

THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON THE BRIAN LEHRER  
SHOW**

**Brian Lehrer:** But we begin as we do every Friday with Mayor Bill de Blasio and our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, we'll give him a response to the president too. But there is also so much city news this week as well including the report now released by the Mayor's Advisory Commission on Art, Monuments, and Markers. In other words the commission on what should be done about statues and other items celebrating Christopher Columbus and others to, you know, put an un-romantic, un-whitewashed telling of history on things that might have been covering up racism, murder, Nazi collaboration, and other things not to be celebrated in the way they seem to now.

And our lines are open for your Ask the Mayor questions on anything at 2-1-2-4-3-3-WNYC. 2-1-2-4-3-3-9-6-9-2, or tweet a question using the hashtag "#AsktheMayor". Mr. Mayor, welcome back to WNYC.

**Mayor Bill de Blasio:** Thank you Brian.

**Lehrer:** Many New Yorkers, obviously, come from the countries the president referred to in that way, want to react?

**Mayor:** Of course. It's – it's sickening. It's just sickening that a President of the United States would say in a, essentially public setting in front other leaders, something that denigrates millions of Americans. And what's amazing is he thought he could get away with it and I think it speaks to something that we still have to fight in our society where somehow racist speech is deemed acceptable by many people in a conversation so long as there isn't a, you know, camera running.

But I want to commend Senator Durbin for coming out and laying out very bluntly what happened, because it has to be stopped, and I think by uncovering it, this is the way to make change.

**Lehrer:** A Republican congressman on Morning Edition today tried to explain it as a very bad choice of the word by the President but that he was getting at real issue. Too many immigrants from places with a lot of problems leaving too many of those immigrants less equipped to

contribute to the U.S. rather than be a net-drain on this country, when admitted in large numbers from those countries, how about when it is rationalized that way?

**Mayor:** It's the same thing with prettier words. The folks who came here from countries that have had a really tough time have contributed a lot to the United States. And I remind, I want to be very straight forward, I want to remind white people of where our ancestors come from and what they were dealing with at the time. When my grandparents came here from Southern Italy, it was a desperately poor place and there was not a lot of freedom, there was not a lot of hope. And if you said, well look where they came from, it's this horrible, dysfunctional place, they shouldn't come here. No they came here and they gave it their all and they lived the American dream and they helped contribute to this country.

So I find that specious to say if someone comes from a troubled country therefore they are hurting us. We should care about that country too. You know, we should care about helping our neighbors like Haiti for example, but also, and I know countless Haitian-Americans in this city who contribute in so many ways and they've made us better and stronger. So I just think it's a disgusting, negative, racist way of characterizing people that could equally have been applied to our ancestors, and it was applied to our ancestors. It was applied to Italian-Americans, and Jews, and the Irish at different points in history.

**Lehrer:** Alright, let's get to your monuments commission. We will get back, folks, to that topic of what the president said and the underlying issues in our second half hour today after "Meet the Mayor" and again we will give people from any of the countries that the president was referencing or if those are your ancestral countries a chance to call in and characterize them for yourselves. Would you like that?

But with the Mayor, let's get to your monuments commission which recommended the Columbus statue stays at Columbus Circle but new things are added for a fuller context. Same with the Theodore Roosevelt statue with the Natural History Museum, also one statue will be removed from Fifth Avenue and 103rd Street of a less known figure. And the Canyon of Heroes where ticker tape parades are held in Lower Manhattan will be renamed. Want to start with Columbus?

**Mayor:** Sure. I mean look the idea here is to be additive in the context of the world's most diverse city. There is no question that we have two parallel realities when it comes to Columbus. One is that very tragically oppressive, what happened to Native Americans as a result of some of his actions, another that Columbus got connected to the larger history of the Italian-American people. And the Italian-American people, including my own relatives and ancestors have contributed a lot to this country and went through a lot of discrimination themselves.

So I think the commission looked at this many elements and said look, let's recognize that which needs to be memorialized here both the historic role and the connection to the larger ethnicity, and in addition to keeping "add the fuller story" and honor Native American people who have so infrequently been honored, that this is a way to try to have a better conversation in our society.

