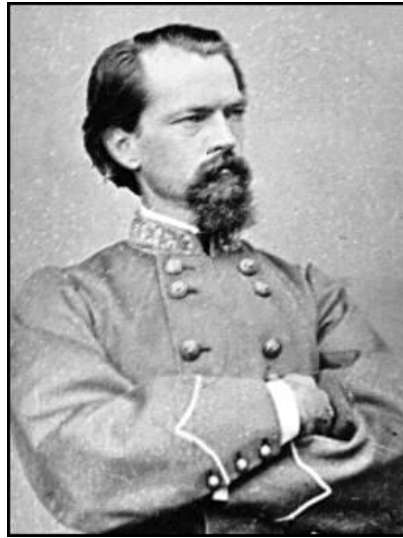

THE RAMROD GEORGIAN

The Legacy of John B. Gordon



By Bryce A. Chandler

Straight in the saddle, unflinching under fire—John B. Gordon was one of the greatest generals to appear in the latter half of the War for Southern Independence. Starting the war as a captain, he later became a major-general and successfully commanded a corps by the war's end. What can young men of today learn from this valiant officer who demonstrated manly conduct? From John B. Gordon, a young man can learn the essential qualities of loyalty, humility, and courage.

During his childhood, Gordon found the strength he would later need in his manhood. He was born in Upson County, Georgia to the Reverend Zachariah and Malinda Gordon on February 6, 1832. Frequently, Gordon travelled with his father as the latter shared the Gospel to others around the State.¹ His parents' instruction in religion led Gordon to a public profession of faith at the ripe age of seven, and, later during the war, religious revivals and conversions would flourish under Gordon's command. In September 1854, Gordon married Miss Fanny Haralson. He practiced law for a year, worked as a journalist, and was active in politics. But in 1856, he moved to northwest Georgia to

work the coal mines with his father.² It was during these early times that Gordon no doubt learned a sacred quality that would follow him forever—loyalty.

Loyalty is literally “duty or love”.³ Everyone wants others to be loyal to them. The husband expects his wife to be loyal, the leader expects his troops to be loyal, and the citizen expects his government to protect his freedom. Yet loyalty is not a one-way street. The Bible says, “A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly.”⁴ To gain the confidence of others, one must first, himself, be faithful to them. This means selflessness, or denying one’s self for the benefit of another.

Gordon’s loyalty to his wife is said better through the words of a poem he wrote to her on their thirty-seventh wedding anniversary:

Still beauty’s seal is on thy brow,
No brighter, nobler, then as now.
My love’s still warm as ‘twas when you
Were seventeen, I twenty-two.⁵

Likewise, Proverbs says, “A faithful man shall abound with blessings.”⁶ One of these blessings is reaping loyalty in return. Mrs. Gordon was a devoted wife and accompanied her husband to the war at the outbreak of the struggles. The Proverb, “The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her”,⁷ was a reality for Mrs. Gordon, who was the reason her husband survived five brutal wounds at Sharpsburg. She faithfully stood by her husband and nursed him back to health. Gordon said, “Thenceforward, for the period in which my life hung in the balance, she sat by my bedside, trying to supply concentrated nourishment....Under God’s Providence, I owe my life to her incessant watchfulness night and day, and to her tender nursing through weary weeks and anxious months.”⁸ Gordon’s daughter, Caroline, said her parents’ marriage was “a perfect union—unmarred by discord through all their years together.”⁹ Loyalty is being true to one’s trust. A man’s word is a sacred promise. Over time, our society has forgotten this, but when young men look at the example of

Gordon, they know that this principle has been kept alive for them to learn today.

When war broke out, Gordon was torn between two loyalties. He said, “The struggle between devotion to my family on the one hand and duty to my country on the other was most trying to my sensibilities.”¹⁰ Despite Gordon’s struggle, he decided his loyalty was at the front, and Gordon was quickly chosen captain of his company of hill-smart backwoodsmen who called themselves the “Raccoon Roughs”. Devotion to his family would never become so unparalleled as he fought for their safety and freedom.

