

# The Orwellian Playbook: Retrospective “Cancel Culture” and the Past we Choose to Ignore

*We will have lost sight of freedom once we have erased the legacies of those who have dedicated their lives to its preservation.*

**T**wo years ago, my neighbour gave me a piece of advice that changed the way I look at the world. “Before you meet your maker,” he said, “you have to have read these three novels: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Animal Farm* and *Brave New World*.” For no particular reason, I decided that the first title would be a worthwhile place to start. Orwell’s haunting prophecy about the world he never lived to see has stuck with me ever since and continued to unfold before my eyes.

The latest example of this phenomena is the recent attempts to rewrite Western history by defacing statues of some of its most prominent figures, on account of their alleged racism during another time, another culture. The statues in question, including that of British wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill, commemorate the lives and contributions of great – though not always good – men.

Sculpted by Ivor Roberts-Jones and unveiled in 1973, the bronze sculpture of Churchill stands on the very spot that Churchill himself declared in 1950 to be the place where his statue would go. Vandals

spray-painted beneath Churchill’s name that he “was a racist,” as part of *Black Lives Matter* protests in London this June.

It is wholly a result of cultural and historical ignorance that this latest episode of the Cancel Culture soap opera has been aired, this time with a retrospective twist. Take the example of activist and chair of the Lambeth Independent Police Advisory Group, Lorraine Jones. In an interview with British presenter Cathy Newman, Jones revealed that she did not know of Winston Churchill. When asked if Churchill’s statue should stand or not, Jones replied, “I have heard many arguments on both sides; some say that he is a racist, some say that he is a hero. **I haven’t personally met him**, but what I would say is that the question of whether he should remain should be put to the community.”

Churchill died of a stroke in January 1965.

Presumably, then, Jones may not know that Churchill was instrumental in the West’s response to the Nazi regime during the Second World War. To this day, he remains a universal symbol of resolute strength, integrity and an embodiment of what it means to have the courage of one’s convictions. Failure to understand Churchill’s influence will be a dangerous step away from the freedom that he sought to uphold.

In 1937, Churchill stated the following: “I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America, or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to those people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, or, at any rate, a more worldly-wise race, to put it that way, has come in and taken their place.”

Those who defaced the statue likely took issue with Churchill's inference that his own Judeo-Christian culture was superior to others. Perhaps some people saw this statement as a justification for the atrocities that took place under colonisation which, by the way, has been commonplace among all civilizations to have ever existed. Every notable civilization has been both the oppressor and the oppressed at some point in history. There is not a single culture that is exempt from this rule that has contributed to the development of the world to the same extent as the West.

In the case of Churchill's statue, the West's underlying sense of guilt overrides our better judgement to the detriment of our culture and, by extension, ourselves.

Should Churchill's attitudes in 1937 be assessed against a 21st Century moral framework? Of course not. Times have changed and so has the culture; had Churchill lived in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, his beliefs would have been influenced by modern norms. In order to move forward as a culture – to learn from past mistakes – we must learn from people like Churchill and judge him for his achievements and the manner in which he pursued them. Furthermore, if it weren't for our knowledge of Churchill's involvement in the Second World War, how would we know how to confront discrimination as he did when he confronted the Nazis? How would we know that discrimination is worth confronting at all?

That Churchill's statue even exists is a testament to his profound influence on the Western World. It was Churchill who said that "those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it." Understanding history is an exercise in resilience, and a good

society cannot make progress in the right direction without resilience and an understanding of the ideas, movements and experiences of the past.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell wrote that "who [sic] controls the past, controls the future. Who [sic] controls the present, controls the past." He also wrote that "the choice of mankind lies between freedom and happiness and for the great bulk of mankind, happiness is better." In light of the defacing of Winston Churchill's statue on account of his supposed racism, these two quotes neatly intertwine. We would all be happier if we were not reminded of our tragic past, but how would we understand the importance of learning from the past if we cannot remember how people like Winston Churchill responded when our ideals came under threat?

Defacing and destroying statues is a symptom of a "cancel culture" mentality, whereby even the most rational voices are censored if they dare to detest the moral decadence of progressive orthodoxy. As society's values undergo constant change, the history of the West would therefore become subject to regular recharacterisations. Public discourse would be reduced to screaming matches and name-calling. If we are to enact positive changes that reflect our understanding of past mistakes, we ought to pursue options other than erasing our history and weaponising public discourse.

As for Churchill's comments in 1937, I believe that he was suggesting that several aspects of Western culture have made more extensive contributions to social progress than other cultures. Churchill wasn't criticising people on the basis of colour or ethnicity; he was assessing the ideas of other

cultures and their contribution to societal advancement compared to the contribution of Western ideals. A lover of learning, Churchill would've enjoyed works equivalent to, say, Shakespeare, created by artists from foreign lands, if it weren't for a lack of accessibility. One must also ask how this single quote nullifies all of Churchill's better-known quotes about history, courage and success; are they no longer valid?

Instead of coming to terms with the values of previous generations that contradict modern norms, many would prefer to simply erase Churchill from the history books. We must not discard this telamon of modern politics who was instrumental in the defeat of Nazi Germany and characterised the defence of freedom for generations to come. It would be easy to erase those parts of history that are difficult to come to terms with. Perhaps we would be happier if we knew less. However, the unsettling reality of the horrors of the past will be far outweighed by the physical and psychological trauma experienced by a society that allows the mistakes of the past to repeat themselves.

In the words of Orwell, "...how do we know that two and two make four? Or that the force of gravity works? Or that the past is unchangeable? If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable – what then?"

As Orwell wrote in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength." I believe that to suggest that Churchill ought to be "cancelled" for a single distasteful comment is ignorant. And ignorance *is* strength. Who dare believe that they are so enlightened as to adjudicate which parts of history are erased and which are remembered? Who can honestly lay claim to

enough virtue as to suggest that they are somehow deserving of the authority to judge another's character?

Is Churchill racist? The truth is, it doesn't matter. His ideas about race and culture were merely a product of his time, but his defence of freedom in the face of its greatest threat serves as a blueprint for generations to come. We will have lost sight of freedom once we have erased the legacies of those who have dedicated their lives to its preservation. Indeed, a time may come when Churchill's statue will be pulled down once and for all as the great ideals of the West will perish beyond repair. However, as the beneficiaries of Western ideals that have given rise to an abundance of freedom, we ought to ensure that today is not the day when freedom falls.

W.C: 1483