

The Contested Legacy of Robert E. Lee

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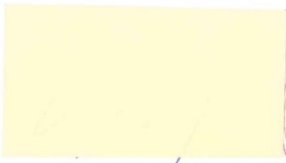
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ABSTRAKT

Během Americké občanské války, nejkrvavějšího sporu v Americké historii, se objevila spousta prominentních osobností, mezi kterými byl i generál Robert E. Lee. Jakožto velitel armády Severní Virginie, snažil se chránit Jih, a to hlavně Virginii, jeho domovskou krajinu, před vojskami z Unie. Ačkoliv byl na straně poražených, z Leeho se stala proslulá osobnost, hrdina Jihu, považován za géniového стратега, který sice čelil přesile, ale nikdy nebyl přelstěn. Tento pohled sdílelo mnoho lidí až do pozdních let dvacátého století, kdy několik historiků začalo zpochybňovat jeho zanechaný odkaz a genialitu. V této práci se podívám na Leeho život před občanskou válkou a události k ní vedoucí, jeho úspěchy a selhání během války, a nakonec to nejdůležitější, co se s Leem stalo po válce a jak se vyvíjel jeho odkaz po jeho smrti. Tato práce se snaží dokázat, že Leeho odkaz je z části křivě pošpiněn spoustami lží, a zároveň rozebírá jeho často napadené a diskutabilní dědictví.

Klíčová slova: Robert E. Lee, Americká občanská válka, Jih, Sever, Konfederace, Unie, Virginia, otroctví, secese, Nový Jih

ABSTRACT

Many prominent figures arose during the American Civil War, the bloodiest event in American history, and among them was General Robert E. Lee. As commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, he sought to protect the South, and especially Virginia, his home state, from the armies of the Union. Albeit on the losing side, Lee quickly became a renowned figure; a hero of the South, hailed as a genius tactician who was outnumbered but never outwitted, a view shared by many until the late twentieth century, when his genius and legacy were called into question. This thesis examines Lee's life leading up to the Civil War, his many successes and failures during the war, and most importantly, what became of Lee after the war, and the evolution of his legacy after his death. The thesis argues that much of the blame put on Lee's shoulders might be misplaced or altered to fit a specific narrative, and that a large part of his legacy is certainly contested and controversial.

Keywords: Robert E. Lee, American Civil War, South, North, Confederacy, Union, Virginia, slavery, secession, New South

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Declaration of honor:

I hereby declare that the print version of my bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

The Lee family name was well known throughout the South. They were one of the “First Families of Virginia,” and these families would go on to create an aristocracy similar to that of the English, amassing incredible wealth in the process. The Lees were always too kind and well-mannered to ever consider themselves “first among equals,” much less to have boasted about being first in the social order. They went on to acquire many estates and plantations, filled major public offices, married well and fought for their mother country and colony, and later for their state and country.

Robert E. Lee was the son of Henry Lee III, and he was destined for great things, just like his father, though he would not share his father’s fate. Robert would go on to become what we now call a “civil engineer,” tasked with constructing many forts along the east coast as well as inland. He would tame the Mississippi River and bring about the commercial development of whole new areas of the country and the creation of many new cities. Robert would also go on to become a prominent figure in the Mexican-American War, during which his military skills were recognized for the first time. Ultimately, he would end up leading the Confederacy’s Army of Northern Virginia during the Civil War, leaving behind a great legacy.

As is often the case, not everything is as black and white as it seems—shades of grey exist. Robert E. Lee’s legacy would eventually become a contested and controversial topic in the United States, which would attract the attention of many writers and historians, among others. After all, few figures in American history are more divisive, contradictory or elusive than Robert E. Lee.¹ This thesis will examine Lee’s life and legacy, and uncover exactly what makes Lee’s legacy so controversial and contested: how the South tried to eradicate Lee’s mistakes and turn him into a saint; why a man who sympathized so heavily with the North’s cause turned against them and became a general in the Confederate ranks; or how his generalship was often hampered by his reluctance to enforce his will on his own generals, which proved to be a fatal flaw during the Civil War. It will also show how his legacy—and that of the Confederacy—still have serious, lasting effects on the modern United States.

¹ Roy Blount, Jr., “Making Sense of Robert E. Lee.” *Smithsonian*, July 2003, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/making-sense-of-robert-e-lee-85017563/> (accessed March 14, 2020).

1 THE LEE FAMILY

1.1 The First Lee

Robert E. Lee's lineage can be traced back to the first Lee who left England and arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1639, Richard Henry Lee, a.k.a., "The Immigrant." He arrived in North America ambitious and well-connected, with the "patronage" of Virginia's first governor, Sir Francis Wyatt. He soon proved himself a tough, fearless and skilful individual when it came to climbing the colonial political ladder,² from attorney general to secretary of state, before settling as a colonel in the Virginia Militia. Apart from these positions, he was also at various times a fur trader, a slave trader and a tobacco planter, which allowed him to become one of North America's richest men, as well as one of the largest landowners in the colony. The fame and success of the Lee family only grew from then onwards, as two descendants of Richard Lee would be signers of the Declaration of Independence,³ two others would become great generals (one of them being Robert E. Lee, the other his father), and one of them, Zachary Taylor, would become not only a general but also a U.S. president.⁴

Richard Lee found fortune not only in business and politics, but also in fathering children, all ten of them. Having so much land, he left large parcels of it to his children, and they went on to build their own astonishing houses, in turn creating several branches of the Lee family, all of which produced men of distinction and merit, and women who married well.⁵ When the first American Lee died in 1664, unbeknownst to him, he left behind a family that would proceed to carve the Lee name into history.

1.2 The Branch of the Third Son

One branch of this fast-growing and mighty family tree descended from the third of Richard Lee's seven sons, Richard Henry Lee Jr., who was known in the family as "Richard the Scholar" thanks to his education at Oxford University. His personal book collection was one of the largest libraries in North America, alongside his ability to fluently write in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. Walking in the steps of his father, he filled numerous colonial offices and

² Michael Korda, *Clouds of Glory: The Life and Legend of Robert E. Lee* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2015), 3-4.

³ Richard Brookhiser, "Calls of Duty," *National Review*, 21 January 2015, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2015/02/09/calls-duty/> (accessed March 14, 2020).

⁴ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 5-6.

⁵ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 8.

served in the King's Council. He had eight children, one of them being Captain Henry Lee, who became the father of Henry Lee Jr.⁶

Henry Lee Jr. married Lucy Grymes, a distant relative of George Washington himself. He built for Lucy and himself a great manor house, called the Lee House, where they had eight children, the first of whom, Henry Lee III, also known as Light-Horse Harry Lee, would rise to prominence in the Revolutionary War, becoming the most famous cavalry commander of the war. Aside from some of his failures, Henry Lee III eventually rose to become the governor of Virginia and a Virginian representative in congress, and most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, the father of Robert Edward Lee.⁷

Henry and Lucy Lee believed that their eldest son, born in 1756, was destined for a brilliant career, a feeling he soon shared. A 1773 graduate of the College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton), he intended to pursue law in England, but was stopped from doing so by the outbreak of war. Over the next three years, young Henry Lee abandoned any and all ambition he may have had to be a lawyer, and decided to join the army instead, as a captain in a light cavalry regiment. Although lacking formal military training, it turned out he might have been born for the cavalry—he was tall, strong and a natural horseman—and it did not take long until he made a name for himself. He was recognized for his skill in organizing and leading a small, nimble force of light cavalry, the opposite of which were dragoons, or heavy cavalry. These “light horsemen” were frequently tasked with daring raids, to quickly move across long distances and carry out reconnaissance missions, or to dismount and fight as light infantry, equipped with just a short musket or pistols and a short, curved saber.⁸

Henry Lee's ability to take daring risks, as well as to raise the spirits of those around him, made him a perfect candidate for leading a light-cavalry regiment. He became the talk of the army after managing to beat off a surprise British attack at Spread Eagle Tavern in 1778. Hearing this, General George Washington offered him to become his aide-de-camp—which Lee turned down, because he preferred to fight in the field. This gained him Washington's lifelong respect, along with a promotion to major. After another daring, yet not entirely successful attack a year later, he won Washington's “unstinted” praise, and Congress awarded him with a gold medal. His skills recognized, he was put in charge of his own light-cavalry and infantry formation (something of an innovation at the time) and

⁶ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 9-10.

⁷ Thomas Emory, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 19-20.

⁸ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 13-14.

promoted to lieutenant colonel, at just twenty-five years old. However, alongside his competence, there were also worrying signs of a certain lack of judgment.⁹

He proved himself as a commander of extraordinary talent when he was sent south to serve under General Nathanael Greene, amazing both his own superiors and the enemy by his skills and raiding speed. He played a major role in General Greene's successful campaign to free the Carolinas and Georgia, which also earned him the honor of carrying dispatches from Greene to Washington. In some ways, this was the high point of Henry Lee's life, or at the very least the moment before things went downhill. He became resentful and imperious, claiming his services had not been sufficiently appreciated, even though he was one of the recognized heroes of the war, and the only officer below the rank of general to be awarded a gold medal by Congress. He proceeded to resign from the army in 1782, determined to win, as he put it, "riches and eminence" in public life. He might have expected to be promoted to general, and was offended when he was not.¹⁰

Henry Lee III seems to have begun as a charming rogue and an eternal optimist, but swiftly degenerated into a gifted and persuasive confidence man, careless with facts, always promising more than he could deliver, unable to learn from his own disastrous experiences—in short, he turned into a well-bred crook. His family members quickly caught wind of this and made sure to put codicils in their wills or financial arrangements, making sure Henry Lee III could make no decisions regarding their property or their estates, although they do not seem to have been any less fond of him for that.¹¹ After all, every family needed a black sheep, and that was the role of Henry Lee III in the Lee family.

Originally, it seemed he was stepping in the right direction. He married a second cousin, Matilda Lee, who inherited a great mansion from her father, along with over six thousand acres of land. Their marriage was even attended by George Washington himself. Henry Lee followed in their family tradition of public service and became a member of Congress, then a governor of Virginia. Matilda bore him three children, one of whom did not live to adulthood. Henry Lee's poor judgment and economic unreliability, compounded by the fact that he tended to put duties before family, caused Matilda to bequeath the mansion to her children when she died in 1790. Nevertheless, Henry Lee managed to persuade Matilda's

⁹ Emory, *Robert E. Lee*, 25.

¹⁰ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 16-17.

¹¹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 17.

trustees to let him sell off much of the land around the mansion, leading to the overall deterioration of the property. His reputation deteriorated with it.¹²

Henry Lee attempted to restore his fortunes by trying to secure a commission as a general in the French revolutionary army, but was stopped from doing so by Washington on the grounds that Lee was still governor of Virginia. Stymied professionally, he decided to marry again, this time to twenty-year-old Ann Hill Carter, the daughter of the richest man in the commonwealth. Anne's father gave his blessing to the marriage but made sure Henry Lee would have no access to, or control over, Ann's money. Ann went on to bear six children, the next to last being Robert E. Lee.¹³

1.3 Robert E. Lee's Early Life

Robert Edward Lee was born on a winter's day in 1807, in an increasingly crowded mansion. As a young child, he viewed his father as a hero, and in this, he was not alone. Henry Lee *was* a bonified hero in Alexandria, Virginia. Many in the town had served under his command in "Lee's Legion" and referred to him as "General Lee," a rank which he and they thought he should have had at Yorktown. He filled his house with war memorabilia, and was greeted with respect whenever he would venture into the public, all of which made an impression on young Robert that his father was a soldier and a hero.¹⁴

Robert grew up largely ignorant of his father's financial troubles, fall from grace, and ultimate self-destruction. In fact, it was the exact opposite. The supposed persona of General Henry Lee III as a kind of second Washington guided and formed Robert E. Lee as he became a soldier himself, and rose in fame far beyond his father. Nevertheless, Robert might have known more about his father than he let others believe, as he was scrupulous about money, and was always determined to never get into debt, as well as paying every bill on time. In this regard, he was exactly the opposite of his father. The importance of thrift, modesty, truthfulness, unshakable faith in God and scrupulous accounting of every penny, along with gentlemanly behaviour, had been taught to Robert by his mother—she made sure to instil in all her children the virtues her husband so desperately lacked.¹⁵

Robert Lee, just like his father Henry, was tall, physically strong, a born horseman and soldier, and so courageous that even his own soldiers often begged him to get back out of

¹² Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 18.

