

# Warrior and Gentleman's Gentleman

Despite being a battle-hardened general, Robert E. Lee never lost his most admirable trait: his devotion to God, friends, duty, and honor.

*Because this year marks Robert E. Lee's 200th birthday, we republish, with permission, an abridged version of the chapter on Lee from R. Cort Kirkwood's book Real Men: Ten Courageous Americans to Know and Admire (Cumberland House, 2006). To order the book, please see the ad on the inside back cover. — Editor*

**A**bove most American “giants,” Robert E. Lee soars. Measuring a man against Lee is almost unfair, yet Lee is the standard against which any man could measure himself.

Lee was a Christian gentleman, a Cavalier of the old order, the embodiment of chivalry. He was physically and morally courageous, humble, loyal, steadfast in his Christian faith. He carried his cross. For Lee, duty was all; self-denial and self-discipline were the 11th and 12th commandments; prayer, a daily debt joyfully paid to a merciful, beneficent, and loving God. As one writer describes it, many Southerners who worship at the shrine of Lee would portray him as St. George, slaying the Yankee dragon. He was rather more akin to St. Francis: loving, kind to man and beast alike, retiring, an apostle of humility. Lee never thought of himself before others; he always came fourth, after God, family, and friends. He did not exalt himself and after the War for Southern Independence, he rarely discussed his role in it and he wrote nothing about it.

War won renown for Lee, but the impeccable whole of his manhood is our model.

## Boyhood and Mexico

He was born January 19, 1807 at Stratford Hall, the ancestral manse in Virginia's Northern Neck, the mortar of its bricks having been mixed through seven centuries. To understand the man, one must understand his ancestry and his own model of manhood, George Washington.

During the Norman Conquest of Britain, the family's founder, Lancelot de Lee, courageously fought with William the Conqueror in the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Lee also claimed as an ancestor Lionel Lee, who fought with Richard the Lionhearted in the Third Crusade. The Lees who came to the colonies sired brothers Richard Henry, Francis Lightfoot, and Arthur Lee. On June 7, 1776 in the Continental Congress, Richard Henry offered the motion for independence from Great Britain, seconded by his fast friend, John Adams. Richard and Francis signed the Declaration of Independence; Arthur

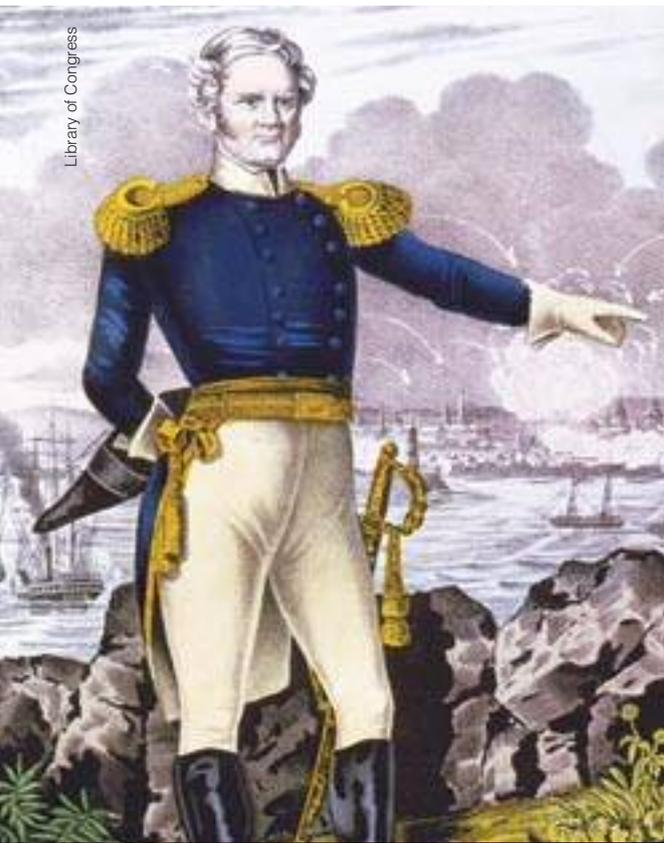


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**Robert E. Lee, likely the best-recalled Southern commander of the War Between the States, owing to several major victories over Union forces, is worth recalling because of his devotion to duty and to doing what was right and honorable at all times — no matter what the situation.**

