

# Robert E. Lee, Vietnam, and Abortion: History, Truth, and Changing Times

By Stephen A. Brown



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As a youth he participated in the bicentennial of Winchester, his home town, with an extensive Civil War history; his senior honors paper at Yale was on an aspect of the Civil War; and he has maintained a lifelong interest in the events of 1861-65. Too young to participate in the Korean War and too old for Vietnam, he has never served in the military.

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This paper was presented to the Winchester Torch Club December 3, 2014.

How we understand events in the past may change over time. For instance, our judgment of the Civil War, its causes, and its leaders has changed markedly in the last fifty years. Two more recent conflicts, Vietnam and Iraq, appear to have much in common, but are viewed quite differently, partly because of the time that has

elapsed between them. These examples make us wonder how the controversies of our own time, such as abortion, will look to our descendants. Will they be mindful of the complexities of these issues, or will they opt for a simplistic black or white judgment?

## Robert E. Lee and the Civil War

From at least 1864, Robert E. Lee has been venerated in the southern United States, treated as a secular saint. By the mid-twentieth century, that admiration and adoration had spread across the United States. This paean of praise arose in part from the conduct of the man, his military genius, his sense of duty and honor, and his chivalric bearing. But we can also discern a need within the people, at first in the south, then across the country, to find a way to reconciliation after the bloody civil conflict. Lee offered a template others could emulate.

The South may have lost the Civil War, but they fought fiercely. The South may have lost the war, but their leaders believed in the concepts of chivalry. They were "wrong" on many issues, most notably slavery, but they were noble. And, sometimes literally, the rebels were the brothers of Johnny Yank.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this school of historical interpretation of the Civil War became known as the Lost Cause school, and it dominated not only historical writing but other expressions as well (Janney). The novel and film *Gone With the Wind* are classic expressions of the Lost Cause.

For those who espoused the Lost Cause interpretation, the overriding cause of the Civil War was the necessity for Southerners to defend their homes and the right of a state to determine its own destiny without the interference of the federal government. For them, slavery was but an incidental (albeit embarrassing) part of the southern way of life and not a major cause of the war. The defeat of this principle had a positive outcome, though, in the realization that our brothers are not just those in our state, but include all Americans. Author and historian Shelby Foote has famously said (on Ken Burns' magnificent series for PBS, *The Civil War*), the true outcome of the war was that before the war we said "the United States are," and afterward, "the United States is."

For Southern whites, the Lost Cause theory explained a crushing defeat in a way that removed at least a bit of the sting and that avoided looking too deeply at the moral and societal consequences of owning another human being. For all Americans, it satisfied a yearning for heroes. Understandably, it gained a strong foothold.

However, by the mid-twentieth century, at the time of the war's centennial, historians had become skeptical of the Lost Cause interpretation. Such a seminal event, they concluded, could not be explained so simply. From the vantage point of a century, they argued that to truly understand the Civil War and how it came to occur, one must look at a multitude of causes. These included the inherent conflicting needs of the northern manufacturing economy and the southern agricultural

economy, the conflict between a centralized government and recognition of the full rights of the states, and of course slavery, to name but a few. The Lost Cause was superseded by the “Multi Causation” historical theory (“Causes of the Civil War”).

Another half century has passed, and we are now in the midst of the war’s sesquicentennial. The Civil Rights revolution that began during the Civil War’s centennial gave African Americans, previously disenfranchised, a powerful new voice. Moreover, the white population of America in the twenty-first century must look back with horror and shame at America’s treatment of blacks in the first two hundred years of our existence as a country.

Today there is a near unanimous agreement among contemporary historians that the chief cause of the Civil War was slavery. Famed Civil War historian James McPherson has said “Probably 90 percent, maybe 95 percent of serious historians of the Civil War would agree on the broad questions of what the war was about and what brought it about and what caused it, which was the increasing polarization of the country between the free states and the slave states over issues of slavery, especially the expansion of slavery” (qtd. in Badger). All other factors pale into insignificance. Slavery was the overriding cause, notwithstanding that President Lincoln insisted that preserving the union was *the* cause and that most Union soldiers agreed that if ending slavery was the dominant reason, the war was not worth fighting (Lincoln).

Focusing on a single dominant cause of the war feeds into what appears to be our societal need to reduce every issue, no matter how complex, to a binary choice: there are good guys and bad guys. In this analysis, the North were the good guys and the South the bad guys.