¹³ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 19.

¹⁴ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 22.

¹⁵ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 26.

range, in vain of course. His ability to inspire loyalty and throw an enemy off balance—gifts he surely inherited from his father—helped him in many situations. On the contrary, perhaps because of his father's many quarrels with Jefferson and Madison, Robert had an ingrained distrust of politics and politicians, including those of the Confederacy. However, the most important trait that influenced Robert was a negative one: whereas his father was voluble, imprudent and hot-tempered, quick to attack anybody who offended or disagreed with him, Robert was, or rather forced himself to be, exactly the opposite. He kept the firmest possible rein on his temper, avoided personal confrontations of every kind, and disliked arguments. Characteristics such as these, often thought of as virtues, turned out to be Robert E. Lee's Achilles' heel, the one weak point in his otherwise admirable personality, a dangerous flaw for a commander, and perhaps even a flaw that would, in the end, prove fatal for the Confederacy. Some of the most mistaken military decisions of the Confederacy can be attributed to Lee's reluctance to confront a subordinate and have it out with him on the spot.¹⁶

His mother, Ann Carter Lee, seems to have picked out Robert early on in his childhood as the most responsible and reliable of her children. She entrusted him with many things that kept the household going. Ann was determined to make sure Robert would not grow up to be like his father, and thus she devoted a great deal of her time and energy into his spiritual well-being. For this, she was extraordinarily well suited, having formidable theological knowledge, as well as a precise sense of right and wrong and a deep spiritual belief. Even later in his life, Robert would often say he “owed everything” to his mother. Despite all of this “religious intensity” focused on Robert, it did not make him humorless, or less high-spirited than any normal child. Throughout his life he had a taste for family jokes, teasing, mild flirtation, and good conversation—it was only the public man who displayed the “marble face” that so impressed those who fought for him.¹⁷

1.3.1 Lee's Days at Alexandria Academy and West Point

Around the age of twelve, Lee entered Alexandria academy, a day school founded in 1785. One of the first trustees was, unsurprisingly, George Washington himself. This is where Lee was introduced to Latin and the classics, acquiring over the next three to four years a taste for the former that he would retain throughout his life; and to mathematics, for which he had a remarkable aptitude, which would stand him in good stead.¹⁸

¹⁶ Emory, *Robert E. Lee*, 44.

¹⁷ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 33-34.

¹⁸ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 37.

It had to have been hard for Ann Carter Lee—sending her oldest boy, Charles Carter Lee, to Harvard; there was no way she could afford to send Carter’s younger brothers to college as well. The next in age, Sydney Smith Lee, she sent to the navy, seeking from President Monroe a midshipman’s commission for him, which basically meant going to sea and being trained by a naval officer, as there was no naval academy back in those days. Thus, it must have seemed natural to send the third son in line, young Robert, to the army; he was, after all, healthy, a good horseman, bold, energetic, good at mathematics, which was the indispensable foundation of military science, and also the son of a famous general. At the time, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, was only fifteen years old, still something of an innovation, and by no means a popular one. It was, in fact, one of Washington’s greatest contributions—the creation of a trained and professional army that could fight alongside the even more professional French army, and nobody recognized more clearly the country’s need for a well-trained officer corps. For Ann Carter Lee, the most important advantage was that West Point offered the chance of a free college education, as well as a stepping-stone to an honorable, if poorly paid, profession.¹⁹

As Robert left Virginia and Maryland behind and crossed into Pennsylvania, he noticed one important change. For the first time in his life he found himself in a part of the country where slavery did not exist. Blacks were omnipresent in the South—they worked the fields, barns and stables; they did menial labor and were servants in many households. They were sold and bought like cattle, or left to one’s heirs like any other form of property, even used to pay debts, but whatever their function and in whatever form, they were a constant, familiar presence. Lee’s mother had four slaves who had been given to her by her father, and in the many great houses she had visited, most of the servants and all of the field hands were black. In Pennsylvania, blacks were comparatively few, and most importantly, those who lived there were free—not necessarily treated as equals, but at the same time nobody’s property, able to marry legally, and able to bring up their children without the fear that they might at any time be sold to plantations in the deep South, whatever the reason may be. The farther north Robert’s journey took him, the fewer black faces he would see, and none of them in bondage.²⁰

The U.S. Military Academy was situated on what amounts to a peninsula, reflecting a clear physical isolation, surrounded by farmland and a few small villages, with roads that

¹⁹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 38-39.

²⁰ Emory, *Robert E. Lee*, 56.

were poor and in winter often impassable. Even though presidents Adams and Jefferson had both been in favor of a national military academy, neither they nor Congress wished to establish a military elite; and President Jefferson wanted to combine the Military Academy with a school of science in what would later be called civil engineering.²¹

After a brief oral examination, the cadets were marched off, and each was assigned a tent, consisting of mostly spartan equipment that would serve them well in the coming months. The new cadets were given four hours a day of drill instruction, and the scholastic year officially began on August 27, when the cadets moved from their summer tents into the barracks. The curriculum concentrated on mathematics and French, with special focus on a higher knowledge of mathematics, which was essential for a military officer, particularly for service in the engineers or the artillery, while French was the language of most of the military textbooks the cadets had, few of which had been translated into English. For Robert, who had spent a year assiduously cramming in Alexandria, the mathematics courses presented no great difficulty—all his life he had a “head for figures” and a passion for mathematical exactitude, qualities in which his father had been tragically lacking.²²

The schedule of a West Point first-classman seems to have been designed to test the mind, body, and character of a cadet to the extreme limits, even for one as well prepared as Robert. The schedule was well calculated to keep cadets out of mischief, though young men being what they are, it often failed. The list of things forbidden to a cadet was long and unambiguous. By the end of his first year at West Point, Robert was third in his class with no demerits and an academic rating of 286 out of a possible 300. He was placed on the list of “distinguished cadets,” which was furnished to the secretary of war and published in the *Army Register*, and promoted to staff sergeant, an unusually high rank for a first-year cadet. Lee’s academic record was and would remain outstanding, although he never managed to beat out his rival Charles Mason, who would go on to graduate number one in their class. Lee’s physical perfection, his erect soldierly posture, and his graceful movement on the drill field had already led his fellow cadets to describe him as the “Marble Model”—ironically, since as a general he would become known as the “Marble Man,” after his impassive expression in the face of both victory and defeat.²³

In Robert’s second year, drawing of maps was added to his list of studies, which proved of no difficulty to him. He was made a “senior cadet,” acting as an “assistant professor of

²¹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 49.

²² Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 55.

²³ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 56.

mathematics” to tutor fellow cadets who were having difficulties. He also showed the first signs of a deep and lifelong interest in the campaigns of Napoleon, taking from the library three volumes of General Montholon’s memoirs of Napoleon dealing with the early campaigns, and another book, describing Napoleon’s advance to Moscow in 1812. It would be thirty-four years before Robert E. Lee would have the opportunity of putting into practice Napoleon’s battlefield tactics, and at the age of nineteen he had no reason to imagine that he would one day lead a large army in a series of brilliant campaigns. In fact, all the things that made Lee such a formidable commander from 1861 to midsummer 1863 were, whether he knew it consciously or not, Napoleonic. In no sense did he imitate Napoleon, nor did he ever express admiration for him, but perhaps the most important thing he learned at West Point was not in the curriculum, but in the few hours he had in which he rewarded himself by reading for his own pleasure, and during which he tucked in the back of his mind the basic lessons of Napoleon’s generalship; that with speed, audacity and a well-led army, one could defeat an army twice its size, and that hammer blows repeated at brief intervals could demoralize even the largest and best-equipped armies.²⁴

Robert began his third year at West Point at the end of August 1827. This involved the addition of “natural philosophy,” as physics was then called, and chemistry, both subjects that he enjoyed, as well as tactics at the battalion level and an introduction to artillery. Lee also continued to read voraciously for his own pleasure—from books about Machiavelli and Alexander Hamilton, to works on navigation, astronomy and optics. Throughout his life, he would often surprise people by his knowledge of subjects far removed from military engineering or tactics. His intellectual curiosity was always intense and well-grounded but, like his sense of humor, carefully concealed. Lee completed his third year at West Point as number two, once again, as Charles Mason remained just a few points ahead of him in examinations. For his final year, Robert was also named adjutant of the corps, the highest rank a cadet could achieve. The arduous course of studies in the first three years of a cadet at West Point was merely a preparation for the formidable challenge of the fourth year, with more advanced military training and engineering added to an already crowded curriculum.²⁵

At the final examinations, Robert earned 1,966 points out of a possible 2,000, receiving perfect scores in artillery and tactics, which placed him second in his class, 29 points behind Charles Mason. Nevertheless, this was an extraordinary record, which earned Robert the

²⁴ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 64.

²⁵ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 65-72.

right to choose to be commissioned in the Engineer Corps, then the most prestigious and intellectually demanding arm of the U.S. Army, and the one for which his scientific and mathematical abilities best suited him.²⁶

1.3.2 The Life of a Civil Engineer

One of Lee's first tasks as a civil engineer, fresh out of school, was to construct a "coastal defense," a project to which both the Congress and the Corps of Engineers were committed. It was hugely ambitious, much of it in places where the construction of even a modest shack would have presented problems. One of these places was Cockspur Island. Twelve miles downstream from the port of Savannah, in the southern channel of the Savannah River, it was about a mile long and two-thirds of a mile wide, most of it underwater at high tide, and all of it underwater in any serious storm. When Lee first saw Cockspur Island, it presented "a drab and desolate" appearance, which closer examination would not improve, and it must have looked like the most improbable place in the world on which to construct a fort. Major Babcock, to whom Lee was supposed to report, had already been sickened by the climate and the "exertions" involved in trying to find a site for the fort, and was soon to drop out of the picture altogether. Lee seems to have plunged in at once and taken over from his ailing commanding officer, and was soon building embankments to keep back the tide, and a canal to drain the area. In effect, his first task was to create enough dry land for a construction site in what amounted to a tidal swamp. Since this was his first job as an officer in the Corps of Engineers, he labored at it as hard as he could, even digging himself, day after day, in water up to his armpits.²⁷

Work on the island ceased for all practical purposes with the approach of summer, since even a hardened labor force of hired whites and leased or rented black slaves was not expected to excavate there during the summer months, when the combination of heat and mosquitoes made it almost uninhabitable. When Lee returned to Cockspur Island to resume work, he was dismayed to find that storms had washed away much of the work that he had done in the previous season. Major Babcock did not reappear, so Lee and the few laborers who had remained on the island set out to redo it all from scratch, which was not a cheerful prospect. In January, word finally arrived from the War Department that the missing Babcock would be replaced by Lieutenant J. K. F. Mansfield. No sooner had Mansfield arrived than he decided that Cockspur Island would never bear the weight of the fort the

²⁶ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 73; Mason would go on to become chief justice of the Iowa Supreme Court.

²⁷ Emory, *Robert E. Lee*, 90-91.