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**General Winfield Scott, one of the commanding generals in the Mexican-American War, said after the war of his subordinate officer Robert E. Lee: he was the “greatest military genius in America, the best soldier that I ever saw in the field.”**

was emissary to France during the War for Independence from the British Crown.

Robert E. Lee’s father was Lighthorse Harry Lee, George Washington’s intrepid cavalry commander who, fighting with Francis Marion, “The Swamp Fox,” drove the British from South Carolina. His mother was Ann Carter Lee, the daughter of another of Virginia’s first families. Maternally, one historical account says, Lee’s

ancestry traces to Robert the Bruce, and he may have been descended from three other Scottish warriors who fought the English at Bannockburn in 1314. Thus was Lee’s pedigree firmly grafted not only to the infant tree of American liberty but also to the taproot of Western Civilization.

From early childhood, Lee’s hero was George Washington, his father’s commander and first president of the United States. “The family held fast to this reverence,” biographer Douglas Southall Freeman wrote. “In the home where Robert was trained, God came first, and then Washington.” Lee married Mary Custis, Washington’s granddaughter by adoption. Because of Lee’s choice of a wife, for much of his adult life from young manhood, Washington’s relics surrounded Lee, and would ever provide the inspiration for his conduct as a gentlemen, soldier, and American.

Thus did Lee’s aristocratic genealogy, family and cultural heritage, and his indissoluble bond to the early Republic set the unwavering course for his life.

God handed Lee a terrible blow at an early age. His debt-ridden father abandoned the family to roam the Caribbean, then died in 1818, when Robert was just 11, on Cumberland Island, off the Georgia coast. But imbued in his son were the virtues that would see him through West

Point, across the battlefields of Mexico, and in the War Between the States.

Even as a boy, Lee exhibited the qualities that made the man. “He was a most exemplary student,” said Lee’s Quaker teacher in Alexandria. “He was never behind-time in his studies; never failed a single recitation; was perfectly observant of the rules and regulations of the insti-

tution; was gentle, manly, unobtrusive, and respectful in all his deportment to his teachers and his fellow students.” Lee’s “specialty was finishing up.”

In 1825, Lee landed at West Point, where he made his first marks as a man. He had grown into a fine specimen, about six feet tall, with black hair, and handsome beyond what any man deserved, “the handsomest man I ever saw,” a British journalist said. After four years, he graduated as an engineer, first in his class without one demerit. Thus graduated, Lee’s martial exploits began in the thick of battle in Mexico, under the command of General Winfield Scott.

At Cerro Gordo, Lee made his name by reconnoitering for Scott’s army. Furtively scouting the terrain around the hill, the site of Mexican batteries, as well as nearby Rio Del Plan, Lee wound up behind Mexican lines. He was traversing a path near a spring when he heard Spanish voices, and quickly dropped behind a log near the water where the Mexicans came to drink. Undergrowth around the log concealed the tall Virginian, and the Mexicans, discussing the Americans confronting them, sat down on the log just three feet away. One even stepped over the log, but the engineer never moved. He waited hours, until dark, then crept away back to his own lines with a report. Lee led American troops back to the area around Santa Anna’s left, a movement that led to the rout of the Mexicans and the near capture of Santa Anna.

