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Commemoration of Robert E. Lee as Commanding General

Abstract

The commemoration of Robert E. Lee as Commanding General of the Army of North Virginia has been affected by the implications of collective memory. In an effort to promote the underlying themes of the Lost Cause, the South essentially created a double standard for the evaluation of Lee, ultimately resulting in a biased commemoration.

As appointed commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, Robert E. Lee is arguably the best general resulting from the American Civil War. Thus, he is of particular interest when studying what is referenced as the “bloodiest” war in US history. Although he was the leader behind the ultimately defeated Confederate Army, he is nevertheless noted with the highest regard as an American army commander. Lee’s legacy shows him as a strong, devoted, and intelligent officer. Today, several monuments and a various array of memorials can be found throughout the nation in the name of Lee. Robert E. Lee serves as one of the many interesting multi-dimensional characters from the Civil War. For the sake of objectivity, other areas of his supposed greatness are not considered but instead we concentrate on Lee as commanding general in the main Confederate Army. In this, his tactical and strategic ability is examined. Two major battles in which he participated serve as the points of reference. One is the Battle of Chancellorsville, considered to be Lee's “perfect” battle. The other is the Battle of Gettysburg, which provided the turning point against the Confederacy in the Civil War. Information found through this research is starting ground in the exploration of how and why the commemoration of Lee in these battles was affected by the collective memory of Southerners. Surely, the process of exaggerating certain facts and ignoring others was in an effort to hide any signal of Lee's

incompetence, but why? Collective memory has contributed to Robert E. Lee's commemoration as general of the Confederate Army in such a way that allows for Southerners to arbitrarily lay glory upon Lee for their greatest victory and blame on other factors that led to their most significant defeat. This biased commemoration of Robert E. Lee's falls under the themes associated with the "Lost Cause" ideology formulated by the South in post-war attempts to alleviate the pangs of defeat.

As collective memory is the conceptual frame for evaluating the influence on Robert E. Lee's commemoration, it is crucial to explain what exactly the term implicates. Collective memory's manner of manifestation is certainly tangible but it is ultimately meant to be regarded abstractly. In theory, collective memory is a social adaptation in interpreting history and its associations. In effect, collective memory conceptualizes itself from individual's ideas into a phenomenon; a tool at the hands of society. The idea of this transfer from concrete to conceptual is explained by Gedi & Elam (1996) where it is stated, "Society thus functions as a location...where concrete individuals are capable of transforming their obscure image into clear concepts" (p. 9). This is the process by which collective memory makes its way into the commemoration of Lee. As an influential factor in the analysis of the Confederate Army, Southerners lay importance on how Lee is viewed for generations ahead, so they developed individual ideas for the image they hoped to create for Lee. Society then becomes the medium through which these ideas perpetuate for ultimate conceptualization. Heyse (2008) explains how some women of the South took advantage of collective memory for this effort, "relying most heavily on the great men theme of the Lost Cause, and the strategy of amplification, the women highlighted favorable traits and actions of the Confederate soldiers" (p. 426). In emphasizing the strength and potential Lee possessed, the South essentially manipulated true

history in an effort to provide a pleasant memory of him for their society to recall on. By way of the tactics outlined by Heyse, the South was enabled to develop their individual concrete ideas of how Lee should be remembered into what eventually becomes an example of the concept of collective memory for their society. In result, collective memory sets the blueprint for how today's commemoration of Robert E. Lee separates itself from the true facts of history.

Furthermore, collective memory's implications become self-serving for the society it most directly affects, in this case, the South. Specifically, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the South fostered the ideology of the Lost Cause. Goldfield (2002) explains the reasoning behind this interpretation: "To justify the war, its great sacrifices, and its tragic conclusion, white southerners exalted the cause for which they fought" (p. 2). Progressively throughout the war and especially after, Lee became a central symbol in the application of the Lost Cause. He was a source of satisfaction by "[providing] the needed symbolism for the defeated South in its search for explanations for defeat and justification for secession" (Connelly, 1973, p. 56). Lee provided the possibility of exploiting his contributions to enhance the South's effort in the war. Thus, his performance as commanding general and the "symbolism" it produced were key for the "cause" the South wished to convey for post-war recollection; "justification" for their efforts. The efforts to enhance Lee's performance throughout the war contribute to the resonation of the "Lost Cause" for future generations.

