

OPINIONS

LEIGH STREET ARMORY

Anti-DEI war leaves history MIA

The Pentagon's anti-DEI purge of Jackie Robinson and Native American code talkers has been reversed. But the web history of Richmond's Leigh Street Armory remains a broken link.

Amid a right-wing movement to censor classroom lessons and library books as America marches toward fascism, it tracks that the next step would be "404 - Page not found" messages where web pages on soldiers of color once existed.

Let's call this what it is: a whitewash.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is seeking to scrub diversity, equity and inclusion from the military. But this cynical and racist mission is so couched in vagueness that military units were instructed to conduct this erasure using keyword searches like "racism," "ethnicity," "history" and "first," according to CNN.

"I think the president and the secretary have been very clear on this - that anybody that says in the Department of Defense that diversity is our strength is, frankly, incorrect," Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said. "Our shared purpose and unity are our strength."

But this war on what Hegseth called "DEI woke shit" is, to coin the right-wing talking point, inherently divisive.

The CNN list also included the keywords "LGBTQ," "justice" and "privilege" - and ironically, "historic," given that the result leaves history missing in action.

The collateral damage, as documented by VPM, includes the history of Richmond's fortress-like brick building with the crenulated roofline at Leigh and St. Peter streets. Formally known as the First Battalion Virginia Volunteers Armory, its history is on plain display in a video panel at the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, which calls the building home.

Black veterans formed militias throughout the South after the Civil War, primarily for protection. Between 1872 and 1899, Virginia led the nation in establishing Black militia units, according to the book "Richmond's Leigh Street



DEAN HOFFMEYER, TIMES-DISPATCH

The Leigh Street Armory is now home to the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia in Jackson Ward.

Armory and African American Militia," by Roice D. Luke, Maureen Elgersman Lee and Stacy L. Burrs, all formerly affiliated with the Black History Museum.

In 1894, Richmond City Council approved funds for the construction of a new armory for a Black militia through the lobbying of John Mitchell Jr., editor of the Richmond Planet, and Wilfred Cuthshaw, the city engineer and former Confederate army officer.

The militias were a precursor to today's National Guard; Richmond had four white armories.

The Leigh Street Armory's contractor was Armstead Walker, Maggie L. Walker's husband. It opened in October 1895 to fanfare. "Richmond is the only city in the country, so far as we have been advised, which has provided so well for its colored citizen soldiery as to erect an armory building," Mitchell wrote.

But three years later, when the Spanish-American War broke out, the Army refused to place Black officers in charge of Black troops. Mitchell wrote a different message: "No officers, no fight!"

After the war, the U.S. government disbanded Black militias in Virginia and beyond. The Leigh Street Armory was given back to the city and became a hub of education, recreation and social life. During World War II, it became a service center for thousands of Black troops passing through Richmond.

A February 1980 fire left a hole in the roof that exposed the building to elements and plunged it into disrepair before a 2002 Save America's Treasures

grant replaced the roof and stabilized the structure. In 2014, the museum took over and renovated the building.

"The Virginia National Guard is reviewing the content removed from its public web site in accordance with the DOD content refresh guidance for historical context," spokesman Cotton Puryear said in an email Friday. "The review process is ongoing, and there is no definitive timeline on when it will be complete and any follow up action taken."

In the meantime, Shakia Gullette Warren, executive director of the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, is mystified by the Guard's action.

"To the best of our knowledge, the information about the armory on the website was part of the historical record," she said in a statement. "The Leigh Street Armory holds significant importance as the nation's only 19th-century armory built specifically for an African American militia, and we are honored to help preserve it as the home of our museum."

"The building represents a key chapter in the history of African American military service and community building. The removal of a web page does not diminish the historical value of this important landmark," she said, before concluding: "Black history is American history - that is a fact that cannot be denied or deleted."

But hey, if they'll delete an American icon like Jackie Robinson, no one is off limits.

