

The Naming of Military Forts

I did some research on the naming of US military forts because of the current debate on why we named forts after Generals who fought against the US. As most of us remember from our history classes, during the American Revolution, General Benedict Arnold who fought gallantly for the colonies, became a traitor when he switched sides and tried to turn over West Point to the British. There are no forts named for him, nor are there statutes or monuments honoring him. However, we have in the US at least ten forts named after generals who fought against the US during our Civil War; Ft Lee in Virginia, Ft Bragg in North Carolina, Ft Pickett in Virginia, Ft Hill in Virginia, Camp Beauregard in Louisiana, Ft Benning in Georgia, Ft Gordon in Georgia, Ft Hood in Texas, Ft Polk in Louisiana and Ft Rucker in Alabama. Most of the forts were named during the early 1900s up to WWII. All of the forts were named after generals who fought against the US during the Civil War, a war that saw over 600,000 deaths; 360,000 from the North and 258,000 from the South.

How are forts named? The answer, according to the US Army has changed over the years. Early in our history, forts were named by the commander of the regional military division where the fort was being established. Currently the naming of forts must meet one of five criteria, the first being ‘a national hero of absolute preeminence by virtue of high position’. Of course, politics also plays a part in fort naming.

Why were the ten forts named after generals who fought against the US? Following the Civil War, there was a movement in the South called the Lost Cause that sought to present the war from the perspective of the Confederacy in the best possible terms. The Lost Cause claimed that the rebellion was based on states rights and not to maintain slavery, that African Americans were unprepared for the responsibility of freedom, Confederate soldiers were heroic and saintly and the most heroic and saintly was Robert E Lee. Since the naming of the ten forts occurred during the early 1900s when the decision was made regionally, the South named the regional forts after their ‘heroic generals.’

Article three of the US Constitution states that “Treason against the United States, shall consist only in levying War against them, or in adhering to their Enemies, giving them Aid and Comfort. No Person shall be convicted of Treason unless on the Testimony of two Witnesses to the same overt Act, or on Confession in open Court.” Was Benedict Arnold guilty of treason? Were the ten generals of the Confederacy guilty of treason?

The question remains, why name forts after generals who rebelled against the US? It is not a revision of history but a serious review of history.