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Abstract

Jefferson Davis sent Robert E. Lee an unusual note after the battle of Gettysburg. The dispatch did not contain any presidential recommendations or requests, only a clipped article from the Charleston Mercury criticizing Lee and his subordinates for failure in Pennsylvania. Why Davis sent this article is impossible to say, and Lee apparently was not interested in the president's motivations. The General dismissed newspaper criticism of himself as "harmless," but the Mercury's condemnation of the army disturbed him. He considered the charges harmful to the cause, for his officers and soldiers were beyond reproach. Defeat, Lee insisted, was his responsibility alone. "No blame can be attached to the army for its failure to accomplish what was projected by me," he wrote, "nor should it be censured for the unreasonable expectations of the public. I am alone to blame, in perhaps expecting too much of its prowess & valour." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

political correctness, Neo-Confederate, Robert E. Lee, Revisionist history, Civil War, Confederate history, Victorian Era, Lost Cause

Disciplines

History | Military History | Political History | United States History


“Truth is mighty & will
eventually prevail”

Political Correctness, Neo-Confederates,
and Robert E. Lee

by Peter S. Carmichael



Ways of knowing are fundamental to the interpretive battles over Confederate history broadly and over Robert E. Lee in particular. Drawing from both the modernist and Victorian perspectives can bring greater complexity to historical inquiry. Robert E. Lee, 1864, photographed by Julian Vannerson, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.



Jefferson Davis sent Robert E. Lee an unusual note after the battle of Gettysburg. The dispatch did not contain any presidential recommendations or requests, only a clipped article from the *Charleston Mercury* criticizing Lee and his subordinates for failure in Pennsylvania. Why Davis sent this article is impossible to say, and Lee apparently was not interested in the president's motivations. The General dismissed newspaper criticism of himself as "harmless," but the *Mercury's* condemnation of the army disturbed him. He considered the charges harmful to the cause, for his officers and soldiers were beyond reproach. Defeat, Lee insisted, was his responsibility alone. "No blame can be attached to the army for its failure to accomplish what was projected by me," he wrote, "nor should it be censured for the unreasonable expectations of the public. I am alone to blame, in perhaps expecting too much of its prowess & valour."¹

As the press and public debated the cause and consequences of Gettysburg with nitpicking fervor, Lee assured Davis that the true story of the campaign would ultimately stand once the foamy wash of rumor and innuendo receded: "Truth is mighty & will eventually prevail." Here, Lee's theory of history reveals itself as a field of study in which objectivity, grounded in unbiased facts, leads to unvarnished truth; the reality of the past reappears in perfect clarity, full of moral and intellectual lessons for future generations to behold and absorb. Lee's understanding of history provides insight into *how* he thought and not just *what* he thought. Like so many nineteenth-century Victorians, Lee rigidly ordered the past and the present in attempts to rid himself of moral confusion, intellectual clutter, and emotional ambiguity.²

Lee's underlying belief in historical objectivity as the straight and narrow path to truth swayed back and forth in the unpredictable winds of war following Gettysburg, leaving him confused, depressed, and wondering if people could actually perceive the course of human events and align themselves accordingly. Although he nearly abandoned his faith in the comprehensibility of the human existence, Lee, like so many of his Confederate peers after Appomattox, sought sanctuary in the Victorian belief that the world was governed by fixed truths of right and wrong, of morality and immorality, and of purity and evil. This way of knowing, rooted deeply in the very intellectual structures of Victorianism, started to lose its dominance with the rise of modernism in the twentieth century. Yet the orientation of nineteenth-century Victorianism, in both form and content, has not disappeared entirely, even though the ideology behind slavery and hierarchy, which Lee so forcefully articulated and so unwaveringly defended, has essentially vanished.³

Ways of knowing are fundamental to the interpretive battles over Confederate history broadly speaking and over Robert E. Lee in particular. Americans engaged in the cultural battles over Confederate history often are caught between the Victorian belief in the knowability of the past and the modernists' rebuttal that



Regardless of where one's sympathies lie, people who have a more Victorian disposition desire a history where sublime truths about human nobility tower above the wreckage of human existence, and where there is not the palest shadow of doubt over the future course. A celebratory perspective of Robert E. Lee at Chancellorsville, May 1863, photomechanical print, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

history is highly interpretive, constantly changing in meaning, and ultimately an expression of power and authority in society. Disagreements over Lee continue to energize historical and political debates among Americans today, and a greater appreciation of distinct cognitive styles—one rooted in Victorianism and the other in modernism—reveals how people apply their own perspectives when focusing on the past. We can, as a result, better appreciate why the wars of historical memory continue to besiege Confederate heritage and the legacy of Robert E. Lee to this day.

THE LOST CAUSE AND LEE AS A VICTORIAN HERO

The cultural influence of Victorianism continues to leave its imprint upon the ways Americans make meaning of the Civil War. Regardless of where one's sympathies lie, people who have a more Victorian disposition desire a history where sublime truths about human nobility tower above the wreckage of human existence, and where there is not the palest shadow of doubt over the future course. Victorianism serves as a simplifying cultural filter, straining out the detritus so that all that remains is a perfect gold nugget of noble truth.

While northerners might appear comparatively apathetic about the memory of

the Union cause, white southerners have been tenacious in searching for moral clarity in the past. There has never been one southern white mind when it comes to the cause and consequences of the Civil War, but there have been many attempts to discover indisputable moral lessons from the years of 1861 to 1865. Shortly after Appomattox, many white southerners found intellectual and psychological comfort in the Lost Cause's depiction of a cavalier South, valiantly losing a war over states' rights, republicanism, and Christianity to the industrial might of Yankee-dom. The legacy of Robert E. Lee has been central to this interpretation, while satisfying the Victorian cravings for a history where the boundary between good and evil is never blurred. When Lee died in 1870, the general was metaphorically resurrected into a Christlike figure of perfection and the embodiment of the Lost Cause as envisioned by his former comrades.

