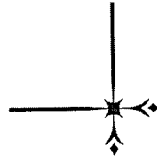
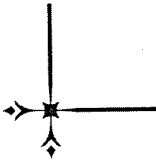


Elizabeth Brown Pryor

Reading the Man

*A Portrait of Robert E. Lee
Through His Private Letters*

VIKING



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resignation.³⁶ In another wrenching scene Lewis Armistead—nephew of the general who had defended Fort McHenry on the night of the “Star-Spangled Banner”—tearfully grabbed his friend Winfield Scott Hancock by the shoulders. “Hancock, good-by,” he choked out. “You can never know what this has cost me.” Armistead was cut down by Hancock’s men during Pickett’s Charge.³⁷

Lee, shocked at the thought of dismantling the nation, maintained that disunion was “anarchy” and that “secession is nothing but revolution.”³⁸ Exasperated with extremists both north and south, he decried equally the “aggressions” of the former and “selfish & dictatorial bearing” of the latter. Long after the “fire-eaters” were manipulating public emotion, he clung to the fantasy that secession could be peaceably reversed.³⁹ “I trust there is wisdom, patriotism enough in the Country to save them, for I cannot anticipate so great a calamity to the nation as a dissolution of the Union,” he told one of his favorite nieces.⁴⁰ Lee’s distress was so acute that it fractured the correct demeanor he normally cultivated. Not only did he startle his colleagues by exploding with rage when secessionists tried prematurely to force his resignation, he broke down when he heard that Texas had actually left the Union. “I shall never forget his look of astonishment . . . his lips trembling and his eyes full of tears,” a friend wrote of that bleak February day.⁴¹

From the start of the crisis Lee knew that his destiny was to follow the fortunes of Virginia. If his state chose to stay in the Union, so would he; if it withdrew, his actions would follow suit. He was candid about this with everyone who asked him and never changed his conviction that this was the only respectable course. He hoped the crisis would abate, he explained to Markie, but acknowledged that if it continued he would “go back in sorrow to my people & share the misery of my native state & save in her defence there will be one soldier less in the world than now.”⁴² As he left San Antonio, a fellow officer shouted after the ambulance he was riding in, “Colonel, do you intend to go South or remain North?” Lee stuck his head out and replied: “I shall never bear arms against the United States,—but it may be necessary for me to carry a musket in defence of my native State, Virginia, in which case I shall not prove recreant to my duty.”⁴³

It is clear that the nation’s emergency had imposed a personal crisis on Lee. He never wavered in his determination to link his actions to Virginia’s, but he was less clear about his reasons for it. “While I wish to do what is right,” he declared in a moment of supreme confliction, “I am unwilling to do what is not, either at the bidding of the South or North.”⁴⁴ He told a friend, Charles Anderson, that even though he saw little justification for secession, he had been educated to believe that his “loyalty to Virginia ought

to take precedence over that which is due to the Federal Government.” Anderson, recalling the legacy of Lee’s brother Henry, who had railed against the primacy of states’ rights, and Light-Horse Harry’s passionate belief in Washington’s nationalist principles, recalled: “I sadly asked myself: *whence was this education?*”⁴⁵ Light-Horse Harry Lee had led an army to stymie the first challenge to federal authority during the Whiskey Rebellion, and though he was once heard to declare that Virginia was his “country”—which he felt bound to “obey”—he had ultimately concluded that “our happiness depends entirely on maintaining our union” and that “in point of right, no state can withdraw itself from the union.”⁴⁶

Another part of Robert Lee’s dilemma was that although he was convinced that the framers of the Constitution had never intended the right of secession, he strongly agreed with the secessionists on virtually every other policy.⁴⁷ He believed in racial supremacy and could not envision an egalitarian society; he thought the nation had been founded on “perpetual union,” but admitted that if the bond could “only be maintained by the sword and bayonet, instead of brotherly Love & friendship . . . its existence will lose all interest with me.”⁴⁸ He spoke out for the Crittenden compromise, which would have guaranteed the permanent existence of slavery and permitted its extension into the territories, maintaining that this cornerstone of proslavery thought deserved “the support of every patriot.”⁴⁹ Above all, Lee “resented” aggressive badgering by the North and feared southern political impotence under the rule of its majority population.⁵⁰

