

ROBERT E. LEE
THE EPITOME OF A SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN

Presented by James G. Adams, Jr.
Athenaeum Society - March 7, 1985

Robert E. Lee - The very name invokes in all of us our personal image of a man who has been held as a Great American Hero. A man who fought brilliantly and against all odds in defense of his native South and especially his native Virginia. In all probability, we all have some knowledge of Robert E. Lee and remember him for his exploits on the battlefield. This paper, however, seeks to look at Lee from a different viewpoint. A viewpoint that I feel modern day historians sometimes overlook. We want to look at Lee the man, his character and how he lived life and how we can gain from his example. Therefore, this paper is entitled "Robert E. Lee: The Epitome of a Southern Gentleman".

We have all heard stories, most of them true I think, of Lee's great character in defeat following the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse in April of 1965. But what in his character lead to his being hailed as a prime example of the southern gentleman to the point that school boys, especially in the South, were told to use him as their example in life; that lead a national college fraternity, Kappa Alpha Order, to hail him as their spiritual leader?

A proper understanding and appreciation of the character and qualities of Robert E. Lee is impossible without some knowledge of the family, social and political background which contributed to the formation of those characteristics. We feel that although this paper is not a biography, it is certainly necessary to stress certain aspects of his personal life in order to know the man.

Lee was a Virginian. This was probability THE dominating factor in his life. It was the supreme consideration during

the greatest crisis of his life. Virginia was, of course, one of the constituent Commonwealths of the United States of America, but to the average Virginian of Lee's day, it came natural to think of the State as the first object of allegiance. Lee's family history and the history of the Commonwealth of Virginia are inseparable. The "Lees of Virginia" had become an identifying phrase prior to his birth. Robert's father, known to all as "Light-Horse" Harry Lee, was a Revolutionary War hero who had stated: "Virginia is my country. Her will I obey; however, lamentable the fate to which it may subject me." It is therefore highly probable and I would argue instinctive, for Robert E. Lee to have remembered such statements and attitudes as expressed by his father, when confronted with his celebrated dilemma immediately prior to the War Between the States.

The Lee family had a long and distinguished record in England long before the first Lee immigrant came to the New World. Lancelot Lee was one of those who fought with William the Conqueror at Hastings. Lionel Lee rode with Richard the Lion Hearted in the Third Crusade and his armor hangs proudly in the Tower of London. Henry Lee was knighted by Queen Elizabeth I. The Lees first came to Virginia very shortly after the settlement of Jamestown in 1607. With the distinguished background exhibited by the Lee ancestors in England, it was natural for the Lees to assume places of leadership in the affairs of the colony. John Adams in writing to Samuel Cooper in 1779 stated: "The family of Lee has more men of merit in it than any other family in these Colonies".

With this background of the Lee family, our attention now turns to the subject of this paper. Robert E. Lee was born

on January 19, 1807 at the Lee ancestral home in Stratford, Virginia. Robert was the fourth child of Harry and Anne Hill Carter Lee. His character and sense of duty must have come early to young Lee for Armistead Long writing in his Memoirs of Robert E. Lee, states: "Persons are living who remember Robert E. Lee in those days of childhood, and who have an abiding recollection of his thoughtfulness of character and of his earnestness in performance of every duty."

Robert's father died when he was only 11 years old. Because his older brothers were away from home and his older sister of delicate health, many of the domestic cares of the Lee household fell upon the shoulders of young Robert. It seems, according to the accounts of persons interviewed by Mr. Long and others, that Robert accepted these responsibilities with a maturity beyond his years.

The evidence seems to indicate that Robert's mother played a very important role in the formation of Robert's character. She taught him in the years of his childhood to practice self-denial and self-control as well as the strictest economy in all financial matters.

