

# “Honorable men”: Robert E. Lee, Erwin Rommel, and the Memory and Forgetting of Defeat and Guilt

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## Abstract

In October 2017, White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly criticized those who wanted to bring down statues of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, defending him as “an honorable man.” Gerardo Rivera also took part in the heated debate about Confederate monuments: “#RobertELee is a lot like #ErwinRommel a glorious yet failed warrior, untarnished by the sins of his brothers.” With his tweet the Fox News commentator and former talk show host responded to a Twitter post by the economist and columnist Paul Krugman who had asked: “On statues of Robert E. Lee: what would we think if German towns put up statues of Erwin Rommel, also a good general serving a vile cause?” This article looks at the larger debate about the Lost Cause and the history and memory of slavery and the Civil War in a case study focusing on Robert E. Lee, trying to raise some larger questions of memory and forgetting through a comparison with Erwin Rommel. The article analyzes the special places Southern General Robert E. Lee and Feldmarschall Erwin Rommel have occupied in the memories of the American Civil War and World War II, respectively. It will argue that to find something honorable in all the evil of lost wars that were fought for the wrong ends can be regarded as an individual and collective way to deal with pain, guilt, and defeat. Part of this is honoring the soldiers and their sacrifices, focus on famous battles, and celebrate distinguished generals while ignoring and “forgetting” what the real goals of these wars had been. Today, both Rommel and Lee have been pushed off their pedestals, in the case of Lee statues even literally. But the fact that Lee and Rommel have been glorified as honorable, loyal, and patriotic military men also by those who were their opponents/enemies makes this comparison even more interesting, because it cannot be explained by a collective amnesia in order to suppress and forget guilt and crimes. In connection with remembering, the author argues, it is also important to take a closer look at the different functions of “forgetting” that have been described by Aleida Assmann and other scholars, especially at what Assmann calls “complicit” and “constructive” forms of forgetting. Both examples show that these types of forgetting protected perpetrators, helped shape a selective historical narrative, and were also important in new beginnings and reconstruction after a catastrophic defeat.

**Keywords:** Erwin Rommel; Robert E. Lee; Memory; Defeat and Guilt; Forgetting.

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Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;  
 [...] The noble Brutus  
 Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:  
 If it were so, it was a grievous fault,  
 And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it.  
 Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest—  
 For Brutus is an honorable man;  
 So are they all, all honorable men—<sup>1</sup>

In Julius Shakespeare's tragedy *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony gives his funeral oration for Caesar after Brutus himself spoke. Antony had to promise not to criticize Brutus and the other conspirators. He does not, and even calls them "honorable men," but he brilliantly turns that against them. When White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly in October 2017 used "an honorable man" to describe Confederate General Robert E. Lee, he did mean it:

I would tell you that Robert E. Lee was an honorable man. He was a man that gave up his country to fight for his state, which 150 years ago was more important than country. It was always loyalty to state first back in those days. [...] the lack of an ability to compromise led to the Civil War, and men and women of good faith on both sides made their stand where their conscience had them make their stand.<sup>2</sup>

Kelly made this statement during a heated national debate on Confederate monuments, some of which were being taken down. Already in mid-August 2017 the economist and columnist Paul Krugman had tweeted: "On statues of Robert E. Lee: what would we think if German towns put up statues of Erwin Rommel, also a good general serving a vile cause?"<sup>3</sup> A few days later the Fox News commentator and former talk show host Geraldo Rivera commented: "#RobertELee is a lot like #ErwinRommel a glorious yet failed warrior, untarnished by the sins of his brothers."<sup>4</sup> Both Krugman and Rivera make a simple equation of Rommel and Lee in their damnations and admirations, respectively. But the comparison is worth pursuing. This article analyzes the place Confederate General Robert E. Lee has held in the history and public memory of slavery and the American Civil War and Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in (West) German remembrance of World War II and to some degree also the Holocaust. This is done through their "public history," expressed, for example, in Lee monuments and paintings and in photographs and movie depictions of Rommel. The two men are used as a lens to take a comparative look at how the United States and Germany have dealt with their difficult pasts. Rommel and Lee were highly respected strategists during the Civil War and World War II, but they each stood on the losing side and by doing their "duty" became accomplices in the crimes committed by their governments. But why did they become the arguably most popular military leaders in the postwar periods in their respective country? The military and especially military leaders, it will be argued, had a special function in the way Germany and the United States tried to deal with and remembered defeat and guilt. The implication is not that things were the same, and there are many important differences between the Confederate States and Nazi Germany, their respective war aims and crimes as well as between a reunited USA after 1865 and two separate Germanys after 1945. But a comparison can reveal interesting similarities (and differences) and provide answers to how societies remember and, as importantly, what they choose to forget, and what functions "forgetting" has played.

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1. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, [http://shakespeare.mit.edu/julius\\_caesar/full.html/](http://shakespeare.mit.edu/julius_caesar/full.html/).
  2. Eli Rosenberg and Cleve R. Wootson Jr., "John Kelly calls Robert E. Lee an 'honorable man' and says 'lack of compromise' caused the Civil War," *Washington Post*, October 31, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/10/31/john-kelly-calls-robert-e-lee-an-honorable-man-and-says-lack-of-compromise-caused-the-civil-war/?utm\\_term=.13flc69492ba](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/10/31/john-kelly-calls-robert-e-lee-an-honorable-man-and-says-lack-of-compromise-caused-the-civil-war/?utm_term=.13flc69492ba). Kelly's statement about the "lack of compromise" rightly received strong criticism.
  3. Paul Krugman (@paulkrugman), "On statues of Robert E. Lee: what would we think if German towns put up statues of Erwin Rommel, also a good general serving a vile cause?" Twitter, August 12, 2017, 9:46 p.m., <https://twitter.com/paulkrugman/status/89645787170397185>.
  4. Geraldo Rivera (@GeraldRivera), "#RobertELee is a lot like #ErwinRommel a glorious yet failed warrior, untarnished by the sins of his brothers" Twitter, August 17, 2017, 6:32 a.m., <https://twitter.com/geraldorivera/status/898039806382440448?lang=de>.

