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'Robert E. Lee: A Life', with Dr. Allen Guelzo

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

On this episode, Kevin interviews Civil War historian Dr. Allen Guelzo, Senior Research Scholar at Princeton. Dr. Guelzo's new biography of Robert E. Lee paints a portrait of neither a sinner nor a saint, but a full picture of a complex human being. Dr. Guelzo is a historian with a solid theological background. He and Kevin address how General Lee could be both opposed to slavery and commit treason to defend it. The South came very close to victory: How would that have changed history? How did Lee's fatherlessness affect his leadership? And of course they cover the question of the removal of statues.

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Books and Everything:

Robert E. Lee: A Life, by Allen Guelzo

The Great Courses

Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia: 175 Years of Thinking and Acting Biblically, by Philip Graham Ryken

Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate, by Allen Guelzo

Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President , by Allen Guelzo

Gettysburg: The Last Invasion , by Allen Guelzo

Redeeming the Great Emancipator , by Allen Guelzo, et al

Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction, by Allen Guelzo

Faith of the Fatherless, by Paul Vitz

"Of Monuments & Men," by Allen C. Guelzo and John M. Rudy

Transcript

[Music] Greetings and salutations welcome back to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung and good to be with you and have a special guest that I'll be introducing in just a moment and want to thank again our sponsor Crossway Publishing and encourage you to look at the newest books. The books that they put out by Michael Reeves and also there's a new one by Dane Ortland.

Many of you listening, this probably have read Dane's book, Gentle and Lowly. Probably read Michael Reeves' book on the Trinity and others and both of them have new books coming out. They have a similar cover look and they are in this series that Union Seminary is doing over in where Michael is at over in the UK.

Check that out, thankful for Crossway. I have, it's just me, Colin and just turned out with us, but a special guest here. I'm very excited.

Dr. Allen Guelzo, Dr. Guelzo, thank you for being with us. Pleasure to be here. It's a very

long introduction which I found to give your whole bio and all your many books.

I won't go through all of it but you are currently teaching and leading a government or policy institute at Princeton University. And before that you have taught at Gettysburg College and way back when at some point you were at Eastern, I believe. Yes, that's right.

Yeah, and have written many, many books. I have been wanting to talk to Dr. Guelzo for some time. He doesn't know this and he probably is a first time listener.

Right now it's a life in books and everything. So glad to have him on. But I have read, oh, at least half a dozen of your books and have benefited from all of them.

So I am glad to have you here in person and I've listened to, I don't know, there may not be too many of me out here, but I think I've listened to all of your courses on the great courses. Oh my. So the American mind and the Civil War and American history and Lincoln and on the Revolutionary War.

So any of our listeners, if you have not listened, done some of the great courses and you can, you can buy 80 hours of a course for one credit on Audible. That would be the easiest way to get it. But Dr. Guelzo is a fantastic lecturer.

He's written for all sorts of publications won the Bradley prize numerous Lincoln awards and is a real joy to have you on here. We're going to talk about Dr. Guelzo's new book, Robert Lee, a life, but I'm told that I do have permission to ask you about a few of your other books we'll spend most of our time on that. I bet most of your interviewers will not start with this book but I think the first work I've read from yours was your contribution to this history of 10th Presbyterian Church.

That does go back quite a way. Yeah, so tell us, how did you get. Did you go to 10th? How were you familiar with 10th? How did you come to write the opening chapters for the history of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

When I was a college student in Philadelphia, I would attend 10th Presbyterian Church. I became a big fan of James Montgomery Boys and got to know Jim Boys. I wrote a couple of pieces for what was then the church's quarterly magazine, 10th and evangelical quarterly.

And when the church decided it was going to pull together a volume to celebrate its anniversary, Jim asked if I'd be interested in writing the opening chapter, setting the colonial background to Presbyterianism. Basically, to take the history of the church before it was the church, set the background from the colonial times, right in the middle of the moment, when 10th church was founded. So this was, I'm reflecting, I think this must have been 1977 when Jim asked if I would do this.

And of course, being a student, I mean, I was just flattered beyond measure. You're a student at the time. Yeah.

And was happy to do it. So wrote the chapter. And it came out in the book.

Then many years later, the book was reissued with Phil Reichen in charge of it. Right, Phil, by that point being the president of the pastor of the church. So I have had over the years what I would regard as an important connection with 10th.

Some of my fondest memories from college days were attending the Philadelphia Conference on Reform Theology at 10th. And there I met some of the great luminaries. That was where I met and shook hands and got autographs with John Stott, with J.I. Packer, with Ralph Kuiper, R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner.

Those were really wonderful times. Really, really wonderful times. And is this, you did your, your master's and your doctor worked at U Penn.

So is this where we... That is correct. Yeah, it overlapped with that, yes. And you have, I've picked this up from listening to your lectures, reading a number of your books, but uncommon, I think, to most historians, you have a real solid theological background.

Did you teach theology? You trained in some theology? I'm a seminary grad. I went to the old Reformed Episcopal Seminary, also in Philadelphia. So, yes, I have that.

And did some teaching there for a number of years. It was, it was while I was there, I wrote the book that I thought you were going to point to. Oh, yes, right.

On Edward's On the Will. So, yes, there is, there is a good helping of theology knocking around inside of me. I want to ask about your book on Lincoln, which won the 2000 Lincoln Prize, Redeemer President.

Great book. When people ask me, I've read, you know, a number of Lincoln biographies, but this is the first one I always recommend. Just give a snapshot.

What, what did you mean by the subtitle here, Redeemer President? I was actually borrowing a phrase from an editorial written by Walt Whitman in 1856. Whitman, at that point, was looking back at the rubbish of the administration of Franklin Pierce and looking forward, not with a whole lot of anticipation to the next President, James Buchanan. And he writes this anguished op-ed for the Brooklyn Eagle, which he was then editing, saying, when are we ever going to get the Redeemer President of this country? And the phrase stuck with me.

