
The Confederacy in Person: Confederate Nationalism and Robert E. Lee during the Civil War Era, 1830-1870

Gabriel L. Mansfield

Gabriel Mansfield is a senior history major and jazz studies minor from Onarga, Illinois. His paper was written for Dr. Hubbard's Civil War graduate class. He plans to pursue a master's degree in library science after graduation in December.

How did the Confederate States come into being? How did they unify so rapidly under one flag? How did the confederacy fall apart after only a few years of existence? Historians have studied and debated these questions for years. One of the few conclusions they have reached was that nationalism and devotion to the confederate way of life unified southern people and drove them from the United States in the 1850s to the Confederacy in the early 1860s. This study examines the historiography of confederate nationalism and argues that General Robert E. Lee played a significant role in forging nationalism during and after the Civil War.

Lee, in particular, held a special place for those fighting and living in Virginia, as he was originally from that state. Nonetheless, he became a national symbol for the Confederacy by the spring of 1862, after he achieved stellar victories, including Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, and also "close" defeats, like Antietam and Gettysburg. The Confederate population, for the most part, continued to hold him up on a pedestal even after Petersburg and Richmond fell, and even after the surrender at Appomattox. Thanks to efforts by sympathetic historians, as well as other prominent leaders after the war, many southerners hailed Lee as a hero and an invincible general, no doubt helping to stir and maintain the "lost cause" ideology, which arose after the war. Alongside Lee, one must still consider what nationalism was and meant to the southern people, whether they were from Virginia or Alabama. Furthermore, the writings of historians on this subject must be taken into consideration, as opinions about confederate nationalism have transformed significantly over time.

In essence, General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia were indispensable to the Confederacy, serving as a source of national unity along the frontlines and the home front, through victory or defeat. They provided a symbol and figurehead where Confederate President Jefferson Davis and the government attempted to unify their population, but largely failed to deliver. If Davis was viewed less favorably in the postwar South, the opposite proved true for Lee. He became an integral part of southern culture and was viewed positively, even by some in the North. Well after his death in 1870, Lee provided a heroic and honorable image to justify the Confederacy's existence, even in defeat.

Historians and Confederate Nationalism

Before addressing Lee and his army as a focal point in the Confederate will to fight, Confederate nationalism as a whole should be discussed. According to historian Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, nationalistic development emerges out from personal and cultural

feelings.¹ However, this is only one interpretation, and an agreed-upon definition of nationalism has proven elusive. The sort of nationalism Anderson describes can clearly be seen in the antebellum South, where a sort of “southern honor” tradition took prominence, as well as a devotion to the institution that held much of the South together, slavery. Anderson also notes the development of “print capitalism,” which helped spread nationalism during and after the American and French revolutions, describing it as a way to inspire the masses. Print capitalism helped create national consciousness and connected people into an imagined community.²

One important interpretation of the Confederacy that specifically addresses nationalism is offered by Pulitzer-prize winning historian Gilpin Faust in her book *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*. Her focus is “how Confederates defined themselves and their commitment to a common, corporate existence.”³ Faust stresses commonality and unity as part of the nationalism that bound the nation together. She goes on to describe nationalism as a “dynamic of ideas and social realities that can, under the proper circumstances, unite and legitimate a people in what they regard as reasoned public action.”⁴ She cites favorably historian David Potter’s concerns about the teleological challenges of understanding confederate nationalism.⁵ However, along with historian Anne Sarah Rubin, Faust disputes Potter’s contention that nationalism died with the Confederacy in 1865.⁶ Faust believes, contrary to some of the historiography at the time, that Confederate nationalism developed not in a “spurious” manner, but over time. She describes this as a process, not something that happened overnight.⁷

One of the key components of the development of southern pride and eventually Confederate nationalism was religion, a case made by Faust and several other historians. Much of southern nationalism was nurtured through the pulpit in the antebellum period, through the justification for slavery, as well as through a common hatred for the North and the abolitionists. It was in this way that the Confederacy defended secession, as a means to preserve their traditions, even if one of those traditions was slavery. Finally, Faust looks briefly at some of the class differences that may or may not have fed Confederate nationalism. Faust concludes that nationalism was more prominent among the elite, rather than the working, yeoman farmer. The non-slaveholding class wanted reform in taxation, governmental structures, and public services. Whereas the elite was more heavily fixated by amorphous notions of nationalism.

