

**How Robert E. Lee  
Lost The Civil War**



# HOW ROBERT E. LEE LOST THE CIVIL WAR

*By Edward H. Bonekemper, III*

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E-mail: Civil-War@msn.com  
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## *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to my loving and patient wife, Susan,  
and as a memorial to my fellow Civil War buff,  
Alfred W. Weidemoyer.



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Although this book could not have been completed without the generous assistance of all these people and institutions, I am solely responsible for any errors that remain.

## Preface

### Lee's Fatal Flaws

Robert E. Lee is often described as one of the greatest generals who ever lived. He usually is given credit for keeping vastly superior Union forces at bay and preserving the Confederacy during the four years of the American Civil War (1861-65).

This book presents a contrary view, a side of the coin infrequently seen. It relies upon previously-published sources but extracts from them a more critical analysis of Lee's Civil War performance. It goes beyond any of the earlier critics of Lee by describing all of Lee's strategic and tactical errors, analyzing their cumulative effect, emphasizing the negative impact he had on Confederate prospects in both the East and the West, and squarely placing on him responsibility for defeat of the Confederates in a war they should have won. More attention is given to developments in the West than in most books about Lee because events there spelled the ultimate military doom of Lee's army and because Lee himself played an often-overlooked role in those events.

The cult of Lee worshippers began with former Civil War generals who had fought ineffectively under him. They sought to polish their own tarnished reputations and restore southern pride by deliberately distorting the historical record and creating the myth of the flawless Robert E. Lee.<sup>1</sup>

In his capacity as the Confederacy's leading general and President Jefferson Davis' primary military advisor for virtually the entire war, however, Lee bears considerable responsibility for the war's outcome. Even more significantly, Lee's own specific strategic and tactical failures cost the Confederates their opportunity to outlast the Union, to cause President Abraham Lincoln's electoral defeat in 1864, and, thereby, to win the war.

The war was winnable through a conservative use of Confederate resources, but Lee squandered the Confederacy's precious manpower

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I herein, *Historians' Treatment of Lee*. On the "transcendental" myth of Lee, see Fuller, J.F.C., *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957) [hereafter Fuller, *Grant and Lee*], pp. 103-8.



and its opportunity for victory.<sup>2</sup> The South's primary opportunity for success was to outlast Lincoln, and deep schisms among Northerners throughout the War made Confederate victory a distinct possibility. Northerners violently disagreed on slavery, the draft and the war itself. To exploit these divisions and in order to prevail, the Confederates needed to preserve their manpower, sap the strength of the North, make continuation of the war intolerable, and compel recognition of the Confederacy's independence.

The South was outnumbered by a ratio of 4 to 1 in terms of white men of fighting age and could not afford to squander its resources by engaging in a war of attrition.<sup>3</sup> Robert E. Lee's deliberate disregard of this reality may have been his greatest failure.

The possibility of a Confederate victory through a defeat of Lincoln at the ballot box in 1864 is demonstrated by the fact that, during August 1864, Lincoln himself despaired of winning reelection that coming November.<sup>4</sup> Had Lee not squandered Rebel manpower during the three preceding years, that 1864 opportunity for victory could have been realized.

Lee's strategy and tactics dissipated irreplaceable manpower -- even in his "victories." His losses at Malvern Hill, Antietam, and Gettysburg, as well as his costly "wins" at Second Bull Run and Chancellorsville -- all in 1862 and 1863 -- made possible Ulysses S. Grant's and William Tecumseh Sherman's successful 1864 campaigns against Richmond and Atlanta and created the aura of Confederate defeat that Lincoln exploited to win reelection. If Lee had performed differently, the North would have been fatally split, Democratic nominee (and "out-to-pasture" Union Major General) George B. McClellan might have defeated Lincoln, and the South could have negotiated an acceptable settlement with the compromising McClellan. Although some have contended that McClellan would not have allowed the South to remain outside the Union,<sup>5</sup> he often had demonstrated his reticence to engage in the offensive warfare necessary for the Union to prevail; he

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<sup>2</sup> "The weaker side can win; the South almost did." Hattaway, Herman and Jones, Archer, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983, 1991) [hereafter Hattaway and Jones, *How the North Won*], p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114; Nevins, Alan, *Ordeal of the Union*, 8 vols. (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947-50) [hereafter Nevins, *Ordeal*], IV, p. 488, citing Appleton's *Annual Cyclopaedia* (1861).