And I thought he got his answer. He didn't quite, he didn't quite anticipate the form in which it was going to come, but he did get his answer. He did get a Redeemer President, who in the sense redeemed us from the political morass in which the country had

become involved.

But Redeemer President also had a somewhat more ambiguous aspect to it as well, because that then raised the question, Redeemer, redemption. This is a theological category. Does that mean that Lincoln is also a religious figure? And there is where the ambiguities entered him.

Because if there is one theme which does not enter into any aspect of what you can call Lincoln's religion, it's redemption. Lincoln is the only President never to have joined a church. He never made any kind of formal profession of faith.

And people throughout his life criticized him for that. He understood this was a tax on his political visibility. And yet he is the President who in the middle of the Civil War turns most often to God for answers, trying to sort out in remarkably theological terms exactly what is going on in this war and what it means.

And the culmination of that of course is his second inaugural address, which is about as close as a President of the United States ever comes in an inaugural address or almost any other address to preaching a sermon. And yet even there, the one factor which is most significantly absent, even from the second inaugural with malice toward none with charity for all, the significant absence is any sense of redemption being part of the results of the war. So yes, I latch onto this phrase because there is the marvelous ambiguity, which is packed into it, and which I open up and explore at a number of points during the book.

Yeah, that's one of the things I really enjoy about your books that as a historian, you're not just chronicling, and then this happened and this happened but you're always trying to give something of an interpretation without being anachronistic but an interpretation to try to get behind the man and understand something. And so Lincoln is, you know, has this very predestinarian religious upbringing. Yeah, and has that and is very God haunted and is constantly referring back to the Bible.

And yet I've heard many Christians and pastors want to make Lincoln into an evangelical Christian and maybe there's this letter that came through a bridge too far, you think? I understand the desire to, shall we say, posthumously baptized Lincoln. Right. But no, there's just no evidence of it.

He was raised in a devout Baptist household predestinarian Baptist of the, I mean these were reformed Baptist of the stiffest imaginable construction. And yet very early on he rebels against this. And he takes that rebellion with him through life.

And yet while he's rebelling against it, he also continues to wear the imprint of it. So you might say that Calvinism, Calvinism creates the map of his mind. And he spends the rest of his life traversing that map, even though he won't commit himself to believing it.

There's almost a sense in which his Calvinism got in his way. He once made the comment to someone who impressed him on the subject that he really couldn't make a decision about Christianity because decisions like that were out of the hands of ordinary human beings. And that he had to fumble his way around in the dark as he put it like poor doubting Thomas did.

And maybe one day Grace would be given to him, but until that time he just simply had to wait for it to happen. Well, that's taking Calvinism directions. Calvin would never have approved, but nevertheless, it's the logic that many people use sometimes as an excuse, but also sometimes as a rationale for the struggle that they had.

Yeah. I just mentioned a few other books and then we'll get to Lee, but just the ones I pulled off my shelf here this morning. So for listeners here certainly check out Gettysburg the last invasion.

This was a New York Times bestseller. So everything you want to know about Gettysburg and maybe even more. And these were lectures that were given a number of years ago and then put into a book redeeming the great emancipator and wonderful series of lectures and then just for a civil war history.

Dr. Gelsso has written, "Fateful Lightning, a New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction." There are many others, but we'll get those in the show notes so people can look at those. I do want to just ask you about these great courses, which I've listened to more than a dozen and I've listened to three or four of yours. It's sure you're such a good lecture.

It sounds like you're reading a manuscript, but are you? Are you just from notes? What is it like recording those lecture series? I am reading because in the studio, of course, they're recording not only audio, but video as well. And the teaching company employs three large cameras and a teleprompter. And I'm happy to make use of the teleprompter.

So I write out myself all of the material and then it goes up in the teleprompter and I read it off the teleprompter. And I do that because that safeguards me from wandering off subject, which is something as you well know, preachers and teachers are very want to do. So I do it as a disciplinary measure.

It keeps me on focus. I think that very good to listen to because that's good. I'm glad you're there.

There are no wasted words and there's a certain panache in your delivery, which is, which is really good. So I do commend those to our listeners to go find some of those. And I talk about this new biography, Robert E. Lee, a life.

So I'm a pastor and that's my first job. My second job is to teach systematic theology at

seminary. And sort of my third thing or I don't know where it is down the line, but I did doctoral work in history and study John Witherspoon.

We could do a whole podcast and ask you about John Witherspoon. I could. I'll delay that.

Maybe I'll work in a John Witherspoon question. But as someone who's done academic history work, I would look at a biography like this. And the first question that comes to my mind is how long did it take you? What was the process? Obviously, you have a lifetime of expertise in the Civil War and American history.

But what was the process like in putting together 600 page biography? It took quite literally almost eight years, which is not as long as some people have labored over a biography. I've known people who put a lot longer into writing a book of similar length. But for me, this was an eight year adventure, which actually took longer than I thought it was going to take.

It took longer for three reasons. One is that the primary sources only, his letters, for instance, are not concentrated in any one single archive, nor are there published editions of the complete letters and correspondence and writings of Robert E. Lee, such as there are for Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses Grant, even Jefferson Davis, even Andrew Johnson has a complete writing tradition. Lee does not.

And one principle reason for that is, first of all, the man was a compulsive letter writer. He must have written something between six and eight thousand letters in his lifetime. But they are scattered in penny packets, in archives from the Morgan Library in New York City to the Huntington Library in San Marino.

And it seems like it almost all points in between. And tracking these down required a great deal of time, great deal of labor, great deal of patience. So I'm pulling Lee collections from Georgia.