By 1900, Confederate veterans had succeeded in advancing Lee as a symbol of national reunion and reconciliation. Since then, Lee's military exploits have been widely celebrated by northerners and southerners alike, skirting difficult moral questions involving slavery and secession. Bloody battlefield victories—audaciously conceived and fearlessly executed—have and continue to capture the American imagination, fulfilling that bone-deep belief in the United States that war unleashes our most admirable qualities. Civil War buffs on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line act out this belief when they play armchair general, getting lost in a romantic make-believe land of war, rather than confronting the tough stuff of Civil War history.

CULTURE WARS AND LEE'S HISTORICAL STANDING

Of late, however, historians have contested Lee's high standing as a general and his saintly reputation as a Christian gentleman, resulting in charges of revisionism from critics. The modernist conclusions about the general seem especially threatening to those who hold to the tenets of the Lost Cause, since such conclusions rest upon the notion that slavery was the core cause of the Civil War and the Confederate experience. This understanding has certainly encouraged new thinking about the Confederacy. Beginning in World War II and gaining traction during the Civil Rights era, it has become the dominant force of inquiry in southern history in the last thirty years.

It surprises no one today that historians ask tough questions about Lee and his fellow Confederates; what is shocking is that the rise of modernist thinking about the Virginian has infused political discourse with deep suspicion. A conspiratorial rage hijacks debate in which each side refuses to empathize with the other. Indeed, to do so is perceived to be self-destructive, a surrendering of principle, and akin to capitulation to a dangerous enemy. Without empathy, however, there can be no understanding, and the glaring absence of civility in the public discussions

surrounding Lee testifies to this, underscoring a tragic turn in the United States where ideological extremism has devoured gradualism, balance, and moderation.

Many non-academics inside and outside the South deeply resent and resist any claim that slavery caused secession, that the Confederacy was devoted to human bondage, or that Lee defended the enslavement of African Americans. These same people insist that anyone who suggests that Lee fought for slavery is performing for “political correctness” theater, staged by members of the liberal academic establishment who desire nothing more than to direct a morality play in which the white South is ostracized for the nation’s sins of racism. Professional historians of the modernist strain have been puzzled by this hostile response—especially since the political correctness charge suggests judgments based on contemporary moral fashions, when historians perceive their efforts to be objective attempts to contextualize Lee within the standards and mores of his era. For the most part, scholars have dueled over Lee’s military record without violating the professional decorum expected of such academic debates. Not only do such discussions keep clear of contemporary politics, they also refrain from rendering moral judgments about Lee or the Confederacy. They acknowledge that slavery was a moral abomination but emphasize that the historian’s task is both to take historical figures on their terms, not ours, and to understand the otherness of the past. In contrast, the non-academic Right’s onslaught against academia (and the shameless politicking of a few professors in the classroom) have poisoned the public’s perception of how historians teach and conduct their research.

While not every debate about Lee has disintegrated into a politically charged shouting match, many defenders of the general are lumped under the “neo-Confederate” label which in effect brands them as unabashed racists. Their views however are far more complicated and diverse. Many just want to honor their Confederate ancestors, some use Confederate heritage to advance the political cause of small government, while others associate the southern nation as a distinctly Christian one. Regardless of the perspective, they have rallied together in condemning those whom they perceive to be critics of Lee. They portray modernist historians as revisionists who promote liberal dogma by damning the Confederacy for failing to live up to twenty-first-century standards of morality. One lay critic of Lee “revisionists,” for instance, recently made the impassioned pitch that any book criticizing the general is part of “the Communist dream” to eliminate “states’ rights” and to create “an all powerful central government.” This critic concluded: “Killing the Confederates and the Confederacy was a necessity if Americans were to learn to worship THE STATE, instead of the Lord.” Although it may seem outrageous to some, this sentiment indeed is a common theme among Lee’s most extreme defenders, who tend to identify with a growing right-wing populist movement that rails against a leviathan state in Washington, D.C. In turn, some critics of “neo-Confederates” tend to dismiss Lee’s defenders as delusional racists



While northerners might appear comparatively apathetic about the memory of the Union cause, white southerners have been tenacious in searching for moral clarity in the past. Flag of 37th Pennsylvania Infantry, ca. 1864, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

so taken by conspiratorial thinking and so consumed by hatred that their advocacy for small government and free-market economics is dangerously seductive to people on the margins of society. Discussions about Lee are far more than simple debates about history.⁴

HOW NEO-CONFEDERATES AND REVISIONISTS THINK

A number of writers, including Tony Horwitz, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, and David Goldfield, have brilliantly explained how both camps follow contemporary politics, not the inspiration of Clio, when exploring the past. Their work demonstrates that public controversies about the Confederacy cannot be reduced to straightforward academic questions about whether Lee was a great general, a proponent of slavery, or a model of Christian gentility. While this body of scholarship on southern memory brilliantly explains the diverse ways that people manipulate their Civil War heritage, these scholars' focus on *what* people think overlooks *how* people think. Lee's "revisionists" generally reflect an intellectual orientation influenced by modernism, with its belief in many truths and its capacity to locate the many selves that reside in each individual. The general's most strident defenders,

who are mostly outside of academia, tend to attach themselves to an absolute and simplified reading of the past, fixed in meaning and time. How people think—as distinct from *what* they think—is central to understanding why some people either resist or accept the myth of Lee.⁵