<sup>4</sup> Nevins, *Ordeal*, VIII, pp. 92-6.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, William C., *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), pp. 142-7.

also had demonstrated great concern about southerners' property rights in slaves.

Lee's strategy was defective in two respects.<sup>6</sup> First, it was too aggressive.<sup>7</sup> With one quarter the manpower resources of his adversary, Lee exposed his forces to unnecessary risks and, ultimately, lost the gamble.<sup>8</sup> Second, Lee's strategy concentrated all the resources he could obtain and retain almost exclusively in the eastern theater of operations, while fatal events were occurring in the "West" (primarily in Tennessee, Mississippi and Georgia).<sup>9</sup> Historian Archer Jones provides an analysis tying together Lee's two strategic weaknesses:

More convincing is the contention that if the Virginia armies were strong enough for an offensive they were too strong for the good of the Confederacy. They would have done better to

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<sup>6</sup> For details of Lee's defective strategy, see Chapter 12, "Overview."

<sup>7</sup> "Like Napoleon himself, with his passion for the strategy of annihilation and the climactic, decisive battle as its expression, [Lee] destroyed in the end not the enemy armies, but his own." Weigley, Russell F., *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973) [hereafter Weigley, *American Way of War*], p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> "Even some generals who enjoy high reputations or fame have actually been predominantly direct soldiers who brought disaster to their side. One such general was Robert E. Lee, the beau ideal of the Southern Confederacy, who possessed integrity, honor, and loyalty in the highest degree and who also possessed skills as a commander far in excess of those of the Union generals arrayed against him. But Lee was not, himself, a great general. Lee generally and in decisively critical situations always chose the direct over the indirect approach." Alexander, Bevin, *How Great Generals Win* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993) [hereafter Alexander, *Great Generals*], pp. 25-6. "Of all the army commanders on both sides, Lee had the highest casualty rate." McPherson, James M., *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988) [hereafter McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*], p. 472.

<sup>9</sup> Lee operated in an area of 22,000 square miles, while the western theater consisted of 225,000 square miles in seven states. Connelly, Thomas Lawrence, "Robert E. Lee and the Western Confederacy: A Criticism of Lee's Strategic Ability," *Civil War History*, 15 (June 1969), pp. 116-32 [hereafter, Connelly, "Lee and the Western Confederacy"], p. 118. "... a very real criticism of Lee is that while he managed to defend Richmond for almost three years, he allowed the rest of the Confederacy to be slowly eaten away." Katcher, Philip, *The Army of Robert E. Lee* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1994), [hereafter Katcher, *Army of Lee*], p. 27. "... [Lee's] thoughts were always concentrated on Virginia, consequently he never fully realized the importance of Tennessee, or the strategic power which resided in the size of the Confederacy." Fuller, *Grant and Lee*, p. 255. Although defenders of Lee contend that he was merely an eastern army commander for most of the war, he frequently advised President Davis on national issues, including military strategy. Connelly, Thomas Lawrence, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) [hereafter Connelly, *Marble Man*], pp. 202-3.



spare some of their strength to bolster the sagging West where the war was being lost.<sup>10</sup>

Just as significant as his flawed strategy were Lee's tactics, which proved fatally defective.<sup>11</sup> His tactical defects were that he was too aggressive on the field,<sup>12</sup> he frequently failed to take charge of the battlefield,<sup>13</sup> his battle plans were too complex or simply ineffective,<sup>14</sup> and his orders were too vague or discretionary.<sup>15</sup>

The results of Lee's faulty strategies and tactics were catastrophic. His army had 121,000 men killed or wounded during the war -- 27,000 more than any Union or Confederate Civil War general including that alleged "butcher," Union Lieutenant General Ulysses Simpson Grant,

<sup>10</sup>. Jones, Archer, *Confederate Strategy from Shiloh to Vicksburg* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), p. 29.

