

The Need for Intellectual Courage, the History Leadership Council, and the History Advisory Board

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SHE WAS SOBBING UNCONTROLLABLY. One of the National Park Service's finest, most professional employees was so overcome with emotion that, when attempting to brief her colleagues as to what she had witnessed a few days before, she could not maintain her composure. She is an African American, the daughter of a Tuskegee Airman. Her name is Rose Fennell.

In December 2009, the National Park Service Civil War Sesquicentennial group, consisting of National Park Service employees from throughout the nation, gathered at Manassas National Battlefield Park for the first time to plan the National Park Service's commemoration of the American Civil War's 150th anniversary. Over a dozen employees met. Some were in the National Park Service interpretive series. One was African American. None was in the National Park Service historian series, and no academic historians were present.

Nothing better demonstrates the need for intellectual courage, the History Leadership Council, and the History Advisory Board—three vital recommendations in the Organization of American Historian's report *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*—than the drama that unfolded within this group. In many ways, it mirrored the same controversy that the National Park Service faced with the Liberty Bell Center at Independence National Historical Park. The employees first had to draft a vision statement, a document that would guide the National Park Service throughout the four years of the commemoration, a document that would capture the themes and ideas that the National Park Service considered critical to Americans' understanding of the watershed of its history. In so doing, these employees found themselves engulfed in a debate that has raged throughout this nation from the days of the Civil War until the present, and will probably rage forever.

The employees vehemently disagreed on three points. Should the vision statement include the phrase "Civil War to Civil Rights"? Should the vision statement include the term "African American"? Should the vision statement even include the word "slavery"? The majority of employees expressed fear as to the controversy that they would face from certain groups and organizations if these terms were included in the vision statement. They preferred a vision statement that was not controversial, one that would be accepted by all Civil

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War groups. After extensive debate, the group finally decided to include “African American” but not the phrase “Civil War to Civil Rights” and not the word “slavery.” As one member of the majority later wrote in support of the vision statement, the National Park Service should avoid the terms “slavery” and “civil rights” because they were unnecessary “distractions.”

Abraham Lincoln stood on the steps of the United States Capitol in 1865 and stated, “All knew that this interest [slavery] was somehow the cause of the war.” Ulysses S. Grant, in the final days of his life, in the conclusion of his memoirs wrote that “the cause of the great War of the Rebellion against the United States will have to be attributed to slavery.” Academic historians have overwhelmingly accepted the principle that slavery caused the war. And yet the National Park Service had no intention of including African American slavery in its vision statement.

As word of the meeting spread, many National Park Service employees responded. One wrote, “This all sounds like the South’s ‘Lost Cause’ approach—just focus on everyone’s noble bravery and ignore why they fought.” Another replied, “A woman fails to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, nine teenagers walk into a school in Little Rock, Arkansas, hundreds of Americans cross an Alabama bridge in the face of billy clubs, tear gas and bull whips, and fifty years later the National Park Service doesn’t have enough guts to stand up for the cause for which they were willing to give their lives.” The African American employees were especially incensed. “I am disappointed also but more determined to continue to speak out against injustice and speak up to remind us (NPS) of what we should be preserving,” one asserted. Another was “dismayed” at the statement while Fennell wrote, “I think that meeting was offensive, heinous, and shocking.”

The National Park Service chief historian, Bob Sutton, a former Manassas National Battlefield Park superintendent, who had been unable to attend the meeting, argued that the “Civil War has no meaning to anyone today, unless we understand where it fits into context—with slavery as the cause and civil rights as the eventual outcome—which are far more important than who shot whom where.” Fennell, the lone African American at the meeting, who lost her composure days later when attempting to brief her colleagues on the meeting’s outcome, and others began to fight for a new vision statement, and in the process, inspired others. Five months later, those insisting on a modified vision statement benefitted from a national controversy that erupted in Virginia. The governor had issued a Confederate History Month proclamation, a proclamation which failed to mention the word “slavery.” He immediately apologized after the proclamation became public, admitting that “the abomination of slavery divided our nation, deprived people of their God-given inalienable rights, and led to the Civil War. Slavery was an evil, vicious and inhumane practice which degraded human beings to property, and it has left a stain on the soul of this state and nation.”

