

*Robert E. Lee: A Reluctant Rebel*  
*Psalm 91*  
*November 13, 2011*

On this Veteran's Day weekend and as our nation commemorates the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, we review the life of one of America's veterans, Robert E. Lee, who served with both the United States and Confederate Armies. I share a brief overview of his life and then three distinguishing characteristics of the man.

Robert E. Lee was born January 19, 1807 to Henry "Light-Horse Harry" and Anne Lee. As a youth Robert was an excellent swimmer, horseman, and skater. His father served as a member of the Continental Congress and governor of Virginia. Following humiliating financial disaster, Henry Lee died when Robert was eleven. As the youngest child, Robert took on the tasks of household manager and nurse for his mother, who was ill.

Robert accepted an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy and graduated in 1829 from West Point with high honors. His Army career spanned 32 years, much of it in engineering duty. The war with Mexico was his first opportunity to serve in the field. For three years he was superintendent of the Military Academy at West Point. After 30 years in the service he received the rank of full colonel. The slow process of advancement was discouraging and often evoked an inner sense of failure.

In 1831 he married his childhood playmate and distant cousin, Mary Custis at the Arlington Mansion overlooking the Potomac River. Mary's father was the adopted son of President George Washington, a hero of Lee's. Seven children were born to Robert and Mary Lee. Mary was chronically ill through most of their 40 years of marriage, becoming an invalid in later years. Their marriage was strained by Robert's long absences and Mary's longing to live closer to her own family. Lee loved to play with his children when he was home and wrote frequent letters of guidance to them from the field.

During the five years after his surrender, Lee refused lucrative business offers. Inspired by a duty to train young men to rebuild the South, he accepted the modest position of President at Washington College in Lexington. The war had left the campus in shambles, with only four professors, scarcely 40 students, no library or laboratories, and a handful of dilapidated buildings. By his death, enrollment had grown to 336 students.

Robert E. Lee died October 12, 1870. His health had been deteriorating for a year. A simple Episcopal service was held, including the hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." The Trustees of the college elected to change the name to Washington and Lee College.

Let us look at three characteristics of this remarkable man.

First, Robert E. Lee was a reluctant rebel. Lee was not an advocate of secession. He disliked the idea. At one time he said, "secession is nothing but revolution." On another occasion, he said, "I wish for no other flag than the star-spangled banner."

Lee accepted a commission as Colonel in the U.S. Army, signed by Abraham Lincoln. Within a month after accepting that commission, Lincoln asked Lee to take command of the army that would deal with the rebellious states. Lee declined.

The key to understanding Lee at this point is that his loyalty to the State of Virginia exceeded his loyalty to the United States. It is almost inconceivable to us who have moved from state to state that there was a time when a person would let loyalty to a state take precedence

over loyalty to the nation. Perhaps in another hundred years our descendants will find it difficult to understand why our generations put loyalty to nation above loyalty to humanity around the world.

This was Lee's position: if Virginia did not secede, Lee would continue as an officer in the U.S. Army. The Virginia Legislature voted to secede. The night after that action, in great anguish of soul, Lee wrote the letter resigning from the Army. He said, "Save in defense of my native state, I never desire again to draw my sword." His wife said that that night Lee "wept tears of blood."

Lee was offered the command of the Virginia state troops. Eventually he became Commander of the Armies of the Confederacy. For Lee the Civil War was a continual weeping of tears of blood. The commanding officers of the opposing army had been his comrades-in-arms. He knew them all. Some had been his teachers when he was a West Point cadet. Some had been his students when he was Superintendent of the Academy.

Lee was no lover of war. In his Christmas letter to Mary in 1862, he wrote, "But what a cruel thing is war, to separate and destroy families and friends, and mar the purest joys and happiness God has granted us in this world; to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbors, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world." Surveying the slaughter at Fredericksburg, he said, "It is well that war is so terrible—we would grow too fond of it."

Following the war Lee thought it was important to establish a working relationship between North and South, between victor and vanquished. He said that the duty of every citizen "is to do all in his power to aid in the restoration of peace and harmony."

He was a reluctant rebel.

Second, Lee was a soldier's general.

To the men of his own army, Lee was revered for both his brilliant leadership and his lofty character. His life was marked by the qualities of grace, humility, self-discipline and duty.

Lee stood up in the presence of enlisted men. They called him "Uncle Robert" – not just when they talked about him but also when they talked to him. He suffered with his soldiers. He slept with but a single blanket under the trees just as they did. Shortages of food and clothing in Lee's army touched every one, officers and men alike. On a cold November day he stopped to show one of his lieutenants how to get a fire started. His soldiers trusted him, not only to make wise strategic decisions, but also to suffer with him when the tide was against them.