The way Lee envisioned his own role in the conflict was particularly convoluted. Here his pronouncements often appear at odds not only with themselves but with realistic expectation. He could not raise his sword against the United States—but if called on to carry a musket for Virginia, he would not shirk. He would take to planting corn, and there would be one less soldier in the world—“save in defence of my native state.” None of this seems plausible; yet it would not be the last time Lee retreated to a dream world of subsistence farming and revolutionary imagery. One of the more intricate steps in this psychic Virginia reel is the word “defence.”⁵¹ It appears Lee thought that if he stayed in the old army, he might be able to maintain a position that resisted offensive operations; and that if Virginia seceded, he could restrict himself to actions that checked aggression. Apparently this belief was bolstered by General Scott, who showed him cabinet papers that denounced war and maintained that any mobilization was solely for the protection of the capital. Indeed he clung to this vision of reactive defense until well after the first battle of Manassas.⁵²

The only way out of this corner was for Virginia to remain in the Union so that Lee could both uphold the United States and defend his natal ground. Lee was open in his hope that this would be the case. “I am particularly anxious that Virginia should keep right,” he advised Agnes, “as she was chiefly instrumental in the formation & inauguration of the Constitution, so I would wish that she might be able to maintain it, to save the union.”⁵³ One of the haunting questions of these anxious months is why he did not use his influence to guide Virginia’s decision. In this, the most critical moment of his life, it seems he fell back on his old passivity. Lee’s name was not yet a household word, but his reputation from the Mexican War was widely appreciated, and his part in the peaceful termination of the John Brown affair was celebrated throughout the South. Neighbors and relatives waited to follow his lead: one recalled that “for some the question ‘What will Colonel Lee do?’ was only second in interest to ‘What will Virginia do.’”⁵⁴ It was well known that he had the ear of General Scott and that his opinion might sway the lawmakers in Washington. Harper’s Ferry had also given him special access in Richmond. His standing there was such that Confederate vice president Alexander Stephens admitted “a look, or even intonation of voice” by Lee at this time would have had enormous power.⁵⁵ Perhaps acting on his old dislike of politics and prominence, he chose not to shape the momentous events before him. Instead he linked his fate to the volatile public will, stating that he must wait patiently, relying on God to order all things for the good.⁵⁶ When he was begged by statesmen and relatives to lead in brokering a peace, he remained resolutely out of the discussions.⁵⁷

In fact Lee almost got his wish that Virginia would remain with the Union. Pro-secession factions tried to force an early decision after South Carolina withdrew from the Union in December 1860, but through skillful diplomacy the choice was left to a statewide convention, which opened the following February. That the Old Dominion would secede was anything but a foregone conclusion. Thirty-one percent of its people were enslaved, the largest actual number of bondsmen of any state in the South. Yet in the 1850s Virginia had been heavily influenced by an influx of northern immigrants, the growth of railroads, and political reforms that were beginning to challenge the old seigniorial class. With its diversified population and economy, it had more in common with Maryland, which remained with the Union, than it did with the Cotton States. Though there were some notably aggressive pro-secession personalities in the Old Dominion, overall there was no great leap to embrace the risky policies of South Carolina. Nowhere was this truer

than in Lee's section of the state, where the economy was booming and the influence of slave culture waning. Union sentiment remained widespread in northern and western Virginia even as the final votes for secession were counted.⁵⁸

During the early months of 1861 Virginia conducted an extraordinary public discussion of secession, unequalled elsewhere. This was not a debate about war: as Henry Adams would observe, few in America expected or wanted the horrors that rocked the land from 1861 to 1865.⁵⁹ Instead it was a sober attempt to resolve a conflict of incompatible regional differences, constitutional rights, and factional politicians. Secessionists tried to exploit the emotional aftershock of Lincoln's election, but in these early months they were overridden by those who still thought the Union offered the best guarantee of liberty and prosperity. Only one-third of the delegates to the state convention favored secession, and their arguments were not holding the day. Lee had legitimate grounds to hope that his home state and his country were at least feebly reconciled when he returned to Washington, at Scott's behest, on March 1, 1861.⁶⁰