To be sure, significant intellectual and political differences divide the self-proclaimed “guardians” of Lee’s historical memory; unfortunately, they are often lined up under the expansive, and indiscriminate, banner of “neo-Confederate.” While delineating a wide range of factions within the southern heritage movement is important to do (but rarely done), there is a similar cognitive style uniting those typically labeled neo-Confederates—and even, in some cases, those labeled revisionists. Emphasizing how people think, it is worth noting, does not diminish the importance of racial identities or other ideological beliefs. Much of the existing scholarship on the Lost Cause and Confederate heritage groups has brilliantly explored the substance of historical memories and how contemporary political realities influence the ways in which people conceptualize the past. Since Appomattox, a system of segregation, unfettered free market capitalism, and disfranchisement rested upon a view of history in which ex-Confederates were victims of a victorious North during Reconstruction, when hapless hordes were unleashed from slavery. Shifting our attention to *ways* of thinking strikes at this topic from a new angle, for it looks at the articulation process of thought as separate from, but related to, the content of ideas themselves. This adds a neglected intellectual dimension to theories of race, the politics of hate, and class alienation, all of which have been central to explaining the motivation of Confederate heritage groups.⁶

DEMONIZING THE OPPOSITION

Unquestionably, the differences between those who tenaciously defend Lee and those who won’t can be deeply emotional in nature. Lee’s role in the institution of slavery, for instance, is the flint that refuses to go dull, for it always draws heat, particularly among defenders who want to portray the Confederacy as a nation divorced from human bondage but devoted to states’ rights. In response to a recent publication that portrayed Lee as a tough-minded slaveholder, an angry reader wrote: “This started in earnest a couple of years ago sparked by the NAACP. It all centers around the NAACP’s campaign to eliminate all vestiges of the Confederacy from the face of America. They feel that as long as General Lee is held in high esteem by most Americans it presents a roadblock in achieving this goal.” Conspiratorial victimization is a dominant trope among Lee’s defenders, a means of claiming reverse discrimination while blaming the liberal academic opposition for using race to politicize commemorative activities. When members of heritage groups assert that they are the true purveyors of historical objectivity, that they have risen above the conformist muck of political correctness, and that through



When Lee died in 1870, the general was metaphorically resurrected into a Christlike figure of perfection and the embodiment of the Lost Cause as envisioned by his former comrades. Tobacco package label, ca. 1870, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

the mist of the past they can see the world for what it actually was, they demonstrate, in effect, a Victorian way of thinking. Just as Victorians had sought perfectibility in their own lives and in their reconstructions of the past, many practitioners of Confederate heritage today want to feel good about their ancestors. This is hardly different from what most people desire when looking backward, but they appear hypocritical when insisting that they are the guardians of objective truth, while at the same time sanitizing their collective regional history.⁷

The most outspoken opponents of southern heritage groups—many of whom fall in line with the scholarly critics of Lee—have been so single-minded in debunking what they perceive as the whitewashing of Confederate history that they have not paid sufficient attention to how Lee defenders actually reach their conclusions. Too often the advocates of Confederate heritage are portrayed as unthinking thugs who are so full of race hatred, so deluded by nostalgia, and so devoted to a conservative agenda that they are incapable of independent thought. Critics of heritage groups can perhaps be forgiven for not paying attention to how their opponents think, given that elements of the neo-Confederate crowd are truly dangerous and potentially violent. However, while scores of individuals wrap themselves in the Confederate flag (when honesty should dictate the wearing of a white hood), it is too easy to write off most defenders of Lee and devotees of Confederate traditions as klansmen in disguise. Avoiding predictable condemnations of heritage groups as racists might seem impossible, especially when we encounter such



Bloody battlefield victories — audaciously conceived and fearlessly executed — have and continue to capture the American imagination, fulfilling that bone-deep belief in the United States that war unleashes our most admirable qualities. Civil War buffs act out this belief rather than confronting the tough stuff of Civil War history. Reenactment of 1862's siege of Bridgeport, Alabama, courtesy of the George F. Landegger Collection of Alabama Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America, Library of Congress.

irrational and angry words as those of the critic above, who has convinced himself that the NAACP wants to dethrone Lee as part of a conspiratorial insurgency against all things Confederate. Unless we get beneath the extreme emotionalism fueling contemporary memory clashes, we will be trapped in an endless cycle of conspiratorial charges and counter-charges. Shifting attention to the actual perceptions that people hold when thinking historically will promote greater understanding between academic and lay historians. We will, as a result, perceive why both camps will likely never reconcile.

The rancor of these debates now extends far beyond academic circles into the blogosphere, print media, and assorted commemorative activities, while some members of the historical establishment have fallen into this cultural gutter fight. They have defended their positions through emotionalism and easy generalizations when a more nuanced understanding of how people perceive history is badly needed. Even renowned historians make sweeping characterizations. Yale's David Blight, in a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, observed: "The Lost

Cause tradition—as both a version of history and as a racial ideology—is certainly still very much alive in neo-Confederate organizations, on numerous Web sites, among white-supremacist groups, in staunch advocates of the Confederate battle flag, and even among some mainstream American politicians.” Blight’s infusing heritage into white supremacy groups under the neo-Confederate label obscures differences among legions of people who would both denounce reactionary ideology and interpret such portrayals as proof of an organized attack from “the Left.” Similarly, outside the academy it is also fashionable to assume that worshipers of Lee and the Confederacy use heritage to hide hate. Social advocacy groups, including the Southern Poverty Law Center, have identified the Sons of the Confederacy and the Daughters of the Confederacy as neo-Confederate ground troops fighting for rightwing, racist organizations. While people with Aryan aspirations are sprinkled in both groups, it is impossible to quantify with any precision the number of extremists and even more difficult to determine their influence. Such a conflation allows for no distinction between unreconstructed racists and the more moderate rank-and-file members of the Sons and Daughters who are devoted to honoring their ancestors without racial animus. How can a person identify with his or her southern ancestry without being damned as a racist thug?⁸

