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Robert E. Lee: Maker of Morale

Lee Birthday Address 19 January 1926

Douglas Southall Freeman
Edited and Annotated by Lieutenant Commander
Stuart W. Smith, U.S. Navy

Douglas Southall Freeman was born in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1886, received his Ph. D. in history from Johns Hopkins University in 1908, and was the editor in chief of the Richmond News Leader from 1915 to 1949; but it was his work as a military biographer that brought him to national prominence.

Freeman's four-volume study of R. E. Lee (1934-35) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize; his three-volume study of Lee's Lieutenants (1942-44) became "required reading" in military circles; and his seven-volume study of George Washington (1948-57) was also awarded the Pulitzer Prize. With these books Freeman rendered an achievement stunning in its scope and scholarship, and earned for himself a permanent place in American letters.

Freeman wrote this address for his father, Walker B. Freeman, who was the commander in chief of the United Confederate Veterans in 1925-26. It was delivered to the annual "camp fire" of the Confederate Veteran Camp of New York. The elder Freeman, who was seventeen years old at the beginning of the Civil War, served in the ranks of the Army of Northern Virginia throughout the entire war and was present at the surrender of the army at Appomattox on 9 April 1865.

In reading this address, then, it is important to remember that the words are Freeman's but the voice is that of an old soldier speaking to his comrades of their chieftain, and of a war that ended some sixty-one years before.

YOU ARE VERY gracious in your welcome. I thank you for your cordial greetings, and I count myself fortunate to be able to celebrate this nineteenth of January, this "Saint's Day" of the South, among those who have not forgotten the land of their fathers' love.

Commander Smith is the former managing editor of the *Naval War College Review*. This address is an excerpt from his book, *Douglas Southall Freeman on Leadership*, which was published by the Naval War College Press in December 1990. (For a review of the book, see page 133.)

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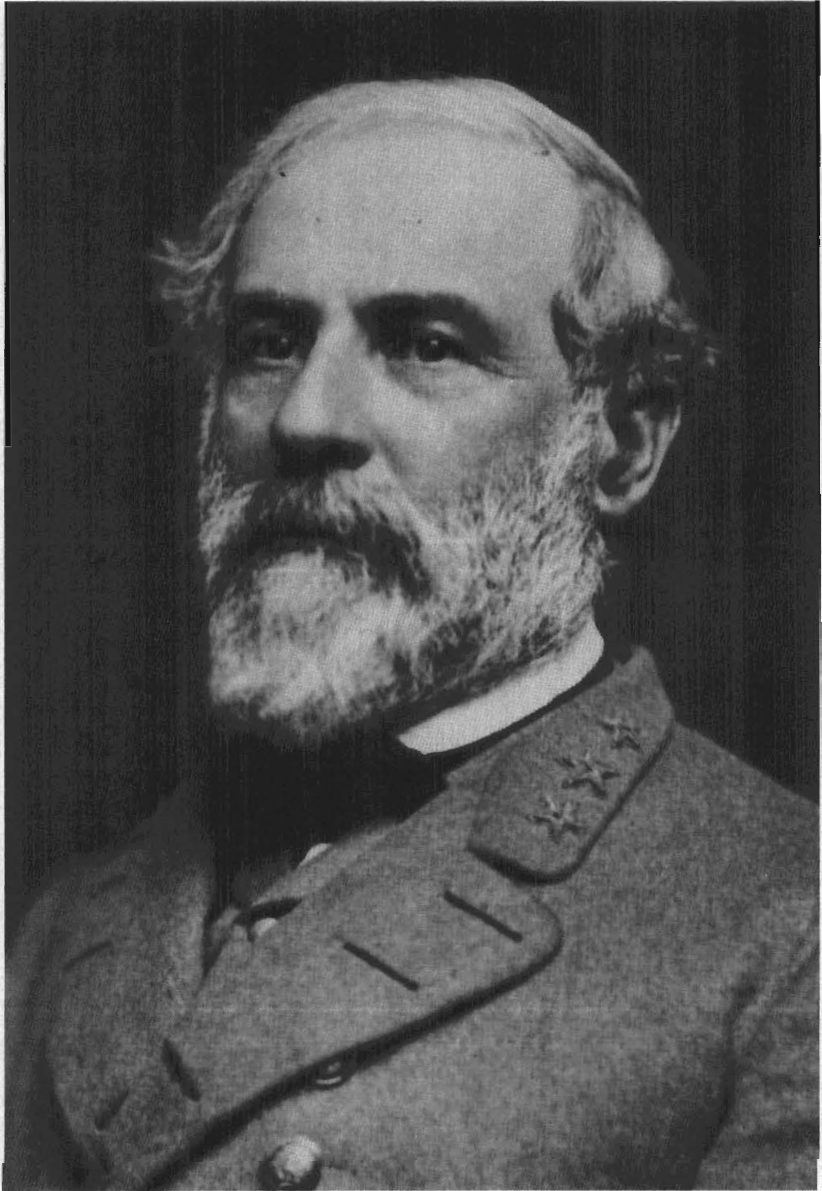
In one of the volumes of reminiscence by an officer of high rank in the war with Germany, I recently read a critical estimate of his general in chief, a man well known in fame to all of you. His superior, this soldier wrote, was admirable but not magnetic, a man to inspire respect but not a man to arouse enthusiasm.

