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Book Notes

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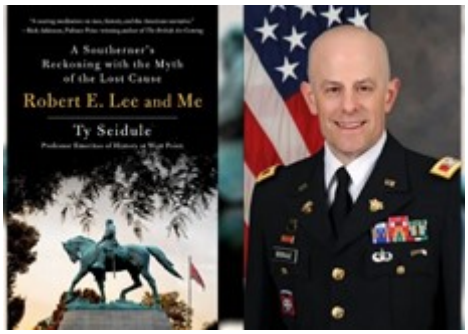
Robert E. Lee – Traitor?



[1]

Seidule, Ty. ***Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause.*** (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021).

Originally in this week's ***Book Notes***, I had intended to examine cancel culture through the lens of ***The Great Gatsby***, Potato Head, Dr. Seuss, and ***Robert E. Lee and Me***. After re-reading it, I decided that a look specifically at***Robert E. Lee and Me*** is too important to be lumped with those others. Recommended to me by a close friend who is the Provost of the United States Army War College, Ty Seidule's ***Robert E. Lee and Me*** is one of the most important books I've read in more than a year of writing ***Book Notes.*** Seidule, who holds a Ph.D. in history from the Ohio State University, is professor emeritus of history at West Point, where he taught for 20 years before retiring as head of the academy's history department. He served in the U.S. Army for 36 years, retiring as a Brigadier General.

Seidule's book is extremely important because it is as timely as the latest post in your Twitter feed and timeless because it addresses the eternal question of race in America. It is important because it is a book only a southerner could write. Rooted in facts, it is a deeply personal memoir tracing Seidule's journey

through America's racial labyrinth. And, it is important because he answers the question: "Why is history important?"

Although the verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial sheds a ray of promise upon the issue, ***Robert E. Lee and Me's*** timeliness still resonates because the George Floyd and Daunte Wright killings in Minneapolis, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and others drives home the message that being black in America is as dangerous in 2021 as it was in 1921, 1821, 1721, or 1621.

On a purely personal note, it was only in 2017 that I first heard the expression "DWB" – *driving while black*. On Easter Sunday morning in April 2017, a black male murdered an elderly black man collecting aluminum cans on a city street in Cleveland and then fled east to Erie, Pennsylvania and possibly points farther east. At the time, I was serving as President of St. Bonaventure University, about 90 minutes east of Erie. The university was closed on Monday. On Tuesday, naively and innocently, I asked a young African American male on my staff what he did that weekend. He said he stayed home, watched some TV, and read. Since the weather was warm and springlike, I asked why he didn't get out and about.

He told me that since beyond the obvious that he was not only black but vaguely resembled the alleged assailant's picture posted on all the news media he didn't want "to die-DWB." Noting my uncomprehending expression, he then explained to my oblivious self what "DWB" meant. Every time I learn of another police shooting, I think of my young staff member and not only his prudence, but also the unjustness of his need for such prudence.

Since a white supremacist murdered nine innocents in a church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 and Charlottesville's 2017 "Unite the Right" white supremacist rally opposing the removal of the statue of General Robert E. Lee from a Charlottesville park, equally timely is Seidule's exploration of the efforts to rename military installations named after Confederate generals and to remove statues honoring the Confederacy and confederate military leaders.

Seidule asks why are we honoring people who sought to destroy the United States of America and the ideals for which it stands.

Seidule reveals that attempting to answer those questions leads one inexorably into a discussion of racism's origins, racism's legacy and racism's continuing impact on American culture, for, as he says, "racism is the virus in the American dirt, infecting everything and everyone". [2] Racism is the eternal American issue; America's original sin it has not yet exorcised. It predates the creation of the United States; it influenced the Constitution's original form until amended after the Civil War; it stained the post-Reconstruction southern Redemption; it is the seed corn and soul of The Myth of The Lost Cause and it fueled Jim Crow; it inspired Confederate monument building; and it impinges on contemporary American culture and politics at almost every turn, even to the flag of treason – the Confederate Battle Flag (the Stars and Bars) – being paraded through the Capitol of the United States on Jan. 6, 2021, something the Confederacy itself never achieved.

No less a personage than James Madison bewailed racism's deleterious impact. Writing to Lafayette on Nov. 25, 1820, Madison said "All these perplexities develop more and more, the dreadful fruitfulness of the original sin of the African trade." [3]

Ty Seidule sets himself the task of exorcising that sin and untangling the lies of The Myth of the Lost Cause. ***Robert E. Lee and Me*** is both a history of America's racial legacy and a personal memoir of one man's dawning awareness of how that legacy shaped him. It is a book only a southerner could have written; a book only a southerner should have written. As Seidule says, he was born on July 3, 1962 – 99 years to the day after Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. In the world in which he grew up, Pickett's Charge was not a debilitating defeat, not a tactical miscalculation of colossal proportions, but the high-water mark of the Confederacy, a glorious exercise, vainglorious as it might have been, in southern courage and valor.