Lee shone again at Padierna and Churubusco, where he crossed a perilous lava field known as the Pedregal. Lee found a road across the field. Next morning, he led a detachment of 500 men, under the command of General Gideon Pillow, across the road to lay siege to Padierna. Lee participated in the battle, then carried messages back to Scott across the Pedregal, through driving rain around immense blocks of lava and across ravines, with “nothing to guide him but his singularly developed sense of direction,” Freeman wrote, “and an occasional glimpse of the hill of Zacatepec when the lightning flashed.” Scott was located in this town, but when Lee arrived, the recipient of his intelligence had gone to San Augustin. Weary and soaked to the skin, Lee carried on to meet his commander. He next undertook a mission at midnight, across the same ground, to

escort General Twiggs to the headquarters of Brigadier General Franklin Pierce.

His missions were preparatory to the Battle of Churubusco, where Lee distinguished himself again and which the Americans won. When it ended, Lee had been walking or riding for 36 hours, had thrice crossed the Pedregal and fought in three actions. Scott said Lee's work was "the greatest feat of physical and moral courage, performed by any individual, to my knowledge, pending the campaign."

Lee led reconnaissance parties again to learn the terrain around Chapultepec, then assembled many of the artillery batteries with which

Scott's forces laid siege to the city. After that, he guided an infantry party and eventually fainted, having gone nearly three days without sleep. Such was the mettle and devotion to duty of Lee. Uniformly, Lee's superior and fellow officers praised his grit and coolness under fire. But Scott's words are the best estimate of Lee.

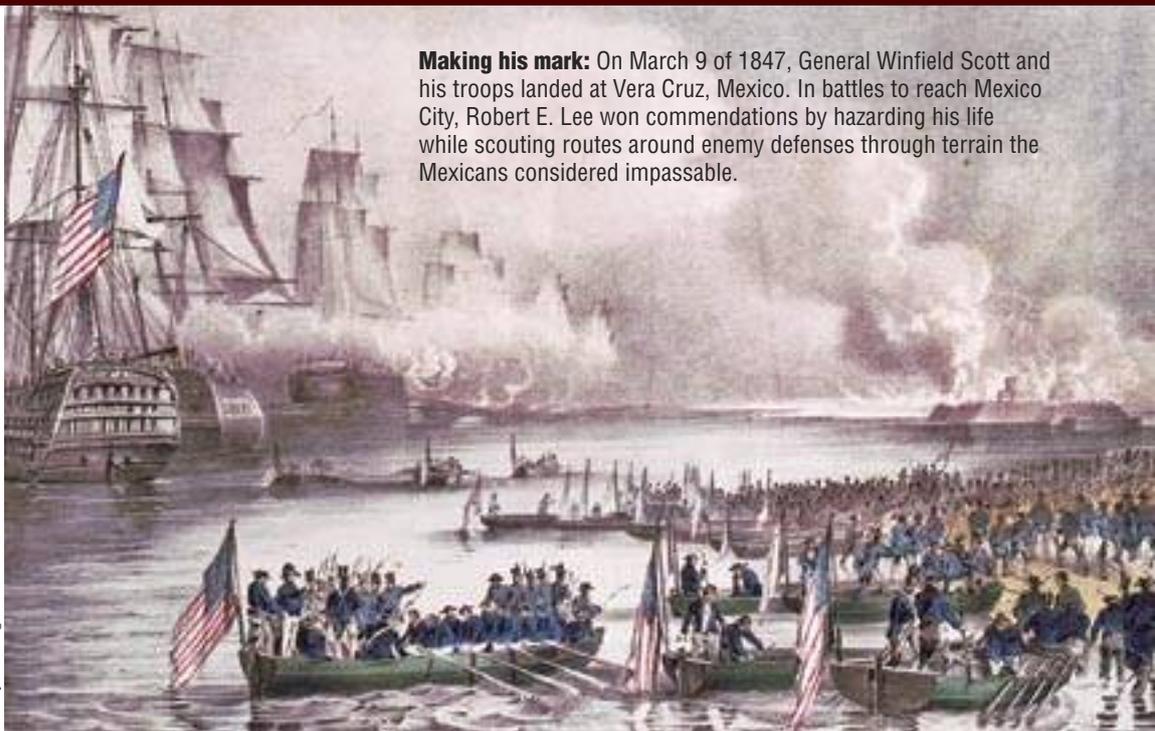
My "success in Mexico," the general wrote, "was largely due to the skill, valor and undaunted energy of Robert E. Lee." He called Lee the "greatest military genius in America, the best soldier that I ever saw in the field." Continued Scott:

I tell you that if I were on my death bed tomorrow, and the president of the United States would tell me that a great battle was to be fought for liberty or slavery of the country, and asked my judgment as to the ability of a commander, I would say with my dying breath, let it be Robert E. Lee.