Historian John McCardell, like Faust, also sees nationalism as a process that developed over time. However, McCardell places a date on the process: He begins as early as 1830 in his book, *The Idea of a Southern Nation*. Part of his analysis of the development of prewar nationalism relates to the generational difference between the old and the young (this will be discussed later). McCardell offers a more simplified view of southern nationalism, describing it as keeping the South’s interests as a priority. Furthermore, he argues that secessionist ideas derived from a minority of the population, rather than the majority of southerners, who hoped for some sort of compromise.⁸

As previously mentioned, many historians link religion and nationalism. McCardell spares no detail developing this aspect of confederate nationalism. He examines the split between the Baptist and Methodist churches over the issue of slavery, which helped solidify a sense of independence in

¹ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 6-7.

² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44.

³ Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 2.

⁴ Faust, *Creation of Nationalism*, 6.

⁵ Faust, *Creation of Nationalism*, 3.

⁶ Sarah Anne Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy 1861-1868* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5.

⁷ Faust, *Creation of Nationalism*, 6.

⁸ John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 9.

the South. By the 1830s, southern churches were teaching slavery as “not a moral evil... [but] as a civil and domestic institution.”⁹ Further, McCardell goes beyond churches to study how religious colleges and universities helped promote the ideas taught on Sunday morning.

Rubin supports ideas similar to those of Faust and other scholars. She devotes, similarly to Faust, attention to “the myriad strands of ideology and identity that made up the Confederacy and shows how the complexity and texture of people’s attachment to their nation as an idea, a state, and a memory.”¹⁰ She differs from Faust, however, by arguing that Confederate nationalism was to a certain degree spontaneous. Yet Rubin agrees that it lasted long after 1865. She makes a crucial point that nationalism existed independently of the political Confederacy.¹¹ She quotes Wilbur Zelinsky and Richard Handler, describing the differences between a nation and a state. In essence, the contrasting views are simple: the state is more of a political construct, where a nation is, “an emotional, ideological and frequently sentimentalized construct, created by people who...are united by a common culture, history, and social personality.”¹²

One of the more surprising parts of the Confederacy was how quickly it formed and operated. Rubin argues this was partly due to the unity and common goal of the states fused into the newly formed Confederacy. She concludes that “Confederates created a national culture in large part by drawing on the usable American past,” that past being the American Revolution. However, Rubin also discusses some of the fallacies of the Confederates vision of nationalism. She describes the problem of zealotry among Confederates: “So much of the Confederate identity seemed bound up with demonstrating Confederate virtue and superiority. The problem, however, was that such ideals were unattainable.”¹³ She continues, explaining that under pressure, people’s true devotion to either themselves or the Confederacy came out. Rubin attributes this to the delicate newness of the nation.

The Confederacy came into existence in the winter of 1860-61. Historian Paul Escott disagrees to some degree with the argument that the South succeeded in maintaining nationalism and unity until the end of the war. Escott focuses on Jefferson Davis in *After Secession*, in particular the president of the Confederacy’s efforts to “build a spirit of Confederate Nationalism and on the internal problems he encountered.”¹⁴ Davis’ labors, Escott shows, in the end proved fruitless. Escott cites examples such as class division and reluctance to secede in some places. He continues, describing how Davis lost the support of the planter class, and eventually the non-slaveholding classes, because of loopholes that allowed elites to escape military service and obtain certain privileges. Later, Escott discusses whether there was confusion between what he calls “Regional Identity or Confederate Nationalism.”¹⁵ In Escott’s opinion, with secession, the South was choosing between its own southern nationalism and the greater American nationalism. Escott believes that southern nationalism began around the 1840s and 1850s, as McCardell suggests, but Escott thinks this nascent southern nationalism failed because of its sole focus on states’ rights. He references early advocates of secession, such as William Lowndes Yancey and Robert Rhett and their plans to gain complete independence from the Union.