It seems to me that these phrases very fairly represent the opinion most of the ex-servicemen have of the generals under whom they fought in France. I have heard these young soldiers praise their captains often and their colonels frequently, but never their generals, and I have heard other veterans of earlier wars note the same fact. How deeply significant this may be, I cannot say. Much of the lack of enthusiasm of these fine fighting men for their chiefs doubtless is due to the size of the armies engaged in the World War. A single corps of the American Expeditionary Force was larger than the Army of Northern Virginia ever was, except for a short time in 1863. There was one brigadier general of infantry to every ten thousand infantry in France, whereas in "our" war, comrades, the brigade was four thousand men at full strength and, after the bloody battles of 1864, seldom actually numbered more than one thousand effectives. I have seen Confederate brigades, in the last dreadful days of our struggle, with fewer enlisted men than were counted in a full company of the AEF. Very naturally, officers in those days were closer to their men and better known to them than in 1917-18.

Even so, I cannot but contrast the difference between the ex-serviceman of the World War and the Confederate soldier in his opinion of the general whose orders he obeyed. It is a constant amazement to me to perceive how high a morale the American Expeditionary Force displayed, when I reflect that the morale of that army was based on enthusiasm for a cause, whereas in the Confederate army there was enthusiasm for a cause plus enthusiasm for the men who were the chief exemplars of it. With these boys, our sons and grandsons, the cause was America; with us "old boys" it was the South—and Lee.

The contrast suggests a theme I do not think has ever been treated in any of the books on the war, except as it may have been hinted by Swinton and by Henderson.¹ That theme is the morale of the Army of Northern Virginia in its relation to him whose birthday we are here to observe.

When Swinton came to describe Appomattox as it appeared to a man who greatly admired the Army of the Potomac, he had praise for those bluecoats who followed us from Petersburg through the mud and rain of that torrential spring. You and I join in that praise, for the Army of the Potomac was a great army. It had patience. It acquired the very quality of high morale about which I am speaking. It was, in fact, at that time a magnificent host. I often caution my sons, and I warn you, young gentlemen, you sons of Confederate veterans: Never speak lightly of the Army of the Potomac. After it became seasoned, it was the *second best* army in the world. Modesty forbids us Confederates from suggesting which was the best army then in existence.



ROBERT E. LEE

This photograph was taken in Richmond in early 1864. In keeping with his simplicity of manner, Lee wore the three stars of a Confederate colonel without the encircling wreath of a general officer.

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Swinton, I say, had high praise and natural partiality for Meade's army,² but when he told of the ninth of April, when we marched out into that field near Appomattox Courthouse,³ even Swinton was moved. And in an unforgettable passage he apostrophized the "incomparable infantry"—incomparable he called it—of the Army of Northern Virginia.

