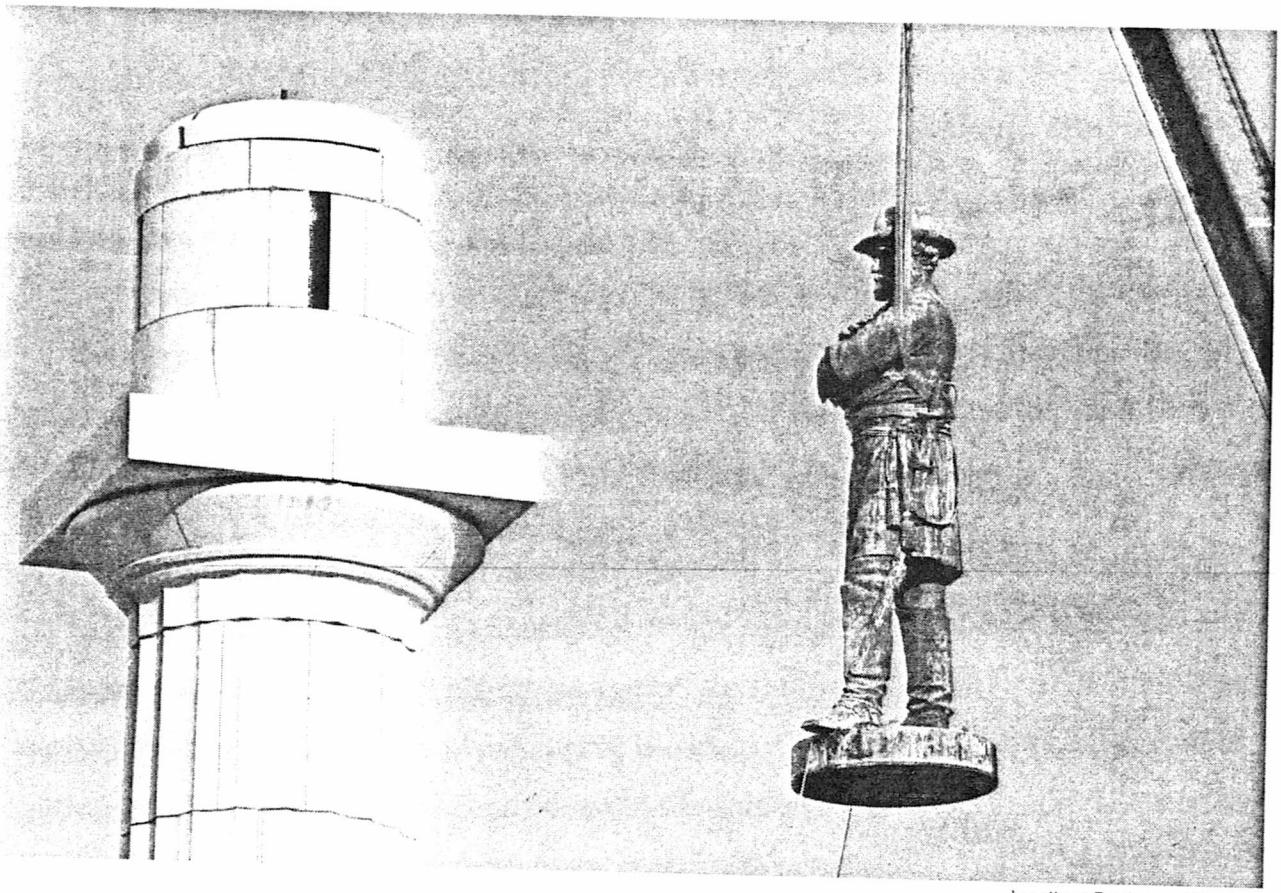
The Myth of the Kindly General Lee

The legend of the Confederate leader's heroism and decency is based in the fiction of a person who never existed.



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The strangest part about the continued personality cult of Robert E. Lee is how few of the qualities his admirers profess to see in him he actually possessed.