Seidule grew up in Alexandria, Virginia and Monroe, Georgia. His childhood Bible was ***Meet Robert E. Lee***, a hagiographic depiction of the Confederate General as the consummate southern gentleman. Seidule says his abiding goal as a young person was to become a "southern Christian gentleman." He graduated from Washington and Lee University, which literally worshipped Lee. The Lee Chapel at Washington and Lee venerates Lee with a statue of Lee lying on the altar. Lee is buried in a crypt beneath the chapel. As Kitty Kelly notes in a review in the ***Washington Independent Review of Books***, the chapel contains no Christian iconography, no hymnals, no ***Book of Common Prayer***, and no Ten Commandments. [6] It is almost blasphemous, for the first commandment is "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me." [7]

At Washington and Lee, Seidule earned an ROTC scholarship, a requirement of which was five years of service after college. He notes that he never intended to make a career of the Army, but discovered he liked it and decided to pursue it. Having grown up in a virtually all-white world in the military, Seidule served with and led a very diverse cadre of people. This experience began to change his perceptions and understanding of race in America. It occurred to him that his earlier experience was somehow skewed and did not represent the America he was meeting in his military service.

Having earned graduate degrees in history from Ohio State, Seidule was assigned to teach history at West Point. It was there his perceptions changed, for he asked himself why were there so many monuments to Lee and other Confederates at West Point? In order to answer his own question, as a trained historian he did what historians do. He went to the archives and began to research the original documents. As he did, he noted a disconcerting set of facts. First, in the 19th century, all mention of the Confederacy and the West Point graduates who had served it were expunged. In effect, having betrayed their oath, they were ostracized from the academy's history. In fact, the academy's famous motto of "Duty, Honor, Country" was created after the Civil War as an explicit rebuke to those who had disobeyed their duty to the academy and to the nation.

Second, he noted a disturbing trend. Every time the military or the academy made a move to admit African American cadets, every time it made progress toward equal rights in the military, there was an offsetting move to honor Lee or the Confederacy by either erecting a monument or naming something in his honor. An example of the latter is that all but one of the barracks at West Point are named after generals who distinguished themselves in combat; the lone exception is one named for a colonel who renounced his oath and fought a war against his country.

That colonel is Robert E. Lee.

Why the special and, one might ask, paradoxical treatment?

In order to answer that question, Seidule goes beyond the archives and documents to study his own history, to discover how he came to believe that men who betrayed their oath, an oath he too had sworn, were heroes. To do this, he intuited that he first needed to know who he was, how he had become the person he was and to understand where those insights might lead him. He decided that to understand himself he needed to know his own history. He embarked on a voyage of self-discovery. What he discovered changed his worldview.

A thoroughly middle-middle class young person, Seidule's father was a teacher. Always marginally aware while growing up of black people's presence on his communities' edges, Seidule drew in the air of southern culture, The Myth of the Lost Cause and yearned for nothing more than to be a Christian gentleman like that Cause's hero – Robert E. Lee.

Although vaguely aware of the racial tremors beneath his hometowns' placid surface, he never questioned their history or their racial codes and veneration of Lee. Returning, however, as an adult, with sharpened eyes, he learned that Alexandria, Virginia, across the river from Washington, D.C., was the scene of multiple lynchings and a major slavetrading site. In fact, since the slave trade had been made illegal in Washington, it became Alexandria's primary economic engine. As he notes, "In 1834, one of the largest slave-trading companies in the country, Franklin and Armfield, owned a huge slave prison in Alexandria from where they shipped between fifteen hundred and two thousand enslaved people to the Deep South a year." [6]

Similarly, Seidule as a young person knew little of Monroe, Georgia's history. Having moved there when his father changed positions, Seidule was aware that the racially segregated private schools he attended were created in reaction to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. But he never thought much of it, for as he notes, "I lived in Monroe, graduated from high school in Monroe, but during my entire time there I never talked to a Black person, even though the city was 50 percent African American." [7]

Returning as an adult, he discovered that Monroe was a center of lynch culture in which "lynchings became violent public spectacles that united the white community while ensuring the subservience of African Americans." [8] Seidule learned that his adopted hometown was the scene of the last mass lynching in American history. On July 25, 1946, four African Americans, two men and two women, were murdered. One of them was a veteran of World War II who had served four years in European theaters of war. [9] An indirect result, ironically, was that the episode spurred President Harry Truman to integrate the Army in 1948.