Lee's fight in Mexico ended with his promotion to colonel. He continued his career in the Army, landing at different posts. He was in Texas when Southern states began seceding from the Union.

### Lee's Duty: Magnanimous Service, Reconciliation

This treatment of Lee avoids detailing his role in the War Between the States. More



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**Making his mark:** On March 9 of 1847, General Winfield Scott and his troops landed at Vera Cruz, Mexico. In battles to reach Mexico City, Robert E. Lee won commendations by hazarding his life while scouting routes around enemy defenses through terrain the Mexicans considered impassable.

important than the tactics he employed in battle were stories about Lee the man — how he conducted himself during the strife.

Lee's decision to fight for Virginia is one such story. Before McClellan, Meade, Burnside, or Grant became giants of the Yankee Army, there was Lee. In 1860, Lee was considered the finest officer in the American Army, although he was not a general officer. On April 18, 1861, Lincoln's top aide, Francis Blair, invited Colonel Lee to meet him. Blair offered Lee command of the federal army, buttressed with 75,000 troops called up by President Lincoln. Lee declined Blair, most likely the most powerful man in America next to Lincoln. Lee would not draw his sword against his home and his people, against Virginia. He was first a citizen of Virginia. After meeting with Blair, Lee went to Scott, who said Lee must resign immediately.

Lee pondered his decision. His wife, Mary, remembered him pacing the floor in his room. A few times, she thought, she heard him fall to his knees in prayer, asking God to guide him. Lee was not, after all, a secessionist, and he thought slavery was a moral evil. But he could not, he knew, draw his sword against his native soil, as he explained in a letter to his sister:

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 save in defence 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.

Lee's decision wasn't just the end of a career; it was the end of his home. Arlington became enemy territory when the war began, and the Lees fled deep into the bosom of Virginia for the remainder of the war, never to return. So angry was Yankee Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs at what he considered Lee's treason and treachery, he buried Union dead around the house, thus beginning the American Necropolis, Arlington National Cemetery.

In victory or defeat, Lee was magnanimous and humble. When his stalwart troops carried the day, he gave the glory to God. When they lost at Gettysburg, he took all the blame. "It's all my fault," he said, and "I alone am to blame." But he also understood that "in the good providence of God failure often proves a blessing." "Thy will be done" was Lee's maxim.

