

'National Garden of American Heroes'

The president floated the idea during his speech in front of the massive Mount Rushmore

AFP | Washington

A new national park populated with statues of "American heroes"?

The surprise idea, proposed by President Donald Trump over the July 4 holiday weekend, hardly seems likely to calm the partisan passions deeply dividing the American people.

And it raises questions about what exactly such a park might look like, and whom it will celebrate upon its aspirational opening date of July 4, 2026.

Coming just four months before November's presidential election, the proposal reinforces the image of a president who has given up any pretense of uniting the country, instead choosing to play one voting bloc against another.

Announced without any evident consultation, the proposal comes as demonstrators nationwide have been demanding the removal of -- and sometimes forcibly pulling down -- certain historic statues, particularly those of generals of the Civil War South seen as glorifying a racist past.

Side-stepping the larger argument and reducing the protest movement to a series of violent acts, the Republican president has positioned himself as a defender of the country's "integrity" in the face of "the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators and the looters."

To Julian Zelizer, a professor of political history at Princeton University, Trump's notion of a National Garden of American Heroes is a purely political ploy.

"He is trying to use a specific version of American history to

promote his attack on the 'radical left' and to appeal to conservatives who might be frustrated with the failed pandemic policies of the administration," he said.

The president floated the idea during his speech Friday in front of the massive Mount Rushmore sculpture of four of his most celebrated predecessors -- George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt.

Trump opposes modernist designs, and a White House statement said the park -- its venue yet to be decided -- would include only "realistic" and not "abstract" likenesses while paying tribute to historic figures "who made substantive contributions to America's public life."

Trump's Rushmore speech was a combative response to anti-racism protesters who have defaced or destroyed statues in several cities, not just of Civil War generals

but also of celebrated Americans who, in some cases, owned slaves.

Trump said the "vast outdoor park" he envisions "will feature the statues of the greatest Americans to ever live."

But just who will they be? And who will decide?

A tentative list cited in a presidential decree features a grab-bag of figures, including George Washington; the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr; frontiersman Davy Crockett; popular evangelist Billy Graham; former president Ronald Reagan; and the late Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia, a pillar of the conservative right.

Not included were any modern figures from the American left.

'Odd' choices

"Some of the choices for those to be honored are direct outreach to the right -- Justice Scalia, for example -- as are the absences, such as Franklin Roosevelt," said Zelizer.

To James Grossman, who heads the American Historical Association, "the choices vary from odd to probably inappropriate

to provocative," he told The Washington Post.

In addition to celebrating figures from public and private American life, ranging from political leaders to inventors and sports stars, the White House said the park could include non-Americans who made significant contributions to "the discovery, the development or the independence" of the country.

It mentioned Christopher Columbus and the Marquis de La Fayette, the young Frenchman who fought on the American side in the Revolutionary War.

Also mentioned was the Spanish friar Junipero Serra, who founded several Catholic missions in 18th-century California. Pope Francis canonized him in 2015, though some Native Americans say he was part of a violent and destructive colonizing process.

Several statues of Columbus -- who forged a reputation for brutality in his voyages to the New World -- have been vandalized or pulled down

in recent weeks across the US, most recently in Baltimore, Maryland. And the city of San Francisco removed a Columbus statue from before its City Hall.

Trump mentioned the explorer explicitly in remarks July 4 from the White House.

"We will defend, protect and preserve the American way of life, which began in 1492 when Columbus discovered America," Trump said.

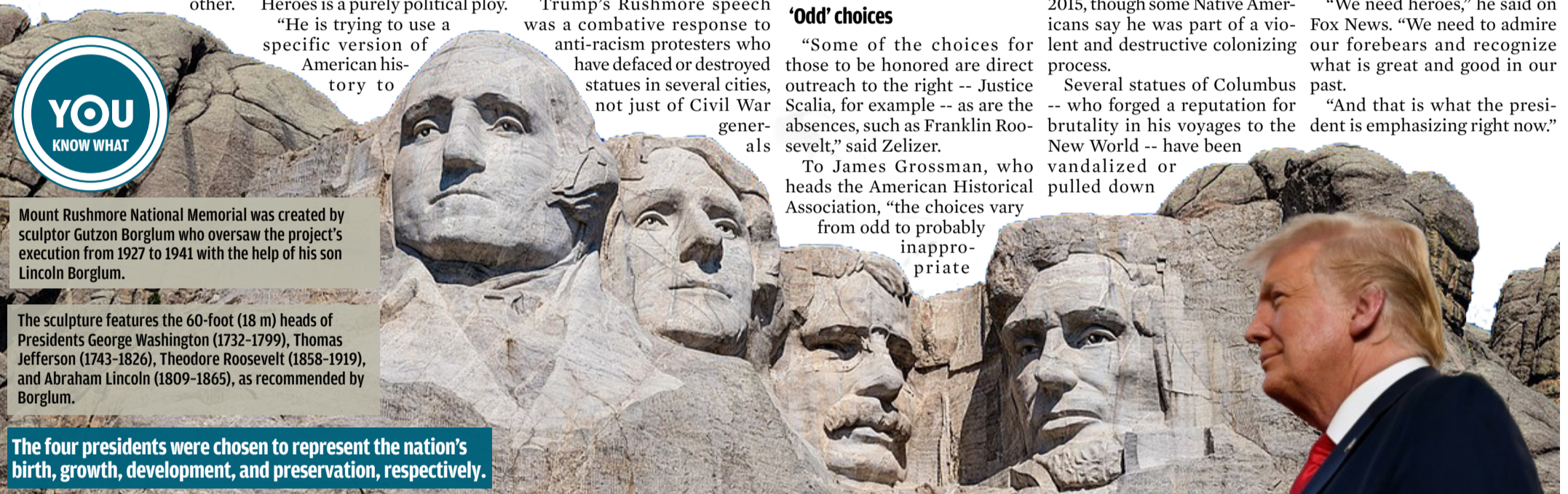
American politicians have so far had little to say about the president's proposal.