Memorial Day has the tendency to conjure up old arguments about the Civil War. That's understandable; it was created to mourn the dead of a war in which the Union was nearly destroyed, when half the country rose up in rebellion in defense

of slavery. This year, the removal of Lee's statue in New Orleans has inspired a new round of commentary about Lee, not to mention protests on his behalf by white supremacists.

The myth of Lee goes something like this: He was a brilliant strategist and devoted Christian man who abhorred slavery and labored tirelessly after the war to bring the country back together.

There is little truth in this. Lee was a devout Christian, and historians regard him as an accomplished tactician. But despite his ability to win individual battles, his decision to fight a conventional war against the more densely populated and industrialized North is considered by many historians to have been a fatal strategic error.

But even if one conceded Lee's military prowess, he would still be responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans in defense of the South's authority to own millions of human beings as property because they are black. Lee's elevation is a key part of a 150-year-old propaganda campaign designed to erase slavery as the cause of the war and whitewash the Confederate cause as a noble one. That ideology is known as the Lost Cause, and as historian David Blight writes, it provided a "foundation on which Southerners built the Jim Crow system."

There are unwitting victims of this campaign—those who lack the knowledge to separate history from sentiment. Then there are those whose reverence for Lee relies on replacing the actual Lee with a mythical figure who never truly existed.

In the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, R. David Cox wrote that "For white supremacist protesters to invoke his name violates Lee's most fundamental convictions." In the conservative publication *Townhall*, Jack Kerwick concluded that Lee was "among the finest human beings that has ever walked the Earth." John Daniel Davidson, in an essay for *The Federalist*, opposed the removal of the Lee statute in part on the grounds that Lee "arguably did more than anyone to unite the country after the war and bind up its wounds." Praise for Lee of this sort has flowed forth from past historians and presidents alike.

This is too divorced from Lee's actual life to even be classed as fan fiction; it is simply historical illiteracy.

White supremacy does not "violate" Lee's "most fundamental convictions." White supremacy was one of Lee's most fundamental convictions.

Lee was a slaveowner—his own views on slavery were explicated in an 1856 letter that it often misquoted to give the impression that Lee was some kind of an abolitionist. In the letter, he describes slavery as "a moral & political evil," but goes on to explain that:

> I think it however a greater evil to the white man than to the black race, & while my feelings are strongly enlisted in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more strong for the former. The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, socially & physically. The painful discipline they are undergoing, is necessary for their instruction as a race, & I hope will prepare & lead them to better things. How long their subjugation may be necessary is known & ordered by a wise Merciful Providence. Their emancipation will sooner result from the mild & melting influence of Christianity, than the storms & tempests of fiery Controversy.

The argument here is that slavery is bad for white people, good for black people, and most importantly, it is better than abolitionism; emancipation must wait for divine intervention. That black people might not want to be slaves does not enter into the equation; their opinion on the subject of their own bondage is not even an afterthought to Lee.

Lee's cruelty as a slavemaster was not confined to physical punishment. In *Reading the Man*, the historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor's portrait of Lee through his writings, Pryor writes that "Lee ruptured the Washington and Custis tradition of respecting slave families," by hiring them off to other plantations, and that "by 1860 he had

broken up every family but one on the estate, some of whom had been together since Mount Vernon days." The separation of slave families was one of the most unfathomably devastating aspects of slavery, and Pryor wrote that Lee's slaves regarded him as "the worst man I ever see."

The trauma of rupturing families lasted lifetimes for the enslaved—it was, as my colleague Ta-Nehisi Coates described it, "a kind of murder." After the war, thousands of the emancipated searched desperately for kin lost to the market for human flesh, fruitlessly for most. In *Reconstruction*, the historian Eric Foner quotes a Freedmen's Bureau agent who notes of the emancipated, "in their eyes, the work of emancipation was incomplete until the families which had been dispersed by slavery were reunited."

Lee's heavy hand on the Arlington plantation, Pryor writes, nearly led to a slave revolt, in part because the enslaved had been expected to be freed upon their previous master's death, and Lee had engaged in a dubious legal interpretation of his will in order to keep them as his property, one that lasted until a Virginia court forced him to free them.

