



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on September 18, 2017

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Robert E. Lee: Answering His Critics

Of late, Confederate General Robert E. Lee has been disparaged as just another racist slave owner. But that is blatantly false.

Confederate General Patrick Cleburne died many years before the rise of the Taliban and their efforts to destroy the monuments and symbols of their enemies. But Cleburne did accurately predict the Taliban-like efforts to alter the history of the Civil War.

“Surrender means that the history of this heroic struggle will be written by our enemy; that our youth will be trained by Northern school teachers; will learn from Northern school books their version of the war; will be impressed by all the influences of history and education to regard our gallant dead as traitors, and our maimed veterans as fit subjects for derision.”

But Cleburne did not realize that the assault would target the common foundations of America, North and South, using the greatest heroes of the late Confederate States of America as a starting point to attack the Founding Fathers — such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

No person identified with the Confederacy has been more admired than General Robert Edward Lee. And yet, there are those Americans who, much in the spirit of the Taliban, have decided that the historical reputation of the late commander of the famed Army of Northern Virginia must be shredded. For example, I recall my recent trip to New Orleans to watch my Oklahoma Sooners play Auburn in the Sugar Bowl. During our vacation, my wife and I took a tour of the Big Easy on a double-decker bus. The tour guide haughtily noted that the Lee monument would soon be taken down, before proceeding to deliver a one-minute rant on the supposed evils of the general, charging that he was just some “slave-owning dude.”

When Lee surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865, both men were former slave-owners. Both had freed their slaves, expressing disdain for the institution. Yet, one man, Grant, graces the \$50 Federal Reserve note, while the other, Lee, is seen as a fit object of scorn by those who wish to cast him as an evil man. Some go so far as to say that even Lee’s reputation as a great military leader is overrated.

This is despite Lee’s string of victories over numerically superior Union forces. His triumph at Chancellorsville, against a federal force twice his own, has been studied at West Point and other military schools across the nation. In the first Persian Gulf War, General Norman Schwarzkopf used a version of Lee’s battle plan at Chancellorsville to destroy the Iraqi army. Lee was still winning victories over larger armies until the final months of the war.





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Some have conceded that Lee was a brilliant military mind, while arguing that his performance at Gettysburg with the so-called Pickett's Charge was a horrendous mistake. As they say, hindsight is always 20/20, but historian Phillip Thomas Tucker offers a convincing defense of Lee's performance at Gettysburg in his recent book *Pickett's Charge*.

"Endlessly derided by historians," Tucker wrote, "Lee's decision to unleash his attack at Gettysburg was his only realistic one because this was the Confederacy's *last* chance to win the war in one decisive stroke. Contrary to today's traditional view that Lee's decision to attack the Union center-right ... was the height of folly, the truth of Pickett's Charge was altogether different. Quite simply, the attack was Lee's best opportunity to reap a decisive success after July 2's tactical opportunities had passed. Based on careful calculation (instead of the stereotypical view of a gambler's recklessness), Lee correctly targeted the weakest point in Meade's line, a weak spot distinguished by a copse of trees located at a high point along the open Cemetery Ridge."

In short, "Lee correctly calculated in striking at exactly the right place and the right time, while utilizing a bold battle plan that was as brilliant as it was innovative."

Tucker argues that if other military officers in Lee's army (such as James Longstreet and Jeb Stuart) had performed as they should have, Lee's army might very well have marched right into Washington, D.C., and dictated peace terms to President Abraham Lincoln.

But of course, the attacks upon Lee's military leadership more likely are based upon the common misconceptions about the origins and purposes of the war itself. The case against honoring Lee seems to be that the Civil War was fought to abolish slavery, and since Lee was the most important military leader of the side that supposedly was fighting to "keep slavery," no monuments should remain honoring his memory — even in his beloved Virginia.

Slavery was certainly a source of friction between the Northern and Southern sections of the country, contributing to the decision of seven Southern states — Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas — to secede from the Union. But one must look at other factors, as well, such as the tariff, which tended to help the economy of the industrialized North at the expense of the more agrarian South. In fact, it had almost caused the secession of South Carolina a generation earlier.

