

Alan T. Nolan, Lee Considered(1991)

2. Lee and the Peculiar Institution

Notes that mythic Lee was opposed to slavery (at least in the abstract).

Deals w/ Lee in the North, specifically the Gettysburg campaign.

Jenkins' brigade. . .they raided and foraged in Penna. and searched for blacks and sent them back into slavery. No sure of the numbers but locals(chambersburg)reported that "quite a number of free and slave--men, women, and children--were sent South into slavery. Whether Lee was aware of this is something else. Nolan suggests that it would be hard to believe he did not. In any case, the "slave-hunting" of his military while invading the North seemed wholly inappropriate and militarily unsound. Furthermore, it all happened under Lee's command.

The thrust of this chapter is to question the traditional view that Lee opposed slavery and rejoiced in abolition of this heinous institution. On the contrary, he seemed to have held the conventional southern view of the institution held by his aristocratic peers. In view of his Virginia roots none of this seemed surprising.

3. Lee Seceds

Nolan plays w/ the chronology here. Notes that Lee at 54 had served in the Federal Army for 36 years. On April 19 he learned privately that Virginia was going to seceded. April 20 the day of Virginia secession Lee resigned his commission. April 22 he accepts Virginia's commission as a major general.

Although Virginia's decision was a critical element in his final resolution, . . .he was essentially committed to the Southern cause before Va.'s secession by virtue of his feelings about slavery and its expansion and by his sense of sectional loyalty. This is contra to his apologists who insist that somehow he was above all the politics of the time and the immediacy of secession. That he was a Virginian pure and simple and went with his state sans ideology, etc.

4. General Lee

A resounding part of the Lee tradition was the man's unquestioned military genius. . . a nearly invincible general, etc. While Longstreet, Ewell, and Stuart were "defective." Lee's unparalleled and unmatched military superiority is central to the Lee tradition.

Nolan, Lee Considered

Page two

The context--that the "Lost Cause" was lost from the beginning. That the North's superiority in resources and numbers inevitably would overrun the South. To Lee's credit, his superior generalship was able to keep the Con. Army in the field longer than any one could have imagined, etc.

But this view is trational and not to be taken at face value.

[McPherson, Ordeal by Fire]: lays out the facts. The burden was largely on the North. It had to invade, conquer, and destroy the South's will to resist. Invasion of the South was logistically far more demanding and problematical than the South's goal--a startegic defense. The size of the Confederacy--as area as large as the North itself if faraway California and Oregon are excluded. The South had the advantage of interior lines, a freindly country. The North had the problem of extended lines of communication and transport in a hostile country. This required a large number of forces to defend these lines. The North could have been defeated in any one of three ways. . . (1) It could have lost militarily in the field (2) It could have been defeated politically, by discouragement of Northern population, who had the power to simply vote a defeat for the North, (3) It could have been defeated diplomatically, by European intervention.

Nothing was certain. But the cliam that the South's fate was dtermined at the outset is not certain. The question is: How did Lee's generalship contribute or detract from the South's chances of winning the war.

Strategies:

Union/ Grant became the strategy of the offensive. Essential to destroy the Rebs in the field before war weariness and abandonment of the will in the North.

Since the South did not need to conquer the North, the grand strategy for the South was defensive. The South should have learned from the Revolutionary War when Washington was able to go from defeat to defeat but never to allow the surrender of his army in the field until the British, after 8 years, wearied of the contest.

Nolan contends that the most persuasive historians (like McPherson) are right: that the Con. never really defined a meaningful grand strategy for their war of independence. Lee's own concept of a war-fighting strategy for his own Army became the strategy that Richmond accepted (esp. his forays into MD. and Penna.)

He discusses Lee's penchant for the "offensive" with the losses this entailed. See Lee's campaigns in the first six months he took over the Army of Northern Virginia. The losses were staggering when we consider that they were different from Union losses because of the Con. problem of replacements.

Lee understood his army's own situation. He was aware of the numerical disadvantage, believed that a seige would mean the end, thought it critical to keep his army in the field. But he continued with his aggressive grand strategy and intention to sweep the Federals from the field. He did not abandon his offensive campaigns until 1864.

Had Lee adopted a defensive strategy during the first two years that he spent on the offensive, he could have saved a good proportion of his 100,000 who were casualties during these first two years. W/ these additional numbers he could have maintained mobility and avoid the seige in the last year of the war. Those 100,000 included many excellent staff and middle grade officers that were irreplaceable. A grand strategy of the defense with these added numbers might have worn the North down--increased their casualties to the point of intolerability by 1864. The grand strategy of the defense he was forced into in the last year was the only feasible alternative and might have led to a Confed. victory.

Lee's "addiction" to the audacious. His thought of not crossing the Potomac after Antietam but to stay and attack. The same was the case after the Third Day of Gettysburg. Lee wanted to stay on the battlefield and take the offensive even when it was clear he did not have the manpower.

In sum, Lee's "kind of war," the grand strategy of the offensive, contradicted the South's true grand strategy. It therefore contributed to the Loss of the Lost Cause.

5. Magnanimous Adversary

The tradition has it that Lee only referred to the Yankees as "those people." The historical record shows that Lee regarded the enemy in much harder terms--Feds were "vandals," who exercised "entire disregard of civilized warfare and dictates of humanity:" they were "cowardly persecutors:" their acts "were unchristian and barbaric." Lee had a demonic image of the Federals. . . that was typical of the way the enemy is portrayed in war time.

6. The Price of Honor

Nolan asks when did Lee know the war was lost. Notes that Lee was never optimistic about the South's chances from the very outset.

Speculates that there were at least three milestones along the road to Appomatox when Lee's pessimism must have intensified:

Nolan, Lee Considered
Page four

Following Gettysburg and Vicksburg; when the seige of Petersburg began; and definitely when Lincoln was re-elected in november 1864.

Even after the fall of Richmond, Lee retreated fighting all along the way to Appomatox. Why? What were his motivations to continue with what is implied as the "senseless" killing and destruction when he knew the casuse was lost beyond recovery?

The consequences. He cites McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, p. 476.

Did he do it for God, honor, duty, and country. . . .as his apologists are anxious to attest as they build the legend. The Lee tradiiton. Nolan's point is that when the human and social consequences are added into the equation of his continuing the struggle without any belief in the possibility of victory, these facts throw a serious doubt over the assumption that Lee's persistence was wholly admirable.

7. Lee After the War

The tradition of Lee as the great "Conciliator," who urged that a spirit of reconciliation and acceptance be the South's path toward a repairing of the divided nation.

The reality was that Lee was basically no different in his post-war years than the average white southerner:

He continued to champion states' rights and white supremacy, and abandoned forever their vision of an independent slaveholders' republic. They had to work within the Union without slavery. Even though they accepted these developments, they did not repudiate their decision to wage war on the Union. Rather they defended their actions in 1861-1865(right of secession)and insisted that the North acknowledge the honor and heroicisim of their cause.

Lee embraced the conventional claims of the defeated South: states' rights, white supremacy, the correctness of secession and the South's wartime efforts, and an insistence that the North honor the South's cause. He was in brief, a mainstream secessionist after the war. . . .

8. Lee Tradition/Civil War History

This tradition is all part of the abounding legends about the Civil War. A number of these fictions have been identified: that the war was precipitated by the abolitionists, that the South simply could not have won the war, that the South was overwhelmed by numbers, that the slaves were faithful to their masters during the war, and that slavery was not the central issue in the conflict between North and South, that the South would have abandoned slavery but for Northern agitation, and that the High Tide of the Confederacy came at Gettysburg.