When two of his slaves escaped and were recaptured, Lee either beat them himself or ordered the overseer to "lay it on well." Wesley Norris, one of the slaves who was whipped, recalled that "not satisfied with simply lacerating our naked flesh, Gen. Lee then ordered the overseer to thoroughly wash our backs with brine, which was done."

Every state that seceded mentioned slavery as the cause in their declarations of secession. Lee's beloved Virginia was no different, accusing the federal government of "perverting" its powers "not only to the injury of the people of Virginia, but to the oppression of the Southern Slaveholding States." Lee's decision to fight for the South can only be described as a choice to fight for the continued existence of human bondage in America—even though for the Union, it was not at first a war for emancipation.

During his invasion of Pennsylvania, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia enslaved free blacks and brought them back to the South as property. Pryor writes that "evidence links virtually every infantry and cavalry unit in Lee's army" with the abduction of free black Americans, "with the activity under the supervision of senior officers."

Soldiers under Lee's command at the Battle of the Crater in 1864 massacred black Union soldiers who tried to surrender. Then, in a spectacle hatched by Lee's senior corps commander A.P. Hill, the Confederates paraded the Union survivors through the streets of Petersburg to the slurs and jeers of the southern crowd. Lee never discouraged such behavior. As the historian Richard Slotkin wrote in *No Quarter: The Battle of the Crater,* "his silence was permissive."

The presence of black soldiers on the field of battle shattered every myth the South's slave empire was built on: the happy docility of slaves, their intellectual inferiority, their cowardice, their inability to compete with whites. As Pryor writes, "fighting against brave and competent African Americans challenged every underlying tenet of southern society." The Confederate response to this challenge was to visit every possible atrocity and cruelty upon black soldiers whenever possible, from enslavement to execution.

As the historian James McPherson recounts in *Battle Cry of Freedom*, in October of that same year, Lee proposed an exchange of prisoners with the Union general Ulysses S. Grant. "Grant agreed, on condition that blacks be exchanged 'the same as white soldiers.'" Lee's response was that "negroes belonging to our citizens are not considered subjects of exchange and were not included in my proposition." Because slavery was the cause for which Lee fought, he could hardly be expected to easily concede, even at the cost of the freedom of his own men, that blacks could be treated as soldiers and not things. Grant refused the offer, telling Lee that "Government is bound to secure to all persons received into her armies the rights due to soldiers." Despite its desperate need for soldiers, the Confederacy did not relent from this position until a few months before Lee's surrender.

After the war, Lee did counsel defeated southerners against rising up against the North. Lee might have become a rebel once more, and urged the South to resume

fighting—as many of his former comrades wanted him to. But even in this task Grant, in 1866, regarded his former rival as falling short, saying that Lee was "setting an example of forced acquiescence so grudging and pernicious in its effects as to be hardly realized."

Nor did Lee's defeat lead to an embrace of racial egalitarianism. The war was not about slavery, Lee insisted later, but if it was about slavery, it was only out of Christian devotion that white southerners fought to keep blacks enslaved. Lee told a *New York Herald* reporter, in the midst of arguing in favor of somehow removing blacks from the South ("disposed of," in his words), "that unless some humane course is adopted, based on wisdom and Christian principles you do a gross wrong and injustice to the whole negro race in setting them free. And it is only this consideration that has led the wisdom, intelligence and Christianity of the South to support and defend the institution up to this time."

Lee had beaten or ordered his own slaves to be beaten for the crime of wanting to be free, he fought for the preservation of slavery, his army kidnapped free blacks at gunpoint and made them unfree—but all of this, he insisted, had occurred only because of the great Christian love the South held for blacks. Here we truly understand Frederick Douglass's admonition that "between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference."

Privately, according to the correspondence collected by his own family, Lee counseled others to hire white labor instead of the freedmen, observing "that wherever you find the negro, everything is going down around him, and wherever you find a white man, you see everything around him improving."

