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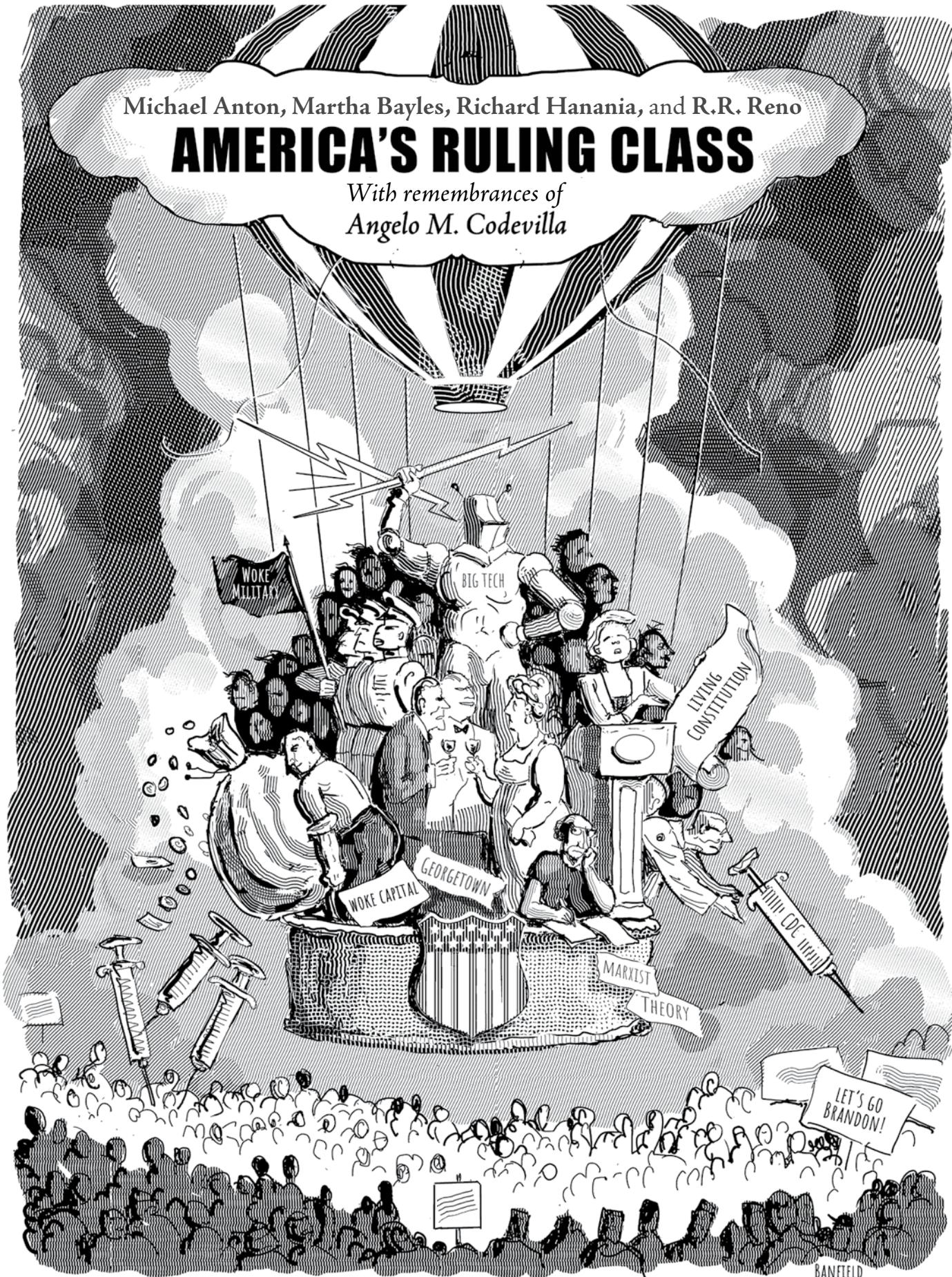
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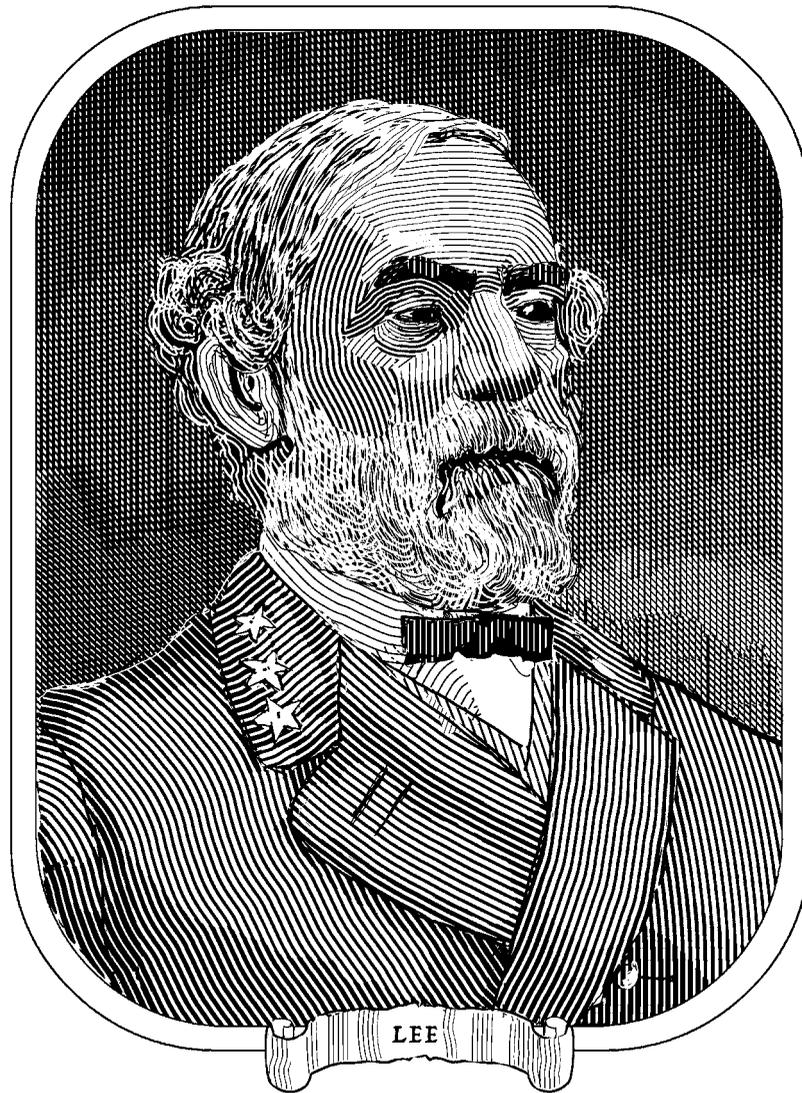