Corps of Engineers wanted to situate there, which was estimated at 25 million tons. They sent a more senior officer, Captain Delafield, to Cockspur Island to survey the site. He and Mansfield then set about redrafting the plans for the fort, with Lee's help as draftsman.²⁸

This sorry tale of delay and wasted effort was in many ways a good lesson in Army life for Lee. First of all, it prepared him for the ponderous slowness of the Corps of Engineers in making any decision, however minor, and for the strain on its officers of carrying out enormous building projects in inhospitable places with insufficient funds, and with promotion that came, when it came at all, at a snail's pace. Second, it taught him the value of getting things right *before* you started, rather than the reverse. Third, it apparently suggested to him that when you are placed in a hopeless position, the best thing is to get out of it as quickly as you can, a good lesson indeed.²⁹

In May, 1831, Lee managed to use whatever connections he had in Washington to get himself posted to Old Point Comfort, Virginia, where Fort Monroe was under construction and almost complete.³⁰ There, he managed to win the heart of Mary Anna Custis, whom he married the same year. Mary decided to share her husband's modest quarters at Fort Monroe, where they would live on Lee's pay. From 1831 to 1846, when the Mexican-American War began, Robert E. Lee was an engineer, working in places as far apart as Virginia, St. Louis, Missouri, and New York City, undertaking enormous responsibilities despite his low rank, obliged to account meticulously for every penny he spent, and reporting back to a bureaucracy in Washington that was as firmly bound in congressional penny-pinching as it was slow-moving. As for almost every officer in the Engineer Corps, water was his chief opponent. After completing Fort Monroe, he laboured to complete another fortress in New York Harbor; he succeeded in diverting the current of the mighty Mississippi River, removing whole islands and rapids and turning the city of St. Louis into a thriving port, to the gratitude of the city fathers. For all Lee's study at West Point of Napoleon's tactics, he was to all intents and purposes a successful civil engineer in uniform. If there was one thing the experience taught Lee it was a determined, patient, almost serene state of mind in facing impossible odds—an attitude that never failed to amaze and impress his subordinates. For the next three years, Lee was occupied by the construction of Fort Calhoun (renamed Fort Wool when the Civil War broke out) on an island in Hampton Roads. Lee did his work well,

²⁸ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 86-87.

²⁹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 89-90.

³⁰ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 89-90; Some measure of Lee's strategic sense can be gleaned from the fact that Lieutenant Mansfield, who had graduated from West Point, like Lee, would remain on Cockspur Island for the next fifteen years building what became Fort Pulaski, which was not completed until 1847.

constructing a fort that would deflect artillery shots and allowed a small number of men to hold back attacks against a much larger body of infantry, among other things. However, that the eventual enemy would consist of Americans attacking other Americans, rather than the British approaching by sea, had not as yet occurred to anybody, of course. Although they were situated in Virginia, Fort Monroe and Fort Wool remained in Union hands throughout the Civil War, with Fort Monroe serving as a prison for President Jefferson Davis after the Confederacy was defeated.³¹

While Lee was at Fort Monroe, there was a slave rebellion led by Nat Turner, a rare black slave who was taught how to read and write, in Southampton County, Virginia. Like many southerners, Lee disliked slavery not so much for its consequences for the slaves as for its effect on whites. His belief that the end of slavery was a matter for God to bring about in his own good time, rather than something for politicians or white slave owners to deal with, was a little more pessimistic than the more popular and prevailing idea that the problem of slavery might be solved by compensating their owners and deporting the blacks en masse. Even those Americans who were opposed to slavery were not necessarily in favor of free blacks participating in the political process or living as equals with other Americans.³²

Lee continued to work on the area where Fort Wool would eventually be constructed. The work gave Lee responsibilities but did not excite him, and he may already have begun to suffer the doubts about the wisdom of having chosen a military career that were to plague him before the Mexican-American War gave him a chance to experience combat and command, while speeding up his promotion, until the secession of Virginia unexpectedly made him a general. Lee's dedication to duty in difficult circumstances was so evident, and so highly appreciated by the chief of engineers, General Gratiot, that in November 1834 he was transferred to Washington as Gratiot's assistant. Lee's duties at the War Department were not onerous and he soon became fond of Gratiot, the chief of engineers and a Louisiana-born hero of the War of 1812. Despite his admiration for him, Lee chafed mildly at the dull routine of office work, and struggled with doubts about his self-worth and his future in the Engineer Corps, since there was hardly any prospect of promotion and the pay and allowances of a second lieutenant were ridiculously low. He seriously considered resigning from the army and complained, even after being promoted to first lieutenant, a modest step up for a man who had been an officer in the army for nearly seven years. Another urgent

³¹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 103-108.

³² Emory, *Robert E. Lee*, 112.

task required Lee's attention around this time. Thanks to his engineering skills, he was requested to "tame the Mississippi River," a job for which he was the best man available, and he knew it.³³

The Corps of Engineers had been working uninterruptedly for the past 200 years to impose some kind of order on the river, with limited success and not always happy consequences for what we now call the environment. At best, the battle between the Corps of Engineers and the Mississippi River can be said to have resulted in a draw. Ease of navigation has certainly been achieved; levees have been raised, bridges, dams and locks have been built across it—but the river's ability to counterattack with destruction on a vast scale remained unimpeded. The immediate problem facing Lee was the fact that the Mississippi was cutting a new channel for itself that threatened to "destroy the river commerce" of St. Louis, Missouri. The risk that St. Louis might be cut off from the trade and commerce that had made it prosperous since 1764 was unacceptable. It was the key "transportation hub" of the west and the starting point of the California and Oregon trails—at any one time as many as 150 steamboats were moored along its levee on the Mississippi. Lee's responsibilities included not only saving the port and waterfront of St. Louis, but removing the many snags formed by trees and branches carried downstream by the river's current.³⁴

His solutions to the problems that were rapidly transforming St. Louis into a landlocked city were brilliantly conceived, hugely ambitious in scale, and triumphantly successful. Not only the immensity of the task, but the immense consequences of Lee's success, which made possible the commercial development of whole new areas of the country and the creation of a long list of new cities. Lee altered the course of American history by his vision and by his single-minded determination to bring it about, making possible the building of great cities where there had once been, at best, a few log cabins or an abandoned Indian encampment. Finally, in July, Lee was at last promoted to the rank of captain, ten years after graduating from West Point—a long wait even by the standards of the day, especially considering his responsibilities, although it is clear that his success regarding the Mississippi River played a major role in his promotion.³⁵

Around 1840, Lee moved on to work in New York City. Lee was determined to have his family around him, though he could hardly have imagined it would take up nearly five

³³ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 110-120.

³⁴ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 137-145.

³⁵ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 148.

years of his life. They settled into life in Brooklyn, which was then a place of rolling fields and farms, and Lee got on with the task of bringing New York City's defences up-to-date. He would remain in New York City until 1846, doing various work for the Corps of Engineers and the government, until he would, at last, on August 19, 1846, receive orders to proceed at once to San Antonio de Bexar in Texas, and report to Brigadier General John E. Wool, whose name would eventually be given to Fort Calhoun, the man-made island that Lee had spent so much time and effort building in Hampton Roads.

2 THE RISE OF GENERAL LEE

2.1 The Mexican-American War

War between Mexico and the United States had been simmering since the 1820s, partly as a result of political chaos in Mexico, partly as a consequence of the expanding American settlement in Texas, and partly because the largely unpopulated Mexican territory in North America, stretching from the Louisiana Purchase to California, and it was an open invitation to a rapidly growing and increasingly self-confident America. Americans looked westward and saw a vast and largely unmapped paradise, although the phrase “manifest destiny” was not yet then in common usage.³⁶

Lee was approaching forty, still a captain, and after twenty-one years of service in the U.S. Army he had yet to hear a shot fired in anger. He was gratified to be within reach of real service at last. At the time, San Antonio was a quaint little town with a population of around 2,000, most of them Mexican, engulfed by the 3,400 American soldiers who were now encamped there. Lee admired the landscape, but found the Mexicans “an amiable but weak people, primitive in their habits and tastes.” The sheer size of Mexico, coupled with the small number of American troops available, made a quick war unlikely. The distances involved alone were daunting. The Mexicans might have been expected to lose heart at the fact that a mere handful of American troops had seized and annexed both New Mexico and California without serious difficulty, but that would have underrated the strength of Mexican outrage about the loss of Texas, and the remarkable determination of Santa Anna, who understood the value in war of trading space for time. The farther American forces marched into the barren vastness of Mexico, the more thinly stretched and vulnerable their supply lines would inevitably become, hampered as they already were by primitive or non-existent roads, and the more possible it might be to deal them a resounding defeat before they reached Mexico City.³⁷

General Taylor had at most 15,000 men at his command, with only a small number of well-trained officers and specialists like Lee. Lee’s immediate task was to prepare a road so that General Wool could cross the Rio Grande and advance on the “important trading center” of Chihuahua. Lee rode out of San Antonio with Wool’s column on September 28, 1846, with this being his first opportunity for active service. General Wool’s troops reached the

³⁶ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 178.

³⁷ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 183.

Rio Grande in eleven days, an advance of about eleven miles a day, which was described at the time as “rapid,” though Lee would not consider it to be so fifteen years later, during the Civil War. It was made possible only by the engineers’ effort to level a road of sorts for the artillery and to bridge whatever small streams were in the column’s path. This is where Lee also got his first practical lesson in the difference between what appears on a map and what the country ahead actually looks like, as well as a lesson in the importance of getting an army’s order of march right for whatever problems lay ahead.³⁸

Eventually, Wool’s forces were ordered to proceed around Saltillo to Buena Vista, where they supported the troops General Taylor had gathered. Lee busied himself fortifying the new camp in addition to his duties as acting inspector general, but he was ordered on before the climactic battle in northern Mexico on February 23, 1847, when Santa Anna finally advanced with 14,000 men to attack Zachary Taylor’s army of 5,000 men at Buena Vista. The Mexicans were crushingly defeated in a battle that assured Taylor of a hero’s welcome when he returned home, and nomination as the Whig candidate for the presidency in the 1848 election. Still, his victory did not open up the way to Mexico City from the north.³⁹

Not much later, the American fleet, waiting in shelter of Lobos Islands, brought in reinforcements and supplies, and with around 12,000 men onshore, General Scott was able to seal Vera Cruz off from the landward side, while the navy blockaded it from the sea. The fortifications of Vera Cruz were considered to be among the strongest, if not the strongest, in North America. The Mexicans had lavished a good deal of money and energy on strengthening the city’s defences. General Scott only saw two choices: either storming the city and then pushing on as fast as possible into the interior before the yellow fever season set in, or besieging the city. He favoured the regular siege approaches, since he feared that storming the city could cost him as many as 2,000 or 3,000 men, leaving him with not enough troops to march inland and take Mexico City. After gathering the opinions of all his officers, Lee included, they decided for a siege. They managed to summon the Mexican commander, who arrived under a flag of truce, only to politely decline surrendering the city. The American artillery then opened fire. General Scott was aware that with the artillery at his disposal he had no chance of making a substantial breach in the walls, and thus he requested six heavy guns from the warships. On March 26, General J. J. Landero formally asked for

³⁸ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 186.

³⁹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 205.

terms of surrender. The next day, Vera Cruz was occupied by the U.S. Army. The garrison of over 4,000 men marched out, laid down their arms, and were sent home as prisoners of war on parole. In just eighteen days Mexico's "principal port of foreign commerce" had been taken, along with more than 400 guns, with the loss of only sixty-four American officers and men. General Scott praised Lee for his work not just as an engineer, but as an aide. Even more important, Lee had distinguished himself among his fellow officers by the two qualities that count most in war: courage and professional expertise, and militarily speaking, neither is of much use without the other. However, he himself was saddened rather than pleased by his first experience of warfare. As would so often be the case in the future, he expressed no words of triumph, or satisfaction in victory.⁴⁰

It was 280 miles from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. General Scott had two routes before him: one to the south, skirting the barrier of the Sierra Madre range about 90 miles from Vera Cruz; the other to the north, slightly longer and steeper, which ran through a mountain pass at Cruz Blanca. The two roads met at the town of Puebla, 100 miles from Mexico City. Of these, the better road was the so-called National Highway, which eventually descended into the great Valley of Mexico. However, this road crossed a number of rivers, ravines and narrow passes, all perfect places for an ambush, particularly since Scott's army would be strung out along many miles, with the three divisions too far apart to support one another in case of trouble. Despite the risk, Scott decided to take it. He was in a race against time, since he had been delayed in Vera Cruz longer than he wished. His supply line was stretched so far that even a small number of enemy troops or guerrillas could cut it at any moment, at the same time cutting off his line of retreat. And thus, the march toward Mexico City began.⁴¹

Santa Anna, having returned to Mexico City after his defeat at Buena Vista, tried to reassert his political control and recruit a new army. Had Santa Anna truly been the Napoleon of the West, he would have sent out his cavalry and discovered that the American army was strung out along the National Highway in disarray. Instead, he took up a defensive position ahead of them, thus providing Scott with the opportunity to concentrate when he ran into Santa Anna's position. Of course, Santa Anna's troops were raw and poorly trained, and he may have been more confident of them in a defensive position on high ground than in a more

⁴⁰ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 210-220.

