

Lithuanian General Kościuszko in the News

- Monument vandalized in Washington, D.C.
- Planner of West Point defended minority rights

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The media has extensively covered the recent nationwide demonstrations that arose in response to the killing of George Floyd, a black man, while in police custody. Among targets of the continuing protests and vandalism was Lafayette Square across from the White House, the site of the Andrew Jackson Monument. There is little doubt that a good portion of the destruction was orchestrated by radical groups joining nonviolent, peaceful demonstrators. On June 27, 2020, the United States Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia announced that four had been charged with the destruction of federal property related to their attempt at tearing down the Andrew Jackson statue.

Most of the media coverage relating to Lafayette Square emphasized the damage to the nearby St. John's Church and the attempt to topple the equestrian statue of General Andrew Jackson. Protestors may have taken umbrage that Jackson, as the seventh President of the U.S., implemented the Indian Removal Act of 1830, or nominated Roger Taney to the U.S. Supreme Court, who went on to uphold the Dred Scott decision, which declared African Americans were not citizens of the U.S.

STATUES VANDALIZED

The news, however, hardly mentioned the vandalism directed at four other monuments situated at each corner of the park. It seems that reports of their desecration were conveniently overlooked. These statues honored American Revolutionary War heroes – the French General Marquis Gilbert de Lafayette and Comte Jean de Rochambeau, the Prussian General Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, and Lithuanian General Thaddeus Kościuszko. None of them could be charged with General Jackson's faults. They were all foreign-born and voluntarily came to America to help the nation in its struggle for independence. Their statues were vandalized simply because they happen to be located in Lafayette Square proximate to the Jackson monument.

ADVOCATED EQUALITY

The vandals who desecrated the Kościuszko monument were either ignorant or did not care to know anything about those who sought the end of slavery in America almost a century before the Civil War finally abolished that terrible injustice. As a matter of fact, Kościuszko steadfastly spoke out for the freedom and rights of all ethnic and racial minorities. He specifically sought the elimination of slavery and serfdom and advocated equality of all people.

Let us review Kościuszko's story. Andrzej Tadeusz



Part of the vandalized monument.

Bonawentura Kościuszko was born on February 12, 1746, to Lithuanian parents residing in a manor in Merechewschina, Brest Litovsk Voivodeship, Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which was then part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As a result of historical shifting borders and Kościuszko having risen to the rank of General in the Polish and American Armies, today he is claimed to be not only Lithuanian, but also Polish, Belarusian, and American.

AT SARATOGA AND WEST POINT

Kościuszko is noted worldwide for his bravery, kindness, patriotism, likeability, and unwavering strength of character. He was a skilled engineer who came to the American colonies offering his service in the struggle for freedom. Here he made two significant contributions. First, he planned the American fortifications before the Battle of Saratoga. This battle, fought in September and October 1777, was a decisive victory for the colonists, and many historians consider it the turning point in the American Revolution. Kościuszko further supervised the construction of defenses at West Point, New York, what is now the home of the U.S. Army Military Academy. Those defensive positions precluded the British from gaining control of the Hudson River, which would otherwise have strategically split the colonies, thereby possibly jeopardizing the revolution. In 1781, General George Washington described the West Point fortifications as "the most important post in America." Thomas Jefferson, the author of the American Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States, who became a personal friend of Kościuszko, later described him as a pure son of liberty. Surely, Kościuszko is not only the most celebrated Lithuanian who ever lived but is also worthy of that honor.

CONTINUING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Following the Revolution, Kościuszko returned home to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and joined the ranks of his nation's reformers seeking more independence and greater social equality. He promoted a strong central government and a standing army, and a more democratic constitution. When Russia, Prussia, and Austria took issue with a more powerful restored Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Kościuszko was again called upon to fight for freedom and liberty. Many historians have maintained Kościuszko's view of the Polish-Lithuanian reform movement as having been a continuation of the American Revolution.

Despite a heroic and valiant struggle, Kościuszko was severely wounded during the Siege of Warsaw in 1794. He was captured and imprisoned in St. Petersburg, Russia. Without his leadership, the uprising collapsed, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ceased to exist after the Third Partition in 1797. With the death of Russian Empress Catherine the Great, her son and successor, Czar Paul I granted amnesty to Kościuszko. In exchange for his freedom and that of other Polish prisoners, Kościuszko agreed never to return home. Upon his release, Kościuszko honored that oath by making another trip to the United States.

FRIENDS WITH JEFFERSON

Kościuszko arrived in Philadelphia in August 1797 and, during that visit, formed a strong and lasting friendship with Thomas Jefferson. Although Kościuszko



The Thaddeus Kościuszko monument in Washington's Lafayette Square

stayed in the United States for less than a year, his friendship with Jefferson continued via letters for over 20 years. One should note that when Jefferson was elected President in 1800, Kościuszko wrote to him, "do not forget yourself in your post, always be virtuous, republican with justice and probity, without display and ambition. In a word,

be Jefferson and my friend." Although Jefferson was very cautious in what he wrote as President, he returned to expressing himself freely once again upon leaving office. Jefferson then eloquently wrote to Kościuszko, "the tree you had so zealously assisted in planting, you cannot but delight in seeing watered and flourishing." This described the Jefferson-Kościuszko friendship. Their epistolary exchanges only ceased with Kościuszko's death in 1817 while in exile in Switzerland.

ESTATE BATTLES

Kościuszko nominated Thomas Jefferson to be the executor of his Last Will and Testament. Under the terms of that will, a portion of his estate was to be allocated to free Jefferson's and other slave-owners' slaves. Kościuszko furthermore provided funding for the education of the freed slaves so that they could "function properly in society." Unfortunately, a protracted legal struggle followed.

Jefferson, who was 77, declined the executor position, citing his advanced age and the numerous legal complexities of the bequest. Still, Jefferson recommended that his friend, John Hartwell Cocke, who opposed slavery, be appointed executor. Cocke declined the position as well. In a letter that he wrote to Jefferson, Cocke noted there were "prejudices to be encountered" in their education and of "an effect which might be produced on the minds of my own people." A federal court then appointed Attorney Benjamin L. Lear to be the executor of the estate, but he died in 1832. His successor, Colonel George Bomford, similarly died before settling the estate.

US SUPREME COURT HAS LAST WORD

Pending legal issues eventually became public. They included counterclaims by relatives, and the surfacing of several other wills, written in Europe. Since these challenges included a request submitted through the Russian Government, Kościuszko's estate's disposition was forwarded to the U.S. Supreme Court for resolution. In 1852, the U.S. Supreme Court disclosed that only \$5,680 remained in the estate, which was formerly valued at \$43,504.40. The missing funds were apparently utilized by Colonel Bomford, for his own purposes. The U.S. Supreme Court further ruled, in light of the discovery of subsequent wills, the American Kościuszko Will be invalid and ordered that the remaining funds be turned over to his living relatives. As a result, none of Kościuszko's funds earmarked for the freeing and education African American slaves were ever used for that purpose.



Lithuanian General Thaddeus Kościuszko