Robert was diligent and attentive in his schoolwork as in his domestic duties at home. When it became necessary for Robert to choose his life's profession, he almost naturally turned to military science and decided to apply to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Prior to attending West Point, he entered Hollowell's Preparatory Academy at Alexandria, Virginia in the winter of 1824 and 1825. Hollowell, the head of the academy carrying his name, wrote: "He was a most exemplary

student in every respect. He was never behind time in his studies, never failed in a single recitation. He was perfectly observant of the rules and regulations of the institution, was gentlemanly, unobtrusive and respectful in all of his departments to teachers and his fellow students. His speciality was finishing up. He imported a finish and a neatness as he proceeded to everything he undertook. The same traits he exhibited at my school he carried with him to West Point, where I have been told, he never received a mark of demerit and graduated at the head of his class". Lee did not, as indicated by Howell, graduate at the head of his class at West Point but was second in the class of 1829.

In the years following his graduation and subsequent commission as a second lieutenant in the Corp of Engineers, Robert served with great distinction. During the Mexican War he earned the high praise of his commanding general, General Winfield Scott. At the outbreak of the War Between the States, Scott recommended Lee to President Lincoln for appointment to the position of commander-in-chief of the Union Army. If there was one controlling principle in the life of Robert E. Lee, it was DUTY. General Lee wrote to his son, Custis, who at the time was at West Point himself, and stated: "Duty is a sublimest word in the English language". Lee's sense of duty is best illustrated by an incident that occurred during the Mexican War.

After the fall of Mexico when the American Army was enjoying the ease and relaxation which it had bought by toil and blood, a brilliant assembly of officers set over their wine discussing the operations of the siege and indulging hopes of a

speedy return to the United States. One among them rose to propose the health of the Captian of Engineers, who had found a way for the army to get within the city, and it was remarked that Captain Lee was absent. An officer by the name of Magruder was dispatched to bring him to the hall. After looking for him for sometime, Magruder last found Lee in a remote room busy on a map. Magruder accosted Lee and reproached him for his absence at the celebration.

Lee looked up from his labors with a calm, mild gaze and pointed to his instruments and shook his head. Magruder explained that this was mere drudgery and Lee should have some lesser officer or enlisted man finish the task. Lee's reply: "No, I am doing my duty."

It was this deep sense of duty which led to the most titantic inner struggle of his life. In March of 1861, Lee was summoned to Washington and there the strongest pressure was brought to bear upon him to induce him to side with the North in the impending struggle. General Scott, his long and personal friend, used all of his powers of persuasion to induce him to "stand by the old flag". The supreme command of the United States Army was offered to him by President Lincoln through his messenger, Montgomery Blair. Lee knew full well the consequences of his siding with the South. He would lose Arlington, his beloved estate, the wealth, the prestige and the rank the United States could afford him. Lee despised the idea of secession and did not look upon it as the remedy for the woes of the Union. In discussions with Blair, he stated: "Mr. Blair, I look upon secession as anarchy. If I owned four million slaves in the

South, I would sacrifice them all to the Union. But how can I draw my sword upon Virginia, my native state?" When on April 17, 1861, Virginia seceded, Robert E. Lee's course was decided.

In a contemporaneous letter, Lee indicates his innermost feelings and the turmoil through which he went in reaching his decision.

"I had to meet the question of whether I should take part against my native state. With all my devotion to the Union and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home. I have, therefore, resigned my commission in the army and serve in defense of my native state with the sincere hope that my poor services may never be needed. I hope I may never be called upon to draw my sword."

However, Lee was indeed called upon to fight against his native country. Had he fought for the Union, he would have been a traitor in the eyes of Virginia, his family and to the South. He was placed by fate in the sorrid position where he was damned if he did and damned if he did not. He chose the course which he felt was dictated by the traditions of his family in their service to Virginia.

During the war, Lee refused to wear any uniform except a simple suit of gray without any ornament or insignia except for three gold stars on the collars, which every full colonel in the Confederate Army was entitled to wear. One day he was asked by one of his subordinates as to the reason he did not wear the symbols of his rank and he replied: "I do not care for any display and the truth is that the rank of colonel is about as high as I

ought to have ever gotten or perhaps I might manage a good calvary brigade if I had the right kind of subordinates."

