

A culture of remembrance

By [Martha Spong](#)

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I grew up in a house in which hung a print of *The Last Meeting of Lee and Jackson* (engraved by Frederick Halpin, after Everett Julio), that classic emblem of the Lost Cause. This was common then in my neighborhood in Old Town Portsmouth, Virginia. My father, a Civil War buff who would tell me about the battles as we drove around Virginia, never indicated that the cause was just, but honored both men as soldiers, tacticians, human beings, Virginians. [Yet in his political life he angered people, including his own political party, to the point of death threats, by his political stands against the institutionally-protected racism of "massive resistance."](#)

I'm not sure how to reconcile these things.

I still have the print, no longer hanging anywhere, but I don't quite know what to do with it. I don't want to send it out into the world, nor do I want to destroy it, simply because it reminds me of my dad. Let me be clear; he was a soft-spoken intellectual, not a gun-toting guy with a truck bearing Confederate flag decals. I told you, in his time, he was considered radical in his politics. Well, radical for Virginia.

Yet, we have this heritage, this culture of remembrance of the men who gave their gifts to what was in every way the wrong side of a terrible war, evil as war always tends to be and doubly evil in pitting, as I learned in school, brother against brother, and even brother against sister in the case of the Jackson family. And ultimately evil in the lies people told themselves and the world about the reasons, praising chivalry and states' rights, denying that the profit to be found in owning other people and considering them to be less than human drove the cause so rightly lost.

Somewhere among my books is a large pictorial biography of General Robert E. Lee, awarded to me for outstanding work in social studies in the fifth grade at an Episcopal girls' school, St. Agnes, in Alexandria, Virginia. It was presented by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. What about the stack of Lenox commemorative dinner plates sold in the 1970s to fundraise for the restoration of the White House of the Confederacy? I never saw them used, never knew they

existed until after my parents were dead. I can picture him writing a check for the sake of historical preservation.

Is it defensible because we should not forget?

Can we remember without glorifying?

What to do with these things?

As a child, I remember sitting on the rug, playing with a figure of Lee seated on his horse, Traveller. That at least is long gone.

I am not the only one who doesn't know what to do with all the things that carry the taint of revolution and racism. I don't want to get rid of them and thereby circulate them.

I do know what **not** to do with them, not to celebrate them, not to display them in our homes or our cars or our public monuments, not to imbue them with some holy power.

Please, South Carolina, take down the flag.

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