And I want to tell you, Darren Walker, who's the head of the Ford Foundation and Tom Finklepearl, our Cultural Affairs Commissioner, worked with a really extraordinary panel of people to try and strike a balance of some of the most challenging questions in our history and I

think they came up with something that makes a lot of sense, helps us move forward, and focuses on adding knowledge and information and perspective, and adding new monuments that reflect who we are and how diverse we are and what we value today.

**Lehrer:** How about the Canyon of Heroes and specifically the promise that you made last year in a tweet to take down the plaque for Henri Philippe Pétain, the Nazi collaborator who had been honored for heroics in World War I. Why aren't you following through on that?

**Mayor:** Again, I've said very publically, and recently as this week that that tweet was one of the rare instances where staff putting my words into a public statement didn't do it accurately. What was supposed to said it would be one of the first things that we address, that was not supposed to pass judgement, because we didn't pass judgement on anything until the commission acted. The fact is that Pétain, what he did later in life, was horrendous, and disgusting, and deeply troubling, what he did earlier in life was seen in the Western world as heroic. It's a complex reality as well.

But we need to look at any situation like that and say, what can we add that tells people the fuller history? I've seen this done – I've said this to folks – I see it done by the National Park Service to great effect and really in a smart, powerful way that helps people think, showing the fuller perspective on our history, not whitewashing and not just showing one element. I think it's the best chance we have educating people in helping think about the larger history and more importantly taking the history and putting into action. That's really what this should be about. I hope – I hope people are not just concerned, I don't think most people are, about debating things that already happened. I hope the context here is we want to take new information and perspectives and help us be better and more unified and more respectful of all people. And I hope what the commission has done will be a good model for that.

**Lehrer:** Well, I assume people in Charlottesville and elsewhere are having this discussion about Robert E. Lee and other Confederate statues and coming to the conclusions that they are coming, which in many cases is taking them down. So are you coming to the conclusion for yourself that Columbus should not be seen as the moral equivalent of Robert E. Lee?

**Mayor:** I think there is an entirely different historical context for a simple reason. You had in the South, really a deification of a racist and segregationist structure and the heroes of the Confederacy, it will put forward as reminders of a worldview that was quite current, that had a lot adherence, that people were celebrating, and was an affront of a huge percentage of the population of those states. And so I think that's its own very real reality. By no means am I saying the North was perfect, but I'm saying there is a distinct reality, when you take down a Confederate statue, you are negating a worldview that has been current, unfortunately, in a lot of places from the time of the Confederacy until now.

The difference with Columbus, I think Columbus did some things that were deeply troubling, as best we understand the history. I am not taking away the fact that there must have been some bravery or innovation in the exploration but obviously a lot of the outcomes were deeply troubling. But Columbus, long ago, a century or more ago, became wrapped up in the larger history of Italian-American people. He has essentially nothing to do with the history of the Italian-American people in terms of what happened over the last 150 years in which Italian-Americans have been here in large numbers. But, his name, his history got wrapped up in it and I don't think it can be unwrapped. I think we have to be respectful. And this is one of the cities

with – a metropolitan area is one of the biggest Italian-American populations in the whole country. And I think that has to be respected and honored too. So, each situation has to be seen for its specifics. But I think what the commission did here that's powerful is that in many contexts what we can add is what will have the biggest impact on moving us forward. And the notion, for example, of adding a true monument to indigenous peoples and talking about their history in a different way is a very important contribution to moving forward because that still hasn't happened sufficiently.

**Lehrer:** Just one other thing on this, since you put Robert E. Lee in the context of a worldview, the worldview in which Columbus – you know, the Columbus – the context – the worldview that was the context for Columbus was a worldview of colonialism which arguably was every bit as bad as the racism and the slavery that Robert E. Lee represented because it colonialized – it colonized indigenous peoples all over the world, and came here and thought that, you know, we could settle lands that were already settled and inhabited, and that is one of the biggest things that ever happened in human history.

**Mayor:** Look, there's no current in this city that's pro-colonialist in my opinion. We all have understood that colonialism was in so many ways profoundly morally wrong and in so many ways a failure starting right here in America. And we were one of the first places to rebel affectively against colonialism.