I well remember a still higher tribute paid us that day. We were coming on that dreadful field under General Gordon, and we were passing through the open ranks of a superb brigade of infantry. We were ragged and we had no shoes. The banners our army had borne to the heights of Gettysburg were bloody and in shreds. There were less than eight thousand of us with arms in our hands, though they were bright and burnished still. Great divisions, the very names of which had once spread terror in the North, were reduced to small regiments, and regiments to squads. We were only a shadow of an army, a ghost of an army, and as we marched in tattered, hungry columns between those magnificent straight lines of well-fed men, faultlessly armed and perfectly equipped, most of us wished, as our great chief did, that we might have been numbered with the fallen in the last battle. But, as we marched forward with heads up—no Confederate soldier ever held his head any other way and no Southerner ever should—as we marched forward in the silence of that sodden field, suddenly I heard a sharp order sent down that blue line, and on the instant I saw that whole brigade present arms to us—to us, the survivors of the Army of Northern Virginia. It was a Maine brigade, comrades, and I confess to you that though more than sixty years have passed since that gray April noon, I never hear the name of that state but that I feel a certain swelling pride as I reflect that there was an army good enough to deserve that salute—and another army magnanimous enough to give it!

What made Swinton call us the "incomparable" infantry of the Army of Northern Virginia? What made Chamberlain's brigade present arms that day in that field by Appomattox Courthouse? It was, I think, primarily because of that army's accomplishments. And what made those accomplishments possible? The morale of the army, I say, and its leadership. The two were bound up together. I doubt if even General Lee could have won so many battles for three unforgettable years, and against such odds, if he had not had the material he did. I am sure the army would not have gained the plaudits it has ever since received if it had not had a Lee to lead it and to inspire its morale. The process, I say, cannot be divided. An army is seldom better than the general who has commanded it through an open campaign. A general is never greater than the troops he leads. It was so with Caesar and his legions. It was so with Richard the Lion-Hearted and his crusaders. It was so with Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, and Grant and the Army of the Potomac. It was true of Pershing and the AEF, and it will be true, I suspect, of the army that fights the last Armageddon and ends forever the bloody strife of a race led away at last from selfishness.

Victory, of course, was responsible for much of the high morale of Lee's army and of the other Confederate forces, whose deeds were as valiant and oftentimes were performed in the face of greater difficulties than we encountered. All honor to our comrades in Tennessee and in the Gulf states, at Vicksburg⁴ and on that stubborn resistance to Sherman's march!⁵

Yet see how quickly that morale was attained, and how few were the victories necessary to develop it! The army that faced McClellan in front of Richmond in June 1862 consisted largely of recruits brought together under a system of elective command, which is about the worst system that can be devised. That army had not passed through the test that weeds out those general officers who are unsuited for the field. General Lee was not popular then. His campaign in West Virginia had not been successful, and he was regarded as a desk-soldier or as an engineer.⁶ Within less than four weeks after he assumed command, he led that green army against a force that was far better equipped and outnumbered him in the ratio of five to three. He took the offensive, fought five battles within seven days, lost 23 percent of his army, and finally saw his adversary get away to the cover of gunboats at Harrison's Landing with fewer losses than he himself had sustained. Within two months thereafter, he had the morale of the army at such a pitch that he was able to divide his forces, to converge on the field of battle with Jackson desperately engaged when Longstreet arrived,⁷ and to win a victory there at Bull Run as brilliant as any he ever gained, except perhaps at Chancellorsville. He not only did this, but he was absolutely confident of his army. When it seemed that day at Second Manassas that Jackson's lines would certainly break before Longstreet went into action, Lee never showed by so much as the quivering of an eyelash that he doubted the arrival of Longstreet's troops. An officer who stood nearby him—the story has never been printed—was a tremble with excitement during those tense moments, and when at last he heard the roar of Longstreet's guns and knew that the troops that had come through the gap were there to relieve the pressure on Jackson, he could scarcely control his enthusiasm. General Lee heard the guns open, of course, but he sat where he was without the slightest gesture or change of expression. Do you wonder we had confidence in a man who had that much confidence in us? And do you not agree that there was something besides victory to give the army such morale that it could win so difficult a victory as that before Lee had been in command three months?

