

# **Republican Perspective**

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## **A Common Soldier**

There was a monument in front of the Old Durham County Courthouse. It consisted of a granite base upon which stood an anonymous Confederate soldier. Erected in 1924, the whole works was about 15 feet high. The base was inscribed: "In memory of the boys who wore the gray."

Two days after the violence in Charlottesville, a group of vandals destroyed that monument. One person climbed the pedestal and looped a rope around the soldier. The group then pulled the soldier to the ground where it crumpled. The police were present but, apparently wanting to avoid a confrontation, did not intervene. They did, however, film the event and have since made several arrests.

Regardless where you stand on the issue of whether there should be monuments to Confederate leaders or not, this vandalism is wrong on two counts. First, it is illegal to vandalize or destroy the property of another---in this case the city. Several jurisdictions are deciding or have decided to remove Confederate statues---others won't. It is up to the monument owner---not a mob of self-appointed vigilantes---to decide the disposition of that monument. If the mob felt aggrieved by the presence of this memorial, their appropriate remedy would have been to petition the city.

Second, and setting aside the criminality issue, the vandals' choice of target was inexcusable. Here's why.

The monument depicted no Confederate leader, no known slaveholder. It was an anonymous soldier without rank or identification. As described on the UNC-maintained website documenting southern history, it was a "common soldier." Officers in those days typically got their commissions by graduating from a military academy, or through their wealth or political connections. The common soldier---Johnny Reb---had no such power and would be an unlikely slaveholder. He fought for his State.

What was Johnny Reb's condition? Compared to his Union opponent, he was under-equipped and under-fed, and his weapons were less effective. The Union had the industrial strength to outfit an army which the South did not.

For example, he may or may not have even had shoes. If he had shoes, there probably wasn't a right and left---his shoes were interchangeable. If he had none, he might eventually acquire a pair when scavenging from the dead on the battlefield.

The same applied to weapons. Johnny Reb may well have arrived on the battlefield with his personal shotgun or hunting rifle. Confederate-issued rifles were less effective than Union rifles. But again, scavenging from the dead was common. As an example of the Union's technological advantage, the Gatling Gun, forerunner to the true machine gun, was used by Union forces but not available to the Confederates.

Common soldiers on both sides had it tough---perhaps even tougher than today's college kids retreating to their "safe spaces." But Johnny Reb had it tougher than the Yankee. His tour of duty featured extreme privation in a fight against long odds.

Video of the mob pulling Johnny Reb off his granite base is a study in contrasts. Johnny Reb represented toughness, courage, determination, fighting to the end against forbidding odds for a lost cause.

He was pulled down by Lilliputians. Once the statue of Johnny Reb was crumpled on the ground, the vandals bravely took turns kicking, spitting upon, and "giving the finger" to the common soldier. A sorry spectacle.

But there's an unfortunate precedent for disagreeing with Government policy and taking it out on the common soldier: the vandals' ideological grandparents spat upon American troops returning from Viet Nam.

In case you misunderstood, this is not an endorsement of the Confederacy. It is an affirmation of "the boys who wore the gray," the common soldier whose monument in Durham was trashed by his inferiors.

*"It does not take a brave dog to bark at the bones of a dead lion."  
(attributed to Winston Churchill)*