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Book Review by Victor Davis Hanson

ON AND OFF THE PEDESTAL

Robert E. Lee: A Life, by Allen C. Guelzo.
Penguin Random House, 608 pages, \$35



ROBERT E. LEE'S LEGACY HAS SUFFERED over the past two years. After George Floyd's death in 2020, a summer of protest, riots, looting, and iconoclasm caused Lee to undergo a Roman-like *damnatio memoriae*. His reputation descended abruptly from the tragic figure in Ken Burns's 1990 documentary, *The Civil War*, in which the baritone actor George Black often read Lee's words, chosen to convey his supposedly consistent opposition to slavery. Today, 31 years later, Burns's portrait of Lee has been vehemently attacked by Ta-Nehisi Coates and other wokerati as ahistorical and racist; and Burns himself would have to produce a very different PBS series on the Civil War today.

Writing in the liberal *Atlantic* last year, General David Petraeus confessed his own growing discomfort:

[T]hroughout my Army career, I likewise encountered enthusiastic adherents of various Confederate commanders, and a special veneration for Lee.... It gives me considerable pause, for example, to note that my alma mater, West Point, honors Robert E. Lee with a gate, a road, an entire housing area, and a barracks, the last of which was built during the 1960s. A portrait of Lee with an enslaved person adorns a wall of the cadet library, the counterpoint to a portrait of Grant, his Civil War nemesis.... We do

not live in a country to which Braxton Bragg, Henry L. Benning, or Robert E. Lee can serve as an inspiration. Acknowledging this fact is imperative.

Perhaps, but why did it become imperative in 2020, nearly 60 years after the Civil Rights Movement's greatest achievements? In an incisive CRB essay earlier this year ("There Goes Robert E. Lee," Spring 2021), Christopher Caldwell pointed out that General Stanley McChrystal had the same Road to Damascus revelations a bit earlier. In 2018, McChrystal—previously known for his key role in eliminating arch-terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, for the *Rolling Stone*-"Joe Bite-me" incident that prompted his forced resigna-



tion, and for creating a successful corporate leadership company, McChrystal Group—decided that he had had quite enough of worshipping Lee. Writing also in the *Atlantic* a little more than a year after the controversial Charlottesville riots, McChrystal’s own *mea culpa* was more personal than Petraeus’s. The subtitle to his essay, “At 63, I Threw Away My Prized Portrait of Robert E. Lee,” was, “I was raised to venerate Lee the principled patriot—but I want no association with Lee the defender of slavery.” McChrystal’s essay began, “On a Sunday morning in 2017 I took down his picture, and by afternoon it was in the alley with other rubbish awaiting transport to the local landfill for final burial. Hardly a hero’s end.”

