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## Book Review

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# The Lee myth is debunked, but not the more dangerous myth-makers

by Fredric W. Henderson

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### **Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History**

by Alan T. Nolan

University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991

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Alan T. Nolan, in the preface to his new book, explains that his intention was not to write or rewrite the biography of Gen. Robert E. Lee, the main commander of the rebel forces in the U.S. Civil War of 1861-65, but to ensure that Lee's image in American history was fully considered, stripped of its mythology, for the first time. In doing so, Nolan has opened to question whole areas that any thoughtful student of the Civil War should find troublesome about the way in which history has treated this most prominent of Southern leaders. He also proves that Lee historiography has all too often chosen to ignore the blatant contradictions in Lee's actions, glossed over his flaws, and allowed him to escape the scrutiny that almost every other figure in American history has been subjected to.

Nolan recognizes that the struggle with the issues of Lee's views and actions in regard to slavery, secession, the South's posture after its military defeat, and with the mainly mythical interpretation these issues have been given by his biographers and historians of the Southern cause generally, is crucial for understanding the history of the Civil War, as one of the world's most important conflicts. However, in Nolan's final chapter, "The Lee Tradition and Civil War History," where he has promised the answer to why this is the case, his book falls short of what is sorely needed to correct the errors of such history. He accepts two revisionist premises:

1) that "Writers . . . have tended to magnify the differ-

ences between Northerners and Southerners out of all proportion. In 1861 the United States did not contain . . . two civilizations" (quoting from Grady McWhiney and Kenneth Stampp); and

2) that slavery was, in and of itself, the primary historical factor in the struggle. He thus produces a powerful demystification of Lee, but supplants one set of myths with another, only slightly more truthful.

I will first deal with Nolan's successes in debunking the Lee myth, and second, outline what it will take to accomplish what he fails to do in his last chapter—to understand both how historians have gone down a series of wrong tracks, and why.

### **'A god, a saint, a hero'**

The image of Robert E. Lee has evolved over the 130 years since America's bloodiest conflict as that of a man who is not really mortal, but virtually angelic. As Thomas Connelly, a leading historian of the Southern military effort, has described it, Lee has become a "god for Virginians, a saint for the white Protestant South, and a hero for the nation."

It has become well-nigh historical gospel that Lee saw the doctrines of secession and disunion as treason, years before the secessionist crisis; that he had no love for slavery, and only with great anguish did he, as a son of his beloved Virginia, take up arms against the nation and Constitution he had sworn to defend. The story goes that having fought the "noble fight," as the quintessential Southern gentleman, he was gracious and forgiving in his efforts to bring North and South together again after defeat.

However, one may ask, what of General Lee's service in the cause of disunion, a political and military effort directed at destroying the very nation that today idolizes him? Or his defense of the institution of slavery, that abomination which was the fulcrum of Southern economic institutions? Or his

standing as a military strategist—ironically in a fashion directly the opposite of Washington, another Virginian to whom he is so often compared—who won almost every battle yet still lost the war? On these and other questions, Mr. Nolan provides some fine insights, and many unimpeachable truths.

Being an attorney, Nolan lays out in eight, somewhat dry, but well-documented chapters his arguments as to why the mythical Lee of historiography is not the Lee of reality. He proves that Robert E. Lee was not so very different from other Southerners of his class, in his views on slavery and secession. Thoroughly undermining the notion that Lee fought for the Confederacy *despite* his supposed opposition to slavery, and his reluctance in accepting the “inevitability” of breaking up the Union, Mr. Nolan presents a body of fact to demonstrate that Lee’s statements (made in the 1850s in private letters) on these issues, so often cited by historians, are directly contrary to his actions and utterances in other contexts.

Possibly more controversial are the arguments he makes which cast doubt on the honesty of Lee’s motives in his decision to resign his military commission in the U.S. Army and cast his lot with the Confederacy. Nolan makes a strong case that most of what has been said about Lee being torn by his sense of honor and duty over this decision, is semi-chivalric nonsense. While Lee’s oft-quoted “I shall never again raise my sword, except in defense of my Virginia” has been used by Lee’s defenders to argue otherwise, there can be no doubt, as Nolan proves, that Lee had conclusively and in a calculated fashion decided on a course to militarily oppose the Union. Nolan likewise argues persuasively that Lee’s purported conduct towards his “Northern brethren” both during and after the war was anything but that of a gentleman.

