



THE ARMY'S ROBERT E. LEE PROBLEM

By Ty Seidule and Jacqueline E. Whitt February 9, 2021
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Jacqueline Whitt: Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. Thanks for joining us for another episode. I'm **Jacqueline Whitt**, Associate Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Army War College, and the Editor-in-Chief for the War Room. Over the last few years, many people in the United States, to include many in military circles, have been part of big, important, but often uncomfortable conversations about the history and memory of race, racism, slavery, the Civil War, white supremacy, and civil rights in our country. Joining me today is Brigadier General (Retired) and Doctor **Ty Seidule**. He served in the Army for more than 30 years, where he retired as the head of the Department of History at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and this is where we had the privilege of meeting and working together. Some of you out there may also recognize him from his viral video from Prager University about slavery being the cause of the Civil War. He is currently the Chamberlain Fellow at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York and most recently is the author of the book "Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause," which was published by St. Martin's Press in February 2021. Ty, it's great to have you here on A Better Peace.

Ty Seidule: Jackie, is always great to talk to you. We served together for several years and I'm honored to be on your podcast. Thank you.

JW: Great. So I want to start with the overview question which is, the premise of the book is that you grew up a young kid in Virginia who is absolutely enamored of Robert E. Lee. He was your hero and now a few decades later, he is not your hero anymore, and in fact I'd call you pretty outspoken and vocal critic of Lee but also the Confederacy and the cultures that venerate them and what they stood for. Can you start off by telling us a little bit about this journey that you have been on?

TS: Well, I think to start at the beginning, I grew up in Northern Virginia in an outpost of Southern patrimony in a way, believing that Lee was a great southern gentleman and I wanted status as a young kid, as a young boy, and the status that I saw was with Lee and people that liked Lee, so on a scale of 1 to 10, I would probably say I rated Lee at an 11. And even though I was a good Episcopalian boy, was the head acolyte and went to church every Sunday, I would have rated Jesus at about 5. So, my journey was that from a very young age, I and my culture

revered Lee, and in Virginia it revered Lee, when I was in Georgia it revered Lee. I did go to Washington and Lee University to become a good southern gentleman and then I've spent a long, long time in the Army, a long time at West Point, and the Army and West Point all revered him. So, my culture, which was a white Southern culture, a very privileged culture, revered him really my entire life and it wasn't until much, much later, even though I knew that the war was about slavery when I was teaching at West Point, it wasn't until later that I really came to grips with who Lee is, what he did, and what the Confederates stood for.

JW: So this book, “Robert E. Lee and Me” is really about this journey through the cultures that you have experienced from growing up, through college and through the Army. Can you tell us a little bit about why you chose to write the book, and who did you have in mind as your audience when you were writing it?

TS: Well, it comes with a story. You know, good historians can't give a straight answer without a story. So I was chair of the Memorialization Committee at West Point—and we can talk a little bit later about my epiphany—but the reason I had to write it like this is that I was creating a new memorial route and we did not have one local place, a single place for the 1,500 West Point graduates who died giving the last full measure of devotion to the nation from the War of 1812 through the Wars of Terror, and we had lost over 100 graduates killed in the wars since 9/11 and the community was reeling from this and needed a place where we could memorialize our heroes. So we came up with this plan and the money, the location and everything but then the question was, who should go in that room and I argued, passionately, that confederates can't go in because they fought against their country, abrogated their oath, killed U.S. Army soldiers for the worst possible reason to create a slave republic. And by the way, where they were going in Cullum Hall, was actually created by an anti-Confederate who said I will never forgive those who forgot the flag to follow false gods and put into law that no unworthy subject should go in there. So I give this to our superintendent at the time and the academic board, our leadership, and tell them this vehemently and they say, no, we want to bring people together and the exact words were, we don't want to be like the Sunni and Shia fighting forever, we want to forgive and get along. And I just went out of that room with my head down just feeling awful and I went back and talked to my wife and I said, Sheri, they voted against it. How could they do this? And she said, Ty, nobody understands why you're so passionate about this. You're bludgeoning them with the facts, but you're not telling them your story. And I went, oh my gosh, she is right again. So I realized that if I wanted to convince the white men around the room, I had to do a different story other than the facts, because it turns out evidence doesn't change peoples' history. History is dangerous because it goes after our identity and our myths. So the only way I could do that was to tell my story, my dangerous history of believing in Lee, idolatry, and believing in the Lost Cause and that I found had greater resonance with people than just giving the straight history.