That eight-hour switch to “rubbish” was quick. Yet one might wonder exactly what were the immediate circumstances that prompted McChrystal’s confessional, given that there have been numerous scholarly as well as popular negative reassessments of Lee over recent decades. What explained the abrupt swing from his past decades of idolizing Lee to literally trashing him?

ICONFESS I HAVE NEVER UNDERSTOOD the veneration of Lee. In *The Soul of Battle* (1999), I contrasted the revered and

kindly Lee—“his dignity, his manners, his composure” as Allen Guelzo puts it in his excellent and timely new biography—with the widely disliked, far rougher Ohioan, William Tecumseh Sherman, architect of the Union forces’ “March to the Sea”:

Robert E. Lee—the “Apollo on Horseback”—emerged from the Civil War as both a humanitarian and a military genius. He was a good man who was neither. The coarser Sherman was a far better strategist, did far more to end the Civil War, killed fewer of the enemy and lost fewer of his own men—and freed rather than owned slaves.

Sherman’s singular strategic vision and dedication to the Union produced paradigmatic examples of what a great army can do by severing its own supply lines, invading the homeland of its enemy, running amok behind hostile lines—and fighting for the morally superior cause. Sherman’s marches contrast favorably to Lee’s misadventures following his crossings of the Potomac into Maryland and Pennsylvania. The June 1863 invasion ended a few weeks later in crushing defeat, great loss, and full retreat from Gettysburg—while Lee’s spent army herded as booty hundreds of

free African-American citizens, subsequently enslaved in the South.

Lee’s fluctuating reputation in the cycles of Civil War historiography and popular culture are well chronicled in Guelzo’s epilogue, “The Crime and the Glory of Robert E. Lee.” Lee was condemned as a traitor in the decade after the war, only to be rehabilitated during the Southern pushback against Reconstruction. He became idolized again in the heyday of the United Daughters of the Confederacy before and after World War I, and was accepted in popular culture as a near co-equal to the greatest Union generals, at least until the Civil Rights era and occasionally beyond. And now Lee suffers renewed denunciation in the tradition of the unpopular Roman emperors whose statues and images were often toppled or erased in accordance with the popular frenzy of the times.

THE CENTURY-LONG DEIFICATION OF Lee was perhaps regrettable, as Guelzo shows, but he acknowledges that the fixation was thought to have a therapeutic logic. Upon surrender, Lee was widely believed to have discouraged any notion of a Confederate guerrilla war to resist Union occupation. (So too, however, did the former slave-trader, future head of the Ku Klux Klan, and always

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ON RECEIVING THE 2021 MERRILL AWARD



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pragmatic Nathan Bedford Forrest, who saw no advantage in years of guerilla war.)

By the mid-1860s, a wizened Lee adroitly distanced himself, sort of, from direct support for racist groups like the emerging Klan. Lee's confiscated but hallowed Arlington, Virginia estate, his illustrious pedigree as the son of Revolutionary War hero Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee III, his marriage to Mary Anna Randolph Custis, who was the great-granddaughter of Martha Washington, and thus the step-great-granddaughter of George Washington—all that reminded the nation that he ought to be seen as a scion of revered American Revolutionary stock rather than a ringleader of recent Confederate seditionists. Guelzo unwinds these strands of the Lee family back to the country's founding, as he illustrates just how difficult it was even for Lee's contemporaries to distinguish him in the flesh from the myths surrounding his pedigree.

Add in other material for making a legend: occasionally inspired tactical generalship in a series of humiliating Union defeats at Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville; a "marbleized" Lee's often quoted aphorisms about the horrors of war; his public regrets at taking American lives; his occasional furor at the institution of slavery; his postbellum successful presidency of Washington College (renamed Washington and Lee University shortly after his death); his demure personality and devotion to family and community; and his stoic endurance of family losses and his own debilitating heart issues during the last two years of the war.

