If you’ve visited Boston before, you likely saw the large Boston Common, located in the heart of downtown. The Boston Common is the oldest city park in the country, and a good number of visitors come to enjoy the park’s natural beauty. Because the Public Garden is also right across the street, it’s easy for visitors to experience both the fields and the greenery. What many park goers may pick up on is the abundance of monuments spread all throughout the public park. Filled with history, each individual monument relays a story to park visitors. In the large fields of Boston Common, many monuments captivate the attention of passersby and tourists in Boston, leaving them with a curiosity to learn more.

In the midst of the greenery and lively atmosphere, one particular monument, the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, atop one of many hills in the Common, boasts a vast history through its large, fascinating structure. The 72-foot tall structure is located near the center of the Common, in close proximity to the Frog Pond. It was originally named the “Army and Navy Monument”, but was changed to the “Soldiers and Sailors Monument”, commemorating the Bostonian men who fought for the country in the Civil War. On the base of the monument, four bronze plaques display the men fighting at war and other war-related scenes. One of the reliefs, titled “The Departure for the War”, illustrates the troops leaving to fight for the country, saying their farewells to family members. The second relief depicts the U.S. Sanitary Commission-- also
known as the USSC-- that helped ill and wounded soldiers, which was a vital part of the war effort. The third plaque, titled “The Return From the War”, illustrates the men marching by the State House, “surrendering their flags to Governor Andrew, while joyful wives and children break the ranks of the regiment.” Finally, the fourth plaque, titled “The Departure of the Sailors from Home”, shows the sailors leaving their homes, while a Federal man-of-war and a monitor have an interaction by a Confederate fortress. As you can see, all four plaques depict the multiple Civil War-related scenes. These reliefs sneakily spread the idea of patriotism, under the guise that the monument is supposedly honoring fallen war veterans. Is its main purpose actually to honor veterans though?

Moving up the monument, there are four projecting pedestals, each holding statues meant to represent different aspects of the end of the Civil War. Interestingly enough, these four statues were missing for a couple years, up until 2014, when they were restored. This actually caused a good amount of speculation amongst park visitors; they were confused as to whether the statues were never actually finished or if they were in storage somewhere. Nonetheless, the four allegorical statues each represent different ideas. Facing the sea, a man standing in a sailor uniform with a hand on his hip is named “The Sailor”. Facing up towards Heaven, a woman is seen sitting with a pen and paper in her hands, and is named “The Muse of History”. Standing at ease, a federal infantryman is pictured, and is named “The Citizen-Soldier”. Lastly, looking South is a woman holding an olive branch, named “Peace”. On top of these four statues, there are four other figures meant to represent the northern, southern, western, and eastern parts of the reunited country after the Civil War.

On the very top of this large monument is the main column, illustrating an eleven-foot tall woman wearing a crown with thirteen stars to represent America. In one hand she holds an American flag, in the other a sword and laurel wreath. Also, on the main panel of the monument is a dedication that reads “To the men of Boston who died for their country, on land and sea, in the war which kept the Union whole, destroyed slavery and maintained the Constitution. The grateful city has built this monument that their example may speak to coming generations.”

As you may have picked up on, the monument becomes more celebratory of America as you move up the tall structure. On the bottom, it started with citizens and men going to war, then moved onto soldiers and sailors in the war, then different aspects of the Civil War and its effects, and finally, the representation of a reunified America on top. What many people seemingly do when they see these kinds of political monuments is stare in awe. While this is an appropriate response, I feel as though we shouldn’t idolize these American achievements because we still have a long way to go until the country is completely free from the ideals that veterans fought for in the Civil War. Yes, monuments should be put up to honor the veterans who bravely fought in wars, but they should simply do just that instead of celebrating the nation’s supposed successes. While the Civil War formally ended slavery in 1865, other methods of racial discrimination were introduced shortly after, such as “restrictive Black codes and regressive contractual arrangements such as sharecropping.” Because of these long-lasting effects of the Civil War, the Soldiers and Sailors monument should aim to only honor fallen veterans. It wrongly illustrates America as a country free of slavery and racism when that is clearly not the case in present-day America. The bottom half of the monument is acceptable for this purpose, but the upper half isn’t because it

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4 Browne, “Boston Soldiers and Sailors”.
5 Ibid.
literally places America on a pedestal, positively depicting the country as successful in abolishing discrimination. Monuments should only aim to tell the unconcealed version of history, which is not the case with this monument. The Soldiers and Sailors Monument does respectfully honor the veterans, but what about the African-Americans? The Civil War abolished slavery, but that was only a label, all for show. By doing so, America was able to brag about the reunified country, but it was all just on paper. Behind the scenes, African-Americans were still being discriminated against, which shows that America shouldn’t be allowed to brag about the wins of the Civil War. Therefore, monuments such as the Soldiers and Sailors monument should strive to solely honor fallen veterans, and not spread celebratory messages about America’s achievements.