And secession was not just a "Southern idea." Northern states, more than once, had threatened secession earlier in U.S. history, largely due to their resentment at the outsized influence of Virginia in the Union.

After seven states left the Union in late 1860 and early 1861, eight states where slavery remained a legal institution were still in the Union. If the war had really been fought to abolish slavery, one wonders why Lincoln did not call for an invasion of those eight states, as well.

But Lincoln did not call for the abolition of slavery when he asked for 75,000 volunteers to suppress what he termed a "rebellion" in seven states. Even after the war was more than a year old, Lincoln expressly told newspaperman Horace Greeley that he was not waging war to abolish slavery, but rather to save the Union. In the August 22, 1862 letter, Lincoln wrote, "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." Enlistments filled the ranks of



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the Union, made up of men who answered the call to “save the Union.” With the modern insistence that the war was waged to end slavery, this motivation is either largely forgotten, or dismissed as mere sentimentality.

This motivation — to save the Union — was grounded in the very reason the Union was created in 1776. The 13 British colonies united out of military necessity, knowing that the only way they could win their independence was through union. When Daniel Webster proclaimed on the floor of the Senate a generation before the Civil War the famous words, “Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable,” he did not need to explain himself. It was widely believed that the only way to maintain the experiment in liberty was through a union of like-minded states. Otherwise, foreign powers such as the British or the French could be tempted to pick them off one by one.

Lee opposed secession for his state of Virginia, while also opposing an invasion of the seven states that had chosen to leave the Union. He resigned from the army rather than participate in the forced subjugation of the seven seceded states.

Yet, when Lincoln made his call for volunteers, Virginia and other states were expected to produce the men that would invade the Deep South. This quickly precipitated the secession of four more slave states — Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas — states that had previously rejected secession. They did not secede to protect slavery, but rather because of Lincoln’s call for an invasion of fellow states. Three other states, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri — all slave states, did not secede, but did eventually provide soldiers for both sides. Again, had the war been fought to “end slavery,” one would think that they would have left the Union, as well.

After Virginia’s secession, Lee felt he had no choice but to offer his services to the Confederate States of America, which Virginia had joined. To Lee, this was his duty, and he once said duty was the most sublime word in the English language.

As the war dragged on, with Confederate troops under Lee and other brilliant military minds winning more battles than they lost, it began to look as though the Confederate States of America would truly become an independent nation. By the fall of 1862, France and Great Britain were poised to recognize this as a fact. Lincoln was desperate to “save the Union,” and took a desperate measure. He could have told the British that they should not recognize the independence of the Southern states because they had no right to secede from the Union, but that might have resulted in derision from the British, who could have just said, “Serves you right,” considering what had happened in 1776.

Both the French and the British had abolished slavery a few decades earlier, and undoubtedly Lincoln could have kept both countries from recognizing Southern independence if he would have made the war about slavery, rather than the legality of secession. But had he done so, he might have faced massive desertions from the Union army. More importantly, logic may have then necessitated the invasion of the four Union states where slavery was still legal.

Lincoln’s solution was to “thread the needle.” He issued an executive order, ending slavery in states “still in rebellion” on January 1, 1863, as a “war measure,” but leaving slavery untouched in those states still in the Union. Combined with the Union’s military success at Antietam in September 1862 in blocking General Lee’s invasion of Maryland, the British and the French decided to hold off in recognizing the Confederacy.

The reality is that Lincoln had no constitutional authority to end slavery anywhere, but his



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Emancipation Proclamation proposed to leave slavery untouched in areas that recognized his presidency, and end it where he had no troops to enforce it. Despite the inherent contradiction of the Emancipation Proclamation, it has led many today to believe that the war was fought to end slavery, and slavery was ended by it.

This assertion that the war was fought to end slavery has also slandered the hundreds of thousands of Confederate soldiers who fought in the war, with many people today damning their own ancestors as having fought to “keep their slaves.” The reality is that only a tiny minority of Confederate soldiers even owned any slaves, and almost none were fighting to save the ugly institution.