<sup>11</sup>. For details concerning Lee's tactical weaknesses, see Chapter 12, "Overview."

<sup>12</sup>. General James Longstreet said, "In the field, [Lee's] characteristic fault was headlong combativeness... He was too pugnacious." Wert, Jeffrey D., *General James Longstreet: The Confederacy's Most Controversial Soldier--A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) [hereafter Wert, *Longstreet*], p. 296.

<sup>13</sup>. Lee explained his approach to a Prussian military observer at Gettysburg: "I think and work with all my powers to bring my troops to the right place at the right time; then I have done my duty. As soon as I order them into battle, I leave my army in the hands of God." To interfere later, he said, "does more harm than good." Connelly, *Marble Man*, p. 199; Piston, William Garrett, "Cross Purposes: Longstreet, Lee, and Confederate Attack Plans for July 3 at Gettysburg" [hereafter, Piston, "Cross Purposes"] in Gallagher, Gary W., *The Third Day at Gettysburg & Beyond* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994) [hereafter, Gallagher, *Third Day*], pp. 31, 43. "What Lee achieved in boldness of plan and combat aggressiveness he diminished through ineffective command and control." Glatthaar, Joseph T., *Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, Inc., 1994) [hereafter, Glatthaar, *Partners in Command*], p. 35. "Lee's battlefield control was minimal." Piston, William Garrett, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant: James Longstreet and His Place in Southern History* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1987) [hereafter, Piston, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant*], p. 36.

<sup>14</sup>. Glatthaar, *Partners in Command*, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup>. "Lee's failure adequately to order his generals to perform specific actions or discipline them if they failed was probably his greatest character defect... One of his staunchest defenders [Fitzhugh Lee] agreed: 'He had a reluctance to oppose the wishes of others, or to order them to do anything that would be disagreeable and to which they would not consent.['']" Katcher, *Army of Lee*, p. 26. "Every order and act of Lee has been defended by his staff officers and eulogists with a fervency that excites suspicion that, even in their own minds, there was need of defence to make good the position they claim for him among the world's great commanders." Bruce, George A., "Lee and the Strategy of the Civil War," pp. 111-38 [hereafter, Bruce, "Lee and Strategy"] in Gallagher, Gary W. (ed.), *Lee the Soldier* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) [hereafter Gallagher, *Lee the Soldier*], p. 117.

and about 90,000 more than any other Confederate general.<sup>16</sup> Although Lee's army inflicted a war-high 135,000 casualties on its opponents, 60,000 of those occurred in 1864 and 1865<sup>17</sup> when Lee was on the defensive and Grant was engaged in a deliberate war of attrition (achieving attrition and exhaustion) against the army Lee had fatally depleted in 1862 and 1863.<sup>18</sup> Astoundingly (in light of his reputation), Lee's percentages of casualties suffered were worse than those of his fellow Confederate commanders.<sup>19</sup>

During the first 14 months that Lee commanded the Army of Northern Virginia, he took the strategic and tactical offensive so often with his undermanned army that he lost 80,000 men while inflicting only 73,000 casualties on his Union opponents.<sup>20</sup> Although daring and sometimes seemingly successful, Lee's actions were inconsistent with the North's 4:1 manpower advantage and were fatal to the Confederate cause. By 1864, therefore, Grant had a 120,000-man army and additional reserves to bring against Lee's 65,000 and, by the sheer weight of his numbers, imposed a fatal 46 percent casualty rate on Lee's army while losing a militarily tolerable 41 percent of his own replaceable men, as Grant drove from the Rappahannock to the James River and created a terminal threat to Richmond.<sup>21</sup>