He found the atmosphere alive with tension. Washington was filled with edgy troops, called in for Lincoln's inauguration. Many, like Mary Lee, thought the lanky westerner should have resigned for the sake of the country rather than take the oath of office.⁶¹ Though Lincoln tried to appear conciliatory, saying that he would not interfere with slavery where it existed, he also made clear that he recognized no independent states and intended to protect federal property. Lee's colleague Samuel Heintzelman attended the March 4 inauguration and thought the address a prescription for war. When he saw Lee at Scott's office the next day, Lee also expressed concern.⁶² Lee's movements for the next month appear to have been low-key and cautious. In theory Scott had recalled him to sit on a board revising the army's regulations, and while the board was being formed, he remained at Arlington without official duties.⁶³ Lincoln was starting to put his administration together, making appointments and reassigning troops, and Lee's capabilities—and his allegiance—were under discussion. Lincoln had appointed Simon Cameron as secretary of war, and one aide recalled a meeting between Cameron and Scott that focused on Lee. "The Secretary asked the General if he had full confidence in Lee's loyalty, to which the General replied, 'Entire confidence, sir. He is true as steel, sir, true as steel!'"⁶⁴ In full dress uniform Lee attended a reception given at the White House on March 13 for seventy-eight military officers. It was probably the only time he met Lincoln.⁶⁵ A week later the new president promoted Lee to full colonel of the 1st Regiment of Cavalry—a coveted position that Lee was confident enough to accept immediately.⁶⁶

But the tenuous chance for peaceful resolution was quickly shattered. In early April Lincoln made the difficult decision to resupply Fort Sumter, which was holding out against a rebel blockade in Charleston harbor. He apprised southern officials of his intention and essentially gave them an alternative: Would their response be peace or war? They chose war, firing at the fort on April 12. In the ensuing panic Lincoln made another fateful choice, this time calling for 75,000 soldiers to defend U.S. property. These two actions galvanized both sides, as the North feared wholesale revolution and Southerners believed Lincoln was preparing to invade their homes. Those who had so dexterously crafted a fragile peace in Virginia were caught in the fury, their months of compromise overturned. A woman who tried to defend the February decision against secession was told by Senator R. M. T. Hunter, “My dear lady you may place your little hand against Niagara with more certainty of staying the torrent than you can oppose this movement.”⁶⁷ On April 17 the question was again put to the convention in Richmond. This time they chose secession.⁶⁸

“Events crowd so fast I cannot write them in my diary,” exclaimed the Lees’ friend Elizabeth Lomax. “Virginia *has* seceded!! Heaven help us!”⁶⁹ The verdict was not yet finalized—that would depend on a popular referendum scheduled for May 23—but few doubted the outcome. At Arlington, Lee learned with dismay of the convention’s impending vote—probably on April 16, when the rumors first reached Washington. According to one family story he dined that night with his brother Smith and cousin Phillips Lee, both U.S. naval officers. His two companions bantered awhile about how Cousin Phil, who intended to stay with the Union, would be bombarded by Smith Lee’s Confederate forces, after which the two would discuss the contest over an amiable toast. During this levity Robert remained miserable and mute. Believing that his silence was born of indecision, Phillips Lee hastily told federal government officials that if they were to sway his cousin they must act quickly.⁷⁰ The next day a note was dispatched to Arlington, calling Lee to the offices of Francis Preston Blair, one of Lincoln’s closest advisers, along with another message that requested his presence in General Scott’s headquarters. At the meeting with Blair, Lee was told that Lincoln intended to offer him command of the forces being called up to defend the Union. The two talked for a long time, Blair “very wily and keen,” playing on Lee’s sense of responsibility and ambition. Lee declined on the spot. He saw nothing but “anarchy & ruin” in secession, he told Blair, yet he could not bring himself to raise his sword against his Virginia home and heritage.⁷¹ From Blair’s office Lee marched straight to see Scott, in such agitation that

he dispensed with his usual courtesies and insisted on being admitted to the general's office. Lee and Scott, bound for so long in mutual admiration, talked candidly for several hours.⁷² What can be pieced together from the available accounts is that Scott tried to persuade Lee that any forces amassed by the Union would be so vast they would stifle the South's will to rebel, making offensive action unnecessary. When Lee said he was convinced aggression was inevitable, and he could not lead an invasion of the South, Scott brusquely rejoined: "If you propose to resign it is proper that you should do so at once; your present attitude is equivocal." Now there was nothing left to say. A journalist was told the two men stood grasping each other's hands, "too full of feeling to find utterance for one word. . . ."⁷³