The Battle of Chancellorsville serves as a prime example of how Lee is overly credited for his successes throughout the war. It is indisputable that Lee outsmarted the opposing Union General Joe Hooker, in the management of his subordinates and general military strategy. However, many choose to overlook the grand effect that moral character played in the outcome of the battle. In Gallagher's (1993) review of Furguson's book on Lee's performance at

Chancellorsville he agrees that, "Lee 'dominated Hooker...mostly with moral force'" (p. 427). Robert E. Lee was revered as a man free of vices, with a strong adherence to personal values, thus epitomizing someone of highest moral character. In his decisions during the Battle of Chancellorsville, Lee made some rather dangerous moves, which we can believe were executed through a sense of duty to this moral character he had so far exemplified. In Glatthaar's (2008) analysis of the battle he states, "Hooker had placed Lee's army in a precarious position, between two large Union forces. Lee's response was his most audacious maneuver of the war. He elected to divide his army...rather than...give up his dreams of a raid northward" (p. 245). One can see how, had Lee not been held so highly on this pedestal of morality, he may not have felt compelled to go through with such daringness that may have very well ended with a disastrous defeat against a much greater army. However, the fact remains that he did act on morals, and the result was (luckily) a victory. Clarifying that moral value was indeed a factor in the events at Chancellorsville illuminates how the victory was a result of several aspects, aspects which collective memory allows to be undermined by the purported "brilliance" of Lee.

Another source of contemplation for whether the victory at Chancellorsville is rightly credited to him to the extent that collective memory implies, lies in the influence of another great leader in the battle, General T.J. "Stonewall" Jackson. To assume that Robert E. Lee was the sole hero to lead the Army of Northern Virginia to victory at Chancellorsville would be a great misinterpretation. Exemplifying the exceptional contribution Jackson provided for the outcome of the battle, Krick (1990) introduces the event as one showcased by *both* leaders: "The ability of [Lee and Jackson] never showed itself more vividly than [at Chancellorsville]...the two Virginians capped a reversal of fortunes as dramatic as any..." (p. 1). By mentioning the leaders' names in conjunction, Krick emphasizes that Jackson was just as much a part of the victory and

should be credited as such. The effort Jackson provided for the battle are provided in more detail by Zebrowski (2003) where he describes Jackson's performance as that of "a military genius, an innovative, wily, and aggressive general...[h]e moved quickly and hit hard, striking an enemy army's vulnerable flank by surprise. When forced to retreat, he regrouped in a flash and lashed back with even more tenacity" (p. 1). Unfortunately for the South, Jackson was mortally wounded in the aftermath of his legendary flank attack and the impact on the army was notable, for Jackson had up to that point established an image of respect from fellow Confederates. Despite this seemingly sincere adoration for Jackson, Lee somehow overtakes his legacy in the collective memory of Southerners. One wonders, by what virtue does this become acceptable? To enlighten the process, the primary fact to understand is that Jackson passed away at a crucial point in time for the Confederate Army. Thanks in great part to his successful battle maneuvering, the army was now in a strong and confident position to move forward in the war, and the army did not wish to lose sight because of Jackson's death. As Glathaar (2008) illustrates through the words of a staff officer, "Our army [is] in the finest spirits & health...[we will] go anywhere with [General] Lee..." (p. 257). Now that Jackson was no longer available for morale-preserving presence, the dependence on Lee was only greater as a result. In effect, the elevation of Lee's value over Jackson, despite Jackson's performance being instrumental in the victory at Chancellorsville, in the South's collective memory becomes more reasonable, though perhaps not rightly.

