

Public Opinion and Confederate Memorials in Amarillo

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INTRODUCTION

A white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, turned violent in August 2017. The rally directed attention to the presence of Confederate monuments in numerous American cities, including Amarillo, Texas. In an effort to understand the Amarillo public's opinion of the Confederate statue in Ellwood Park, a survey was fielded in September 2017. The survey also queried respondents about Robert E. Lee Elementary School in the Amarillo Independent School District. This poster presents the findings uncovered by the survey, including public opinion on the disposition of the Confederate monument, the possible need to change the name of the elementary school, and the public's view of the Trump presidency. Much of the information presented here appeared in the pages of the *Amarillo Globe-News* (Treon, 2017). This poster presents some provocative associations between support for Confederate memorials and support of President Donald Trump.

This poster presents a work in progress. In fact, one might argue that this is data in search of a theory.

CONFEDERATE MEMORIALS IN AMARILLO

We must travel back almost a century in order to find the complete history of Confederate memorials in the city of Amarillo. The *Amarillo Daily News* on June 8, 1931, reported on the installation of a statue in Ellwood Park in Amarillo:

Unveiling and dedicating of the Confederate monument in Ellwood Park, presented to the citizens of Amarillo by the Will A. Miller Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, took place Sunday afternoon at 4 o'clock with fitting program and martial music by Amarillo's new municipal band.

Several hundred persons stood with bared heads and sat upon benches in the shade of elms and maples throughout the exercises, while hundreds of others occupied automobiles parked on the north and east sides of Ellwood Park ("Hundreds at park to see unveiling of U.D.C. monument," 1931).

United State Representative Marvin Jones of Amarillo was the main speaker of the afternoon. In his speech, he emphasized that "the paramount issue for which the South was fighting – that of state's rights in self-government – was then and still a greater issue than either the issue of secession or slavery." The Amarillo paper relates that "Mr. Jones said that all histories he had ever read on the great struggle gave the North credit for importing the first slaves on American soil" (Hundreds at park, 1931).



CONFEDERATE MEMORIALS IN AMARILLO (cont.)

The article relates that the effort to memorialize the Confederacy in Amarillo started in 1915. The fundraising activities were halted during World War I and did not restart until 1926. The monument was designed and installed by the Osgood Monument Company. It "represents a Confederate soldier standing in full uniform with rifle in hand." The granite pedestal is engraved with the words, "Will A. Miller Chapter, No. 1372, United Daughters of the Confederacy. In Memory of Our Confederate Soldiers" ("Hundreds at park," 1931).

Robert E. Lee Elementary School is the second Confederate memorial found in the city of Amarillo. The Board of Trustees of the Amarillo Independent School District approved a motion to name a campus for Robert E. Lee on August 20, 1951. The recommendation to name a school after Lee included the following comment:

Robert E. Lee was recognized nationally as an outstanding military genius, a man of nobility of character, and motivated by the highest sense of duty, having said to his son on one occasion: "Duty is the sublimest word in the language." After the Civil War he refused wealth and places of honor offered by the national government to accept the presidency of Washington College, later Washington and Lee Univ., to which he devoted the last years of his life (AISD Board of Trustees, 1951).

In August 2017, both Confederate memorials become subjects of vociferous public debate. At its regular weekly meeting on August 21, 2017, the Amarillo City Council listened to debate over the possibility of removing the statue of the Confederate soldier from Ellwood Park. "Member of the NAACP and Indivisible Amarillo asked the council to remove the statue, while Amarillo Freedom Riders argued to keep the monument" (Egel, 2017). The City Council took no action on the statue.

The Board of Trustees of the Amarillo Independent School District discussed the possibility of changing the name of Robert E. Lee Elementary School with its legal counsel in September 2017 (Stein, 2017a). Compared with the raucous debate at an August 2017 Amarillo City Council meeting, "there was little protest at the Amarillo Independent School District Board of Trustees meeting Monday [September 17], though a local NAACP official spoke out in favor of renaming Robert E. Lee Elementary School during the public comment period" (Stein, 2017b). In January 2018, the Board of Trustees supported by a 4-3 vote a motion to rename the school Lee Elementary School (Carr, 2018).

PLUMBING PUBLIC OPINION

To better understand the Amarillo public's opinion on the question of Confederate memorials in the city of Amarillo, I fielded an online survey from September 19 through September 30, 2017. To collect survey responses, I programmed the survey in Qualtrics, a sophisticated online survey software. I placed a link on my personal homepage (<http://www.wtamu.edu/~jrausch>) and also asked WTAMU's Office of Communication and Marketing to place the link on the WTAMU homepage (<http://www.wtamu.edu/>). Several media outlets also publicized the survey (see, for example, Stein, 2017c).

The survey focused on the following two questions:

Should a memorial to Confederate soldiers in Amarillo's Ellwood Park be removed? If so, should it be placed in a museum or destroyed?

Should Robert E. Lee Elementary School be renamed?

Over 800 people responded to the survey. Primary analysis was limited to the 428 responses from people who indicated that they live in Amarillo. Almost 50 percent of the respondents indicated that the Amarillo Independent School District should "definitely not" or "probably not" change the name of Robert E. Lee Elementary School. More than 50 percent of the respondents answered definitely no or probably no to the question of removing the Confederate statue in Ellwood Park (Treon, 2017). With the even split in support and opposition, policymakers will have a difficult time reaching a policy outcome to please a majority of the populace.

THE THEORY IS NOT SURPRISING

Social science usually requires a theory. While this survey queried Amarillo residents on current events, several questions were included to aid in the development of a theory. Respondents were asked to consider the job that Donald Trump is doing as President. A question also inquired about respondents' opinions regarding race relations in the United States today.

The presidential job approval question is similar to one asked almost daily by numerous polling operations (see Gallup, 2018):

Do you approve or disapprove of the job Donald Trump is doing as President? (Approve, Disapprove, Unsure)

The question regarding race relations also is a standard question regularly posed on national surveys (Thompson and Clement, 2016):

What is your opinion with regard to relations in the United States today, would you say things are better, about the same, or are worse than they were a year ago?

A crosstabulation analysis indicates respondents who think President Trump is doing a good job are more likely to oppose changes regarding the Confederate memorials. Over 90 percent of the Amarillo residents who approve of President Trump's job were definitely not in favor of removing the Confederate soldier statue from Ellwood Park. Slightly more than 85 percent of the respondents who think President Trump is doing a good job opposed changing the name of Lee Elementary School. Both associations are statistically significant ($p < .001$).

THEORY (cont.)

A second crosstabulation analysis was conducted on the question of race relations. The results of this analysis are more challenging to interpret. Of the respondents who believe that race relations are about the same as last year, about 65 percent definitely opposed removing the statue. Slightly more than 44 percent of the respondents who see race relations as worse wanted to remove the statue. Considering Lee Elementary, 60.93 percent of those who see race relations as about the same as last year definitely do not want to change the school's name. Only 48 percent of those who see race relations as worse than last year wanted to change the name. Both associations are statistically significant ($p < .001$).

The September 2017 survey indicated that the question of Confederate memorials is divisive in the city of Amarillo. The survey also demonstrated the possibilities in using University research to answer questions important to policymakers.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For additional information, please contact Dr. Dave Rausch at jrausch@wtamu.edu.

Image of Confederate Statute found at <http://amarillo.com/local-news/news/2017-08-22/amarillo-city-council-gets-earful-regarding-confederate-statue-ellwood>

Image of Robert E. Lee Elementary School found at <http://northamarillonow.co/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/robert-e-lee-e1502667322534.jpg>

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