JW: I mean that story is so powerful. It reminds me too of a General Martin Dempsey when he was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs who said, winning arguments isn't about who has the best facts, it's who has the best context. And when you walk in a room, you better have the best context. And of course, we want facts to matter. As historians, facts matter a lot, what really happened, but we understand that we have to put those into these broader narratives and to, like you said, wrestle with myth and identity. In the process of writing the book, were there things that you discovered for the first time or rediscovered that were important to you?

TS: Yes, all the way through. So I went in each stage of my life. I wrote chapters on the books that that influenced me. I wrote chapters on the City of Alexandria where I grew up, the high school where I went to in Walton County, Georgia, Washington and Lee, the Army and West Point. The first one about Alexandria, Virginia, I had no idea that Alexandria and Arlington used to be part of the District of Columbia. In fact, George Washington demanded that it be part of Washington, and that's where, "The Room Where It Happens," the great Hamilton Song comes from, and they created this diamond-shaped 10 square miles. Well, Alexandria and Arlington, where the Pentagon is now retroceded in 1847 to protect the slave trade and Alexandria became one of the leading hubs of the slave trade up until the Civil War. And then Alexandria, my city, spent about 10 hours in the Confederacy before was occupied by the U.S. soldiers. And then it became a bastion during the era of integration, of segregation, and so we have more streets named after Confederates in Alexandria than any other city I know, and it was a reaction to integration, so that was another thing. They're all of these reactions to integration that I found throughout and the other thing that I found out, I think I'll tell for our military audiences, is the oath that we take. I went to Washington and Lee University and I was going to take my oath of office and I took my oath next to a portrait of Lee in Confederate gray and then I received a commission surrounded by Confederate flags in Lee chapel. And then when I raised my right hand and took the oath, I didn't realize that that oath that we take was written in 1862. It was an anti-Confederate oath. When it says, "purpose of evasion," when it says, "enemies foreign and domestic," it's talking about Confederates. So here I was, I took an anti-confederate oath surrounded by Confederate flags. So I found these stories throughout and I go back to your saying about Martin Dempsey, about the context, but I realized I had to tell stories, and that's where we as historians I think are most effective, is when we can tell stories that people can remember rather than just the machine gun of facts. We can tell these stories and that's when it can resonate and maybe change peoples' minds.

JW: One of the other things that struck me when I was reading in addition to the stories, in addition to the really easy sort of conversational style and tone that you take, which is quite refreshing to read, you also don't pull any punches. You call racism where you see it, you use the phrase "white supremacy," you call the Lost Cause a lie and those strike me as really important rhetorical choices as well in addition to these narrative journeys that you take us on.

Can you talk a little bit about your choices around how you name the cultures that you're trying to really breakdown?

TS: Jackie, you hit one of the main themes of my book, you really did. There were a whole bunch of words that I thought about and changed. The first one was, I try not to use the “Union Army”. I use the “U.S. Army”. People think the Union Army and they think of the old March phrase. It's in the dustbin of history that the Union Army fought only one war and that was the Civil War. No. It was the U.S. Army. Lee killed U.S. Army soldiers. They wore the same blue uniform that I wore for so many years. That same uniform that Washington picked the color blue for the Continental Army. So the “Union” and “U.S.” I changed. “Plantation”, I stop calling it plantation because it evokes memories of wind whispering through the Spanish moss and Scarlett sitting on the front porch of Tara, sipping iced tea, saying fiddle-de-dee. No. I call them “enslaved labor farms”. I don't call them their “mistresses,” they were raped, black women were raped. And I don't say “slave”, I say “enslaved women”. And it's the same way with the Lost Cause. I looked up what “lie” meant and it means something that is done on purpose for a nefarious purpose. And boy I can't think of anything that is more nefarious than creating a system of white supremacy. I called the South a racial police state, an apartheid state, because that's what it was. I call the Army a white supremacist organization for much of its existence. So I think the language that we use is incredibly important, and I quote John Updike, who is great writer, and he said that, “telling the truth is a ruthless act.” He also said that “the writer’s job is to rub humanity’s nose with the facts,” and I know that's what I'm doing. Part of it is that I... I don't know if I'm a convert, I think I'm more of an apostate actually, an apostate being someone who believed a civic religion, and the Lost Cause was a civic religion, and now that I am so understanding of what it was, I'm going to fight it in any way that I can. And using language and calling these things out for what they actually are is so important. And so yes, I do that throughout the book of using “lie,” “white supremacy,” “racism,” and all of these words that may get some people upset. I'm okay with that. We need to be upset.

