

The Crux of the Matter Cover Letter

8 June 2022

In the following article I try to step back from the heat of the Robert E. Lee controversy swirling on today's Washington and Lee campus; and to look again at who Lee was, what he did, and why, in order possibly to renew our perspective on the justice of the fundamental charge brought against him: namely, that he led a Confederate army, thus acting in defense of the Confederate cause, putting him "on the wrong side of history," as they say; and leading his accusers to the conclusion that it is now, and always has been, wrong to venerate him at Washington and Lee. I think this is an over-simplistic view of Lee and a far too narrowly focused judgement of him, arising partly from ignorance and partly from kowtowing to the crusading woke activism of the day. In any case, I likely say nothing in the article that you do not already know, and hope only perhaps to refresh spirits and renew confidence in the rightness of our views, faced, as we are, with the unyielding intransigence of our opposition.

To this end, please donate to The Generals Redoubt to pay for professional research related to defending Lee Chapel as a National Historical Landmark, and for future funding to educate students about the rich history and legacy of Robert E. Lee. We need your help if we are to save Lee Chapel as a campus and national treasure. Thank you for any contribution you can give us.

Kenneth G. Everett, '64

Robert E. Lee: The Crux of the Matter

To err is human, to forgive, divine.

Alexander Pope

An Essay on Criticism, II, 525

Sometimes we forget the obvious, or choose to ignore it, so that it bears repeating. No astute observer can come away from a careful survey of mankind without concluding that real life, whether that of the individual or of the mass of men, is an intractable admixture of both good and evil. Even in men the most celebrated for moral purity, some instance of fault or reprehensible failure, however great or small, can invariably be found. Does this mean, though, that no man can be admired or honored for rectitude of character if some blemishes yet remain in him or have manifested themselves in his past? If so, then no historical figure, however exalted in personal reputation and accomplishment, can ever be taken as an example for others to emulate in their faltering attempts to rise above vice and folly -- with the result that the influence of personal example is lost to all, latent aspirations to virtue blunted, and the daunting struggle to attain it reduced almost to hopelessness.

As bleak as this prospect is, it appears to comport well with the posture taken by the Washington and Lee administration and Board of Trustees on Robert E. Lee: namely, that Lee's role as a Confederate general is sufficiently damning of the whole of his life and character that he must be expunged from recognition and memory at the institution to which he gave the last five years of his life.

The most cursory review of Lee's life should convince any fair-minded person of the error and injustice of this view. Even as a young, 7 year-old boy, his father, Gen. Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, wrote of his son that, "Robert was always good. . . ," presaging that unwavering constancy of good disposition, upright conduct, and disciplined habits that marked the rest of Lee's life. His record as a West Point cadet was spotless. He graduated second in his class and without a single demerit issued to him in the whole of his four years at the academy, at which, his attributes of personal appearance, general comportment, and record of achievement gained him plaudits as "the Marble Model." Equally spotless and no less replete in accomplishment were his ensuing years in the U.S. Army, which included the

leadership of several challenging engineering projects, a term as superintendent of West Point, as well as his exceptionally distinguished service in the Mexican War under the command of Gen. Winfield Scott, who said of him in some official correspondence of 1858 that he was "the very best soldier that I ever saw in the field."

It was not surprising, therefore, that Scott offered Lee the command of Union forces at the outbreak of the Civil War; nor was it perhaps surprising to those who knew Lee best that he refused the offer, Lee stating clearly that his first allegiance was to his native state of Virginia and her defense, as in a letter he wrote to his sister on April 20, 1861,

"With all my devotion to the Union and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home. I have therefore resigned my commission in the Army, and save in defense of my native state, with the sincere hope that my poor services may never be needed, I hope I may never be called on to draw my sword."

There is no evidence that the question of slavery itself was a prominent consideration in Lee's decision to stand with Virginia.

Thus, he was successively called upon to command Virginia state forces, then later the famed Army of Northern Virginia, and finally, near the end of the war, command of all Confederate forces. Lee did not seek these positions, they sought him. In leading these forces, the excellence of performance characteristic of all the previous endeavors of his life continued, raising him to the utmost heights of military fame and reputation as one of the greatest military leaders that history has known. He was loved, admired, and trusted by his soldiers. As much as he could he took care for their lives and welfare, as they did for his. During the Battle of the Wilderness, when Lee rode forward into the thick of the fight, a shout of "Lee to the rear!" immediately rang out from the soldiers around him.

We may, of course, in our present privileged state of unperturbed abstraction from the tumult of 1861, with all its gusts of passion and poisonous rhetoric, decide that in Lee's failure to abandon Virginia, he revealed a fault of character. But even if drawn to this conclusion, are we to deny him the opportunity of post-war redemption, a path upon which he embarked even as he surrendered at Appomattox? As Gen. E.P. Alexander, his Chief of Artillery, relates, several of Lee's top officers suggested to him that after the formal surrender at Appomattox, a guerrilla war be initiated and the fratricidal contest continued, a proposal that Lee immediately squelched. The issue of an independent South was settled in his mind; peace must be restored, and the country reunited. Later, he declined the pursuit of lucrative post-war positions in business to accept the presidency of little Washington College, which had been left, by the ravages of war, destitute of money, students, and faculty. There, however, he felt he could help rebuild a devastated South, heal the wounds of war, and reunite the country in peace and harmony. Through his wise leadership and steadfast application to the task, he restored Washington College to strength and prosperity, rebuilding its faculty and student body, and transforming the former classical college into a vigorous institution with an innovative, thoroughly modern curriculum.

As importantly, he left to the institution the influence of his personal example as a model of personal integrity and honorable conduct. In all of Lee's extraordinary career, through times that would have tried the soul of any man, no instance of deliberate deception, no dishonest act, no motive of self-promotion or other attempt at self-aggrandizement was ever detected in him. His grace of deportment, penetrating intelligence, amiable graciousness of manner, overall dignity of person and nobility of character, inspired in almost all his associates an admiration and reverent awe that led them to see in him a kind of personal superiority rarely to be found among men. Later generations as well, including innumerable Washington and Lee students, saw the same in Lee, and by him were influenced to cultivate in themselves his multiform virtues, this being not the least gift of Washington and Lee

to its students.

All of this -- from before, during, and after his Washington College presidency -- Lee laid upon the altar of redemption. Yet, the current Washington and Lee administration and faculty, clearly among the foremost beneficiaries of Lee's work, find it inadequate to salvage his reputation. In the measures they have recently taken they are denying the value of Lee's transformative influence on the lives of so many former Washington and Lee students and intend to blind the school's current and future students to his influence by burying his memory and condemning him to obloquy. Have they peered more deeply into the recesses of Lee's soul than the rest of us? Have they approached so near to the wisdom of God as to appropriate to themselves the authority to render such unforgiving judgement? If, indeed, they partake of divinity, it seems not the kind to which Alexander Pope referred in the quotation that heads this article.

Respectfully,

Kenneth G. Everett

Washington and Lee Class of 1964