All that and more after his death in 1870 at an exhausted 63 seem to explain his canonization in Western history, leading to praise from Ulysses S. Grant, Winston Churchill, and many other leaders. By the 1920s, Lee had been fully rehabilitated as the sacred leader of "Lost Cause" revisionism, the strange notion that the Civil War was fought not so much over slavery but over states'-rights principles, including the survival of Southern agrarianism against the onslaught of crude, grasping Northern industrialism.

IN SUCH LORE, THE CONFEDERACY'S HEROIC efforts failed not due to Union bravery at bloodbaths like Shiloh, Gettysburg, and Chickamauga, or the brilliant complementary duo of Grant and Sherman. The South purportedly lost the war only to a material dearth in goods and too few men. These were viewed as fatal disadvantages that not even Southern audacity, courage, and ole "Marse" Robert could quite overcome. And there were lots of near miss "Lost Battle" corollaries to the Lost

Cause mythology. If only godlike Albert Sidney Johnston had not suffered a freak, near-invisible wound in his popliteal artery at the "moment of victory" at Shiloh, if only James Longstreet had dutifully and expeditiously obeyed every detail of Lee's near-suicidal orders for a head-on assault of federal positions at Gettysburg, and if only this and only that, the South surely would have won.

To be sure, there were dissenting voices from Lee's Lost Cause sanctification, especially during the past 40 years. Guelzo notes especially in his epilogue Thomas L. Connelly's *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (1977), Alan Nolan's *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (1991), and Michael Fellman's "caustic" *The Making of Robert E. Lee* (2000). One could include also Elizabeth Varon's more recent *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War* (2013). In other words, any contemporary American reader might find dissenting—perhaps by now preponderant—views that questioned the morality of Lee's career, well before the recent controversies.

WHAT WAS ONCE REVISIONISM IS now orthodoxy in the age of woke, which demands that we recalibrate all our views of American luminaries, from Washington to Abraham Lincoln, and erase from collective memory all Confederate generals, whose vestigial reputations survive mostly in the South through eponymous military bases, street names, and statues of marble and bronze.

Guelzo started his biography in the calmer times of 2014, though his epilogue incorporates some contemporary events during and apparently after 2017. And he assesses Lee's character and legacy in light of the recent mania to see history as governed solely by race and gender. Of the August 2017 Charlottesville clash to topple Lee's statue, fought between "fanatical factions of Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi goons" and "black-clad partisans of the 'Antifa' left," he notes, "The 'greatest' blow to Lee's reputation would come not through a book but through a riot." That is certainly true of present tastes, but given past wild gyrations in the assessments of Lee, who can predict how he will be reconsidered a decade or two hence?

Guelzo is the author of more than 15 books, many of them prize-winning, on the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, emancipation, and Reconstruction. He is currently a senior research scholar in the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University and director of the James Madison Program's Initiative in

Politics and Statesmanship. A self-described "Yankee from Yankeeland," his roots are strongly Unionist, deeply religious, and concerned with the moral implications that drove events before, during, and after the Civil War. In all these studies, he explores tragic themes of well-meaning politicians, statesmen, and generals doing the wrong things for what they thought were the right reasons, often erring terribly, but predictably, given their character and training. As a historian, Guelzo takes account of events' time and place, and the cultural, social, political, and moral norms of the age, but he often looks for men like Lincoln and Grant who were exceptional in transcending rather than merely reflecting the mores of their times.

In short, no contemporary Civil War historian is more qualified to guide us through this contemporary labyrinth of reassessing Robert E. Lee. Guelzo offers light amid the heat of the current Trotskyization of former luminaries, providing scholarly assessments of Lee the man, in his military brilliance and occasional strategic and tactical blunders, and in his abstract humanity juxtaposed to his concrete inhumanity to fellow humans.

OF PARTICULAR VALUE ARE GUELZO'S telling assessments of Lee the Southern icon and Lee the general. In the end, neither is especially flattering. In rejecting his country, Lee claimed he was loyal to his family, his state, and his newfound Confederate nation. But Guelzo notes that even such dubious fealty was incoherent, given family members who remained Unionist, Virginians who opposed secession even after the start of the war, and Southern officers who did not defect. He tellingly reminds us that many prominent Confederates did not own slaves and after the war did not identify with Lost Cause revisionism. Guelzo suggests Lee was at times motivated more by self-interest in seeking to preserve or regain his beloved estate at Arlington, and to keep his branch of the Lee clan free from the impoverishment and excesses that had ultimately ruined his father. Family loyalty, Guelzo regretfully concludes, outweighed Lee's loyalty to his country and to a higher moral opposition to human bondage. "Always balancing any acknowledgment of Lee's glory, however," writes Guelzo, "is the overriding fact of Lee's crime, which is not a word used idly."