I'm pulling Lee collections from Missouri. I'm pulling Lee collections from Texas and try to assemble these all together. So as to form a coherent picture of the man.

So that took a lot of time. So visits had to be made, requests had to be filed. That was time consuming.

Another factor was I had to deal right smack in the middle of all this with meningitis. So I had a nasty spell with that. That was five days in the hospital, and then several weeks after with recovery.

So that slowed everything down. And then there was this business of a job transition from Gettysburg College, where I'd been for 15 years, to Princeton University, where I am now. And that transition subtracted time for writing Lee.

So when you factor in those three things, the wonder is that it only took eight years. Maybe I should have given it longer. I don't know.

But I think by the time I got to 2020, I was pretty much at that point that biographers reach when they're thoroughly sick of their subject. And they just want the project to be done. Right.

That's right. Is the, is the Witherspoon statue still up at Princeton or have they taken it down? The Witherspoon statue is still there. There have been complaints that have been made by some people by John Witherspoon.

And you did this nasty thing. And he was guilty of this unspeakable crime. My response is, let he who is without historical sin cast the first stone.

I would like to point out that this man by signing the Declaration of Independence put a holder around his neck for all of our benefit. Maybe that should count something to him, reckon to him for righteousness. Right.

But I don't know. We will have to see what happens. There is a statue of Witherspoon, by the way, in Washington, D.C. Yeah.

Right across curiously enough from the Mayflower Hotel. I don't know if anyone's noticed it, but as far as I know, that is still there. Yeah, there's that one in Glasgow and just wondering, or in Paisley, how long before, well, we'll save the Witherspoon discussion, but I was curious that it's still up.

Yes, it is still up, or at least until someone listens to this podcast and with Malas of Worth thought and realizes, aha, we have to go after that one. So we have to be careful here. Yes, we will be.

Let me ask this question as we get into the Lee biography. Are there any portrayals of Lee in popular culture that are close to accurate I'm thinking of by popular culture I mean that you know the gods and generals movie or book or the Gettysburg movie of course based on the book by the same author or even Ken Burns Civil War series which has for I grew up, you know, going to school in the 80s and 90s and I watch that thing every single year that shaped probably more than anything my generation of how we understand the Civil War are those. What do they get right what do they get wrong about how they depict Lee.

Well, one thing which certainly comes right in for instance, the Gettysburg movie Ron Maxwell's Gettysburg movie. And I know Ron and he's a he's a good friend. One thing that does come clear in the Gettysburg movie is how intimidating a presence Robert E. Lee could be.

One thing which Martin Sheen got absolutely I think it was Martin Sheen. Martin Sheen

either. Yeah.

Not Charlie. That would have been very different. Yeah.

Because I'm trying to remember it was in the subsequent movie that Ron made gods and generals he had Robert Duvall. Yeah, that's right. Like Lee, who is curiously a Lee relative.

That's his name. That's his name Robert E. Lee Duvall. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I didn't put that together.

But to come back to the Gettysburg movie, one thing which Sheen really did very well and which really got right was how intimidating Lee could be when he was angry. And you see that in two scenes. One where he's facing down his generals after the first days fighting and basically letting them know they're all in the dog house for not having pressed their advantages.

And the other is the scene with Jeb Stuart, both of which really, really capture how formidable and forbidding Robert E. Lee could be when someone failed him. Lee was a perfectionist. And if you did not measure up to his standards, whoa be unto you.

And that included even people of his personal staff. His longtime adjutant and military secretary, Walter Taylor, once wrote a letter to his fiancée during the war saying you have no idea how difficult it is to work for general Lee. He is so, see so unresponsive.

He is so uncooperative. He's so mean. And yet at the same time Taylor would go on and to add, yes, but he really is a great man.

So I guess all great men are like that. But Lee could be difficult to deal with that way. And I think the movies at least captured that one aspect of Lee pretty effectively.

Certainly the Gettysburg movie does. Beyond that, it's actually hard to put a finger on what you would call popular culture, portrayals of Lee. Unlike Abraham Lincoln, who has appeared in over 220 movies, documentaries, educational shorts, my goodness, even an episode of Star Trek.

Robert E Lee has not made it onto the silver screen very much. So those appearances are comparatively few and difficult to evaluate, which I think is a reflection of the fact that the man himself could be very difficult to evaluate could be, he could seem almost opaque to people. I'm glad you mentioned the scene with where he dresses down Jeb Stuart, my congregation here will know that that's one of my favorite sermon illustrations.

And I won't give my my poor accent but then again I didn't think Martin Sheen's accent was particularly convincing either. But what I illustrate from that. So he dresses down

Stuart, you're the eyes and the ears of my army and then when Stuart wants to hand in his sword, he just says, I have no time for this.

Yes, what on your sword, get back. And so I've used that illustration, a couple different sermon context to say, when you have been repent before the Lord but you don't have to grovel, you know, just repent be forgiven, get back into the fight. So that's maybe my favorite scene from, at least from the Lee side from that movie.

This is interesting but because for years at Gettysburg College of course where that's a subject of live attention. I would always hear students quoting back to each other. "Jingle Stuart, there is no time for that." No, I don't want to disenchant things but I have to tell you Kevin, that encounter between Stuart and Lee probably did not occur.

Yeah, that's what I've gathered. If it didn't happen in the book, it should have. Yeah, but the odds are that it probably did not occur.

Yeah, well, the very first description of that encounter doesn't surface until 1915. The first line from the book and later we'll get to the last line because it really, it's a great opening and a great closing. Now you say this book began in 2014 and what now seems like almost another world with a single question.

So here's your question, you begin the book. How do you write the biography of someone who commits treason? Unpack that. Most people, and you tie this up again throughout the book and especially at the end.