First, two similarly structured parts provide brief biographies of Lee and Rommel and describe how they were heroized. The third part connects this with the memory and forgetting of defeat and guilt and describes how and why they have been pushed off their pedestals.

## 1 Robert E. Lee and the American Civil War

Robert E. Lee was born in 1807 to a prominent family in Virginia. He graduated from West Point, becoming a highly praised officer and from 1852 to 1855 served as superintendent of the military academy. In May 1861 Lee declined an offer by President Abraham Lincoln to lead the Union forces against the South, and instead on April 20, 1861, requested his resignation from the U.S. army.<sup>5</sup> He was not in favor of secession, but he did not want to go to war against his native state. As commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, the most important military force of the Confederacy, Lee became a highly praised general and military hero, but also suffered defeats, most famously in Gettysburg.

Through his marriage with Mary Anna Custis, Lee became a slaveholder in 1831. While he had called slavery “a moral & political evil,” he also argued that “the painful discipline they are undergoing, is necessary for their instruction as a race” and that “their subjugation” was “necessary.”<sup>6</sup> With the Confederacy, Robert E. Lee ultimately fought for a political system founded on the defense of slavery. Secession declarations like Mississippi’s openly declared that “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the U.S. Constitution, the constitution of the Confederacy used “slavery” and similar terms. And a few days after ratification, Vice President Alexander Stephens famously proclaimed, “our new Government is founded upon [...] the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition.”<sup>8</sup>

Robert E. Lee has been tied in several other ways to a distorted view of the Civil War, including its ending, often believed to have happened at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. The surrender of Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia that day was surely the most significant one, but it was followed by several more.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless Appomattox is commonly identified as the place where the Civil War ended, and for a reason: it was in the local courthouse where the gentlemanly surrender took place, which made defeat more bearable and less humiliating for the South. That is also proven by the way numerous artists have immortalized the scene over the decades. In *Lee Surrendering to Grant at Appomattox* (ca. 1870) New York-born artist Alonzo Chappel shows Lee and Union General Ulysses S. Grant meeting on eye level.<sup>10</sup> In the most famous painting of the event, Thomas Nast’s *Peace in Union* of 1895, the two generals make peace by shaking hands. Lee, who measured nearly three inches more than Grant, is shown much taller, and he also sticks out with his white hair and beard as well as his grey uniform.<sup>11</sup> In *Let Us Have Peace* (1920) by Philadelphia-born artist Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, it seems as if Lee—sunlit,

5. See his Robert E. Lee to Winfield Scott, April 20, 1861, *Lee Family Digital Archive*, <https://leefamilyarchive.org/robert-e-lee-to-winfield-scott-1861-april-20/>.

6. Robert E. Lee, to Mary Anna Lee, December 27, 1856, <https://leefamilyarchive.org/robert-e-lee-to-mary-anna-randolph-custis-lee-1856-december-27/>.

7. A Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of the State of Mississippi from the Federal Union, January 26, 1861, <https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/app/uploads/2020/11/Mississippi-Secession-p86-88.pdf>. Other states couched their goal to uphold the “peculiar institution” in the language of states’ rights against encroachments from the federal government, e.g. the Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina, Charleston, December 24, 1860, <https://archive.org/details/declarationofimm00sout/page/n1/mode/2up>.

8. Constitution of the Confederate States of America, March 11, 1861, [https://dlg.usg.edu/record/guan\\_civilwar\\_const?canvas=0&x=-6366&y=22375&w=34422](https://dlg.usg.edu/record/guan_civilwar_const?canvas=0&x=-6366&y=22375&w=34422). Alexander H. Stephens: Cornerstone Speech, March 21, 1861, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/cornerstone-speech-by-alexander-h-stephens-march-21-1861/>.

9. As an example, only Appomattox is mentioned repeatedly as the place of the Southern surrender and defeat by Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (London: Granta Books, 2003), 28, 58, 68, 73, 75.

10. For the image see <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/lee-surrendering-grant-appomattox-4607>.

11. For the image see [https://www.nps.gov/articles/images/Peace-in-Union-Thomas-Nast-1865\\_1.jpg?maxwidth=650&autorotate=false&quality=78&format=webp](https://www.nps.gov/articles/images/Peace-in-Union-Thomas-Nast-1865_1.jpg?maxwidth=650&autorotate=false&quality=78&format=webp). Lee actually wore a darker ceremonial uniform for the occasion.

erect, and proud—was accepting the surrender of the much smaller Grant—correctly shown with mud on his boots.<sup>12</sup> Painted 50 years later, on the 100th anniversary of the event in April 1965, Tom Lovell's *Lee Accepts the Surrender Terms* for *National Geographic* depicts the two generals sitting at separate small tables. The focus and the light is on Lee in his grey uniform who is signing the surrender, sitting at a bigger and somewhat higher table and in a higher chair than Grant, who is again shown with dirty boots.<sup>13</sup> In the accompanying article, the Union general's grandson, Ulysses S. Grant III, characterized the event as bringing "peace with honor."<sup>14</sup>

General Grant had included a kind of amnesty for Lee and his army in the surrender document, even though he had not been authorized to do so and was criticized for it. In early June 1865 federal judge John Curtiss Underwood charged Lee and 36 other Southerners with treason, but since there was neither political nor judicial support from President Andrew Johnson and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, respectively, there was no trial. On Christmas 1868, Lee and many other prominent Southern military leaders and politicians, among them Confederate President Jefferson Davis, profited from Johnson's amnesty declaration.<sup>15</sup>

There had been criticism of Lee and some of his decisions as a military commander, but soon after the Civil War—and even more so after his death on October 12, 1870,—the general became a national icon. At the time, Frederick Douglass and others were outraged by what the former slave and famous abolitionist described as "bombastic laudations" and "nauseating flatteries" for the recently deceased "rebel chief."<sup>16</sup>