The day had been cataclysmic for Lee, and he went to talk the matter over with Smith. Everything he had ever been, everything he had worked for, seemed to have culminated in that offer of command, and now he could not accept it. He did not want his state to secede, but had felt powerless to halt the course he believed would be so destructive. That night came reports that Virginia troops had seized the armory at Harper's Ferry, the same arsenal he had so recently defended against wild, prophetic John Brown, and he must have known that all chance of peaceful redress was over. He had wanted to hang on to his hopes, as well as his commission, until the May 23 referendum made secession irrevocable in Virginia. But Scott's pressure forced him to contemplate the loss of not only his job but his credibility within army circles.⁷⁴ Those who met him and his family in Alexandria noted the sharp contrast in their deep depression with the general exhilaration in the town. The people had "lost their senses," Rooney remarked in dismay.⁷⁵ Agnes would write quietly to Mildred that nothing at Arlington was "talked or thought of except our troubles . . . our poor Father & brothers need all our prayers. . . ."⁷⁶

For two terrible days Lee contemplated the matter. His wife, as torn as he



General Winfield Scott around 1860.

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was, told him that she would support whatever decision he made.⁷⁷ The slaves watched as their master “walked backwa’d and fo’ward on de po’ch steddyyin’,” noting that he “didn’t cahr to go. No . . . he didn’t cahr to go.”⁷⁸ A little boy who was visiting the family also remembered seeing Lee pacing in the garden and hearing the floors creak as he knelt and prayed in his upstairs bedroom.⁷⁹ Arlington felt “as if there had been a death in it,” said Agnes, “for the army was to him home and country.”⁸⁰ At midnight the house was still ablaze with lights, as the family gathered with miserable anticipation in the parlor. Finally Lee bowed his head and wrote his resignation, as well as a short explanatory letter to General Scott. Then he slowly walked down the long staircase and handed the letters to his wife. “Mary,” he said, “your husband is no longer an officer of the United States Army.”⁸¹

Lee’s most renowned biographer called it the “answer he was born to make.” Another writer stated that “it was not that the anguished man had any choice.”⁸² Yet everything we know indicates that the decision was, in his wife’s words, “the severest struggle of his life.”⁸³ This poignant moment, when a strong, steadfast man paced and prayed in despair, is a scene worthy of Shakespeare precisely because it so palpably exposes the contradiction in his heart. Why, if he believed all he said, did he come to this point? Lee’s explanation was the spare, elegantly worded one he gave to his cousin Roger Jones and repeated nearly verbatim to each person who asked: “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.”⁸⁴ Yet even his formulaic language gives an impression quite the opposite from banal inevitability. In later years he confessed he held on to his resignation letter for a day before sending it, the moment was so painful.⁸⁵ Lee would later concoct elaborate constitutional theories to explain his decision, but they belied the words he spoke at the moment of crisis. His reticence speaks to his distress, and suggests he knew he must hold on to his conviction and avoid expressing its contradictions, lest he second-guess his own actions.

For in reality there were numerous options available to him, options that others in his situation did choose. Winfield Scott was a Virginian, and he knew that his path lay with the Union. When he was approached by state officials, he dismissed as an insult any suggestion that he would renege on his solemn oath of loyalty. So did George Thomas, with whom Lee had companionably ridden over the Texas desert. Both Thomas and Scott would suffer the social ostracism that Orton Williams prophesized in his resignation letter. “Fuss and Feathers’ has distinguished himself,” one prominent Vir-