When people think about Lee's sins today, and there are many, they don't think of treason strangely enough but you want to remind us of that. Why do you start the book this way? I had written almost everything up to that point about Abraham Lincoln, about the union cause, even fateful lightning. It will not take readers terribly long getting into it to realize that this is someone who's writing it from the perspective of the blue, not the gray.

And that's not entirely surprised. I'm a Yankee. I'm from Yankee land here in Pennsylvania.

I grew up with my grandmother who herself as a school girl in Philadelphia could remember at the turn of the last century, the old veterans of the Civil War coming to her classroom on what they call, then called decoration day. To come and talk about the real meaning of the Civil War, and these old veterans and their little blue caps and blue jackets from the Grand Army of the Republic, they were determined to offer an entirely different understanding of the Civil War than the lost cause, bawboard by those rebels. They were still rebels and they didn't have any romantic attachments of that word.

Well, she imbibed that and sure enough, I got exactly that at her knee as a young kid growing up. So I've come equipped to this subject of the Civil War all these years from

that perspective. But there was itching within me this curiosity.

What did the Civil War look like from the other side of the telescope? And especially, how did you understand someone like Robert E. Lee as prominent as he was, as famous and lauded as he was, yet committing what I could not call by any other name except treason. I mean, my father was US Army. He took the oath to uphold defend the Constitution.

My son is a captain in the army. He also took the oath. I took the oath when I joined the National Council for the Humanities some 10 years ago.

So I take that seriously. So how do I understand the thinking of someone who goes back on that, who commits treason? Because I don't have a better or more accurate or softer word for what Robert E. Lee did when you look at how the Constitution defines treason as giving aid and comfort to the enemies of the United States and making war against them. I can't escape the fact that that's the category into which he fell.

How do you write the biography of somebody like that? I mean, in the largest sense, how do you write what I would call difficult biography? Because not everybody out there can be unqualifiedly admired. In some moral respects, it's easy to write about Jonathan Edwards. It's easy to write about Abraham Lincoln.

What do you do about someone who commits treason? How do you write? And how do you write about people who create big mistakes or people who just are culturally nearsighted? How do you write about a Neville Chamberlain? And you think, how did he not see what was wrong with Adolf Hitler? Even you look at Churchill and you wonder how could someone make so many blunders like the Dardanelles, like Edward the Eighth? And how do you write "difficult biography?" So there was a challenge and Lee, to me, creates the ultimate, difficult American biography because he commits treason. And my curiosity was peaked and curiosity led me into it. And the book is really the result of asking that question.

You do a really good job of this throughout the book and you say early on that if we cast Lee as either saint or sinner, as either simple or pathological, in the end, it will be a less profitable historical exercise. And so there is this, people sometimes will say, well, what is a Christian way of doing history? Well, Christians can be bad historians or good historians and a lot of it. But one of the things I sometimes say is, it does mean on the one hand as a Christian, I want to look with the lens of God's word at what people have done and who they were.

On the other hand, it means loving my neighbor as myself means even loving my dead neighbors as myself. And something of the Quentin Skinner School of Intellectual History and trying to see things their way and trying to at least understand. From our vantage points very easy to see some of the really egregious sins of Robert E. Lee.

And we also want to try to understand who was he in his time, what he was doing. How do you do that is a historian and in particular with this Lee biography to not portray him because a lot of people would want him to be either a saint in some traditions, there is this, you say apotheosis, this deification. He is the southern Arthur and redeemer and he's not only the hero of the Confederacy but he's the hero of America somehow at the same time.

And yet it would be easy to do the other side and just write about all the things he got wrong. How do you try to do both of those things. At the very beginning, I deal with myself as a sinner.

I look at myself, I understand the many conflicting impulses. And I think of those short prayers, which I think everybody should use every day. Lord have mercy upon me as sinner.

The great thing is that the person who said that was exactly the one pointed out by Jesus as the one who was really doing the right thing. Lord have mercy on me as sinner. This was someone who had every reason, to be cataloged as an horrible person.

But for being able to go and say, Lord have mercy on me as sinner, that was what attracted the attention of Jesus. I also look at how many characters of the Bible have been people of conflicted spiritual states. Look at somebody like King David.

Here was a man after God's own heart. And yet there's that terrible incident of Bathsheba where Nathan the prophet goes to him. It's one of the most dramatic scenes in the Bible where Nathan the prophet goes to him and says, let me tell you about this man with a little U lamb and the creep who came along and stole the lamb from him.

And David's all brothy and Nathan. Oh my goodness. What have seen Nathan says, now we're at the man.

And at that point, David's whole self image of himself. You can just hear it crack. So I'm coming at Lee from a biblical complexity of human nature, human motivation and human sin, how people sin repent, sin again, repent again.

I remember in the Psalms, a just man falls seven times a day. So I come to Lee looking not either for stainless purity. Because I don't believe that's that's there in any of us.

But at the same time, I'm not looking to put horns on him and imagine that everything he does is detestable, because that's not how human beings behave either. It is, it is the measure of these things in people's lives that you have to take account of. And for me, one very important rule that I have tried to stay by is a rule that I learned years ago from the literary critic John Gardner.

And I cite this at the end, the very end of the lead book, where Gardner, and he was

talking about fiction, but it's, I think it's perfectly applicable in nonfiction as well. No true compassion without will. And no true will without compassion.

What he meant by that was the writer, and this, and I've transposed this to the historian. And the historian has to have the will to judge. To me, there is no point whatsoever in writing history.

If it's merely facts, facts, facts, and no philosophy of facts, a phrase I learned many years ago from Cornelius Van Til. Now that has stuck with me. What the job of the historian is to do is to take the facts and the historian must pass some kind of judgment on them.

