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TOP STORY

WKU Civil War forum stirs discussion, debate on monuments

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When protests in Charlottesville, Va., erupted in violence last August, Western Kentucky University history professor Glenn LaFantasie felt he was experiencing something new.

“It felt to this historian at least as though the past was truly catching up with the present,” he said, speaking at a Civil War forum Monday at WKU’s Jody Richards Hall auditorium.

Together with history professors Dorothea Browder, John Hardin and Selena Sanderfer, LaFantasie attempted to help students, faculty and community members grapple with the legacies of America’s bloodiest war.

During the forum, called “Uncivil: Race, Memory and the Civil War,” each professor opened by discussing a specific topic area, such as Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Nathan Bedford Forrest or the divisiveness of the Confederate flag.

After that, the event was opened to questions from community members and the historians discussed them.

Hardin pushed back against the romanticized connection some white people hold for the antebellum south. This includes symbols like the Confederate flag and statues erected to memorialize Confederate heroes.

For Hardin, a 69-year-old African-American, segregation isn’t something he learned from a history book, but by watching his parents live through it.

He noted that these symbols have been used to demonstrate resistance to racial reconciliation, including up to the “1970’s when opposition to school busing in Jefferson County encouraged busing opponents to raise and wave the Confederate flag as an emotional symbol for the violent resistance to busing to achieve school integration.”

“As for the Confederate statues, several Kentucky cities and locations are struggling in the 21st century to determine if the statues should be removed, destroyed or housed away from public view in museums,” Hardin said. “Defenders of the Confederate traditions argue that these statues represent a vital period of regional history – and remarkably – not racial hostility toward blacks.”

Hardin made the case that race relations in the U.S. won’t be fully mended “by ignoring the fundamental historical roots of these issues.”

During her presentation, Sanderfer described the history of Confederate Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, who was also an early leader of the Ku Klux Klan.

She noted how powerful symbols like the Confederate flag can change meaning from one generation to the next, such as how southern hip-hop reappropriated the flag in the 1990s, she said.

Sanderfer said she supports Confederate statues raised with private funds and their own museums separate from taxpayer-funded projects.

Browder noted the large number of Confederate monuments in the U.S.

“There are more than 1,500 monuments to the Confederacy on public land,” she said. “I’m not talking about in cemetaries where families remember their fallen ones. I’m talking about on public land.

Browder questioned “why it is that the United State would have so many symbols on public land from people who fought against the U.S. government,” and to preserve their right to own slaves, she said.

“I don’t know where are all the monuments on public land to abolitionists, to leaders of slave revolts,” she said.

After watching violence unfold in Charlottesville, Va., LaFantasie said a part of him supported moving monuments to museums while another part saw it as a slippery slope to erasing history.

“I think we have to stop and think about the multiple layers that exist when we think about statues, historical statues and what they say about the past,” he said.

He suggested instead adding context to them with additional signage to describe their many meanings and information about their sculptors, architects and financial backers.

When taking questions, the historians were asked to debunk myths surrounding the war. Sanderfer described the biggest myth as the idea that the Civil War was fought over “states' rights” and not slavery.

One man discussed Robert E. Lee as an example of the many men who fought in the Civil War because they thought they were upholding the U.S. Constitution. He took issue with the war being described in racial terms.

Some in the audience called out “traitor, he’s a traitor,” in reference to Lee as the man discussed him.

In response, LaFantasie encouraged looking at Lee as a complicated and ultimately human character. Hardin urged remembrance for the common people involved in the war, including 168,000 black soldiers who fought in it. Sanderfer agreed, adding that retellings of the Civil War often leave out the roles black people played.

“We don’t think about the common people whose lives were destroyed,” Hardin said.

Alesis Collins, a senior from Louisville, said she appreciated the historians debunking myths around the war. Collins, who is African-American, said she supports more dialogue around the statues and education about the history they represent.

Until then, America is doomed to repeat its history, she said.

“They’re still a part of our history,” she said.

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