A notable exception was Eugene Scalia, the labor secretary in the Trump administration.

Saying he was deeply touched by the idea of a statue of his father being included in the new park, he praised the concept.

"We need heroes," he said on Fox News. "We need to admire our forebears and recognize what is great and good in our past."

"And that is what the president is emphasizing right now."



Mount Rushmore National Memorial was created by sculptor Gutzon Borglum who oversaw the project's execution from 1927 to 1941 with the help of his son Lincoln Borglum.

The sculpture features the 60-foot (18 m) heads of Presidents George Washington (1732-1799), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), and Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), as recommended by Borglum.

The four presidents were chosen to represent the nation's birth, growth, development, and preservation, respectively.

Bagan | Myanmar

A squad of armed police patrol Myanmar's sacred site of Bagan under the cover of night, taking on plunderers snatching relics from temples forsaken by tourists due to coronavirus restrictions.

Each evening as dusk falls, about 100 officers fan out across the plain of Bagan measuring 50 square kilometres (19 square miles), sweeping torches over the crumbling monuments to scour for intruders.

"Our security forces are patrolling day and night," Police Lieutenant Colonel Sein Win said.

"We have it under control for the moment, but it's a challenge."

The central Myanmar city is strewn with more than 3,500 ancient monuments -- stupas, temples, murals and sculptures -- and was finally added to the prestigious UNESCO world heritage list last year.

But the pandemic has stymied plans to capitalise on Bagan's new-found status.

The dearth of visitors means temples and hotels lie empty, crushing the livelihoods of locals and opening doors to opportunistic burglars.

In a spate of break-ins across the holy site in early June, robbers looted 12 different temples, swiping a range of relics, including copper stupas, ancient coins and jade jewellery.

The 35th Battalion regional police squad have been de-

ployed to bolster local tourism police and firefighters, the teams ranging across the site by jeep, motorbike and foot.

"It's not easy to patrol as the area is so big," one police officer says through his face mask, worn by all on duty to protect against COVID-19.

They also need to be on their guard against the area's numerous venomous snakes, he adds, asking not to be named.

Temple curse?

For now, the extra security seems to have thwarted any break-ins at the most prestigious temples.

Some of the relics date back to the 11th-13th century, an era when Bagan was the capital of a regional empire.

This is the first time in decades the site has been so seriously targeted, says Myint Than, deputy director of Bagan's archaeological department, as he shows at one stupa how the looters scaled the walls to enter from the roof.

"When there were tourists here, there were no burglaries," he explains, adding he believes this is the work of outsiders.

Even if locals' livelihoods have been devastated by the tourist downturn, he says he does not believe they would "betray their heritage".

Times are hard in an area dependent on tourism.

Bagan welcomed nearly half a million visitors in 2019, while this year the figure was 130,000 up until the country's New Year festival in April and much of the area has been closed to tourists since.

Hotels and restaurants lie shuttered while the hawkers and tuk-tuk drivers not lucky enough to clinch rare construction or farming

work wait in vain for customers among the deserted lanes connecting the temples.

Souvenir seller Wyne Yee, 46, says the money she makes in April alone usually keeps food on her family's table for the following six months.

"But this year we have no

money left," she says wistfully.

She says she is saddened by the desecration of the temples but -- like others in the area -- is convinced a curse will see the crooks receive their comeuppance. "The Bagan temples will not tolerate it," she says. "The robbers will be dealt with."

Looters target Myanmar temple treasures in tourist slump

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