### Misses fundamental issues

Mr. Nolan fails, however, in explaining the “why” of Lee’s historically polished image. Like so many others of revisionist bent, he stumbles by ignoring the most fundamental aspects of what led to the conflict in 1861, by denying that there was any deep cultural, political, and economic, conflict between South and North. Quoting from David M. Potter, he asserts, “the efforts of historians to buttress their claim that the South had a wholly separate culture self-consciously asserting itself as a cultural counterpart of political nationalism, have led, on the whole, to paltry results.”

To explain the problems of Lee and Civil War history, is to address the problems of the history of the nation as a whole after Lee surrendered at Appomattox. It was not in the South alone that Robert E. Lee was made a demi-god.

Prior to the war, the South had been turned into a wretched parody of everything America had opposed in the Old World. Its free trade-based slave economy was a direct repudiation of the doctrines of George Washington and his first Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton; it was the product

of growing British control of Southern economic life and thought. Its political and social organization reeked of the aristocratic despotism of oligarchical Europe, rejected by the revolutionaries of 1776. Instead of a commitment to spread republican institutions and the policies of economic development that were essential to them, the South’s rulers pursued the dream of a vast, slave-based empire throughout the southern half of the Western Hemisphere. To sustain a belief in a native superiority which flew in the face of reality, it developed a culture infected by the worst romanticism, with the glorification of feudal institutions and customs which bred the cult of Southern “chivalry.”

By 1860, in this battle between British free trade and “American System” economic policies, the conflict between North and South had been brought to a crisis. The election of Abraham Lincoln meant the re-imposition of the policies of Henry Clay and Henry C. Carey, and the end of the dominance of the anti-republican British economic outlook over national policy. Having captured Southern institutions, the British moved to destroy the nation by provoking the Civil War in 1861, utilizing Southern Freemasonic networks and Northern free traders, especially those—ironically—within the radical abolitionist movement. The story of this effort has been recounted by two historians associated with today’s leading American System economist, Lyndon LaRouche: Allen Salisbury’s *The Civil War and the American System*, 1978, and Anton Chaitkin’s *Treason in America*, 1985. While this British-backed effort failed in the war, those same political forces regrouped to attempt to ensure that the resurgence of republican policies did not politically eliminate them.

### Two currents of historiography

For about 30 years after the war, within memory of most of the active participants, there was an ongoing debate over what the defeat of the South would mean for the nation, and history was seen in the light of that policy battle. After that, the academic historiography of this period developed in two main currents, both badly flawed. Starting around 1895, for nearly a half-century the school of Dunning, Fleming, and the Southern “Lost Cause,” in both its Southern and Northern variants, reigned supreme, as the “history of reconciliation.” It was in this polluted soil that the seeds of the Lee myth sprouted, along with a mass of related lies. That unreal history was, thus, an apology for the fact that, in the name of “reconciliation”—an era of ersatz good feeling—the rights and dignity of American blacks were sacrificed and any hope of liberating the South as a whole from the enslavement of its free trade-imposed backwardness was destroyed, perpetuating the misery and degradation that had been imposed on the vast majority of those who lived there.

Then, in the 1940s and 1950s, the Revisionists began to alter the way in which the Civil War was viewed; but, while reversing some of the terrible frauds of the “Lost Cause” perspective, they refused to recognize the essential cause of

the conflict and thus perpetuated the most insidious aspects of the original myth. They failed to understand, or chose to ignore, the fact that it was two very different views of the doctrines upon which the American republic was based—a republican one, reviving the outlook of Hamilton, Washington, and Franklin; and an oligarchist one, reviving the outlook of King George III—that collided in 1861. So the modern-day revisionists merely applied a “corrective” to the earlier bias of the historians of reconciliation.

In this sense, the history of this crucial period has taken on the linear and false form of the “mere balancing” of differing, *ignorant* viewpoints. Rather than addressing the more politically volatile questions raised by using the absolute criteria of universal history, the revisionist or neo-revisionist historians of the last 30 years have sought to present a supposedly “objective” but, in fact, totally relativistic outlook. In place of such an understanding of the real causes for the war, and the determining features of the period afterwards, revisionists and such neo-revisionists as Nolan have indulged in the type of nonsensical psycho- and socio-history that is the core of Nolan’s failed attempt to explain why the Lee myth continues to have such influence.