ginian critically remarked. "You ought to hear how he is spoken of by his family and State."⁸⁶ Thomas's family never again communicated with him except to ask him to change his name.⁸⁷ A young Virginian, just out of West Point, acknowledged that by retaining his commission he had been shunned by all of his southern associates; yet still he derided those who would hold their obligations so lightly as to abandon the nation when it most needed them.⁸⁸ In all, about two-fifths of the officers from Virginia stayed in the U.S. Army after their state seceded, enduring varying degrees of censure for their stance.⁸⁹ Others opted not to fight on any side. West Point's Dennis Hart Mahan, another proud Virginian, chose not to uphold a cause he believed unworthy and sat out the war.⁹⁰ North Carolinian Alfred Mordecai resigned his commission, but rejected an offer to lead either the Confederate ordnance service or engineer department. He spent the war years teaching mathematics in Philadelphia.⁹¹

Lee had hoped to avoid pitting himself against his family, but that desire would also remain unfulfilled. In fact his decision was controversial in his innermost circles. "I feel no exalted respect for a man who takes part in a movement in which he can see nothing but 'anarchy & ruin' . . . and yet that very utterance scarce passed Robt Lees lips . . . when he starts off with delegates to treat with Traitors," was one response from his family. A young relative began a school fight when he was asked whether his father—a Unionist—was "the Rebel traitor Lee."⁹² Roger Jones, whom Lee declined to advise, finally decided to fight for the Union. A bevy of relations in the army and navy followed suit. Phillips Lee never wavered from his Union loyalties, serving through the war with distinction. His younger brother John Fitzgerald Lee, an 1834 West Point graduate, retained his position as judge advocate of the Union army. Cousin John H. Upshur also resisted "tremendous pressure" in order to remain with the Union.⁹³ Orton Williams, of course, did resign; but his brother Laurence fought on the side of the North, serving at one point as an aide-de-camp to General McClellan.⁹⁴ Philip Fendall, whose family had done so much for Robert Lee's mother, never wavered from his Union loyalties.⁹⁵ Sister Anne was also not in agreement with Robert, and her son, Louis Marshall, fought with General John Pope against his uncle. No one in that family ever spoke to Lee again.⁹⁶ With great reluctance Smith Lee became a Confederate naval officer, where he served without enthusiasm, and as late as September 1863 still "pitched into" those responsible for "getting us into this snarl." Saying that both the Lees and his in-laws in the Mason family had pressured him with ideas that Virginia came first, he grumbled, "South Carolina be hanged. . . . How I did want to stay in the old navy!"⁹⁷ His wife tried

to reverse their son Fitz Lee’s pro-South decision and herself held “to the north end of the Long Bridge” until she was “dragged away from Washington . . . kicking.”⁹⁸ In early 1861 Mary Lee was also conflicted, and her daughters teased her about her staunch Unionist talk. Though she sympathized with some of the South’s complaints, she wrote, “for my part, I would rather endure the ills we know, than rush madly into greater evils & what could be greater than the Division of our glorious Republic into petty states, each seeking its private interests & unmindful of the whole.”⁹⁹ Lee’s sons joined the Confederate forces, but only after their father had declared his intentions. There is a strong chance that if Lee’s decision had been different they would have followed his lead.¹⁰⁰ Had Robert Lee taken the part of the Union, he still would have faced confrontation within his border-state family, many of whom sided with the South. But his assertion that he was acting in simple solidarity with a like-minded group of relatives would never be borne out.

In describing his decision, Lee only twice uses the word *honor*. The first is in a letter to Markie in January 1861 in which he says there is no sacrifice he is unwilling to make for the Union “save that of honour.” The second is the official “honor” he has of tendering his resignation from the army.¹⁰¹ It is a weighty word, and its multiple meanings in Lee’s situation may have made it too painful a choice for his pen. In southern society honor was bound up with family connections and local reputation and a desire to avoid public shame. For those who felt it keenly, the individual consideration of honor could take precedence over civic order or personal welfare—even culminating in violence—the cult of the duel being a notable illustration. Lee may have been influenced by this, though the split in his family makes the question of private loyalties a problematic one. There was no linear path to rectitude in Lee’s case, and every avenue was strewn with irreconcilable principles. For example, one of the concerns that pressed Lee to resign quickly was the worry that he might be ordered by the army to undertake aggressive duty against the South; in military circles it was “dishonorable” to resign because of unwelcome orders. Lee acted on this definition of honor at the very time he was “dishonoring” vows of thirty years.¹⁰² The concern that seems to have motivated him was the bullying of the North, which he had been complaining about since the 1830s.¹⁰³ It was not just his distaste for abolitionists or the fear of an increasingly powerful Northern majority so much as the horror of lost self-esteem, the rage of not being able to defend oneself in the face of mounting humiliations. Secession became the most “honorable” option to Southerners because it showed independence and a