What else was there in the relations of general and subordinates, and what was there in the heart of men and leader that made possible not only that campaign but also those that followed through the months, till hunger wrecked us and our horses there in the trenches of Petersburg in the winter of 1864-65? I am not sure any man can ever give the full answer to that question, for in seeking it we are carried into subtleties of spirit that defy the analyst. We were

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better than by an old comrade of mine, a cavalry captain and long a congressman,⁸ who often said that no man could ever understand the exploits of the Army of Northern Virginia unless he realized that we were a voluntary association of gentlemen organized for the sole business of driving out the Yankees. Nothing else mattered greatly—of privation or of hardship, of long marches or of lonely vigil. We *were* volunteers and we tried to be gentlemen, in camp and in battle, and it *was* our business to drive out the Yankees. We were rather intent upon discharging that business.

“Marse Robert” knew that and knew that he could trust us to the limit of human endurance. He did not have to ask whether we *would* do a thing. You will not misunderstand when I say that he had only to inquire whether the thing *could* be done—whether it was humanly possible for the numbers he assigned to the task. If it *could* be done, he knew it *would* be done! Hence the extreme daring of his campaigns, as in that awful time in June 1864 when he ordered General Beauregard to take those of us who were on the south side of the Appomattox and to hold Petersburg, no matter at what cost. Our line was so thin that in the night, as the bullets kept raining into the stump behind which I crouched, there was not another soldier in sight. The issue was so close that when the artillery was rushed through Petersburg at the gallop, the dust from its dash had not settled on the streets before the anxious people heard the guns open on the enemy. But we held Petersburg. General Lee had told us to.

If he knew he could count on us, we knew we could rely on him, and in our faith in him you have, I think, the third component in the morale of the Army of Northern Virginia. We knew that whatever generalship could accomplish, he would do. We knew he never told us to make a charge unless it had to be made. We knew he never said “hold” unless failure to hold meant disaster to our homes. We were often hungry, but we knew he tried to find us food. We were nearly naked, but we knew he was doing his best to get clothing for us. We were weary oftentimes from the marches he set before us, but were satisfied that he did not call on us to make good his delinquencies. He came daily among us—always the ideal figure of a soldier—and though he never sought popularity by ostentation, when he spoke to us it was with as much of affection as of dignity. I see him now as he looked that awful morning of the seventh of April, 1865, on a hill above Farmville. He had seen all his plans go wrong and all his hopes destroyed. The day before, Ewell’s corps had been captured at Sayler’s Creek and Gordon’s had barely escaped destruction. He must have foreseen what was just two days ahead, but there he sat, composed and reassuring, on his horse. You could see from his manner that his thought was of us, not of himself—of the army’s distress and not of its commander’s defeat. There was not a tremor in his tones as he told us to form across the hill and to collect the stragglers. Nor was there a word of reproach for those good men whose strength had failed them after five days of hard marching.

All that went into making the morale of the army—the confidence and the memory of victory, the general's faith in the army, the army's faith in Robert E. Lee—all three were exhibited more dramatically at Appomattox than anywhere else in the whole history of the army. As he rode back through Gordon's command, the men thronged about him, as you know, until the road was blocked and he had to speak to them.⁹ And what was his message? All about them and nothing about himself! "I have done the best I could for you, men," he began—and I think he need scarcely have gone on and told us we could go home on parole. If he had done his best, that sufficed. His best was enough for us, even in the hour of the death of the Confederacy.

I think our answer to that statement of his was best given by one of the men about sundown, after General Lee had left the apple orchard and while he was on his way to headquarters.¹⁰ The boys all crowded about him, as they had when he came from the McLean house¹¹ to the apple orchard. They started to cheer, and after a little they wept as they looked into his face and saw his anguish for them. And then, one man—a bearded private who doubtless had followed him through it all—cried out to him in words that ought always to be remembered. "General Lee," he said, "General Lee, I love you as much as ever!" In that warm pledge, the Army of Northern Virginia, on the scene of its last engagement, did homage to the leadership of Robert E. Lee. He has been dead these fifty-five years, and we who were "his boys" are now old men. We represent an age that has ended, and we speak for a society that has been well-nigh submerged among alien millions who know not of our yesterdays. Men speak now of another struggle when they refer to "the war." Some of them are so mistaken as to say we should no longer talk of

"Old, unhappy, far-off things
And battles long forgot."