In the following decades, Lee surpassed Jefferson Davis and the immensely popular general Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson in the number of streets, schools, public buildings, counties, and other places and "symbols" named in his honor, mostly, but not exclusively in the former slave states. Virginia, Alabama, Georgia, and others even created holidays in honor of Lee and other Southern heroes, and his portrait was put on several stamps.<sup>17</sup> In addition, numerous monuments were erected to honor the "Marble Man," the most prominent one being a large equestrian statue in Richmond, Virginia (figure 1). It stood in the former capital of the Confederacy on what became Monument Avenue, where several more Confederate monuments were erected, including one to President Davis.<sup>18</sup> The dedication ceremony for the Lee Monument on May 29, 1890, was attended by thousands of people. Archer Anderson praised Lee for having believed in the "substantial identity of the American race in all the States, North and South," by which the former Confederate officer meant only white Americans. According to him, Lee had viewed slavery "as an evil which the South had inherited and must be left to mitigate and, if possible, extirpate by wise and gradual measures." And, above all, the general had always been guided by "duty."<sup>19</sup>

12. For the image see <http://museumcatalog.virginiahistory.org/final/ViewImage.aspx?template=Image&field=DerivedIma&hash=f5de87bd5a356802c58c57fbf4843dc4&r=1605823218&lang=en-US>.

13. For the image see <https://www.illustrationhistory.org/illustrations/tom-lovell-lee-accepts-the-surrender-terms-national-geographic-1965>. Lovell was also from the "North," being born in New York City.

14. Ulysses S. Grant III, "Appomattox. Where Grant and Lee Made Peace with Honor a Century Ago," *National Geographic* (April 1964): 435–469.

15. Cf. John Reeves, *The Lost Indictment of Robert E. Lee: The Forgotten Case Against an American Icon* (Lanham: Rowan&Littlefield, 2018).

16. [Frederick Douglass], "Bombast," *New National Era* (August 10, 1870), <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84026753/1870-11-10/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.132,0.575,0.311,0.136,0>.

17. Since 2019 the Southern Poverty Law Center has published data and studies of place names, monuments, and other Confederate "symbols in public spaces." The fourth edition of *Whose Heritage?* was published in April 2025: <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/xx-whose-heritage-4th-edition-part-i/>. The data set is updated regularly: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1W4H2qa2THM1ni53QYZftGob\\_k\\_Bf9HreFAtCERfjCIU/edit?pli=1#gid=1205021846](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1W4H2qa2THM1ni53QYZftGob_k_Bf9HreFAtCERfjCIU/edit?pli=1#gid=1205021846). The United States Postal Service issued stamps with Lee's image in 1937, 1949, 1955, 1970, 1995, and 2015.

18. Cf. Thomas L. Connelly, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). "Marble man" was first used with regard to Lee by the poet Stephen Vincent Benét in *John Brown's Body* (Doubleday: Garden City, NY 1928), 194.

19. Archer Anderson, "Dedication of the Monument to General Robert E. Lee" (speech, Richmond, VA, May 29, 1890, <https://leefamilyarchive.org/history-reference-addresses-anderson-index/>).



Figure 1. Robert E. Lee Monument at Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia.  
Andreas Etges.

At the same time, the idea of the “Lost Cause” gained in popularity. The term had been first used as the title of a book by Edward Pollard in 1866. In it, the journalist defended the cause of the Confederacy and talked about the superiority of Southerners who should now start a “war of ideas.” He admitted that the war brought the restoration of the Union and what Pollard called “the excision of slavery.” But it had not brought a decision regarding the equality of races, voting rights for African Americans, or states’ rights.<sup>20</sup> For a long time, that “war of ideas” on the national level was dominated by the Lost Cause ideology. It was a “lost” cause from the beginning, because the South had never had a chance to win against the far superior North which made the Southern sacrifices in battles commanded by brilliant generals more heroic. Most importantly, the Lost Cause promoted the argument that the Civil War had mainly been about states’ rights, not about slavery, the latter being drawn in a more positive light. The nostalgic view of the Old South was successfully popularized in films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939).<sup>21</sup>

It was also literally put in stone since the late nineteenth century as part of a memorial landscape not just in the American South. As an expression of white supremacy in the face of desegregation efforts like the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court in 1954, new monuments were erected, and in more and more places Confederate flags were flown. In 1956, as a sign of defiance, the state of Georgia even incorporated the Battle Flag of Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia into its new state flag.<sup>22</sup>

That the Southern interpretation of the Civil War became so influential also is due to the end of Reconstruction in 1877 when Congress put the focus on the reconciliation of the former enemies. That helped pave the way to the celebration of patriotism, heroism, and sacrifices on both sides. The price was paid by African Americans who suffered from widely accepted and systematic legal segregation. How potent the Southern narrative became on the national level is proven by the fact that slavery for many decades was not part of National Park Service’s (NPS) historical interpretation of the Civil War in the more than 50 military battlefields and memorials it administers. That only changed in the mid-1990s—against much resistance.<sup>23</sup>

From the beginning, Robert E. Lee occupied the most prominent place in the Southern memory of the Civil War. He was the “rational of the Lost Cause,”<sup>24</sup> its “effective first father.”<sup>25</sup> In letters written soon after his death, his widow already called him “the Hero of the Lost Cause.”<sup>26</sup> In reflections on the centennial of the Civil War, the poet and writer Robert Penn Warren described Lee’s surrender at Appomattox as the time of birth of the myth of the Confederacy: “We may say that only at the moment when Lee handed Grant his sword was the Confederacy born; [...] in the moment of death the

20. Edward A. Pollard, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (New York: E. B. Treat, 1866), 750–752. Even though Pollard uses a surgical term to describe the end of slavery, it is quite interesting that he admits that it had been a main issue of the war.

21. Cf. W. Stuart Towns, *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012); Caroline E. Janney, “The Lost Cause,” in *Encyclopedia Virginia*. 2020, Virginia Humanities, last modified August 26, 2024, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lost-cause-the/>; id., “The Civil War in Public Memory,” in *The Cambridge History of the American Civil War*, vol. 3, ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 481–505.

22. It is a square version of the Confederate Battle Flag. Due to growing criticism, the flag of Georgia was once more changed in 2003, however with a flag based on the much lesser-known early flags of the Confederate States of America. The flags of several other states still have references to the Confederacy. Cf. Towns, *Enduring Legacy*. John Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America’s Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), provides an overview until the early 2000s, but to some degree defends the use of Confederate flags.