At Gettysburg, Lee demonstrated what it meant to be a Christian officer and gen-

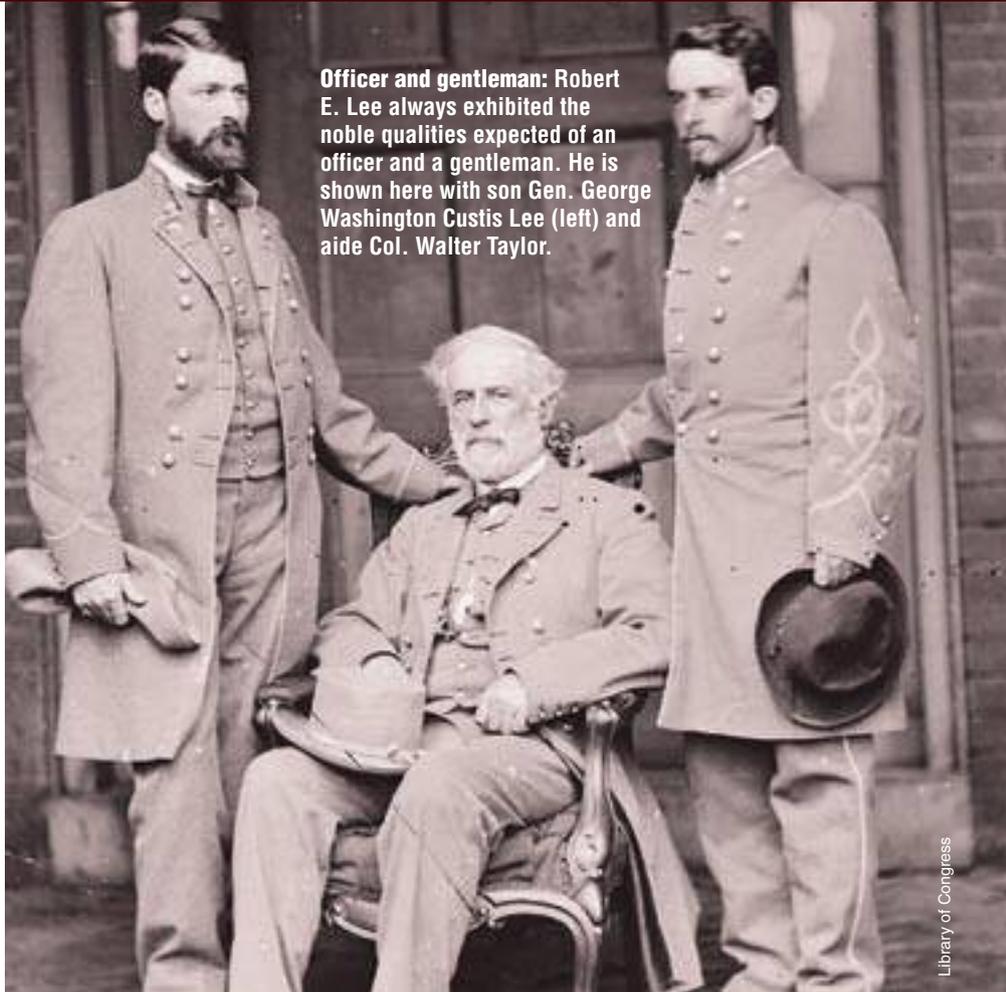
tleman. Not far from Cemetery Ridge, a Yankee soldier lay wounded, a Confederate ball having shattered his left leg. Lee and his officers rode by, and the soldier, “a most bitter anti-South man,” recognizing the most famous man below the Mason-Dixon line, shouted, “Hurrah for Union.” Remembered the Union boy:

The General heard me, looked, stopped his horse, dismounted and came toward me. I must confess I at first thought he meant to kill me. But as he came up he looked down at me with such a sad expression upon his face that all fear left me, and I wondered what he was about. He extended his hand to me, grasping mine firmly, and looking right into my eyes, said: “My son, I hope you will soon be well.” If I live to be a thousand years I shall never forget the expression on General Lee’s face. There he was defeated, retiring from a field that had cost him and his cause almost their last hope, and yet he stopped to say words like those to a wounded soldier of the opposition who had taunted him as he passed by! As soon as the General had left me, I cried myself to sleep there upon the bloody ground.

Lee surrendered at Appomattox because he understood that continuing the bloody war was futile. He gave up the struggle humbly, knowing that the best interests of his country lay in reconciliation, and he discouraged talk of guerilla warfare and permanent discord.

“Madam,” he told a grieving but spiteful Confederate’s widow after the war, “do not train up your children in hostility to the Government of the United States. Remember that we are one country now. Dismiss from your mind all sectional feeling, and bring them up to be Americans.” After the war, in accepting the presidency of Washington College in Lexington, Lee wrote again of reconciliation. “It is the duty of every citizen ... to do all in his power to aid in the restoration of peace and harmony.”