Photo: National Archives and Records Administration

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So why did they fight? To repel an invading army, of course. This is the reason that Lee fought, as well. He said he would have been content for the Union to continue, even if that meant every slave in the South would go free. Yet, Lee has been condemned as fighting to keep human beings in bondage.

The truth is that Lee had denounced slavery long before the war began. In a letter to his wife from Camp Brown in Texas, written on December 27, 1856, Lee described his feelings about slavery.

“I believe,” Lee wrote, “in this enlightened age, there are few who will not acknowledge that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil.”

Despite these words, which one would think would settle the issue that Lee opposed slavery, detractors have argued that these words are “taken out of context,” contending that the rest of the letter somehow contradicts his calling slavery a “moral and political evil.”

Some note that Lee wrote, “The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa morally, socially, and physically.” Critics twist these words in an effort to have Lee arguing that it was better for a black person to be a slave in America than to live free in Africa. This betrays a lack of understanding on the part of these critics as to the condition of the American slaves when their ancestors were in Africa. (The slave trade, which Lee denounced “on every ground,” had ended in America over a half-century before the war, so there were no persons being brought to America from Africa in Lee’s day). The ugly truth is that almost all persons brought to America as slaves were slaves in Africa, as well.

After visiting Africa, the famed black American boxer Muhammad Ali was asked what he thought of the continent. Ali responded that he was certainly glad that his ancestors had “gotten on that boat.” Ali’s views were neither pro-slavery nor racist against blacks, but were another way of saying what Lee had said more than a century earlier.

Once in America, they were often introduced to Christianity, which Lee and his fellow Christians believed led to their eternal salvation. Lee told his wife, “How long their subjection may be necessary is known and ordered by a wise and merciful Providence,” arguing not that he hoped slavery would continue, but rather that it was up to God. But he clearly hoped it would end sooner rather than later, telling his wife that the two of them should give “the final abolition of slavery” the aid of “our prayers.”

To fully understand Lee’s words, in which he accepts the will of God in all things, one must realize that he was a devout Christian. As William Johnson wrote in *Robert E. Lee: The Christian*, “When General Lee won a victory, he gave the glory to a higher Power.” Throughout the war, almost every military dispatch or private letter he wrote has allusions to his trust in God.



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The universal witness is that Lee never drank, never used tobacco, and never used profanity. At West Point, he never received a single demerit. He took a generous attitude toward his enemies. In another letter, he spoke of the murderous abolitionist John Brown, whom Lee had captured at Harper's Ferry in 1859: "I am glad we did not have to kill him."

Years after the war, a Union veteran told a story of Lee's generous Christian spirit. A ball had shattered his left leg, and as Confederate soldiers passed by, he recognized General Lee. The man shouted taunts at Lee and his men, including, "Hurrah for the Union!"

At that, Lee stopped his horse and dismounted, and walked toward the soldier. "I confess I at first thought he meant to kill me," the soldier recalled. "But, as he came up, he looked down at me with such a sad expression upon his face that all fear left me.... He extended his hand to me, grasping mine firmly, and looking right into my eyes, said, 'My son, I hope you will soon be well.'"

William Jones wrote of a similar incident in his *Life and Letters of General Robert E. Lee*. "One day in the autumn of 1869, I saw General Lee standing at his gate, talking to a humbly clad man, who turned off, evidently delighted with his interview, just as I came up. After exchanging salutations, the General pleasantly said, pointing to the retreating form, 'That is one of our soldiers who is in necessitous circumstances.' I took it for granted that it was some veteran Confederate, and asked to what command he belonged, when the General quietly and pleasantly added, '*He fought for the other side, but we must not remember that against him now.*'"

Later, Jones found out that Lee had given the old Union veteran some money. And a kind word.

Still, even Lee's emancipation of his slaves has generated criticism, arguing that he showed anything but Christian charity toward them. Critics argue that if Lee was so opposed to slavery, why did he not immediately free his slaves when he inherited them from his late father-in-law in 1857?