23. NPS chief historian Dwight T. Pitcaithley describes the debate in: “Public Education and the National Park Service: Interpreting the Civil War,” *Perspectives* (November 2007), <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/public-education-and-the-national-park-service-interpreting-the-civil-war-november-2007/>. Cf. Christian Spielvogel, *Interpreting Sacred Ground: The Rhetoric of National Civil War Parks and Battlefields* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); id., *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

24. Connelly, *Marble Man*, 3.

25. Michael Fellman, *The Making of Robert E. Lee* (Random House: New York, 2000), 192.

26. E.g. Mary Custis Lee to Letitia McCreery Burwell, November 15, 1870, *Lee Family Digital Archive*, <https://leefamilyarchive.org/history-papers-letters-transcripts-unknown-sources-u026/>.

Confederacy entered upon its immortality.”<sup>27</sup> Lee, whom the former British prime minister Winston Churchill described as “one of the noblest Americans who ever lived,” became a national hero and a kind of martyr, who like Jesus was ready to sacrifice himself for the larger good.<sup>28</sup> On August 5, 1975, Gerald Ford even signed a bill with which he posthumously restored Robert E. Lee’s rights of citizenship after both houses of Congress had approved of this unanimously. In his signing statement, the president said: “Once the war was over, he firmly felt the wounds of the North and South must be bound up. [...] As a soldier, General Lee left his mark on military strategy. As a man, he stood as the symbol of valor and of duty.” Ford not only emphasized “duty,” he also claimed that Lee’s character had been an example to succeeding generations, making the restoration of his citizenship an event “in which every American can take pride.”<sup>29</sup> Surely not everyone would have agreed with this in 1970, even though Lee at the time was much less controversial.

## 2 Erwin Rommel and the Second World War

Erwin Rommel was born in the small Southwestern city of Heidenheim in the Kingdom of Württemberg in 1891. His military career began in 1910. After Hitler came to power, Rommel quickly rose through the ranks, serving as the commander of the *Führer’s* escort battalion and in important positions during the attack on Poland and the invasion of France. His initial success as commander of the *Afrikakorps* in Northern Africa earned him the nickname *Wüstenfuchs* (desert fox), and in June 1942 Hitler promoted him to the rank of field marshal. Rommel was later tasked with building the Atlantic Wall to protect the French coast against an invasion by the Western Allies.<sup>30</sup>

With the losses on the Eastern front, Rommel increasingly took a critical view of Hitler’s military leadership. After D-Day (June 6, 1944) at the latest, the *Generalfeldmarschall* believed that Germany had lost the war, hoping for negotiations with the Western Allies. Rommel most likely had some knowledge of the planning of the failed assassination attempt against the *Führer* on July 20, 1944, but kept quiet about it. Since a trial at the *Völkgerichtshof* for being a coconspirator was seen as counterproductive by the NS leadership, the enormously popular military leader was offered a deal. If Rommel was ready to commit suicide, he would be given an honorary funeral, and his family would not be harmed. Rommel took a cyanide pill on October 14, 1944.<sup>31</sup>

Without doubt, Erwin Rommel was the most popular German World War II general. The ambitious officer’s celebrity status was enhanced by Nazi propaganda. Photos showed him in his leather coat, with goggles, his field marshal’s baton and the Pour le Mérite medal he had been given during the First World War, studying maps or standing in vehicles in Northern Africa, looking through his

27. Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (New York: Random House, 1961), 15.

28. Winston S. Churchill, *The Great Democracies: A History of the English-Speaking Peoples, vol. 4* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963), 131. The Jesus analogy can also be found in Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, 66–67, and Fellman, 193, 295. Cf. Connelly, *The Marble Man*, 99–122; Gary W. Gallagher, “Introduction,” in *Lee: The Soldier*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), XVII–XXXV.

29. “President Gerald R. Ford’s Remarks Upon Signing a Bill Restoring Rights of Citizenship to General Robert E. Lee,” August 5, 1975. The speech used to be available on the website of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum among “Key Speeches and Writings of Gerald R. Ford.” It was taken down sometime in summer 2024. The last availability in the Wayback Machine is July 4, 2024. By August 30, 2024, it had been taken down, another indication of how Lee’s public status has changed. <https://web.archive.org/web/20240704212504/https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/speeches/750473.htm>. Ford signed the document at Arlington House. The former mansion owned by Lee and his wife was a slave estate. Today it is situated on Arlington Cemetery. Transferred to the National Park Service in 1933, it became known as the Robert E. Lee Memorial. The story of the mansion and the changing narrative told are another important feature of how Lee has been remembered, but could not be addressed here due to space limitations. For more info see Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, <https://www.nps.gov/arho/index.htm>.

30. On Rommel see two books edited by Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg: *Erwin Rommel: Geschichte und Mythos*, (Leinfelden-Echterdingen: Lauinger Verlag 2009), and in *Mythos Rommel: Katalog zur Sonderausstellung*, ed. Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg (Stuttgart: Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg, 2008).

31. Officially his death was announced to have been caused by injuries he had received a few months earlier. Johannes Häußler, “Erzwungener Selbstmord und Staatsbegräbnis. Über den Tod hinaus: Rommels propagandistische Instrumentalisierung für den ‘Endsieg,’” in *Mythos Rommel*, 94–107.

binoculars (figure 2). He became the “hero of the newsreels,” and “Hitler’s favorite general.” Rommel happily played along.<sup>32</sup>



Figure 2. Generalfeldmarschall Rommel (left) in a command vehicle, near Bir Hacheim, North Africa, June 1942. Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-443-1589-09 / Zwilling, Ernst A. / CC-BY-SA 3.0.