Scant wonder then that today scholars and writers are deconstructing Robert E. Lee. Scholars can—and do—argue over Lee’s attitude toward slavery (see Simpson); indisputably, Lee believed very strongly that, if his homeland—which he defined as the Commonwealth of Virginia—was attacked, he was morally obligated to defend it (Blount). But his actions appear differently in the context of our own era’s values. In a piece entitled “Dispelling Lee’s Myths,” columnist Richard Cohen wrote, “He was loyal to slavery and disloyal to his country—not worthy [...] of the honors accorded him [...] such a man cannot be admired” (Cohen; see also Green). By virtue of his being on the wrong side of the issue that defined the war, Lee’s best qualities can seem to discredit him. He is attacked because he was *too* good a general—by his genius he prolonged the war. His personal rectitude is also vilified because his soldiers adored him and fought all the harder for him (MacPherson; Ellem).

## As we learn more about people or events, our understanding of them changes.

Robert E. Lee died in 1870. He has not changed in the last century and a half. What has changed is the way we look at the man and his life. This is a sobering fact for anyone who cares about his or her legacy, whether that be only how you are viewed by your descendants, or how your country interprets your actions. What is honored today may be reviled tomorrow, and vice versa.

This reinterpretation of history is, I submit, different from the phenomenon most of us experience, particularly as we mature. As we learn more about people or events, our under-

standing of them changes. That, however, is because our knowledge of underlying facts increases, not because known facts suddenly take on new meanings.

With the lesson of General Lee in mind, let us look at some other events where history seems to speak to us with forked tongue.

### Vietnam and Iraq

One hundred years after our Civil War, after fighting and winning the “good” war, World War II, the United States engaged in a war in Southeast Asia. The stated goal of the Vietnam War was to prevent that nation from becoming a communist country. The widely discussed “domino” theory predicted that if Vietnam fell to the communists, so would the rest of Asia. In that event, the USSR and communist Asia could overwhelm the US and other democracies. Given this possibility, one would expect strong popular support for the war within the United States.

This did not happen. The Vietnam War became our most divisive conflict since the Civil War. There were major, serious protests against the war across the country, especially on college campuses (“Protests” and “Vietnam War Protests”). Soldiers returning home from Vietnam were reportedly spat upon and reviled (Moffett; for a dissenting view, see Lembke). Many attribute this strong reaction to the fact that Vietnam (like World War II, but unlike subsequent conflicts) was fought by conscripts, not volunteers. This brought young men of upper and middle class into the war as combat infantrymen. While those in the lower economic strata could see military service as a way up into the middle class, this was not so for the college students suddenly fearing a notice from their draft board as a precursor to dying in the jungles of southeast Asia.

Even today, with the advantage of looking back over half a century, Americans remain ambivalent and conflicted about the Vietnam War. In part this ambivalence is because Vietnam was the first war America clearly lost in its nearly 250-year history. The dire consequences predicted if Vietnam fell to the communists have failed to materialize, making the war's rationale seem less credible. Vietnam was also the first war fought by Americans that was reported via television with all its immediacy and lack of filters; the horrors of war had once been an abstraction, but with Vietnam they became a reality that submerged the romantic and heroic visions that permeated our memories of other wars.

The contemporary view of Vietnam seems to be to ignore the rationale for the war while venerating the valor of those who fought the war on our side. Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial on the National Mall is considered a national treasure, and politicians who can claim service in Vietnam are quick to trumpet their service.

However, if the rationale for the war is flawed, yet we honor those who fought it, how can we attack the Confederacy because their cause was unjust? In the Civil War, most men—on both sides—joined the army out of a belief in a cause, or a respect for a leader. The Americans who fought in Vietnam in large part were not volunteers motivated by such rationales, but conscripts, drafted into the military, trained, and sent to fight half a world away in a conflict they neither chose nor understood. At home, those who were able plotted and schemed to avoid the draft, and there were widespread protests against the war.

A half-century later, Vietnam appears as a war fought bravely by our troops to defend a people who turned against the defenders, with flawed and faulty leadership of our military personnel.

Almost fifty years after Vietnam, the United States chose to become embroiled in another war, this time in Iraq. In Vietnam, while the mission may have been flawed, it was at least clear. In Iraq, virtually every pretext for the invasion proved false (“Newly Released Memo”; “Study”). Iraq was not behind the attack on September 11 against the US. Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, the US invasion of Iraq has proven to be destabilizing for the entire region. A country was nearly destroyed, fell into civil war, and only after a near decade did it begin to pull itself out of the rubble and our troops come home. Even today, the condition of Iraq is weakened and perilous.

