

Speech by Blake R.

Lest the Board of Trustees forgets why we are here, let me begin my speech with a simple historical declaration. Robert E. Lee was a virulent racist who fought to uphold the same institution of slavery he benefitted from. If any member on the Board doubts this fact and participates in historical revisionism, let me introduce what Robert E. Lee said himself under oath about Black people when responding to a question in front of Congress on the learning capabilities of Black men:

I do not know that I am particularly qualified to speak on that subject, as you seem to intimate; but 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.

Unlike Lee, I think I am in a position to say that the Board of Trustees and University has elevated this man for far too long. We continue to propagate this man on a pedestal because of his "contributions to our school". I want to ask all of you - if he contributed so much to our school, then why did we have to lie about him inventing the honor system? Last year it was finally changed in the White Book that Robert E. Lee did not help invent the honor system - but rather he "strengthened it". Just like we found out this lie in order that Lee's image could be strengthened, the Board continues to make strawmen instead of dealing with this pressing problem. Well, if Lee didn't invent the honor system at our university, what did he do as president? Keeping with historical truth, we know that the hiring of Robert E. Lee helped save our school from financial ruin - the only reason why Washington College gave Lee the presidency. Using Lee's name in an antagonistically racist South guaranteed tons of funding going to the school. As president, his contributions were minimal: he shifted housing policy around and recruited students from the North. IF we keep Lee in the name for this reason, then why is this school not also named after all the students and professors who attend this university? This school would be completely non-functional without us. I think the Board of Trustees can see naming a university after every single student and professor who makes their existence possible and saves them from financial ruin would be a ludicrous idea, just like how keeping Robert E. Lee in our name for raising donations because he represented the Confederacy and hence the last bastion of chattel slavery is a ridiculous idea.

In fact, the Board of Trustees is actually just copying Lee's beliefs in a way. You see, in an 1856 letter, he writes that slavery is a greater evil to White people than Black people and says that their subjugation is necessary and the length of time it was necessary for was only known by Divine Providence. Really. This is what our Board confesses when they refuse to change the name - they consistently recognize the evil of the Confederacy and yet consider changing the name to be out of the question. We

only know when something can end through an act of God? The Board of Trustees' indecision on this manner seems like they're waiting on this act of God to strike down the name of Robert E. Lee. But instead of an act of God stopping this, what they've done is created a religion with Lee at its center. Just behind me stands what I refer to as the Mecca of the Confederacy. In a building we are supposed to have the utmost respect in, Robert E. Lee's grave remains. The school is named the "Generals" despite Robert E. Lee never having reached the rank of general in the US army. Hell, there is a grave to his horse on our campus and our transit service is named after our horse. The name is not just a one-off thing, our school has purposely crafted a cult of personality around the man. And just like the institution of slavery, God wasn't there to end it with a magical wand. It took the effort of ordinary and extraordinary people to end the institution of chattel slavery across the USA, just like it will take us, ordinary and extraordinary college students, to end the oppressing presence Robert E. Lee contains on our campus.

I leave the Board of Trustees with one final message. In 1903, a Union veteran said to the proposition of putting a Lee statue at Gettysburg "If you want historical accuracy as your excuse, then place upon this field a statue of Lee holding in his hand the banner under which he fought, bearing the legend: 'We wage this war against a government conceived in liberty and dedicated to humanity.'" In this light, I proclaim to the Board: if you want historical accuracy as your excuse, then change the name of the university which honors racism. If you want possible alumni donations as your excuse, then they are not devoted to the success of the university but rather devoted to the cult of Lee you have constructed. And finally, if you want tradition to be your excuse, then remember our motto "non incautus futuri" and remove the tradition and look toward making this school a safe place for people of all races, ethnicities, sexualities, genders, or any other marginalized group.