spirit of self-protection. Many of those who chose to fight for the South gave this as the reason for their fierce determination, and throughout the war the reaction against "subjugation" was a strong motivating force. It had nothing to do with the inherent principles in their cause; more accurately it could be called "pride," that second cousin of honor. In Lee's case this likely colored not only his decision to leave the U.S. Army, but his strongly aggressive performance on the battlefield.¹⁰⁴

Lee sat on his decision for a day and then dispatched his letters to General Scott. Orton Williams, who had not yet left Scott's staff, reported that the resignation had been approved and that the whole army was "in a stir over it."¹⁰⁵ While Arlington's inhabitants were still in shock at the thought of having arrayed themselves against the flag of their country, Lee was contacted by Judge John Robertson, who Governor John Letcher had dispatched to assess his availability for service with Virginia. It must have been an agonizing afternoon, for Robertson was detained by a lengthy, unpleasant interview with Scott, and never arrived for Lee's appointment.¹⁰⁶ The next day, a Sunday, Lee was seen earnestly conferring with some strangers, probably Robertson and other representatives from Richmond, on the grounds of Christ Church. Several relatives stood with Agnes Lee and watched them, remembering that "the vibrations in the air were intense" and that Lee's face showed "a mortal struggle . . . much more terrible than any known to the din of battle." After a long conversation, Lee agreed to meet Judge Robertson the following morning on a train bound for Richmond. One family member thought he had gone to confer about peace; others believed that he was simply weighing his options.¹⁰⁷

Much has been made about Lee's whirlwind transformation in those few April days, for outside the heightened moment it seems his transition from a loyal United States officer to a committed rebel was just a little too quick. Whether or not he was cagily playing both sides for the greatest advantage has been the subject of some debate.¹⁰⁸ Lee had indeed been approached by southern leaders as early as mid-March, but if he responded, the correspondence has yet to be found.¹⁰⁹ Certainly he was assessing every possibility, for it would have been unwise not to, given his beliefs and the precarious political climate. There is no indication, however, that he proffered his services, or ever sought information about receiving a commission in any southern army before his resignation. When he was finally offered the leadership of Virginia's forces, state officials took some trouble to avoid soliciting him before he had resigned his commission, feeling that it would be "dishonorable" to pressure anyone still under oath to defend the United States.¹¹⁰ His

cousins, always the sounding board of his soul, believed his preference was to outwait the crisis at Arlington, and Lee also mentioned that this was his intention.¹¹¹ Yet excitement and opportunity were in the air, and there was a good deal of discussion among resigning officers about who would pluck the limited number of plum positions with the southern forces. Lee may have succumbed, as did J. E. B. Stuart, to the urgency to act before "the southern army will all be drawn and you will have the place of the laggard."¹¹²