His popularity, both during and after the war, was not limited to Germany. Anglo-American publications like David Young’s bestselling 1950 biography *Rommel: The Desert Fox* and movies often reproduced the Nazi propaganda iconography of the field marshal.<sup>33</sup> Another prime example is the 1951 Hollywood film *The Desert Fox: The Story of Erwin Rommel* which was based on Young’s book. In it, British soldiers are read an order from General Claude Auchinleck asking them not to credit Rommel “with supernatural powers.” But while trying to dispel the Rommel myth—after all, the *Afrikakorps*, led by a “capable” but “an ordinary German general” was eventually defeated—the movie at the same time invoked it.<sup>34</sup> That was also achieved through its final assessment of the German Field Marshall by a man described as “Nazi Germany’s sternest enemy,” Winston Churchill:

He [...] deserves our respect because, although a loyal German soldier, he came to hate Hitler and all his works and took part in the conspiracy to rescue Germany by displacing the maniac and tyrant. For this, he paid the forfeit of his life. In the sombre wars of modern democracy, there is little place for chivalry.<sup>35</sup>

In the major movie about the D-Day invasion, *The Longest Day* (1962), Rommel is again depicted as a chivalrous, honorable, and brilliant officer, admired by both friend and foe, and as a strong critic of Hitler’s military decisions. But he and others continue to follow the *Führer’s* orders because they had sworn an oath to do so. If truly evil Germans are shown in Hollywood films in those decades, they are members of the SS or other fanatical Nazis who willingly follow the *Führer*.<sup>36</sup>

32. Kay Hoffmann, “Wir müssen weiter... Erwin Rommel – der Held der Wochenschau,” in *Erwin Rommel*, 132–151; Günter Riederer, “Hitlers Krieger im Wüstensand. Zur medialen Konstruktion des militärischen Mythos ‘Rommel’ nach 1945,” in *Die Medien der Geschichte: Historizität und Medialität in interdisziplinärer Perspektive*, ed. Fabio Crivellari et al. (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2004), 569–588; Paula Lutum-Lenger, “Rommel – ein Held?,” in *Mythos Rommel*, 9–13.

33. David Young, *Rommel: The Desert Fox*, (Harper & Brothers, New York 1950); Patrick Major: “‘Our Friend Rommel’: The Wehrmacht as ‘Worthy Enemy’ in Postwar British Popular Culture,” *German History* 26 (2008): 520–535; Riederer, “Hitlers Krieger,” 578–580.

34. Henry Hathaway, dir., *Desert Fox: The Story of Erwin Rommel* (1951, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003), DVD.

35. The slightly changed quote is taken from Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. 3: The Grand Alliance* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1950), 177. When Churchill’s words are heard, moving images of Rommel’s iconography are recreated.

36. Cf. Andreas Etges, “Honorable Soldiers, Courageous Resistance, and an Unbeatable Band of Brothers: National Narratives



This depiction of Rommel and other German officers in the Anglo-American world fit quite well with a dominant view in postwar West Germany that the *Wehrmacht* had fought an honorable war but had been misused by Hitler and his cronies for their criminal plans. Thereby the German soldiers could be seen more as victims of the war, less as perpetrators, while a major part of the German public for quite some time considered those who had conspired to kill Hitler on July 20, 1944, as having betrayed their oath. Rommel was regarded as the embodiment of the “clean” *Wehrmacht*. Günter Riederer even described him as a “shimmering integration figure of the early Federal Republic.”<sup>37</sup> Rommel’s former chief of staff was key in turning him into a “national hero for the German people.” Already in 1949 Hans Speidel had described Rommel as the “embodiment of true and clean German military.” The Field Marshall represented the “best traditions of the German military,” as Speidel, now a general in the new West German forces, said at a commemorative ceremony at Rommel’s gravesite on November 18, 1956, the anniversary of his funeral. Emphasizing the positive traditions of German soldiery in the presence of regular Bundeswehr soldiers was important in order to draw a direct line between the soldiers of the older German armies and the new West German army, which had been created in 1955.<sup>38</sup>

Rommel was also honored through the naming of streets, military barracks, and a destroyer that was christened by his widow Lucie Maria.<sup>39</sup> Against criticism even from inside the military, Gerhard Schröder had broken a taboo in 1969 by having three ships for the new navy named after military “heroes” of World War II who had not been part of the resistance to Hitler. But the conservative West German Minister of Defense justified his decision by stating that they had “bravely and faithfully served their country.”<sup>40</sup>

On the occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1961, Rommel’s hometown Heidenheim an der Brenz erected a monument for him. The initiative had come from the veterans of the *Afrikakorps*, who covered most of the costs. Additional funding came from Heidenheim and the state government of Baden-Württemberg. The front side of the simple white memorial stone made out of shell limestone reads “Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel.” On the back, the coastline of Northern Africa is engraved. The inscription next to it picks up central elements of the Rommel myth:

UPRIGHT  
CHIVALROUS  
AND BRAVE  
UNTIL HIS DEATH  
AS A VICTIM OF TYRANNY.<sup>41</sup>

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and Myths about World War II and Hollywood’s Portrayal of the War in Europe” in *Transatlantic Cinema: Production – Genres – Encounters – Negotiations* eds. Karsten Fitz and Jürgen Kamm (Passau: Ralf Schuster Verlag, 2020), 109–120.

37. Riederer, “Hitlers Krieger,” 571. Cf. Marc von Lüpke-Schwarz, “Der Nationalheld des deutschen Volkes. Hans Speidel und der Mythos Rommel,” in *Erwin Rommel*, 152–173.

38. On Speidel see Lüpke-Schwarz, “Nationalheldes” (quote on 160), and Cornelia Hecht, “Umstrittene Erinnerung. Erwin Rommel als Projektionsfläche für politische Ziele und Interessen,” in *Mythos Rommel*, 124–141, quotes on 127, 130.

39. Cf. Hecht, “Umstrittene Erinnerung.”

40. Quoted in “Mumm haben,” *Der Spiegel* (35/1967): 23–25. Günther Lütjens and Werner Mölders, after whom the other two destroyers were named, were even more controversial than Rommel. In May 1941, aboard the sinking flagship *Bismarck*, Admiral Lütjens had sworn Hitler to fight to the last shell. Mölders had been a fighter ace of the infamous Legion Condor that fought on the side of the fascists led by General Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War. The *Spiegel* article cited a shipyard worker at the Bath Iron Works in Maine, where the destroyers had been built, who asked the German journalists whether their country had only “Nazi heroes” to honor.