Lee expected Southerners to restore peace and treat Northerners, including former federal soldiers, courteously. Once, when it was rumored that General



**Officer and gentleman:** Robert E. Lee always exhibited the noble qualities expected of an officer and a gentleman. He is shown here with son Gen. George Washington Custis Lee (left) and aide Col. Walter Taylor.

Library of Congress

Grant would visit the Greenbrier, a young woman asked what Lee would do. For Lee, only one answer was possible. “If General Grant comes,” he replied, “I shall welcome him to my home, show him all the courtesies which is due from one gentleman to another.”

On another occasion, a soldier landed at the gate of his home, talked for a few minutes and went away “well pleased,” Freeman wrote. Coincidentally, a pastor of the Baptist Church and college chaplain walked up, whereupon Lee remarked, “That is one of our old soldiers who is in necessitous circumstances.” When the “wholly unreconstructed” pastor inquired after the Confederate command for which the poor man had fought, Lee replied, “He fought on the other side, but we must not remember that against him now.” Later, that Union veteran, like other Northerners, remembered Lee as “the noblest man that ever lived.” Lee “not only had a kind word for an old soldier who had fought against him, but he gave me some money

to help me on my way.”

Lee fully demonstrated what reconciliation meant, not just by denouncing “bitter expressions against the North and United States government” as “undignified and unbecoming,” but by a deed of remarkable moral courage at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond. When the minister announced communion, a black man stood first, then walked up to the altar and knelt in his Sunday finery. The congregation was stunned, the congregants kept to their seats in “solemn silence,” according to one account, and the minister was embarrassed. They believed it was an attempt to embarrass the congregants with a symbolic, undeclared avowal that the regime of the Old South had ended. But then Lee rose and knelt next to the man, his example a silent reproach to the assembly.

## Humility, Honor, and Duty

In accepting the post at the college, Lee again demonstrated his deeply ingrained and life-long humility. “I have feared that

I should be unable to discharge its duties to the satisfaction of the trustees or to the benefit of the country. The proper education of youth requires not only great ability, but I fear more strength than I now possess.”

But Lee had always been a humble man. When the secession convention in Virginia appointed him commander of the state’s army and navy, he said he was “not prepared.... I would have much preferred had your choice fallen on an abler man.” One wonders whom that would have been. Lee once told a would-be biographer who requested an interview, “I know of nothing good I could tell you of myself.” And to Jefferson Davis, he once wrote, “I have no complaints to make of anyone but myself.”

Even in a letter to his wife in 1863, Lee’s humility speaks: “I tremble for our country when I hear of the confidence expressed in me. I know too well my weakness, and that our only hope is in God.” Just before his death, on a tour of the South, crowds of admirers awaited his every stop, much as the soldiers who followed him into battle cheered him as he rode through their ranks. But Lee was ever humble: “Why should they care to see me?” he asked, “I am only a poor old Confederate.”

As Marshall Fishwick wrote in *Lee After The War*, “Never would Robert E. Lee scramble for favor.” Although still a captain 21 years after leaving West Point, “he would not push his case” for promotion. “I know how those things are awarded at Washington, and how the President will be besieged by claimants. I do not wish to be numbered among them.”

At the college, his mission, a reprise of his superintendency at West Point, was uncomplicated. Lee wouldn’t just instruct his charges academically, but morally and religiously as well. He knew the students by name and the grades they made, and could recite them from memory. He once corrected a professor on one pupil’s mathematics grade, again, from memory. He gently remonstrated with young men who fell behind in their studies. But his maxim as a man whose

guide was the Bible, and who was charged with the formation of a young man’s future, was simple: “If I could only know that all the young men in the college were good Christians,” said he, “I should have nothing more to desire. I dread the thought of any student going away from the college without becoming a sincere Christian.” At Washington College, Lee attended chapel daily, another example for the men he would send into the world.

His renown was such that businessmen sought to profit by his name, but Lee, having accepted a mission to educate young men, refused their blandishments. On one occasion, he refused \$10,000 to act as titular head of an insurance company. “I cannot consent to receive pay,” he answered, “for service I do not render.” He turned down a \$50,000 annual salary from an English businessman with these words, “I cannot leave my present position. I have a self-imposed task. I have led the young men of the South in battle. I must teach

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their sons to discharge their duty in life.”