Otherwise, those facts have no meaning whatsoever. And it's merely an accretion of barnacles. So you have to have the will to judge that has to be there.

Yet at the same time, that will has to be tempered by compassion. A compassion that recognizes I am also a sinner. We are sinners who have all fallen short of the glory of God.

Similarly, there are many people who want to write compassion away. Sometimes the compassion is what leads them to this, this stainless sacred Lee. And that's wrong too.

Because Jesus also makes judgment when he says to the woman caught an adultery. I am not going to judge you. He then says, go and sin no more.

There's a moral injunction there. He's going to hold her to a standard himself. And there has to be, along with the compassion, there also has to be that will.

There has to be that judgment. And I have tried to keep those in view as I have moved through this Lee biography and move towards some kind of evaluation at the end that would leave us in a position where we can look at Lee, judge Lee, and still somehow at the end of it live with Lee. Because he's there whether we like it or not.

How do we deal with him? That's those are the signs I have tried to use as my guides. The last paragraph, I'll just read it because it was a terrific, it was a great last paragraph and you've alluded to it here. There can be no true compassion without will, but there can be no true will without compassion.

Or without compassion, no one can summon the will to live a true life or fashion the true arts. And then the self pity played a far larger role than compassion and leads character in his pursuit of perfection froze compassion into obligation. But that need not be the case in us mercy, or at least a nalet prossiqui and legal term to mean abandoned the prosecution.

And that would be the most appropriate conclusion to the crime and the glory of Robert E. Lee, after all, I can't imagine there are too many lead biographies that end on the note

of mercy. Is that some of your, you know, your Christian's. Oh, yeah.

Oh, yeah. The greatest of Lee biographies, the Mount Everest, so to speak, almost the Himalayas, the entire range is Douglas Suthall Freeman's four volume biography. The first part he Lee, which he published in the 1930s won a Pulitzer Prize for it.

Freeman was a lost cause advocate. And for him, Robert E Lee, as he put it himself, Freeman says straight up Robert E Lee's character was simple. It was guided purely by duty.

And in the close of the fourth volume, Lee is in his coffin. And, oh, my goodness, Freeman has this scene. It's his own imagination.

But he has this scene. The sun coming up in the morning and the rays of the sun coming through the windows on to these coffin. And you're thinking, Oh, don't tell me there are going to be the women waiting at the edge for the resurrection.

And I'm thinking, yeah, this is Freeman. This is this is really over the top. So you get one extreme that way.

And then, frankly, it says repulsors. But then there's the other extreme, which uses Lee as a whipping boy. And Lee is a person who is evil.

He is racially unenlightened. He is a terrible person. He is psychologically crippled.

And this becomes the story of Robert E Lee that is told by people like Thomas Connolly in his 1977 book, *The Marble Man*, which was actually the first book I ever read about Robert E Lee long, long ago. But it also informs Alan Nolan's *Lee considered* and Michael Feldman's *The Making of Robert E Lee*. And both of them go entirely in the other direction from Freeman.

I think in some respects, it's an overreaction that does not factor in so many other aspects of Lee. So I am trying to chart something of the middle course. I don't adore the Lee because I don't think you should bow down and worship men.

At the same time, I want to be cautious about how I condemn because there's so many mitigations and so many contradictions built into the character of Robert E Lee. That he doesn't fit. He doesn't fit the outline of a Robin Hood villain.

He just doesn't. Yeah. So you talk about the lost cause, which is shorthand for this idea that the south never had a chance to win the war.

And it was just grand was a butcher. The south had all of the glorious generals and they didn't have the personnel, they didn't have the material, but Lee, he wasn't even conquered. He merely surrendered and displayed Christian valor throughout.

And this begins, you say in the book, early on, of course, Jubal Early really popularizes that. And there's a whole book, *The Lost Cause*. But even in Lee's lifetime, it begins.

Was Lee supportive of this growing mythology around himself in the south? Well, in large measure, Lee dies before the lost cause really takes off. If we want to pin a date on the birth of the lost cause, I think it really begins with Jubal Early's memorial address about Lee in Lexington in 1872, now two years after Lee had died. But you know, they were, but they were already the stirrings of this.

And on the one hand, Lee discourages it. Lee's constant message in the five years that he lived after the surrender of the mathematics was we have lost. We have to come to grips with the fact that we have lost.

We are now once again part of the United States. We are all one country and southerners need to pick themselves up, rehabilitate themselves and get on with the project of being part of one nation. Part of his labor as president of Washington College was to equip and educate young southerners to take up leadership roles in creating a new south that would be part of the United States as a whole.

So Lee himself never goes on some kind of campaign to glorify the Confederacy. When Tom Rosser, one of his cavalry officers, writes to him about proposing monuments, Lee tells him, forget it. This is not what we should be doing.

When a Northern entrepreneur writes to Lee to try to solicit Lee's interest in participating in a reunion at Gettysburg, Lee declines. He does not want to go back and revisit things. Unlike Ulysses Grant, when Grant becomes president, Grant brings all of his old staffers.

He brings John Rawlins. He brings Eli Parker into his administration. Lee doesn't do that at Washington College.

He never attends reunions. He never brings his old officers to Lexington to serve in positions at Washington College. He corresponds some with them, but not very much.

He's not busy trying to build this edifice of southern memory. He constantly toys with the idea that he will write a history of the Army of Northern Virginia, but he never gets around to it. The only thing like that, he ends up writing is a memoir of his father, Light Horse Harry Lee, from the Revolution.

If the lost cause had anything to attract Robert E. Lee, certainly perishing Lee little evidence of it, the lost cause really is the confection of a number of other people, like Lee's biographer John Jones. He certainly had a personal interest in promoting a lost cause because it attracted attention away from how much he contributed to the South losing the war. You can blame it on Longstreet, all the better.