Opening the door for collective memory, the success at Chancellorsville is the source of the Southerners' exaggeration of Lee's tactical ability as a commanding general. Collective memory allows Southerners to ignore the other influential factors that may not be viewed as very admirable for Lee. Heyse (2008) defines this manipulation as the process of "amplification",

where collective memory “enables rhetors to glorify accomplishments while simultaneously forgetting the ordinary or the not-so-flattering” (p. 418). It is clear that Lee was an intelligent officer, and thus definitely offered great advantages to the Confederate army, but these attributes are not solely responsible for the victory at Chancellorsville. For instance, the fact that moral character gave Lee the courage to go through risky maneuvering in this battle allows for different interpretations of his strategic ability, some of which would contradict the preferred commemoration for Lee. For example, one can readily credit his victory as a result of “good luck” more so than as an act of brilliance. Also, one can enlighten the importance of General Jackson's successful execution of his flank attack for the victory. In other words, Lee's victory was dependent upon other factors, clarifying the ideas that he “won with help from the [Union's misfortunes], particularly when [General Howard] allegedly ignored Hooker's warnings to prepare for an attack, and 'Stonewall' Jackson's famous flank march succeeded” (Rafuse, 2010, p. 30). Had one of these events fallen through, the Confederate army would have had everything to lose at the hands of a provoked Union army. However, with the less-than-valid evaluation of Lee formulated through collective memory, these ideas of including moral value in association with good fortune, or the greatness of fellow officers, as deciding factors in the events at Chancellorsville are better left “forgotten” in preference for glorification of Lee for the victory. The question of how Lee is commemorated in a biased way now extends to how he is viewed in light of his defeats. A great point of analysis is the Battle of Gettysburg, as it is significant not only for facts on Lee's military competence, but also for influence on anyone involved in the war at the time. The events at the battle set the stage for the turning point in the war, with the Union army overtaking the Confederacy for the advantage. More importantly for this paper's purpose is that the Battle of Gettysburg is the event where Lee may be most scrutinized as incompetent as

commanding general. Lee's strategic ability during the battle has come under fire in several accounts of the conflict. More broadly, it offers great substance for such claims against him, like those made by Connelly (1969) in his criticism of Lee: “[He] never espoused a consistent philosophy of concentration, and did not present a stable plan for operating on a single line of the enemy's advance” (p. 131). In retrospect, one can believe that Lee's actions had much to do with the sense of good fortune he gained from the preceding “lucky” battle experiences (i.e. Chancellorsville); “Lee knew his previous campaigns had been high-risk affairs in which, with a bit more luck and prudence on the part of their commanders, the [Union army] could easily have prevailed” (Rafuse, 2010, p.33). Unfortunately for the Confederate soldiers, the Union army would soon come to realize this and turn the tables on Lee and his army, ultimately handing the Confederate army their greatest loss in the war. Thus, one can argue Lee's reliance on “good luck” was an impractical factor in his decisions for the campaign, contributing to Lee’s lack of “consistency” and “stability” in his strategy, and ultimately subtracting from his greatness as commanding general. However, for the sake of preserving the legacy which Southerners feel is most appropriate, this fault of Lee’s is disregarded. Instead, the South searched for other options to place blame upon for the loss.

Noted as the "high-water mark" of the Confederacy, the disaster that was "Pickett's Charge" at Gettysburg can be largely considered as Lee's worst fallacy in the battle, if not the war. Upon orders by Lee, 13,000 Confederate soldiers, led by Pickett's division, were to attack at the center of Union defenses, only to be pre-maturely met with enemy fire that presented a virtually hopeless situation. As "the failure of that charge is, with no question, how most Americans remember the Battle of Gettysburg", the devastating event would presumably work to nullify Lee's up-to-then untainted legacy. (Carhart, 2005, p. 246) However, an opportunity for