Notwithstanding the murkiness of the mission and the length of the conflict, protests against the Iraq war have been muted. In part this is because the bulk of Americans have been untouched by the war. Vietnam was fought by draftees, from all segments of American society; the American soldiers who went to Iraq were volunteers, mostly from the lower economic classes. The war was also fought on a credit card. Americans not only did not see their taxes raised to fund the war—their taxes were actually lowered (Bartlett).

In the aftermath of the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, there was a surge of patriotism and a need to strike back, even if it was against the wrong target. Thus, while many have challenged the rightness of the Iraq war and questioned the leaders who insisted upon it, no one has questioned the actions of those Americans who have fought the war. There has been no public discussion of how, if at all, the Principles of the Nuremberg Tribunal, 1950, apply to US conduct in the Iraq war. Nuremberg Principle IV states unequivocally, “the fact that a person acted pursuant to an order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him of responsibility”

(“Principles”). Perhaps there is also a level of “survivors’ guilt” among thought leaders, who feel guilty that others sacrificed, while their lives remained unchanged.

Instead we are constantly reminded to “support the troops.” As someone who believes not only that the Iraq war was unnecessary, uncalled for, and wrong, but that indeed it was immoral, I have never understood what “support the troops” calls me to do. Certainly I can hope and pray that they remain safe and come home safely, but how can I rejoice in their destruction of another country and the killing of its citizens for no defensible reason?

Many of those who today call for supporting our troops still refuse to honor those who fought and died for the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, because of a belief that the Southern cause was not only wrong, it was immoral. Of course it is neither new nor exceptional that the winners write the history. Those of us who were children during World War II see it through a patriotic haze as the “good war” fought by brave and noble men. Everyone who was able had a role to play in this cause. Those whose youth was during Vietnam or Iraq are in a darker, much more ambiguous place.

Whether this loss of innocence is good or bad is a subject for another paper. For our present purposes, it is a fact we will note and move on.

Thus our view of the Civil War, as shaped by historians and other thought leaders, has shifted from believing the Confederates were a noble, if flawed, people overwhelmed by the greater resources of the North, to a belief that the rebels were ruthless traders of human flesh, fighting against their morally superior foes, trying to preserve a barbaric way of life.

Our views of Vietnam and Iraq begin from almost the same place.

Both conflicts were entered voluntarily ostensibly to prevent a serious threat to our safety. Yet those who fought in Vietnam came home to derision and hatred, while those from Iraq are made heroes.

### Abortion

And so we come to the last subject in my title. Abortion, the ending of life before birth or the termination of a pregnancy before birth, has always been with us. It probably always will be. For at least the last forty years, it has been a political hot button issue, one that has divided this country much as the slavery issue did in the nineteenth century. In the 1970's the rising chants of "our bodies, our selves" were heard as feminism claimed for every woman the right to control her own body. As time passed and the pendulum swung, deeply religious pro-life individuals attained positions of political power and reminded us all of the sanctity of human life. They supported this position by enacting laws in many states that have the practical effect of virtually extinguishing the ability to obtain a legal abortion (Guttmacher Institute).

Indeed, the opposition to abortion has grown so strong that the outliers of the anti-abortion movement are now arguing it is necessary to "kill the pill" and define the beginning of human life as the moment of fertilization. Bills to codify this position have been introduced in several states (National Women's Law Center). Since the right and ability to practice contraception is extremely popular in America, if the "kill the pill" movement attains any serious traction, we can anticipate a strong resistance from the pro-choice side of the debate. And so the debate will continue. As it does, one fact is undeniable; on both sides of the issue there are sincere, well meaning, intelligent advocates. They simply disagree as to which position is correct.

One hundred or 150 years from now, however, my guess is that this debate over abortion will be but a quaint historical artifact, and the issue—so divisive today—will be fundamentally resolved, one way or the other. I possess neither the intelligence nor the temerity to predict how the U.S. will ultimately resolve it.

I do hope our descendants will have the wisdom to refrain from vilifying those who ended up on the losing side of the debate. In the mid-16th century, England was beset by religious strife between supporters of Catholicism and the new Church of England. Oxford's University Church was the site of the heresy trial of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, for his renunciation of Roman Catholicism and support of the nascent Church of England. Cranmer was convicted and burnt at the stake. Today in the nave of the church there is a memorial to those who died on both sides of the religious divide during the Reformation (Musgrove 161). This should be our hope.

I would like to think that future historians will acknowledge the sincerity and depth of conviction on both sides of the abortion debate. Such an acknowledgement would recognize the difficulties good people have in arriving at "correct" decisions.

If our current interpretation of the Civil War is any guide, however, I am not sanguine that such a result will be reached. We must remember that the truth can rarely be discerned from a single point of view.

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