Who else did the battle of Gettysburg? Why did the South lose? Somebody asked George

Pickett that question. I suppose that George Pickett would know almost better than anybody else. Someone asked George Pickett that question.

Why did the confederacy lose the battle of Gettysburg? The biggest answer was, I suppose the Yankees had something to do with it. I think at the end of the day, that's very much the case. I think at Gettysburg, really what happens is Robert E. Lee does not so much lose a battle as he loses an opportunity.

He came close though. It has to be said that really the confederacy came within an inch of victory at Gettysburg, but sometimes an inch is all that matters. You mentioned light horse Harry Lee, and he looms large in this biography.

You say toward the beginning that Lee grew up practically fatherless. How did that influence the rest of his life? Well, when you consider the trauma that is inflicted by the loss of a parent before adolescence, it is hard to see how there would not be an impact. That's particularly true, I think, but the loss of fathers.

A number of years ago, a theologian wrote a book called Faith of the Fatherless. I thought it was an interesting exploration because what the book was about was about atheists. Faith of the Fatherless had this really creative insight, and they pointed out how often prominent atheists were people who had grown up in fatherless households.

In other words, in their personal experience, they had no way of conceiving of God as their father, hence their unbelief, their atheism. It was a pattern which was repeated in so many biographies of atheists that it was worth taking into account. Well, when I transposed that to Robert E. Lee, whose father basically walked out on him before his eighth birthday and never came back.

That is a serious trial for Robert E. Lee. Robert E. Lee is a person who spends a large part of his life trying to compensate for that loss. He compensates for it as an adolescent by becoming a kind of surrogate father.

In this case, he becomes his mother's household servant, his mother's messenger boy, his mother's household manager. He's trying to be what his father had subtracted from the household. When you watch how Lee operates in later years, he's always looking for these surrogate fathers.

He finds one in Charles Gratiot, who was the chief engineer when Lee began life as an army engineer. It's likewise for Winfield Scott. It's only after Robert E. Lee comes into his own as a personality in 1862.

He really starts to lose this obsession with being a replacement father or finding replacement fathers. It's actually the moment when he pays his first visit to his father's grave. The irony of this, of course, is that through all of those years as an adolescent right up until the beginning of the Civil War, whenever people talk about Robert E. Lee,

they always talk about him as the son of Leidwurst Harry, the famous revolutionary cavalry commander.

I often wonder as he's being introduced in place after place and time after time as the son of Leidwurst Harry, I wonder if these people have any idea of how much pain they're inflicting on him by saying it. Even when he receives his commission from the Virginia legislature to take command of the Virginia forces in 1861, he's introduced as the son of Leidwurst Harry, former governor of Virginia, and these walls can still vibrate with the sound of Harry Lee's voice. I'm thinking, "Oh my goodness, do you think of any idea what they're saying? What ideas and memories they're generating and Robert E. Lee's mind when they're saying this?" Well, he doesn't tell us, but I cannot help for speculating.

Many people when we think of Lee, it's basically 1861 to 1865 and sort of everything after that. Oh, that's right. Famously, Lincoln asks him to lead the federal troops, but you remind us in the biography, he was mostly an engineer in his military career and famous in '59 for suppressing John Brown's rebellion.

But what did Lincoln see in Lee that he would offer him that commission? Well, I don't know that Lincoln himself saw much in Lee because Lincoln was not a military man. Lincoln often joked about his almost complete absence of any understanding of military life. But Lincoln at that point was being heavily advised.

First of all, by Winfield Scott, who thought that Robert E. Lee simply walked on water. And by Francis Preston Blair, the long time Washington political operative, and some Blair offspring had-- if Blair's daughter had married a Lee, it was a distant cousin of Robert E. Lee, but people knew the Lee's. So it becomes logical for Scott and for Blair to recommend to Lincoln that Robert E. Lee, with that point, is Colonel of the First Cavalry, be given command of federal field forces.

And Lincoln through Francis Preston Blair does make that offer, extends that offer, but Lee refuses it, Lee declines. It was not an illogical decision because the United States Army at the outbreak of the Civil War is a very small affair. We were talking 16,000 people, both officers and enlisted.

And Lee had made quite an impression during the Mexican War, serving under Winfield Scott. I mean, he starts out as an engineering officer, but Scott quickly sees that Lee's got a lot of capabilities. He begins really to use Lee as his principal reconnaissance officer, advisor, staffer.

Scott would say later, speaking to Reverdi Johnson, that all the glory he won in the Great Campaign to Mexico City in 1847 was really owed to Robert E. Lee. That if there was, Scott once made the comment that if he was on his deathbed and had to make a recommendation to the President as to who should succeed him in command of the Army, he would, unhesitatingly, say that it should be Robert E. Lee. Now, Scott just

thought the world of Robert Lee.

And when Lee turns down the offer, Scott tells him, you have made the greatest mistake of your life. One of Scott's staffers said that Scott, Scott so destroyed. He laid himself down on the sofa in his office, told everybody to leave.

He didn't want to talk to anybody. He didn't want to discuss anything. And he said he never wanted to hear the name of Robert E. Lee again.

He had put so much of his personal capital in Robert E. Lee. And it was a torment to Scott when Lee decides, in fact, not to accept the offer. Man, I have 20 questions, 25 more questions to all of them.

So let me try to ask some encapsulating questions, both on the saint and on the center side. So if you were making the case for, at the end, you talk about the glory and the crime. So the glory of Lee as a man, as a military strategist, what goes in that column of the glory of Lee and what his troops who revered him saw in him? The glory of Lee lies in the fact that he turned out, without anything as precedent, to be a really skillful, strategic thinker.

