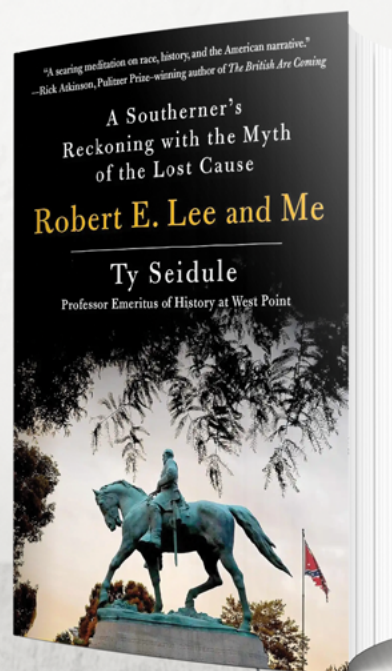


Robert E. Lee and Me

A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause



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Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause by Ty Seidule, a retired U.S. Army brigadier general and former head of the Department of History at West Point, is an intimate look at Robert E. Lee's formative youth and career within the military alongside a collage of stories about the Civil War that Seidule increasingly felt at odds with. In its pages, Seidule pulls no punches in confronting a slew of ingrained narratives connected to the American Civil War, particularly those affiliated with Lee. Seidule persuasively argues that these myths, as he sees them, continue to influence both military traditions and American culture writ large.

In 1914, a huge monument was erected at Arlington National Cemetery honoring the Confederacy. This was proof how thoroughly the "Lost Cause" narrative had been absorbed by the collective consciousness of the Nation.¹ Billing it a monument to national reconciliation, President Woodrow Wilson called it an "emblem to a reunited people."² "The statue represents all the terrible lies of the Lost Cause."³

An African American woman, portrayed as an overweight, crying, but loyal "mammy," takes a white baby from her "master," a Confederate soldier heading off to war. Clinging to her billowing skirt, another child seeks the "mammy's" protection. In reality, young enslaved girls, not adult women, looked after white children. Another enslaved figure follows his "master" to war, serving as a body servant. The figures provide one racist trope after another.⁴

"The statue serves as an act of defiance. The sculptor knew exactly what he was doing. [The sculptor] wanted to portray an 'accurate' history of the loyal, happy slave, not the 'lies' told through books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which showed the brutality of slavery. Instead, the artist said the monument represents the South, which fought 'for a constitutional right, and not to uphold slavery.'⁵ Inscribed on the monument was a Latin phrase that translates as "the victorious cause pleased the gods, but the conquered cause pleased Cato."⁶ For

one noted historian, “the inscription is a ‘f*** you’ to the Union.”⁷

It’s worth remembering that Seidule is a genuine historian himself and engages in serious historical analysis while pondering his own legacy with these myths that he wholeheartedly embraced growing up in Alexandria, Virginia, and Georgia. The book’s relevance, in terms of a military audience, revolves around the impact these myths continue to have on military culture, heritage, and, most importantly, values.

But the book is more than just historical analysis. It is also a memoir, chronicling his evolution from a childhood rich in Confederate mythology that slowly, and with resistance, gives way to a more nuanced understanding of the war’s true causes and consequences as he incorporates a lived existence. Seidule readily admits he grew up with a profound reverence for Lee as a classical hero, a feeling echoed by so many across the South and reflected in a profusion of monuments, schools, textbooks, and even street names. But as Seidule matured, his professionalism developed, and he honed his academic chops, he began to see a chasm between uncomfortable facts he knew to be true about both Lee and the Confederacy and the widely propagated Lost Cause narrative. That Lost Cause story depicts the Confederacy as a gallant effort on behalf of states’ rights instead of a preservation of slavery.

Seidule does an exemplary job of deep diving into the life of Lee, his role as a leading Confederate figure, and the accompanying mythology that emerged over time. He critically examines how the military, its academies, and society at large have embraced these myths and insists that society must reevaluate how history is both taught and memorialized.

