

Robert E. Lee: Traitor or American Hero?

by [Clyde Wilson](#)

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This year is Robert E. Lee's bicentennial — the 200th anniversary of his birth. Nothing better illustrates the swift and vicious descent of Political Correctness upon American history and symbols than the shadow that has, in just the last few years, been thrown over a man regarded (rightly) for well over a century as among the greatest of Americans.

Even before the War to Prevent Southern Independence had ended, his Northern enemies were claiming Lee as a prized exhibit of America's contribution to the world. (As they also were claiming his great lieutenant, "Stonewall" Jackson.) Such a claim could hardly be avoided since the entirety of the civilized world, watching the American bloodbath with interest, had already made that judgment. The British military commentator, Viscount Wolsely, expressed much international opinion when he wrote of Lee: "He is stamped upon my memory as being apart and superior to all others in every way."

Lee was the son of a renowned general in the Revolution, nephew of two signers of the Declaration of Independence, and husband of Martha Washington's granddaughter. His last five years were spent as a non-citizen with life and liberty at the mercy of the bounders and petty tyrants who had come exercise the power of the United States. This he endured with exemplary Christian fortitude and charity. Lee was an audacious military genius and inspired leader of men, called by Churchill the greatest captain of the English-speaking peoples, but his fame rests even more upon his character. No American leader has ever set a higher example in peace and war of what the Western world used to understand as a Christian gentleman. When the "traitor" died in 1870, the *New York Herald* editorialized: "Here in the North we . . . have claimed him as one of ourselves. . . have extolled his virtue as reflecting upon us — for Robert E. Lee was an American, and the great nation which gave him birth would be today unworthy of such a son if she regarded him lightly."

That judgment had become pervasive national opinion by 1907, when Charles Francis Adams Jr., the only Adams to have seen active service in the war, celebrated Lee in a speech in Boston and other cities called "Lee the American." Adams admitted that the Constitutional position of Lee's cause

had been correct (but had to be defeated, he claimed, because it stood in the way of national progress and greatness). More recently President Truman picked a large equestrian portrait of Lee for the lobby of his Presidential library and President Eisenhower went out of his way to vindicate admiration for Lee against complaints that he was honouring a "traitor." They were merely expressing mainstream American sentiment.

How the times have changed — and suddenly. The official doctrine of the MSI (Mainstream Intellectuals) now condemns Lee as a traitor and oath-violator and his cause as little better than Hitler's. This interpretation rests upon either a deliberate or a vastly ignorant misinterpretation of everything important in American history. The orchestrated blackening of Lee and his cause exhibits the triumph of Marxist categories in American historiography and public discussion. The War to Prevent Southern Independence has become not a great, tragic, historic drama of Americans, but a matter of the destruction and continued demonization of a "class enemy." This now semi-official view warps the understanding not only of The War but of all of American history — which is its purpose.

A powerful answer to the demonization of Lee and the distortion of American history will be given in a program scheduled for Arlington, Virginia, on Saturday April 28, not far from the Washington-Lee home illegally seized and turned into a cemetery by the U.S. government. The program, called "Lee: Hero or Traitor?" will involve some of the same sponsors and speakers who participated in the immensely successful "Lincoln Reconsidered" conference in Richmond in 2003. It will be an unprecedented exploration of Lee and his cause, which Murray Rothbard called the last of America's just wars. Thomas DiLorenzo, Donald Livingston, Kent Masterson Brown, John J. Dwyer, Thomas Moore, Robert Krick, and Yours Truly will explore "Lee and Liberty," "Lee and Slavery," "Lee and the True Nature of the Union," "Lee's Military Genius," "Lee as Man and Christian," and "Lee's Relevance Today." A certain Congressman from Texas whose name is quite familiar to readers of this site is expected also to participate if his schedule allows.



Full details can be accessed and reservations made at 1-800-MY SOUTH or at scv.org.

February 9, 2007

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