

THE EMERGENCE OF THE “LOST CAUSE” MYTHOLOGY

This paper is a summary of a presentation made via video by Professor Gary Gallagher, University of Virginia. The presentation is the last lecture in the Teaching Company's a series of 24 lectures titled "Robert E Lee and His High Command" given by Dr Gallagher. This lecture series is available on-line by accessing the Teaching Company's web-site www.TEACH12.com

A number of Lee's subordinate officers wrote memoirs and other accounts of the Civil War that were to have a most significant influence over the ways that subsequent generation would interpret the War and its aftermath. These ex-Confederate officers sought to establish a written "history" of the War that placed the Confederacy in the best possible light.

In mounting what was to be a most successful campaign of "spin-doctoring" these writers hoped to:

1. Find something honourable in their failed bid for secession;
2. Influence future generations in the knowledge that there would be a debate over the meaning of the War and that future historians would use participants' accounts as a research resource;

These arguments eventually became known as the Lost Cause school of interpretation. It is important to note that there was no formal statement of Lost Cause dogma although most Lost Cause writer did agree on a number of issues, namely:

- Slavery had **not** been central to secession or the War itself;
- The overwhelming US manpower and materiel resources had been fundamental in bringing about the Confederate defeat; and
- The Confederate people, soldiers and civilians alike, had been steadfast in their effort to win their independence from the Union.

Robert E Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia served as the primary focus for the Lost Cause writers since he and the army were perceived as standing for the most attractive aspects of the Confederate experience:

1. Lee was perceived to possess such character traits as modesty, being religious, courtly and restrained;
2. His forces won stunning victories against long odds;
3. Importantly, Lee and his army could be discussed without having to address the issue of slavery or divisive Confederate political history.

In Lee, the Lost Cause writers had a successful and genuine "hero" and not somebody that needed "spin-doctoring" to raise their profile and image.

The Lost Cause writers engaged much of their initial debates on the Battle of Gettysburg. In this regard, they argued that a victory at Gettysburg would have brought the War to an end and given them independence. They insisted that Lee had not been responsible for the defeat at Gettysburg and asserted that:

- Richard Ewell lacked aggressiveness on the first day of the Battle (July 1);
- JEB Stuart's absence early in the campaign doomed Lee's chances of success.

They soon settled, however, on James Longstreet as the principal "villain" in the defeat at Gettysburg. Longstreet and Jubal Early became great antagonists in the 1870s (significantly after Lee's death) with the result that:

- Early proved to be more than a match for Longstreet in their confrontations;
- Longstreet's action in joining the Republican Party and converting to Catholicism hurt his case as did his public criticism of Lee;

Furthermore, Longstreet suffered from invidious comparisons with Stonewall Jackson, the first of the martyrs to the Confederate cause.

John Brown Gordon represented a later generation of Lost Cause writers who criticised Longstreet but also did urge reconciliation with the North on a number of issues. Other former Confederates remained aloof from these arguments – Edward Porter Alexander, the commander of the Confederate artillery at Gettysburg was known to admire both Lee and Longstreet and has written the best critical analysis of Lee's campaigns.

The Lost Cause remains influential in popular conceptions of the Civil War. In this regard,

- Lee is more popular than Grant (in Civil War literature and art Lee as a subject far exceeds anything on Grant)
- Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia remain the most written-about aspect of Confederate history.

There is evidence, however that the Lost Cause case is losing ground both in the eyes of historians and the public generally. With respect to the latter, current debates over Confederate flags on licence plates and on State flags suggest this is the case.

ESSENTIAL READING

Gallagher Gary W, *Lee and His Army in Confederate History*: Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002. Chapter 8.

Gallagher Gar W and Nolan Alan T, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil war History*: Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000, Essays by Gallagher, Nolan, Simpson and Wert.