Going back to the secession movement, Escott looks at the political motives of some southern states in the presidential election of 1860. States like Arkansas and North Carolina voted for southern Democratic candidate John C. Breckinridge simply because he was the representative of the party which they favored, rather than a supporter of secession. In fact, Escott makes clear

⁹ McCardell, *The Idea of A Southern Nation*, 184.

¹⁰ Rubin, *A Shattered Nation*, 1.

¹¹ Rubin, *A Shattered Nation*, 2.

¹² Rubin, *A Shattered Nation*, 3.

¹³ Rubin, *A Shattered Nation*, 50.

¹⁴ Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), ix.

¹⁵ Escott, *After Secession*, 19.

that Breckinridge was against secession and was a staunch unionist. In the upper south, secession was not the primary motivator for voting in the election either. Escott points to the secession vote in Alabama to gauge views in the deepsouth regarding secession. The state was split between north and south, with non-slaveholders dominating the northern part of the state. Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia supported unionist views and compromise, as long as peace was an option. Escott makes clear with these examples that many of the southern states did not have a collective majority who wanted to secede from the Union. Many white southerners were willing to compromise.

These sharp divisions presented a challenge for secessionists. In order to accomplish their goals, they drew on common ideas of rebellion in America, like the revolution from the British that occurred some eighty years earlier. This tactic proved successful to some degree, and for some southerners, the connection to the American Revolution remained relevant throughout the war. Davis also attempted to stir up nationalism by blaming others for the confederate predicament, like the North for instance. As a result of all of these actions, by the end of 1861, nationalism was beginning to take shape in the Confederacy. In turn, military recruitment went up significantly, a sign of growing nationalism.

Yet by 1863, according to Escott, the Confederate people were growing tired of war as well as their government's failure to fulfill promises. Davis quickly realized that his vision of strict states' rights was crumbling and that the national Confederate government would have to assert more authority. He also continued emphasizing the connection to the American Revolution. As Davis explained, "the new southern nation was the true heir of the founding fathers and existed to continue the work which they had begun." Davis "tried to demonstrate that the United States had fallen away from its heritage and become 'a land of fanaticism, executive usurpations, and tyranny.'"¹⁶ Many southerners still viewed the North as a nation, but Davis insisted only the Confederacy was a true nation. Escott sums up his chapter on the Confederacy by describing its desperation later in the war. "By the end of 1863 the prospects of the southern nation had darkened greatly, and Confederate ideology became little more than the invocation of threats that the future would be intolerable without victory," he writes.¹⁷

The Question of Robert E. Lee

One key aspect of confederate nationalism, related to Lee and his army, was the generation gap in the South. In his book, *The Last Generation*, Peter Carmichael makes the case that there was a significant difference in generations in Virginia. He focuses on the younger generation, and how it shaped confederate nationalism. The typical southern youth, according to Carmichael, was seen as lazy, immoral and hotheaded. However, the "emotional history of Southern men must be understood within the context of the religious and intellectual life of the Old South," he further explains.¹⁸ The "younger" generation were men born in the south from 1830-1842. One demographic of this group was that they were typically better off and a part of the elite class. To some, the generation appeared rebellious and reckless. Carmichael argues that this showed up in rash decision-making on the battlefield. The younger generation was fed up with the issues that plagued the state of Virginia, which they blamed on the older generation and its devotion to old traditions. They "reserve[d] their harshest criticism for "old fogyism," an explanatory device that underscored the backward nature of Virginia's political class without identifying party affiliation or specific

¹⁶ Escott, *After Secession*, 170.

¹⁷ Escott, *After Secession*, 195.