Lee's father-in-law, George Washington Parke Custis, left his slaves to his daughter and his son-in-law, making Lee the executor of the estate. In his article for *The Atlantic*, "The Myth of the Kindly General Lee," Adam Serwer, a strongly left-wing writer, distorts the historical record concerning this inheritance in order to castigate Lee. In the article, Lee is pictured as a man who delayed their emancipation, and even sold some slaves for profit.

The truth of the matter is that the Custis will made it practically impossible for Lee to free them immediately. As Douglas Southall Freeman wrote in his Pulitzer Prize-winning, four-volume biography, *R.E. Lee*, the will contained a provision that only when Custis' debts were all paid, were the slaves to be emancipated. Custis expected this would happen within five years.

"The immediate trouble," Freeman wrote, "was that Mr. Custis left more than \$10,000 of debt and virtually no money with which to operate the estate." The Arlington estate was run-down. Lee was forced to dig into his own modest financial resources to save the estate. (It should be noted that the sale of Arlington would have included the slaves, as well, but Lee refused to take that option.) Lee had to take a leave from the army in an effort to save the plantation. His superior, General Winfield Scott, granted the leave, calling Lee "the very best soldier I ever saw in the field."

Rather than sell off slaves, Lee hired some of them out in order to raise the necessary funds to pay the debts, which would then allow him to later free them. Freeman wrote, "The demand for servants was so limited in northern Virginia, and the return was so small that he was compelled to send some of the



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Arlington Negroes to work in eastern Virginia.”

Freeman noted that this may have caused two of them, a young couple, to run away. “They were captured in Maryland and were returned to Arlington. Thereupon Lee sent them to labor in lower Virginia, where there would be less danger of their absconding. That probably was the extent of the punishment imposed on them.”

The charge that Lee beat his slaves is refuted by Freeman. “There is no evidence, direct or indirect, that Lee ever had them or any other Negroes flogged,” although Freeman admits false stories were spread, stories that Freeman dismissed as “libelous.”

“This was Lee’s first experience with the extravagance of antislavery agitators. The libel, which was to be reprinted many times in later years with new embellishments, made him unhappy,” Freeman said.

One story that originated in a letter to the editor in the *Boston Traveler* that is still repeated by those wishing to besmirch Lee’s reputation is that Custis, while dying, told his slaves that they should be freed immediately, rather than five years on. Lee responded with his own letter in the *Boston Traveler* in early 1858, disputing the ugly assertion. “Mr. Custis left his property to his daughter and only child, and her children,” Lee explained. “His will was submitted to the Alexandria County Court for probate on the first day of its session.” The will, Lee wrote, “is there on record in his own handwriting, open to inspection.”

“There is no desire on the part of the heirs to prevent the execution of its provisions in reference to the slaves,” Lee insisted, “nor is there any truth or the least foundation for the assertion that they are being sold South.”

Lee challenged the assertion that Custis had told the slaves something different than what was clearly stated in the will. “During the brief days of his last illness, he was constantly attended by his daughter, grand-daughter and niece, and faithfully visited by his physician and pastor. So rapid was the progress of his disease, after its symptoms became alarming, that there was no assembly of his servants, and he took leave of but one, who was present when he bade farewell to his family.”

It is certainly possible that Custis had told some of his slaves that they would be freed sometime after his death, but that he did not share with them the details of his will. It is unlikely, however, that Custis assembled the slaves to tell them that he was overturning the terms of his written will, without informing his family of his desire for their earlier emancipation. Even had he done so, with crushing debts upon the estate, it would have been impossible to free them, because the resulting bankruptcy of the estate would have resulted in their sale to satisfy the creditors.

On December 29, 1862, Lee filed for the manumission of the Custis slaves in Henrico County, pronouncing them “forever set free from slavery.” Ironically, the deed was recorded January 2, 1863, one day after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation went into effect.