⁴¹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 221-222.

ambitious fast-moving flank attack, but there is no denying he threw away a chance, perhaps the last chance, of a decisive Mexican victory.⁴²

After Scott, accompanied by Lee, rode a few miles beyond the bridge over Río del Plan, he found the first two divisions of the American army roughly encamped, and learned that Santa Anna and his army were entrenched only a few miles away to the west on higher ground that was hard to interpret from the plain below. The few detailed maps of Mexico were sketchy and unreliable, so no one had a clear idea of what lay ahead. Even the exact route of the National Highway was unknown. Clearly, what was needed was a thorough reconnaissance, and Scott chose Lee to lead it. The next day, the morning of April 15, Lee went forward and observed at once that whatever his other defects as a general, Santa Anna had a good eye for a defensive position. Santa Anna had effectively blocked the highway at a point about a mile and a half from the American camp. It was clear that there was no easy way to outflank Santa Anna's right along the river, but there was a chance to outflank him on his left by going around a small cluster of hills. Lee understood at once the strength of Santa Anna's position and the danger of attacking it frontally, but thought he saw a better way than trying to advance north around the hills in full view of the enemy.⁴³

Lee climbed partway up one of the steep ravines on the Mexican left, where the brush was so thick that Santa Anna believed "not even a jackrabbit could penetrate its fastness." Lee decided to go farther forward, convinced that it would lead to the Jalapa road and the lower slopes of the two hills that constituted the strong point of the Mexican line. Although there were Mexican troops on higher ground to either side of him, he worked his way slowly through the thickets unseen until he suddenly reached a small clearing with a spring from which led a well-trampled path. He heard voices speaking Spanish approaching and hid behind a large log. He could not move, or even breathe, for fear of revealing his presence. Lee realized this was the water supply for the left wing of the army, and concluded he was now in fact far *behind* the enemy's left wing and within reach of the road to Jalapa.⁴⁴

When night came, Lee made his way back in the dark with great difficulty. This single act of scouting turned out to be vital in the American victory over Santa Anna's army, as it allowed a small group of soldiers to get behind the Mexican lines and not only surprise them, but also cut off their retreat, while a larger part of the army attacked the Mexicans from

⁴² Russell F. Weigley, "Lee, Robert E.," *American National Biography*, February 2000, <https://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0400622> (accessed March 21, 2020).

⁴³ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 230.

⁴⁴ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 234.

around the hills. After their victory, Lee was promoted to the rank of brevet major, and was praised not only by General Scott, but also by General Twiggs, who dedicated a whole paragraph in his report to Lee's remarkable and invaluable services, as well as his "gallantry and good conduct on both days."⁴⁵ Lee's reputation as a hero spread throughout the army, and rumors of it soon reached home. He had demonstrated his skill at reconnaissance; his courage, without which no other military virtue has meaning; and his ability to stay calm when everyone around him panicked. All in all, he was the perfect warrior.⁴⁶

The Mexican-American War dragged on mostly due to the fact that no one in Mexico wanted to take the responsibility for negotiating a peace. The war came to a relatively swift conclusion after the American forces attacked and seized Chapultepec, a fortress on a summit overlooking the western wall of Mexico City. The loss of Chapultepec certainly had an effect on the defenders of Mexico City, where organized resistance collapsed soon afterwards. The American troops entered the city and seized the citadel, learning in the process that Santa Anna had fled. For two days the American occupiers battled street criminals whom Santa Anna had released from prison. These shots would be the last fired in action that Lee would hear until 1861. Lee was promoted to brevet colonel for his part in the assault of Chapultepec, the highest rank he would reach until 1861. He learned many valuable things while being under the command of an expert, but unbeknownst to him it would take thirteen years before he could put his newly acquired skills and reputation to the test again on the battlefield.

2.2 The Deep Breath Before the Plunge

A long period of peace awaited Lee, from 1848 to 1860. Lee, being a professional soldier as well as an engineer, was a man best suited to the frequent separations that came with a military career—he was never short of new challenges.

As is usual for soldiers returning from war, the first thing Lee did was unexpectedly return to his home in Arlington. They had been eagerly awaiting him, and he spent quite some time with them, making sure to make up for all the time he spent away, be it fighting or working. Lee and Mary's life revolved around their children, which was rare in their time. Children, however loved they might be, were not the central focus of family life that they

⁴⁵ "Biography: General Robert E. Lee," *American Experience*, February 2010, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/grant-lee/> (accessed March 21, 2020).

⁴⁶ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 258-260.

became in America in the twentieth century. The Lees, to the contrary, seemed to have lived constantly surrounded by their seven children, totally absorbed in their upbringing.

As a father of four daughters, with three sons to educate, Lee worried ceaselessly about money, and was enormously careful and exact about it. He returned to work at the War Department in the summer of 1848, mainly completing drawing maps that he had begun in Mexico—it was slow, painstaking work. Aside from working at the War Department, he was regularly sent to oversee constructions of various forts, due to the fact that The Corps of Engineers as well as the Congress were still acting on the assumption that Great Britain would continue to be the enemy to worry about. Whatever Lee thought of that, he was once again involved in building stone-and-mortar fortresses. This expertise, together with the gift he had shown for rapidly building “earthworks,” well-designed trench systems and carefully sited, dug-in artillery batteries, would turn out to be a substantial element of his military genius—he would prove to be one of the great masters of earthworks in the history of warfare. For now, the Corps of Engineers remained wedded to the construction of fortresses, so Lee stuck to that.⁴⁷

His children settled into their new schools with few crises as well, the only one missing was Custis, the oldest son, who had followed his father’s footsteps to become a cadet at West Point, and whose academic career there Lee followed earnestly. Lee had in fact gone to a good deal of trouble to secure Custis an appointment at the Military Academy, demonstrating that he was willing to lobby on behalf of his children, though he would not do so for himself. Here, at last, was an area in which his advice went beyond the moral to the practical.⁴⁸

In the spring of 1852, Lee received a letter from Brigadier General Totten assigning him to take command as superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy. The super-intendency of the academy was a prestigious post, and very much in the public eye; it carried with it a “handsome house,” a full staff, and direct access to the War Department, and it would also bring Lee’s whole family together in one place, since Custis was still a cadet. Given the care with which Lee oversaw his children’s education, it is surprising he was not pleased. This might have been due to Lee’s modesty. He constantly responded to any form of promotion over the years by protesting that he wished an “abler man” had been chosen for it. At first, Lee refused, but eventually agreed, and Totten knew he had picked the best man for the job. Lee was going from the routine of overseeing a construction project, however ambitious, to

⁴⁷ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 284.

⁴⁸ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 289.

what we would now call a high-profile role, in command of several hundred cadets and a large army establishment, for West Point then as now was a hallowed institution.⁴⁹

It was a tough job for Lee, and the amount of paperwork connected with it only attested to that. Lee enjoyed it, but at the same time struggled with the cadets, since as a perfectionist, he set high standards for all of them, just as he was used to do with his own children, which proved problematic. For three years, Lee was preoccupied with constant moral and academic trials of his cadets.

During Lee's years at West Point, the subject of slavery was already becoming the flash point of American politics. As if it were a portent, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the second best-selling book of the nineteenth century in the United States (after the Bible), was published in 1852, further inflaming passions on both sides of the divide. Tensions rose rapidly during the presidency of Franklin Pierce, a northerner who sympathized with the southern states. His calm and modest rhetoric compared with most of the flood of angry debate and raging editorials that accompanied the lengthy and stormy passage of the legislation through both houses of Congress, among other things, fatally eroded his reputation. The policies that he followed as president might as well have been designed for the specific purpose of dividing the United States into two warring camps. During this time, Lee's interest in slavery was lukewarm at best, and his personal involvement with the day-to-day realities of slave ownership on any substantial scale had not yet begun. In any case, Lee's tenure at West Point was one of the most peaceful and satisfying periods of his life.⁵⁰

However, steps were already being taken in Washington that would radically change the direction of Lee's career, and send his family back to Arlington. Lee was opposed to secession, dismissing it as "silly" and the equivalent of revolution. He was a man who would certainly have been open to compromise if it would keep the Union together. He was no enthusiast for extending slavery in the territories, or for resuming the slave trade, which he abhorred. Lee saw slavery as a spiritual issue, not a political one. He himself was the owner of more than a few slaves, whom he had determined should be liberated on his death, and most of his contact with slaves had been with familiar and sometimes beloved house servants. He had never actually purchased a slave, he had either inherited his slaves or received them as a gift from Mr. Custis. Lee strongly believed slavery to be a moral and

⁴⁹ "Lee as Superintendent of West Point," *History Net*, August 2013, <https://www.historynet.com/robert-e-lee> (accessed March 19, 2020).

⁵⁰ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 310-314.

religious issue, not one that could be solved by politics. Nevertheless, Lee paid close attention to events happening in Washington; it is hard to imagine how he could do otherwise, since the nation seemed about to tear itself in two.⁵¹

2.3 The Beginnings of the Civil War

It is important to realize that Lee moved toward secession reluctantly, with infinite doubt and sadness, but with a firm line in mind that he would not or could not cross. He was not in sympathy with the cheering crowds calling for secession when it became clear that Lincoln had won the presidency on November 6, 1860; nor was he eager to give up the rank in the U.S. Army that had taken him so long to achieve. Then too, he was a Virginian, born in a manor house which George Washington had often visited. The Federal government was not a faraway abstraction for Lee; it was only a short ride from his house to the War Department. It would not be easy for Lee to think of that government as the enemy.

Lee rejected for himself any automatic support of “southern nationalism,” describing the “Cotton States” in terms that are, for him, very strong indeed, and objecting to their attempts to coerce the “Border States” in the same terms as he objected to northerners’ attempts to coerce Virginia. That he was against renewing the slave trade (across the Atlantic from Africa, not internal slave trading in the United States) is hardly surprising. Ultimately, Lee was opposed to *any* attempt to dictate radical alterations to the status quo in the South. His position was that of a landed Virginian social conservative, similar to most of his family. However, he was no longer optimistic that the Union would not be torn apart, and he had some presentiment of what the future was likely to bring.⁵²

When he was back at Fort Mason, in direct command of the Second Cavalry, Lee found his officers and troopers bewildered by events. On December 20 South Carolina seceded from the United States, and within a few days Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and Georgia followed in seceding from the Union. Many of Lee’s men were divided in their loyalty, as he himself increasingly was, and supplies to their fort were beginning to be delayed, as were any sensible orders. Between December 14, 1860, and January 23, 1861, however much Lee desired to see the Union preserved intact, he had made up his mind about what it would take to make that possible: the Federal government must not tamper with the institution of slavery or give in to the demands of abolitionists in the North or attempt to use force against the

⁵¹ Richard G. Weingardt, “Robert E. Lee: Larger-than-Life Icon,” *ASCE Library*, 14 June 2013, <https://ascelibrary.org/doi/10.1061/%28ASCE%29LM.1943-5630.0000236> (accessed March 20, 2020).