¹⁸ Peter S. Carmichael, *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 6.

individuals.”¹⁹ One thing was always clear with this younger generation. Despite all of the problems the state had, and how much young men did not like it, they remained loyal to the state of Virginia as well as the Confederacy. In that same sense, most of the younger generation in Virginia supported secession from the Union. They viewed this as the most logical step in maintaining the institution of slavery and their sense of honor. Carmichael draws the reader back to their reasoning for seceding. “They advocated secession as a way to realize their generational mission to restore the Commonwealth to greatness. Honor did not always turn Southerners into unthinking warriors, deluded by a romantic sense of self that compelled them to fight. In the case of young Virginians, sober reflection trumped honor,” he writes.²⁰ Unfortunately, they also believed that secession would fix their internal problems, but, as history continued to unfold, internal strife partly became the Confederacy’s undoing.

In the case of Lee and Confederate nationalism, it was not until the spring of 1862 that people had begun to view the general in high regard. Early on there was great concern over Lee’s skills commanding an army. From May through December 1861, Lee was sent up the western part of Virginia to recruit troops and secure a foothold. From there, confederate planners hoped Lee’s forces might have the ability to strike at the North. Unfortunately for Lee, the people of western Virginia did not favor secession. Also, General George McClellan’s union army was there to counter confederate forces. Lee chose to retreat instead of fight, which upset southerners who began dismissing the general as Robert “Evacuating” Lee. Popular opinion changed however when Lee drove the union army of around 100,000 men away from Richmond, and eventually off the York-James Peninsula in roughly a week’s time. This stunning feat of strategy and luck quickly changed the people’s opinions of the general. Now they hailed him as a hero. In her journal, Mississippian Kate Stone celebrated the army’s win and described Stonewall Jackson’s progress attacking McClellan’s rear as, “That was a ‘stonewall’ McClellan found hard to climb.”²¹ Likewise, in her diary, South Carolinian Mary Chesnut praised Lee’s victory for driving away the Union army from Richmond. After this battle, skepticism lingered among some concerning Lee’s battlefield skills. However, in the following months, at the close loss at Antietam and victory at Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville, the Confederacy’s opinion of the newly named Army of Northern Virginia would change.

Initially, Virginian Kate Stone was not prepared to celebrate Lee because her brother was supposedly killed at the December 1862 battle. *The Richmond Examiner*, however, wrote a little more favorably about Fredericksburg. The editor, John M. Daniel wrote on December 17, 1862, shortly after the battle, “The Confederate general’s plan was purely defensive, and was perfectly supported in all its parts.”²² After Chancellorsville, General Jackson’s death overshadowed the stunning victory. Kate Stone wrote a compelling tribute to him on the twenty-third of May: “In the death of Stonewall Jackson we have lost more than many battles. We have lost the conqueror on a dozen fields, the greatest general on our side...As long as there is a Southern heart, it should thrill at the name of Stonewall Jackson...his death has struck home to every heart.”²³ Daniel of *The Richmond Enquirer* writes similarly, just after Jackson’s death on May eleventh, “This announcement [of his death] will draw many a tear in the South.”²⁴ This moment proved not only a turning point for Lee’s popularity, but Jackson soon became a martyr for the Confederate cause.

¹⁹ Carmichael, *The Last Generation*, 38-39.

²⁰ Carmichael, *The Last Generation*, 122.

²¹ John Q. Anderson ed., *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 129.

²² Frederick S. Daniel, *The Writings of John M. Daniel* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 62.

²³ Anderson ed., *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868*, 211.

²⁴ Frederick S. Daniel, *The Writings of John M. Daniel*, 83.

In his book, *Lee and His Army in Confederate History*, historian Gary Gallagher examines the aftermath of Gettysburg from the perspective of the Confederate home front of Vicksburg several months after Jackson's death. Like historians Emory Thomas and James McPherson, Gallagher sees the losses at Gettysburg and Vicksburg as detrimental to Confederate morale. Yet Gallagher also sees other issues at work. He mentions how the peace movement in North Carolina began to pick up as a result of the loss at Gettysburg, yet he also points out that southern newspapers, primarily the *Richmond Daily Dispatch* and the *Lynchburg Virginian*, believed that Gettysburg amounted to a strategic victory for the Confederacy, thwarting northern attempts to attack Richmond. Others viewed Gettysburg as an insignificant loss, since the North barely held its positions. However, Gallagher points out that the *Charleston Mercury* took a critical stance, calling it, "impossible for an invasion to have been more foolish and disastrous."²⁵ Meanwhile, people like Catherine Edmonston of North Carolina labeled the loss at Gettysburg a "sore disappointment."²⁶ Overall, Gallagher finds that few really took this loss seriously, simply because they thought Lee was unbeatable and invincible. "Confederates across the South persisted in viewing Lee as an invincible commander whose army increasingly sustained the hopes of the entire nation," writes Gallagher. "For them as for most of the men in the army of Northern Virginia, Gettysburg was not a harbinger of eventual ruin."²⁷

