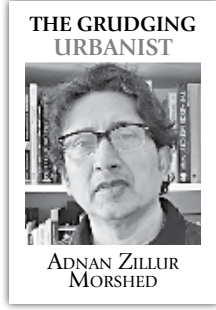


To remove or not to remove?

The "soft weapons" that continue to perpetuate structural racism in the US



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

LINCOLN Park is our community hub on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Just a block away from where we have lived for nearly two decades, it is a magnificent swath of urban green, within walking distance from the US Capitol. This is where we often take a stroll, jog, watch toddlers doing fun stuff, and breathe fresh air that blows through a range of native and exotic trees: American Elm, Sawtooth Oak, Norway Maple, Black Locust, Chinese Elm and Saucer Magnolia, among others. The neighbourliness of our community flourishes here.

Yet, there is a monument in the park that has always made us uncomfortable: the Emancipation Memorial, built in 1876, to commemorate Abraham Lincoln for "freeing the slaves" with his Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Set on a high pedestal, the monument portrays Lincoln as a towering saviour and an unshackled slave, who kneels in front of him, as a grateful recipient of white mercy. Many in our neighbourhood view it as an unabashed embodiment of white supremacy. Many consider it repugnant.

But, as in any other diverse neighbourhood, not everybody finds the statue unnecessary. There are those who feel that monuments like this are necessary to remind people of America's birth defect: while, in 1776, the United States Declaration of Independence stated that "all men are created equal," captured African slaves were transported to America in ships specially built to maximise human cargo and sold as "property" in slave markets. Not all men were created equal. Some "deserved" to be in chains and work in the cotton fields like animals. As the 1619 Project of *The New York Times* tells us, the period between 1760 and 1860 was the heyday of slave trading in the United States.

Approximately 1.2 million enslaved men, women and children were sold during those hundred years. The White House Historical Association notes that at least eight of the first 12 US presidents brought slaves with them to work at the White House.

There is no black-and-white narrative about racism in the USA. Some of our black neighbours discover the promise of a new America in the slave "rising" before a Moses-like Lincoln glorifying the Emancipation Memorial. Some see in it a mutually respectful convergence of white and black America. Many white and black neighbours believe that Lincoln was more concerned about saving the Union than freeing the slaves. They want the monument gone. There has been no dearth of opinions. The lingering question has been: to remove or not to remove?

It was déjà vu when our neighbourhood suddenly found itself in the national spotlight. As the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement inspires people across America, local and out-of-town activists of all political persuasions converged on Lincoln Park. The young BLM activists described the Emancipation Memorial as a symbol of America's systemic racial injustice that makes the brutal police killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor possible. Therefore, it should be removed as soon as possible.

In late June, they convened a public meeting in front of the memorial to demand its removal. But the meeting quickly fizzled out in the cacophony of conflicted opinions: "topple it," "take it away," "put it in a museum," "no, keep it up, it is history," and "that statue ain't killing me, police is." The failed meeting, it seemed, was symptomatic of the never-ending national debate on America's entrenched racial inequality. Taking down a controversial statue in a civic space could be more difficult than winning a military battle.

In the context of the recent debate on Confederate monuments in the US, architectural historian Dell Upton suggested that making moral arguments against individual historic figures (such as Lincoln) was a "losing

proposition" because good and bad coexist in individuals and, in the end, it is impossible to make a reasoned case for their erasure from history. He argued, "no final accounting convincing to everyone can be made." But one wonders why it is important to convince everybody. Could a statue with complicated histories ever be removed or retained by consensus? Of course, not everybody agrees with Upton. Writing on the radical

to discuss race relationships. The pioneering American silent film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), didn't need a knee to press down on anybody's oxygen supply. Instead, it normalised racial hierarchy. Embedded in its epic story and filmic innovation was the glorification of the slave-owning Old South and its ideology of white supremacy. The American film critic Roger Ebert wrote: "It is a great film that argues for evil."



PHOTO: ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

toppling in Bristol, UK, of the statue of seventeenth century slave trader and philanthropist Edward Colston, Oxford archaeologist Dan Hicks stated: "... these statues were never 'just statues,' but part of an apparatus of racism. Statues were used to make racial violence persist. Today, their physical removal is part of dismantling systems of oppression."

The debate on the Emancipation Memorial on Capitol Hill shows how structural racism does not necessarily need a racist police to enforce the ideology of racial domination or a frenzied white mob to lynch a black male. It can work, more powerfully, through public symbols, films, novels, and even white politeness in refusing

Another American classic, *Gone With the Wind*, the 1939 Oscar winner, portrayed southern plantation slaves as a happy bunch, living harmoniously with their white masters in a peaceful pre-Civil War South. These slaves were made to look like they would never leave their plantation utopia even when free. A black-owned newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, called the film "a weapon of terror against black America."

