

To: Michael McAlevee, '86, Rector

From: Rick Saunders, '65

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I have been reading many of the various letters, articles, essays, and posts associated with the proposed name change and am encouraged that so many people are participating in the dialogue. I was surprised and disappointed, however, when I read the statements to the Board of Trustees from the Executive Committee. While I respect their recommendation to remove President Lee's name from the university, I was bewildered by the reason: "The call for the removal of Lee from our institutional name is...a call to end the exaltation of a figure representative of values incongruous with the values of our university."

To insure that I understood the context of their reason I explored various dictionaries to find a suitable definition for "values" and came up with this one: "A person's principles or standards of behavior; one's judgment of what is important in life." Following up with a visit to Roget in search of synonyms, the words "ethics," "beliefs," "character," "sense of duty," "standards," "integrity," and "sense of honor" appeared.

After reading professor Toni Locy's editorial in *The Nation* I felt compelled to read through Elizabeth Brown Pryor's *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters* as it was one of 2 main reference sources behind her article. I will avoid commenting on the accuracy of Professor Locy's article as I believe that it has been persuasively rebutted by fellow alumni Al Eckes and Neely Young and I would not attempt to match the eloquence of these two academicians who both possess a PhD in history. Suffice it to say that cherry-picking negative passages from the book and assigning a demeaning label ("an efficient PR machine") to biographers whose views are contrary to hers represents a sad commentary about the state of journalism today. (Full disclosure: I long for the days when *The New York Times* was the gold standard of journalism, when opinions were confined to the editorial page and to columns in the sports section, and when the rest of the newspaper was devoted to who, what, where, when, and how.) But I digress....

What did Pryor say about Lee's values? To answer that question let's look at some passages from her book that were omitted from professor Locy's article.

-"No doubt Robert's service [to his ailing mother] was an excellent lesson in self-denial, and it seems to have brought out a genuinely nurturing side that he would later exhibit with his own family."

-“Superintendent [of West Point] Thayer must have seen in Lee the reflection of his own traits: the punctuality, precision, and reserve that characterized his style; the self-discipline and follow-through he esteemed; the unmistakable air of command. In outlook and commitment to excellence the two men were unmistakably similar.”

-“It may seem startling to call Lee a self-made man, but even his nephew noted that “no one knew better than he that in a republic...a man’s ancestry could not help him, but that place and promotion depended on individual merit.””

-“Lee had so internalized the popular principles of self-restraint, hard work, and perseverance that he was given to proselytizing on their virtues....”

-“Educational reform was not Lee’s specialty, and he did not enjoy the work. That he performed it conscientiously is not in question. What is more remarkable is that he developed an innovative approach with far reaching applications...Then he steadily lobbied his patrons for means to establish essential professorships and acquire the right apparatus. He put top men in the new positions. He wrote strongly worded treatises about the role of the teacher and the key elements of children’s formation, holding that example and personal integrity were as important as academic expertise.....”

-“The relinquishment of command is among the most ennobling of American traditions...Robert E. Lee’s actions just after the Civil War are a proud example of that tradition. His courageous military restraint in 1865 and his early words of reconciliation were more than a face-saving final bow from the stage. They offered a model for a great and proud army that felt itself humiliated; a salve for a devastated citizenry; a running start toward reconciliation. Some may be disappointed that Lee was not perfectly noble in every word and deed during the postwar period. Yet his tremendous forbearance under pressure of prosecution, public criticism, and personal ostracism is notable...All he could do [after Appomattox] was to rise to each day and try to grace it. By the accumulation of these hard-won moments, he would construct something concrete and optimistic. By this he could-and did-raise a beacon against bewilderment and despair.”

To recap Pryor’s findings we see Lee as self-denying in service to family; being self-disciplined and committed to excellence; believing in a meritocracy, hard work and perseverance; conscientiously and innovatively performing work activities that he didn’t like doing; and exhibiting leadership in the reconciliation of the country. I’m not sure which of these values are “incongruous with the values of our university.”

There are many other excerpts from the book that I could cite as examples of Lee's virtuous values, but they would be superfluous. The author can hardly be included as part of "an efficient PR machine" since Locy cited her as a major source in her article.

Let's look at some of the other values that Lee possessed that are indisputable. No biographer has failed to note his modesty. Pryor opened one of her chapters citing a letter from Lee to his wife after the victory at Cerro Gordo during the Mexican War. Even though Pryor and his other biographers detailed his skill and heroism that were an indispensable part of the victory and which merited Winfield Scott singling him out in his battle report, in the letter Lee gave little mention of his own participation.

Similarly, in his conditional acceptance letter to the Washington College trustees he stated, "I have feared that I should be unable to discharge [the President's] duties to the satisfaction of the trustees or to the benefit of the Country." He shared his concern that having been excluded from amnesty after the war he might "...draw upon the college a feeling of hostility; and I should, therefore, draw injury to an Institution which it would be my highest desire to advance."

His sense of honor was another trait with which there appears to be little disagreement among the biographers. Dr. Ollinger Crenshaw, former head of the W&L history department, wrote in *General Lee's College*: "The disciplinary system of Washington College during the Lee years has been widely praised, especially the emphasis upon honor and self-respect of students."

In Margaret Sanborn's *Robert E. Lee: The Complete Man* she related that shortly after taking office President Lee was offered the presidency of an insurance company at a salary that was six times more than he was making. When Lee responded that he wouldn't leave his current position and couldn't do both jobs, the insurance agent replied, "But General, we do not want you to discharge any duties. We simply want the use of your name. That will abundantly compensate us."

"Excuse me, sir" Lee said, "I cannot consent to receive pay for services I do not render."