By June, 1864, Lee's diminished forces were tied down by Grant at Richmond and Petersburg. In the following month, Sherman reached Atlanta. Atlanta fell on September 1, and the Shenandoah Valley was lost in October. Lincoln was reelected in November. The South was doomed, Sherman was marching through Georgia, and Confederate soldiers were dying, near starvation and deserting in droves.

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<sup>16</sup> McWhiney, Grady and Jamieson, Perry D., *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1982) [hereafter McWhiney and Jamieson, *Attack and Die*], pp. 19-23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> "Though Lee was at his best on defense, he adopted defensive tactics only after attrition had deprived him of the power to attack. His brilliant defensive campaign against Grant in 1864 made the Union pay in manpower as it had never paid before, but the Confederates resorted to defensive warfare too late; Lee started the campaign with too few men, and he could not replace his losses as could Grant." *Ibid.*, pp. 164-5.

<sup>19</sup> Major Confederate generals' percentages killed and injured were: Lee, 20.2%; Joseph E. Johnston, 10.5%; Braxton Bragg, 19.5%; P.G.T. Beauregard, 16.1%; Earl Van Dorn 8.5%; Jubal Early, 11.2%; and John Bell Hood, 19.2%. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21. See Chapter 12, "Overview," for more comparative statistics. Also, see Appendix II herein, "Casualties in the Civil War."

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19; Livermore, Thomas L., *Numbers & Losses in the Civil War in America, 1861-65* (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus Reprint Co., 1990, reprint of Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957) [hereafter Livermore, *Numbers & Losses*], pp. 82-103.

<sup>21</sup> McWhiney and Jamieson, *Attack and Die*, p. 19; Livermore, *Numbers & Losses*, pp. 110-6.

The time had come to end the war, but Lee did nothing. Revered and loved by his troops and the entire South, Lee certainly had the power to bring down the curtain on the great American tragedy. His resignation would have brought about an even more massive return of southern soldiers to their homes and would have destroyed the Army of Northern Virginia's, and, ultimately, the Confederacy's, will to fight. But he did nothing. For five more months after Lincoln's reelection, up until the last hours at Appomattox, Lee continued the futile struggle. The result of Lee's failure to resign was continued death and destruction throughout the South. This senseless continuation of the slaughter was Lee's final failure.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Although the morale of some in the Confederacy remained high until the end, many realized that defeat was becoming increasingly likely in late 1864 and early 1865. Massive desertions from Lee's army reflected, among other things, the likelihood of defeat. See Chapters 10 and 11.



## Chapter 1

# The Making of the Man and Soldier

"The Lees of Virginia." That simple phrase conveys the historical burden that fell on Robert Edward Lee. Most of his ancestors had been rich, famous and, most importantly, respected.

But, despite a romantic record as a Revolutionary War officer, Lee's father had disgraced the family name. His war record actually was tainted. Henry Lee, III, proudly known as "Light- Horse Harry" Lee, had been court-martialed twice. He had ordered a deserter hanged and then, cruelly, had the man's severed head delivered to General George Washington.<sup>1</sup> Finally, he had resigned from the army in 1782 while engaged in a love affair.