The extreme categorizing behind this discourse has created impenetrable walls between those on both sides, who, in their separate worlds, demonize the other without having to engage in meaningful dialogue. The Confederate heritage groups, for their part, have been equally aggressive when responding to criticism of Lee. Non-academics usually describe academic critics of Lee as politically correct drones working on behalf of the liberal academic establishment. Democratic Senator James Webb of Virginia, in his book *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*, serves up an all-too-common defense of poisonous emotions and convoluted logic when he insists that the Confederate past is being condemned to Nazification: “Even the venerable Robert E. Lee has taken some vicious hits, as dishonest or misinformed advocates among political interest groups and in academia attempt to twist yesterday’s America into a fantasy that might better serve the political issues of today. The greatest disservice on this count has been the attempt by these revisionist politicians and academics to defame the entire Confederate Army in a move that can only be termed the Nazification of the Confederacy.”⁹

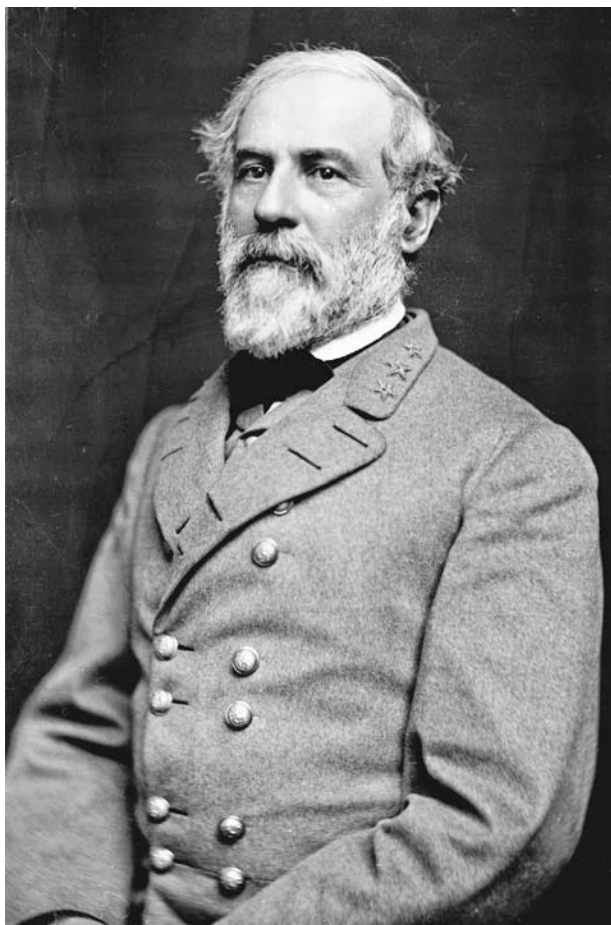
The publication of Elizabeth Pryor’s recent biography of Lee, *Reading the Man*, has proved the existence of a Marxist conspiracy in the minds of some critics. “Thanks to Karl, Lincoln’s Marxists/Commies/Socialists/so-called lovers of ‘Democracy’ have always been adept at bending those little twigs of American kids into grown-up folks who write best-selling anti-Confederate tomes,” observed one angry reader. “Maintaining the present all powerful central government of today,” the reader concluded, “also, depends on keeping Constitutionalists in literary bondage—by publishing and honoring only anti-South authors.

Reconditioning again and again the gullible with lies claiming the infamy of the South's great leaders is but one means of accomplishing that—for the Confederacy held the most ardent supporters of the U.S. Constitution this land has ever known. Certainly Robert E. Lee was one of them.”¹⁰

Both sides perceive a sinister plot, barely surfacing on the political radar, hidden beneath a veil of interpretive differences, but forming an irresistible storm ready to sweep aside anyone who tries to stand against the powerful forces of conspiracy. The reverberations of such conspiratorial thinking have been felt especially in America's schools, where the creation of history standards has rung the bell for cultural pugilists to begin swinging. In Florida, to take just one example, former governor Jeb Bush signed a law in 2006 that revised teaching standards in the state's schools. Part of the legislation included the following provision: “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.” Whether an individual agrees with the Florida legislature or not says a great deal about how that person approaches the past and what he or she expects to find at the end of a particular historical inquiry. The defiant stand against the historical relativism of modernism is the most striking and important feature of the bill. Moreover, this piece of legislation shows how debates over the meaning of history can become highly politicized. The tensions between Victorianism and modernism help explain why interpretive differences about Robert E. Lee are so radically at odds with each other, and how these contentious intellectual debates animate cultural wars over Confederate history.¹¹

THE SCHOLARLY DEBATES

It is difficult to single out scholars who best represent the traditional and modernist followers of Lee, largely because historians tend to fly together in flocks. They follow highly coordinated historiographical patterns, wheeling one way because of new research before veering in the opposite direction in response to a recent publication. Rarely will one individual or pack of historians stray from the group and lead the way. Thus, taking aim at any one scholar of Lee might seem like a random potshot, but, as with every flock, there are birds who manage to stand outside the group, and Michael Fellman and Robert K. Krick have drawn attention to their scholarship because they explicitly articulate, unlike so many of their peers, the political and cultural implications of their interpretations. Fellman and Krick stand at the interpretive poles of the Lee debate, although they have never directly engaged each other's scholarship. Krick offers the traditionalist perspective and Fellman the modern, and from their words one can see how the threads of Victorianism and modernism sew different patterns and make for very different historical cloth.