I think its apples and oranges. I think these issues are all very real which is why we gave them to an extraordinarily diverse and distinguished panel of people to try and work through and at least take us a first few steps on the road. I think again the segregationist worldview in the south was real and immediate and continued in so many ways and I understood and deeply admire the leaders who took down those statues in the last years because they were addressing an immediate and urgent and specific reality in their state that was still quite live. I think in the context of colonialism we're talking about something that, thank God, has been renounced and moved past in many ways, not entirely, but in many, many ways and certainly in the life of this city. So I do think these situations differ.

The central point I would make is the notion of being additive takes us forward. We need to start in each place where there are these real concerns putting the counterview in plain sight and allowing people to come up to anyone of these situations and look at the full picture and think about and reflect on, make the own decisions and decide what it means for how we move forward. The absence of those additional views and that balance I think has been absolutely a mistake. We now want to see what it means to give people the full picture and how that will help have a different – how it will help us have a different dialogue in this city.

**Lehrer:** And tell us about the one statue that apparently –

**Mayor:** Can you hear me?

**Lehrer:** – relocate, the J. Marion Sims statue at Fifth Avenue and 103rd Street in Manhattan.

**Mayor:** I missed the beginning of that Brian.

**Lehrer:** I'm asking you to tell us about the one statue that apparently the City will relocate, the J. Marion Sims statue at Fifth Avenue and 103rd street in Manhattan.

**Mayor:** Yes that one – there were many, many factors I think the commission looked at there including obviously the horrible and painful choice of this individual to experiment on slave women without their consent, the deep concern in the surrounding community which is largely a community of color, the fact that it was located at a place where there's supposed to be a broader celebration of medical science. And this was a very bad example of that. And that there was an alternative site to try and respect the fact that there were also contributions that this individual made to science. So, that one was I think very particular and very specific. But again the additive reality is to come up with something on that site that speaks to a more positive reality and I think that was about the specifics of that site.

**Lehrer:** We're going to come back to the immigration question with our first caller for the Mayor today. Sam in Brooklyn you're on WNYC. Hello Sam.

**Question:** Good morning Brian, good morning Mayor. Thanks for taking the call. Mr. Mayor you have been, thankfully, in the forefront of the resistance to the Trump administration and have declared New York City to be sanctuary city, and I applaud you for that. But, yesterday something very troubling happened which was that when the immigration authorities attempted to haul off Ravi Ragbir and there was a protest which included several of our City Council people, what happened – what appeared to be an almost a police riot and Jumaane Williams and another City Councilman I believe were arrested rather brutally. And I guess my question is if we're really going to be a resistant city as things escalate, which they appear to be doing, how can we have the New York City Police Department working with ICE to enforce these draconian policies? Shouldn't we –

**Mayor:** Well, no –

**Question:** – instruct the police department to help within the resistance?

**Mayor:** Yes, I want to be really clear. This police department and Commissioner O'Neill have said from day one of the Trump administration that we will not – we will not ask New Yorkers their documentation status, we will not cooperate with ICE except for a very limited number of categories according to a City law that was passed by my administration and the City Council four years ago. This was not what happened yesterday. What happened yesterday was troubling on a number of levels starting with the activities of the federal agents who I think in a very provocative way took someone who was a leading advocate, highly respected individual and in a manner I think that might have meant to be provocative acted to suddenly deport him. That was done by federal authorizes, that was not done by New York City officials or New York City police officers in any way, shape, or form. And I think that started a chain of events in the place.

We are definitely going to investigate what happened with our police officers because I am concerned to know exactly what happened, why it happened. And if anything happened that was not appropriate in the handling of the protesters that needs to be acted on. But the – if you will the original sin here is ICE took an action in a very abrupt and provocative way. Then I think there was some confusion about an ambulance that came to help the undocumented leader because he was also having a health problem at that moment. And understandably, any first

responders knowing someone has a health problem are just trying to get that person and provide help because they don't know how bad it is, they don't know what's going to happen.

So I think a lot of things came together in a kind of unexpected and challenging dynamic underlined by a very unjust policy by this federal administration. But we're going to look at every detail of what happened and if there's any changes that need to be made or any actions that need to be taken, we'll take it.