⁵² Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 372.

southern states. Much as he wished to preserve “a government formed by the patriots of the Revolution,” if the United States used armed force against Virginia, he would join in its defense, whatever the cost or the personal anguish.⁵³

Events started to move quickly. On January 26 Louisiana seceded, and on February 1 Texas followed, turning the U.S. Army forces in the state into the enemy overnight in the view of many secessionists. Lee received an urgent message for him to return to Washington, D.C., immediately and “report in person to the general-in-chief by April 1st.” Upon arriving at a hotel in San Antonio, Lee was surrounded by armed men in civilian clothes. He learned that General Twiggs, who had replaced Lee as commander of the Department of Texas, surrendered his command and that all Federal troops were now “prisoners of war.” Lee was shocked and outraged at the possibility that he might be treated as a prisoner of war. He prudently made his way to headquarters, where he found that secessionists were already in charge, explaining that his allegiance was to Virginia and the Union, in that order, and that he was returning home. Lee very often said, “If Virginia stands by the Union, so will I. But if she secedes, then I will follow my native state with my sword, and if need be with my life.”⁵⁴

As state after state seceded, Lee patiently waited and did nothing, as he said he would, until Virginia decided its own fate—apart from having a “long interview” with General in Chief Winfield Scott, while also being promoted to the rank of full colonel on March 16. Lee suspected that Scott had already revealed to the president that he considered Colonel Lee the best-qualified man in the U.S. Army to command an army in the field in case of war. Coincidentally, Lee had also received a courteous letter from the Confederate secretary of war, L. P. Walker, offering him a commission as a brigadier general in the Confederate Army, but Lee held onto his beliefs and did nothing, waiting for Virginia to decide for him.⁵⁵

Lee was a patient man. It was another of those qualities that would make him a great general. His self-control was unshakable and inspired confidence even in men who might otherwise have lost heart. He had only to appear at any critical point on the battlefield to infuse men with his own courage. It was not a pose, Lee’s calmness, his “marble image,” and his refusal to reveal his emotions were all reflections of the man himself. Once it became clear to Lee that Virginia decided to secede, he turned down an offer from president Lincoln

⁵³ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 378.

⁵⁴ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 380.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Brown Pryor, “Robert E. Lee’s ‘Severest Struggle’,” *American Heritage*, December 2008, <https://www.americanheritage.com/robert-e-lees-severest-struggle> (accessed March 21, 2020).

to command the Union army that was slowly being assembled, and also resigned his commission in the U.S. Army. He would shortly become a major military and political asset of the Confederacy, when he would be offered the command of Virginia's military and naval forces by the governor of Virginia, John Letcher, carrying with it the rank of major general, which Lee immediately accepted.

2.3.1 Major General Lee

Lee immediately set about transforming chaos into the makings of an effective military machine, quickly putting together a personal staff and replacing inept or elderly senior militia officers with experienced officers. He drew up plans to gather arms from wherever he could, and to designate railway junctions throughout the state where militia companies could be mustered and armed under the command of an experienced officer. Lee amazed everyone by his energy and professional skill, putting together in a matter of weeks an army of 40,000 troops and 115 field artillery pieces, as well as a group of officers many of whom would be among the South's leading generals—including Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, John Bell Hood, and John B. Magruder.⁵⁶

Lee was always aware that only a few miles north, in the Union, his friend and mentor General in Chief Winfield Scott was doing the same thing on a much larger scale, and with much greater resources to command. Despite his impeccable courtesy, Lee did not accomplish all this without ruffling some feathers in the process, mostly because he did not appear to many people sufficiently enthusiastic about secession, or about the ability of the South to win the war. Part of this was the realism of a professional military man, not given to the easy optimism of amateur soldiers; part of it was the fact that whoever won the war, the world he knew and loved would be destroyed.⁵⁷

Lee knew the war would not soon be over. He also struggled with shortages of everything his army would need. Muskets were in such short supply that many volunteers were issued with smooth-bored flintlocks, like those of the Revolutionary War, rather than the more modern percussion weapons. Soldiers who received the older weapons felt humiliated and enraged, as was to be expected. Almost everything else was also in short supply, including uniforms, shoes, cavalry sabers and pistols, as well as tents, blankets, horses, mules and wagons—the last three to remain critical problems throughout the war.

⁵⁶ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 405.

⁵⁷ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 406.

2.3.2 The Mounting Pressure

After a number of small skirmishes with the Union, the Confederacy managed to establish footholds at the borders with the northern states, though the pressure against the southern states was increasing. On March 24th, 1862, General Magruder reported the startling news that 35,000 Union troops had been landed from steamers at Old Point, sheltered by Fort Monroe, raising the possibility of a Federal advance up the peninsula on Richmond. Lee had nerves of steel: momentous events and bad news at short intervals never shook him, he always remained calm and searched for a solution. Lee cannily responded by moving small units of troops toward the peninsula and sought everywhere for weapons with which to arm them. Everywhere he looked, from the Mississippi to the peninsula, he was besieged by pleas from governors and from generals for troops, weapons, and ammunition, which he dealt with in his usual polite and efficient way.⁵⁸

In the meantime, blow after blow struck the Confederacy. Johnston, anticipating a crushing attack by McClellan in northern Virginia, resisted sending reinforcements to support Magruder in the peninsula, while Jackson appealed for reinforcements in the Shenandoah Valley. The worst news came from southwest Tennessee, regarding the two-day battle of Shiloh on April 6 and 7, the bloodiest battle in the history of American warfare to that date, in which General Ulysses S. Grant won a precarious victory. By April 9 it became clear that the Army of the Potomac, instead of advancing on Fredericksburg, was landing on the peninsula in full force, along with General McClellan. Although McClellan had succeeded in surprising the Confederates, he remained troubled. Nevertheless, he made elaborate plans for laying siege to Yorktown, and began the long, expensive task of bringing up his siege train, which included thirteen-inch mortars each weighing over eight tons.⁵⁹

Thanks to Lee's skills and by carefully sifting every unit of the Confederate Army, he had been able to increase the number of Magruder's troops to just over 30,000 by April 11. That was almost three times his strength when McClellan's force had landed, though still less than a third of what McClellan thought was facing him at Yorktown. Lee also had to be careful in transferring General Johnston's four divisions of approximately 28,000 men from Fredericksburg down to the peninsula. He knew that a simultaneous Union attack on Magruder's line on the peninsula and toward Fredericksburg in northern Virginia could overwhelm the Confederate forces defending Richmond, though Lee never expected that

⁵⁸ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 521.

⁵⁹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 525.

McClellan would give him nearly a month's time to perfect Richmond's defences. Meanwhile, McClellan continued to believe that Johnston's army, which he estimated at over 120,000 men when it was in fact less than half of that, was still holding the line in northern Virginia. Considering the stakes, Lee played a poor hand with a combination of brilliance and coolness that has seldom been equalled in warfare.⁶⁰

McClellan was advancing "cautiously," as usual, the sheer size of his army was enough to slow down his advance along the narrow, boggy roads. By May 24 he had 105,000 men along the Chickahominy, facing Johnston's army of 60,000. He still believed that Johnston had at least 200,000 men, and although he was anticipating "one of the great historical battles of the world," he was in no hurry to begin the battle. It never occurred to him that Johnston might beat him to the punch. Just as he had at Yorktown, McClellan toyed with the idea of a siege, the kind of warfare he understood best. In his mind, McDowell with his 40,000 men would march from Fredericksburg southeast to Mechanicsville to support him. With that in mind, he began to move a portion of his army across the Chickahominy, while keeping the bulk of it to the north of that river in order to protect his line of communication and the vital railway line to his base at West Point. In doing so, he made the cardinal error of splitting his forces in two. There was no way one half could support the other if it came to a battle. Johnston understood the situation clearly and was offered the opportunity to attack just over a third of McClellan's army with his full strength. Sadly, due to General Johnston being reluctant to share his intentions to Lee, and Major General Longstreet—not yet Lee's trusty "Old War Horse"—had taken the wrong road with his division and was unable to support Johnston on the battlefield, thus the Confederacy had forfeited their superiority in numbers.⁶¹

Even though McClellan would claim that Fair Oaks had been "a glorious victory," it was nothing short of a draw, and a fairly bloody one at that: approximately 5,000 Union casualties to 6,000 Confederate. The fighting had been desperate, and on both sides the tactical handling of troops had been poor. Lee realized that the opportunity of delivering a crushing blow to the Union left wing had been lost. Lee continued to improve the defences and earthworks around Richmond, so that he could defend the city with as few men as possible, and fortunately for him, McClellan gave him enough breathing space in which to perfect his strategy. Lee soon came up with a bold new strategy, which, if we were to look at it now, could have resulted in a decisive Confederate victory in 1862, but even President

⁶⁰ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 526-527.

⁶¹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 548-552.

Davis could not persuade the governors of Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina to strip their own defences for the benefit of such a risky operation. Lee expected his plan to be rejected, and thus accepted the decision calmly and instead turned his attention to a new form of attack—he decided to bring a bombardment to McClellan. Lee’s principal concern in the first two weeks of June 1862 was to develop a strategy that would drive McClellan back from Richmond, and if possible, expel him from the peninsula altogether. Even before Lee assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia, he recognized that the key to defeating McClellan on the peninsula was a swift, secret transfer of Jackson’s forces in the Shenandoah Valley for just long enough for the combined troops to strike a crushing blow at McClellan’s right.⁶²

This is exactly what they had planned for the afternoon on June 26. The “Seven Days” battle on the peninsula was a painful learning experience. Lee had never commanded an army of this size before, and Jackson had never served as a critical part of a much larger army. What matters more is that when the first day of battle began, General McClellan was within seven miles of Richmond, waiting for the roads to dry to bring up his siege train and start the bombardment of the city, and a week later he and his army had been driven into a small “pocket” on the James River under the protection of Union gunboats, twenty-five miles away from Richmond, which would not be threatened closely again for two more years. That, by any standards, was a victory—Lee’s victory.

2.3.3 Battle of Gettysburg

After Lee’s Maryland campaign of 1862, during which the battles of Manassas, Sharpsburg and Fredericksburg—among others—have taken place, comes the Battle of Gettysburg, arguably one of the most important battles fought during the Civil War. Two months before Gettysburg, Lee had emerged victorious at Chancellorsville,⁶³ and began to move north.⁶⁴

Throughout June 29 and June 30, the armies of the Confederacy and the Union moved toward each other—a shorter march for the former, though Lee’s army was spread out and could not even remotely have been described as “concentrated.” The Battle of Gettysburg was unavoidable, since the Army of Northern Virginia had to keep moving to find food and forage. Lee could not retreat and risk having to abandon his wagon trains containing

⁶² Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 578-580.

⁶³ Robert K. Krick, “Lee’s Greatest Victory,” *American Heritage*, March 1990, <https://www.americanheritage.com/lees-greatest-victory#1> (accessed March 17, 2020).

⁶⁴ Stephen W. Sears, “Getting Right with Robert E. Lee,” *American Heritage*, May 1991, <https://www.americanheritage.com/getting-right-robert-e-lee#4> (accessed March 17, 2020).

ammunition, nor could he march back through country his army had already picked clean; he could not look for a better place to fight—he had no option but to fight it out where he was.⁶⁵

The whole army was on the move toward Cashtown on June 30, which was just over six miles from Gettysburg. Lee fretted about his lack of cavalry, mostly because the whereabouts of his officer Stuart were still unknown. The heavy rain that came afterwards did not help with the army's march, although it must have come as a relief to men and horses in the sultry heat. For the moment, Lee had no plan except to see what General Meade, who commanded the Army of the Potomac, the principal Union army, was after. It is important to note that mid-nineteenth century maps were neither topographically accurate nor easily available, thus Lee had very little idea of what the country ahead of him actually looked like; even Meade, a Pennsylvanian with Pennsylvanian regiments in his army, had almost no idea of what the country was like around the little town. The average citizen today with a cell phone and a GPS device would be better informed than was either commanding general.⁶⁶

The first day of the Battle of Gettysburg came about—July 1 broke as a clear, hot day with a gentle breeze. There were no fewer than five roads leading into the market town that was Gettysburg, from the north and the west, and all of them were packed with Confederate troops from early morning on. Lee was still disturbed by the absence of Stuart, noting to his officers that he “should have heard from him by now.” It is hard to believe that such a phenomenal and perceptive commander such as Lee could not anticipate the major battle that was fast approaching,⁶⁷ though it is important to note that the Union was in a much better position to survey the surroundings of Gettysburg than the Confederate army. The lack of reports from his cavalry scouts, as well as from Stuart, only made the situation worse for Lee, and so he had to rely mostly on his gut than any solid information.⁶⁸

Though Lee had not wanted this fight, not yet and not here, the morning had gone well for the Confederates. Before noon, General Reynolds, one of the best Union generals, was dead, and by the early afternoon Federal troops were being pushed back into the streets of Gettysburg. Confederate units had been fed into the battle piecemeal as they arrived on the

⁶⁵ Ian V. Hogg, *Robert E. Lee* (New York: Longmeadow Press, 1992), 46-47.