Returning to his alma mater, Washington and Lee University, Seidule asked himself what were the origins of the cult of Lee? Having grown up breathing the air of The Lost Cause's lies, he never questioned Lee's cultic veneration. Looking at it again with both the eyes of a military veteran who had served in harm's way with people of all colors and with the eyes of a historian trained to look beneath the surface for underlying origins, he saw the truth behind *The Myth of the Lost Cause's* many lies.

Rather than a tale of southern valor, it is a destructive ideology rationalizing the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War and serving as a justification for the white

reign of terror beginning with the Ku Klux Klan in the 1870s through the Redemption of the 1870s and 1880s through the era of Jim Crow and Confederate monument building at the turn of the 20th century. It is a collection of cultural lies that still infects American society. When I first started ***The American Tapestry Project***, I had to spend a great deal of time explaining The Lost Cause, for many people had either never heard the expression or did not understand its connotations.

Seidule does a superb job detailing its origins, its stories and myths, and its cultural impact. First coined in 1866 by Edward Pollard in his book ***The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates***, The Lost Cause is a glaring example of historical revisionism arguing that the cause of the Confederate States was just and heroic. It recast the cause of the Civil War as states' rights and not slavery, an assertion Seidule, as many other historians have done, obliterates by condemning the southerners with their own words. Every single seceding state's articles of secession explicitly identified slavery as the cause for which they fought. Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens' notorious *"Corner-Stone Speech,"* in which he explicitly identifies slavery as the cornerstone of southern culture for which they fight, is the most famous example. [10]

Seidule does a superb job illustrating "The Myth of the Lost Cause's" origins in the writings of Jubal Early and others, but his most valuable contribution is his analysis of its impact on American popular culture through stories like Uncle Remus and ***The Song of the South***, Thomas Dixon's ***The Clansman*** which D.W. Griffith made into ***Birth of a Nation***, and, most insidiously, Margaret Mitchell's novel ***Gone With the Wind*** that painted a portrait of southern culture as white gentlemen and ladies and happy slaves. Seidule, like Henry Louis Gates in ***Stony the Road*** (which we discussed in a previous ***Book Notes*** which can be found here) demonstrates that language and imagery are important. Mitchell's romanticized lie about the beauty of antebellum southern culture on gorgeous plantations explodes with the simple changing of one word. Replace "plantations" with "slave labor camps" and the ugly truth behind the technicolor veneer leaps into focus. [11]

This "Note" began with a passing remark about cancel culture. The phrase "cancel culture" specifically refers to instances of people being "cancelled," i.e. ostracized and banished for social media posts and other post-modern missteps offending some group or other. More relevant to ***Robert E. Lee and Me*** is the cancel culture debate about renaming buildings or entire institutions. Or, more pointedly relevant to ***Robert E. Lee and Me***, the movement to take down Confederate statues. Seidule provides an important service here, for he meticulously examines the origins of Confederate monuments and the purposes they served. He asks the three questions anyone should ask about reassessing any monument: 1) When was it erected? 2) Who erected it? And, 3) why did they erect it?

Although he primarily focuses on Confederate monuments at West Point, his analysis is apt for any Confederate monument. They were almost all erected in the early-20th century by southern sympathizers – notably the *United Daughters of the Confederacy* – attempting to both validate and institutionalize The Myth of the Lost Cause, to cement the moral legitimacy of Jim Crow laws and white supremacy and, particularly in the south, to intimidate African Americans and demonstrate their subservient position. As such, they all contradict, if not outright refute, America's founding ideals – "We hold these truths ..." – as stated in

the *Declaration of Independence's* second paragraph and reaffirmed by Lincoln at Gettysburg.

This is inescapable and irrefutable. One must either reject The Myth of The Lost Cause or reject America's founding values. There is no middle way.

What about Robert E. Lee himself? In what must have been a difficult chapter to write, *My Verdict: Robert E. Lee Committed Treason*; Seidule exposes his youthful hero as the man with clay feet. As he did in exposing the lie of the Civil War being fought for state's rights, Seidule exposes Robert E. Lee with his own words. For those who say Lee had no choice but to serve Virginia, Seidule points out that of the eight West Point graduates with Virginia ties, only one fought against the United States. That one was Lee. That Lee was a great general is for others to debate, but he lost more often than he won. Seidule meticulously builds his case that Lee committed treason by citing the multiple times Lee violated both his Constitutional responsibility as an American citizen and his sworn oath as an Army officer to protect the U.S. Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic. Perhaps most damning are Lee's own words in defense of slavery and his explicit racist utterings belittling African Americans, a phrase Lee did not use, preferring uglier epithets.