I do want to remind all New Yorkers we've had lots and lots of protests since President Trump was elected, the NYPD I think has done a really outstanding and respectful job of making sure those protests happen peacefully and that everyone who is trying to get their point of view across had that opportunity to do so. There's been a lot of them, and this to my mind may be the first one where there was anything like this that did not happen in the way we would want, and that, I think, had to do with the very sudden actions of the federal authorities.

**Lehrer:** There were also two City Council members arrested during that protest. Is it your understanding that they set out to be arrested as an act of civil disobedience to make a statement or –

**Mayor:** Yes.

**Lehrer:** – might we have an NYPD issue?

**Mayor:** No for the best of my – I spoke to Speaker Corey Johnson about this and to hear his account because he was there. It's absolutely my understanding this was a conscious act of civil disobedience. But again, typically – I've been involved in plenty of civil disobedience in my day and typically that is pre-negotiated with the police and everyone understands. I think, again, because this happened very suddenly. At the beginning of the day yesterday no one thought that Ravi Ragbir was going to be deported and suddenly he was being deported and I think people understandably reacted with real passion to what they thought was an unjust situation. And, you know, I think did spontaneous civil disobedience but I think that added to the confusion. But from everything I understand it was a purposeful act of civil disobedience.

**Lehrer:** Let's take another phone call. Ben in Queens, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello Ben.

**Question:** Good morning Brian. Mr. Mayor, good morning.

**Mayor:** Good morning Ben.

**Lehrer:** What's your question Ben?

**Question:** Okay, I've been involved in the Willis Point issue for ten years since the adoption of the 2008 development plan, and nothing's been accomplished. [Inaudible] happen until you, Mr. Mayor, wake up to reality. Bloomberg gave this deal to a bunch of real estate moguls who were deceitful and liars. They never had any intention of doing the job, they wanted to build a casino. When that failed they came up with an absurd plan that they needed to have a mega-mall and Citi Field parking lot to earn enough money to build it. These are multi-millionaires. They never had

intention of doing anything. And you have an opportunity now to get things straightened out. Get rid of these guys. We don't need them. You go ahead and hire somebody else to do the job.

**Lehrer:** Ben let me ask you. What's your issue? Is it the building of a mall on public parkland in Flushing Meadows –

**Question:** No, no

**Lehrer:** – Park?

**Question:** That's dead at the moment. The New York State Court of Appeals said they could not build the mall. We're talking about Willis Plan, the 2008 plan.

**Lehrer:** Okay.

**Question:** We're now concerned, there's a rumor, that this administration may be giving 23 acres of Willis Point land to these builders. We oppose that. That costs of hundreds of millions of dollars. They're giving it to these guys for one dollar.

**Lehrer:** Mr. Mayor, go ahead.

**Mayor:** Okay, I – Brian I know Ben, and Ben I truly admire you, you've been at a number of my town hall meetings and you're a passionate activist and you have been for decades. So I thank you. I think – look, first be careful about rumors. I've said to you in public before, I want to reaffirm it to everyone who's listening. We want affordable housing at Willis Point, that's our priority. We're not focused on anything else, we want affordable housing. And anything the City does will come with the guarantee upfront and the actualization of a substantial amount of affordable housing or else we won't approve anything. So, there's a lot more that's going to play out. Ben is exactly right that the Court of Appeals decision I think put us in a position to fix the mistakes of the previous administration. I share a lot of his critique that I think the original concept of Willis was supposed to be focused on community needs including the need for affordable housing, it drifted substantially or was altered substantially in the years before I came into office. We want to go back to that original focus on affordable housing.

**Lehrer:** Speaking of affordable housing we talked here last week, you and me, about the heat problems in some NYCHA buildings during the very cold snap and Politico New York has been reporting on public housing and says the old estimate of NYCHA needing about \$17 billion in capital funding to really get back into functional shape is being updated with the number \$25 billion. Can you confirm that or say why the increase?