But it was Henry Lee's profligate spending of his two wives' money that brought dishonor and disgrace to him and the family. In 1782, he married his cousin, Matilda Lee, and spent their (her) money so foolishly that she hired an attorney to put the remaining assets in trust for their two sons. After her sudden death, Henry married Ann Hill Carter of the famous and wealthy Virginia Carters -- over the strong and wise opposition of Ann's father. That 1793 marriage resulted in the birth of five children, including Robert E. Lee (the fourth child and third son) on January 19, 1807, but ended in another financial disaster. The grand Stratford Hall plantation, Robert Lee's birthplace, was reduced from 6,600 acres to 236 acres under the profligate management of Light-Horse Harry.<sup>2</sup>

Harry had, thus, squandered a second family fortune, passed bad checks (including one to George Washington), fraudulently sold to his brother land that he no longer owned, and served two jail terms totaling a year for failure to pay his debts. Four relatives cut him out of their wills. In 1813, Lee's father, desperate to escape his debtors, fled the

<sup>1</sup> Nagel, Paul C., *The Lees of Virginia: Seven Generations of an American Family* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) [hereafter Nagel, *Lees of Virginia*], pp. 161-4; Connelly, *Marble Man*, pp. 176-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164-82; Thomas, Emory M., *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995) [hereafter Thomas, *Lee*], pp. 23-9.

country. Five years later, the mortally-ill Light-Horse Harry tried to return to Virginia to die but, instead, perished on Cumberland Island off the Georgia coast while on his return journey.<sup>3</sup>

As if that disgrace were not sufficient, Light-Horse Harry's son, Henry IV (Robert E. Lee's half-brother), earned the sobriquet "Black-Horse Harry" by impregnating his wife's sister, Betsy McCarty, who also was his ward. That 1820 indiscretion became public the next year when she obtained a court order ending the guardianship. The court said that "Henry Lee hath been guilty of a flagrant abuse of his trust in the guardianship of his ward Betsy McCarty." The scandal reached national proportions a decade later when President Andrew Jackson attempted to name Black-Horse Harry consul to Algiers. Because of his previous misconduct, the Senate, in executive session, unanimously defeated the nomination. By then Black Horse Harry, like his father, had fled the country. He never returned.<sup>4</sup>

The notoriety and prodigality of Robert's father and half-brother brought shame and humble circumstances to the small family of Robert, his mother and siblings. After his 1807 birth at stately Stratford Hall in Westmoreland County on Virginia's Northern Neck (east of Fredericksburg), Robert and the rest of the family moved to Alexandria in 1810. This forced move followed the 1809 imprisonment of Light-Horse Harry because of his bad debts. Thereafter, Robert and his mother lived in borrowed homes courtesy of wealthy relatives.

From a very early age, Lee cared for his frail mother, Ann Carter Lee, and his two sisters until he left their Alexandria home to go to West Point in 1825. When he departed Alexandria, his mother reportedly said, "How can I live without Robert? He is both son and daughter to me."<sup>5</sup> Having struggled to live until Robert's return, she died in 1829, about a month after he had returned to Alexandria as a graduate of West Point and an officer in the United States Army.

Restoration of his family's honor became a driving force in the life of Robert E. Lee. At West Point, where he and five of his peers spent four years without receiving a single demerit, Lee's classmates tagged him "the Marble Model." Lee finished second in the Class of 1829.<sup>6</sup>

Upon his mother's death, Lee inherited ten slaves. Two years later, in July 1831, Lee married Mary Anne Randolph Custis, the only child of George Washington's adopted son, and, thereby, went a long way toward reestablishing his aristocratic credentials. His marriage also

<sup>3</sup> Nagel, *Lees of Virginia*, pp. 164-84; Thomas, *Lee*, pp. 24-36; Connelly, *Marble Man*, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas, *Lee*, p. 40; Nagel, *Lees of Virginia*, pp. 207-26; Connelly, *Marble Man*, p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *Lee*, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-55.



gained him access to the grand, 1,100-acre Arlington House plantation, which he made his permanent home until the Civil War. Between 1832 and 1846, the Lees had seven children, two of whom became Civil War major generals; another became a captain in Lee's army.

