Virginia Senate.

What about barriers that prevented demographics from driving change in Richmond sooner, like the 1960s? “In a period when most Jim Crow laws remained in effect, the prospect of soon having a majority black city was alarming to Richmond’s leaders,” the Weldon Cooper Center added. “To diminish blacks’ voting power, Richmond filed to annex predominantly white suburbs in neighboring counties and to change its city council to an at-large system.”

Today’s volatility brings stark reminders of the atmosphere in 1890, when the Lee statue first came into public view. In its same May 31 story from that year, the Dispatch wrote of how a detail of soldiers “still guard the spot and their services will doubtless have to be prolonged indefinitely.” The piece added that it was necessary to have someone on watch “at all hours” for “wanton boys … may mark or otherwise injure the monument.”

On page three of the Planet, again, there was a different tone. Under the headline “LYNCHED!,” the paper dedicated space to 387 Southerners who lost their lives through such savagery from 1887 to 1889. “Shall this barbarity continue, until the God of retribution marshals his strength against the barbarians?” asked the closing paragraph.

The violence and vandalism gripping Richmond’s streets today is wanton. The video of Floyd’s murder — and the Lost Cause propagated by our Confederate monuments — is barbarity.

But the general comment toward the monuments today cannot be as easily characterized as “favorable.” And the sentiment against their presence in the middle of Richmond’s streets was not first conceived on May 29, 2020. The argument for change burst on that day, in our city and others across the nation.

Once again, we don’t condone the violence that has toppled these structures’ place in our city’s history. But we must know and recognize why change is taking place, and our leaders must establish a civil venue that brings real closure. That is today’s “object of public interest” for Richmond — democracy, shared prosperity and common good going forward.

— Chris Gentilviso

**June 19, 2020  
Editorial: Barricades are not the answer**

After nearly three weeks of nightly protests, Richmond experienced an unusual occurrence on Wednesday evening: calm.

The whizzing of helicopters, the sounds of sirens, the looting of businesses, the toppling of statues and the clouds of tear gas have left the city in tatters.

In front of the Robert E. Lee statue this past Sunday, we heard the sounds our city deserves: laughter amid spirited picnicking, harmony amid passionate singing and tears of joy from people of all backgrounds, who saw better days ahead for Monument Avenue and Richmond.

Those are the days we want for our city. Barricades are not the answer in Richmond and, right now, we see several that are impeding our city and region from realizing true progress.

The parking cones, caution tape and concrete culverts in front of the Richmond Police Department (RPD) headquarters are despicable. At a time when the community needs more engagement with law enforcement, the wall sends the wrong message of an ongoing war with citizens. We hope RPD knows that.

The destructive clashes between protesters and police that led to such barriers are just as reprehensible. With our city reeling from a historic public health challenge, historic violence only compounds the uphill climb. A boarded-up Richmond can’t recover. We hope Mayor Levar Stoney knows that.

The absence of a sufficient police presence and city leadership has established dangerous precedents over the past few weeks. The acceptance of desecrated property, the latest being the Arthur Ashe statue in broad daylight, is a broken promise. The march of protesters into Stoney’s apartment building is a red line for danger, not a plan for reform. We hope the people know that.

The violence and dereliction of duty distracts from the better cause. How about amplifying the outpouring of civic responses? At this past Saturday’s “5000 Man March Against Racism” in Richmond, George Floyd’s cousin, Tavares, reiterated the true reason for the unrest.

“My cousin perished and he died pleading for his mother, and he died at the hands of police officers,” he said. “That’s what it means to be a black man in this country.”

And one week earlier, a Times-Dispatch report captured the image of the McKeever family. Mother Requel carried a sign that read: “My Sons’ Lives Matter — Signed A Black Mom.” Her 10-year-old son, Rikye, held his sign, “My Life Matters — Signed A Black Boy.”

“This is a time for him to see that he has a voice,” Requel told the RTD.

A just 21st-century Richmond requires democratic processes that place levers of power in responsible hands, not a violent tug-of-war that brings our systems for public safety to the brink of collapse. And newsflash to our current leaders: Richmond’s chapter starts and ends with you, Mayor Stoney and City Council.

On Sunday, Amy Wentz, a candidate in the 8th District race, flagged that this month’s public safety committee meeting was canceled. “Seems like a bad time to be canceling such an important committee that reviews legislation related to RPD and has RPD higher ups in attendance regularly,” she tweeted. “Was looking forward to that discussion.” So were we.

And Ross Catrow’s “Good Morning, RVA” newsletter added context that the committee has not met since February. “Do we even have a public safety committee anymore?” his Tuesday headline asked. Good question. Residents deserve better.

Earlier this month, Councilmember Michael Jones became a lead voice to “defund the police,” but he explained the plan behind that idea. “We’re not talking about getting boots off the ground,” Jones said, according to WTVR-TV. “We’re not talking about RPD going away but we’re talking about RPD looking drastically different than it does today and the reality is this — the people need to own that conversation and help get that conversation going,” Jones said.