JW: I'm a Southerner as well, a couple of decades behind, but the things that we grow up hearing and using the language and that revelation for me happened in graduate school, often about how language really affects our understanding and I've gotten to the point now, my two cats are named for a United States Army, Civil War folks, General Sherman and Admiral Farragut. And so this idea that language shapes how we think and how we approach topics strikes me as a really important one and one that I think comes through. But it also has very clearly made some people really angry. One of my favorite things right now is following you on social media, where you're posting one-star Amazon.com reviews. Why do you think it's generated that sort of visceral response and why do you think it's important to post those one-star reviews for everybody to see?

TS: Well, this started when I did the video. You mentioned that Prager video that has had, I don't know, it has had more than 30 million views and I had no idea it was going to be a big deal. I did it before the Charleston massacre and it came out afterwards. Stars and Stripes wrote a bad article about me, said I was too close to a right-wing organization, the Nation criticized me for being a propagandist for the Army. The Army investigated me whether I was doing political speech. I got hundreds of emails to my West Point address several which were death threats. So when this came out, I knew it was coming, but this time I knew it was coming and I wanted to poke fun at these people because nothing makes them look sillier than to post these things which are just ridiculous, and laughter, it turns out, is a really affective way of defanging people. And I also wanted to show that just from a perspective that these knuckleheads are doing that to me. And I know that they do it to me and I'm a retired Brigadier General. I'm a white Southern man, but they often do this to women. And I wanted to show people that they do it to me, but I'm not going to let them get me. When they did this Civil War one, they trolled my looks and I do have a face made for radio. I'm a perfect face for this podcast, Jackie. I'm bald and I've got a very unusually shaped head, so they sent hundreds of emails to me about the alien-nature of my head which were hilarious. But I wanted to defang them through humor and I'm hoping that I'm doing that. So I try to do it not every day but to keep doing this to let people know that you can have your message and those knuckleheads are not going to stop me from talking the truth.

JW: I love it. Like I said, it's been some of the most amusing things and it's stunning really what people will write and what people will send people via email and to their employers and all sorts of things. I've gotten just a bit of that as well. So Ty, let's talk about West Point. We worked together. I was there in the department from 2008 to 2012. We taught in our Mil Art class. It was two semesters, and we taught, I don't know, nine or ten lessons on the American Civil War for every first class for a long time, and I always thought West Point has this really complicated relationship with the Civil War, with the Confederacy and all sorts of things. What did you notice from your time at West Point in the classroom, as the history Department head and also working so closely with the Memorialization Committee?

TS: Well, this is really where I started figuring out, I went around and looked. So let me tell the story about how I actually came to start telling my story and really having my epiphany. So I was living on Lee Road by Lee Gate in Lee housing area. And I was walking one day to get some West Point swag for my family at the cadet store and I walked back past Eisenhower Barracks, past Pershing Barracks, past Grant Barracks named after some of our greatest generals, and then I got to Lee Barracks and I looked at the sign and it said, Lee Barracks, and I stopped and looked at that. Then I looked East about twenty yards, Reconciliation Plaza, which I write about in the book, which is so problematic and there was a new something that had gone up while I was gone. Between when I left in '97 and came back in 2004, there was a new monument there to Lee, and I just I looked at it and stared at it and said, why are there so many things here named after Lee? So I started running around campus and I found a dozen things that were named after Lee. I said,

