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REFLECTIONS OF ROBERT E. LEE IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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To the extent that Robert E. Lee is central to an understanding of the social, cultural, and political dynamics operating in this country for the last 150 years, a study of his reflections in our culture, both popular and academic, will help reveal the key cultural fault lines that have remained with us from prior to Fort Sumter in 1861 and long after Appomattox in 1865.

The origin of this paper and the research for a forthcoming book on the topic are to be found in my childhood in the mid to late 1950s in Norfolk, Virginia. Although we were a military family (my father was a career Petty Officer in the Navy) and I was the only one of three brothers born in North America, Norfolk was my birthplace. As with many children, I more or less absorbed unconsciously some personal identifiers. In my case, even though we had moved frequently from one naval base to another, across half of the world, I had somehow inculcated a view of myself as a native Virginian. We had returned to Norfolk in the mid-'50s after my Dad retired from active duty. We lived in an area of Norfolk called Ocean View (which was originally connected to downtown Norfolk by a railroad headed by Colonel Walter Taylor, Lee's chief staff officer) (Taylor viii), on a "spit" of land that ended at Hampton Roads. My newspaper route covered most of the spit, on the east side. The north end of the spit stopped a few hundred yards from the site of the 1862 battle of the ironclads, the USS Monitor and the CSS Virginia. In the 700 block of my paper route resided an elderly widow, Mrs. Elias B. Etheridge. For whatever reason, she took a fancy to her impressionable young paper boy and

often invited me into her home for some milk and cookies and a friendly conversation. She was particularly kind to me in the Christmas holidays, giving me a generous tip—a \$2 dollar bill. During my visits to her home, she learned of my interest in all matters related to the Civil War. It turns out that she was a member of the Daughters of the Confederacy. More to the point, she told me of her father, who had fought in the war as an officer in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, and, by her account, was one of the few men involved in Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg who made it to the stone wall and survived to tell the tale. He must have been a young man then, because I have calculated that Mrs. Etheridge was born in the late 1870s or 1880s. As mentioned, she was elderly in the mid to late '50s.

She generously shared some personal gifts with me—Confederate money, \$50 bills. Perhaps she was lonely and just needed someone with whom to talk. I found her fascinating and looked forward to each interaction. Without knowing it at the time, this personal relationship between two people born three quarters of a century apart became quite important to me as I matured. She had created for me a sense of a personal connection to this distant war and its many important historical dimensions, while also feeding my nascent sense of being a Virginian.

Just after I had started high school in Norfolk, our family moved to central Florida. Mrs. Etheridge wrote a few letters to her former paper boy, and my life went on in typical teenager fashion, with a certain regret that my direct relationship with her had ended. Eventually, her letters stopped coming.

Even though I was not attending school in Virginia, I was still in the American South, living in another former member of the Confederacy, and the centennial commemorations of that distant war were ubiquitous. The vestiges of The Lost Cause revisionism were evident in the South's secondary education in the early '60s, and this blended with the states' rights movement

and the urgency of the civil rights marchers to make the study of the Civil War a compelling matter. Central to this confluence of powerful issues was one of the most famous Americans to be found in our history books—Robert E. Lee.

With my boyish sense of an identity as a native Virginian, I had developed a deep fascination with Lee. Perhaps because of Mrs. Etheridge, I felt something like a personal connection to him. Basically, I was impressed by what I took to be his noble, chivalrous, gallant, courageous character and leadership. It is not an exaggeration to say that in the South, Lee was and is worshipped. There is nothing new or alarming in making that claim. It has been very well documented. Several generations of Americans educated in the South have learned to look up to Lee as a great American, and, I might add, a perception shared by a not inconsiderable number of people in the North.

I left the South in 1963 and started college at Notre Dame in Indiana. My graduate studies took place at Michigan State. My professional career as a professor took place entirely in Oregon. I was out of the South—but was the South out of me?

Like most people who entered adulthood in the '60s, there were countless crucial, burning lessons to be learned, not the least of which involved the American experience involving racism, civil rights, states' rights and the lamentable, tragic legacy of the practice of slavery. For me, this was a haunting, very painful consciousness. To think that my native state was the leader of a confederation designed to make slavery a permanent feature of life on this continent, and that Lee was a central figure in the newly born country that fought to the death for this “peculiar institution” created a kind of unpleasant, haunting cognitive dissonance within me.

