Baltimore is a city with a vexed relationship to its own Civil War past, and for good reason. Maryland never seceded from the Union, but its citizens leaned strongly toward the Confederacy. Any schoolchild from or tourist to Baltimore knows the first blood of the Civil War was shed here, in the Pratt Street Riots, violence that ensued when Baltimoreans attacked Union soldiers heading south through the city for war. From that moment on, the city was under martial law, and Fort McHenry, now known almost solely for the role it played in the War of 1812, became home to some of the city’s most elite citizens and leading Confederate sympathizers. All the contradictions of this past that is still very much present are engraved in the infrastructure of the place, from street and park names to its more obvious public memorials and monuments that remind us of this war.

Baltimore has four monuments to the Civil War—three in honor of the Confederacy and one in
honor of the Union, the latter serving as the city’s “official” monument to the conflict. Whether this is a demonstration of the city’s ultimate loyalties or the result of efforts at reunification after the war ended, to see them now is to be reminded that in terms of official public memory, the war is largely still about the exchange between similarly situated and supposedly honorable white men. Take, for example, the words engraved at the base of the memorial to Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee that sits at the corner of Wyman Park near the Baltimore Art Museum: “They Were Great Generals and Christian Soldiers and Waged War Like Gentlemen.” So much is assumed here, about what it means to be “great,” “Christian,” and “a gentleman,” but what it really does is normalize a narrative of heroics divorced from value or morality and hung instead on the idea that whatever the cause, to do battle is to be good men.

It matters as well that the Lee and Jackson Monument was not erected shortly after the war, before history would begin to allow that perhaps the Confederacy was not fighting a noble cause, but in 1948, after a design process that began in 1935. The monument is part of a continued rehabilitation of the Confederacy and the causes for which it was fought. It remains the site of Confederate memorials, hosting each January a birthday celebration for the two men sponsored by the Sons of the Confederate Veterans (SCV), including music from “The War Between the States,” the playing of Dixie, an honor salute to the Confederate flag, and troop marches.

For 20 years, nearby Johns Hopkins University rented the SCV a room to allow participants to warm up and enjoy refreshments following the ceremony; they stopped that practice---in 2009. In other words, the struggle over the meaning of these memorials continues, and the sense of a glorious Confederate past continues to radiate from this memorial, the memory of slavery and bondage past and present, about which this war was fought, surely ghosting the place. At an even more basic level, this memorial joins the host of others that make natural and even glorious a continued state of war, and the part where they can fade into our background—well, that’s pretty powerful stuff.

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