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Historic figures and their historic deeds



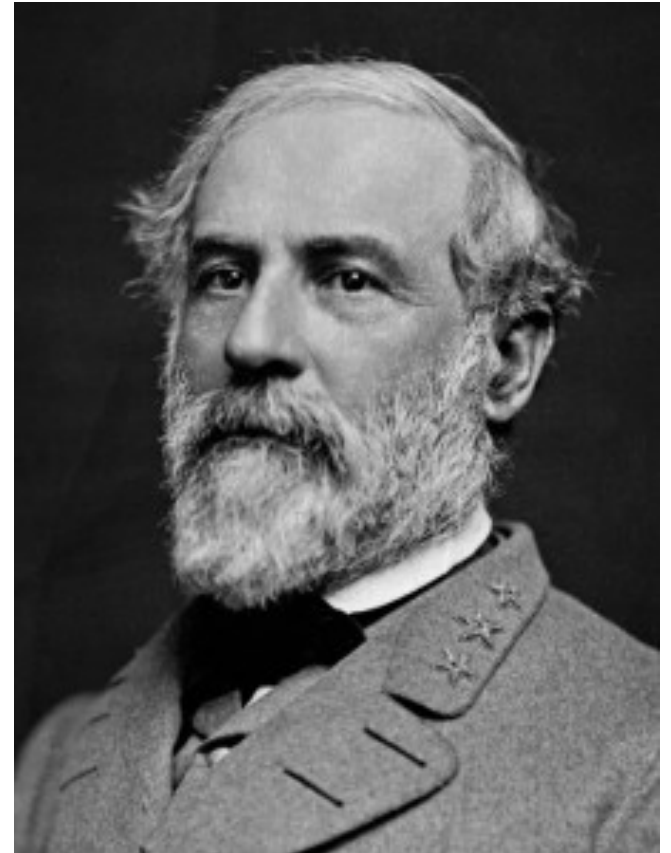
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Dwight D. Eisenhower in Defense of Robert E. Lee

by Mathew W. Lively • August 10, 2014 • 0 Comments

Robert E. Lee remains one of the most polarizing figures of the Civil War (or War Between the States). Debates and opinions abound in newspapers, books, and social media as to whether Lee is a person to be admired or condemned. Many of the anti-Lee arguments center on his resignation from the U.S. Army to fight for the Confederacy, an act many view as an inexcusable violation of his oath as a West Point graduate and army officer.

Along those lines, surely an exemplary officer and general like Dwight D. Eisenhower would also regard Lee as a traitor, would he not? Basically, that was the question asked of then President Eisenhower in August 1960. During the Republican National Convention of that year, Eisenhower mentioned that he kept a picture of Robert E. Lee in his office. That prompted a dentist from New York to send the following letter to the White House:



[August 1, 1960](#)

[Mr. Dwight D. Eisenhower](#)

[White House](#)

Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President:

At the Republication Convention I heard you mention that you have the pictures of four (4) great Americans in your office, and that included in these is a picture of Robert E. Lee.

I do not understand how any American can include Robert E. Lee as a person to be emulated, and why the President of the United States of America should do so is certainly beyond me.

The most outstanding thing that Robert E. Lee did, was to devote his best efforts to the destruction of the United States Government, and I am sure that you do not say that a person who tries to destroy our Government is worthy of being held as one of our heroes.

Will you please tell me just why you hold him in such high esteem?

Sincerely yours,

Leon W. Scott

Despite undoubtedly having more important things to do as president, Eisenhower must have felt his answer was of such importance that he took the time to send Dr. Scott the following reply from the White House:



August 9, 1960

Dear Dr. Scott:

Respecting your August 1 inquiry calling attention to my often expressed admiration for General Robert E. Lee, I would say, first, that we need to understand that at the time of the War between the States the issue of secession had remained unresolved for more than 70 years. Men of probity, character, public standing and unquestioned loyalty, both North and South, had disagreed over this issue as a matter of principle from the day our Constitution was adopted.

General Robert E. Lee was, in my estimation, one of the supremely gifted men produced by our Nation. He believed unswervingly in the Constitutional validity of his cause which until 1865 was still an

arguable question in America; he was a poised and inspiring leader, true to the high trust reposed in him by millions of his fellow citizens; he was thoughtful yet demanding of his officers and men, forbearing with captured enemies but ingenious, unrelenting and personally courageous in battle, and never disheartened by a reverse or obstacle. Through all his many trials, he remained selfless almost to a fault and unfailing in his faith in God. Taken altogether, he was noble as a leader and as a man, and unsullied as I read the pages of our history.

From deep conviction, I simply say this: a nation of men of Lee's calibre would be unconquerable in spirit and soul. Indeed, to the degree that present-day American youth will strive to emulate his rare qualities, including his devotion to this land as revealed in his painstaking efforts to help heal the Nation's wounds once the bitter struggle was over, we, in our own time of danger in a divided world, will be strengthened and our love of freedom sustained.

Such are the reasons that I proudly display the picture of this great American on my office wall.

Sincerely,

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Detractors will likely point to Eisenhower's friendship with Lee biographer Douglas Southall Freeman and his use of the term "War between the States" as an indication that he was blinded by the Lost Cause mentality of the time. Nevertheless, there is no disputing that Dwight D. Eisenhower – raised in Kansas, graduate of West Point, Supreme Allied Commander of World War II, five-star general, and President of the United States – admired Robert E. Lee for his character without considering him a traitor to the uniform or the country.

Source:
Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, "Dwight D. Eisenhower, Records as President, 1953-1961; White House Central Files, President's Personal File Series, Box 743, Folder: PPF 29-S Lee, General Robert E."

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