The Emancipation Memorial, too, is a "soft weapon" that serves as a propaganda piece at the heart of a public park by reinforcing the hierarchy of the master and the slave. Modelled after a real-life freed slave named Archer Alexander, the kneeling slave—

dependent on white benediction—hardly represents Alexander's heroic and arduous journey to freedom. His subservient presence on the pedestal is defined by what the African-American novelist Ralph Ellison called "invisibility." Before Lincoln's prophetic posture, he remains invisible, socially and politically. He is hardly given any historical space.

I kept wondering, why can't erasure or removal itself be part of a monument's continuing legacy? The presumed permanence of a public monument is itself an oppressive idea, dangerously incompatible with the democracy of a public place. The eternal presence of a statue, in the name of preserving history, impervious to criticism and revisionism, can perpetuate the inhumanity of the system that produced it in the first place.

The sustainability of an unjust system often depends on its ability to create perpetual, infallible public signs, symbols, monuments, and a compliant majority unwilling to question their original intent to intimidate. The idea of "emancipation" is complicated. Oppressive systems can adapt to evolving conditions and repurpose the very idea of emancipation to control what they consider both dangerous and inferior. That is the tragic side of the idea of emancipation.

Many in our neighbourhood thought that the restoration of normalcy in Lincoln Park would be possible only when the emblem of racial inequality is taken to a museum to educate people about America's past failings. The moral context of the monument's removal is that a city's civic realm must treat all its citizens equally and its history with the empathetic power of hindsight.

By the way, family DNA research reveals that Archer Alexander, born enslaved in Virginia in 1813 and the model for the kneeling slave, was the great-great-grandfather of boxing great Muhammad Ali.

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The ministry of utmost disappointment



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

THE call for defunding police in the US, after the death of George Floyd in police brutality, is one of the most striking messages coming out of what is perhaps the largest civil movement in US history. Has there ever been a call to defund a ministry? If there were, I imagine Bangladesh's health ministry would be a top contender for this "honour". To be clear, I am not actually suggesting we do that. But if you look at the endless public sufferings and protests caused by the cataclysmic failure of this ministry in the over four months of Covid-19 in Bangladesh, the idea suggests itself. Which means, in practical terms, embracing a radical approach to reform and revitalise this vital ministry so it can finally start doing its job.

That bureaucracy-as-usual is not going to cut it is pretty clear by now. The recent Regent/JKG testing scams have laid bare, once again, how corruption is deeply ingrained in the system. We've had reports detailing how the owners of these hospitals gained favour with powerful people in the government allowing them to operate without licenses, bag lucrative deals and even sell thousands of fake Covid-19 certificates. The dizzying pace at which new facts and evidence have come to the surface makes it hard to distinguish the essential from

the superfluous. What I find more interesting is the rapid-fire barrage of accusations and protestations that came in response to reports that the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) had signed an MoU with Regent Hospital in a ceremony attended by the health minister himself and many high officials. The deal, signed in full knowledge of its lack of legal status, allowed the hospital to operate as a dedicated Covid-19 facility.

Note some of the statements that have come out since this revelation: "The MoU was signed at the direction of the higher authorities" (DGHS DG); "Countless deals are made; ministers don't read all papers" (health minister); "We have been deceived after giving contracts to Regent and JKG in good faith" (one DGHS official); "There is a syndicate that has been active since BNP's term and I tried to dismantle it but failed; ministers are helpless in the face of its dominance" (former health minister). One old video clip aired by Ekattor TV shows a boastful DG (DGHS) claiming that the ministry cannot take his job even if it wants to. Another report by *Pratham Alo* quotes several ministry officials who said it has no control over the DGHS partly because, they claimed, it is located "far away" from the ministry!

These statements, amusing as they may seem, reveal more than what they were intended to. They give us a glimpse into a ministry where chaos is order and order is chaos, where there is no central command and no accountability at all. It's being tied down by reckless corruption, mismanagement, inefficiencies as

well as bureaucratic deadweight that wouldn't let it evolve or serve the people even at this most crucial moment. In the broader context, Regent/JKG is just another piece on the chessboard in an infinitely repeated game. They are neither the first of their kind nor the last. By now, it has become rather tiring to recall all the times a crime was exposed, either in the health sector or others, followed by

How long before we understand that going after a few corrupt individuals and officials only without dismantling this system, which enables or creates or sustains them, will never uproot corruption?

customary arrests and grand promises of corrective action, and nothing came of it eventually. Each new case only makes the list longer, as new players rush in to fill the vacuum.