But whatever may have been taken and whatever may have been denied, thank God we have our memories—of the civilization that is no more, of the army whose rear guard we are, of the days when the name of that army made Southern hearts beat up. Nothing in life can take those memories from us, and I doubt if death does. And always in the center of the picture, as radiant as in life, our old chieftain sits astride his horse. Always he rides at the head of the mighty column that memory brings back from the grave, and we acclaim him still as we did in those distant days: General Lee, we love you as much as ever!

Notes

This address is filed in Freeman's papers at the Library of Congress. The original text, a double-spaced rough with handwritten corrections, is in the Speech, Article, and Book File (Container 127). The finished version, a brochure apparently printed for the occasion, is in the Special Correspondence and Biographical File (Container 123). Freeman did not assign a title to this address; the title that appears here is mine.

1. William Swinton was the author of *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: C. B. Richardson, 1866; revised and reissued by Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882). G. F. R. Henderson was the author of several
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books on the Civil War, the best known of which was *Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War*, 2 vols. (London, New York, etc.: Longmans, Green & Co., 1898; new impression published 1904). Freeman once described this book as follows: "Where the careers of Lee and Jackson run together, this book is and will doubtless remain the one best account of their campaigns, and this apart from the fact that as a literary biography it is a masterpiece" (*Lee's Dispatches to Jefferson Davis, 1862-1865*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915, p. xlii).

2. George G. Meade assumed command of the Union Army of the Potomac on 28 June 1863, three days before the battle of Gettysburg, and remained in command of that army until the war's end. However, it was Ulysses S. Grant, commanding general of the Union armies, who directed the movements of Meade's army during the Virginia campaign of 1864.

3. "The ninth of April" was the day Lee signed the surrender terms. The surrender ceremony, during which the Confederate army "marched out into that field near Appomattox Courthouse," took place on 12 April. Neither Lee nor Grant was present at the ceremony. Accepting the surrender for the Union was Brigadier General Joshua L. Chamberlain; at the head of the Confederate column rode Major General John B. Gordon.

Chamberlain was commissioned in the Twentieth Maine Infantry in the summer of 1862 and took command of that regiment in June 1863, one week before the battle of Gettysburg, where he won the Congressional Medal of Honor for his defense of Little Round Top. In the summer of 1864 Grant promoted Chamberlain to brigadier general as a result of his performance at the battle of Petersburg (this was the only field promotion Grant made for gallantry in action). For a marvelous portrait of Chamberlain, see Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels* (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1974), a superb novel of the battle of Gettysburg as told through the eyes of some of the principal commanders there.

One of the most capable of Lee's commanders, John B. Gordon began the Virginia campaign of 1864 as a brigade commander and ended it as the commander of the Second Corps. In the third volume of *Lee's Lieutenants* Freeman describes Gordon as follows: "A certain freshness, a boldness, a freedom, an originality in sound military design are Gordon's. He differs from most orators in that his actions outdo his exhortations. . . . No wonder an admiring soldier says of him: 'He's most the prettiest thing you ever did see on a field of fight. It'd put fight into a whipped chicken just to look at him!'"

4. Vicksburg, Mississippi, a Confederate stronghold high on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, fell to Union forces under Grant on 4 July 1863. The fall of Vicksburg combined with the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg marked the beginning of the end of the Confederacy. The Mississippi River was now in Union hands, the Confederates had lost men that they could not replace, and the stage was set for the major events of 1864: the assignment of Grant to command all the Union armies, his movement against Richmond, and Sherman's movement against Atlanta.