Robinson's page - part of a "Sports Heroes Who Served" series on the Department of Defense website - was restored amid an outcry. Before he broke Major League Baseball's color barrier, Robison was court-martialed, but later acquitted, for refusing to move to the back of an Army bus. This narrative alone refutes the political right's absurd denials about systemic racism.

Also restored was the history of Navajo code talkers who delivered secret messages based on their native language during World War II. The Pentagon acknowledged mistakes in taking down the page of a Black Medal of Honor winner and Japanese American service members.

All of this makes sense only as an attempt to re-establish whiteness as an American default.

How else to explain a middle school teacher in a suburb of Boise, Idaho, being ordered to remove a poster featuring outstretched arms and hands of various skin colors, with hearts held in their palms, beneath a message saying EVERYONE IS WELCOME HERE?

The poster, according to the Idaho Statesman, runs afoul of school district policy because it is not suitably "content neutral," whatever that means. When you start censoring the display of brown-hued arms in a classroom, you've moved past neutrality toward hostility.

That poster, in MAGA America, is off-message. Unwelcome is the point.

The Leigh Street Armory is featured on the cover of local historian Selden Richardson's book, "Built by Blacks: African American Architecture and Neighborhoods in Richmond." The removal of the armory's history from the Virginia National Guard website infuriated him.

"George Orwell warned about the danger of trying to manipulate the past to fit a particular present and a bent future," Richardson said.

"Slave quarters weren't guest cabins, Shockoe Valley was not just an industrial site, and Richmond has a complicated history that has always, always been shaped by race. Thank goodness we have anchor points like the Leigh Street Armory and the Black History Museum to hold history to the truth, and all the cynical revisionism in the world won't change that."

It should be noted that the Virginia Air National Guard once featured Confederate battle flag insignias on its airplanes and uniforms before then-Gov. L. Douglas Wilder put an end to that in 1992. No outfit associated with the Virginia National Guard should be a willing participant in revisionist history.

I keep waiting for America to write its next chapter, in which it honestly acknowledges and addresses its complicated and painful history and commits to do better.

Instead, I keep getting "404 - Page not found!"

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

America will pay heavy price for senseless firings

It is easy for the American public to see the thousands of federal employees being fired as faceless bureaucrats. But I have a different view.

In a previous administration I had the privilege of serving as a deputy assistant secretary in the Office of Community Planning and Development (CPD) at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). I entered that world from a leadership position in an advocacy organization which had often challenged HUD. As a result, I entered the department with a less-than-positive view of HUD staff.

It only took me a short time to learn how very wrong I was, as I watched smart, committed civil servants take on the task of helping address the pressing issues facing this nation's cities and towns.

According to CNN, more than 80% of the entire CPD staff have been fired. This was not a rational act of assessing how best to reorganize the department or improve performance. This was a massacre that will have horrific impacts on the lives of millions of Americans now and for years to come.

Who were these faceless bureaucrats who were let go? They were housing experts who crafted strategies that have put roofs over the heads of millions of homeless and low-income Americans. These were people focused on the pressing needs of rural America, and on addressing the continuing need for housing for people living with HIV/AIDS. These were the staff that helped to deploy disaster relief. These were men and women who supported efforts to improve the quality of life in places large and small.

Above all, the federal employees who have lost their jobs are human beings who have made their life's work serving the American people.

And for that their lives have been brutally upended. With their loss, we will all pay for this irrational and mean-spirited act.

Fred Karnas
Richmond

Spanberger is hardly 'too radical' for Virginia

Rich Anderson, chairman of the Republican Party of Virginia, claimed in an op-ed ("Abigail Spanberger is too radical for Virginia," Feb. 27) that gubernatorial nominee Abigail Spanberger would be a threat to Second Amendment rights and hostile to law-abiding gun owners. On the contrary, Spanberger is uniquely qualified to champion gun violence prevention.