He was one of those military people who could take in an entire vista of military territory and know exactly what had to be done and when it had to be done. He had, so to speak, the coup of the eye. And that in the largest sense, not just a particular piece of battlefield terrain, but the overall connections of what would make a war happen and how a war could be brought to a successful conclusion.

He understood that probably better than almost anyone else in the south. And what he understood about it was this. The south did not have the resources to go a long, full, heavy weight belt.

It wasn't going to go 15 rounds. I just couldn't do it against the north. If it was going to win, it had to score a surprise knockout in the first two rounds.

And that was what he demanded by taking his army north of the Potomac in 1862. He might have succeeded. If he had moved, successfully moved across the Potomac up into Pennsylvania as he had planned, and there inflicted some kind of defeat on Mr. Hyper caution, George McClellan, then the political fallout for this might have been catastrophic for the Lincoln administration.

And the Lincoln administration might have been forced to the negotiating table with the Confederacy. That could very possibly have happened. It didn't happen because of the famous lost orders.

Special orders number 191 that get picked up in a field by federal soldiers from the 27th Indiana. And it goes up to McClellan. And suddenly McClellan has all of Lee's campaign

plans in his hand.

So that cut short that effort. But a year later Lee's added again. Again, he crosses the Potomac.

Again, it's up into Pennsylvania once again. Looking to create political havoc for the Lincoln administration and force the Lincoln administration to the negotiating table. He almost did it.

If he had been victorious at Gettysburg. Mike, Mike. The possible outcome of that.

Right. It is the army of the Potomac would have gone to pieces, quite frankly. It had lost so many battles.

Lincoln would have probably lost the next year. Well, it might not have even lasted that long. Yeah.

Because in the fall 1862 elections, the governorships of New Jersey and New York went into the hands of anti-administration Democrats. Joel Parker and New Jersey Horatio Seymour and New York. Now, there are gubernatorial elections coming up in Pennsylvania and Ohio in the fall.

And there are significant anti-Lincoln candidates running for governor in those states. If there had been some kind of major success for the Confederacy in Pennsylvania in the summer of 1863, that would have put all the Jews necessary to elect anti-Lincoln governors in Ohio and Pennsylvania. That means you've got New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania moving over into the anti-Lincoln column.

Those governors can say to Lincoln, we're not putting any more resources into this war. No more troops. We're not allowing the draft to operate.

That's going to pull down the tent. He saw that that would be the train of events. That was why he launched those invasions in '62 and '63.

So I'm looking at this and saying, this is a man who really understood what the strategic needs of the situation were. And he almost pulled it off. Yeah.

And that is one of the ironies of the lost cosmetology. Actually, no, the South could have won. People have foregone conclusion.

Kevin, people often ask me what I think the turning point of the Civil War was. And what they're expecting is that I'll say Antietam or Gettysburg or something like that. I tell them, turning point of the Civil War was a pepamatic courthouse.

Yeah. Because, and I'm exaggerating a little, but the truth is that right up until Lincoln is reelected in November of 1864, it could have gone the other way. If George McClellan

had been elected president rather than Lincoln in November of '64, there's simply no question that McClellan would have had to go to the negotiating table with the Confederates.

His party would have forced him to do it, kicking and screaming, but he would have gone to the negotiating table. Once at the table, no one was going back to war. I mean, there'd been these years of bloodletting.

No one was going back to war. They would have divided the country. We would have had a Balkanized North America.

Because, look, once you separated the South from the United States, that was only going to be the signal for other clumps of the country to do the same. The Northwest around the Great Lakes would have formed its own Confederacy. The Pacific coast would have formed its Confederacy.

You would have been Balkanized. What then would have happened in the 20th century? A different world, not an exaggeration. Oh, oh my.

It's not the kind of thing you want to lay awake at night thinking about. Yes, it was what Wellington said at Waterloo. It was a close run thing.

Yes. Right up until November of '64, it really could have gone the other way. All through this conflict, the options for catastrophe were all too open.

They could have happened, though. Of course, I'm calling them catastrophe because, yes, I'm a Yankee from Yankee land. That's a catastrophe.

I think I'm also speaking as an American. Yes, even as a Christian, I think that would have been a catastrophe in world history. On the other side, we would be remiss if I didn't ask you something about Lee's views of race and slavery.

And then other men of his class in Providence? He was more enlightened, but no more willing to do anything about that enlightenment. Lee occupies a position in Virginia that is very peculiar. He only ever in his lifetime owns one slave family in his own name.

That's a family he inherited from his mother, who was a Carter. And Virginia Carter's, that's still a name to conjure with Virginia. That doesn't mean he wasn't connected to slavery, though, because he marries into the Custis family.

And the Custis family are major slave owners. The Custis is on something close to 200 slaves. So while he doesn't own slaves in his own name, he benefits from their services, clearly.

On the other hand, when he finally does, finally say something on the subject of slavery, in a letter that he writes to his wife in the 1850s, when he's often Texas, as Lieutenant

Colonel of the Second Cavalry. He comes out and says, "Slavery is a moral and political evil in any country." You look at that, you think, "Oh, my." And yet he then immediately goes on and says, "But we really can't do anything about it because it's so ingrained and it's going to take so long for this evil to be dealt with. Look how long it took 2000 years for Christianity to civilize Europe and America.

We're just going to have to wait for God's time to come for the end of slavery." And you look at that and you think, "You have looked at slavery, Mr. Lee. You have looked at it. You have seen it for what it is.

You have called it for what it is. You know what it is. It is a violation of natural law.

And yet, the first thing you do is turn your gaze away from it. And when he does that, he's doing something very similar to what a lot of upper south slave owners did. And they could do it.

They could afford to do it because for 40 years, slavery had been slowly leached out of the upper south and moved into the lower south and down to the southwest. Virginia was a net exporter of slaves. If slavery was bleeding out in Virginia because it was ceasing to be as spectacularly profitable as it was in the Mississippi River Valley.