Lee served in a variety of engineering posts in Virginia (Fort Monroe), New York (Fort Totten), Maryland, Georgia and Missouri. While Lee was on duty around the country, Mary and the children often remained at the Custis family estate in Arlington, across the Potomac from Washington and just north of Alexandria. Mary had been a pampered child and could not tear herself away physically or emotionally from her doting parents and the luxurious estate. She and Robert were separated for most of their married lives. They shared a depressing and strained marriage, and suffered through increasingly debilitating illnesses (she for 30 years and he for his final eight).

The highlight of Lee's pre-Civil War career was his heroic experiences in the Mexican War (1846-48). There he garnered experience and exposure as a member of General-in-Chief Winfield Scott's staff. Scott, rivaled only by General Zachary Taylor as America's hero during the Mexican War, led the victorious campaign from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. Demonstrating initiative, intelligence, and bravery, Lee was a hero in several battles, particularly Cerro Gordo, Contreras, Churubusco, and Chapultepec; he received three brevet (temporary) promotions in recognition of his sterling performance. Lee emerged from the war with the brevet (temporary) rank of colonel. General Scott even talked of insuring Lee for five million dollars if the nation ever went to war.<sup>7</sup>

On the down side, however, his Mexican War experiences may have given Lee an erroneous impression of what could be accomplished by daring, perhaps rash, frontal assaults. He actively participated in a series of successful attacks upon positions defended by poorly-trained infantry armed with unrifled, inaccurate, short-range, muzzle-loading muskets. At Cerro Gordo, for example, the Americans attacked successfully, even against some field works, and emerged victorious with losses of only five percent. Similarly, they incurred insignificant casualties in their successful, war-winning assault on the Mexican fortress of Chapultepec, just outside Mexico City. There was to be little resemblance between those heroic and victorious charges of the Mexican War and the deadly, disastrous frontal assaults of the Civil War.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>. Thomas, *Lee*, pp. 113-42.

<sup>8</sup>. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-1.

Lee's heroic Mexican War adventure may have been the only time he enjoyed his pre-Civil War military career. It, perhaps, made him believe that he had partially restored his family's honor. The Mexican War experience, however, probably created in Lee's mind an unrealistic confidence in the success that could be achieved through offensive warfare. The capture of Mexico City, for example, by an army of 9,000 opposed by 30,000 defenders and a hostile populace may have been misleadingly easy. Any confidence gained by this experience was misplaced because of the basic incompetence of Santa Anna's Mexican Army and the soon-to-be-outmoded weaponry used by the Mexican defenders against the American assaults.

The relatively small number of troops on both sides also distinguished that struggle from the later Civil War. The Americans invading Mexico could be managed by a commanding general with a small staff. Lee, later, would make the mistake of attempting to manage a force many times as large as Scott's with the same, small, personal staff. In addition, Scott's strategic position in Mexico was similar to the North's position, not the South's, in the Civil War. Unlike the Confederacy fifteen years later, Scott had to conquer the Mexicans and win the war and, therefore, was compelled to take the offensive. Also, as Scott moved farther from Vera Cruz, retreat became a less viable option and attack became increasingly necessary. Scott, at Mexico City, unlike Lee at Malvern Hill, Antietam, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg, had to engage the enemy directly. These strategic and tactical distinctions seem to have escaped Lee in the 1860s.

During the early 1850s, Lee served as Superintendent of West Point. In 1855, he became the lieutenant colonel of the just-formed 2nd Cavalry Regiment and embarked on a western tour of duty, once again far removed from his wife and children. His colonel was Albert Sidney Johnston, and they joined John Bell Hood and Edmund Kirby Smith of the same famed regiment as four of the Confederacy's eight four-star generals. In fact, the 2nd Regiment furnished eleven generals to the Confederacy and eight to the Union.

