



American Thinker

August 1, 2015

Lincoln vs. Lee: How History is Distorted to Preserve Legends

By [William Sullivan](#)

Social engineers have a knack for destroying history, then self-servingly reshaping it to align with political agendas for consumption by the masses.

The results of their skill are no better exemplified than we are currently witnessing. Confederate history is quite literally being destroyed, as monuments to Robert E. Lee and other Confederate heroes are being [defaced](#) by ignorant vandals who know nothing more than the legend of how Abraham Lincoln and his brave Union army crushed Jefferson Davis' and Robert E. Lee's Southern hordes in the name of liberating enslaved blacks.

That this is legend is in no way true makes it no less pervasively believed by those who wish to remain ignorant. If you don't believe me at my word that Lincoln did not wage his war in the name of freeing Southern slaves, perhaps you might believe his? In a [letter](#) to Horace Greely in August, 1862:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and it is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save the Union by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.

His primary impetus for the invasion of the South was the preservation of the Union. That much should be clear, as the above quote was written well afterward.

Lincoln believed fervently that this righteous endeavor of preserving the Union, and not the abolition of slavery, warranted the conflict that now call the Civil War. From the [1861 Inaugural Address](#):

In your hands, my dissatisfied countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to preserve, protect, and defend it.

The Southern states had seceded, forming a government anew. It was very like the one from which they had seceded, but they believed this new government might suit them better. The Confederate states did in fact scribe a constitutional allowance for slavery. But this was not entirely an unreasonable thing in the context of the times (albeit horrific to the contemporary eye), particularly given that slavery was held as a constitutional right in the United States at that time of secession, deemed so by the *Dred Scott* case in 1857.

Lincoln's shiftiness on the principle of secession is yet another point which might mar his legendary status, if history were more commonly known. Of the Texians' revolution in 1836, Lincoln [said](#) in 1848, clearly invoking the precepts of 1776:

Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the right to rise up and shake off the existing government and form a new one that suits them better. This is a most valuable – a most sacred right – a right, which

we hope and believe, is to liberate the world. Nor is this right confined to cases in which the whole people of an existing government may choose to exercise it. Any portion of such people that can, may revolutionize, and make their own, of so much of their territory as they inhabit.

And yet, when it came time for Abraham Lincoln to play his role as King George III, he played it with furious gusto. When his own countrymen sought to reassert the right to self-determination, Lincoln saw no alternative but to preserve the Union by force. The King George analogy is rather appropriate, particularly in that slavery was outlawed in the British Isles at the time of the American Revolution. Had the English armies defeated the colonials, would the American rebels, Washington, Jefferson, et al, be remembered in some repackaged history as racist traitors, as the Confederates are now viewed?

That's certainly an interesting question for those willing to ponder it.

Lincoln was an abolitionist, yes. And that is an admirable trait to remember. But was the Great Emancipator for the equality of the races, as so many might be inclined to believe today? This [statement](#) from the Lincoln-Douglas debate of 1858, might answer that question:

I will say then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about, in any way, the social and political equality of the white and black races.

I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters of jurors of Negroes; nor of qualifying them to hold office. Nor to intermarry with white people. And I will say, in addition to this, that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be a position of superior and inferior, and I, as much as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

This is not meant to be purely a broadside against Lincoln's legacy. In my studies, I've found him to have many fine qualities, including, as I mentioned, his devotion to abolition and his very vocal warnings about the dangers of judicial activism, among other things. He was a gifted writer and orator, and his above defense of a people's right to self-determination is as well-articulated as such a defense might possibly be, and one with which I wholeheartedly agree. Admittedly, these more favorable qualities are often overshadowed for me by certain facts such as described above, but the purpose here is not to overtly smear him. It's just that given Lincoln's legacy as the multi-racial pluralist that he's come to be known, it sickens me that a man like Robert E. Lee could be so oppositely considered.

While Abraham Lincoln spoke of the unreachable potential of blacks to live among Americans as equals, here's what Robert E. Lee had to say on the subject, in a [letter](#) to his wife in 1856:

In this enlightened age, there are few, I believe, but what would acknowledge, that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil in any country, [and] it is useless to expatiate on its disadvantages.

...

The Blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa; morally, socially, and physically, and that while we see the course of the final abolition of human slavery is onward, and we must give it all the aid of our prayers and all justifiable means in our power [...] emancipation will sooner result from the mild and melting influence of Christianity than from the storms and contests of fiery controversy.

Lee, in contrast to the thoughts of the Great Emancipator, believed that a multi-racial and autonomous culture was not only possible, but desirable. A society in which blacks and whites could live amongst one another without conflict in a culture bound by values.

And while Sherman's march to the sea was among the most brutal military campaigns waged by an American army, Lee, by contrast, engaged in quite the opposite. Retaliating against the Northern invasion of the South by invading Pennsylvania in 1863, Lee [prohibited](#) "wanton injury to private property" during the campaign, and ordered that his soldiers pay for provisions acquired from

their previous countrymen in the North.

Lee also never personally owned slaves. After his father-in-law died, he acquired slaves, whom he freed over time. By the time of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 (which exempted slaveholders from border states like Missouri and Kentucky, a curious exemption for a moral edict), Lee had freed all of his inherited slaves.

And here's a story that always stuck with me, related [here](#) by Richard Poe at FrontPage Magazine in 2001:

After the war, Lee continued to set an example in treating black freedmen as equals.

At a service in St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, a black man created a stir by rising to receive Communion.

One witness reported that parishioners "retained their seats in solemn silence and did not move," while the priest looked "embarrassed."

It was Robert E. Lee who broke the ice. He strode up the aisle and knelt beside the black man to take communion. Others then rose and followed his lead.

Men of such magnitude are rare in history. They come but once a century.

It's time to replace Lee's portraits, wherever they might have been taken down, time to restore Marse Robert to the schoolbooks, and to honor him as the great American he truly was.

Never again should we squander our heritage so recklessly and to so little purpose.

Of Lee and Lincoln, who holds the higher moral ground in modern context? I'll concede that this is a matter that should be up for open and honest discussion among reasonable men, based upon the substance of history.

The problem, however, is that reasonable men may be rarer than ever these days, and the substance of history has been all too often distorted by an elite class which is driven by a pursuit of political agendas.

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