41. AUFRECHT/RITTERLICH/UND TAPFER/BIS ZU SEINEM TODE/ALS OPFER DER GEWALTHERRSCHAFT. For more information on the monument and images see “Erwin Rommel 1891\_1944\_1961\_2020\_,” Stadt Heidenheim, accessed August 30, 2023, <https://www.rommel-denkmal.de/en/index.php>, and “Rommel-Denkmal,” Wikipedia, last modified June 4, 2024, <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rommel-Denkmal>.

### 3 Dealing with Defeat and Guilt

Robert E. Lee and Erwin Rommel were described in very similar ways both by their contemporaries and by later generations as having done their “duty” in difficult times. They might have stood on the wrong side of history, fighting for lost causes they did not fully believe in. Nevertheless, they remained “honorable men” and loyal patriots. Lee, it was argued, had neither been a proponent of slavery nor of secession, and Rommel supposedly had lost his life in resistance to Hitler. Based on those legends, both men could serve as highly respected role models in their respective countries, even beyond the military, though Lee surely was of greater importance in the United States than Rommel in West Germany.

Why did their legends become so widely shared and why did their heroization and memorialization remain so powerful for so long? Celebrating famous battles and victories as well as “brilliant” military leaders has a long tradition. Both men were already highly admired strategists during the wars they fought in. And they led their troops onto the battlefield at times when military achievements and victories as well as patriotic sacrifices of their soldiers were still unquestioned types of heroism.

Glorifying Lee and Rommel as honorable, loyal, and patriotic military men has also been a convenient way to ignore and “forget” what the real goals of “their” wars had been, and thereby to partly disconnect them from the historical context they acted in. However, the fact that the admiration for Lee and Rommel was shared and even promoted by their former opponents and enemies means it cannot simply be explained by a collective amnesia in order to suppress and forget guilt and crimes. Both exemplify a way how societies that fought for a lost cause, that were defeated and found “guilty,” have tried to create a narrative in order to shape public memory. To find something honorable in all the evil of lost wars that were fought for the wrong ends served as an important individual and collective way to deal with pain, guilt, and defeat—and to make a new start.

Remembering and forgetting are closely linked, cannot easily be separated, and are neither good nor bad per se, as scholars like Aleida Assmann have rightly emphasized. She distinguishes between seven kinds of forgetting, which all serve different individual and societal purposes and needs, and which can coexist. “Automatic forgetting” is biological. “Preservative forgetting” to her means “the entry into the archive.” “Selective forgetting” includes necessary “neglecting, overlooking, ignoring” as an “integral part of remembering.” What she calls “*damnatio memoriae*” is a kind of eradication, a “repressive forgetting.” Assmann’s remaining three forms of forgetting all matter much more in the context of this article. “Defensive and complicit forgetting” protects the perpetrators and is often accompanied by the victims’ silence. Then there are two kinds of forgetting that have been regarded much more positively. What Assmann calls “constructive forgetting” enables a “*tabula rasa* for a new political biographical beginning.” It has increasingly been displaced by “therapeutic forgetting” that starts with deliberate remembering.<sup>42</sup> The German historian Christian Meier also sees a close connection between remembering and forgetting. In his study on the “imperative to forget,” he argues that from ancient times onwards the necessity to forget cruelties and evil was emphasized and even literally agreed on by former enemies. Only with the Holocaust, with Auschwitz, did the mandate to never forget, to remember, become dominant.<sup>43</sup>

Both on the individual and societal levels, Americans/the United States and Germans/Germany have undergone different forms of forgetting. While Germany has often been praised for its exemplary way of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*—of coming to terms with and of working off its past, it is still an ongoing process. Also, it took quite some time, until the late 1950s, for West Germans to begin to come to terms with National Socialism, World War II, and the Holocaust. The immediate focus after 1945 was on rebuilding the destroyed cities and on economic recovery.<sup>44</sup>

42. Aleida Assmann, “Forms of Forgetting” (Public Lecture at Castrum Peregrini, Amsterdam, October 1, 2014), herengracht 401, <https://h401.org/2014/10/forms-of-forgetting/>. See also her longer essay about forgetting: Aleida Assmann, *Formen des Vergessens* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018).

43. Christian Meier, *Das Gebot zu vergessen und die Unabweisbarkeit des Erinnerns: Vom öffentlichen Umgang mit schlimmer Vergangenheit* (München: Siedler, 2010), 11.

44. The literature about this is vast. Among the best studies and edited books in English are: Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the*

To Meier, this “long silence” might even have been the “precondition” for a very difficult but, overall, quite remarkable German memory culture.<sup>45</sup>

The magnitude of the crimes and international pressure after 1945 surely impacted the relatively open public debate in Germany about how to face the Nazi period and World War II. However, and in spite of the fact that glorification of the military in Germany to a large degree ended after 1945, the myth of the “clean” *Wehrmacht* did last several more decades. Even though historians had long proven its participation in mass killings on the Eastern front and of the genocide of European Jews, it took a traveling exhibit on the crimes of the German army by the privately funded Hamburg Institute for Social Research to finally shatter that myth in the 1990s.<sup>46</sup> The changing public view of the *Wehrmacht* in turn also had an impact on the perception of Rommel. He was not known for anti-semitic statements, with few exceptions had ignored criminal orders to execute prisoners of war, and had increasingly voiced criticism of Hitler. But he had long been loyal to the regime, was happy to be used for propaganda purposes, and his involvement in the resistance was rather passive, at best.<sup>47</sup> As Paula Lutum-Lenger sums it up well, Rommel did not approve of criminal actions, but he had loyally served a criminal.<sup>48</sup>

