**Robert E. Lee**

****

Always outnumbered but never outfought, Robert E. Lee was one of the most brilliant tacticians in American military history and the embodiment of Southern military prowess during the Civil War. The Confederate States of America could not have lasted as long as it did without his battlefield virtuosity. For three years, he defied and outmaneuvered superior numbers of Union troops, though his Army of Northern Virginia was perpetually short of men, equipment, and supplies. Furthermore, Lee's humanity, high sense of duty, and utter selflessness made him a popular figure, respected in the North and revered throughout the South.

Robert Edward Lee was born in Stratford, Virginia. The third son of American Revolution hero Henry Lee, he gained appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1825 and graduated second in his class four years later without a single demerit. Lee subsequently joined the elite Corps of Engineers as a second lieutenant, rose to captain in 1838, and distinguished himself in a variety of engineering tasks along the Mississippi River. During the opening phases of the Mexican-American War, he accompanied Gen. John E. Wool's campaign to Saltillo and in 1847, joined the army of Gen. Winfield Scott during the advance on Mexico City. Lee fought with distinction at Vera Cruz and Cerro Gordo, where his daring reconnaissance determined Scott's flanking movements. After additional fighting at Churubusco and Chapultepec, where he was wounded, Lee gained a brevet promotion to colonel and returned home.

In 1852, Lee was appointed superintendent of cadets at West Point, a post he felt unqualified for, but he revitalized and tightened the school's curricula. Furthermore, he was a strict disciplinarian and nearly expelled his own nephew, Fitzhugh Lee, on account of poor grades and behavior. In 1855, Lee left the academy to become lieutenant colonel of the Second U.S. Cavalry under Albert S. Johnston, a unit renown for training large numbers of future Confederate officers. In 1859, while on a furlough home, Lee was called on to suppress abolitionist John Brown's uprising at Harpers Ferry, which he did bloodlessly with a company of marines. Lee advanced to colonel of the First U.S. Cavalry and was commanding the Department of Texas in 1860 when the specter of civil war awakened a crisis of loyalties.

As a soldier, Lee supported neither secession nor slavery, but he felt deeply obliged to support his native state of Virginia. When President Abraham Lincoln offered him command of all federal armies, he respectfully declined and tendered his resignation in April 1861. By May, he was made a lieutenant-general of Confederate forces by President Jefferson Davis. Lee, however, bungled his initial assignment to subdue the western counties of Virginia, due mostly to uncooperative subordinates. Consequently, he became known in some circles as "Granny Lee." Davis, however, recognized his potential and assigned him to shore up the defenses of the southern Atlantic coast. Before long, Lee was back in Richmond as Davis' military adviser. In this capacity, Lee relieved Union pressure on the Confederate capital of Richmond by dispatching Gen. Stonewall Jackson on his famed Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1862.

Lee's fortunes, and the Confederacy's, changed dramatically when he assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia after Gen. Joseph E. Johnston was wounded at Seven Pines in May 1862. He had never commanded in battle before, but immediately launched what became his tactical trademark—a relentless series of hard-hitting and punishing attacks. This offensive, known as the Seven Days' Battles, pushed the huge army of Gen. George B. McClellan away from the gates of Richmond. The Union forces were never seriously defeated, and Confederate loses were heavy, but Lee had correctly gauged McClellan as overly cautious. In August 1862, Lee and Jackson caught another Union force under John Pope at Second Manassas in a pincer attack and nearly routed it.

Having gained the strategic initiative, Lee then carried the war north into Maryland, and on September 17, 1862, he fought McClellan again at the Battle of Antietam. The battle was a near disaster for the South, but Lee's army was saved by Union bungling and the last-minute appearance of Ambrose P. Hill's division. It was the bloodiest single day of the entire Civil War, with 12,400 Union and 13,700 Confederate casualties, and a strategic defeat for the South. Nevertheless, when McClellan failed to pursue the enemy, Ambrose Burnside was appointed his successor. Burnside cornered Lee into strong defensive positions at Fredericksburg in December 1862. He then resorted to unimaginative frontal assaults against entrenched Confederate positions and was repulsed with heavy losses. The year ended with the Army of Northern Virginia enjoying high morale, world renown, and an aura of invincibility. Lee himself had become an objective of veneration to his men and genuinely beloved.

In the spring of 1863, a new Union commander, Joseph Hooker, decided to force Lee into a decisive battle. He succeeded in outflanking the Confederates in a brilliant march but lost his nerve and fell back to a wooded area known as the Wilderness. Observing this hesitancy, Lee boldly divided his army in half, sending Jackson on a wide sweep around the Union right, which caught Oliver O. Howard's XI Corps on the flank, routing it. The ensuing Battle of Chancellorsville was another major Confederate victory, but the gallant, strategically perceptive Jackson was mortally wounded by his own men. For the rest of the war, Lee was forced to depend on less reliable subordinates.

Taking advantage of Union confusion and demoralization, Lee took the war north again into Pennsylvania. The contending armies collided at the Battle of Gettysburg on July 1, 1863, but Lee, deprived of intelligence when Gen. J.E.B. Stuart took most of his cavalry on a deep raid, could not fight to advantage. Gen. Richard S. Ewell also failed to take the high ground behind the town, while Gen. George G. Meade took up strong defensive positions and defied every attack thrown at him. Gen. James Longstreet and Gen. George E. Pickett were repulsed with heavy losses on July 2 and 3, and Lee retreated back to Virginia. Having lost the most decisive engagement of the Civil War, the high tide of the Confederacy had crested.

In the spring of 1864, Lee was confronted by a new adversary, Ulysses S. Grant, whose Army of the Potomac numbered 120,000. The Army of Northern Virginia scarcely mustered 60,000. When Grant advanced on Richmond, Lee bested him in a series of battles at Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor, inflicting 50,000 casualties. However, unlike his predecessors, Grant did not retreat. When confronted by insurmountable Confederate resistance, he simply sidestepped and inched closer to Richmond, forcing Lee to pursue. In this manner, the Army of Northern Virginia became fixed near the Confederate capital, while Union forces under Gen. William T. Sherman broke through Georgia and advanced on Lee from behind. To relieve pressure on his front, Lee dispatched Jubal Early on a famous, but futile, campaign down the Shenandoah Valley. Early's defeat in the fall of 1864 signaled the coming collapse of the Confederacy.

For nearly a year, Lee maintained his dwindling army in the trenches before Richmond and Petersburg. In February 1865, he was appointed general in chief of all Confederate forces, but by then the Southern cause was breathing its dying gasps. The impasse ended on March 31, 1865, when Gen. Philip H. Sheridan broke through Confederate lines at Five Forks. His position untenable, Lee abandoned Richmond and made a run for North Carolina to link up with Joseph E. Johnston's army. Grant, however, pursed vigorously and the Army of Northern Virginia was cut off by Sheridan's cavalry at Appomattox. Lee, realizing the game was finally up, surrendered there with great dignity on April 9, 1865 to spare his ragged, hungry troops further bloodshed.

After the war, Lee turned down lucrative employment offers and served as president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. He accepted defeat gracefully and urged his former compatriots to work for a restored Union. Following his death in Lexington, Virginia on October 12, 1870, the college renamed itself Washington and Lee University in tribute. Lee occupies a conspicuous niche in the pantheon of American heroes on account of his brilliance, tenacity, and genuine humility. His citizenship was officially restored by an act of Congress in 1975.