the transfer of responsibility and blame for the loss arises by the manipulation of details. While Lee had ultimate authority in battle plans, the implementation was up to subordinate commanders. Thus, the outcomes of battles should presumably be based on the performance of *both* Lee and his subordinates. Lee did in fact hurt the army's chance of victory with some faulty decision-making, at and around Pickett's Charge. As Krick (2008) notes, "The army had performed at an astoundingly high level ...and Lee soon did ask nearly impossible feats from it..." (pp. 16-18). This overconfidence Lee felt allowed him to believe his men were capable of more than they practically were, and thus granted them more ability than they possessed. As a result, Lee improperly under-managed the events at Gettysburg without regard to the change of circumstances. Carmichael (1998) explains how Lee's "hands-off approach" was successful previously, "but those brilliant feats [in Second Battle of Manassas and Chancellorsville] had been achieved largely by subordinates who firmly believed in Lee's overall strategy. At Gettysburg, [others] did not share Lee's faith in the tactical offensive" (para. 17). In effect, the "feats" Lee enjoyed at previous battles in combination with his sense of confidence in his army, prompted him to demand and expect a reproduction; a "feat" that was simply unachievable given the different circumstances at Gettysburg. However, how Southerners chose to manipulate these details is where collective memory comes in. Southerners, perhaps noting that subordinate commanders have a more direct effect on the outcomes of battle than would the commanding general (Lee), take the opportunity to transfer the blame from Lee to the performance of his subordinates in events like Pickett's Charge, an event to be remembered. Collective memory allows for the South to disproportionately magnify the failing efforts of those other than Lee at Gettysburg.

Southerners would rather open up other factors as allocations for blame than to discount their hero, Robert E. Lee. Instead of holding Lee responsible, several other means of explaining the loss at Gettysburg arise, such as the blaming of his subordinates. In this way, and as only collective memory would allow, Lee is treated as a handicapped participant in the conflict and thus is not evaluated in the ways we would normally expect. Simply labeled as “forgetting”, “...collective amnesia...allows collectives to deny or feel better about their past, especially the contentious parts” (Heyse, 2008, p. 417). By way of the “forgetting” outlined by Heyse, Lee's faults in his reliance of good fortune are not considered for the South's recollection. Also, by denouncing Lee's role in the defeat, his list of achievements is not tainted by the one monstrous blunder that could be the tell-all behind Lee as a heroic and brilliant commanding general. In light of possibly his worst performance as commanding general, Robert E. Lee is essentially pardoned by society, thus preserving his legacy and avoiding any negative fallbacks on the collective memory the South wishes to retain.

One way to formulate a critique of Robert E. Lee, particularly in his respective practice, is to evaluate him both at his best and at his worst. This is to say Lee's true colors were shown when the situation demanded it. As a means to follow this course of analysis, Robert E. Lee is evaluated through his best win at the Battle of Chancellorsville and his most important loss at the Battle of Gettysburg, essentially covering the spectrum of Lee's performance. In addition to objectifying the argument, this procedure also offers a clear connection between the two battles, as the events shaping the battle at Chancellorsville set some important precedents for Lee's decisive actions at Gettysburg. In an intermediate event between the heart of both battles, Glatthaar (2008) foretells the effect Chancellorsville would have on Lee's army: “Lee's army was still basking in the glow of victory at Chancellorsville when Federal horsemen caught

Stuart's cavalry unaware" (p. 268). Although eventually the Confederates launched a strong counterattack, it is noted that the occurrence was "perhaps...an omen" (Glatthaar, 2008, p. 268). Riding on the sense of good fortune Lee felt his army possessed after Chancellorsville, he approached Gettysburg with a self-defeating persona. Alongside other factors, Luvaas (1990) accounts that one of the things that went wrong for Lee at Gettysburg was that, "[he] may well have been overconfident", presumably as a result of the victory at Chancellorsville (p. 133). In studying the logistics of both battles, it becomes apparent how factors outside of Lee's tactical ability affected the sequence of events, particularly the influence of "good luck" in battle and ultimately Lee's decisive ability. However, most of these are disregarded for the collective memory of Lee for the South. Instead of rightly attributing outcomes as a result of all factors, Lee is seen as either solely responsible or conversely non-involved, depending on the case at matter. The result is a double-standard for Lee, described by Connelly (1973): "If Confederate fortunes went well, it was achieved by Lee's advice; if fortunes faltered, it occurred because Lee had no real authority" (p. 63). The bias behind the commemoration of Robert E. Lee as commanding general is clear: if a factor, such as the role "good luck" played in the victory at Chancellorsville, served to diminish his greatness, then the solution became to discount that factor's influence. The same factor, in the context of providing Lee's "overconfidence", would be further discounted if it provided a clue to Lee being at fault for Gettysburg. In effect, regardless of the circumstances, Lee's image would remain untainted. Manipulating of history is evident for the collective memory of Robert E. Lee.