Beginning in 2008, Rommel’s monument in Heidenheim was repeatedly sprayed with graffiti, calling him “fascist,” “Nazi pig,” or “Nazi general.” Due to public pressure, in 2011 the municipal council decided to add an additional marker close to the memorial, which did not take a clear stand, however.<sup>49</sup> Responding to continuing demands to take the monument down, a counter memorial consisting of the silhouette of a mine victim was added in July 2020 (figure 3). Depending on the position of the sun, its shadow darkens the bright white stone of the original monument—and with it Rommel’s legacy. Attempts to have Rommel’s name taken off *Bundeswehr* barracks that still bear his name have been rejected by Germany’s Department of Defense, however, even though a study by the Research Services of the German *Bundestag* came to the conclusion that Rommel was not a good model for modern German armed forces.<sup>50</sup>

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*Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Bill Niven (ed.), *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). See also the comparative study by Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

45. Ibid. 68-69. More recently, some scholars have challenged this positive view, also highlighting the connection between Germany’s colonialism and Nazi Germany. Cf. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); A. Dirk Moses, “The German Catechism, Geschichte der Gegenwart, May 23, 2021, <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/the-german-catechism/>.
46. Cf. Hannes Heer et al. (eds.), *The Discursive Construction of History: Remembering the Wehrmacht’s War of Annihilation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). For the German catalogue and a publication dealing with the controversy see: Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, ed., *Katalog zur Ausstellung des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1996); id., ed., *Eine Ausstellung und ihre Folgen: Zur Rezeption der Ausstellung “Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944”* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999).
47. Cf. Ralf Georg Reuth, *Rommel: Das Ende einer Legende* (München: Piper Verlag, 2005); “Die Traditionswürdigkeit Erwin Rommels für die Bundeswehr,” Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Deutschen Bundestages, WD 2 – 3000 – 005/19 (February 22, 2019); Maurice Philip Remy, “Rommel und der militärische Widerstand,” in *Erwin Rommel*, 104–131; Peter Lieb, “Erwin Rommel. Widerstandskämpfer oder Nationalsozialist?,” *Vierteljahrshefie für Zeitgeschichte*, 61 (2013), 303–343.
48. Lutum-Lenger, “Rommel,” 9.
49. “Rommel-Denkmal.” The inscription celebrated Europe’s peaceful unity and also said that “in war, braveness and heroism, guilt and crime, are often close together.”
50. Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Deutschen Bundestages: Die Traditionswürdigkeit Erwin Rommels, 6, 15, 19.



Figure 3. Counter Memorial at Rommel Monument, Heidenheim.  
SPD Landtagsfraktion BW. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

In the United States, “defensive and complicit forgetting” have lasted much longer, and the Lost Cause ideology is a result of that. But it also served the purpose of “constructive” forgetting. In the words of Wolfgang Schivelbusch, the Lost Cause helped to create “healthful protective shields or buffer zones” to heal the wounds.<sup>51</sup> But the process of “reconciliation and healing” between North and South, or rather the white North and South, was inseparably connected to the segregation of African Americans in the Southern states.<sup>52</sup> And as Assmann rightly points out: “traumatic pasts do not simply disappear but return and claim attention, recognition, restitution and remembrance.” But “recognition, restitution and remembrance” have been lacking, and with them “therapeutic” forgetting is not possible.<sup>53</sup>

That has begun to change, and the debate about slavery, the Confederacy, Jim Crow, their legacy and memory culture has gained a new urgency. In the wake of the murder of nine African Americans in a church in Charleston by the white racist Dylann Roof in 2015, Confederate flags have been taken down and hundreds of Confederate symbols have been removed all over the country. Still, around 1500 remain.<sup>54</sup>

Some of the biggest recent controversies have dealt with the Civil War’s most commemorated Southerner. In 1869 Lee himself had questioned the building of memorials and monuments, worrying that they might “keep open the sores of war.” He was not generally opposed to the erection of Southern monuments but feared that so soon after the end of fighting they might cause a backlash. His suggestion was to support the efforts of Southern women to mark graveyards and to “wait for bet-

51. Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, 26, makes the same point for France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and the German loss in World War I.

52. Cf. David W. Blight, “Healing and History: Battlefields and the Problem of Civil War Memory,” in *Beyond the Battlefield*, 170–190.

53. Assmann, *Forms of Forgetting*.

54. Southern Poverty Law Center’s, *Whose Heritage?*

ter times.”<sup>55</sup> Those “better times,” in Lee’s sense, would come with the end of Reconstruction, finally making him a truly national hero.<sup>56</sup>

In 2003 the last Lee statue on public land was dedicated on Antietam National Battlefield with an inscription that repeats the well-known narrative that even though the general “was personally against secession and slavery,” he fought out of “duty for his home.” In addition, it includes the outrageous claim that Lee also fought for “the universal right of every people to self-determination,” which perverts the historical facts.<sup>57</sup>

Most likely there will be no more new Lee statues in the public sphere. And with few exceptions, Lee’s defenders have been on the retreat in the recent past or have even completely switched sides. One of the most prominent “deserters” is Ty Seidule. The retired United States Army brigadier general had admired Robert E. Lee since childhood—and throughout most of his tenure as professor and chair of West Point’s history department. That has radically changed: “My former hero, Robert E. Lee, committed treason to preserve slavery.”<sup>58</sup> The Confederate general has been pushed off the pedestal, not just symbolically, but in the case of his statues even literally and quite controversially. In response to the vote of the City Council of Charlottesville, Virginia, to have an equestrian statue of the general removed from a local park, white supremacists organized demonstrations. On August 12, 2017, one of them drove his car into a group of counter protestors, killing one woman. After long court fights, the statue was finally removed in July 2021 and melted down in 2023 (figure 4). A few months later the famous statue of Lee in Richmond also came down, as the last of five confederate statues on Monument Avenue. It had become a center of protests, the white pedestal full of graffiti and with images of *Black Lives Matter* and George Floyd projected onto it.<sup>59</sup>

While there have been significant changes in Lee’s home state Virginia, Georgia continues to stubbornly resist an honest reckoning with the past. The legislature recently changed the law in order to make it much harder to remove Confederate monuments. Stone Mountain, on which the world’s largest relief sculpture is carved, was even put under special protection. It depicts Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson on their horses. The monument, first suggested in the 1910s, took decades to finish and was dedicated in 1970. The Ku Klux Klan was involved in early efforts to create the monument and frequently used Stone Mountain for gatherings and cross burnings. In 2020, Georgia’s General Assembly decided that:

the memorial to the heroes of the Confederate States of America graven upon the face of Stone Mountain shall never be altered, removed, concealed, or obscured in any fashion and shall be preserved and protected for all time as a tribute to the bravery and heroism of the citizens of this state who suffered and died in their cause.<sup>60</sup>

No other state has gone that far in trying to protect its Confederate monuments. And none has used similar language in its state laws to literally heroize Confederate leaders like Lee. The future will tell whether this is kind of a “last stand.” After all, a new majority in the state capitol in Atlanta might one day change that law.

