speculation, sharping, and land monopolies notwithstanding, Oberly finds that warrant transactions were reasonably equitable, sellers realized handsome profits, and competition among big buyers tended to lower—not raise—acreage prices. In addition, he painstakingly explains the manner in which the warrants were processed and issued by the federal government as well as the way they were used by sellers and settlers in the upper Mississippi valley.

Yet to describe is not to explain. Anticipating the corruption of the Gilded Age, Oberly suggests that veterans lobbies, interest-group politics, and congressional land giveaways together signaled “the end of the old republic of Washington . . .” Perhaps. Early national and Jacksonian debates over the disposition of the public domain were structured and informed by a political culture defined by the interaction and tension between classical republicanism and nascent liberal capitalism. Oberly, however, roots the land bounty system in opportunism and pragmatism. That the older debate was eclipsed is clear; why it failed to resonate with the public is not. Nor is Oberly’s assessment of the dynamics of interest-group politics wholly persuasive. Many Jacksonian scholars contend that the function of antebellum politicians was to identify a hobby and ride it to power: that is, to give the public what it wanted. And by Oberly’s own account, the language and arguments employed by veterans organizations were rooted in the assumptions of that political environment.

The strengths of Oberly’s book are many. Its organization, research, and in-depth analysis shed light on a dimly understood, albeit narrow, development in national economic policy. Oberly also provides a number of healthy correctives to assumptions in the extant literature on land usage. Yet the absence of a broader historiographic context and, specifically, the failure to root this policy in the fluid political economy of the 1840s and 1850s, limits understanding of the transition to and popular appeal of the land bounty system. By extension it vitiates Oberly’s contribution to the economic history of antebellum America.

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A Virginia-born slaveholder and career military man once indicted for treason against the United States, Robert E. Lee some-
how mythically entered the mainstream of American culture. Lee's reservations about slavery, his initial reluctance to fight against the old Union, his audacious military successes in the face of overwhelming odds, his magnanimity, his dutiful persistence, and his final realistic adjustment to defeat appealed to Americans in ways that transcended sectional politics.

Alan T. Nolan is suspicious of all these claims to national stature made by Lee's partisans over the years. When looked at closely, Nolan argues persuasively, the life of Robert E. Lee appears to be that of a Virginia planter-aristocrat who was a Pierce Democrat before the war and, during Reconstruction, a supporter of Andrew Johnson and Horatio Seymour. Lee believed that slavery, for all its embarrassing and sorry consequences for whites and blacks alike, ultimately benefited the “African.” He always associated the black race with degradation and believed the races were best separated.

As a general, Lee, though fiercely effective on the battlefield, lacked a grasp of national strategy. The result, Nolan would have readers believe, is that Lee's aggressiveness, and the consequent heavy Confederate casualties, undermined the only grand strategy that might have succeeded for the Confederacy, the obstinate prolongation of conflict until the North lost the political will to fight. In fact, if the Lee legend is read closely, the general's military achievements appear dazzling only if one assumes they were doomed from the start. And his dogged persistence in bloody fighting seems downright inhumane if one believes, as some writers have argued, that Lee knew his cause was militarily hopeless as much as twenty months before Appomattox. In other words, Nolan says, Robert E. Lee was a rather ordinary southerner with considerable military talent who honored his privileged birth with an irrational or unthinking devotion to duty.

The evidence for this revised portrait is solid—mostly Lee's own words—but slender. Lee seldom wrote about politics and rarely articulated his national vision. Nolan makes the most of the few letters where such subjects arise, but Lee was neither a politician nor visionary. He was a man of action, and to cross-examine his skimpy intellectual testimony is to judge him by a part of the record where even Lee's partisans have always admitted weakness: the general could rarely write with eloquence or verve.

Lee's actions, however, embodied an eloquence that persuaded even his military adversaries of his greatness, and the core of the myth may survive Nolan's attack because he chose to look more at Lee's words than his behavior.

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