This external event and the continuing internal pressure eventually caused the National Park Service to revisit the vision statement. Sutton was asked to draft a sentence that would include slavery as the cause of the war. However, his draft still required approval from the National Park Service members of the servicewide Civil War 150th committee. Fourteen employees attended a conference call on April 27, 2010, to decide whether the National Park Service would commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War with the former vision statement or the new one. The discussion was divisive. But, like those African American sol-

diers who had so bravely charged across fields 150 years before, and like those Red Tails who had so courageously fought for their country in the European skies, Fennell charged forward as well. The employees sharply diverged on the question of whether slavery was the cause of the war. Fennell asked her fellow employees to identify the war's cause, if slavery was not it. One employee responded, "The firing on Fort Sumter." While technically correct, this reply completely ignored causality. This answer suggested that Edmund Ruffin was simply strolling down the Charleston boardwalk one fine April day when he, by chance, encountered a loaded cannon that happened to be aimed at Fort Sumter, and for no particular reason, pulled the lanyard that inexplicably plunged the entire nation into the cataclysmic trauma of the American Civil War.

After lengthy debate, the vote was taken. It was eight to six. Eight employees voted to have slavery identified as the primary cause of the war, while six voted against it. Fennell had succeeded. The vision statement now included these two sentences: "In particular, the NPS will address the institution of slavery as the principal cause of the Civil War, as well as the transition from slavery to freedom—after the war—for the 4 million previously enslaved African Americans" and the NPS will "deliver meaningful opportunities to understand, contemplate, and debate the events of the Civil War, the Reconstruction Era, the Civil Rights Movement, and their significance today."

However, this entire drama would have unfolded far better, or perhaps have been completely avoided, had the Organization of American's Historian's report on the state of history in the National Park Service existed prior to this controversy, and had the recommendations contained in the report been implemented. The Organization of American Historians should receive the highest praise for this outstanding report. First and foremost, it should be congratulated for the methodology employed. The investigative team did not sequester themselves in a closed room. Instead, they interviewed dozens of the agency's employees and visited numerous national historic sites. For this approach, the OAH deserves the National Park Service's deepest thanks and appreciation. It is only by communicating with employees at all levels of the organization that one can fully grasp the positive aspects and the ongoing challenges for the study of history in the National Park Service.

Three points of the OAH report merit special approbation. First, the authors recommend that National Park Service employees practice "intellectual courage." This is absolutely crucial. We have been entrusted with the care of America's most sacred places, places that are critical because of the controversies that occurred at these sites, whether it is a Japanese concentration camp in California, a massacre site in Colorado, or a high school in central Arkansas.

Second, the OAH recommends the establishment of a History Leadership Council (HLC). This is a laudable recommendation that would provide national leadership for history. It would function best as a mix of interpreters and historians, representing all the regions, and jointly chaired by the chief historian and the associate director for interpretation and education. The collaboration of interpreters and historians at the national level would serve as an example for the entire service, would bridge the disconnect between history and interpretation, and would serve as an internal group to focus on the challenging issues of history in the National Park Service.

Thirdly, the OAH recommends the establishment of a History Advisory Board (HAB). This board would provide a permanent connection between the study of history in the National Park Service and the academic community, a permanent connection that is so desperately needed. Former Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley deserves special praise for accomplishing the first crucial step in this relationship by completing the cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the OAH, an agreement that formalized the relationship. The establishment of the HAB is the next logical step. This board would serve as the external group to guide the National Park Service with the expertise of professional academic historians.

Had intellectual courage permeated the National Park Service, had the HLC and the HAB existed in the fall of 2009, the agency would have avoided the Civil War vision statement controversy. The HLC and the HAB could have provided the much-needed guidance, fortitude, and leadership. And it is this leadership that all of us need in the National Park Service, and in the nation, and all of us would be better for it.

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