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# Honor and Compromise, and Getting History Right

Allen C. Guelzo  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Honor and Compromise, and Getting History Right

## **Abstract**

White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly does not have a Ph.D. in history, although he does have two master's degrees, in Strategic Studies (from the National Defense University) and in National Security Affairs from the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. So perhaps it was simply that he believed what he said about the Civil War this past Monday on Laura Ingraham's new Fox News 'Ingraham Angle' was so innocuous that he could also believe that it wouldn't even become a blip on anyone's radar screen. (*excerpt*)

## **Keywords**

Civil War, John Kelly, Lost Cause, Robert E. Lee, Confederate States of America

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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# The AMERICAN INTEREST



## Honor and Compromise, and Getting History Right

[Allen Guelzo](#)

*How the media's attacks on John F. Kelly's Civil War comments missed the mark by a mile.*

White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly does not have a Ph.D. in history, although he does have two master's degrees, in Strategic Studies (from the National Defense University) and in National Security Affairs from the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. So perhaps it was simply that he believed what he said about the Civil War this past Monday on Laura Ingraham's new Fox News 'Ingraham Angle' was so innocuous that he could also believe that it wouldn't even become a blip on anyone's radar screen.

He could not have been more wrong. Asked for comment on the decision of Christ Episcopal Church in Alexandria, Virginia, to remove two identifying plaques, marking pews occupied by George Washington and Robert E. Lee, Kelly responded, “Robert E. Lee was an honorable man.” When Lee resigned his commission as the colonel of the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Cavalry in April 1861 and accepted a general’s commission in the service of the breakaway Southern Confederacy, Kelly added, he was simply acting in defense of his native state of Virginia. “He was a man that gave up his country to fight for his state, which 150 years ago was more important than country. It was always loyalty to state first back in those days. Now it’s different today.”

But Kelly didn’t stop there. He went on to add that the reason “an honorable man” found it necessary to make such a decision in the first place was because of the bungling of wooden-headed politicians. The Civil War was triggered by what Kelly called “the lack of an ability to compromise... and men and women of good faith on both sides made their stand where their conscience had them make their stand.”

This touched off not only political fire—that Kelly would seem to be justifying the man who, especially since the August 12<sup>th</sup> riot in Charlottesville, has become a symbol for the American Left of much that is repugnant in American life—but historical fire as well. After all, Kelly was describing as “honorable” an American soldier who raised his hand against his own flag, and in defense of a cause that placed the slavery of 3.9 million African Americans among its principal reasons for fighting. Both CNN and the *Washington Post* rushed to enlist commentary from prominent academic historians, condemning Kelly’s remarks. Juana Summers, writing for *CNN Politics*, cited African American historian Edna Greene Medford and the president of the American Historical Association, James Grossman, who criticized Kelly as “just too simplistic.” Grossman particularly scorned Kelly’s comments on “lack of an ability to compromise” as “fantasies.” Grossman asked, “What compromise was available once states had made it clear that they would secede from any nation that would interfere with their right to own human beings? Prolonging the enslavement of those people?”

The *Washington Post* turned to Yale’s David Blight and Columbia’s Stephanie McCurry for even more stringent criticisms of Kelly. McCurry accused Kelly of promoting a ‘Lost Cause’ view of the Civil War, a version of the war’s origins which insisted that state rights or tariffs or resistance to centralized government was the “real” Southern motive for secession and the war that followed, rather than the defense of slavery. “What’s so strange about this statement is how closely it tracks or resembles the view of the Civil War that the South had finally got the nation to embrace by the early 20th century,” she said. “It’s the Jim Crow version of the causes of the Civil War. I mean, it tracks all of the major talking points of this pro-Confederate view of the Civil War.” McCurry professed incredulity at Kelly’s naivety. “It was not about slavery, it was about honorable men fighting for honorable causes?” McCurry said. “Well, what was the cause? [...] The reason there was no compromise possible was that people in the country could not agree over the wisdom of the continued and expanding enslavement of millions of African Americans.”

Simplification is the bane of good history. Unfortunately, simplification is what the 24/7 media-cycle feeds upon, and it did not take long before the comments were subjected to the most dreary

and hyper-compressed of conclusions, starting with the *New York Times* editorial board, which fatuously declaimed that Kelly's "central message is, 'Racists, we're your guys.'"

If so, there have been a lot more "racists" in the fields of historical academe than we ever dreamt. The great Allan Nevins, whose multi-volume *Ordeal of the Union* series dominated the field of Civil War history in the era of the Civil War Centennial, entitled one of the chapters in *The Emergence of Lincoln*, "The Failure of Compromise." Nevins described "the thinking" of North and South alike as "largely irrational, governed by subconscious memories, frustrated desires, and the distortions of politicians and editors."

Nor was it the Lost Cause mythmakers who invented the idea that the war was caused by a "blundering generation" of politicians. That was the argument of Progressive historians of the generation preceding Nevins. As James Garfield Randall (whose textbook on the Civil War era was the standard in college classrooms until the 1980s) wrote, "To suppose that the Union could not have been continued or slavery outmoded without the war and without the corrupt concomitants of the war, is hardly an enlightened assumption." Instead, the American mind of the 1860s became "a sorry mélange of party bile, crisis melodrama, inflated eloquence, unreason, religious fury, self-righteous, unctuous self-deception and hate"—somewhat like the *New York Times* editorial board. Northerners, Randall believed, were particularly prone to be obdurate because they regarded "war as an elemental, purifying force"—in much the same way that it appears Kelly's critics would like to regard the Civil War.