⁶⁶ Hogg, *Robert E. Lee*, 48.

⁶⁷ Tony Horwitz, “Looking at the Battle of Gettysburg Through Robert E. Lee’s Eyes,” *Smithsonian*, December 2012, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/looking-at-the-battle-of-gettysburg-through-robert-e-lees-eyes-136851113/> (accessed March 19, 2020).

⁶⁸ “Did Robert E. Lee Doom Himself at Gettysburg?” *History Net*, August 2013, <https://www.historynet.com/robert-e-lee> (accessed March 19, 2020).

scene—something which Lee had wanted to avoid—and had taken heavy casualties without any hope of winning a decisive victory, since three-quarters of the Army of the Potomac were still on the march toward Gettysburg and Lee had less than one-third of his own army present. Also, without Stuart’s cavalry, Lee had no idea how many Federal corps were marching toward the town. While the Confederates had achieved a small victory in pushing back the Union troops, it was not the kind of victory that Lee was seeking. Federal troops, however disorganized, now held the high ground. Since General Meade had not yet arrived on the battlefield, he ordered Major General Winfield Scott Hancock to take command and decide if the army’s position on the high ground south of Gettysburg could be held. Hancock not only decided that it could be, but was just the man to restore discipline and prepare the ground for the assaults he knew were coming.⁶⁹

Lee realized he had pushed the enemy back from a weak and scattered position into a strong and concentrated one. His gaze took in the landscape before him and he immediately realized that Culp’s Hill was the key to their predicament and taking it as soon as possible would clearly be advantageous. The first moment of hesitation that would have a fatal effect on the Confederates came when Lee ordered Ewell to take Culp’s Hill before the day was out, though with his natural politeness and famous phrase “if practicable.” Ewell, fussing about the number of Union prisoners he had on his hands, decided he could do nothing until the arrival of Major General Edward Johnson’s division on the battlefield, and in the meantime deemed it “unwise to continue the pursuit.” Lee expected his orders to be carried out once he indicated what he wanted done, something that Stonewall Jackson understood very well. However, the same cannot be said about Ewell. Given the fatal phrase “if practicable” Ewell immediately decided that it was not, and if ever there was a moment when the gentlemanly instincts of men were bound to produce a disaster, this was it.⁷⁰

In the afternoon, General Longstreet had finally arrived, though his corps were still badly strung out all the way back to Chambersburg, and carefully surveyed the field. To him, the position the Federals were taking seemed very formidable. The conversation that followed between Lee and Longstreet has been at the centre of a controversy that still sputters on 150 years later and marks the starting point for the whole “Lost Cause” school of southern history, where the blame for losing the battle, and in a larger sense for the defeat of the Confederacy, is assigned primarily to General Longstreet, who is said to have been

⁶⁹ Hogg, *Robert E. Lee*, 49.

⁷⁰ Hogg, *Robert E. Lee*, 50.

single-handedly responsible for depriving Lee of a decisive victory. The difficulty with this scenario is that we only have Longstreet's version of what was said, and over time he added a few embellishments to his story. Longstreet always remained extremely respectful of Lee, even though they disagreed, and Lee also retained his respect for Longstreet until the very end of the war, and for some years after its end, though perhaps mistakenly.⁷¹

It must be remembered that Longstreet had argued against the invasion of the North in the first place, and after he lost that argument, he thought he had obtained Lee's promise to fight a *defensive* battle on a ground of their choosing, but that was not the case. Even though nowadays it is usually assumed that Longstreet was right and Lee was wrong, the reality is a good deal more complex. Lee still had no cavalry, so he could not be sure how many corps Meade was bringing up or when the bulk of the Army of the Potomac would arrive. There was also the problem of finding food and forage for the army, and if he were to set out on a flanking march, men and animals might starve. Rightly or wrongly, Lee decided to concentrate his army at Gettysburg, and considered that his best hope was attacking as fast as possible before Meade's whole army was ready to fight back.⁷²

Drafting plans for the next day, July 2, Lee had decided that their only hope was to make Ewell's corps hold a defensive and supportive role on the right, while Longstreet's corps would advance around the left of Gettysburg and flank the Federals. Lee knew Longstreet was a great fighter when he got in position and everything was ready, but he was too slow. This turned out to be prophetic, but it was based on experience.

As the second day came about, Lee's main objective was for Longstreet to carry out a full-scale assault on the Union left, take Round Top and Little Round Top. However, Lee that day was uncharacteristically indecisive and slow, and he also chose a wrong spot with poor view of Longstreet's corps—there is nothing worse than a commanding general with a lack of information. Though why the battle went as poorly as it did might have also been due to a severe lack of discipline and motivation among his officers; Ewell "courteously" rejected his order from yesterday to capture Culp's Hill; Stuart was still missing along with his cavalry and had not reported to Lee for days; A. P. Hill was ill and unable to command his men; and Longstreet did not want to take a major engagement with the enemy on a land of their choosing, when they are in a defensive position with tight communication and supply lines.⁷³

⁷¹ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 949.

⁷² Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 958.

⁷³ Hogg, *Robert E. Lee*, 51.

Lee was about to fight a battle he had not wanted, in a place that offered him very little option but an attack over difficult ground on his far right. Unable to disengage, Lee had no choice but to fight, and worse still could assault the Federals with only less than one-third of his army, under a general who had already expressed strong doubts about Lee's plan. Given all this, he may have preferred to observe the battle from closer to his left—when Longstreet's brigades hit the enemy's right hard and swung across the ridge, Lee would have to make sure that Ewell attacked hard at Culp's Hill in support, and that the ailing A. P. Hill's corps struck at the "saddle" of the ridge, ensuring a three-pronged attack that would drive the Federals off Cemetery Ridge and send them in full retreat down Baltimore Pike.⁷⁴

As the afternoon dragged on, everything was "profoundly still," interrupted only by occasional skirmishes. It began precisely at 4:45 p.m., when Longstreet's artillery was finally able to open fire. The contrast between the long silence and the sudden noise of the cannonade impressed everybody. Ewell's artillery soon joined in, and the Union artillery soon replied with "at least equal fury." The attack that Lee had wanted Longstreet to make when talking to him in the morning was, in the afternoon, no longer a practical plan. The Union left was no longer in the centre, or "saddle," of Cemetery Ridge, it was on Little Round Top. At this stage of the attack, Longstreet gets blamed for "silent insolence," which is to say that he was determined to follow Lee's orders scrupulously, even blindly, although he knew they were no longer relevant and did not correspond to the reality on the ground. Longstreet was trapped not only by Lee's orders, but also by the passage of time, partly caused by his own slowness in moving his troops earlier in the day.⁷⁵

In any great battle, there comes a moment when doing one's duty and obeying one's orders to the letter may prove fatal to the cause—and this was that moment for Longstreet. He ordered to continue with the attack as planned, no doubt with a heavy heart because he had never wanted to make this attack in the first place, and he could already see that it was very likely to fail. The result was that the Confederates met with the Union troops head on in a fight over Little Round Top, which Federals firmly held. There was no maneuvering involved, no element of surprise, no flanking movement—just sheer face-to-face carnage at close range against an enemy that held higher ground. As darkness fell, the Confederates had been driven back, and all major objectives on the Union far left were still in enemy hands. Ewell's attack was poorly coordinated, late and failed as well. At the end of the day,

⁷⁴ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 973-974.

⁷⁵ Hogg, *Robert E. Lee*, 52.

Hill's and Longstreet's corps had gained some ground, Ewell had gained none, but nothing of importance was achieved. There was significant lack of impulsion and leadership on the Confederate side on July 2, for which the blame must rest on Lee's shoulders.⁷⁶

At first light on the third day, Lee rode to Longstreet while Ewell's cannons opened fire. He had intended to attack the Union center with the three divisions of Longstreet's corps, but Longstreet advised against it. Seeing the ground with his own eyes, Lee accepted Longstreet's view, with whatever reluctance. One cannot help feeling that Lee's control over his army was not what it should have been on July 3, and that he was allowing the day to slip out of his hands—geographically, Lee was in the worst position for a commander. Lee's officers estimated that, should their last attack be “entirely successful,” it would be at a very bloody cost. The Confederate troops charged with making this attack had not suspected that the heavy weight of history rested on their success. Not many of them may have guessed that a great victory here might, at last, bring about negotiations to end the war. For the Confederacy much—perhaps everything—depended on the outcome of this third day of the battle. In the end, as Lee always believed, it was all in God's hands.⁷⁷

At exactly 1 p.m., as had been prearranged, two shots were fired one right after the other, the signal for the beginning of the Confederate artillery barrage. The federal counterfire was less intense than might have been expected—it seems they tried to preserve ammunition for the Confederate infantry attack to which this was the prelude. Despite the intensity of the Confederate barrage, it failed to break or scatter the defenders. At 2 p.m., the Confederate artillery had wasted over half their ammunition within the past hour, and it was apparent that if an attack was planned, it must happen at once. The attack did happen, though it was merely a last effort of the Confederates to break the near invincible line of defence that the Union army was holding. Lee was exhausted, unwell, heartbroken, and yet he rode back and forth between his men, consoling them, taking on all the blame for the failure—this is the kind of behaviour that was typical of Lee, unlike the first two days of the battle. Over the last three days, casualties on both sides were great: over 23,000 on the Federal side, as many as 28,000 on the Confederate side, for a total between the two armies of over 50,000—the bloodiest three days in American history.⁷⁸

Lee had already decided to retreat back across the Potomac—he had no option but to withdraw. Neither the prisoners they captured nor the long train of supplies and animals

⁷⁶ Hogg, *Robert E. Lee*, 53.

⁷⁷ Hogg, *Robert E. Lee*, 53.

⁷⁸ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 1015.

captured by Ewell and Stuart in Pennsylvania were of any compensation for his defeat, or for the fact that—as of yet unbeknownst to Lee—General Pemberton surrendered Vicksburg, with 30,000 men, to Grant on July 4, ceding to the Union control of the Mississippi from its source to the sea, and effectively splitting the Confederacy into two parts. Fortunately for the Confederates, the weather turned bad on July 4, preventing Meade from making any attempt to pursue their retreat, though it must not have been easy for Lee and his army to tread back in such weather. The next day, Lee talked to Longstreet, refuting the notion that there was any bad feeling between them, and told him, “It’s all my fault, I thought my men were invincible.” Which was, and remains, the most truthful and convincing explanation for his defeat at Gettysburg, and perhaps the most moving.⁷⁹

2.4 The Last Stand of the Confederacy

In retrospect, the defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg seem to mark the point at which the defeat of the Confederacy became only a matter of time. Lee had twice tried to invade the North, and both times had been defeated, in Maryland and Pennsylvania. After July 1863 the war would be fought only on southern soil. The defensive war that Longstreet had urged unsuccessfully on Lee would now become an inevitable reality, although with each battle there would be less to defend.

It was clear that Meade would not renew the struggle in full force until the spring of 1864. Meade had lost the confidence of President Lincoln after failing to pursue and destroy Lee’s army after the Union victory at Gettysburg. Lincoln was looking for a different kind of general—and he at last chose Major General Ulysses S. Grant, the victor of Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, and Missionary Ridge. He was made the first lieutenant general since George Washington had been appointed to that rank by Congress, and given command of the whole U.S. Army. Grant knew Lee, and he understood that Lee was a master of manoeuvre—and for that very reason Grant was determined not to let him manoeuvre. Grant had no interest in Richmond, though he assumed correctly Lee would feel obliged to defend it as long as he could; nor was he interested in fighting a big set-piece battle that would decide the war. Grant’s object was not the Confederate capital, but Lee’s army, and he had in mind a three-pronged attack that would wear the Army of Northern Virginia down remorselessly. Grant had more men, more guns, more supplies; he was confident he could make good his losses more quickly than Lee could, and that if he pushed forward constantly,

⁷⁹ Hogg, *Robert E. Lee*, 54-55.

day after day and never let up the pressure, Lee's casualties would eventually become unsustainable. Time, pressure, and numbers were Grant's secret weapons—he intended to fight Lee every day, win or lose; he would go on until the Army of Northern Virginia could fight no more. Thus, after more than three years, Lincoln had finally found the right man for the job.⁸⁰

After the Battle of the Wilderness⁸¹ came the Siege of Petersburg, during which Grant relentlessly attacked Lee, day after day, as he originally planned. He had the Confederacy under a firm grip, and even though they were holding the Federals back, they had virtually no chance of breaking out. One great advantage of Grant was the fact he commanded all of the Union's forces, whereas Lee only commanded the Army of Northern Virginia. Had Lee been made the commander of the entire force of the Confederacy in 1863, he may have very well won the war. Lee was nominated "general in chief" of all the Confederate armies on February 4, 1865, and formally assumed command of the military forces of the Confederate states on February 9, but this was two years too late and was practically just a formality. At this point, the defeat of the Confederacy was inevitable, as Lee recognized the lack of supplies, men, the many deserters in his ranks, as well as the crumbling economy and shrinking territory of the southern states.