**Mayor:** That's one non-profit budget group, the Citizens Budget Commission I believe it was that came up with that estimate. We have not confirmed that. We're certainly going to look at it. It's certainly stands to reason that the number that we originally put out a few years ago which was \$18 billion will go up over time because there's nothing coming in from the federal government that's new, there's no meaningful new investments coming even though public housing was built entirely on the notion of a steady amount of federal investment. And the State of New York, despite our many efforts to get the State to make meaningful contributions, really hasn't.

So what's happened is the City has put in billions into NYCHA in the last four years trying to turn it around. But unquestionably with every passing year a lot of facilities are aging and ending up in tough shape. The NextGeneration NYCHA plan is our big plan over years to try and right the ship. We have stabilized the finances but there is massive need for capital investment for physical repair. Last year's budget passed in June was the biggest single investment in NYCHA by the City I think in decades and we want to look for every opportunity to deepen that. So, it's a tough, tough situation.

On the boilers I can only say – because I went out to Woodside Houses in Queens I saw the boiler repair teams in action. I mean here's the reality, in most instances they're able to fix those boiler problems the same day which you know, for any resident I understand even an hour without heat is a big problem. But I do want to say that folks who work at NYCHA do a really good job with tough conditions of getting those boilers up and running in the vast majority of cases quite quickly.

**Lehrer:** Allie in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi Allie.

**Question:** Hello. My [inaudible] apartment and while the crew was here there were walking [inaudible] and I told the case worker that was here what was happening and she did nothing about it and when I called the police later that night and I called them back a month later to give them time to investigate they told me that they can't investigate the problem because the money taken was under a thousand dollars and I get [inaudible] I did not ask them to walk [inaudible] step on my porch to steal money from me and I [inaudible] agency and the [inaudible] worker –

**Lehrer:** Mr. Mayor could you get somebody to personally look into Allie's situation?

**Mayor:** Absolutely, Brian. And Allie, I'm very, very sorry you went through this and I'm going to have both the NYPD and the agency which runs adult protective services look into this right away and see what we can do to address this. I thank you for reporting it and we will follow up immediately.

**Lehrer:** Allie we're going to take your contact information off the air and the Mayor will have his people follow up with you. So hang on and we're going to take that from you off the air and get you a response.

Mr. Mayor we have a few minutes left, we had a ProPublica reporter here yesterday on her reporting on private carters in New York City. Seven pedestrian deaths from private trash truck accidents in 2017 alone is the reported number compared to zero in the last three years from the City Sanitation fleet. Not to mention the worst toll on the workers themselves described in the article which pointed to various working conditions including longer hours, more pressure to work too fast compared to City Sanitation workers that causes this. How aware are you of this and how much, including for you as a Vision Zero leader, do you think requires a stepped up policy response?

**Mayor:** We – first of all I thank you for the reporting on this and we are going to come up with new safety guidelines right away. We'll have them out next month. This is a real problem. We want to address it in the here and now but we also have a bigger vision for changing the entire



private waste industry and creating a new structure for it that we've announced and will be put in place over the next few years. We think that will also help to address the safety issues and reduce a lot of truck traffic in the bargain. So, we're definitely going to address this.

**Lehrer:** I didn't even realize, I guess I should have realized this but I didn't realize until the ProPublica reporting that the City doesn't pick up business trash, it just picks up residential trash

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**Mayor:** Correct.

**Lehrer:** Why is one a public function and one not?

**Mayor:** One is based on, you know, peoples' dwelling place and the other is based on a business and I don't know all the origins but the notion is, you know, a business — a profit making business or a business with revenue has a different set of dynamics than a personal residence. That's, I think, the essence of it.

Brian, I just want to note before we run out of time, I would expect you to talk about divestment because I know it's the kind of thing that would interest your listeners.

**Lehrer:** Yes, well we had your Corporation Counsel on yesterday and we had the Comptroller on. Do you want to talk about it for a minute?

**Mayor:** I do. New York City, first major city in America and actually first city or state in America that is going to fully divest from companies that have fossil fuel reserves which means 190 companies that include some of the biggest household name oil companies. We will divest fully, it's about \$5 billion we estimate. We hope this will now change the assumptions about fossil fuel divestment. If the biggest city in the country, in the middle of the finance capital world can do it then other cities, states, counties can do it too. So we really want to spark a bigger movement.