When in July of 1863 Lee was taken to see General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, who was dying of a gunshot wound, the modest Lee exclaimed: "I cannot express my regret at the occurrence. Could I have directed the offense, I should have chosen, for the good of the country, to have been disabled in your stead." To which Jackson replied: "Better than ten Jacksons should fall than one Lee."

While in the field, he chose to share the fortunes of his soldiers even though as commanding general he could have had his pick of accommodations. He rarely slept in a house, and he never slept outside the lines during the war. When on the march, some convenient fence corner would be his most frequent place of bivouac. He never allowed his mess to draw from the commissary more than it was entitled to, and not infrequently he would sit down to a dinner meager in quality and scant in quantity.

He was invited on one occasion to dine at a house where an elegant dinner was being served. He declined all the rich foods offered him and dined only on bread, beef and water. In quiet explanation to the lady of the house, he stated: "I cannot consent to be feasting while my poor soldiers are nearly starving."

Lee throughout his life was a total abstainer from tobacco and very rarely had a glass of wine. There were several instances when Lee would be given a bottle of good brandy or whiskey to take to a campaign in case of illness. He would return almost without fail with the seal unbroken.

Lee was never one to exploit the power he had over others. Some of his personal writings attest to his philosophy on this point.

The forbearing use of power does not only form a touchstone but the manner in which an individual enjoys certain advantages over others is a test of a true gentleman.

The power by which the strong have over the weak, the magistrate over the citizen, the employer over the employed, the educated over the unlearned, the experienced over the confiding, even the clever over the silly, the forbearing or the inoffensive use of all of this power or authority or a total abstinence from it when the case admits it will show the gentleman in a plain light. The gentleman does not needlessly and unnecessarily remind an offender of a wrong he may have committed against him. He can only forgive, he can forget; and he strives for that nobleness of self and mildness of character which imparts sufficient strength to let the past be but the past. A true man of honor feels humbled himself when he cannot help humbling others.

Not only did he write about such thoughts on the forbearance of power, but he put it into practice in his own dealings with people. For example, one evening Lee was quietly sitting under a tree and night was settling over the field of battle. None of his aides or carriers were present when an impetuous surgeon

(Now, Jack Amis will tell us that the two terms are contradictory.) galloped up and abruptly said "Old man, I have chosen that tree for my field hospital, and I want you to get out of the way."

Lee replied: "I will cheerfully give place when the wounded come, but in the meantime there is plenty of room for both of us."

The irate surgeon (again no surgeon would ever get irate would he, Jack?) was about to make some harsh reply when, to his utter consternation a staff officer rode up and addressed the surgeon's "old man" as General Lee. To the surgeon's profuse apologies and explanations, General Lee quietly replied: "It does not matter, doctor, there is plenty of room for both of us until your wounded are brought."

While Lee showed great character throughout his military career and as General of the armies of northern Virginia during the war, perhaps his greatest contribution and highest calling came not in war but afterwards by setting the example for the defeated people of the South to follow during Reconstruction. In writing to the former Governor of Virginia, John Letcher, in August of 1865, Lee stated:

"The conciliatory manner in which President Johnson spoke to the South must have been particularly agreeable to one who has the interest of its people so much at heart as yourself. I wish that spirit could become more general. It would go far to promote the confidence and to calm feelings which have too long existed. The questions which for years were in dispute between the state and the general government, which unhappily were not decided by the dictates of reason, but referred to the decision of war, having been decided against us, it is the part of wisdom to acquiesce in the result and of candor to recognize the facts.