She told a rally of volunteers at the state Capitol in January that she has three girls in public schools and is a former federal agent who carried a gun every day as part of her job. "So I come at this issue as someone who cares deeply about the safety of our kids and as someone who understands the responsibilities of owning and of carrying a firearm," she added.

Spanberger singled out Lucia's Law as a commonsense measure, named for 13-year-old Lucia Bremer, who was shot to death by another youth. The law, which garnered bipartisan support in the General Assembly before being signed by Gov. Glenn Youngkin last year, requires adults with at-risk children in their care to secure their firearms or face felony charges.

At the Richmond rally, Spanberger also touted strengthening secure storage laws further and banning so-called "ghost guns," or firearms made from untraceable, unserialized parts that aren't subjected to background checks. Both policies are supported by a majority of Virginians as well as a majority of Republicans.

As a member of Congress in

CORRESPONDENT OF THE WEEK

Wittman: Stop ducking and fight for constituents

In a statement released after dodging his own town hall in Midlothian in late February, Congressman Rob Wittman said the goal of increasing government efficiency should be "pursued with greater compassion." In other words, he suggests firing tens of thousands of federal workers (so far) and shuttering vital government activities both at home (child cancer research, veterans' services) and abroad (lifesaving USAID programs) is both legal and necessary, but ... what? It should be done with more sympathy? As though that will make everyone who lost their jobs feel better?

According to the Congressional Research Service, approximately 19,000 federal workers live in Virginia's 1st Congressional District, which Wittman represents. His attitude insults them, as well as the rest of us who benefit from their dedication and service.

Instead of avoiding his constituents, Wittman should fight for these public servants working every day to find new

cures for deadly illnesses, ensure the safety of everything from our food supply to airspace, and manage our natural resources. Instead of letting our economy unravel, the congressman should fight to keep people employed. I'm sure he knows that when large numbers of people lose their jobs all at once, it means devastating economic consequences for everyone. Instead of letting Elon Musk destroy the rule of law without accountability, Wittman should fight for the Constitution he's sworn to protect and conduct the necessary oversight of Musk's actions.

Over 120,000 of Congressman Wittman's constituents receive some form of Medicaid, reports the state Medicaid office. By remaining silent on the purge of government workers but voting in favor of the recent budget resolution, likely bringing significant cuts to that program and others helping regular folks while giving tax breaks to the wealthy, Congressman Wittman has signaled he's unbothered by both bad policy and the collapse of our institutions.

Matt Wells
Glen Allen

Mike Fox
Crozet

America, what kind of people are we?

The recent dismantling in Washington and the ensuing turmoil have been brewing for decades.

Failing to acknowledge our shortcomings, Americans quickly blame political parties and their

leaders. Rarely do we blame ourselves.

For example, presidential election data from the University of Florida Election Lab finds that in 2024 nearly 90 million eligible voters did not vote. At such a pivotal time in America, that is unconscionable. Additionally, a newly elected president at the stroke of a pen can overturn decisions championed by the previous president.

I don't understand why leaders take pride in these selfish, vengeful reversals.

In the Pledge of Allegiance to our flag, we purport these beliefs: "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Those beliefs are eroding.

Recent data on religion in America from the Pew Research Center shows we are no longer "one nation under God."

On a daily basis, our division is rarely absent. Even houses of worship experience disunity.

As for liberty and justice for all, "all" keeps losing ground.

In the famous "They call me Mr. Tibbs" scene from the movie "In The Heat Of The Night," two piercing questions are asked: "My God what kind of people are you? What kind of place is this?"

Those questions roil through my heart everyday.

Part of me wonders if America is experiencing its own internal D-Day.

Will we implode because our hearts have been misguided and overtaken by disrespect, fear, greed, hate, incivility, revenge and selfishness?

H.L. Mencken wrote: "The men the American people admire most extravagantly are the most daring liars; the men they detest most violently are those who try to tell the truth."

America, what kind of people are we, what kind of place is this?

Bill Pike
Henrico