And second we're suing five of the biggest oil companies which have covered up the impact their industry has had on climate change and continued to sell a product that they know is damaging and dangerous. We're going to sue them using the same theory as the tobacco lawsuits from years ago that were successful. Looking for billions of dollars in damages from them to help us deal with the resiliency challenges we now have because of so much of the work they did to foster global warming.

**Lehrer:** To be a parallel lawsuit victory to what happened with the tobacco companies where it was found that they had evidence of the harmful health effects of their products that they didn't fully release to the public. What will you have to demonstrate?

**Mayor:** We think we have the exact same kind of information here, that the science was not only broadly available publically to these companies but that their own assessments acknowledged the problem internally and failed to act on it cynically in the name of profit. So, we believe that this one is very sharp and clear and that we have a strong legal basis because quite evidently, once it was clear that global warming was creating billions of dollars in negative impact I believe the estimate for when Sandy hit New York, I believe the estimate alone was \$19 billion in damage,

let alone all the things you have to do going forward to protect. We have a currently \$20 billion resiliency plan and we're going to need more after that. That's one city. So, you know, many hundreds of billions of dollars of impact globally based on something they knew was creating this direct harm and in fact they went – just like the tobacco companies, and tried to hook people further on their product trying to drill more, sell more. It's cynical, it's provable, and we believe this lawsuit could be a leading edge in forcing change in that industry.

**Lehrer:** Going to sneak in one more quick call –

**Mayor:** Please.

**Lehrer:** - Nick in Astoria, you're on WNYC, Nick we have about 30 seconds for you.

**Question:** Alright, well thanks for taking my call, thanks for doing this every Friday. Mr. de Blasio, I'm concerned about small businesses. I've seen a lot of local mom and pop shops closing down, not to mention Coogan's up in Washington Heights most recently. I've seen a lot of franchises and corporate chains opening up.

And I think that's the problem for our city, we lose our middle class. We lose our status as the cultural capital of the world when that happens. And as a small business owner myself, I do know that we really are on our own when it comes to providing our own essential services. We've heard a lot of callers the last couple weeks complain heat, and to the City's credit, you did bring HPD to fix their heating, but they're residential tenants. As a commercial tenant, we don't have those protections, we can call 3-1-1, we can have inspections done, but there is no agency to come in and fix our heating when it breaks down –

**Lehrer:** - And Nick, I'm going to jump in for time. Mr. Mayor, I do want to get into the context of your answer a specific comment on Coogan's, which is the latest example in Manhattan, in Washington Heights in this case, of the landlord jacking up the rent by tens of thousands of dollars. And the landlord in this case is New York Presbyterian Hospital, as I understand it, but tens of thousands dollars and forcing an iconic New York establishment to close.

**Mayor:** Yeah, I think it's a huge mistake. I did not know the landlord was a hospital, and that makes me even more upset. I think they should reconsider immediately, that Coogan's is an extraordinarily important institution in that community and a link to the past and some things are more important than money.

Look, the bottom-line to Nick's question, we do provide legal assistance to small businesses that are having problems with their landlords. And that's through Small Business Service's Department. So Nick, please give your information so we can follow up, because that's the kind of thing that us, helping you get legal support so you can get your landlord to provide the heat or whatever other issue, or renegotiating a lease, there's all sorts of ways that we can legally help small business. We have reduced fines on small business by over 40 percent. We just took a major action to reduce the commercial rent tax in some of these small businesses in Manhattan. Big opportunity in Albany coming up to see if we can figure out some kind of vacancy tax or vacancy fee to stop landlords from taking storefronts off the market for long periods of time and leaving them empty which is bad for communities.

So there is a lot we're trying to address it. But the last thing I'd say is, first of all, landlords need to be responsible. So in this case, the hospital needs to think about the community they serve and that supports them, and second consumers. One of the most important things we can do as individuals, if we love those neighborhood businesses, patronize them a lot, don't just go once in a while, go as often as you can, because that is part of what helps them to stay alive.

**Lehrer:** Mr. Mayor, as always, thank you very much, talk to you next Friday.

**Mayor:** Thanks, Brian.

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