Public controversies about the Confederacy cannot be reduced to straightforward academic questions about whether Lee was a great general, a proponent of slavery, or a model of Christian gentility. Robert E. Lee, ca. 1864, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

Robert K. Krick, the former chief historian of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, a leading preservationist of Virginia battlefields, and the author of a number of important books on the Army of Northern Virginia, is one of the most highly regarded and respected writers on Lee today. While Krick does not believe that Lee was flawless, he rarely departs from the historical gospel of Douglas Southall Freeman, whose enduring *R. E. Lee* and *Lee's Lieutenants* depict the famous Virginian as the embodiment of human perfection, both as a man and as a general. Krick's allegiance to the historical methodology of the Victorian era partially explains his tenacious defense of Freeman's principal themes as unassailable truths. He certainly has a right to endorse Freeman, especially since there are so many virtues to *R. E. Lee* and *Lee's Lieutenants*, but Krick's response to Lee's challengers is both intriguing and somewhat disturbing. He attributes the recent scholarship as part of an academic conspiracy to demolish all things Confederate. Rather than dissect the methodology and arguments of the modernists, Krick writes off Lee's critics as "bootless revisionist[s]" who have "a total lack of perspective of historical time and sense."¹²

The interpretive differences between the modernists and Lee's more traditional defenders, as Krick correctly observes, boil down to a question of perspective. But it is not, as he argues, an issue of the revisionists' lacking a historical perspective. Whereas Krick and other Victorian-oriented scholars want to recover the actions and deeds of Lee into a single grand narrative, modernist scholars believe a historical figure can be many people at once, depending on the audience and situation, making it difficult to collapse an individual's life into a single objective narrative. The methodological differences between the traditionalists and "revisionists" are further strained by the modernists' desire to roam around the mental world of their subject, which historians of Krick's persuasion typically consider nothing more than psychobabble—an abandonment of "real" evidence, the very stuff that gives history its concreteness and durability. Krick and many others of the extreme pro-Lee camp consider these imaginative interpretations as lacking empiricism and, thus, credibility.

On the other hand, Michael Fellman has advanced some of the most controversial and critical assessments of Lee deriving from modernist methodology. In the beautifully written *The Making of R. E. Lee*, Fellman's goal is to locate the "unknowable soul" of Lee. He admits that no biographer can completely capture the soul of his subject, but "that is the challenge," he writes, "and that is where imagination comes into play. Like novelists, memoirists, and historians of all stripes, biographers have fragments, sometimes lots of them, sometimes fewer, with which they must do their best to construct the richest, most complex, and at the same time most truthful, rather than true, story." Through careful research and by contextualizing the general's life within the story of his ancestry and the planter culture that produced him, Fellman reveals the many sides of Lee—the consummate flirt, the guilt-ridden Christian, a man full of lust, an unhappy husband who is sexually repressed, a devoted and loving father, a stern patriarch, a stoic Christian, and an uncontrollable warrior filled with rage. And it is these fault lines that give Lee's life not only texture but an authenticity that modernists insist cannot be found in the Lost Cause's celebration of Lee as the grand cavalier.¹³

Weighing the merits of Fellman and Krick's arguments is a distraction from the ways their methodological approaches underlie interpretive differences over Lee. It also fails to account for how ways of knowing must be considered in order to understand the nature of historical debate itself. Not all new inquiries into Lee history are from freethinking modernists, and not all of Lee's academic defenders are antiquated Victorians. The interpretive camps overlap to varying degrees, and a pure expression of Victorianism or modernism simply does not exist in any scholarly work. Intellectual tendencies, however, are discernable, and they show how the defenders and detractors of Lee operate on opposing analytical trajectories. Subordinating the content of source material is necessary at times in order



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to see how each camp interrogates and organizes sources in significantly different ways. Even though the two types of scholars dig from the same archival mines, they will most likely never come to the surface with the same interpretive findings.

Why, though, do debates over Lee become so vitriolic? Professional historians are not the victims of having their scholarly debate hijacked by frenzied masses, but many inject a conspiratorial tone into their writings, offering vague references to perverse alliances. Krick, for example, uses his review of Alan T. Nolan's provocative *Lee Considered* to characterize the "revisionist" camp as a think tank for the cause of political correctness. Academics, of course, are the main villains in his plot, and their viciousness goes unchallenged, as Krick sees it, since the political correctness juggernaut implants an irrepressible "yearning to smash idols." This desire, he concludes, "affords a limitless appeal in a smug way to the political-correctness wowsers." Who are these "political-correctness wowsers"? Krick routinely identifies Thomas Connelly, Alan Nolan, and Michael Fellman in his speeches, but this hardly constitutes a political correctness conspiracy or a substantially far-reaching intellectual movement of any kind. Nonetheless, Krick's line of reasoning, which is widely shared among the mainstream Lee traditionalists, assumes that anyone critiquing Lee's generalship is a political-correctness zealot. Of course, it is in the vagueness of the term "political correctness" that the rhetorical advantage lies.¹⁴

Krick's unsubstantiated charge of political correctness is hardly unique. There are many others who are far more reckless in their accusations of a left-wing academic conspiracy. Some of the most outrageous public utterances have come from Clyde Wilson, a former professor at the University of South Carolina, the author of a superb biography of Confederate general James Johnston Pettigrew, and the editor of the John C. Calhoun papers. Wilson writes in 2007, "This year is Robert E. Lee's bicentennial—the 200th anniversary of his birth. Nothing better illustrates the swift and vicious descent of Political Correctness upon American history and symbols than the shadow that has, in just the last few years, been thrown over a man regarded (rightly) for well over a century as among the greatest of Americans." He concludes, "How the times have changed, and suddenly. The official doctrine of the MSI (Mainstream Intellectuals) now condemns Lee as a traitor and oath-violator and his cause as little better than Hitler's. This interpretation rests upon either a deliberate or a vastly ignorant misinterpretation of everything important in American history. The orchestrated blackening of Lee and his cause exhibits the triumph of Marxist categories in American historiography and public discussion."¹⁵

