RISE TO THE MOMENT OF TRUTH
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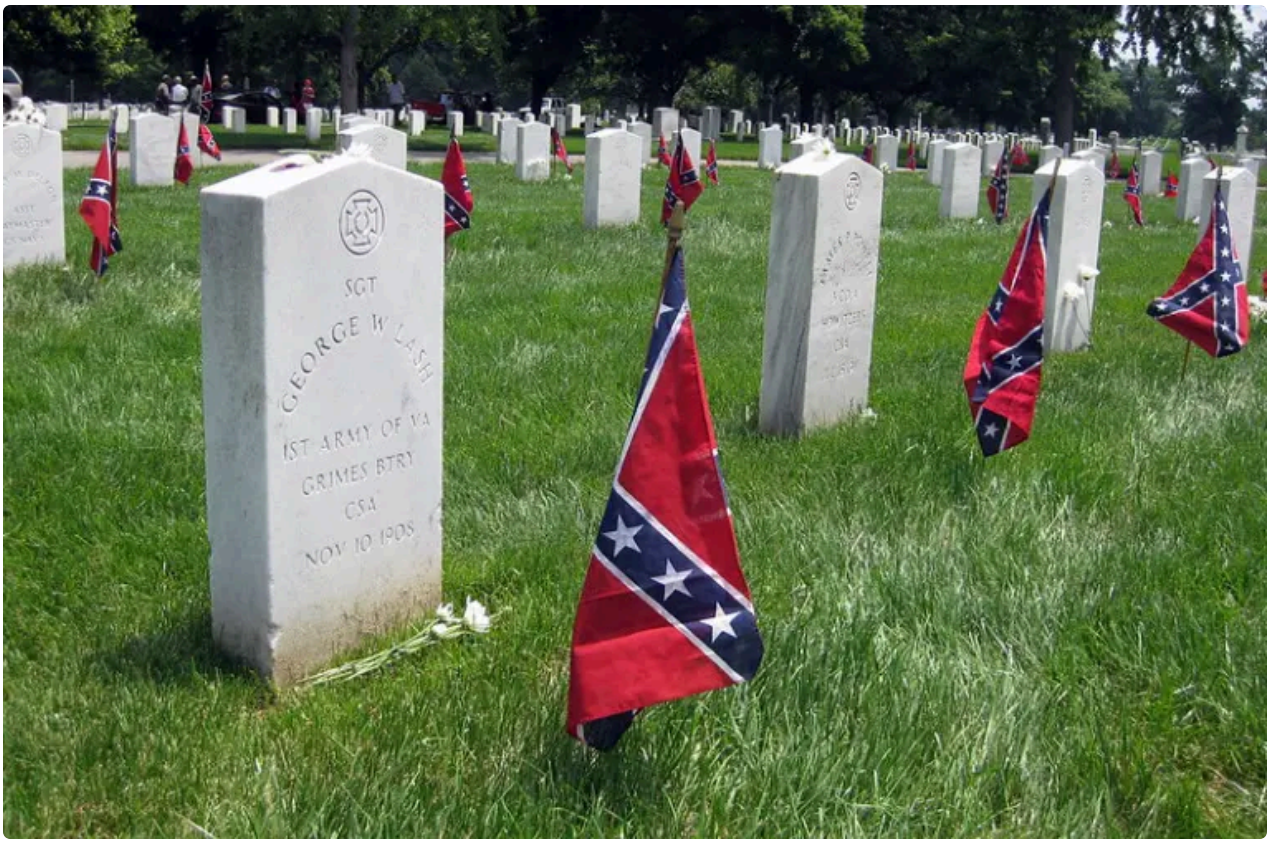
Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: The Speech in the File Cabinet

Allen Mendenhall | 04.27.25



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This month, having accepted a position with the Heritage Foundation, I was emptying my academic quarters at Troy University when I uncovered a most extraordinary artifact. Nestled among forgotten papers in my file cabinet was a note from my grandmother, who slipped away from us last August, concerning her father, E. Herndon Glenn, an attorney in Opelika known locally as "the Judge," though he wasn't one.

Born in 1887, this great-grandfather of mine (whom I never met) left behind something quite remarkable: a "Memorial Day" address he delivered in 1929 when he stood precisely at my current age of 42. My grandmother enclosed a photocopy of it.

This crisp reproduction of an old newspaper clipping given to me a decade ago indicates the speech was presented in an auditorium at Palmer Hall, which I've deduced must be one of two places: that elegant structure on the University of Montevallo campus, erected in 1921 and christened for that institution's third president, or, far more likely, an old school in Opelika that burned down decades ago.

The coincidence – his words preserved from when he was my age – feels like one of those delicious little symmetries the universe occasionally arranges, especially since my grandmother noted of us, "You would have liked each other very much."

In what at first appeared to be a delicate maneuvering around the Southern sensibilities of the era – a dance of regional pride – the newspaper prefaces the complete text of my great-grandfather's oration with a reassurance that this address pays "tribute to the memory of those brave heroes who fought for the southern cause in the sixties" – meaning, of course, that tumultuous decade of the 1860s.