As I neared retirement from full-time teaching, I was paying careful attention to the developing political scene under America's first African-American president. It had taken more

than a century after Reconstruction to see America elect a national leader who, had he been born in 1861 and not 1961, might well have been a slave for much of his childhood. Millions of soldiers had fought this nation's bloodiest war over a complex of issues that centered on slavery—many of which remain with us, not the least being the ongoing concern of states' rights.

Hailed as a conquering hero, or vilified as the worst traitor, Robert E. Lee was central to the painful, tragic process that seems to have removed the institution of slavery from our collective experience. Probably at the urging of General Winfield Scott, President Lincoln sent an envoy to offer Lee command of the Union army. Lee submitted his resignation from the U.S. Army within a day or two after rejecting that offer, unable to wage war against his family and state. Early in the conflict, his wife's ancestral home, Arlington, with its sweeping views of the Union's capital city, was taken over by the U. S. government and eventually turned into the national military cemetery that we can visit today. This was not an accident; it was an intentional insult and act of revenge against the traitor. (Nor is it an accident that Lee was quite conscious of having married into George Washington's family, and that Lee copied Washington's practice of wearing the insignia of a colonel, not a Confederate general, even as his personal effects during the war included Washington's mess kit).

Lee could not face the prospect of raising his sword against his family and native state. As an engineer educated at West Point, and with combat experience involving artillery, Lee certainly recognized that Union military leaders would immediately perceive the tactical threat represented by Arlington; he had to know that his family's home would be a target of Federal occupation. Nevertheless, his decision was an agonizing one, but he does not seem to have looked back on it with regret, even though he had admonished a son with the opinion that secession was treason at the time of the American Revolution. "What can it be now?" he asked

(Connelly 195). In spite of his reservations and doubts, he served his fledgling country to the best of his ability, then in defeat served as a college president in order to help bring the decimated South back into the good graces of the reunited Union.

After decades of studying about Robert E. Lee, I am comfortable claiming that he was basically a good man whose personal decisions thrust him into a maelstrom the destructiveness of which few could have predicted. One hundred and fifty years after that war, however, Lee's status within the larger cultural picture of this country remains somewhat unsettled. I wish to investigate his reflections in our culture across time to, as new historicist Stephen Greenblatt might say, put him to work for us today, the better to understand ourselves.

The U. S. Military Academy at West Point is keenly aware of its graduate, Robert E. Lee. He was, after all, West Point's superintendent within a decade prior to the outbreak of the war. From his own career in the Army, he had come to know many of the men who later served as the leading generals of the two sides, as well as many bright, young junior officers on both sides who were at West Point during his years as superintendent.

Today's history department at the Point does not fail to teach about Lee to the cadets. His tactics and military leadership are subjects of keen investigation. Two history professors at West Point, Prof. Samuel Watson, and Colonel Ty Seidule, do much of the work there that involves Lee. Both add to the military history their considered view that Lee was a traitor. He did, after all, turn his back on the country that he had served honorably for more than three decades, and eventually led a Confederate army that inflicted perhaps 200,000 deaths on opposing Union forces before surrendering.

On the other hand, another section of the U. S. government—the Postal service—has printed no less than five postage stamps bearing Lee's likeness. Even more surprising, perhaps,

is the fact that the U. S. Navy in 1960 commissioned a nuclear submarine with Lee's name, the USS Robert E. Lee (SSBN 601). (Let it be noted that the U. S. Navy has never commissioned a ship of any kind to honor the memory of one Benedict Arnold). In World War I, the War Department honored Lee by creating Fort Lee in Lee's home state, an Army post that is still in service. It appears from these examples that certain key figures in the American military and government saw Lee to be worthy of honoring in this manner. Likewise, in the civilian world New York University seems to have confirmed Lee's emerging status in the early twentieth century as an American icon when Lee's bronze bust was added to twenty-eight others in the initial grouping of the University's prestigious Hall of Fame for Great Americans. Numerous schools in the South bear Lee's name and several former Confederate states have, over the years, honored the memory of Lee (and Jefferson Davis) with state holidays. In addition, Lee's name is honored in parks, highways, streets, and various southern heritage groups across the nation (see, for instance, the Robert E. Lee chapter #885 of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in Seattle, Washington). A statue of Lee the Virginian resides in the U. S. capitol; George Washington is the other honoree representing the Old Dominion.

On a 2011 research visit to the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, I took some time for a tour of the adjacent Confederate White House. The tour guide was a recently retired Sergeant Major from the U. S. Army. The guide was impressive for his command of the minutiae in Jefferson Davis's wartime Richmond home. His military bearing, even in civilian clothing, gave a certain gravitas to his presentation. He commanded respect. It also became obvious that he deeply admired Lee. I will say more about his presentation shortly, but one of the truly striking aspects of his tour was his fond recollection that he, too, had once visited the Confederate White House, as a teenager in 1960. The tour guide for his visit was none other

than Lee's granddaughter. She seems to have motivated the youngster so much so that his interest in Lee blossomed and reached fruition after he retired from active duty.

The other striking component of his informative presentation is that he was an African American. Indeed, his great-great-grandfather, a white man, had served as an officer in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. This man had had several children with a freed slave before marrying a white woman and fathering another family. The freed slave was my guide's great-great grandmother.

I will come back to the tour guide again, but it is also worth mentioning that, contrary to the professional historians at West Point, this Army veteran saw Lee as a true patriot. I even mentioned this West Point interpretation to him and he replied that there were some West Point cadets who had recently taken the tour. They had told him the same story—Lee was a traitor. He solemnly informed me that he would have to correct the historians: Lee is a patriotic American. (The tour group was in the state dining room in the Confederate White House when he said this. He had carefully shown the tourists the seating arrangements for important meetings...among others, this chair for President Davis, this for the vice president, this one for General Longstreet, this one for General Lee).

Needless to say, these seemingly contradictory interpretations (Lee as traitor, Lee as honored American), cause a certain cognitive dissonance. It's doubtful if he can be all of the above, yet American culture clearly supports both perspectives. What does this reveal of us? Have we never successfully lain to rest the ghosts of our racist, insurrectionist past? Some have argued that the Civil War never ended, that we are still in the late stages of the fight, both socially and politically.

Of course, Lee's reputation today is primarily related to his military leadership and the battles his army fought. But there is also a certain level of admiration for his character that is not isolated to his military exploits. Building in part on Lee's reputation, the Bradford Exchange produces high-quality memorabilia of a variety of icons, including Lee. The company very kindly agreed to an interview regarding its products. When asked about the reasons people buy their Lee products, company representative Suzanne Magnuson replied:

People admire Lee's leadership, personal integrity and bravery. He exemplifies the noble warrior to his fans. The man fighting for what he believed in, home, country and self-determination. He is a symbol of all that is noble about a soldier and the Southern way of life. He is admired by people interested in the Civil War, but he is revered in the South.... we create works of art that celebrate his nobility and leadership, and we strive to put those qualities into our products.... Lee sells better than Lincoln; Lee sells best among Civil War figures. (Magnuson interview)

Artist John Paul Strain, who works closely with the Bradford Exchange, echoes these thoughts. Having worked with Lee's images for a quarter of a century, Strain finds that those who purchase his paintings seek "authenticity" in his depictions of Lee's "role as a great leader and example" (Strain interview). It would not be wild speculation to suggest that artists and sculptors in prior decades also sought to render these values, such as seen in Jean Antonin Mercié's impressive work on Monument Avenue in Richmond, or Alexander Doyle's statue in Lee Circle, New Orleans.

There is a cluster of images that coalesce around this: his manliness, his Christianity, his nobility, his grand presence. He has literally been portrayed as a saint; certain of his appearances among his soldiers—the April 1864 review conducted upon the return of Longstreet’s Corps to the Army of Northern Virginia in particular—were described as partaking of a “military sacrament” (Alexander 346). One little girl, after the war, is reported to have said this after catching a glimpse of the General: “We had heard of God, but here was General Lee!” (John M. Taylor 227; Johnson 211). Praise for Lee abounded for decades after the General died in 1870. For example, a member of Congress from Michigan lauded Lee’s exalted character, noble life, and eminent services (Connolly 126-127). In a compelling memorial tribute to Lee, Georgia Senator Benjamin H. Hill touched on many of the attributes often ascribed to Lee, both then and now:

He was a foe without hate, a friend without treachery, a soldier without cruelty, and a victim without murmuring. He was a public officer without vices, a private citizen without wrong, a neighbor without reproach, a Christian without hypocrisy, and a man without guile. He was a Caesar without his ambition, Frederick without his tyranny, Napoleon without his selfishness, and Washington without his reward. He was as obedient to authority as a servant and royal in authority as a king. He was as gentle as a woman in life, pure and modest as a virgin in thought, watchful as a Roman vestal, submissive to law as Socrates, and grand in battle as Achilles. (Johnson 248-249)

President Calvin Coolidge, who authorized the minting of a U.S. coin to help the Stone Mountain memorial project, with its emphasis on Lee in this monumental undertaking, noted Lee's "purity of soul and high sense of personal honor" (Connolly 126-127). (It is not known if Coolidge was aware of the KKK's involvement in this project, yet another intriguing example of the ambiguities that surround Lee's reflections in American culture). Coolidge was not alone. Woodrow Wilson, whose father was a Confederate chaplain, met Lee as a young teenager and, near the end of his life offered an interpretation of the General: "The true eulogy of General Lee is a life which is meant to be patterned after his standards of duty and achievement....the central figure of a great tragedy" (Wilson 322). President Franklin D. Roosevelt, while attending an unveiling of a Lee statue in Dallas in 1936, also praised Lee. His remarks on this occasion reveal the degree to which Lee's reputation had seemingly been completely rehabilitated:

All over the United States we recognize him as a great leader of men, as a great general. But, also, all over the United States I believe that we recognize him as something much more important than that. We recognize Robert E. Lee as one of our greatest American Christians and one of our greatest American gentlemen.

(Washington and Lee archives)

Lee's admirers point out Lee's impressive ancestors, including Launcelot Lee, who served with William the Conqueror, and Lionel Lee, who marched with Richard the Lion-Hearted (Johnson 21). The King of Scotland, Robert the Bruce, is also claimed to be an illustrious ancestor of the General. Indeed, "It is noticeable that many of the traits of character,

such as military talents, pertinacity of purpose, loyalty of soul, and unselfish devotion to native land, so fully developed in General Lee, are seen, more or less distinctly marked, in all his ancestors of whom history has given us a picture” (Fontaine). The royal or kingly attributes often given to Lee serve to link him directly with brave military leaders and heroes from the past.

Lee’s subsequent roots in Virginia can be traced to 1640 (John Taylor 51), long before the American Revolution, although he and his wife were related directly to several signers of the Declaration of Independence and prominent figures in state and national governance. Born in 1807 to a Revolutionary War hero, “Light-Horse” Henry Lee, it is an important but debatable matter that a deep sense of American nationalism had not fully set in for people of Lee’s generation. Indeed, evidence of a different understanding of the national picture is found in Lee’s oath taken as a plebe at West Point, as well as his oath decades later in 1855 as he ascended to the position of superintendent at West Point—in both cases we find similar references to the United States and the plural copulative “are” (John Taylor 51). President Woodrow Wilson’s 1923 “Interpretation” of Lee also uses the plural re the United States (325). He also finds that there are “no more sections to this country now that we have accepted Lee” (328). Ninety years later, Wilson’s comment would have much less support.

Furthermore, Freeman points out that a certain textbook in use at the Academy in 1825-26 made a strong argument on behalf of secession, although it is not known if Lee actually used the book in his studies (I 78-79). Needless to say, these matters are handled in an entirely different way today, but they indicate the rather fragile nature of a sense of unified nationalism in the first half of the nineteenth century. (As some advocates for secession point out, the New England states were the first to threaten secession; it took the Civil War to resolve the issue).

The worshipful attitude articulated about Lee certainly reveals important, perhaps even laudatory elements of Lee's overall influence upon those around him. Today, his image seems benign enough, grandfatherly perhaps. But due to the cause for which he fought—centered on the continuance of slavery, white supremacy, and states' rights--he is forever linked to a very dark, even if romanticized, period in American history. We know that the emergence of the Lost Cause version of that history attempted to whitewash the sad reality of the South's social history, an effort that proved to be somewhat successful over time, but the persistent, patient insistence upon achieving true civil rights for all Americans in the mid-twentieth century revealed that much remained to be done. On the surface, this progressive effort succeeded to a certain extent.

Political realities today, however, have exposed the depths to which certain racist attitudes and beliefs have persisted and infected the perceptions, attitudes, and actions for a fairly large segment of this country's population. We live in very unsettled and somewhat alarming times. Observing all this, some commentators have noted that the Civil War is not only not over, it is being re-fought again. Furthermore, the competing sides seem to have frozen in time, both convinced beyond doubt that they are right. Using Mark A. Noll's argument from his study of *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, we resemble the citizens of the divided country in the period leading up to the war itself, with:

a deeply entrenched intellectual synthesis divided against itself...its proponents...reassuring combatants on either side that each enjoyed a unique standing before God and each exercised a unique role as the true bearer of the nation's Christian civilization. (21)

My concern, then, is the degree to which the public's memory--the accepted and widespread images--of Confederate General Robert E. Lee contribute to the lamentably revanchist behaviors we see acted out in social media, in Washington's politics, and throughout important wings of the nation's mass media. Could those reactionary, ugly episodes and claims have Lee's grand, noble images and memory hovering over the scene, offering a benediction that makes all well? Would the good general be appalled to see the scene in this country one hundred and fifty years after the conclusion of the Civil War? Would Lee be surprised that a kind of Southern nationalism, the Neo-Confederate phenomenon, argues today that

the true South embodies and reflects natural laws and moral principles that have their foundation in divine truth....[that] the mythic South...is a fundamentally moral civilization whose members are guided by the highest Christian principles of honor, duty, loyalty, faith, and integrity....[pitting] the traditional against the modern, rural against urban, agrarian against industrial, Christian against heathen, and neo-Confederacy against democracy and civil rights. (Hague 228)

Michael Fellman's study of *The Making of Robert E. Lee* indicates that there are elements in Lee, the "Southern Nationalist," that could well contribute to contemporary Southern nationalism. Fellman notes that Lee, early in his presidential tenure at Washington College, valued the South's "elevated standards of morals, religion, & literary culture" (Lee's words, from a letter to Walter Taylor) (280). In Lee's work as president of the college, Fellman finds that Lee was attempting "to create a purified little republic that later might be copied in larger ways. Hints of that muted "Christian Confederate utopianism" lingered with Lee until his death in 1870 (280).

Some other views of Lee's also lend themselves to today's Southern conservative views of America and its role in the world. In Fellman's view, "Lee hated naked American power..." with the South as its "passive victim." In a letter to a relative in 1867, in words that echo those later reported by Lord Acton, Lee lamented the "tendency...to [have] one vast Government, sure to become aggressive abroad & despotic at home; & I fear it will follow that road which history tells us such Republics have trod, might is believed to be right, & the popular clamor the voice of God" (Fellman 290). Amidst the detritus of a defeated government and nation, that is, the remaining evidence of its brief existence—statues, memorials, cemeteries, museums, art works, flag reproductions, music, etc., the image of Lee looms as a reminder of what might have been. For those who wax nostalgic for that lost past, for those who resist the superpower that gradually emerged, and for those who honor a shared history and an awareness of the evolution of the United States, Lee became central to the developing understanding of ourselves, but he also reflects the unresolved tensions in our social and body politic.

The process of heroizing Lee began early in the War. Poet Paul Hamilton Hayne saw General Lee in Charleston, South Carolina, in late 1861, during Lee's short Confederate service tenure there. His observations, made long before Lee had acquired a national reputation, seem to have set the initial tone for subsequent accounts and also began the process of exhausting superlatives:

In the midst of the group, topping the tallest by half a head was, perhaps, the most striking figure we had ever encountered, the figure of a man seemingly about 56 or 58 years of age, erect as a poplar, yet lithe and graceful, with broad shoulders thrown back, a fine justly-proportioned head posed in unconscious dignity, clear,

deep, thoughtful eyes, and the quiet, dauntless step of one every inch the gentleman and soldier. Had some old English cathedral crypt or monumental stone in Westminster Abbey been smitten by a magician's wand and made to yield up its knightly tenant restored to his manly vigor . . . we thought that thus would he have appeared, unchanged in aught but costume and surroundings.

(Freeman, I, 612)

Hayne's observations capture the essence of a complex of images regarding Lee that will appear consistently for a century and a half after his last battle: a striking figure, erect, graceful, dignified, a gentleman, a knight. (Note particularly that Hayne saw Lee as a "half a head" taller than those around him).

A half century after Hayne recorded these observations, we can see the developing pattern in Gamaliel Bradford's biography of *Lee the American*: Lee manifests "kingly stature...a royal soul...a royal body...." He is high-bred, dignified, with a "lordly carriage...a magnificent physique...." Of his character, Lee shows the "largest tenderness, profoundest human sympathy, [the] most perfect love...." (13).

Strange as it may seem, the facts regarding Lee's height are by no means settled. That he has been heroized by many Americans and thus made "bigger than life" is not surprising. What may be surprising, however, is the range of figures given for his height. Some have reported that Lee was 5' 10" or slightly taller. My enthusiastic guide at the White House of the Confederacy claimed that Lee was 6' 2". Jean Leon Gerome Ferris's 1920 painting of Lee's surrender (entitled "Let Us Have Peace") portrays the commanding, immaculate figure of Lee towering over the seeming supplicant, the disheveled, deferential Grant. A measurement of the Edward

Virginius Valentine's recumbent Lee in the chapel at Washington and Lee or the Valentine Museum in Richmond verifies a Lee no taller than 5' 10". One fact is not to be denied...Lee's shoe size. Freeman reports it at a rather surprising 4 1/2C (IV, 170)...a very small foot, making a 6' 2" Lee highly unlikely. But facts are not vital to the project of memorializing a historical figure, especially when the cultural dynamic demands a figure of romantic, idealized, heroic proportions.

After the War and during Lee's presidency at Washington College, an admirer sent a copy of Philip Stanhope Worsley's translation of the *Iliad* to Lee, complete with a dedicatory poem that aligns Lee with Homeric mythology, the Confederacy with fallen Troy—"so white and fair...so pure of crimes...." (This claim has to be one of the earliest harbingers of the eventual Lost Cause mythology, including the oblique reference to what amounts to an innocent white supremacy).

The grand old bard that never dies
Receive him in our English tongue!
I send thee, but with weeping eyes,
The story that he sung.
Thy Troy is fallen, thy dear land
Is marred beneath the spoiler's heel.
I cannot trust my trembling hand
To write the things I feel.

Ah, realm of tombs!—but let her bear

This blazon to the last of times:

No nation rose so white and fair,

Or fell so pure of crimes.

The widow's moan, the orphan's wail,

Come round thee; yet in truth be strong!

Eternal right, though all else fail,

Can never be made wrong.

An angel's heart, an angel's mouth,

Not Homer's, could alone for me

Hymn well the great Confederate South,

Virginia first, then Lee. (Freeman, IV, 260)

An untold number of such accolades emerged in the decades immediately following Appomattox. Clearly, those who admired Lee relied on a pre-existing mythological structure, including Arthurian legends as well as Christian hagiography. Note the narrator's rejection of Homer for angels to sing the praises of the Confederate South, Virginia, and Lee. The Confederacy was self-consciously religious, claiming itself to be the most uniquely Christian nation in the world at the time; unlike the U. S. Constitution, the Confederacy's Constitution explicitly referenced a Christian God, "invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God" (Stout; Fea). Lee's admirers and supporters exhaust the superlatives; he is perfection personified. What does this signify? Is this a function of the need to identify the Confederacy

with something pure? Or is it the very way that the Confederacy saw itself, an image and role that has persisted for 150 years?

Lee was not as overtly devout as was Stonewall Jackson, but he welcomed a revivalist spirit in his Army, attended services with his men when he could, and stated countless times his faith in a benevolent, wise Providence that oversaw the affairs of men, including the well-being of his Army and the ultimate disposition of all human efforts (a rather fatalistic view for someone engaged in his wartime pursuits). His personal religion has led several authors to focus their portrayals on his example as a Christian soldier (for example, see works by McGuire, Johnson, Roddy, and Sowers, among others). Given Christianity's various apologies on behalf of just war theories, this is perhaps not as anomalous as it might seem—the devout General in the religious service of the Prince of Peace who nevertheless operated in the midst of the bloodiest military conflict in American history. It is simply another of the fundamental paradoxes associated with Lee.