When one looks beyond the words of historians like Wilson, one finds an alarming absence of evidence. Michael Fellman is the only practicing academic who has published on Lee in the last ten years who fits the "revisionist" modus operandi established by scholars like Krick and Wilson. Fellman's interpretations have a contemporary accent, especially when it comes to issues of race and sexuality. He



Democratic Senator James Webb of Virginia, in his book Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*, serves up an all-too-common defense of poisonous emotions and convoluted logic when he insists that the Confederate past is being condemned to Nazification. “Even the venerable Robert E. Lee has taken some vicious hits,” says Webb. The Monument to Lee in Richmond, Virginia, photographed in 1991, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.*

writes, for instance, that Lee’s aggressiveness on the battlefield had a sexual function equal to the “erotic energy that had periodically forced its way up through the carefully controlled exterior the young Lee had normally shown the world in his relationships with young women.” Gary W. Gallagher, George Rable, William Cooper, Steve Woodworth, Ethan Rafuse, Mark Grimsley, William “Jack” Davis, James Robertson Jr., Joseph Harsh, James McPherson, Brooks Simpson, Richard McCaslin, Steve Newton, Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Tracy Power, Joseph Glatthaar, Herman Hattaway, Daniel Sutherland, Charles Roland, Emory Thomas, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Charles Joyner, and Carol Reardon — all part of the academy and respected authorities in their field — have offered assessments of Lee that in no way resemble the party line of the so-called “revisionist political-correctness gang.” Wilson and Krick’s rhetoric rests upon an imaginary group of revisionist historians working together as invisible assassins, ready to take out great Americans for the cause of political correctness.¹⁶

Historians like Wilson and Krick give cause and comfort to those who believe they are being persecuted for simply wanting to honor Lee or pay respect to their Confederate ancestors. Strangely, a victimization mentality takes hold

among Lee's defenders, who use their persecution as way to aggressively advance their own historical and political agenda. In the spring of 2007, for instance, the Stephen Dill Lee Institute advertised a Robert E. Lee conference with the following teaser:

2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Robert E. Lee, one of America's most revered individuals, once esteemed in the North by his former enemies, as in the South. But opinions are changing in this era of Political Correctness. Was Lee a hero whose valour and leadership were surpassed only by his honour and humanity? Or, as some suggest today, was he a traitor whose military skill served a bad cause and prolonged an immoral rebellion against his rightful government? . . . The Symposium will cover Lee the man, his views on government and liberty, his humane attitudes toward race and slavery, Lee and the American Union, Lee as inspired commander and his relationship with the Army, Lee as a Christian gentleman, and the meaning of Lee for today.¹⁷

No one need dispute the S. D. Lee Institute's right to hold a conference, but the organizers should not be exempt from standards applicable to any scholarly conference in which the interpretive agenda is never set beforehand. Circling the wagons against the onslaught of the political correctness bogeyman is the rallying cry of the event, but more importantly, each line of inquiry is structured as a dichotomy demanding mutually exclusive answers. Lee was a great American *or* a cowardly traitor, a humane man *or* a sinister slaveholder, a brilliant commander *or* a reckless killer. The Victorian desire for inflexible truth, for moral lessons to appear, and for an absolute assessment of Robert E. Lee as both a man and a general permeate the conference's announcement.

Although the Lee Institute's justification for a conference is certainly troubling, we have an obligation to understand why members of this and other heritage organizations feel so threatened. We need to acknowledge that prejudices and biases exist among those who are critical of Lee devotees and Confederate heritage groups without giving credence to the ridiculous notion that a political correctness conspiracy among Marxist scholars is taking over southern history. Michael Fellman unfortunately plays into the hands of those who fear they are being hunted down by the thought police for their admiration of the Confederacy when he writes, for example: "Yet Lee's star is fading, along with the passing of segregation, and fewer Americans, even in the Deep South, still venerate Lee uncritically, although pockets of neo Confederates continue to worship him as the deity of Southern 'tradition' or 'heritage,' the code words by which they mean the old white supremacist order, based, whether consciously or not, on a belief in the natural superiority not merely of the 'white race' but of a hereditary ruling class such as the Virginia gentry." This observation too broadly categorizes those who want to honor Lee or their Confederate ancestors as racists.¹⁸



Careful research and contextualizing the general's life reveals the many sides of Lee—the consummate flirt, the guilt-ridden Christian, a man full of lust, an unhappy husband who is sexually repressed, a devoted and loving father, a stern patriarch, a stoic Christian, and an uncontrollable warrior filled with rage. These fault lines give Lee's life not only texture but an authenticity that modernists insist cannot be found in the Lost Cause's celebration of Lee as the grand cavalier. Robert E. Lee, ca. 1864, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

CONCLUSION

We can bring some much-needed specificity to this intellectual and political debate by being more aware of the language employed and by questioning those who fall back on easy descriptors like “neo-Confederate” and “political correctness.” Gestures on our part, however small, matter a great deal and will keep the focus on the historical subject and away from sideshow politics. Drawing from both the modernist and Victorian perspectives will also bring greater complexity to the historical inquiry into Lee. The Victorians’ emphasis on history as knowable is vital if we want future generations to find relevance in studying the past. Too many academics of the modernist persuasion lose touch with reality by insisting that history is purely a construction of each succeeding generation or invented to exercise domination and power. Recognizing history as constructed cannot blind us to history as something that was experienced by real people who made real decisions and who took concrete actions. History is more than just an interpretive text or subjective words on a paper.¹⁹