This ***Book Notes*** began with a statement that ***Robert E. Lee and Me*** is an important book for three reasons. It is timely. Its discussion of America's racial heritage is as fresh as the news you read or watched this morning. It is timeless, for it is the essential, one might say, existential American issue with which Americans have wrestled since the very beginning of American history, if not 1619 then certainly 1789. It is profoundly moving as we journey with Seidule on his voyage of self-discovery. And, it is important because it illustrates history's enduring importance.

I have not yet found a negative review of ***Robert E. Lee and Me***, but I am sure it is out there. When I find it, I doubt the reviewer, except in the nethermost regions of the internet or perhaps Tucker Carlson in one of his "replacement theory" rants, will have the nerve to overtly defend racism and to attack Seidule for exposing it. No, most likely they will accuse him of some form of cancel culture or accuse him of rewriting history. Yes, I guess, in a sense it is a form of cancel culture, for some things deserve to be cancelled, deserve to be called out for what they are, and deserve to be shamed. What could be more deserving of such cancellation than virulent racism backed up by cultural and linguistic terrorism that resulted in torture, rape, and murder?

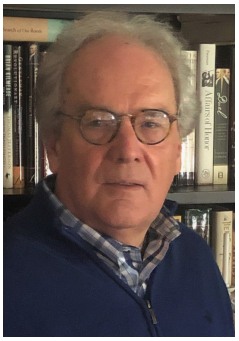
And, yes, it is rewriting history, if by rewriting history one means correcting mistakes of omission and commission in order that the truth, in order that the entire story – the good, the bad, and the ugly – gets told so that the ugly can be put behind us so we can move forward embracing the good. Seidule does that by doing what historians do – examining the evidence, placing it in context and seeking to tell the story, regardless of the pain it might cause oneself, as accurately and truthfully as possible. As we have discussed in previous ***Book Notes***, history, as Jill Lepore has stated, is the art of making an argument about the past by telling a story with accountable evidence. [12] It is also, as John Lewis Gaddis and others have shown, never complete. It is always a landscape coming into sharper and clearer focus as the seeker discovers new information and new evidence shedding clarifying light upon the past. [13]

This is exactly what Ty Seidule has done. He has unflinchingly looked at the facts

behind the veneer of the southern romanticism and the American racism with which he grew up. He has honestly owned his previous mistakes in order to tell his story with candor and moral clarity. In order to protect two institutions that he both loves and honors, the U.S. Army and the United States Military Academy at West Point, he retired from active service to write ***Robert E. Lee and Me***. And, like the first-rate scholar he is, he had the courage to follow where the evidence led him.

In doing so, he demonstrates how probing a profound story's three great questions – where did we come from, how does that impact how we live now, and where does that suggest we might be going – is the essential first step in both understanding who we are and the work we need to do to create for ourselves and our posterity a better future. For that he deserves our highest praise and gratitude, for as he concludes ***Robert E. Lee and Me***, in order "to combat racism, we must do more than acknowledge the long history of white supremacy. Policies must change. Yet, an understanding of history remains the foundation. The only way to prevent a racist future is to first understand our racist past." [14]

I recommend ***Robert E. Lee and Me*** to you without reservation. It is an important book. Regardless of how many books you read this year, it will be the most enlightening.



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End Notes

1. Photo of book jacket cover and Ty Seidule available at https://coffeeordie.com/robert-lee-and-me-review/ accessed April 18, 2021.
2. Seidule, Ty. **Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause** (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021), p. 256.
3. Madison, James. *"From James Madison to Lafayette, 25 November 1820,"* **National Archives: Founders Online** available at https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-02-02-0137 accessed April 20, 2021.
4. Kelly, Kitty. *"Review of Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause,"* in **Washington Independent Review of Books** available at http://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/index.php/bookreview/robert-e-lee-and-me-a-southerners-reckoning-with-the-myth-of-the-lost-cause accessed April 20, 2021.
5. *"Thou shalt have no other gods before me,"* at **Bible Gateway** available at https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2020%3A3-5&version=KJV accessed April 20, 2021.
6. Seidule, p. 50.
7. Seidule, p. 81.
8. Seidule, p. 84.
9. Seidule, pp. 91-95.
10. Stephens, Alexander. *"Corner-Stone Speech, Savanah, Georgia, March 21, 1861"* in **American Speeches: Political Oratory from the Revolution to the Civil War**. Ed. Ted Whitmer. (New York: The Library of America, 2006), pp. 717-731.
11. For a fuller treatment of this issue, see Edward E. Baptist's **The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism.** (New York: Basic Books, 2014).
12. Lepore, Jill. **The Story of America**. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 15.
13. Cf. John Lewis Gaddis. **The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past**. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
14. Seidule, p. 256.

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