

# Robert E. Lee, the Man for These Hard Times

*The former Confederate general should serve as an example to conservatives.*

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*Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Va. (Mark Dozier/Shutterstock)*



**I**f Donald Trump were imprisoned and then found dead, hanging in his cell, his repp-stripe tie serving as a noose, would you be surprised? I wouldn't be.

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The Justice Department would redouble its commitment to protect democracy, promising to imprison climate change deniers, pro-life protesters, and attendees of Latin Masses. And the media would be a-chortle, saying that Trump had it coming, that the arc of the moral universe bends against Republicans, and that it was ever thus with fascists: witness Hitler in his bunker.

It seems clear that whatever else the future holds, we are headed for hard times. The last president held in prison was Jefferson Davis, though he survived, faced no trial, was released after two years in chains, and eventually retired to Beauvoir House in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Davis, a West Point graduate, combat veteran, and planter, had served as a U.S. senator, secretary of war (a very good one), and a member of Congress before he became president of the Confederate States of America. But when the defeated South looked to its exemplar, it did not look to him; it looked to the Confederacy's highest-ranking general, Robert E. Lee.

### **Robert E. Lee, the Classic 'Gentleman'**

As Pulitzer Prize-winning historian James McPherson wrote in his celebrated book [\*The Battle Cry of Freedom\*](#), Lee was the “greatest tactician and charismatic commander” of the Civil War, as well as a “‘gentleman’ in the classic sense of that word and a worthy representation of the Virginia gentry that did so much to shape the early history of the United States.”

The eventual commander of Queen Victoria's army — and Lee's contemporary — Field Marshal Viscount Garnet Wolseley, [remarked](#): “I have met many of the great men of my time, but Lee alone impressed me with the feeling that I was in the presence of a man who was cast in a grander mould, and made of different and finer metal than all other men.” Another great Englishman, Winston Churchill, [later noted](#) that Lee was “one of the noblest Americans who ever lived, and one of the greatest captains known to the annals of war.”

So, naturally, the Left has been busy recently, tearing down his statues and disparaging his name as part of its great iconoclastic fight against patriotic American history. But Lee and his reputation have endured hard times before. **(READ MORE: [From Sitting Room to White House: 100 Years of Calvin Coolidge](#))**

Think of Lee's position after the war. He was a man stripped of his citizenship, unable to vote, and nearly destitute; his career of military service and carefully harbored savings were in tatters; and it was possible he would be tried for treason. He had suffered the premature death of a daughter, a daughter-in-law, two grandchildren, and countless colleagues and friends. His home was confiscated, and its lands were transformed into a cemetery. His native state was under federal occupation, with an imposed military governor, as Military District Number One. One-quarter of the draft-age white male population of the South lay dead from battle or disease; an estimated two-thirds of the South's assessed wealth had been obliterated. The temper of the times was such that Sen. Benjamin Wade of Ohio wrote in a letter to Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts that perhaps if the newly freed slaves slew "one-half of their oppressors," that would teach the remaining Southern whites just who was in charge now — the radical Republicans intent on reconstructing the South as they saw fit.

Lee had [four goals after the war](#): care for his family, rebuild Virginia and the South, assist in the reconciliation of a forcibly reunited Union, and "accomplish something useful for the good of mankind and the glory of God." He was given that opportunity when he was offered the presidency of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University). At first, however, he [demurred](#), saying that, "[b]eing excluded from the terms of amnesty in the proclamation of the President of the U.S. ... and an object of censure to a portion of the country," he "thought it probable that [his] occupation of the position of President, might draw upon the college a feeling of hostility." The college board thought otherwise and convinced Lee to take the post.

The school was impoverished, as the South was generally, and a wreck, suffering from “the sack and plunder of hostile soldiers,” with only four remaining professors and 40 students. But as Lee had built an army virtually from scratch, so too he rebuilt a college from the ashes, one that would become a university shortly after his death. To the school’s classical curriculum he added courses in engineering, farming, commerce, modern languages, journalism, and law, with additional plans for creating departments of astronomy and medicine. He wanted his graduates to become Christian gentlemen — and part of that was insisting that they [govern themselves because](#) “virtue is worth but little that requires constant watching and removal from temptation.” As he [said](#): “We have no printed rules. We have but one rule here, and it is that every student must be a gentleman.” His goal was to train a new generation of leaders who would rebuild the South.

### **The Aftermath of Lee’s Confederate Service**

Lee reverted to his military training and refrained, for the most part, from involving himself in politics. But when pressed on his political beliefs, Lee would tell people he had no difficulty accepting the abolition of slavery. As he told Lord Acton, “That is an event that has long been sought, though in a different way” — namely, by moral suasion rather than by the “arbitrament of war” — “and by none has it been more earnestly desired than by citizens of Virginia.” But he also believed that Southerners who had served the Confederacy deserved the same rights as any other citizens and that if he could vote, he would do so for “the most conservative eligible candidates for Congress and the legislature,” candidates who believed in the old republic of sovereign states and the limited powers granted to the federal government by the Constitution.

Though he was disinclined to speak of the war and wrote no memoir, Lee was sometimes sparked to defend his Confederate service. When a friend told him that he was working [exceedingly hard in his civilian job](#) because he was “so impatient to make up for the time [he] lost in the army,” Lee upbraided him immediately. “Mr. Humphreys,” Lee said, “however long you live and whatever you accomplish, you will find that the time you spent in the Confederate army was the most

profitably spent portion of your life. Never again speak of having lost time in the army.” **(READ MORE: [Remembering the First Fourth of July](#))**

Above all, Lee was a man of duty and a man who trusted in divine providence. As Lee told a pastor who could not give up thinking that the late war might have been won if certain decisions had been made at key points: “Yes, all that is very sad, and might be cause for self-reproach, but that we are conscious that we have humbly tried to do our duty. We may therefore, with calm satisfaction, trust in God and leave the results to Him.”

That strikes me as good advice for conservatives.

In the dark days ahead, we must work hard, do our duty, keep the faith, and trust that God will turn all things right. During some of the worse throes of Reconstruction, Lee [reminded his son](#) Rooney that duty demanded that all “earnestly work to extract what good we can out of the evil that hangs over our dear land.” Let Lee be our guide in Christian stoicism — *Deo vindice*.

*H.W. Crocker III is a popular historian and novelist. His classic bestseller [Robert E. Lee on Leadership](#) has just been reissued in paperback.*