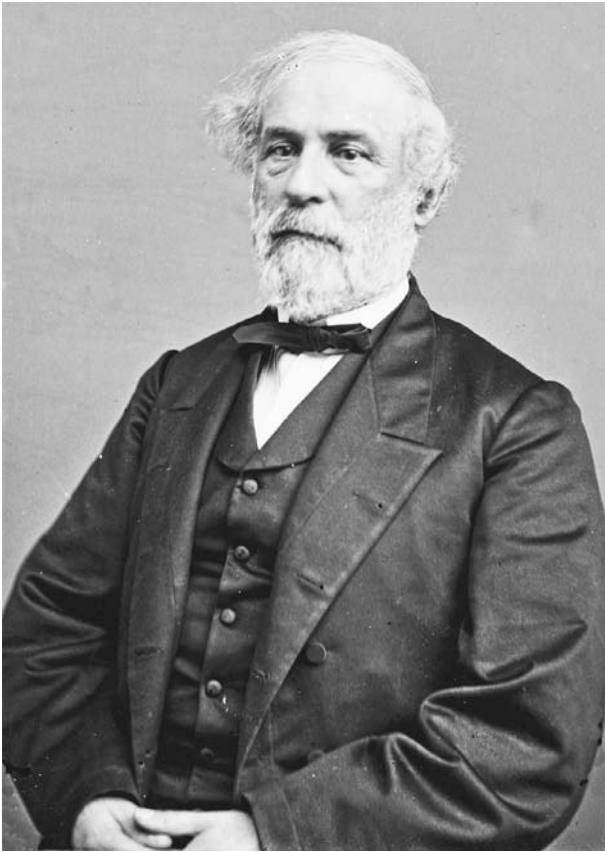
The Victorians’ insistence that history is knowable, however, encouraged intellectual arrogance through the enshrinement of universal truths. The modernists offer a proper corrective. There is no single truth but instead a historical middle ground—a “truthfulness,” per Fellman—where many perceptions of the past coexist, revealing ambiguity, contradictions, and tensions that make up the human

condition. We can find the rich middle ground by returning to General Lee's tent after he read the *Charleston Mercury*. The general's own words provide valuable insights into his reaction to Gettysburg and also offer a portal into the open-ended and contradictory ways in which he tried to make sense of grand historical events, even though he was reluctant to admit that his own intellectual journey did not result in unambiguous judgments. In a July 31 dispatch, Lee told Davis that, "No blame can be attached to the army for its failure to accomplish what was projected by me, nor should it be censured for the unreasonable expectations of the public. I am alone to blame, in perhaps expecting too much of its prowess & valour."²⁰

Did Lee really think he alone was to blame for Gettysburg? Or were his public confessions of guilt designed to inspire unity in the army? Postwar evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Lee was bitterly disappointed in the performance of key subordinates. In 1868, he told William Allan that "Stuart's failure to carry out his instructions *forced the battle of Gettysburg, & the imperfect, halting way in which his corps commanders (especially Ewell) fought the battle, gave victory, finally to the foe.*" Not only is this at odds with Lee's wartime correspondence, but Lee's 1863 claim that public criticism after Gettysburg did not affect him does not match Allan's recollections of their postwar conversations. "Gen. Lee talked feelingly of the criticism to which he had been subjected," Allan remembered, "said 'critics' talked much of that they knew little about, said he had fought honestly and earnestly to the best of his knowledge and ability for the 'Cause.'"²¹

Surprisingly, what is missing from Lee's postwar conversations is any mention of God smiting the Army of Northern Virginia at Gettysburg. In the fall of 1863 the general felt certain that God had inflicted defeat on his army for the sins of the Confederate people. "I hope will yet be able to damage our adversaries when they meet us, & that all will go right with us," Lee wrote his wife. "That it should be so, we must implore the forgiveness of God for our sins, & the continuance of His blessings. There is nothing but His almighty power that can sustain us." Lee not only worried about the South's relationship with God after Gettysburg, but he faced the practical problem of desertion gutting his army. To Jefferson Davis he admitted that large elements of the rank-and-file were badly demoralized and that only brute force would stop desertion. Almost twenty deserters were executed during the month of September alone. In his private letters, however, Lee never revealed the growing instability of his command, assuring family and friends that his army was in superb condition and excellent spirits.²²

Lee was not a hypocrite because of the inconsistencies between his wartime correspondence and postwar remarks. Nor should these contradictions lead us to charge Lee with manipulating the historical record. The tensions among the accounts should be seen as interpretive opportunities to explore the fluid murkiness of the past where a single "real Lee" does not exist but where the many shadows of his being can be found. We cannot expect to solve the mysteries of Lee's behavior



Despite Lee's assertion after Gettysburg that "truth is mighty, & will eventually prevail," the general knew better.

He knew that every student enters a bewildering maze of learning and that no one escapes with the holy grail of historical truth. Robert E. Lee, ca. 1866, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

after Gettysburg, or anywhere else for that matter, like a basic arithmetic problem. We should embrace the fact that we will never possess a definitive answer and respect others for trying to sort out the impossible, even if we do not agree with their methods or conclusions.

Despite Lee's assertion after Gettysburg that "truth is mighty, & will eventually prevail," the general knew better. He knew that every student enters a bewildering maze of learning and that no one escapes with the holy grail of historical truth. In an 1863 letter that Lee sent to his daughter Mildred, who was struggling with her studies in Raleigh, North Carolina, we are reminded that any historical endeavor is a humbling journey in which Clio never relinquishes mastery over her student. We also need to remember that Lee wrote these inspirational words of advice when his world was filled with unspeakable violence, when he longed for the presence of his family, and when he felt a deep isolation from everyone around him in the army. If Lee could find such words of hopefulness at a time of war, then we should be able to rediscover in ourselves the joy of intellectual humility: "You say rightly, the more you learn the more you are conscious of your ignorance," Lee wrote on September 10, 1863. "Because the more you know, the more you find there is to know in this grand & beautiful world. It is only the ignorant who suppose them-

selves omniscient. You will find all the days of your life that there is much to learn & much to do.”²³

NOTES

This essay is based on a 2007 lecture on the historical legacy of Robert E. Lee, delivered at the Lee Chapel & Museum, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia.