As we remain occupied with the dramatic capture of Regent Group Chairman Md Shahed or the fact that he faked his own Covid-19 positive report to gain sympathy from police, we are told that Regent was, in fact, borrowing

from an old playbook. Actually, two-thirds of the country's over 15,000 private clinics and diagnostic centres have been running without any valid licence since 2018, hardly facing any consequences. These facilities have been providing various surgeries, medical treatment and pathological tests. It's frightening to think of the impacts of such large-scale anomalies on public health. No less frightening, especially during a pandemic, is the continued trade of counterfeit medicines, fake protective equipment, and other such corrupt practices both in the private and public sectors.

Meanwhile, people continue to die or get infected, in greater numbers than ever. According to the latest count, the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases has crossed the two lakh mark while the death toll has surpassed 2,600. The total infection rate in the country stands at 19.86 percent. When it comes to testing, among the 22 countries that have so far reached at least one lakh infections, Bangladesh has the lowest level of testing. On July 18, only 10,923 samples were tested. How do you explain such a number in a country of over 160 million? Calls for addressing our progressively decreasing testing capacity, as for widening access to treatment for those infected as well as the general patients, have gone largely unheeded. Nothing seems to be working as it ought to. While a few old guards are still in place, serving the people as best as they can, they risk coming undone in the absence of proper leadership.

But how long before we realise that this cannot go on? How long

before we reform how the system governing the health ministry and its departments works? How long before we understand that going after a few corrupt individuals and officials only without dismantling this system, which enables or creates or sustains them, will never uproot corruption? Or should we stop having such "juvenile" asks from an administration where the weather is an eternal free-for-all, with deeply connected layers of corruption, confusion and lawlessness?

A shift in existing policy is urgent and long overdue. The old spheres of influence that have held back progress in our health sector must be dismantled. Old policies and strategies that have proven to be unscientific must be discarded. Given the health emergency and given its life-endangering potential, corruption must not be tolerated. And those who have consistently failed us in these past months must make way for those who can deliver.

Involving health experts in the decision-making process of the health ministry by creating high-level posts for them and granting them appropriate authority would be the most logical step forward. These people will basically make policy decisions and lead Bangladesh's overall Covid-19 response, while a handful of skilled bureaucrats will help them and coordinate with other sectors as well as do regular official work. This will not, of course, solve all our problems. But it may give us a radical new start that is essential for our fight against Covid-19.

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QUOTABLE Quote

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN (1925-2017)
Polish-born sociologist who was one of the most influential intellectuals in Europe.

Power, in a nutshell, is the ability to get things done, and politics is the ability to decide which things need to be done.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Walked in water
- 6 Ready to hit
- 11 Mindful
- 12 Paris divider
- 13 Letter feature
- 14 Annual traveler
- 15 More acute
- 17 Cry from Homer
- 19 Capture
- 20 Vitality
- 23 Stir up
- 25 Lion feature
- 26 Cheater's deck
- 28 Different
- 29 Pendant with a picture
- 30 Toronto-to-D.C. dir.
- 31 Signing need
- 32 Old hand

DOWN

- 1 Used to be
- 2 Really impress
- 3 Unexpected candidate
- 4 Pennsylvania port
- 5 Protection
- 6 Useful skill
- 7 Sign of sorrow
- 8 Storage spot
- 9 Crumb carrier
- 10 Afternoon social
- 16 Sewing items
- 17 Titled women
- 18 Some exams
- 20 Board-walk's partner
- 21 Rear-- (accident)
- 22 Basil-based sauce
- 24 Luau strings
- 25 Comic Bernie
- 27 Get in touch with
- 31 Tough puzzle
- 33 Book unit
- 34 Lotion additive
- 35 Drill need
- 36 Outback bird
- 37 Camel
- 39 Friend of Harry and Hermione
- 40 Has permission to

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	P	A	D	E	W	I	S	H
T	A	S	E	R	P	A	S	T
U	N	S	E	R	A	T	L	A
A	D	A	M	A	T	T	E	S
R	O	Y	S	A	T	S	H	Y
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A	R	E	A	R	E	S	T	
M	A	T	L	A	S	O	R	E
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D	E	P	O	T	R	A	B	I
I	N	E	R	T	R	A	B	I
C	A	S	T		F	A	X	E

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT