

To Trustees and supporters of W&L and The General's Redoubt (TGR), Dr. Kenneth Everett '64 has written this impassioned letter reflecting the values of TGR and the movement to return W&L to its previous noble stature. We applaud Dr. Everett for his thorough evaluation of the challenges W&L is facing today.

## **The Lee Chapel Issue: A Moral Perspective**

The art of defaming historical figures is not new, but seldom in the history of human knavery has it been practiced as assiduously or with as much unfettered abandon as today. It is an easy art for the unscrupulous to practice, for at least two reasons: first, the figures maligned are no longer alive to represent themselves in person, meaning that the measure of their characters must be taken from historical accounts, the validity of which can always be subjected to skepticism, justified or not; and, second, the historical context in which the disdained figure lived is commonly neither well-known nor desired to be honestly understood by the accuser, nor, considering the

elapse of time, can the forces at work in the pertinent historical milieu be as immediately felt by the accuser as by the accused. Therefore, the leap to condemnation of the dead is often short, taken with brash confidence and with little fear of the detection of misrepresentation. Moreover, whatever of undeniable good is attached to the derogated person, it is not accepted as compensating for the imputed bad, however much the former outweighs the latter; nor is forgiveness of a detested fault, however minor, allowed, nor redemption by later amendment of behavior. Nowhere has such malevolence of assault been more plainly on display than in the recent unrelenting attacks on Robert E. Lee at W&L. The veneration of Lee by generations of past W&L students and distinguished friends of the university has been peremptorily dismissed as misguided and morally indefensible by a currently fashionable, closeminded crowd of ideological activists who casually presume moral superiority to figures of the past whom they dislike, as well as to any figures of the present who disagree with them. And nowhere at W&L is their assault on Lee more clearly seen than in the recently announced changes being planned for Lee Chapel. The Chapel is to be sanitized as much as possible of all things relating to or reminiscent of Lee, and even of Washington: to include removal of Lee's name from that of the Chapel; the permanent closing off of the recumbent statue of Lee from view by audiences in the Chapel auditorium; the removal of famous paintings of both Lee and Washington from the auditorium; as well as the removal of plaques formerly displayed on the Chapel's walls, enshrining much of the university's long history, these plaques now to be hidden away from the public eye if not consigned

to outright destruction. Sharply revealing of the moral chicanery brought to light in W&L's proposed actions regarding Lee Chapel is, to take just one example, the removal of the stone plaque formerly hanging inside the Chapel near its entrance, listing the names of former W&L students who served in the Liberty Hall Volunteers during the Civil War, a number of them losing their lives in that conflict. It may reasonably be assumed that these young "students-turned-soldiers" were mostly still in their teens and easily swept up by the patriotic drum-beating of the time, and not overly thoughtful of what they were doing or why. Although some, probably a minority, came from slave-holding families, what must primarily have impelled most of them to enlist in the Confederate army was the visceral impulse to defend their state from imminent invasion and their homes from depredation. Indeed, that was the posture of Robert E. Lee himself in declining General Scott's offer to him of command of the Union armies, Lee explaining that he could not be a party to the invasion of his native state or of the South, much less as the leader of such an invasion. Lee's decision, however, was the product of mature personal judgment, whereas that of the typical student-soldier obviously was not, a young soldier's youth and inexperience inclining him to fall under the influence of his elders and to accept the duties prescribed by them as arising from superior wisdom and experience. It is one of the curses upon humanity that the young must die in old men's wars. Yet, no concession to youthful obedience to age, nor any concession to the long-established principle of leniency toward juvenile indiscretion, has been granted by the W&L administration to the Liberty Hall Volunteers. By removing from Lee Chapel the

plaque commemorating their military service, these young W&L student-soldiers have been effectively condemned in mass as evil persons, lost souls, fighting for an evil cause, and thus unworthy of any recognition by their alma mater, and better relegated to a deserved oblivion. To put into even sharper focus the morally inexcusable removal of the Liberty Hall Volunteers' plaque merely because of its Civil War associations, more can be said. Granting that the Civil War, insofar as it was fought for the preservation of slavery, was an evil, it is not the only American war thought to have been so in the judgement of retrospection. The Vietnam War, which cost the lives of over 50,000 American soldiers and about one million Vietnamese, was vehemently, often violently, protested against as ill-conceived and a shame and disgrace upon the country, a verdict, in a longer view of the conflict, now pretty generally accepted. For all the guilt and shame attaching to the Vietnam War, however, the Washington, D.C., monument listing the names of the American soldiers who fought and died in that war still stands, no serious suggestion that it be removed having ever been made. So are Americans at large more morally enlightened than the current W&L administration in forgiving dead soldiers that were caught up in conflicts now judged as being fought in defense of wrong causes? To make another telling comparison, in the La Cambe German military cemetery in Normandy, France, lie over 20,000 German soldiers who died fighting for the Nazi state against Allied Forces following the D-Day invasion of 1944. In this cemetery, overlooking the graves, is a tall, starkly beautiful stone monument commemorating the German dead. That monument still stands, despite modern Germany's herculean

efforts to purge from itself all relics, symbols, and other remembrances of the Nazi era of its history -- an era of extreme atrocities and grossly reprehensible racial doctrines that make the evils of American slavery pale in comparison. Notwithstanding all of this, the modern Germany of today plainly continues to honor its war dead, indeed more than W&L honors its own war dead. Do the modern Germans possess a greater rectitude of moral judgement than the current W&L administration? To offer one more comparison, relevant specifically to the recumbent statue of Lee in the Chapel, at Les Invalides in Paris is the magnificently grandiose tomb of Napoleon Bonaparte, a man who patterned his life and career after those of the Roman emperors, and who, in pursuit of glory and empire building, drenched the continent of Europe in blood; all in all, a career that now evinces revulsion in most modern Europeans. Yet, Napoleon's tomb is not today walled off from public view and remains an honored memorial to the excellencies that Napoleon did have: his unquestioned military genius; his codification of French law, which still forms the basis of the modern French legal system; as well as other administrative achievements, such as his promotion of the metric system in Europe, and his major reform of the French educational system by modernizing its structure and curriculum, thus laying the foundations of the current French system as well as those of much of modern Europe. The French can admire and honor the good in a flawed national hero, while forgiving, if not forgetting, the bad. As this relates to Robert E. Lee, it must be noted that any comparison of Napoleon with Lee, made by assessing the balance of good and bad in their respective characters, would, in the

judgement of almost any civilized person, rank Lee easily the superior of Napoleon. Both men stand among the most brilliant and celebrated military leaders of history, although the martial careers of both ended in military defeat. Both men were skilled, able administrators; but tainting Napoleon was an unrestrained ambition of empire, a lust for power, a love of personal glory and adulation, traits not ever detected in Lee by even the severest scrutiny of his life. Not notwithstanding all of this, however, W&L plans to wall off the Chapel's recumbent statue of Lee, while the French give Napoleon his due honor by continuing to exhibit his tomb with pride. The French have always, and with characteristic pomposity, considered themselves a more enlightened and culturally accomplished people than the Americans -- and now, in W&L's actions against Lee, they have fresh evidence in support of their contention. Pertinent to the matter of the removal of Lee's name from that of the Chapel, great moralists have always insisted that the classical virtue of justice is central to morality, that rectitude in moral reasoning depends upon it -- unadorned justice being conceived as rendering to each his due. How, then, is it moral to strip Robert E. Lee's name from that of a chapel he built on the campus of an institution he rescued from financial ruin after the Civil War and proceeded to develop into a modern college by upgrading its curriculum and rebuilding its faculty and student body -- especially when the Chapel is the only public general-use building on campus bearing his name? Is it not rendering to him his due that the Chapel retain his name? Not according to the current W&L administration, which seems to have abandoned any pretensions to the virtue of justice when it comes to Lee. A proper

judgment of Robert E. Lee deserves better than this. It is a timeless truth of human nature that moral character is shaped more powerfully by example than by the lifeless abstractions of rule books and desultory admonitions. What, then, is a more precious gift for a school to bestow upon its young, as yet unformed students, than to hold up before them a man eminently worthy of their admiration and emulation, a man whose probity of character and spotless record can serve as a model after which they can pattern their lives; so that in later life when they face any perplexing moral dilemma they can ask themselves, "What would General Lee do?," and know the answer. When as a W&L student myself I sat in Lee Chapel with the recumbent statue of Lee visible to me in all its effulgent splendor, I was not infrequently prompted by the almost palpable presence of Lee himself to take stock of my life, gauging whether I was making progress toward becoming the gentleman Lee would have wanted me to be, whether I was living up to the standards Lee so beautifully exemplified in his own life as a man of unimpeachable honor and civility. Now, however, with the impending walling off of the Lee statue, future students sitting in those Chapel seats will be prompted to no such salutary introspection. In them, W&L is today busy inculcating the belief that Lee was the opposite of what he really was, the sort of man whose life and associations will forever be sources of shame and ignominy upon the university, to be expunged as far as possible from the school's life and memory by banishing any mention of him to the sequestered confines of a campus history museum, where he can be represented as the relic of a sordid W&L past better forgotten; all to cast in brighter relief the presumably superior woke brand

of morality that the university now proudly flaunts in its decision making. Finally, and possibly descrying a beam of light in the darkness, I will note that the current Woke/Cancel Culture movement now holding sway at W&L arose in its full ugliness and power of action in a rather sudden flash, following the murder of George Floyd, a black man, at the hands of a rogue police officer in Minnesota. The currently growing unpopularity of the extremes of policy and outright nonsense emanating from Wokeism, however, raises the hope that its reign may soon be ending, possibly in as abrupt a flash as that which gave it birth. The recent election of Gov. Youngkin in Virginia, as well as other indicators, may be the heralds of things to come, giving us the hope that we may once again see a generation of students at W&L who will value the institution's history, rediscover the richness and abiding wisdom of its traditions, and once again revere George Washington and Robert E. Lee as two of the greatest Americans ever to have lived, and in their multiform virtues, imperishable as models upon which young lives can be built. I would only add that the advent of such a revival at W&L will only add to the catalog of the sins of its current administration that of lack of foresight.

Respectfully, Kenneth G. Everett, W&L Class of 1964