In another letter, Lee wrote "You will never prosper with blacks, and it is abhorrent to a reflecting mind to be supporting and cherishing those who are plotting and working for your injury, and all of whose sympathies and associations are antagonistic to yours. I wish them no evil in the world—on the contrary, will do them every good in my power, and know that they are misled by those to whom they have given their confidence; but our material, social, and political interests are naturally with the whites."

Publicly, Lee argued against the enfranchisement of blacks, and raged against Republican efforts to enforce racial equality on the South. Lee told Congress that blacks lacked the intellectual capacity of whites and "could not vote intelligently," and that granting them suffrage would "excite unfriendly feelings between the two races." Lee explained that "the negroes have neither the intelligence nor the other qualifications which are necessary to make them safe depositories of political power." To the extent that Lee believed in reconciliation, it was between white people, and only on the precondition that black people would be denied political power and therefore the ability to shape their own fate.

Lee is not remembered as an educator, but his life as president of Washington College (later Washington and Lee) is tainted as well. According to Pryor, students at Washington formed their own chapter of the KKK, and were known by the local Freedmen's Bureau to attempt to abduct and rape black schoolgirls from the nearby black schools.

There were at least two attempted lynchings by Washington students during Lee's tenure, and Pryor writes that "the number of accusations against Washington College boys indicates that he either punished the racial harassment more laxly than other misdemeanors, or turned a blind eye to it," adding that he "did not exercise the near imperial control he had at the school, as he did for more trivial matters, such as when the boys threatened to take unofficial Christmas holidays." In short, Lee was as indifferent to crimes of violence toward blacks carried out by his students as he was when they were carried out by his soldiers.

Lee died in 1870, as Democrats and ex-Confederates were commencing a wave of terrorist violence that would ultimately reimpose their domination over the Southern states. The Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1866; there is no evidence Lee ever spoke up against it. On the contrary, he darkly intimated in his interview with the *Herald* that the South might be moved to violence again if peace did not proceed on its terms. That was prescient.

Lee is a pivotal figure in American history worthy of study. Neither the man who really existed, nor the fictionalized tragic hero of the Lost Cause, are heroes worthy

of a statue in a place of honor. As one Union veteran angrily put it in 1903 when Pennsylvania was considering placing a statute to Lee at Gettysburg, "If you want historical accuracy as your excuse, then place upon this field a statue of Lee holding in his hand the banner under which he fought, bearing the legend: 'We wage this war against a government conceived in liberty and dedicated to humanity.'" The most fitting monument to Lee is the national military cemetery the federal government placed on the grounds of his former home in Arlington.

To describe this man as an American hero requires ignoring the immense suffering for which he was personally responsible, both on and off the battlefield. It requires ignoring his participation in the industry of human bondage, his betrayal of his country in defense of that institution, the battlefields scattered with the lifeless bodies of men who followed his orders and those they killed, his hostility toward the rights of the freedmen and his indifference to his own students waging a campaign of terror against the newly emancipated. It requires reducing the sum of human virtue to a sense of decorum and the ability to convey gravitas in a gray uniform.

There are former Confederates who sought to redeem themselves—one thinks of James Longstreet, wrongly blamed by Lost Causers for Lee's disastrous defeat at Gettysburg, who went from fighting the Union army to leading New Orleans's integrated police force in battle against white supremacist paramilitaries. But there are no statues of Longstreet in New Orleans.* Lee was devoted to defending the principle of white supremacy; Longstreet was not. This, perhaps, is why Lee was placed atop the largest Confederate monument at Gettysburg in 1917, but the 6-foot-2-inch Longstreet had to wait until 1998 to receive a smaller-scale statue hidden in the woods that makes him look like a hobbit riding a donkey. It's why Lee is remembered as a hero, and Longstreet is remembered as a disgrace.

The white supremacists who have protested on Lee's behalf are not betraying his legacy. In fact, they have every reason to admire him. Lee, whose devotion to white supremacy outshone his loyalty to his country, is the embodiment of everything

they stand for. Tribe and race over country is the core of white nationalism, and racists can embrace Lee in good conscience.

The question is why anyone else would.

** This article originally stated that there are no statues of Longstreet in the American South; in fact, there is one in his hometown of Gainesville, Georgia. We regret the error.*

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