

History 225

Re: Notes on Lee (use w/ Gallagher Essay in Boritt

Source: McPherson in "Lee Dissected"

The place Lee holds in the South's "Lost Cause" mythology

Lee's champion biographer was Douglas Southall Freeman of Richmond.

His four volume biography might well be the best biography ever written by an American about an American.

If you look under the Index under "personal characteristics" you find these entries:

abstemious, alertness, amiability, boldness, calmness, charm of manner, cheerfulness, courage, courtesy, dignity, diligence, fairness, faith in God, friendliness, generosity, goodness, good judgment, good looks, grace, heroic character, humility, integrity, intelligence, justice, kindness, modesty, patience, poise, politeness, resourcefulness, sincerity, tact, thoughtfulness, and wisdom.

Lee is godlike. Almost Christ incarnate for the true believers of the "Lost Cause" school of the Civil War.

Lee in the "Lost Cause" mythology is the very personification of what the Confederate cause was all about. Remembering that the body of the "Lost Cause" mythology does not mention that the war was fought over the preservation and the perpetuation of slavery. But the war was fought for principle--principles embodied in General Robert Edward Lee--of state rights and constitutional liberty.

McPherson on Lee. He agrees with Gallagher in that the Confederacy only chance of winning in her desperate gamble for independence in reality rested with Lee. On three occasions Lee almost pulled it off:

With his defeat of McClellan in the Peninsula and second Manassas and the invasion of Maryland in 1862.

With his victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville and his invasion of Pennsylvania in 1863.

With the casualties he inflicted on Grant in 1864 in the Richmond-Petersburg Campaigns.

In any of these cases Lee was in a position with a victory in the field of sapping Northern morale and forcing the Union to call off the war and acknowledge Southern independence.

As it was Lee that forced the war on the North for four years. Not another Confederate general or combination of Rebel generals or commanders could have accomplished this.

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Take Lee out of the equation and you have one of the many ironies of the War. Had the South had no Lee, McClellan's campaign in 1862 would have probably been successful and Richmond would have fallen to the Federals. It was Lee who picked up the Confederacy when she was on the canvas and turned certain defeat into transforming victory. If Joe Johnston had remained in command outside of the Confederate capital Richmond would have fallen and the war would have been over.

Lee made all the difference (with help from McClellan to be sure).

But had Richmond surrendered in 1862 there would have been no Emancipation proclamation. The war would have ended with slavery intact.

Lee's victory in the Peninsula in 1862 and his string of subsequent victories prolonged the war until it destroyed slavery, the plantation economy, the wealth and infrastructure of the region, and virtually everything the Confederacy stood for. That was the profound irony of Lee's military genius.

moral of the story - Be careful what you wish for.

It may your wish very come true.