

COMMENTARY

Robert E. Lee in the 21st Century

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Not long ago I took my son Nash into the old wing of the Lee County government building downtown, the one-time courthouse where the county commissioners now meet. You may not have been there. But it's cool and comfortable and marble and stately, with high ceilings, wide gradual staircases, polished floors that invite a hundred generations to walk calmly across them, and a sense of permanence that no contemporary building seems to muster.

Out front stand a live oak and a banyon fig that were there, I swear, when Robert E. Lee himself arrived about 1841.

Nash and I were there to see a couple of new county commissioners, Frank Mann and Brian Bigelow. We'd come for work — well-paying, easy work, if possible. (Notably, they did not ask if we were related to the commissioners, a promising sign for local government.)

And then we slipped down the great hall and up the great stairs and through the great maze of second floor hallways, with their little dead ends and their "STAFF ONLY" doors, and back down the great stairs. No one appeared.

Finally we popped the door of the silent Commission chamber and walked down the long shadowy aisle right to the foot of the blessed altar of government. It was a lot like the Catholic Church I used to sneak

into on quiet afternoons in my boyhood, aiming for the blessed wine closet. But never mind that now.

There, at the same height as Jesus would have been if this were actually church, appeared Robert E. Lee.

The portrait shows General Lee in full Confederate dress uniform.

He sports three stars on his stiff gray collar, and a perfect military alignment of the buttons on his jacket with the polished belt buckle on his trousers. The thigh-high cavalry boots rise, it seems, almost to the handle guard of the sword sheathed on his left side. He is gloved. In this 1929 painting commissioned by Lee County elected officials from a Virginia artist, Lee is ready to ride into battle.

General Lee remains all the things everybody has ever understood about him, as far as I could see in the portrait: Proud, stern, brave, honorable, unbending. And did I detect kindness in that mordant expression. Yes, of course. History shows that.

History also shows error. Robert E. Lee was dead wrong, with an emphasis on dead.

But so what? Isn't this country about having the right to be wrong? Sure it is.

And isn't this 1,200-square-mile county named after one of the most proud, stern, brave, honorable, and unbending human beings the United States has ever produced? Yes, it is.

This was a man even capable of the courage of humility. After he fought those tough scrappy Yankees until they beat him

into the bloody dirt, he sought ways to reconcile the people who waged the war on both sides. He allowed as how slavery, for example, was wrong.

Nash, meanwhile, climbed into a comfortable leather chair in front of the altar.

"Daddy," he asked, "why is that man carrying a sword?"

And there you have it, from the mouth of a four-year-old. Not, Daddy, why do they honor a traitor who believed his native state to be more important than the right of poor black Africans to be free? And who believed state's rights were paramount, not a Union? And who killed vast numbers of people in his insistence, before admitting he was wrong?

No Sir. Nash (whose great-great grandfather Nash served under Lee) asked a more astute question: "Why is that man carrying a sword?"

Here's the answer I would have given him, if I'd thought of it: He shouldn't be. He shouldn't be wearing three stars on his collar, or cavalry boots and gloves. He shouldn't be ready to ride into battle.

If Lee will continue to appear as our county icon and namesake, he should be staring at us from that wall burdened by all the terrible despair the world can saddle on a man so right in character, and so wrong in action. He should be wearing a simple suit made dark for mourning, carrying a simple hat faded pale over sorrows — many of them his doing — and commanding all



This portrait of county-namesake Robert E. Lee hangs in the Lee County Commission chambers.

those who sit within the history of his unflinching gaze to remember: Character and courage count for little unless they're bearings in a compass direction that champions all of us.

Ironically, Lee's greatest triumph was not his military record, his talent for strategy and leadership, or his native birthright as a Virginian. It was his humility.

That's the portrait I want my son to see hanging in chambers in the old government building downtown: The humble Lee, a portrait for the 21st century in Lee County. Not the stiff icon of 20th century local leadership here.

So maybe Nash and I will go back again soon and ask to see the commissioners one more time.

This time we'll ask them: Would y'all see fit to commission a new portrait of Lee?

Or maybe one of you talented local artists would just up and donate a new Lee for the good of an old cause. ■



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