

Roots in Ripon

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The King of Spades

It has been said that *"if we do not learn from history then we are doomed to repeat it."*

It is my contention that this truism is uncomfortably accurate. In recent months we have seen the rise of those seeking to ruin monuments of persons or ideologies they find objectionable and offensive.

One such person is General Robert E. Lee, commander of all Confederate Forces during the Civil War of 1861-65. His statues have been damaged or torn down because he was the military leader of southern forces during the "War of Northern Aggression", which is just one of the many names attributed to the Civil War. But what do we know of this man who nearly lead the Confederacy to victory over Union forces, often many times larger than Lee's?

Robert Edward Lee was the son of Revolutionary War officer and hero, Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee III. Robert graduated in 1829, second of his class at the Military Academy (West Point) behind Charles Mason, who resigned from the Army a year later. Graduates of the academy were selected for assignments in the Army based upon their academic standing. Those who scored lowest were sent to the infantry. The brightest were chosen to be military engineers. Lee served in the U.S. Army for 29 years, mostly reengineering military installations around the country. He even served a time as the commandant of West Point (1852-59). One of the nicknames attributed to Lee by his academy classmates was, "The Marble Model" because he so typified the soldier they all aspired to be.

During the Mexican-American War (1846-48), the commander of American forces, General Winfield Scott, described Lee in this manner, *"He is the best officer in the Army."*

There are often numerous ironies during war that can only truly be appreciated after time and temper has passed.

The First Irony: In 1859 Lee was visiting Washington, DC when the radical abolitionist, John Brown and his ragtag band of followers seized control of the federal armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. The War Department asked Lee, a colonel at this point in his career, to take a detachment of U.S. Marines and recapture the armory. The recapture was successful. The trial and execution by hanging of John Brown, occurred December 2, 1859. Brown wrote the night before

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his execution these sobering words, *"I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done."*

The Second Irony: In April 1861 Lee turned down the offer to command the Union Army. The person who had the authority to offer such a command was none other than General Winfield Scott! Lee told his old mentor, *"I am a Virginian first."* Allegiance to one's state often superseded national loyalty. Lee did not support secession and firmly believed that his home state of Virginia would choose to stay with the Union. When this did not happen, he felt his loyalty was to Virginia, though it grieved him greatly. It also brought about the split in Virginia, creating the new state of West Virginia because the sentiments of the majority of the folks living in that part of Virginia were for the Union.

The Third Irony: Colonel Lee resigned his commission from the U.S. Army two days after he was offered command of the Union Army and three days after Virginia seceded from the Union. He spoke with General Scott on April 18, 1861, explaining his decision. He said he would have resigned his commission already *"but for the struggle it has cost me to separate myself from a service to which I have devoted the best years of my life and all the ability I possess."* His final comment to Scott was, *"Save in the defense of my native State (Virginia), I never desire again to draw my sword."*

The Fourth Irony: After the war was over Robert E. Lee opposed the construction of public memorials to Confederate rebellion on the grounds that they would prevent the healing of wounds inflicted during the war.

The Final Irony: Following the close of the Civil War in 1865, Lee accepted the offer to be president of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) serving in that capacity until his death in 1870. Lee did not suffer the indignities of arrest and imprisonment so often suffered by enemy combatants. However, his family home, the Custis-Lee Mansion, had been seized by Union forces during the war and was eventually turned into Arlington National Cemetery.

And the reason for the article's title, "The King of Spades"? Well, when Lee assumed command of the Confederate Army, he put his military engineering into practice, requiring his men to take their shovels (spades) for digging earthworks, fortifications, and entrenchments in preparation for battle. The Daily Herald, Feb 16, 2014 states that, *"General Ulysses S. Grant learned the hard way that if he gave Lee's Army of Northern Virginia just six uninterrupted hours head start that they would have field fortifications built that were suicide for Union troops to attack. Grant attacked them anyway, and the butcher's bill was catastrophic for the Yankees."*

I wonder how many of these recent "monument destroyers" know any of this about Robert Edward Lee?