

# The Museum Solution

**T**HERE'S A NICE symbolism to the latest proposed solution to the fight over a New Orleans monument, the one the city wants to remove because it honors white supremacists: The city council has voted to remove the obelisk from the streets and put it in a museum. Nothing could be more appropriate for a piece of local history commemorating sentiments that would, in a better world, by now themselves be considered museum pieces.

The deal's not yet complete for the 1891 obelisk, which has already been removed from public display once in the face of fierce opposition to its presence by black residents of New Orleans, who find it offensive. It commemorates an 1874 battle in which local white supremacists attacked and drove out a biracial elected government during Reconstruction. But a coalition of lawyers and preservationists—including, lamentably, David Duke—sued and forced the reinstatement of the obelisk on the grounds that federal money had been used in the original removal (ostensibly for road work and cleaning). Federal guidelines did in fact require that the piece be relocated to an "appropriate" place. That's what's at issue in the latest vote to seek a museum setting, though more than a few local citizens have said they'd rather see it "dumped in the Gulf of Mexico."

Museums can come to the rescue here. They allow cultures to preserve their past as a

record—a genuine record, not one that simply reflects present political fashions—and to show important objects, like the obelisk, without implying that the present day still honors those objects or agrees with them. The post-Communist Eastern European countries are now struggling with similar dilemmas in historical commemoration, and one, Hungary, has hit on a variation of the same answer: A sculpture park has opened outside Budapest to house the innumerable statues to Marx, Lenin and the New Soviet Man. The locals, it's reported, don't feel any overwhelming urge to visit the park, but it's expected to become a steady source of foreign currency.

It's not likely that the New Orleans obelisk will exert so durable a fascination, except perhaps to some of the activists—like Mr. Duke—who've fought to get the monument returned to its place of honor, pleading historical accuracy. The obvious question was whether they wanted just to commemorate the white supremacist philosophy enshrined in the obelisk or in fact also to honor it—the latter inference being bolstered by the detail that Mr. Duke favored the monument as a spot for pro-KKK rallies in his days as an American Nazi Party member. It's also notable that supporters of the obelisk's continued presence resisted efforts to add explanatory material or otherwise gloss this apparent glorification of white racism. Putting it in a museum makes a lot more sense.