Lee's refusal to flee the country when facing pending prosecution for treason and his encouragement of other southerners to stay and work for a reunified country show both his honor and his loyalty to the United States. Pryor cited this conversation with his cousin: "I shall avoid no prosecution the government thinks proper to institute. I am aware of having done nothing wrong and cannot flee."

Many argue that Lee betrayed that loyalty by joining the Confederacy. Facts, and his letters, show that conflicting loyalties were the issue. Charles P. Roland opened his

book, *Reflections on Lee*, by opining: “Robert E. Lee is America’s great tragic hero, in the classical use of the term, doomed by a fatal flaw in one of his cardinal virtues, loyalty.” The flaw to which Boland refers is Lee’s loyalty to his state superseding loyalty to his country.

Pryor wrote, “From the start of the crisis Lee knew that his destiny was to follow the fortunes of Virginia. If his state chose to stay in the Union so would he: if it withdrew, his actions would follow suit. He was candid about this with everyone who asked him and never changed his conviction that this was the only respectable course.”

Lee is on record repeatedly decrying secession from the Union. Pryor quoted the words he spoke to a niece: “I trust there is wisdom, patriotism enough in the Country to save them, for I cannot anticipate so great a calamity to the nation as a dissolution of the Union.”

Pryor also wrote that when Lee was the interim military commander of the Department of Texas in 1860, he formulated plans to protect the government’s arms and other property against local secessionists. Although he relinquished command prior to having to take action Pryor speculated, “Had he remained in charge of the Department of Texas a few weeks longer, and had the secessionists forced the issue, as they later did at Fort Sumter, the Civil War might have begun there. Commanding the defense of Union property against the rebels would have been Colonel Robert E. Lee.”

His letter to General Scott after his resignation from the U.S. Army contained the prophetic words, “Save in defense of my native state, I never desire again to draw my sword.”

Perhaps former White House Chief of Staff General John Kelly summed it up in a 2017 interview: “I think that we make a mistake as a society, and certainly as individuals, when we take what today is accepted as right or wrong and go back 100, 200, 300 years or more and say what those people... did was wrong years later. It’s inconceivable to me how much of a lack of appreciation of what history is....I will tell you that Robert E. Lee was an honorable man, a man who gave up his country to fight for his state, which 150 years ago was more important than country. It was always loyalty to state first in those days. Now today it’s different.”

Pryor’s assertion that only “two-fifths of the officers from Virginia stayed in the U.S. Army” reinforces Kelly’s words.

There is no doubt that Lee suffered from what President George W. Bush, Seema Verma and others have called “The soft bigotry of low expectations.” Many of his comments show a major disdain of the abilities of slaves (and subsequently freedmen).

On the other hand, Michael Korda wrote in his Lee biography *Clouds of Glory* that “By the standards of many Confederates his opinions were moderate.”

Pryor concurred with this evaluation: “His assessment of black inferiority, of the necessity of racial stratification...was in keeping with the prevailing views of other moderate slaveholders and a good many prominent Northerners.” She wrote that Abraham Lincoln never “considered African-Americans [his] equal.”

While testifying before the Congressional Joint Committee on Reconstruction in 1866 Lee was asked about the enfranchisement of former slaves. Douglas Southall Freeman, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *R. E. Lee*, quoted Lee’s reply: “My own opinion is that, at this time, they cannot vote intelligently, and that giving them the right of suffrage would open the door to a great deal of demagogism, and lead to embarrassments in various ways. What the future may prove, how intelligent they may become...I cannot say more than you can.”

By today’s standards those sentiments are alarming to say the least. However, as Charles Bracelen Flood wrote in *Lee The Last Years*, at the time of Lee’s testimony, Connecticut, Michigan, and Wisconsin had just voted down the right of blacks to vote, and two years later 12 northern and Midwestern states “would still sharply limit or prohibit voting among their small black populations.”

Dr. Eckes wrote, “Presentism flows from an imperfect understanding of the past.” In a 2015 article in *Forbes*, David Davenport, former president of Pepperdine University, wrote “Colleges should not be places of intolerance but of openness and learning. Students must be prepared to hear lectures and have experiences that stretch them, even make them uncomfortable. It’s part of the free and open environment of learning....Only when you strip away your modern preconceptions can you truly understand, appreciate and learn from history (“Presentism: The Dangerous Virus Spreading Across College Campuses”).

Presentism is the basis for this name change discussion we currently are having. In the two years since The Commission on Institutional History and Community recommended not changing the school’s name, no new negative revelations about Robert E. Lee’s life have come to light. The way that some people interpret historical events and figures may have changed based on this summer’s events, but history related to Lee hasn’t.

The introduction to the commission's report stated that President Wilson had confidence that the university would "set a national example by demonstrating how the issues confronting us can be addressed thoughtfully and effectively. That is what a university should do, and it is especially what Washington and Lee should do." Removing Lee's name from the university does not live up to this standard.

Maya Angelou said, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." Erasing the university's link to Lee is not facing history with courage.

Professor Locy stated in her article, "It's going to get increasingly hard to persuade high school students who care about diversity to attend a university named after a Confederate general." I wonder if she is engaging in her own "soft bigotry of low expectations." I would like to think that the caliber of student who attends W&L is capable of a higher level of critical thinking than that.

I realize that there are many factors that will go into the Board of Trustee's final decision on the name change, including the impact on the Washington & Lee brand, opportunity costs associated with a change, and the effect on future fund raising activities. Yale's Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming highlighted three criteria used in their recent renaming decisions: principal legacy, standards of the time, and reasons for the naming. If the board and the Special Committee use similar standards I am confident that President Lee's name will remain on the masthead.

Thank you for the opportunity to be included in the discussion.