Throughout the 1850s, Lee was depressed and thought of himself as a failure; promotions were slow, accomplishments were few, and his marriage was characterized by duty more than love.<sup>9</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of, his long separations from his wife, Colonel Lee, in early 1859, advised fellow officer Winfield Scott Hancock's wife, Almira Russell Hancock, to accompany her husband to his California post

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas, *Lee*, pp. 175-90 (Chapter 14, "How Hard It Is to Get Contentment"); Nagel, *Lees of Virginia*, pp. 241-62.



because separated young couples "...cease to be essential to each other."<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, the increasing sectional dissension concerned Lee. In 1857 he deplored the growing national discord and expressed his concern about certain northerners who seemed dedicated to "...interfere with & change the domestic institutions of the South."<sup>11</sup>

While on leave in Arlington, in October, 1859, Lee had the opportunity to put down John Brown's ill-fated and poorly-planned slave insurrection and raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Lee's men captured Brown and freed his hostages. The efficiency of Lee's actions at Harper's Ferry enhanced his military reputation in Washington and Virginia. Brown's subsequent hanging, for treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, made him a martyr in the eyes of northern abolitionists.

In 1860, Lee returned to duty in Texas, where he watched, with interest and apprehension, the accelerating rift between the North and South. His correspondence made it clear that he would go wherever the Commonwealth of Virginia went. In December, 1860, he tellingly wrote, "As an American citizen, I prize the Union very highly & know of no personal sacrifice that I would not make to preserve it, save that of honour."<sup>12</sup> By January, he made it clear, in other letters, that his honor compelled him to side with Virginia: "If the Union is dissolved, I shall return to Virginia & share the fortune of my people," and "If the Union is dissolved, I shall return to Virginia and share the misery of my native state..."<sup>13</sup>

On the eve of the Civil War, Robert E. Lee was one of the finest officers of the United States Army, a military hero of the nation's previous war, an officer convinced of the advantages of offensive warfare, and a man obsessed with a need to prove himself and to uphold the honor of his family name.

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<sup>10</sup> Jordan, David M., *Winfield Scott Hancock: A Soldier's Life* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, 1996) [hereafter Jordan, *Hancock*], p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas, *Lee*, p. 173, citing Lee to Edward Childe, January 9, 1857.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186, citing Lee to Rooney Lee, December 3, 1860.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, citing Lee to Annette Carter, January 16, 1861, and Lee to Markie Williams, January 22, 1861.



## Chapter 2

### 1861: Failure In Western Virginia

With the November, 1860, election of Abraham Lincoln, southern state leaders became aware that slavery in U.S. territories, and, thus, slavery itself, was in serious political trouble. There was no northern interest in President James Buchanan's December, 1860, proposal of pro-slavery constitutional amendments which were intended to avoid secession and war.<sup>1</sup> Led by South Carolina, seven states (South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Florida and Texas) seceded from the United States before Lincoln's March 4, 1861 inauguration. On February 9, Jefferson Davis was elected provisional president of the Confederate States of America; he was inaugurated nine days later.

During those critical months, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee, U.S. Army, was on duty in San Antonio, Texas. On February 13, the same day Virginia's Constitutional Convention initially voted against secession by one vote, Lee was ordered to report to Washington. He made the long trek from Texas to Virginia and arrived at his Arlington home March 1, 1861. It is clear, from Lee's Texas correspondence and letters he wrote while journeying to Virginia, that he intended to cast his lot with the Commonwealth of Virginia. Critical to Lee's determination of his future, therefore, was Virginia's decision on whether or not to secede. That decision awaited military developments.

Meanwhile, U.S. military installations were falling into state and Confederate hands throughout the South. The prominent exception was Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, the cradle of the Confederacy. Lincoln refused to surrender the fort, ordered it re-supplied, and maneuvered the southern forces into firing on the fort -- thereby placing the stigma for actual initiation of hostilities on the Confeder-

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<sup>1</sup> Nevins, Allan, *Ordeal of the Union*, IV, pp. 352-4; Savage, Douglas, *The Court Martial of Robert E. Lee: A Historical Novel* (Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Combined Books, Inc., 1993) [hereafter Savage, *Court Martial*], p. 60.