Lee’s gift to us is his example, his dedication to duty, his humility, his self-denial and his faith. Lee practiced what he preached; he set an example for his sons and daughters, and instructed them in the timeless truths that inspire right reason and a Christian life that would get them to Heaven. He left many of his maxims in letters to his children, students at West Point, and Washington College and fellow officers. Among the many, these are representative:

- “You cannot be a true man unless you learn to obey.”
- “There is a true glory and a true honor:



**Surrender: At Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, after being surrounded, Lee surrendered his army to Union General Ulysses S. Grant. Hearing of Lee’s surrender, other Confederate armies also surrendered, ending the War Between the States. Afterward, Lee was a champion of uninhibited reconciliation between the North and South.**

**Lee was, biographer Douglas Southall Freeman wrote, “one of the small company of great men in whom there is no inconsistency to be explained, no enigma to be solved. What he seemed, he was — a wholly human gentleman.”**

The glory of duty done — the honor of the integrity of principle.”

- “God disposes. This ought to satisfy us.”

- “We should live so as to say and do nothing to the injury of any one. It is not only best as a matter of principle, but it is the path to peace and honor.”

- “Those who oppose our purposes are not always to be regarded as our enemies.”

- “Young men must not expect to escape contact with evil, but must learn not to be contaminated by it.”

- “Be strictly honorable in every act, and be not ashamed to do right. Acknowledge right to be your aim and strive to reach it.”

- “If you have any fault to find with any one, tell him, not others, of what you complain; there is no more dangerous experiment than that of undertaking to be one thing before a man’s face and another behind his back.”

John Henry Cardinal Newman, the esteemed 19th-century British prelate, said, “It is almost a definition of a gentleman to say that he is one who never inflicts pain.” The words applied to Lee and formed his own description of what it means to be a gentleman:

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 which the strong have over the weak, the magistrate over the citizen, the employer over the employed, the educated over the unlettered, the experienced over the confiding, even the clever over the silly; the forbearing and inoffensive use of all 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 cannot 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.

Such was Lee’s example that his praises were not just heard in the South, but across the North. Yankees wrote of him admiringly, seeing in Lee a man for the ages, and knowing God had created a peerless human being.

“When the future historian shall come to survey the character of Lee,” said Benjamin H. Hill to the Southern Historical Society in 1874, “he will find it rising like a huge mountain above the undulating plane of humanity, and he must lift his eyes high toward heaven to catch its summit.”

He possessed every virtue of other great commanders without their vices. He was a foe without hate; a friend without treachery; a soldier without cruelty; a victor without op-

pression; and a victim without murmuring. He was a public officer without vices; a private citizen without wrong; a neighbor without reproach; a Christian without hypocrisy and a man without guile. He was a Caesar without his ambition; Frederick without his tyranny; Napoleon without his selfishness; and Washington without his reward. He was obedient to authority as a servant, and royal in authority as a true king. He was gentle as a woman in life; modest and pure as a virgin in thought; watchful as a Roman vestal in duty; submissive to law as Socrates; and grand in battle as Achilles.

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In 1870, Lee’s meritorious life closed. Like Stonewall Jackson, on his deathbed, Lee called upon General A.P. Hill to engage the enemy. “Tell Hill he must come up.” As Lee “crossed over the river to lie under the shade of the trees,” to quote Jackson’s last words, he uttered a final order: “Strike the tent.”

In Lee, we find all that is noble, gentle, kind, loving, faithful, loyal, and courageous. Lee teaches us what it means to be a real man. ■



**Unforgiven in life:** After the war, Lee applied for an amnesty offered to former Confederates who would swear their allegiance to the Union, but through an oversight by the secretary of war, Lee had not received amnesty by the time of his death of natural causes on October 12, 1870.