55. Robert E. Lee to David McConaughy, August 5, 1869, <https://leefamilyarchive.org/robert-e-lee-to-david-mcconoughy-1869-august-5/>, and Robert E. Lee to Thomas L. Rosser, December 13, 1866, <https://leefamilyarchive.org/history-papers-letters-transcripts-uva-v076/>.

56. Gallagher, Introduction, XXIV.

57. “Monument to Gen. Robert E. Lee”, *National Park Service*, <https://www.nps.gov/anti/learn/historyculture/mnt-lee.htm>, last modified January 27, 2020.

58. Ty Seidule, *Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner’s Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2021), 9.

59. Floyd had been murdered by a policeman in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. On debates in Richmond see Nicole Maurantonio, *Confederate Exceptionalism: Civil War Myth and Memory in the Twenty-first Century* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019).

60. “Official Code of Georgia Annotated,” 50-3-1(c), *LexisNexis*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/gacode>. The Atlanta History Center provides a lot of information on the history of the monument on its website, including images and a 30-minute documentary: “Monument: The Untold Story of Stone Mountain,” <https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/monument/>, accessed August 30, 2025.



Figure 4. March to Confront White Supremacy rally in front of the covered Robert Edward Lee sculpture in Charlottesville, Virginia, August 28, 2017.  
AgnosticPreachersKid. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

## 4 Conclusion

In *Julius Caesar* Mark Antony maintains that “the evil that men do lives after them.” That is true for both Robert E. Lee and Erwin Rommel, and one could see them as “honorable men” in the way Brutus and his fellow conspirators are described by the consul in Shakespeare’s play.<sup>61</sup> The analysis has shown that looking for the honorable in all the evil of lost wars that were fought for the wrong ends can be regarded as an individual and collective way to deal with pain, guilt, and defeat. Part of this is honoring the soldiers and their sacrifices, focusing on famous battles, and celebrating distinguished generals while ignoring and “forgetting” what the real goals of these wars had been.

Forgetting can serve different individual and societal purposes and functions, and it can take many different forms. In a negative way, it protects perpetrators and helps shape a selective historical narrative. But some form of forgetting might even be necessary in order for societies or nations to make a new start. Germany has made quite some progress in this regard. This has also meant critically reevaluating the German *Wehrmacht* and Field Erwin Marshall Rommel and honestly acknowledging the active role they played in Nazi Germany.

It has taken much longer in the United States to challenge and change the national narrative associated with the Lost Cause. Today, the centrality of slavery as a cause of the Civil War is acknowledged by the National Park Service in places like Gettysburg that are visited by millions of people annually.<sup>62</sup> Also, the history and memory landscape in the United States has been changing quite visibly, especially regarding Confederate symbols and monuments. Like in the German case, this also had to negatively impact the military and its leaders, particularly the Confederate soldiers and General Robert E. Lee.

But as important as what has been removed is what has been constructed. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture on the Mall in Washington, which opened in 2016, is an outstanding example of this, both architecturally and with its exhibitions.<sup>63</sup> The Equal Justice Initiative’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice (2018), better known as the “Lynching Memorial,” and its Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, are an even bigger break with the dominant narrative by putting a major focus on the perpetrators and arguing that “slavery in America did not end. It evolved.” (figure 5)<sup>64</sup> The United States seemed to finally be on the rocky path of “recognition, restitution, and remembrance”—but that abruptly ended on January 20, 2025.

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61. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*.

62. One example is National Park Service, *Foundation Document: Gettysburg National Military Park* (August 2016), 12, [https://www.nps.gov/gett/learn/management/upload/GETT\\_FD\\_SP-508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/gett/learn/management/upload/GETT_FD_SP-508.pdf), which states: “The Civil War was the result of decades of increasing divisiveness caused primarily by the issue of slavery that pulled the nation apart economically, socially, and politically.”

63. “A People’s Journey, A Nation’s Story,” *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, <https://nmaahc.si.edu>.

64. “The Legacy Sites,” *Equal Justice Initiative*, <https://legacysites.eji.org> and <https://eji.org/racial-justice/>.



Figure 5. National Memorial for Peace and Justice (Lynching Memorial), Montgomery, Alabama. Each of the 805 hanging steel rectangles represents a U.S. county where a documented lynching took place. The names of the victims are engraved on the beams. Irmgard Zündorf.

On the day of his second inauguration, President Donald Trump began an attack on critical history. Government websites dealing with America's difficult racial past had to be taken down, the National Park Service had to change narratives at some of its sites, the head of the National Archives was fired, and the National Endowment for the Humanities was forced to cancel more than 1000 grants. The most direct attack came with an executive order on March 27, 2025. In a prime example of the doublespeak described by George Orwell in 1984, it is titled "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." Trump sees "a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation's history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth." All of this "deepens societal divides and fosters a sense of national shame," instead of promoting a history of American greatness that citizens can be proud of. The executive order particularly blames the Smithsonian Institution and the National Park Service, with the former having supposedly "come under the influence of a divisive, race-centered ideology." Trump also ordered the Secretary of the Interior to "take action to reinstate the pre-existing monuments, memorials, statues, markers, or similar properties."<sup>65</sup>

The president issued a cultural and ideological declaration of war on truth and facts, threatening to use his executive power and the power of the purse to enforce the changes he seeks. Trump might win some victories in this battle, but like the Confederacy, he is fighting for a "Lost Cause."

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65. "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," *Executive Order, March 27, 2025*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/>.