Not being held accountable for a defeat of upmost significance and conversely being inaccurately glorified for a victory that was in actuality due to various factors, illustrates how Robert E. Lee's commemoration is a product of collective memory. The process by which

collective memory makes its way into the commemoration of Robert E. Lee has now been clarified. To deepen the argument, one now inquires on *why* Lee's legacy has been affected as such and what purpose it serves for those most associated with him, the Southerners. To answer, it is important to realize what Lee represented during the war, particularly for the South.

Although initially unsupported in his appointment as commanding general (he was thought to be timid in his command), Lee eventually invigorated a sense of respect and was affectionately called "Marse Robert" (a term of endearment). This was achieved after his successes at the Seven Days Battles. The following triumphs at Second Manassas, Fredericksburg and ultimately the highlight of Lee's command, Chancellorsville, served as the milestones of Lee's growing popularity. Through these and other surprising victories Lee offered the Confederate army, he became the singled-out contributor of hope to a people who had more than enough reasons to expect defeat. Quoting Connelly, Nolan (1991) says, "Lee 'became a God figure for Virginians, a saint for the white Protestant South, and a hero for the nation...who represented all that was good and noble'" (p. 5). Thus, it became important to maintain this adoration, even through his upcoming not-so-great moments, because Lee held up the morale for the South. Eventually, this is how Lee sealed his prominence for the Lost Cause, embodying a symbol of greatness and optimism. As Goldfield (2002) remarks, "...southerners elevated defeat into a heroic Lost Cause, their fallen comrades and faltering leaders into saintly figures..." (p. 20). In the end, it became more important to commemorate Lee as a "heroic" and "saintly" idol than to properly accept the ultimate loss in the Civil War.

Lost Cause supporters exemplify how bias towards Robert E. Lee's performance was ultimately for self-serving purposes which benefited the South's overall morale after the war. The aftermath of the Civil War was a daunting memory to grasp in the context of being on the losing side. An

adaptation to the memories was crucial for the well-being of the people of the South, as Goldfield (2002) remarks: “Southern white men could not live with failure and dishonor, so they manufactured a past that obviated both and returned their pride...” (p. 16). The results of the Civil War, in all intents and purposes, hit home for the South. For the sake of future generations, the South's loss in the Civil War would not be studied analytically by Southerners, but instead altered in whatever way was most convenient for the preservation of the Lost Cause. The combination of “an insistence that the South was not beaten in battle, [blaming other factors]... [and] the celebration of great military...men” were underlying themes for support of the Lost Cause (Heyse, 2008, p. 415). It was necessary to use collective memory to formulate a more pleasant interpretation of events, albeit inaccurate. In effect, these efforts of denying responsibility and “celebrating” leaders translated into contribution to the Lost Cause theme, which offered the South an opportunity to collectively form an ideal recollection of what may have otherwise caused feelings of “failure and dishonor.” Employing the tactics of collective memory, the commemoration of Robert E. Lee was manipulated for the benefit of the South, in particular their adherence to the Lost Cause.

Robert E. Lee's legacy is a product of collective memory; a substantial one. Collective memory allowed the South to employ manipulative tools in order to provide a satisfying memory for passing along through the generations in an effort to reduce the implications of what would otherwise be considered a hopeless fight. With his impressive actions and significance in the fight against the North, Lee became the light in a dark room, thus raising him to the pedestal of a saintly hero for the South. After the loss in the Civil War, he was up for exploitation at the hands of those supporting the Lost Cause. Specifically in regard to his competence as commanding general, his responsibilities were interpreted in a less-than-objective way. Particularly in two of

his most significant battles, the Battle of Chancellorsville and the Battle of Gettysburg, one can note the influence of collective memory. In the light of victory, Lee is in all ways hailed and credited. Conversely, in the light of defeat, the South finds other factors to blame which exclusively pardon Lee's mistakes. In essence, the legacy of Lee is never damaged, despite the opportunities. The biased commemoration of Robert E. Lee as commanding general in the Confederate army, through collective memory, is an implication of the South's struggle to cope with the aftermath of the Civil War.

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