The fundamental problem lies in the word *compromise*. After all, in her 2012 book, *Confederate Reckoning*, McCurry herself described the rush to Southern secession as leaving Southern Unionists with "no power to deliver the compromise necessary" to "hold their states back from the precipice of secession." The real objection seems to be that anyone *today* should ever imagine that there was anything about slavery that *could* be the basis of compromise—which is, in itself, an uncompromising position and, presumably, an example of what Kelly was talking about. The 750,000 soldiers who died in the war might have had something to say about the desirability of compromise, but their voices have long since been stilled.

There were, in fact, numerous proposals for compromise on offer during the nervous "secession winter" of 1860-61, two of them hatched in Congress: the Crittenden Compromise of December 18, 1860, and the Washington Peace Convention (February 4-27, 1861). But both of them fell colossally flat. Why? Partly because when Southerners spoke of "compromise," what they really meant was "concession," especially the concession of a federal slave code that would nationalize legalized slavery across most of the nation.

But another aspect of the problem was that Northerners, including Abraham Lincoln, simply could not believe that the South wasn't simply bluffing. Richard Yates, Lincoln's Illinois political ally, laughed-off Southern threats of secession and civil war as mere stereotypical Southern bluster. "We are told that the South will not submit and that the Union is to be dissolved," Yates said. "Do you want my advice on this subject? Then all I have to say is, keep cool. [...] I confess I have but little fears of secession or disunion. [...] We believe it will not be one year till the whole South, except the traitors bent on disunion... will hail the election of Mr.

Lincoln as one of the greatest blessings.” Why compromise when you don’t believe there will be any penalty for remaining unmoved?

Even Lincoln, who was ready to go so far as to offer guarantees to the Southern states for slavery within their own boundaries, drew the line at allowing slavery to be legalized in the western territories. “Let there be no compromise on slavery extension,” Lincoln wrote. And if Southerners thought their solution lay in seceding from the Union, then “My opinion is that no state can, in any way lawfully, get out of the Union, without the consent of the others; and that it is the duty of the President, and other government functionaries to run the machine as it is.” But Lincoln likewise dismissed the possibility that the secession crisis would come to war. “There is really no crisis except an artificial one!” he said in a speech on February 15, 1861. “There is no crisis, excepting such a one as may be gotten up at any time by designing politicians.”

Randall and Nevins were wrong to attribute the “inability to compromise” to “blundering.” Both sides in 1861 were actually driven by the most glittering, hard-edged logic. But logic can be just as uncompromising as stupidity, and in this case it provided a lethal formula in which both sides refused compromise and then dismissed any need for compromise. Four years later, in his second Inaugural Address, Lincoln acknowledged the hardness of that logic (and in precisely the terms Kelly used about the “lack of an ability to compromise”) when he said, “Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came.”

Nor was Kelly stretching points by describing Robert E. Lee as “an honorable man.” Honorable men are sometimes called upon to serve bad causes, something both Lee and Ulysses Grant experienced while serving in the U.S. Army during the Mexican-American War. “To this day,” Grant wrote in 1885, he regarded the Mexican conflict as “one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation,” and Lee agreed, saying that, “It is true we bullied” Mexico. “Of that I am ashamed, as She was the weaker party.”

Grant’s own opinion of Lee ratifies Kelly’s. At Appomattox, Grant “felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.” Even then, Grant did “not question... the sincerity of the great mass of those who were opposed to us.” In fact, not even Winston Churchill, as World War II raged, would withhold a word of praise to an honorable opponent in the German army, Erwin Rommel: “We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us, and, may I say across the havoc of war, a great general.”

I may, in some respects, actually be less forgiving than Grant, in that I think Lee’s decision to serve the Confederacy was at least treasonous, if not an act of treason. (It is odd that the *New York Times* did not seem to regard treason worth complaining about.) But Kelly was right to observe that there were legal and constitutional questions that complicate that judgment, and which prevented Lee from actually being tried for treason after the war. The most significant of these, as Lee himself pointed out before a congressional committee in 1866, was the uncertain constitutional relationship between state and national citizenship. “The act of Virginia, in

withdrawing herself from the United States, carried me along as a citizen of Virginia,” Lee insisted, “her laws and her acts were binding on me.”

That is hardly unreasonable. Before the Fourteenth Amendment, the Constitution was maddeningly vague on the relationship between national and state citizenship, and the obligation to respect the “privileges and immunities” they entailed. Whatever distaste I feel for Lee’s cause, no one was ever able to accuse him of ordering wartime atrocities. Others *did* order them, but not Lee. Even Lincoln, who wished in 1863 that he had had authority to arrest Lee before Lee could join the Confederacy, acknowledged in 1865, when shown a photograph of Lee, that: “It is a good face; it is the face of a noble, noble, brave man.”

“The past is a foreign country,” wrote the British novelist L.P. Hartley, “they do things differently there.” It is also a complicated country, and it doesn’t pay to rush through its landscape, looking for quick *gotcha!* moments. John Kelly may not be an historian, but he has been a good and honorable soldier. He knew another honorable soldier when he saw him, even at a distance.

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**Allen Guelzo** is the Henry R. Luce III Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College, where he serves as Director of the Civil War Era Studies Program.

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