1. Robert E. Lee to Jefferson Davis, July 31, 1863, in *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, ed. Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin (Boston: Little Brown, 1961), 565.

2. Robert E. Lee to Jefferson Davis, July 31, 1863, *The Wartime Papers*, 565; The secondary literature on Victorianism is vast. For a superb introduction to the subject, see Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

3. Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters* (New York: Viking, 2007), 237–38; The intellectual and cultural transition from Victorianism to Modernism is expertly discussed in Daniel Joseph Singal’s *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

4. Letter in possession of the author; For a superb overview of the neo-Confederate movement, see Euan Haque, Heidi Beirich, Edward H. Sebesta, *Neo-Confederacy: A Critical Introduction* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2010).

5. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2002); and Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

6. For some of the finest work that emphasizes the role of race in southern memory construction, see David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); this insight is taken from Daniel Wickberg’s “What is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New,” *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (June 2007): 661–84.

7. Letter in possession of the author.

8. David Blight, “The Civil War Sesquicentennial: The Goal Should be an Enlightening Commemoration,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 1, 2009, <http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i38/i38blight.htm> (accessed June 26, 2009); for the Southern Poverty Law Center’s classification of the UDC and SCV as neo Confederate organizations, see <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=253> (accessed June 26, 2009).

9. For a good example of how the opposing sides on cultural heritage refuse to listen to each other, see http://www.oanow.com/oan/news/local/article/councilman_removes_confederate_flags_from_graves/69708/ (accessed June 26, 2009); James Webb, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 207.

10. The American paranoid style of thinking, so closely aligned with conspiracy thought, was outlined by the great historian Richard Hofstadter, who argued that emotions associated with resentment and powerlessness deluded conservatives into seeing a world controlled by secret forces. The absence of evidence did not matter; in fact, in the minds of some it actually confirmed the presence of a sinister cabal in need of extermination. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 3–40. An excellent summary of Hofstadter’s theory of paranoia as it relates to cognition can be found in Wickberg’s “What is the History of Sensibilities”; Letter in possession of author; Elizabeth Brown Pryor’s *Reading the*

Man received wide acclaim, receiving both the Museum of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis Award and the acclaimed Lincoln Prize.

11. Florida House Bill 7087 (2006), 44.

12. The fact that Freeman's *R. E. Lee: A Biography*, 4 vols (New York: Scribner's, 1934–35) and his *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command*, 3 vols (New York: Scribner's, 1942–44) have remained in print testifies to the enduring impact of his scholarship. For a critique of Douglas Southall Freeman's work, see Gary W. Gallagher, "Shaping Public Memory of the Civil War: Robert E. Lee, Jubal A. Early, and Douglas Southall Freeman," in Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Lee & His Army in Confederate History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 255–82; Robert K. Krick, "Confederate Books: Five Great Ones and Two Bad Ones," in *The Smoothbore Volley that Doomed the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 233.

13. Michael Fellman, "Struggling with Robert E. Lee," in *Southern Cultures* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 6.

14. A connect-the-dot conspiratorial approach that links the modernist questioning of truth to the academy and leftist politics can be found in Lynne V. Cheney, *Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense—and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Krick, "Confederate Books," 236; Connelly was one of the first historians to explore the myth-making process of Lee. See his *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

15. On Clyde Wilson's argument that a political correctness campaign is being waged against Lee's historical legacy, see <http://www.lewrockwell.com/wilson/wilson23.html> (accessed June 26, 2009).

16. Michael Fellman, *The Making of Robert E. Lee* (New York: Random House, 2000), 306.

17. The program for the Stephen Dill Lee Institute can be found at http://www.lewrockwell.com/speakers/LEE_SYMPOSIUM_ANNOUNCEMENT.htm (accessed June 26, 2009).

18. Fellman, *The Making of Robert E. Lee*, 306; Even in popular culture, Confederate heritage groups serve as easy targets for ridicule. In a 2007 monologue, comedian Jay Leno suggested that Don Imus, after being fired for racist remarks aired on the radio, planned to raise funds for his favorite charity, the Sons of Confederate Veterans. The Sons' leaders denounced Leno's comments for implying the group was racist. While some might consider Leno's joke as harmless fun, it is understandable why these popular misperceptions might make the people behind the Confederate heritage movement feel besieged, causing them to become insulated, defensive, and in the end, vulnerable to reactionary politics. Tony Horwitz, in his brilliant *Confederates in the Attic* discovered during his odyssey across the South an incredible diversity in heritage groups. Ed Ayers makes a similar argument in "What we talk about when we talk about the South," in *What Caused the Civil War?: Reflections on the South and Southern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 37–63.

19. For an encouraging example of opening a debate with the so-called neo-Confederate side, see William L. Ramsay, "Horowitz, Genovese, and the Varieties of Culture War: Comments on the Continuing Unpleasantness in Idaho," at History News Network, <http://hnn.us/articles/23113.html> (accessed June 26, 2009).

20. Robert E. Lee to Jefferson Davis, July 31, 1863, in *Wartime Papers*, 564.

21. William Allan, "Memoranda of Conversations with General Robert E. Lee," February 15, 1868, in Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Lee the Soldier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 14, 15.

22. Robert E. Lee to Mary Anna Lee, July 15, 1863, in *Wartime Papers*, 551.

23. Robert E. Lee to Mildred Lee, September 10, 1863, in *Wartime Papers*, 597–98.