On April 2, Grant began his long-expected attack with "an assault along the whole of the Petersburg front" by 125,000 men against Lee's long, far-stretched line of no more than 33,000 half-starved fighting men. Lee's lines at Petersburg had been broken, and Richmond was lost. The members of the Confederate government were now fugitives and had nowhere to go. It is ironic that the Confederacy began as a government without an army and ended as an army without a government. Lee wanted to concentrate his army and strike at Grant, emerging victorious. In the end, the logistics of the Confederacy thwarted him, enabling Grant to cut the railroad to the south and thus trapping Lee. After a couple skirmishes between what remained of the Confederate States Army and the Union forces, Lee had finally agreed to meet with Grant. On April 9, 1865, Grant met with Lee to finalize the terms of surrender, and by 4 o'clock that day, Lee had officially surrendered.⁸²

⁸⁰ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 1038.

⁸¹ Louisa Woodville. "Common Bonds: The Duty and Honor of Lee and Grant," *Humanities*, July 2007, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2007/julyaugust/feature/common-bonds-the-duty-and-honor-lee-and-grant> (accessed March 20, 2020).

⁸² Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 1136-1137.

3 ROBERT E. LEE'S LEGACY

It seldom happens in history that one man comes not only to embody but to glorify a defeated cause. More exceptionally still, Robert E. Lee would become a *national*, not just a southern hero. It is hard to think of any other general who had fought against his own country being so completely reintegrated into national life, or becoming so universally admired even by those who have little or no sympathy toward the cause for which he fought.⁸³

3.1 The Marble Man

Before the war, Lee had expressed the belief that slavery was a greater evil for the slave owner than for the slave, and that it was a moral and political evil. He also thought that slavery was part of God's process for civilizing the blacks and could be ended only when God chose to end it. This opinion was widespread in the South before the war, and remained so in various forms well into the twentieth century. Lee held this belief quietly, but firmly, throughout his life. He did not modify it, nor apologize for it—Lee was frank about it even while testifying in front of a congressional committee. He did not attribute to blacks a permanent inferiority, as many did in the South, but allowed that time (and God) might change their condition in ways he could not foresee or predict. It was, as he liked to say, “all in God's hands.”⁸⁴

The importance of this lies in the increasing and systemized transformation of Lee into a flawless, faultless symbol, in which the real man was rapidly overshadowed by the gleaming marble image. This was in no way a doing of Lee; he had too much modesty to assume the mantle of perfection. The mythic Lee of southern history became in time a man who never made a mistake, and who had no faults: not only the perfect gentleman, but the perfect warrior.⁸⁵

Even though we know different when it comes to the mistakes that Lee had made during the Civil War, many of which are covered in this thesis, history shifted the blame onto Lee's officers—the blame for Malvern Hill was transferred to Jackson; the blame for Gettysburg was assigned primarily to Longstreet, but also to Stuart and Ewell; and Lee's dislike of the institution of slavery was given more prominence than his pessimism about the future development of the former slaves and freedmen.⁸⁶

⁸³ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 1140.

⁸⁴ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 1150.

⁸⁵ Thomas Lawrence Connelly, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (Louisiana: LSU Press, 1978), 20.

⁸⁶ Connelly, *The Marble Man*, 27.

We have to remember that Lee was human, and he made mistakes too, even major ones. His deeply held, sincere views on race do not measure up to modern standards. It is important to realize that Lee loses nothing if he was portrayed as a fallible human being—in fact, the opposite happens. His strength was his courage, his sense of duty, his religious belief, his military genius, whether he made mistakes or not, he believed in himself and embraced those mistakes and tried to take the blame for them. Even despite his views of the blacks, he did not hesitate to shake a black man's hand or kneel beside him in prayer.⁸⁷

The “Marble Man” is in many ways a construct of the southern historians and people that arose in prominence after the war, though it cannot be completely discredited as well. Lee brought out the best in his men, he faced adversity head on and he never let a dire situation constrain him—a testament to his strong work ethic, and deeply rooted belief in God and his will. However, it would be disingenuous to say he was perfect—though we can say that he always did his best, no matter the situation in front of him, while being absolutely calm and focused on the task at hand.

3.2 Lee as a College President

After the civil war, Lee spent his last few years at Washington College as the president. His task at the college was an enormous one, and it was thorough and painstaking administration work, involving huge quantities of correspondence. He tried his best to stay out of the limelight as much as possible. Luckily for Lee, he had no trouble asserting authority over the students of Washington College—after all, he had handled the cadets at the U.S. Military Academy. He was patient, firm and profoundly respected. He did not attempt to impose any kind of military discipline, since he was not training these young men to become officers. Nevertheless, his vigilant eye could tell the strengths and weaknesses of his students—a quality that had made him such an admirable commander at West Point. Lee was a wise and enlightened disciplinarian and expected a sustained and maximum effort from his students, along with absolute truthfulness and the manners of a gentleman. Thanks to Lee, within a year after he had accepted the presidency, the amount of students at the college increased from 100 to 400, and the curriculum had been boldly updated and expanded.⁸⁸

It is important to note that, even though this was a new chapter in Lee's life, this time as an educator and college administrator, he tried to be a symbol of the desire to aid in the

⁸⁷ Connelly, *The Marble Man*, 40.

⁸⁸ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 1160.

restoration of peace and harmony. Even though him being tasked with educating young men stirred up angry criticism in the North, Lee was sincerely determined to set them an example of submission to authority. He was dedicated to making sure the next generations do not repeat the mistakes of his time. Despite his personal struggle at the very end of his life in trying to strike a balance between his belief in the need to submit to Federal authority and his unrivaled prestige as the Confederacy's most admired military figure, Lee tried to make sure that whatever he was passing down to his students, it was in the hopes of avoiding the possibility of another war.

3.3 Modern Vilification of Lee

Having finally outlined the life, successes and failures of Robert E. Lee, I would like to shine some light on what makes Lee's legacy so contested and controversial.

If we were to define the term "contest," then, as is stated in Oxford's English Dictionary, we would find that, for the purposes of this thesis, it can be defined as "something that is supposed to be wrong or something that was not done properly,"⁸⁹ in simpler terms, "a dispute or a conflict." Therefore, a contested legacy would imply that such a legacy is being "opposed as mistaken or wrong" by someone—in this case, by some members of the public, be they journalists, writers, historians or simply regular citizens.

One example of the modern vilification of Lee was in an article written by Stanley A. McChrystal, a retired U. S. Army general, which was published by *The Atlantic*. The entire article is based on the premise that Lee was "a defender of slavery," to quote McChrystal:

At West Point, Lee and the other Southern heroes became icons whom other cadets and I instinctively sought to emulate. In a painful contradiction, they also betrayed the oath we shared, took up arms against their nation, and fought to kill former comrades—all in the defense of a cause committed to the morally indefensible maintenance of slavery.⁹⁰

Though the article does make some valid points, the base of the article on which it is founded is fundamentally wrong. The author states he changed his opinion of Lee, whom he respected until the age of 63, due to the fact that Lee sought to defend slavery, and even fought a war against his own country to defend it.

⁸⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 173.

⁹⁰ Stanley McChrystal, "At 63, I Threw Away My Prized Portrait of Robert E. Lee," *The Atlantic*, 23 October 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/why-i-threw-away-my-portrait-robert-e-lee/573631/> (accessed March 23, 2020).

This assumption is simply not accurate, as is depicted earlier in this thesis. Lee stated multiple times throughout his life to various people he knew and trusted, and even wrote in his letters,⁹¹ that his loyalty is first and foremost to Virginia, then to his country, and even lived his life according to this belief. It is true that Lee led the Confederacy, whose principal goal was to defend the institution of slavery in the South, but that was not the reason why Lee fought—he fought to protect Virginia, his home state, which was made all the more complicated by the fact that the Confederacy chose Richmond in Virginia as its capital.

Lee disliked the institution of slavery; to him, it was a moral and political evil that only God could change. Lee himself had never purchased or sold any slaves—whatever slaves he had he inherited, or gained thanks to his marriage and acquaintances. It is true that Lee doubted whether the blacks could, in the long term, develop up to the level of whites if given freedom, but to say he defended slavery would be to disgrace the legacy of the man he was. We also have to understand that the view of slavery was very different then compared to now. When trying to understand how the people of nineteenth century viewed slavery, we need to look at everything through their eyes and not insert our modern views of slavery into our assumptions.

In another article by the *Boston Globe*, Lee is called an “American traitor,” and the author also goes on to say that the “kindly General Lee” we know from history is, “an old legend—more fiction than fact—sustained by the long propaganda campaign of Lost Cause ideologists, who for generations whitewashed the Confederate cause. When it mattered most, Lee was not an American patriot, he was not an opponent of slavery, and he never acquiesced in the equality of freed slaves as American citizens.”⁹²

Much like in the first example, the author here is trying to alter the narrative in such a way that it supports his false claims. Lee was, until the end of his life, against the institution of slavery⁹³, and due to his strong and unshaken belief in God and in Christianity, the thought of trying to actively solve the problem of slavery never occurred to him, as he believed God will do away with the institution of slavery in due time. We have to remember that faith

⁹¹ John F. Ross, “Unlocking History: Treasures of Robert E. Lee Discovered,” *American Heritage*, December 2008, <https://www.americanheritage.com/unlocking-history-treasures-robert-e-lee-discovered#1> (accessed March 23, 2020).

⁹² Jeff Jacoby, “Robert E. Lee, American traitor,” *The Boston Globe*, 28 January 2019, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2019/01/28/arguable/RoEcRoxu0og8OzYHTITKxN/story.html> (accessed March 23, 2020).

⁹³ Ann M. Simmons, “Robert E. Lee was not the George Washington of his time. But a lot ties them together,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 August 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-washington-and-lee-20170817-htmlstory.html> (accessed March 23, 2020).

played a major role in peoples' lives back then, so it is not hard to understand where Lee was coming from.

It is true that, by fighting for the South, Lee was inadvertently aiding their cause, which was to defend the institution of slavery, there is no denying that. However, I believe a clear distinction needs to be made here, since Lee never explicitly sympathized with that cause—Lee's letters clearly state where he stood when it came to the matter of slavery. He was vehemently against it, though he did lean in favour of white supremacy as a long-term solution for interracial engagement with the freed blacks.⁹⁴

Understanding history is essential to understanding our own world today, and we should be suspicious of people looking to make a contemporary political cause out of the American Civil War. The results are often more racial division and less understanding of history. Attacking General Lee is transparently about the present, not the past. That myopia can lead people down a blind alley.⁹⁵

3.3.1 The “Lost Cause” Propaganda

Though many people lean towards the one extreme of criticizing Robert E. Lee in any way they can and they try to do their best to discredit and taint his legacy, there are also those on the very other side of this imaginary spectrum that support the so-called “Lost Cause of the Confederacy.”

The Lost Cause is an American pseudo-historical, negationist ideology which firmly holds the belief that the cause for which the Confederacy had fought during the Civil War was a just and heroic one. It endorses the supposed virtues of the South's Antebellum and views the war primarily as a means to save the Southern way of life, or to defend states' rights, against the overwhelming Northern aggression. The Lost Cause tries to minimize, or outright deny that slavery played a pivotal role in the build-up to and outbreak of the war.⁹⁶

The Lost Cause activists tried to preserve the memories of Confederate veterans through activities such as building Confederate monuments or writing history textbooks for schools. They wanted to ensure that future generations of Southern whites would know of the South's “true” reasons for fighting the war, and would thus continue to support white supremacist

⁹⁴ Eric Foner, “The Making and the Breaking of the Legend of Robert E. Lee,” *The New York Times*, 28 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/28/books/review/eric-foner-robert-e-lee.html> (accessed March 24, 2020).