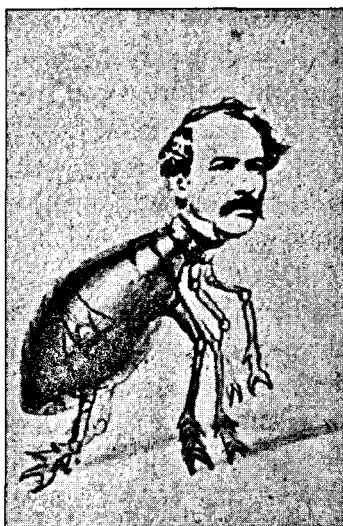
According to Judge Robertson, Lee did not know that he was to be offered any command until he boarded the train. He may have been interested in going to Richmond just to assess the situation; he later said, rather questionably, that he went to look at the Pamunkey estates. It seems unlikely that so cautious a man would have made the journey without a strong understanding of its purpose. Others had certainly caught wind of the state's intentions, and along the rail route Lee was excitedly cheered.¹¹³ By the time he reached Richmond, the state convention had voted him commander in chief of all forces. Before he had much time to ruminate, he found himself being presented with George Washington's sword, and hailed a hero in a powerful tribute by the president of the convention. Was he caught unawares and forced to react too quickly, or was this really the very spot where he most longed to be? Was this finally the recognition Lee sought—the culmination of his skill and his self-discipline? It is hard to say, for Lee fell back on the accepted, courteous platitudes of his era, expressing surprise at the praise and protesting his inadequacy for the job. But it pleased him enough that a newspaper account of this triumph was found in his pocket diary at his death.¹¹⁴

The quick turnaround was probably entirely logical in Lee's heart, for he had said from the first that he would link his fate to Virginia's. As can be imagined, however, few outside the South believed the decision reflected the noble principles he invoked to explain it. Honor was in the eye of the beholder in 1861, and from the beginning Lee's motives were criticized. Technically Lee had acted correctly by resigning when he felt that he could no longer uphold his vows to defend "the United States paramount to any and all allegiance . . . to any State" or "against all enemies or opposers."¹¹⁵ The skeptics, however, believed that those who swore easy oaths in fine times, and then abandoned them, not only shamefully betrayed the country but had no honor. When she heard from Mary Lee that Robert had spent two prayerful days in decision, a cousin remarked acidly: "I wish he had read over his commission as well as his prayers."¹¹⁶ At West Point someone drew a picture of Lee with his head attached to the body of an insect. Lincoln

would use Lee's "deceitful" dealings as a justification for his suspension of habeas corpus.¹¹⁷ The reaction of former army friends was just as sharp. "Robert Lee is commander in chief of the forces of the Commonwealth—'O Lucifer son of the morning star how art thou fallen,'" was the response of one colleague's family. The phrase echoed words that Light-Horse Harry's beloved Nathanael Greene had used to condemn Benedict Arnold.¹¹⁸

While still in frontier Texas, Lee had recognized that his decision would be based on intangibles. "I know you think and feel very differently, but I can't help it," he had told esteemed northern colleagues. In the end it mattered not that Henry Lee believed "the good of the state is entwined with the good of the Union," or that his son's fortunes might prosper by following another course.¹¹⁹ Solemn oaths and Unionist relatives ultimately could not override the pull of what Lee's cousin Anna Maria Fitzhugh called "a sweet binding to this spot of earth, this soil of Virginia that is irresistible."¹²⁰ Lee tried to disavow private interests in his statements, but in fact it was the intense personal quality of his struggle that made it emblematic of the nation's torment.¹²¹ His decision came to represent more than a divided country, or divided regional fidelity; it went beyond a divisive vote on secession or a splintered family. It strikes a timeless chord because it evokes that lowest of all miseries: the nightmare of a divided soul.

That pensive, disciplined Robert E. Lee made an emotional decision affects each of us every day. One of the most trenchant "what-ifs" of the Civil War is the question of how Lee's stance shaped the course of the nation. We sense that history would have been altered if the options presented to Lee—resignation; leadership of the Union troops; acceptance of high command in Virginia—had been decided differently. We do not know exactly how this would have developed, but intuitively we know it to be true. Lee's dilemma was not simply a historic wrestling match between right and wrong, patriotism or treachery. It stands as a critical moment in our nation's pageant because it forces us to consider some very basic questions. What is patriotism?



A cartoon made of Lee at West Point after he decided to fight for the South.

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Who commands our first loyalty? Can loyalty be divided and still be true? And who defines truth anyway? It is the excruciating gray area that makes these questions universal. Lee tells us that the answer to each is highly subjective. By taking a stand and never turning back, Lee also teaches us that they must be faced by every individual at the moment they are summoned, no matter how unsure or unprepared, and that the grandest theories in the world fall away at the moment of heightened instinct. And then his decision tells us something more: that following the heart's truth may lead to censure, or agonizing defeat—and yet be honored in itself.¹²²