The interests of the state are therefore the same as those of the United States. Its prosperity will rise or fall with the welfare of the country. The duty of its citizens then appears to be plain. All should unite in honest efforts to obliterate the effects of war, and to restore the blessings of peace. They should remain, if possible, in the country; promote harmony and good feeling; qualify themselves to vote; and to elect to the state and general legislatures, wise and

patriotic men who will devote their ability to the interest of the country and the healing of all dissensions. I have invariably recommended this course since the cessation of hostilities and have endeavored to practice it myself. I am obliged to you for the interest you have expressed in my acceptance of the presidency of Washington College. If I believed I could be of advantage to the youth of the country, I should not hesitate. I have stated to the committee of trustees the objections which exist, in my opinion, to my filling the position and will yield to their judgment."

As noted in the letter, Lee, after the war, accepted the presidency of a small college in Lexington, Virginia known at that time as Washington College. It is now, of course, known as Washington and Lee University. Lee felt that he could do more to heal the wounds of the country by showing the young men of the South how to live with humility and respect and charity toward all.

Thus, Robert E. Lee who long served as a military man became in the last years of his life an educator. Lee had a deep conviction that for all its poverty and distress, the South had to promote the general education of its young people. He stated in 1866: "Nothing will compensate us for the depression of the standard of our morale and general culture and each state should take its most energetic measures to revive its schools and colleges and if possible to increase the facilities of instruction and to elevate the standards of learning. The thorough education of all classes of the people is the most effective means, in my opinion, in promoting the prosperity of the South. We must look to the rising generation for the restoration of the country.

In an address to the students at Washington College, he evoked with success upon the students there assembled the ideas of character he had practiced throughout his life - "The immediate ends of college discipline are attention to study and good order as necessary to such diligence. Its higher and more comprehensive end is attention to study and good order obtained by means which will cultivate virtuous principles and correct habits, not merely for the brief period of a college course, but also for a subsequent life."

As a sidenote, I would recommend to the members of the Society who are interested in this period of Lee's life, a recent book by Charles Bracelen Flood entitled Lee, The Last Years. Flood's book shows in greater detail than I can delve into in the allotted time tonight the contributions that Lee made to the students at his college in the period 1865 until his death on October 10, 1870.

Lee insisted upon his ascension to the presidency that a chapel be constructed and upon its completion he instituted regular chapel services. He felt that it was vitally important that the young men at his college be instilled with the values of Christianity. In writing to Ministers of the Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal and Presbyterian churches of Lexington in September of 1869, he expressed his beliefs on the importance of Christianity:

The faculty also requests that you will extend to the students a general invitation to attend the churches of their choice regularly on Sundays and other days and invite them to join the Bible classes established in each. That you will, as may be convenient and necessary, visit them in sickness and in health and that you will in every proper manner urge upon them the great importance of the Christian religion.

Lee practiced his Christianity throughout his life. As an example, Jones in his Memoirs of Lee previously cited states an incident that occurred in the autumn of 1869:

"I saw General Lee standing at the gate, talking to a humbly clad man, who was evidently delighted with his interview just as I came up. After exchanging salutations, the general pleasantly said, pointing to the retreating form, 'That is one of our old soldiers who is in the necessitous circumstances'. I took it for granted that he was some Confederate veteran and asked to what command he had belonged. The general quietly and pleasantly replied: 'He fought for the other side, but we must not remember that against him now.'"

Was then Robert E. Lee the epitome of a southern gentleman? Webster defines a gentleman as: 1. A man well born; sometimes, above anyone above the social condition of a yeoman. 2. A well-bred man of fine feelings, good education and social position. 3. A servant, especially a valet of a person of high rank."

From the evidence presented, it is our contention that Robert E. Lee was a gentleman of the highest order. Certainly, he was well-bred and his feelings and attitude toward others were exemplary. He indeed was a servant all his life, whether as a military leader or as an educator. The characteristics of the life of Robert E. Lee can be best summed up as follows:

Vanquished,
Yet, he was a victor
To honor virtue is to honor him;
To reverence wisdom is to do him reverence,
In life he was a model for all who live,

In Death

He left a heritage to all,
One such example is worth more to earth
Than the stained triumphs of ten thousand Caesars.