⁹⁵ Dan McLaughlin, “A Myopic View of Robert E. Lee,” *National Review*, 5 June 2017, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/was-robert-e-lee-hero-or-villain/> (accessed March 24, 2020).

⁹⁶ Gary W. Gallagher; Alan T. Nolan, et al. *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000), 27.

policies, which is one characteristic of the Lost Cause narrative.⁹⁷ This narrative usually portrays the Confederacy's cause as noble and its leadership as exemplary, and that they were defeated by the Union armies through numerical and industrial force which overwhelmed the South's superior military skill and courage. Some advocates of the Lost Cause movement condemned the Reconstruction that followed the Civil War as well, claiming it was a deliberate attempt by Northern politicians to keep the South down. It is also important to note that nowadays, the Lost Cause themes have been widely promoted by the Neo-Confederate movement—a modern movement of people who still believe and advocate for the secession of the former Confederate States.⁹⁸

Supporters of the Lost Cause tried to erase all of Lee's mistakes in an attempt to glorify him as a perfect, kindly general, one that made no mistakes and whose "marble face" inspired even the worst of men to fight under him and follow him until the bitter end. They shifted the mistakes Lee made from him and placed them onto his officers, and proceeded to blame them for losing the Civil War.⁹⁹

Lee was an ordinary man, like all of us. He was not perfect and he made mistakes, but it is important to realize that what makes Lee great is his ability to acknowledge his mistakes (he never blamed any of his officers for his own mistakes) and push on regardless. We should not glorify Lee as the Lost Cause supporters do, we should embrace the imperfect man behind the mask of the general, for it is this man who deserves to be remembered.

3.3.2 Confederate Statues and What They Represent

Only three years ago, a huge discussion erupted in the United States about the potential removal of Confederate statues—memorials of the many important people who have fought and or have fallen during the Civil War, including Robert E. Lee.¹⁰⁰ It happened in the aftermath of neo-Nazi-led¹⁰¹ violence in Charlottesville that left one woman dead, while

⁹⁷ James C. Cobb, "How Did Robert E. Lee Become an American Icon?" *Humanities*, July 2011, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2011/julyaugust/feature/how-did-robert-e-lee-become-american-icon> (accessed March 25, 2020).

⁹⁸ Charles Wilson. *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 159.

⁹⁹ Mackubin Thomas Owens, "In Defense of Grant and Lee," *National Review*, 20 September 2014, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2014/09/defense-grant-and-lee-mackubin-thomas-owens/> (accessed March 29, 2020).

¹⁰⁰ Russell Contreras, "AP Explains: Trump revives debate about Robert E. Lee," *AP News*, 26 April 2019, <https://apnews.com/78d014f6c5e74d2ca51c47629b60f258> (accessed March 28, 2020).

¹⁰¹ Michael S. Rosenwald, "The truth about Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee: He wasn't very good at his job," *The Washington Post*, 26 April 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/05/19/the-truth-about-confederate-gen-robert-e-lee-he-wasnt-very-good-at-his-job/> (accessed March 25, 2020).

white supremacists triggered clashes and said there was blame on “many sides,” as is mentioned in an article by *The Independent*.¹⁰²

The article mentions a descendant of Lee, Karen Finney, a great-great-great grandniece of General Lee, who claims that Donald Trump does not know what he is talking about and was not “intellectually interested” in learning about the difficult, complex history he was diving into. This was a reaction to Trump’s tweet where he defended the Southern memorials and was against their removal, while also praising Robert E. Lee as the “greatest strategic military mind in the history of the United States.”¹⁰³

It is important to realize what these memorials actually represent. The narratives they convey can be interpreted differently, depending on the person. The memorials of the South stand as a reminder of what the South had fought for—to defend the institution of slavery, to uphold white supremacy and to defend states’ rights. White southerners especially might be filled with pride and honour when they see all those mighty monuments, which contain a dark, twisted truth many of them might be unaware of.¹⁰⁴ The root of the Confederate statue conflict goes deeper than the memorials themselves, into these narratives that have been assigned to them both during and after their inceptions. It is these narratives that must be of primary interest when determining the longevity of a Confederate memorial site.¹⁰⁵

The memorial to Lee specifically was a focal point for two competing narratives as they clashed over representations of the stories told by the sculpture—something that Lee predicted may happen, when he objected to the raising of Confederate monuments in 1869, one year before his death, as he believed it would be wiser “not to keep open the sores of war but to follow the examples of those nations who endeavoured to obliterate the marks of civil strife.”¹⁰⁶ The statue might be viewed as a reminder to the African-American citizens,

¹⁰² Andrew Buncombe, “Robert E. Lee’s descendant tells Trump to stop defending Confederate statues: ‘How dare you’,” *The Independent*, 24 August 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-confederate-statues-robert-e-lee-descendant-stop-defending-comments-a7911116.html> (accessed March 25, 2020).

¹⁰³ Nikki Schwab, “Donald Trump praised Robert E. Lee as ‘greatest strategic military mind’ in meeting with aides amid Charlottesville crisis – and then took them on a Lincoln Bedroom tour,” *Daily Mail*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8172617/Trump-praised-Robert-E-Lee-greatest-military-mind-amid-Charlottesville-crisis.html> (accessed April 1, 2020).

¹⁰⁴ Julian Maxwell Hayter, “Charlottesville was about memory, not monuments,” *The Washington Post*, 10 August 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/08/10/charlottesville-was-about-memory-not-monuments/> (accessed March 27, 2020).

¹⁰⁵ Abigail Sutton, “Lee’s Last Stand: Story and Narrative in the Confederate Statue Conflict,” *University of Tennessee*, May 2019, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e9e6/ff768543c7f9f20d291395c4e69166f06805.pdf> (accessed March 27, 2020).

¹⁰⁶ Jacey Fortin, “What Robert E. Lee Wrote to The Times About Slavery in 1858,” *The New York Times*, 18 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/us/robert-e-lee-slaves.html> (accessed March 27, 2020).

who were once enslaved, that the whites are still above them (and thus hinting at the possibility of white supremacy being deeply rooted within modern Americans, especially in those from the South), though that might seem a bit far-fetched to some.

Others might claim that these statues and memorials simply commemorate the heroes of the war, such as Robert E. Lee, without specifically representing any ideals, motives or narratives from the past. Whatever the truth might be, it is certain that this is a very contested and heated topic which definitely warrants a deeper conversation. It might be hard fixing the mistakes of the Civil War and what happened afterwards, during the Reconstruction and onwards, but it is a matter of fact now that those statues have played a significant part in representing the American culture and history for the past hundred and fifty years.

3.3.3 Lee's Controversial Generalship

Because the South eventually lost the war, and because Lee's defeat on the third day of Gettysburg now seems to many people in both the South and the North to have ended the last chance of a Confederate victory, Lee's generalship has been a controversial subject for a century and a half. In the South, Lee's defeats are generally attributed to overwhelming numbers against him. Nobody could have been more aware than Lee himself of his army's weaknesses, nor of the Confederate government's inability to remedy them. The boldness of Lee's manoeuvring and the rapidity with which he fought one great battle after another were in large part a reflection of this—the enemy would gain strength by resting in position and waiting for events, Lee would not.¹⁰⁷

Though criticism of Lee's generalship was muted during his own lifetime, it was not entirely absent either. One of his biggest critics was his very own officer from the war, James Longstreet. He often voiced his criticism of Lee's strategic decisions and battlefield tactics after the war, but Lee deflected it with a certain degree of wry good humour. Longstreet's criticism became sharper once he committed himself to writing his memoirs, which brought down on his own head an avalanche of refutation and indignation by angry southerners. Some scholarly works tend to agree with Longstreet's point of view and criticism, but many do not.¹⁰⁸

The case against Lee's generalship was summed up best by J. F. C. Fuller in his book about Grant and Lee. Lee was no grand-strategist, because he refused to be influenced by policy or to influence it. His theory of war was based upon the spirit of his army which he

¹⁰⁷ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 719.

¹⁰⁸ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 720.

considered to be invincible. He understood the valor of his adversaries, though he read like a book the character of many of their generals, and on the whole had the highest contempt for their abilities. His cause was a moral one and his attacks were also moral ones, in the sense that Lee was unwilling to do what is wrong at the bidding of the South or the North, which showed when he refused to acquiesce in the right of the Federal government to raise an army against its own citizens.¹⁰⁹

Even though the South tried to eradicate Lee's mistakes and turn him into a kind of military secular saint, the real man was not always right, and his generalship was often hampered by his reluctance to enforce his will on his own generals, which proved to be fatal during the Battle of Gettysburg. Lee possessed every quality required of a great general except the ability to give a direct order to his subordinates and ensure that it was obeyed. He inspired love, admiration, and respect, but not fear. He was not lacking in willpower, he could move an entire army to undertake things that required terrible sacrifices and suffering, but good manners and a remarkable dislike of personal confrontation often hindered the execution of his plans. Lee again and again left matters to his corps commanders once battle was engaged, and hesitated to give them a direct order to do what he wanted them to.¹¹⁰

On the other hand, if we take a look at Grant, he was the exact opposite of Lee. When Grant issued an order, it was always short, precise and to the point, written on a piece of paper—unlike Lee, who had a tendency to issue vague verbal orders which usually ended with “if applicable.” Grant always looked for simple, effective solutions, no matter what was in front of him.¹¹¹ He would often be thrown into very stressful situations and ordered to deal with them, yet stress has never clouded his judgment and he always managed to find the simple solution he was looking for. Out-of-the-box thinking was Grant's speciality—he was able to take lots and lots of pieces of information and put them all together in his mind, thus being able to come up with a clear picture of what was happening on the battlefield and react adequately. This would always give him the advantage, no matter the opponent he was facing.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ John F. C. Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982), 110.

¹¹⁰ Korda, *Clouds of Glory*, 752.

¹¹¹ Mackubin Thomas Owens, “In Defense of Grant and Lee,” *National Review*, 20 September 2014, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2014/09/defense-grant-and-lee-mackubin-thomas-owens/> (accessed March 29, 2020).

¹¹² Fuller, *Grant and Lee*, 121.

“It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it.”—

Robert E. Lee

CONCLUSION

The deification of Robert E. Lee by the South and its consequences might still have serious effects on modern southerners, though it is also true that many people seek to humanize Lee by discrediting many of the good deeds of the man behind the general's mask.

The legacy of Robert E. Lee includes many past mistakes and atrocities. Monuments and memorials of Southern war heroes still remind many people of the institution of slavery, which the Confederacy had tried so desperately to defend, and of white supremacy, which was directly connected to slavery due to the many white slave owners in the South, along with the rest of the whites in positions of power. We should leave the monuments of the past as exactly that, and instead figure out how to achieve real racial integration, for slavery might have been abolished, but freedom is all that has been gained from it. The next logical step is achieving racial equality, and for that, the whites of the South need to let go of their past and accept the blacks as brothers.

It would be foolish to claim Lee's legacy is uncontested. In fact, many people contest it to this day, claiming it stands for this or that, but I firmly believe, after doing my research, that we should not add any more burden onto the shoulders of the great General Robert E. Lee—whether it may be true or not—and we should instead try and remember the man behind the general's mask. The kind and loving husband, the man dedicated to work and duty, the engineer who had beaten the Mississippi River and allowed the expansion to the West, the soldier who had helped achieve victory in the Mexican-American War, and the professor and college president who wanted to impart his wisdom and knowledge onto his students, and serve his country—and Virginia—diligently and honestly, until the very end.

We can attempt to tear Lee's contested legacy apart and try to fully understand it, though thanks to our present circumstances, it might be impossible to know the real truth behind what Lee has left behind, unless we had the ability to go back in time and talk to the man himself.

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