How exquisitely careful the editors were, I thought, to remind readers that this commemoration stands "as dear to the South as any day could be to any people on earth." I'd always heard Memorial Day was a "Yankee Holiday."

Upon closer inspection, I noticed the dateline, April 27, which rearranged my understanding entirely. This couldn't possibly have been a Memorial Day address.

With that calendar placement, it must have been a *Confederate* Memorial Day oration, which falls traditionally in late April.

This slight calendar distinction – a mere notation I nearly overlooked – transformed the entire context of my great-grandfather's words. It was like realizing a portrait had been hanging in subtly wrong light all along; the adjustment brought everything into proper perspective. The newspaper's defensive posturing now appeared less a concession to Northern sentiment and more an assertion of a separate but parallel tradition of commemoration – its own ceremony of grief, conducted on its own day.

Speaking of portraits, I recall being told that my great-grandfather displayed one of Abraham Lincoln. In those days, Lincoln's visage in a Southern home or office would have raised eyebrows, perhaps even whispers. The war was not some distant historical vapor then, but a lived memory with children of soldiers moving about town squares throughout Alabama.

For my great-grandfather to possess such a portrait hints at a nuanced relationship with the past that defies the neat categories outsiders so love to impose upon Southern sensibilities. Then again, my mother doesn't recall such a portrait, and I cannot summon who planted this curious detail in my mind. Perhaps it's merely a trick of imagination, the mind creating what ought to have existed more readily than what did.

Curiously, though, one of my uncles insists the Lincoln portrait *did* exist – hung with quiet pride in my great-grandfather's law office. According to this uncle, my great-grandfather genuinely admired Lincoln and may have claimed a distant relation to Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon.

At any rate, the speech my grandmother preserved reveals a man who cherished both memory and progress. Rendered in print with an abundance of dashes and a notable lack of periods, it speaks to a generational posture of both pride and transformation.

"What a distance we have come since those days," he said. "What a change in our Social Order, what marvelous progress, what awakening has taken place since then

– Progress has replaced despair – factories have replaced ruined fields and smoking hearthstones and shattered homesteads – a new order has come, a new day has dawned – out of the darkness has come the light and from defeat hope."

Yet he also affirmed enduring reverence for Confederate figures: "We have not come so far but that the names of Lee and Jackson and Davis and Forrest and Stuart and Gordon and Little Joe Wheeler are still enshrined in our heart of hearts."

His speech reflects a sentiment once widespread in the South: a desire to honor ancestral sacrifice while affirming national unity. He praised the healing of wounds and what he viewed as Northern respect for Southern soldiers, noting with pride that Confederate veterans had marched in President Hoover's inauguration and that Northern journalists had defended their inclusion.

His address culminated in a kind of reconciliationist patriotism:

> Thank God, that we are still Americans and that we are in our Father's house. The South understands that the war has ended. It has no desire to revive worn-out issues. It is loyal to the Nation. It is as ready as any other Section to honor the emblem of our reunited Country, yet it will never agree to dishonor that other flag, under whose folds brave men fought and fell and whose colors, though lowered in defeat, were never lowered in dishonor.

Today, symbols of the Confederacy are the subject of intense national conversation. Understandably so. Their meaning is contested and their legacy fraught. My great-grandfather's reflections belong to a particular time and place. But understanding that context – without necessarily endorsing it – can help us better grasp the layered complexity of memory, identity and history in the American South.

It's also true that American flags fly in abundance on Southern porches. Patriotism remains deeply woven into Southern life, sometimes with a fervor that, say, New Englanders may not fully appreciate. While interpretations of history vary widely, many Southerners view historical figures as deeply human: flawed, brilliant, complex.

As Memorial Day approaches next month, I find myself reflecting on how my great-grandfather's words still echo across generations. They remind us that remembrance is not only about the past. It's also about the values we carry forward: what we choose to see, what we decide to question, and how we recognize our place in the larger American story.

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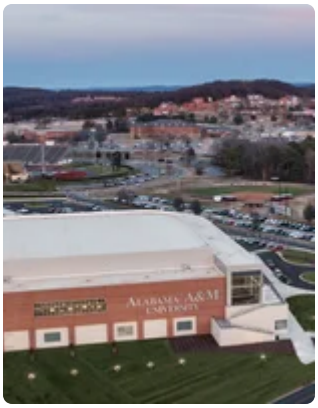

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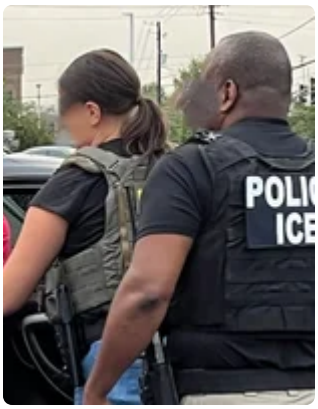

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