

## HONOR, DUTY, COUNTRY

In the last few days, the president's chief of staff has stirred up a firestorm that had been brewing for a while. He referenced Robert E. Lee, the Confederate commander in the Civil War, as an honorable man. This triggered any number of pundits and politicians to decry that statement and denounce Lee.

This occurred against the backdrop of the white supremacist brouhaha that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia, where one attendee was killed, and the not-so-quiet removal of Confederate monuments throughout the southern states.

Much of the verbiage is just that, verbiage, but it represents a long-simmering resentment throughout the South that has been there since Reconstruction. Local tradition and custom has been to revere these statues as symbols of resistance to those 'damn Yankees'.

If truth be told, in spite of the shelling and surrender of Fort Mchenry in Charleston harbor, the Confederacy never started the Civil War. It was begun by the North in order to bring the secessionist states back under Union control. While slavery was a big factor in the furtherance of the conflict, it was never the primary reason that Lincoln continued the war. In fact, until late 1864, Lincoln was amenable to letting the southern states keep slavery if they would only come back into the fold. After his reelection in 1864, he was swung to an uncompromising position of disallowing slavery, particularly since he had issued the Emancipation proclamation at the beginning of 1863 and couldn't very well go against it. But the fact remains that originally, the war was one of aggression and invasion by the North. In fact, the only battle fought on Union soil was Gettysburg.

Returning to General Lee, we have to take into account the ethics and thought process of the era.

First, Lee had gone to West Point with most of the other officers on the Union side. They all knew each other, having graduated together and fought in the Mexican conflict in the 1850's. None of them wanted to fight against their friends.

Second, we have to remember that the allegiance of people at that time was to the land and the state that they lived in. The alliance of the 'United States' was nowhere near the federal system that we have today, and the individual states held far more sway than did the central authority. Even on the Union side, you had the regiments of volunteers who identified themselves as the Sixteenth Pennsylvania, the twenty-third New York, or the now-famous Twentieth Maine. They identified

themselves much more as belonging to the state that they lived in, rather than to the unified country.

General Lee was no exception. He was a Virginian first, and an American second. And when the state seceded and he was offered the command of the Army of Virginia, he had no choice but to answer that call. Command of the Union army, which he was offered, was a command that he could not bring himself to accept, since it would mean that he would have to fight against not only Virginia, but the entire South.

When General Kelly said that Lee was an honorable man, in a military sense he was exactly that. He was not a politician, he was a military commander, carrying out the plan of the secessionist government of the Confederacy. He performed that duty expertly and effectively.

We forget to take into account the context of the time. When we apply twenty-first century values to nineteenth century social structures, we have such a disconnect that it causes us to make value judgments that are often incorrect. When you start quoting history, you have to quote the entire history, not merely the part that wags your tail.

This also applies to the Confederate monuments. A lesson could be learned from the Moslem invasion of North Africa and the subsequent occupation. They allowed all the local customs and religions to flourish insofar as they paid their tributes and taxes. This kept the local firebrands and dissidents to a minimum, and they ruled successfully for more than four-hundred years. In most parts of North Africa, Islam is still the dominant religion, even though the Islamic rulers from the Middle East are long gone.

In our case, the local/state sentiments for their monuments far outweigh the problems that their removal causes. That removal has stoked the embers of white supremacy which had lain dormant for a century and a half. Yes, the black population of the South regarded them as offensive reminders of segregation and slavery, but an argument has to be made leaving the statuary alone in favor of not inflaming white nationalists and groups such as the KKK. If the black population wants to return to the old-time South, this is a great way to do it.

General Kelly was right, in light of the factual history and context of the time. It was through the vehicle of Reconstruction that the flames of white supremacy were suppressed but never quenched. Indeed, Lincoln was avidly in favor of bringing the South back into the Union peaceably and helping them get back on their feet. It was after his

assassination that the politicians that wanted revenge on the southern states took over and decided to make the southern states pay for their decision. And thence the resentment was born and has stayed to this day.