why are there so many things named after Lee? And so I went to my boss at the time who had chaired the Memorialization Committee. He didn't know and didn't care, so nobody could answer this. So I went into the archives and the archives are what changed me. The history changed me. The facts changed me. And what I found was that in the 19th century, West Point banished the Confederates from memory, so there were none in the cemetery, no Confederate buried there. There are none on our great Civil War monument, battle monument where it says the War of the Rebellion, none there. None in Cullum Hall, our Memorial Hall. In fact, I argued in a much earlier journal article that duty, honor, country, which was written in 1898, is also an anti-Confederate monument. And I found that Congress came very close to shutting West Point down in 1861 and 1863, because as one senator said, there are more traitors at West Point than any institution since Judas Iscariot. So I found that out, but that didn't answer my question. When did they come? So they came in the 1930s, the 1950s, 1970s and the early aughts. So when I started looking at those, I realized that they came in reaction to integration, at least the first three tranches. In the 1930s when Lee Road, Lee Gate, all of those were named was when Benjamin O. Davis Jr. and the first of black cadets came back to West Point in the 20th century and graduated. So that's when a Lee portrait went into the Sup's house. So that was a reaction to integration. The famous portrait of Lee in our library in Confederate gray with an enslaved serving in the background is actually from 1951. It's a reaction to the Army being forced to integrate, and it's a southern secretary of the army who was slow rolling integration, fighting it tooth and nail that ordered West Point to put that up. In 1970, when Lee Barracks is named is also a reaction, I argue, to the minority admissions program starting for the first time. Now the ones in 2001, 2002 are hard to explain, except that the classes that put those up, 1957 and 1961, grew up with the Lost Cause. So what I found was that these are reactions to integration and that just torqued me something fierce and made me look into this. And so when I was the Memorialization Chair, I killed more than one, Confederate somebody that wanted to give money for a Confederate lecture series or whatever, never got past me. So I fought it tooth and nail but again, I didn't tell my story initially. But West Point does have a complicated relationship. It shouldn't. It's easy. They fought against their country to destroy their country. Our mission at West Point is very clear and we should get rid of those things ASAP.

JW: So this really leads me to the next question, which is it's not just West Point with a complicated relationship with the Confederacy and with Confederate Generals, Carlisle where the War College is, forty-five minutes from Gettysburg. It's in Pennsylvania. That's Yankee territory, full stop, has a complicated relationship with Confederate generals sometimes and the artwork that's in hallways and things like that. What is it about the Confederacy that has this stranglehold on this institution, that you served for multiple decades that I work for now, that people all over the country... why is it still such a thing?

TS: Yeah, well, I looked at the artwork. So I got the book from the War College Foundation that had each class's print, whatever those prints are called, and I looked at it and my first rap I had

that in there but it just it was one story too many and I had to cut it out when I went down to edit it down. And what I found is most of them, a lot of the were done in the 90s. After the war starts in 2001, they pretty much go away, but boy in the 90s, they really were there and in the 80s as well. And at least half of them were these peons to the Confederates. So the question is, why do they have this hold? And I think they had this hold because of the Lost Cause myth that was perpetrated on the country and bought by everyone, including the Army. And that Lost Cause myth is—and I'm sure many of your readers or listeners know—the war was fought over states' rights. No, it wasn't. It was fought over slavery. Enslaved people were happy. That's an abomination. Slavery featured the rate, the lash, breaking families apart for profit. The U.S. won because of more manpower material. Well, it had a little bit of that, great on them, but it also had more people because immigrant labor was there. It didn't have slavery, which was so terrible for the South and all of the enslaved labor left the South and fought for the North, 180,000 troops. Reconstruction was a failure, and I mean that's just not true. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendment, equal rights, education, 2,000 black men served with honor in elected positions. Grant was a butcher and a drunk. Ulysses S. Grant was the finest officer in the Civil War and had a strategic vision, was just amazing. And at the top was this great scholar, Robert E. Lee, the greatest soldier who ever lived. So all of this became an ideology based on white supremacy that first the South bought but then the entire Army and the nation bought. So that's why we name things after them. They had this hold because it's a hold of white supremacy. That's what it's a pillar of. And what people sometimes don't realize and should is that it is a pillar of white supremacy and the Army has a long history of being a white supremacist organization. So if those two things are together, then we have to look carefully at why that is, and that's what I try to do in this book is say, why did the Army believe this so much? Well, it doesn't take a rocket scientist or a great historian to realize, because the Army was racist. It was and even when the Army is trying not to be racist, as it starts in the 70s and 80s, it still has this lingering racism that has not been expunged.