The people have owned it. They’ve done their work. Now it’s the mayor and Council’s turn. Own the conversation. Do your job. Work for change. Make a platform that yields the presence our communities have been asking for.

Don’t talk about checks and balances for RPD. Implement them. If police are overrun with calls related to homelessness, mental health and other nonpolicing issues, don’t just commit to the Marcus Alert. Show us the details.

If police use of tear gas truly has no place during peaceful protests, words are shallow. Put a policy in writing. There’s a great blueprint for citizen conduct in the Code of Virginia. It’s a Class 3 felony when done with malicious intent, and a Class 6 felony without such cause.

And don’t sit back and watch the streets decay. After a monthslong pandemic, the public’s patience is thin. Richmond is ready for inclusive change, but that can’t happen by abandoning the basics of public safety. If the violence continues, we might see the kind of change that really makes a difference — at the polls, in November.

— Chris Gentilviso

**July 1, 2020  
Editorial: New police chief’s top task: Bring stability and unity to a fragile Richmond**

When new Richmond Police Chief Gerald Smith starts his first day of work on Wednesday, he’ll face an immediate test.

In a normal year, Richmond would be brimming with outdoor festivals and celebrations to honor America’s birthday. This year’s Fourth of July brings the worry of different fireworks.

Since the death of George Floyd on May 25, America and Richmond have engaged in a long-overdue conversation about racial justice and policing practices in our country and city. And Richmond has emerged as one of the most heated U.S. cauldrons of emotion, with near nightly protests anchored around the specter of the divisive Confederate statues that hover over our streets. What will this coming Saturday look like?

We wish Smith a warm welcome. He has seen a lot during his nearly 30 years of service for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in North Carolina. As we listened to his opening remarks on Saturday, we heard the right things. He vowed to listen, to bring new ideas, to be accountable for his department’s performance and to engage with the public about how to move forward.

“We’re looking at the community being deeply involved in this police department,” Smith said.

That brings two questions: Whose voices will be heard and what changes will we see? Smith’s task, as is true for all civic leaders, is to find ways to balance the divergent needs, interests and opinions within the community. Smith’s first task might be listening but his top task is bringing stability and unity to a fragile Richmond.

“Chief Smith is ready to lead this department in these challenging times and to work collaboratively with the community on how they want this department to operate,” Mayor Levar Stoney said at the Saturday press conference. “I knew we had the chief of Richmond that we need when he told me that his number one priority is to listen to the community because this is their police department.”

The embattled Stoney glossed over the divide in what different segments of the Richmond community are saying and how they are feeling about their police department. There are protesters fighting for a police force that protects and serves Black communities, rather than punishes and scares. There are residents and businesses seeking streets that project peace and calm, not late-night clashes, tear gas, flash bangs and boarded-up storefronts. There are RPD officers who responsibly engage in lifesaving work and are in need of a morale boost, not a blanket narrative that paints them as the universal enemy.

If Gerald Smith listens closely, he’ll hear the cacophony of tensions. He’ll meet Black Richmonders who have no confidence that their drive or walk home, or their trip to school, will be a safe one if they cross paths with police. He’ll meet city residents who have been unable to sleep well for weeks. He’ll meet RPD officers who silently wore “I stand with 2140” T-shirts in support of ousted Police Chief William Smith. That was his badge number.

Gerald Smith will hear competing arguments about the Confederate statues on Monument Avenue — that history should have been better protected, that the graffiti-laced structures provide true context or that the monuments must go altogether. He’ll hear perspectives that the protests for police reform went too far, or did not go far enough; same for RPD’s decisions to use chemical agents on citizens. And he’ll hear a common thread across these groups: people feeling they are not being heard and lack a seat at the table.

“We’re going to work together to make a good department great,” Smith said. “And that’s not to say that this department has deficiencies or errors. It could be as simple as complacency. We can never get too comfortable. We have to always seek improvement and I think that’s where the Richmond Police Department is right now.”

It’s unlikely that Smith will find a blanket solution over the next few months that rectifies the deficiencies and errors over the past 30 days. And moreover, it’s an open question if he — and Stoney — will emerge on the other side of a November mayoral election where public safety should be a front-and-center issue.

But Smith deserves credit. With his fresh outlook, he already projected a thought that has been a persistent barrier on Richmond’s streets of late.

“Police departments look different across the country,” he said on Saturday. “This is a conversation. They do, and in this country, we like our individuality.”

Smith’s comments were in reference to Richmond’s community policing needs being different than Charlotte or Washington or New York. But to create a safe Fourth of July in his fourth day on the job, he and the RPD will need to focus on the “individuality” among its citizenry.

When do our individual freedoms come into conflict with public safety? And how can police keep order without threats to one, the other — or worst of all, both? In split-second moments, much more than listening is required to strike that delicate balance. But in a police chief, that’s what we’re looking for.

— *Chris Gentilviso*