Lee left [the Union] for the same reason the southern states seceded. The southern states went to war to protect and expand chattel slavery because they felt threatened by Lincoln’s election. ... Lee chose the Confederacy because of his abiding belief in slavery. A senior Army colonel as intelligent as Robert E. Lee knew full well why the states seceded; they told the world why they seceded—to protect and expand slavery. Lee chose to fight for a new nation whose explicit, constitutional guarantee was human bondage—forever.⁸

First and foremost, Seidule’s book is a frontal assault on the Lost Cause tale, which clearly romanticizes the shaky Confederate foundation. And this is a herculean task given the degree to which the myth is ingrained. As previously noted, the myth celebrates a proud, albeit doomed, resistance toward so-called Northern aggression, underscoring Lee as a beacon of light, somehow possessing a moral superiority. Using both precision and persistence, he demolishes the myth with unassailable evidence—Confederate leaders’ own words and documents—definitively showing the Confederacy’s primary objective was to maintain, if not expand, the tradition of slavery. The author contends the myth was constructed in the war’s wake as a means by which to reconcile the victors and the vanquished at the expense of Black America. What the myth really did was, plain and simple, sanitize motives and blur the horrific brutality of slavery.

Seidule implores the military community to consider how these myths have warped traditions and institutions. He dissects Lee’s actions and decisions, probing the morality attributed to him. In so doing, however, he does not discount his military genius. But he contends that Lee’s choice to fight for the Confederacy and, by default, support slavery, cannot be divorced from any assessment of his legacy. And Lee’s postwar behavior, which included staying quiet regarding violent acts of white supremacy and a refusal to advocate for racial equality, further muddies his legacy.

For military members reading this book, consider the fact Lee is not only a historical figure but also a symbol interlaced with military values like duty and self-sacrifice. Confronting this directly, Seidule openly asks the reader if it is appropriate to revere a man who abandoned his country and worked to preserve slavery. In short, is the Confederate general worthy of respect and admiration? Here is but one example to consider regarding Lee’s character:

Lee joined Mary at Arlington in November 1857 after George Curtis, Lee’s father-in-law, died. Until January 1860,

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Lee served as the executor of the will with no army duties. Winfield Scott, the commanding general of the army, gave Lee more than two years of administrative leave at full pay to sort out his father-in-law's estate. Lee's paid leave was more than twice as long as that of any other officer during the entire antebellum period.

... He certainly spent more time managing enslaved workers than he did leading soldiers.

As the executor of Curtis's will, Lee had several competing tasks. The first remit was to pay all debts, which proved to be substantial. ... the final task was to free all Curtis's enslaved people within five years. ... he could have chosen to sell land to pay the debts immediately. If he had done this, he could have freed the enslaved workers within months. Instead, Lee chose another path, keeping the enslaved workers as long as he could to pay off Curtis's debts and build money for the family. To do this, he broke families apart using the hiring system. ... Whenever Lee made a decision regarding enslaved people, he chose profit over human decency. ... Lee finally emancipated his [father-in-law's] enslaved workers [per the law at the time], but only after losing a court case in which he tried to keep them longer.

In addition to his keen financial interest and belief in human bondage, Lee loathed those who fought for emancipation. He deplored the "evil passions" of abolitionists who stirred "disloyalty" among slaves.⁹

From Seidule's point of view, as a soldier and scholar, commemoration of various Southern Civil War

"heroes" are not just impartial acknowledgements of history but vigorous endorsements of the myth. And upon closer examination, many of these commemorations arose during periods of racial tension and were pointedly intended to buttress a social order anchored to white supremacy.

The author confronts the military, as an institution, to own its guilt in perpetuating certain myths and consider what values it aspires to project going forward. He says renaming bases (already done) and removing Confederate statues (largely done) would be steps in the right direction toward aligning military culture with suitable values. He argues military professionals are obliged to seek the truth and to educate themselves and their subordinates about the complexities of history rather than accept sterilized or partial versions of the past.

One thing the book excels at is stressing the importance of historical education within the military profession. Seidule's own trek from ardent supporter of the Lost Cause myth to historian devoted to unearthing the unvarnished reality reveals the transformative power of education. His thoughtful exposition serves to remind us of the need for continuous learning and critical thinking, particularly as it pertains to history and that history's impact on both society and the military. In a way, the author's full throttle analysis serves as a framework for grasping the significance of institutional change and cultural reform within the military.

Robert E. Lee and Me is a courageous and illuminating work that challenges deeply held myths about the Civil War and what it was really all about. The book is at once both a commendable exfoliation of history and a call to action. And it comes with my highest recommendation. ■

Notes

1. The Lost Cause is a skewed historical interpretation of the American Civil War that attempts to portray the Confederate cause as just and heroic, and downplays the role of slavery in the war.

2. Ty Seidule, *Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020), 160–61.

3. *Ibid.*, 161.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 226.

9. *Ibid.*, 228–30.