In the spring of 1864, General James Longstreet's corps had just returned to Virginia after seven hard months on the western front. Shabby and weary, Longstreet's veterans had little but bitter memories. Lee rode out to welcome them back, a bugle signaling his arrival. He gazed upon them, and then slowly removed his hat in salute. The men cheered wildly. An observer recalled that "the effect was as of a military sacrament."

When Lee surrendered to General Grant, his first thought was for his men. He asked if his calvarymen and artillerymen, who owned their own horses, would be allowed to keep them. Grant said, "No. The terms as written do not permit it." Grant had not known that the Southern Army owned no horses. Lee pressed the matter saying that the men would need their horses for the spring plowing. Grant decided to overlook the written terms and do even more than Lee asked. He turned to his officers and told them to let every Southern soldier claim a horse or a mule. Then Lee whispered into Grant's ear that his men had had nothing but parched corn to eat for several days. Grant had not known that Lee's army was at the point of starvation. He told his officers to share the quartermaster's supplies and to tell every Northern soldier who had three

rations to turn over two of them. Lee's soldiers knew that he cared for them. It is no wonder that they loved him.

As Lee mounted his horse to leave, the Union general and his staff, in a further gesture of respect and goodwill, followed him outside and removed their hats in tribute to a general who for four years had out-thought and out-maneuvered half a dozen of their best generals.

On the sorrowful trip home to Richmond, Lee came upon a young veteran whose mule had bolted, leaving him to walk home barefoot. He took the Yankee to his brother's nearby home to get the young man a pair of shoes.

Lee was a soldier's general.

Finally, Robert E. Lee was a man of deep religious conviction. As a child, he learned of God from his mother. Family worship and scripture reading were daily rituals. His family regularly attended Christ Church in Alexandria, where his hero, George Washington, had occupied pew box number five. Although a devout worshiper, Lee was not confirmed as a member of the Episcopal Church until the age of 46, along with two of his daughters.

He was a man of devout prayer. He prayed daily and selflessly for the needs of others, especially his wife, children, and the men under his command. He was deeply concerned for the safety of others and he mourned the deaths of friend and foe alike. He waged a continuing inner war against depression. In intimate communion with God his confidence and hope were often restored. He had a strong temper, and upon his failure to control his feelings, Lee was not ashamed to apologize and make amends. Tragic events and important decisions often forced him to his knees, asking for guidance and developing a mature faith within.

Lee's favorite book was the Bible. He made it his textbook for daily living. Among his favorite biblical books were Job, the Psalms, especially the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 91<sup>st</sup>, and 120<sup>th</sup>, Romans, and James.

Lee experienced God as a loving Father in Heaven who had guided and protected him and to whom he owed abundant gratitude. It was important that his faith be displayed in action.

One Sunday while worshiping at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, a black man came forward for communion. The congregation was stunned. Lee knew what to do. He rose and went to kneel beside the black man, providing the example for the congregation to follow.

Lee's final public appearance was a vestry meeting at Grace Episcopal Church to discuss two major problems: the building program and the pastor's stipend. Although he was very ill, Lee conducted the three hour meeting with his usual dignity. He personally pledged to make up the deficit in the pastor's salary. His last public words were, "I will give," for then he walked home, collapsed at the dinner table, and died a few days later.

Robert E. Lee was a reluctant rebel, a soldier's general, and a man of deep religious conviction.

Gracious God, we are grateful for the promise of shelter in your loving care. When life is difficult, we long to be embraced in your protective presence. As the pressures mount, we ache to taste your peace. Thank you for reviving our spirits when they are parched. We praise you for rescuing us from the trouble that overwhelms us

We give thanks for those who have served our nation through the armed forces to preserve our freedom. We pray that your protective presence would abide with those who continue to serve. Bless all veterans who live with scars from their wartime experience. Instill courage and hope in those who have been wounded in combat. Offer comfort to families who have lost loved ones in battle.

Move us toward peaceful ways of resolving tension and conflict. Help us to experience the value in one another to avoid the pain suffered by many. May your Spirit of reconciliation enter into the crises that continue to brew around the world.

As many continue to seek employment and housing, we pray that they might find spiritual shelter in your loving present. May those who live in harms way know that you are a trustworthy refuge and fortress. Deliver those who are live on the precipice of despair.

We lift our prayer in the name of Jesus the Christ, who has shown you to be our refuge and fortress. We unite our voices to pray with Christ....

*“And One Was a Soldier”*” *The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Robert E. Lee*, by Bishop Robert R. Brown. White Mane Books, Shippenberg, PA, 1998.

*The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society*, by Thomas L. Connelly. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1977.

*Robert E. Lee: The Other Side*, by Rev. Robert W. Moon. Central United Methodist Church, Stockton, CA, February 11, 1979.

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