Of course, Lee's rare musings on slavery were sometimes admirable and reflected an abstract dislike of the institution both morally and as a liability to the South. Lee was sincere both when he wished that slavery had never plagued the South and when he expressed a



desire to end it and thus take away a moral advantage from the North. But in the concrete, Guelzo shows us that Lee often seemed to find practical reasons to delay freeing slaves, given the cash value of their servitude, the supposed legal complexities of manumission, and their needed labor and service to his increasingly endangered and impoverished extended Lee family. Slavery to Lee was like secession: the abhorrent idea of others which he vehemently opposed in speech, but eventually sought to defend and even empower.

ON THE BATTLEFIELD, THERE ARE similar predictable and recurrent themes in Guelzo's often nuanced assessments. When Union armies were led by mediocre generals like Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker, George McClellan, and John Pope, Lee seemed a gifted tactician and a sound strategist in grasping that the war hinged on winning the battle space between the two rival capitals, Washington and Richmond. Lee saw that the fall of either city would deliver a psychological wound likely to render that side's continuation of the war impossible.

But by late 1863 Lee for the first time faced a tactician who was likely his superior, Grant, and, soon to his rear, a strategist who certainly was, Sherman. Both Northerners grasped the war would ultimately be formally finished in the East but only by prior victories in the West, a concept foreign to Lee's Virginia-centric thinking. In the summer of 1864, Grant foresaw that the war's terrible arithmetic would be far more ominous for the Confederacy than the Union—so long as Lincoln was reelected in the fall. And Sherman, the pragmatist, foresaw that he would be driving relentlessly to Atlanta and making its capture a "gift" to embattled candidate Lincoln.

When Lee had as his two fists and corps commanders Generals Stonewall Jackson and James Longstreet, then the Army of Northern Virginia pounded the Union army like a heavyweight champion in the ring with an amateur. When Jackson was killed at Chancellorsville, and Longstreet was wounded and sidelined after the Battle of the Wilderness, Lee found that their replacements, like most of the Confederates' military top echelon, were mediocrities.

At first glance it seems a testament to Lee's genius on the defensive that it took the North—with three times the territory of the Confederacy, two-and-a-half times the population, over twice as large a military, and almost nine times the industrial capacity—four years to subdue the rebellion. But we must remember the North's near-impossible agenda: not just to repel or batter Southern armies to stalemate, or even to defeat the Confederacy, but to destroy it, free the enslaved, and force the Southern states back into the Union. That formidable objective required invading, occupying, and subjugating an area the size of Mexico, with few dependable roads or railways, a hostile population, and often rugged terrain. Meanwhile, back in the North, a sizable number of Copperheads, border-state sympathizers, less than enthusiastic immigrants, and by 1864 exhausted McClellanites were eager to let the Confederacy secede in peace.

IN THIS AGE OF GIVING NO QUARTER TO moral imperfection, past or present, what are we to make of the complex Robert E. Lee? Guelzo goes through a checklist of pros and cons, with the cons more numerous and persuasive. He admits that the unsavory T-words—as in "treason" and "traitor"—are nevertheless apt for Lee's wartime career. That Lee has rarely been judged an outright

traitor, Guelzo notes, is more likely due to the magnanimity of his Northern victors than to any absence of culpability.

But unlike contemporary Lee haters and statue topplers, Guelzo has no desire to see Lee erased from our popular memory. It is enough for him to show how a capable and upstanding military officer found himself the battlefield incarnation of the terrible twin causes of secession and slavery, which rendered his admirable manners, his familial fealty, and venerable conduct so often irrelevant. It is sometimes comforting for historians to think that the retiring, self-effacing Lee would not have welcomed his postmortem deification, but Guelzo ably demonstrates that the self-interested icon usually wrote and networked in selective, all-too-human ways to try to cement his lasting popularity.

In this wonderful new biography, the scholarly, analytical, and eminently fair-minded Allen Guelzo does not deny that Lee was likely a better man and a more astute military commander than most of the generals he led. His point, however, is that Lee was not *enough* of a better man to be all that great, at least as he is too often celebrated. I leave us with his own wise judgment:

Self-pity played a far larger role than compassion in Lee's character, and his pursuit of perfection froze compassion into obligation. But that need not be the case in us. Mercy—or at least a *nolle prosequi*—may, perhaps, be the most appropriate conclusion to the crime—and the glory—of Robert E. Lee after all.

Victor Davis Hanson is a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, and the author, most recently, of The Second World Wars: How the First Global Conflict Was Fought and Won (Basic Books).

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