Given the religious, devout historical context for the Confederacy, some of which has survived over time to today's South, over time Lee emerged as the anointed saint of the defeated South. Robert Southall Freeman identifies Lee with Moses (III 268); he later sees Lee in Arthurian terms (IV 325, 411, 505). Michael Fellman beatifies him as a sacrificial lamb, going so far as to say that Lee functioned as the Confederate Christ crucified on the cross at Appomattox (193). Like Christ, Lee seemed to have had no blemish—from his spotless childhood, through a perfect discipline record as a West Point cadet, during more than thirty years as a US Army officer, and into the early days of the Civil War. Initially given some desultory and unsatisfactory assignments early in the War, Lee quickly emerged as the dominant force in Confederate military history once he took command of the Army of Northern Virginia,

the title of which he designated. Initial skepticism by pundits quickly turned to adulation, and even the surrender at Appomattox served only to provide more data for the eventual canonization of the South's martyred saint.

Perhaps in contrast to these references, we can see other uses of Lee perhaps not so benign. Does he provide a grandfatherly face to the social and political values of the neo-confederacy? John Taylor sees him as a "god of war" (176), yet another image that seems to conflict with Christ's message in the Sermon on the Mount. We should note well the disturbing fact that Lee's image was combined with overt displays of the Confederate Battle Flag and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in Atlanta in 1946, as seen by investigator Stetson Kennedy, who was attempting to observe the KKK's activities. This particular display was done by the "Columbian Workers Movement" in support of "Race, Nation, Faith" (Coski 88). It would seem to me, however, that such overt depictions today are rare if not entirely absent, that the overt use of Lee's image or memory by the most radical racists of the neo-confederates or white supremacists has not emerged as part of his legacy today. Still, this is an area of concern that should be studied further; there is no doubt, for instance, that Lee is a crucial figure for members of the Southern nationalist League of the South or those involved in the Stephen D. Lee Institute. The issue is extremely complex; the political spectrum of conservative southern groups is very broad and Robert E. Lee is at least tangentially associated with key examples of their claims and values.

So, what are we to make of a figure who fought the United States through four years of its most lethal experience of war, the same United States he served for more than three decades? He came to be recognized as the most famous Confederate of all, defending a country that sought to preserve slavery and white supremacy, while championing its own version of "liberty" in the

guise of states' rights. The racism that characterized much of the nineteenth century American experience has not disappeared in the early twenty-first century. Indeed, the election of an African-American President seems to have led to a resurgence of overt racist attitudes, albeit perhaps rhetorically "softened" a bit by a somewhat more sophisticated political movement.

Robert E. Lee was a quintessential man of his time; we cannot expect him to share the total set of enlightened, progressive values that may be found in today's America. He faced and made extremely difficult choices as the nation sundered, and then even more difficult decisions once he had cast his lot with the new nation. These decisions involved him in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of American men, both Northern and Southern. After the war, he made a conscious effort to heal as much as he could, with a focus on renewing and reinvigorating a ravaged homeland through higher education. The open question in my mind is the degree to which Lee may be assessed as partially responsible for certain regrettable contemporary attitudes and behaviors today. As a protean figure, his unending fame can be co-opted by almost any person or group, regardless of the actual truth of his personal beliefs and values.

My research will go on until I have satisfied myself that the numerous aspects of the project have been thoroughly investigated. The current paper is merely a gesture in the direction of the finished product. Many of the important issues remain unresolved in my mind. Yet as I conclude this paper, I am aware that I seek to "save the appearances" of General Robert E. Lee. To that end, I wish to conclude with a significant anecdote and image of this venerated man: shortly after the war ended, Lee attended a church service in the devastated city of Richmond. During the communion service, a lone, elderly African-American man walked forward from his pew and knelt at the communion rail. No one in the congregation moved forward to join him—

until an older white man, with a white beard and a stately presence, joined him in communion (John Taylor 42, among others).

This was Robert E. Lee.

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