JW: What you just said reminds me of our broadest understanding of culture. When it is simply the water we swim in, we do not even notice what it is, and so it has to be called out, it has to be named in order for us to have the kind of reckoning, personal or institutional. So, let's talk a little bit about what an institutional reckoning might look like. Your book is about your journey, Robert E. and Me and how you sort of made these discoveries and reflections. How does an institution as big as the Army is, as diverse as it is, how does an institution go about this same kind of reckoning?

TS: So how as an institution are we going to change? Well, I think we have to start with our history. So if you think about Black History Month, which we're in right now, it's often about the Pioneers. So the Army always talks about Henry O. Flipper, the first black graduate of West Point, or it talks about Benjamin O. Davis, or it talks about the first division commander, or it talks about all the firsts of the black experience. What we should talk about as well is the racism

in the Army and we have to talk about the ugly parts of American history, the ugly parts of the Army's history. So one of the things that I do is quote the U.S. Army War College, The Negro Manpower Study. The War College in the inter-war period were the Army planners and it said that basically, paraphrasing that the negro is not fully human. The level of racism is so ugly we have trouble dealing with it, but until we get into our education system and start talking about who we actually have been, we're not going to fix this problem. And I'm not saying that this is the only thing that's going to fix it. We've got to change policies. There are a whole bunch of things, but until we get the history right of who we are, we're not going to get it right. So if we can say, segregation laws, Jim Crow, white terror, lynching, which by the way happened to soldiers, black disenfranchisement, Confederate monuments, all of those were symbols and pillars of white supremacy, then we're not going to be able to fix it in this institution. So history matters. Who we pick as leaders matter. So I'm very happy to see Secretary Austin. I have to tell you one story about Secretary Austin. He was a cadet in 1972, 71-72 as a plebe when Richard Nixon tried to put a Confederate monument on Trophy Point, and Cadet Lloyd Austin signed a black manifesto as they called it, demanding that they not put that on there, demanding that they changed the name which we today have, Buffalo Soldier Field, demanding equality. And by the way, his Howitzer quote, his yearbook quote was "young, gifted and black," quoting a Nina Simone song. So we have the right people in the leadership. If we pick other leaders like that, if we have diverse communities, if we use our history and if we don't revert back, I really think that if this country doesn't fight against racism, it reverts to racism.

JW: I think this idea that it requires top down, strong leadership plus grassroots bottom-up voices and action, it's going to require, as you said, it's going to require leadership at every level of the institution in uniform, out of uniform. It's going to require veterans' voices. It's going to require civilian political oversight. This is going to take a concerted effort from all of us to really root it out, to talk about it, to confront it, and then to figure out how to fix it. We're about out of time, but is there any last advice that you would give to leaders who are still in uniform, perhaps, about what they can do in their day-to-day leadership and existence within the Army, but also within the other uniformed services as a first step, or as a way to confront some of this?

TS: I think there are two things I'd say. First, the Army only really changes when our politicians demand it, and our politicians are now demanding change. So we're an obedience-based organization, get on board. So the first is, do it. The second is, you've got to educate yourself and it could be you're educating yourself on your unit, on your post, on your hometown city, on your own life. And that's what I did is believe that understanding your own past, and you will find racism there. I guarantee you whatever city you live in the country, you'll find it there. So learn a little bit more about your soldiers and about where they came from, but learn more about yourself and accept responsibility.

JW: Unfortunately, our time today is up, but I want to thank you, Ty, a friend, a colleague, a leader, and a mentor for me, thank you so much for joining us on this conversation on A Better Peace.

TS: Jackie, thank you so much for having me. It was a great conversation, great to catch up with an old friend. Thank you so much.

JW: And to our listeners, thanks to all of you for tuning in. As always, please send us your comments on this episode and all the episodes and send us suggestions for future ones as well. We're always happy to hear from you. We'd like for you to subscribe to A Better Peace if you've not already done so on the podcatcher of your choice. And after you've subscribed, please rate and review this podcast so that others can find it as well and so that we can continue to grow this community for conversations like this one that you've heard today. This conversation is over, but the conversations continue and until next time, for War Room, I'm Jackie Whitt.