### **The ‘Lost Cause’: The British attempt to recapture the U.S.**

The “Lost Cause” has been grossly misunderstood as a romantic, almost benign fantasy, more than anything the psychological crutch for a region defeated in the conflict of 1861-65. That it might have been grounded in real, and powerful, forces of the ante-bellum South, which were to be perpetuated after the war, has been dismissed except for a tiny handful of historians. The one historian, Rollin Osterweis, who has devoted much thought to the effects of such a cultural and political mythology on both the South, and its history, has largely been ignored by the revisionists.

Yet, this myth of the “Lost Cause” provides a critical insight into a unity of Northern and Southern thought on the major issues that arose from the war. This can be seen most dramatically in the work of a man that both schools have chosen to bury, the very man who coined the term by which this political and cultural outlook would be known. Edward A. Pollard, who wrote the South’s first history of the conflict, *The Lost Cause: A Southern History of the Late War* and *The Lost Cause, Regained*, is today dismissed as only a misguided diehard of the Southern cause. He is more interesting than that.

With the exception of Gen. Jubal Early and the Southern Historical Society under his reign, Pollard’s *Lost Cause* books did the most to build the Lee myth. Pollard, who wrote both of his volumes within a year of the war’s end, had spent the better part of the war as editor of the *Richmond Examiner*, where he attacked the incompetence of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and raised Lee to the level of the Confederacy’s military savior and premier statesman.

Pollard was *the* historian of the South as it was licking the wounds of defeat. While his works on the war, once widely read, have a certain vogue today for those who worship Lee and the supposedly “noble” cause which he served, and were recently reprinted, they have been dismissed by the revisionists. But the polemical sections of *The Lost Cause* and the more important *The Lost Cause, Regained*, reveal not only the apology for the South’s effort to destroy the Union. They are a call to arms for continued struggle, *in political form*, of the Southern oligarchy, so as to ensure not only the survival of its principles, but, as Pollard describes it, their “ultimate triumph.”

Though ignored by Mr. Nolan, and most other historians of the period since World War II, Pollard, more concisely than any of today’s historians, understood that political and military conflicts arise from the clash of irreconcilable ideas and principles. Realizing that the South, backed by Britain, had lost in its effort to fracture the United States and that the war meant the end of slavery as it had existed before the war, he also understood that neither secession nor slavery were the primary goals to those who had led the South into war.

### **‘Lost Cause, Regained’**

He argued in the *Lost Cause, Regained* that the South, as an instrument of pro-British policy, could still prevail. In an important sense, it did. Lincoln’s plan for Reconstruction of the South was overthrown, thus ensuring the survival of the South’s oligarchical class. In tandem, the “American System” economic practice of Lincoln’s adviser Henry Carey, et al., was destroyed in the British-inspired Specie Resumption Act of 1879. These two catastrophic policy failures became the basis for the “reconciliation” of the 1890s, precisely when the British grab for full control over American cultural, economic, and foreign policies manifested itself most blatantly. The Union that came about patched together a resurrected Southern aristocracy with the Northern political and financial power which shared similar views on the fundamental issue—the determination to castrate republican institutions and policies in the United States. Thus, a combination of the type that had provoked secession and war in 1861, emerged in the postwar period to corrupt national policy and national ideology.

Pollard argued for the continued fight of Southerners for what he described as their “superior” culture and social and political institutions. While slavery was dead as an institution, the basic economic relations of the pre-war South, a dependence on British finance, and its Northern allies, based primarily in New York, would remain intact. In a cruel irony, this would be the predominant feature of economic life in the much vaunted “New South” well into the 20th century; in 1930, the proportions of the Southern population engaged in agriculture and industry would be exactly the same as in 1860!

Using white supremacy as the rationale for this, and ar-

guing for the continued oppression of Southern blacks, Pollard adduced the Darwinian crank version of “natural science” and “natural history” promoted by the British imperialists to concoct the ideological common ground between Southern oligarchs and former abolitionists and both radical and moderate Republicans. The collapse of Reconstruction and the obliteration of “American System” economic policies represented the “failures” that justified the argument for the superiority of the British doctrines. The social drivel of Thomas Huxley and Charles Darwin, heavily laced with the influences of British romanticism, bolstered the old free-trade economic outlook of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, to provide the nexus of unity.