Throughout the war, Gordon displayed loyalty to his men on the battlefield. Together, they weathered many furious battles. During his first combat experience, which took place in the swamps at Seven Pines, Gordon’s men were extremely cut up. Gordon, himself, had bullets nip at his jacket, a horse shot from beneath him, and even saw his nineteen year old brother lying on the ground lung-shot. By the time the battle was over, Colonel Gordon lost his adjutant, lieutenant-colonel, major, about half his captains, and over half his men, but did not once desert the field of battle.¹¹ During the Seven Days’ Battles around Richmond, Gordon and his men charged the unforgiving Yankee artillery at Malvern Hill. As the colonel moved forward with his regiment, shells exploded all around him. “One shell had killed six or seven men in my immediate presence,” Gordon later recalled.¹² Another shell exploded so close that it tore away part of Gordon’s jacket, ripped off the handle on his pistol, and punctured his canteen. Yet another shell exploded and showered dirt over the colonel and blinded him. Even then, Gordon’s thoughts were not for himself, but rather for the safety of his men. Yet the blindness was only momentary, and he quickly regained his sight.¹³ All through this, Gordon continued to be steadfast to his men.

But, it wasn’t until Sharpsburg that Gordon found his truest test of loyalty. Gordon’s men were outnumbered four to one, and the Yankees charged. When the enemy was thirty paces away, Gordon gave the order—“Fire!” Nearly the whole enemy front ranks dropped. When the Yankee’s started firing, Gordon was hit in the calf. Even after he had been hit four times, Gordon did not return to the

rear. He knew his men needed him; he knew his men counted on him. Only after Gordon was shot a fifth time and was rendered unconscious did he leave the field.¹⁴ The Bible says there is no greater love than for a man to lay down his life for a friend. Gordon knew this was true loyalty, and he more than once put his life on the line for those he loved. Is it a wonder why Gordon's troops grew to love him?—They would follow him anywhere.

Next, a boy can learn humility from Gordon. No one likes being around someone who puts himself above others and crows on his own accomplishments, but humility—a lack of pride—wins favor. The Bible says, “For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”¹⁵ In 1828, Noah Webster defined humility as “a modest estimate of one's own worth....a deep sense of one's own unworthiness in the sight of God...” As a Christian, Gordon doubtless understood that his “righteousnesses [were] as filthy rags”.¹⁶ As Robert E. Lee said, “And I can only say that I am nothing but a poor sinner, trusting in Christ alone for salvation...”¹⁷

This kind of humility was shown by Gordon at Seven Pines when his brigade commander, Robert Rodes, was wounded, and the other colonels asked Gordon to assume command. “It was not only unexpected, but unwelcome and extremely embarrassing,” Gordon said. “For of all the regimental commanders in the brigade, I was the junior in commission and far the youngest in years.” But the others insisted that he assume command and gave Gordon their upmost support.¹⁸ During the retreat from Yorktown on the Virginia Peninsula during early 1862, Gordon did not deem himself superior to his brave soldiers. Gordon found artillerymen, with whom he had no attachment, struggling to get their guns out of the mud. Gordon relates, “As I dismounted from my horse and waded into the deep mud and called on [my men] to save the artillery, they raised a shout and crowded around the wheels.” Gordon was pleased to say that the army did not lose one artillery piece or ammunition wagon.¹⁹ Gordon understood that it was the private soldiers who gave the dearest sacrifice. He said, “No language would be too strong or eulogy too high to pronounce upon the privates who did their duty during that long and dreadful war...who were ready to march and to suffer, to fight and to die, without once calling in question the wisdom of the orders or necessity for the sacrifice.”²⁰ Truly,

Gordon knew he had no reason to boast against such men. Gordon showed humility by acknowledging the worth of others, and the unworthiness of himself. The young man of today must strive to do the same and never think of himself too highly. We must remember that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Last—but perhaps the greatest quality one can learn from Gordon—is courage. During the War for Southern Independence, some of the greatest acts of bravery and valor ever seen by mankind came to bear and have inspired men for generations. Yet, this “quality of mind which enables men to encounter danger and difficulties with firmness”²¹ is not a solitary quality. Just as cowardice breeds demoralization, courage inspires courage. “[Gordon] had the God-given talent of getting in front of his troops and, in a few magnetic appeals, inspiring them almost to madness, and being able to lead them into the jaws of death,” said Stephen D. Lee, who was a Lieutenant-General during the war and afterward succeeded Gordon as Commander-in-Chief of the United Confederate Veterans.²²