Why would Serwer and others distort this entire incident? One can only speculate, but it should be noted that Serwer has written for a string of hard-left publications, including *Mother Jones*, *American Prospect*, *Buzzfeed*, and *MSNBC*. In short, consider the source.

Lee was president of Washington College (later Washington and Lee) after the War Between the States, and Serwer even uses this to attack Lee as indifferent, at best, to the mistreatment of slaves. He even quotes approvingly of liberal historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor’s book, *Reading the Man*, in blaming Lee



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for what some of his students did during his college presidency. “According to Pryor,” Serwer wrote, “students at Washington formed their own chapter of the KKK, and were known by the local Freedman’s Bureau to attempt to abduct and rape black schoolgirls from the nearby black schools,” and there were “at least two attempted lynchings by Washington students during Lee’s tenure.”

Regardless of the veracity of Pryor’s accusations against some of the Washington College students, it seems a bit unfair to blame the college president for the misbehavior of some of the students. If that is the standard, almost every college president in the country would have much to answer for!

Knowing Lee’s actions in other matters, it is likely that Lee did not approve of rape and lynchings. For example, Lee displayed kindness toward ex-slaves, not violence. Writing in the *Confederate Veteran* of August 1905, Colonel T. L. Broun of Charleston, West Virginia, recalled having been present at St. Paul’s Church in Richmond, Virginia, in June 1865. “It was communion day; and when the minister was ready to administer the holy communion, a negro in the church arose and advanced to the communion table. He was tall, well-dressed, and black. This was a great surprise and shock to the communicants and others present. Its effect upon the communicants was startling, and for several moments they retained their seats in solemn silence and did not move, being deeply chagrined at this attempt to inaugurate the ‘new regime’ to offend and humiliate them during their most devoted Church services.” Broun notes that even the minister seemed embarrassed.

Broun continued: “General Robert E. Lee was present, and ignoring the action and presence of the negro, arose in his usual dignified and self-possessed manner, walked up to the aisle of the chancel rail, and reverently knelt down to partake of the communion, and not far from the negro. This lofty conception of duty by Gen. Lee under such provoking and irritating circumstances had a magical effect upon the other communicants (including the writer), who went forward to the communion table.”

“By this action of Gen. Lee,” Broun continued, “the services were conducted as if the negro had not been present. It was a grand exhibition of superiority shown by a true Christian and great soldier under the most trying and offensive circumstances.”

Besmirching the memory of General Lee by smearing him as a slave-owning racist who led a bloody rebellion to preserve slavery that cost well over 600,000 American lives is despicable. Edward Smith, director of American Studies at American University in Washington, D.C., and the co-director of the Civil War Institute (and who contends the above story is absolutely true), wrote in *National Geographic News* on September 7, 2001, “Today, and deservingly so, Lee is honored throughout the country.”

It was certainly so at the time of his death in 1870. Americans North and South at that time knew that Lee was a great man, deserving of the admiration of his countrymen. For example, upon his death the *New York Herald* wrote, “On a quiet autumn morning, in the land which he loved so well and served so faithfully, the spirit of Robert E. Lee left the clay which it had so much ennobled and traveled out of this world into the great and mysterious land. Here in the North, forgetting that the time was when the sword of Robert Edward Lee was drawn against us — forgetting and forgiving all the years of bloodshed and agony — we have long since ceased to look upon him as the Confederate leader, but have claimed and recorded his triumphs as our own; have extolled his virtues as reflecting upon us — for Robert Edward Lee was an American, and the great nation which gave him birth would be today unworthy of such a son if she regarded him lightly.”

“Never had a mother a nobler son. In him the military genius of America was developed to a greater



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extent than ever before him. In him all that was pure and lofty in mind and purpose found lodgment. Dignified without pretension, affable without familiarity, he united all those charms of manners which made him the idol of his friends and of his soldiers and won for him the respect and admiration of the world. Even as in the days of triumph, glory did not intoxicate him, so when the dark clouds swept over him, adversity did not depress.”

Photo: National Archives and Records Administration



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