### Treason in the Northern media

Pollard died in 1872. His pro-British brethren, North and South, continued his “war of ideas,” with the hefty support of continued British ideological attacks on republican institutions and principles. Such “liberal” Northern journals as *The Nation* and *Scribners Weekly*—later renamed *The Century*—played a critical role in this process. These had been leading Republican (in the case of *The Nation* radical) publications until the late 1860s, but staunch supporters of free trade. As Reconstruction collapsed, they ran targeted exposés alleging political corruption in the South, as the former secessionists moved to once again usurp power, and became the apologists of “reconciliation.” *The Nation*’s editor E.L. Godkin, and other such “reform” Republicans, opined that the Reconstruction period proved that blacks were unfit for self-government, and that the doctrines of the Republican Party of Lincoln and Carey couldn’t survive the test of so-called “natural history.”

*Scribners* was a classic example of this exercise in hypocrisy and manipulation. Beginning with a series of articles by Edward King called “the Great South,” that ran throughout 1873-74, *Scribners* became what co-founder and editor Roswell Smith described as “the interpreter of the South to the nation.” Throughout the rest of the 1870s and into the 1880s, under the new name *The Century*, the publication showcased postwar Southern literature. Through such Southern writers as Joel Chandler Harris (the creator of Uncle Remus), George Washington Cable, Thomas Nelson Page (the creator of Marse Chan and Meh Lady), James Lane Allen, and Grace King, the glories of Southern life were spread all over the nation. A romantic and tranquil South, peopled by the benevolent planter Marse Chan and his lady, and their contented blacks, made palatable for the North the myth of black inferiority, and the alleged black acceptance of that imposed inferiority. After 1877, the year of Compromise, *Scribners/The Century*, became the major promoter of the mythical image of a “New South” economically, as well. In 1883, *The Century* serialized Walter B. Hill’s “Uncle Tom Without a Cabin” a piece that portrayed the supposed plight of Southern blacks, adrift without slavery, and painted a flattering picture of

Southern paternalism as the solution. In 1883, with great fanfare, *The Century* would begin its famous “Battles and Leaders” series of Civil War reminiscences, to feed the flood of romantic recollections of Civil War veterans, and to romanticize the Southern military effort.

During the same period, Sophie Bledsoe Herrick, as its influential science editor, made *The Century* the leading popularizer of the scientifically incompetent and dishonest theories of Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and the Social Darwinists in America. Herrick was the daughter of Albert Taylor Bledsoe, one of the South’s leading apologists for slavery before the war and a collaborator of Pollard’s afterwards. Before coming to *The Century* she had worked in helping to found his *Southern Review*, a leading voice of the South in its postwar “battle of ideas.” *The Century*, along with *The Nation* and other Northern national weeklies, also unanimously promoted the doctrines of free trade, in opposition to what they argued was the “slavery” of “American System” economic policies.

### From Robert E. Lee to Teddy Roosevelt

The peacetime triumph of the very doctrines that had failed to destroy the nation during the Civil War, in the form predicted by Pollard, goes a long way toward explaining the apotheosis of Robert E. Lee, the historical figure. Lee, the personification of the Southern cause, was an imperialist, a racist, an aristocrat, and a genocidalist. The myth made that all respectable. It would be turned into a national character type in the person of Teddy Roosevelt, when he became President thanks to the assassination of President McKinley in 1901. Sadly, America has had to live with this legacy since, as America more explicitly embraced in the 20th century the very hated British policies it fought against in the Civil War.

All of this is ignored by Mr. Nolan, as it has been by every other historian who has attempted to understand the post-1865 period. The lesson of Mr. Nolan’s book is that the failure to do battle with such policies, and the failure to apply the measure of universal history to assess both past and the present, is what ensures that such myths remain untouched. And so long as such myths have power over people’s views, Americans will tolerate the un-American policies that are destroying it. Lee was a traitor, who fought to destroy what Abraham Lincoln justly described as “man’s last best hope on Earth.” Admitting that fact is no more vindictive or divisive than recognizing that President Bush’s policies are an abomination as horrible as that which President Lincoln sought to defend America, the “last best hope,” against.

Myths live on and shape history, because those who ought to be the nation’s political and intellectual elite remain small-minded. Rather than examine the evil, cruel, and ugly events in our past and apply the lessons to the present, it is always easier for some to live with fiction, and more convenient for them that the rest of us do so as well.