So there were a lot of people like that who said the same thing that Lee did. His father-in-law, George Washington, Park Custis, says the same thing. Slavery, he says, is a vulture.

But he doesn't... he doesn't manuminate his slaves except in his will. And then he turns around and makes Robert the executor so that Robert has to be the one who emancipates the slaves. But here's the interesting thing.

That is what Robert does. I mean, between 1857, when old Park Custis dies, and 1862, when the will mandated the emancipation of the slaves, Lee moved steadily along towards emancipating those slaves. And the end of December 1862, he signs the final manumission papers.

Now, you've got to think, at the end of December of 1862, if Robert E. Lee had gone into any Confederate Virginia court and said, "Oh, look, hey, we're just not going to go through with this." I'm sorry. I can't imagine a Confederate Virginia judge saying, "No, generally, you have to do this. You have to emancipate these slaves." No, that wasn't going to happen.

He could have gotten out of it. He doesn't. He pushes straight through to the emancipation.

And not only that, he emancipates that one slave family that he owns, which he wasn't obligated to do by the terms of his father-in-law's will. By the beginning of 1863, Robert

E. Lee is slaveless. And he's trying to lecture Jefferson Davis about how the Confederacy needs to move to emancipation, too, because slavery is a millstone around the Confederacy's neck.

And does he think they might fight on the side of the Confederacy? That's what he moves towards in February of 1865. Let's emancipate the slaves and recruit them for the Confederate armies. And the hardcore Confederate types go absolutely nuts.

If you want to hear people say nasty things about Robert E. Lee, don't go to Northern abolitionists. Go to what the Charleston Mercury had to say about Robert E. Lee after Lee endorses the proposal for emancipating slaves and recruiting them. The Charleston Mercury says, Robert E. Lee is just another stinking old Federalist.

He has never been with us. He's never been one of us. He's betraying us.

You're thinking, this is the Charleston Mercury. And they're talking about Robert E. Lee. These people are crazier than I thought they were.

So the response he gets, I mean, how come Senator from Georgia stands up in the Confederate Senate? If this proposal is right, then our whole theory of this war is wrong. I mean, at that point, I said, great, great how you got it right. You know, the broken clock just struck the time correctly.

So, but this is what this is the reaction that Lee generates. So you look at that, you think, my, that doesn't sound like the Lee that after the war, people wanted to make over into the Paladin of the Lost Cause. Right.

Let me ask you this one last question. It's the question that probably listeners would want me to have started with, but I'll end with it. And that is the Board of Trustees come to you.

Maybe they do. I don't know. And they ask you, Dr. Gelsa, you've written this.

The Board of Washington and Lee. Should we remove Lee from our name? The City of Richmond comes to you and says, what should we do with the Lee statue? How do you help us as Americans or these particular institutions where the whole countries, you know, embroiled in these sort of controversies, but Lee in particular, his name to be stricken, all of the statues to be taken down? After the Charlottesville riot in 2017, I co-wrote with one of my former students, who's an interpretive officer for the National Park Service, an article about monuments, and especially about Lee monuments, but about Confederate monuments and questionable monuments in general. And what I suggested in this, and John suggested this with me, John Rudy, my co-author, was a decision tree.

Because toppling statues, renaming things, this is playing with history, and you don't play with that on an impulsive or emotional basis. So, let's create a decision tree, and we

created a five-step decision tree that we recommended people go through. We didn't have any predetermined answers.

But what we wanted to say at the end was that no matter what conclusion people come to, whether to keep a statue or not to keep a statue, keep the name, not to keep the name, at least there has been a reasonable and thoughtful process that people have gone through. And I would point people to that article. It appeared in Civil War Monitor in 2017.

And I would say that for cases like these, first of all, you do have to approach them on a case-by-case basis. Secondly, you need to resist the overwhelming demand of the moment. Because I'm always reminded of how easily this kind of thing moves into iconoclasm.

The Tate Gallery in London has estimated that at the time of the Protestant Reformation in England, something like about 70% of England's religious art was destroyed. And it was done with the best of motivations. It was done with people who were terribly sincere, who believed that these pictures of the Virgin Mary and these statues and churches were only leading people to the worship of the godless papal antichrist.

And people were going to hell because of us. So we had to destroy these things. And they did in the Old Testament, right? And they did, yeah.

So 400 years later, we look back and we hit our foreheads with the palm of our hands and say, "What were we thinking?" And my anxiety about iconoclasm is that that may be what we think 50 years from now. Were we just functioning on the basis of impulse and have we, in fact, done ourselves a good deal of harm this way? I don't know. This is why I say I want to proceed on a cautious basis, a reasonable basis, and a situation by situation basis.

And in some of those situations, I'm not even going to be the best expert to make any kind of recommendation. But what I am anxious to see in all of these situations is that a reasonable process be gone through. And all too often a reasonable process is not what I have seen happen.

Well, I have so many more questions. I'll let that be the last word. Dr. Gels with thank you again.

Want to encourage everyone to get. Don't be intimidated by the big size. It is very readable.

He's a wonderful author and historian Robert E. Lee, a life. This book just come out. And of course, all of the other books that was mentioned and other things.

It's a real privilege. I've learned a lot. Thank you for coming on the program and look

forward to the next thing you write.

And maybe we'll have you come on again and we'll talk about John Witherspoon. That will be a pleasure. And it was a pleasure today talking with you and being able to talk, yes, a little history, but also talk a little theology too.

Wonderful. Thank you for being with us. Until next time, for all of our listeners, glorify God, enjoy Him forever and read a good book.

Now that is worth repeating. That's my tag, yes.

(buzzing)

[buzzing]