

**The Testimony of the Reverend Robert W. Lee, IV
Before the National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee of
The United States House of Representatives**

To Chairwoman Debra Haaland and members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands:

I am here to give testimony in regard to H.R. 970 and the broader conversation regarding Confederate monuments. As with anything I do, I am acutely aware I could not do this alone nor without people to help along the way. I am grateful to Congressman Anthony Brown for asking for my testimony, for Kaleigh Darty, an attorney from my hometown for her tireless efforts to assist this endeavor, and most importantly my wife Stephanie who is currently at work but helped copy-edit this speech.

I also want to acknowledge the reality in the room and the reason I am here, I am not the first Robert Lee to testify before the United States Congress. One did in 1866 during Reconstruction—it is indeed another person who bears a first and surname identical to mine, and whose lineage I bear as a nephew of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

But I dare not speak for my entire family or for the General—as some still revere him and see no reason for the hearing today. I will instead let the famed Confederate soldier speak for himself as his documented testimony before Congress can be found easily in your records. When asked before Congress and the country if Black American citizens were equally capable of acquiring knowledge as white Americans, that Robert Lee responded, “*[I] do not think that he is as capable of acquiring knowledge as the white man is. There are some more apt than others. I have known some to acquire knowledge and skill in their trade or profession. I have had servants of my own who learned to read and write very well.*” (Primary Resource 1866)

Lee was later asked by the Senator from Missouri during that same hearing if the southern states should allow the suffrage of black Americans. Lee remarked, “*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.” (Ibid)

I raise these two moments from the other Robert Lee’s testimony to highlight the difference and dissonance from what *this* Robert Lee is about to say, I fully believe along with a host of other amazing citizens of this great country that Black lives matter—and for us to continue to celebrate a man who questioned the education, disparaged the right to vote of black life, and had previously fought for the continued enslavement of Africans on the North American continent is an affront to those now suffering under the continued weight of oppression.

I want to uplift two people who ultimately shared this with me, one was Janie Bowman—my black nanny in the South in the 1990’s who sang Sweet Hour of Prayer while I slept in her arms when my parents worked. Though she is not here today I know in the Hereafter she along with countless others who experienced racism and white supremacy are cheering you on to show that the cost of following what’s right might not be politically expedient, but it is incredibly good. Likewise, my confirmation mentor—a strong woman of color named Bertha Hamilton taught me that we can take Confederate symbols down and still live to tell the tale. She implored me to remove a flag and picture I had in my room because she saw my life as more valuable than those symbols. I’m here to say the same is true for you.

If we are honest, the answer is clear. We cannot remain complicit with these monuments. We cannot remain silent any more, if we do, our silence becomes agreement and endorsement to complicity. This statue at Antietam that this bill represents and statues everywhere must be removed for a more perfect Union—which is inclusive of a better tomorrow.

I will close by saying that as much as I love history and the study therein I am most avidly an armchair presidential historian. Many presidents from President Kennedy, President Reagan, and President Obama have compared these United States to a shining city on a hill. While I acknowledge that all three presidents were incredible orators and public speakers—the notion of a city on a hill is distinctly scriptural, an area I hope I know well. In the Christian New Testament, Matthew’s Gospel states, “You are the light of the world, a city built on the hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket.” (Matthew 5:14-15a)

I call on this Committee and Congress to pass this bill not because of erasing history, but on the fact that the American people have lit a light that is no longer hidden. The world and indeed your constituents are watching. Thank you.

Bibliography

- Primary Resource, 1866.
Primary Resource: Robert E. Lee’s Testimony before Congress, February 17th, 1866.
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- Matthew 5:14-15a
The New Revised Standard of the Bible.