Even towards the end of the war in the spring of 1865, Confederate morale remained surprisingly high in large part due to faith in Lee and his army. However, after Lee's surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, many southerners saw their nation now as a lost cause with the war now over. In another book, *The Confederate War*, Gallagher describes one soldier's response to Lee's surrender, "My las hope died within me when Genl Lee surrendered [sic]."²⁸ A Floridian wrote, "Oh, I wish we were all dead! It is as if the very earth had crumbled beneath our feet."²⁹ Many in the South did not respond well to Lee's surrender. The one figure in whom they placed so much faith and hope, gave up, leaving the North to take over the independent Confederacy. However, not all came to that conclusion.

Postwar Confederate Nationalism

As Rubin mentions in her book, confederate nationalism continued well after the war, and even through reconstruction. The most prominent manifestation took the form of memory creation. Shortly after the war, Jubal Early, former Confederate general, declared that the Confederacy's loss was because of the sheer overwhelming might of northern forces, rather than superior tactics and fighting. This was the beginning of what is known as the "Lost Cause" ideology, in which blame for the war was shifted from the Confederacy to the Union. Lee himself supported this notion. He explained, "the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources."³⁰

The lost cause stressed Confederate valor and honor. Early cast Lee and Jackson as good Christians, rather than ruthless military leaders. "[Lee] had been a general of unparalleled brilliance, Stonewall Jackson stood just behind Lee in the southern pantheon...despite defeat, Lee and Jackson

²⁵ Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee & His Army in Confederate History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 87.

²⁶ Gallagher, *Lee & His Army in Confederate History*, 88.

²⁷ Gallagher, *Lee & His Army in Confederate History*, 106.

²⁸ Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 95-96.

²⁹ Gallagher, *The Confederate War*, 96.

³⁰ Gallagher, *Lee & His Army in Confederate History*, 256.

offered an ideal of Christian military leadership in which the white South could take continuing pride,” insisted Early.³¹

In both of his books, Gallagher wrote of Lee’s importance, during and after the war. The general remained highly regarded after his death, possibly more so than during the war. Some in the North also bought into this Lost Cause ideal. This strain of thought continued to the 1930s, articulated by historians such as Douglas Southall Freeman. Other historians, including Thomas Connelly and Barbara Bellows, thought that “Lee’s reputation as the invincible Confederate general was a postwar phenomenon,” arguing that it was not until the 1880s that he achieved this status.³² Yet Gallagher’s argument seems more accurate: “by the summer of 1863 at the latest,” he writes, “Lee was the most important southern military figure, and he and the Army of Northern Virginia had become the principal national rallying point of the Confederate people.”³³

Conclusion

Throughout the antebellum South, during the war, and postwar, southern nationalism evolved. Whether it was based on hatred for the North, devotion to slavery, secession, Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, it was always present to some extent. Even after the war, the memory of the Civil War in southern eyes stood as a sort of test of southern nationalism that southerners cherished through Reconstruction and after. Although some aspects of southern nationalism never took, such as Jefferson Davis’ views, sentiments shifted and coalesced instead around Robert E. Lee and his army. Even though it took some time for the Confederate people to get past their skepticism of Lee, it could be argued that devotion to Lee gave southerners the morale and motivation to fight into 1865 and, then, later maintain pernicious myths about the Confederacy even today.

³¹ Gallagher, *Lee & His Army in Confederate History*, 258.

³² Gallagher, *Lee & His Army in Confederate History*, 266.

³³ Gallagher, *Lee & His Army in Confederate History*, 269.