In addition, Psalm 31:24 says, “Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord.” How can one be courageous? Thomas J. Jackson, the general who stood like a stone wall at First Manassas, would have responded quickly that a resolution of death with the knowledge of safety in Christ is the only way to gain that victory. Likewise, John B. Gordon said something very similar, for he, too, placed his trust in Christ. Gordon said, “The religious revivals which occurred in the Southern camps...rendered [the men] not insensible to danger, but superior to it.” When not leading his men into roaring cannons, Gordon led his soldiers in supplications to Almighty God and would personally instruct his men in the way of the Cross. A former military chaplain, J. William Jones, said, “I...have seen him go off into the woods with his arms about some ragged private, that he might point him to ‘the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world’.”²³ So we learn from Gordon that courage is rooted deep within a faith in Christ.

This courage Gordon found from being a child of God led him and his men into the swamps of Seven Pines where nearly 60 percent of his regiment fell victim to Northern guns. It led him to the

intimidating Malvern Hill, where artillery literally cut lanes in the Southern ranks. It led him to Sharpsburg, where he fearlessly confronted the Yankees outnumbering him four to one. It led him to charge the enemy fortress on Marye's Heights with only a brigade during Chancellorsville and to hold the "Bloody Angle" at Spotsylvania. And it preserved him through bitter tears at Appomattox. Thus, Gordon has taught us how courage separates the men from the boys. Yet courage is more than bravery on the field of battle. It is bravery to obey one's calling; it is bravery to trust God for one's daily bread; it is bravery to walk by faith and not by sight. This is how the modern boy can be courageous, and this is what we can learn from JOHN B. GORDON.

Loyalty, humility, and courage—one must always live by this code, even if it means forfeiting one's own life. Yet the young man must remember that it does not take a war to create loyalty. There does not have to be a struggle for him to demonstrate humility; he must practice it daily. Neither must he wait upon the call to charge an enemy stronghold to show the courage of his heart. Stephen D. Lee said Gordon "was a devout and humble Christian gentleman."²⁴ May we strive to be men like him — the straight, unflinching, "Ramrod Georgian".

OUTLINE

What Can young men learn from John B. Gordon?

I. Loyalty

- A. Definition of
- B. Shown to his family
- C. Shown to his soldiers

II. Humility

- A. Definition of
- B. Shown at Seven Pines
- C. Shown during retreat from Yorktown

III. Courage

- A. Definition of
- B. Based on faith in Christ
- C. Shown multiple times

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bible: King James Version.

Eckert, Ralph Lowell, *John B. Gordon: Soldier, Southerner, American*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

—————, “General John B. Gordon”. [Available at: home.alltel.net/ehallman/jbg.htm].

Gordon, General John B., *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, Atlanta, The Martin and Hoyt Co., 1904. [Available at: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/gordon/gordon.html>]. Text scanned (OCR) by Jennifer Kellerman. Images scanned by Jill Kuhn. Text encoded by Jill Kuhn and Natalia Smith. First edition, 1999. ca. 1MB. Academic Affairs Library, UNC-CH. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999.

Jones, J. William, D.D., *Christ in the Camp*, Harrisonburg, VA, Sprinkle Publications, 1986.

Webster, Noah, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, New York, S. Converse, 1828. (Repub. by Foundation for American Christian Education, San Francisco, CA, 1989.)

ENDNOTES

1. Ralph Lowell Eckert, *John Brown Gordon: Soldier, Southerner, American*, pg. 8.
2. *Ibid.*, pg. 10-11.
3. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*.
4. Proverbs 18:24.
5. "General John B. Gordon".
6. Proverbs 28:20.
7. Proverbs 31:11.
8. John B. Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, pg. 91.
9. Ralph Lowell Eckert, *John Brown Gordon: Soldier, Southerner, American*, pg. 10-11.
10. John B. Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, pg. 3.
11. *Ibid.*, pg. 56.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 74.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 74-75.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 90.
15. Luke 14:11.
16. Isaiah 64:6.
17. J. William Jones, *Christ in the Camp*, pg. 50.
18. John B. Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, pg. 58.
19. *Ibid.*, pg. 53.
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 136.
21. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*.
22. John B. Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, pg. xiv.

23. J. William Jones, *Christ in the Camp*, p. 104.

24. John B. Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, pg. xix.