



Was Lee a “Defender of Slavery?” (With Excerpts from Un-Cancel Robert E. Lee)

September 12, 2024

To the Board of Trustees of W&L, then, this is our plea:

Reconsider your anti-Lee crusade. Set aside your pride and acknowledge the error of your ways. Heed the pleas of alumni. Restore Lee Chapel to its *status quo ante*, bring back Founders’ Day, and return Robert E. Lee to his rightful place of honor on campus.

This is The Generals Redoubt’s call to action that appears in the final chapter of my recently published book, *Un-Cancel Robert E. Lee: An Open Letter to the Trustees of Washington and Lee University*.

Perhaps the greatest criticism of Robert E. Lee is that he led the military of the Confederacy and as such he fought to defend the institution of slavery. His detractors point to this dubious “defender of slavery” charge as justification for erasing or deemphasizing Lee on the campus of W&L.

The truth about Lee’s motivation for fighting, however, is entirely at odds with this pejorative narrative. As pointed out in the following excerpts from my book, Lee was not only opposed to slavery (calling it “a moral and political evil”) but he “rejoiced” that slavery was abolished. Lee was chiefly motivated to defend Virginia from the invading Federal forces and Lincoln’s government in Washington that destroyed wide swaths of Virginia and the South in their arguably tyrannical prosecution of the war:

Lee was amazingly prescient in warning about the concentration of power in Washington, DC. In a letter to Lord Acton after the war, Lee wrote

I yet believe that the maintenance of the rights and authority reserved to the states and to the people, not only essential to the adjustment and balance of the general system, but the safeguard to the continuance of a free government. I consider it as the chief source of stability to our political system, *whereas the consolidation of the states into one vast republic, sure to be aggressive abroad and despotic at home* [Emphasis added], will be the certain precursor of that ruin which has overwhelmed all those that have preceded it. [1]

Confederates like Lee were motivated to defeat an aggressive, tyrannical central government, not “to perpetuate slavery.” Lee himself articulated that point after the war. In an 1869 meeting in Baltimore with Reverend John Leyburn, a Presbyterian minister originally from Lexington, “Lee expressed his regret that Northern newspapers continued to assert that the object of the war had been to perpetuate slavery.”

“On this point,” wrote Doctor Leyburn in a subsequent report of the interview, “he seemed not only indignant but hurt. He said it was not true. He declared that, for himself, he had emancipated most of his slave’s years before the war, and had sent to Liberia those that were willing to go; that the latter were writing back most affectionate letters to him, some of which he received through the lines during the war. He said, also, as an evidence that the colored people did not consider him hostile to their race, that during this visit to Baltimore some of them who had known him when he was stationed there had come up in the most affectionate manner and put their hands into the carriage window to shake hands with him. They would hardly have received him in this way, he thought, had they looked upon him as fresh from a war intended for their oppression and injury.

“So far,” said Lee, “from engaging in a war to perpetuate slavery, I am rejoiced that slavery is abolished. I believe it will be greatly for the interests of the South. So fully am I satisfied of this, as regards Virginia especially, that I would cheerfully have lost all I have lost by the war, and have suffered all I have suffered, to have this object attained.” [2]

The simplified notion among many historians today that Lee and other Confederates were fighting solely to defend slavery completely misses the mark. By 1862, Southerners undoubtedly believed that they were fighting against a despotic president and his out-of-control administration, who regularly violated the civil liberties of their opponents on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. They identified strongly with their forebears in the American Revolution who stood up to a similar tyrant in King George III.

If you would like to order a copy of *Un-Cancel Robert E. Lee*, it is available on Amazon at [Un-Cancel Robert E. Lee](#)

For donors of \$500 or more to The Generals Redoubt, we will send you a copy of *Un-Cancel Robert E. Lee* signed by the author. (Please provide your mailing address).

Gib Kerr ‘85

The Generals Redoubt