5. William Tecumseh Sherman assumed command of the Union armies in the West in succession to Grant, who in March 1864 was called east to take command of all the Union armies. During the next few months Grant moved against Richmond and Sherman moved against Atlanta, which fell in September 1864. On 15 November Sherman's forces left Atlanta on their "March to the Sea," which ended with the capture of Savannah on 21 December. Sherman was a proponent of "total war," and this march was characterized by the widespread destruction of civilian property.

6. Lee was thrust into command of the Army of Northern Virginia on 1 June 1862, when General Joseph E. Johnston was wounded at the battle of Seven Pines, just outside of Richmond, Virginia, capital of the Confederacy. When Lee assumed command, the Union Army of the Potomac, under General George B. McClellan, was within seven miles of Richmond.

Lee's service reputation rested on the following foundation:

- He graduated second in the West Point class of 1829, having served as adjutant of the corps during his senior year. In his four years at West Point, he had not received a single demerit.

- He spent the next twenty-six years in the Corps of Engineers. During the Mexican War he served with great distinction on the staff of General Winfield Scott. He displayed great skill and bravery during the invasion of Veracruz and the subsequent advance of Scott's army to Mexico City, rising in rank from captain to brevet colonel. Scott later referred to Lee as "the very best soldier I ever saw in the field."

- From 1852 to 1855, Lee served as the superintendent of West Point (a position then required by law to be filled by an engineer officer).

- In March 1855 Lee transferred from the staff to the line when Secretary of War Jefferson Davis appointed him second in command of the newly established Second Cavalry regiment. These duties took him to the frontier (primarily Texas), where he was involved in many courts-martial and an occasional skirmish with Indians or bandits. In October 1857 Lee began an extended period of leave to return to his home in Arlington, Virginia and settle the complicated estate of his father-in-law. He was concluding this leave in October 1859 when he was assigned to command of the forces hastily assembled to capture John Brown and his men, who had seized the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

• During the first year of the Civil War, Lee served briefly as the commander of Virginia's forces and then as military adviser to President Davis. In late July 1861, Davis sent Lee to western Virginia to coordinate Confederate operations against two Union armies. During the next three months, Lee reorganized the Confederate forces and managed to halt the Union advance, but the only offensive operation of the campaign failed when Lee's forces became bogged down on rain-slickened mountain slopes. From November 1861 through February 1862, Lee supervised the fortification of the Georgia and South Carolina coasts. He returned to Richmond in early March 1862.

As a result of this background, Lee was regarded as a staff officer rather than a field commander; and his appointment to command the Army of Northern Virginia was greeted with skepticism in many quarters.

7. Thomas J. ("Stonewall") Jackson and James ("Old Pete") Longstreet emerged from the battles of Seven Days, Second Manassas, and Sharpsburg as Lee's best division commanders. In October 1862 the Army of Northern Virginia was organized into two corps: Longstreet was given command of the First Corps and Jackson the Second.

In the first volume of *Lee's Lieutenants* Freeman describes Longstreet as follows: "Blunt and roughly bantering, he is not ill-natured. If he is not brilliant, in strategy or in conversation, he is solid and systematic. . . . The secret of his power is his incredible nervous control. He never gets tired."

And of Jackson Freeman writes: "Mediocre teacher at the Virginia Military Institute and a former professional soldier, age 37, profoundly and, some say, fanatically religious, with a precise regard for discipline and army regulations. A man he is of contrasts so complete that he appears one day a Presbyterian deacon who delights in theological discussion and, the next, a reincarnated Joshua. He lives by the New Testament and fights by the Old."

8. Identified in Freeman's later lectures as Captain John Lamb, Lamb commanded a Virginia cavalry company during the war and served in the House of Representatives from 1897 to 1913.

9. This scene occurred just after Lee's surrender to Grant (their meeting having concluded at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon).

10. After speaking to Gordon's men, Lee retired to a nearby apple orchard, where he clearly wanted to be left alone. He departed the orchard just before sunset to ride back to his headquarters, about a mile away.

11. Grant and Lee negotiated the surrender of Lee's army at the home of Wilmer McLean in the village of Appomattox Court House. McLean's former home in Manassas had been occupied by the Confederate army and seriously damaged by Union artillery fire during the first battle there. In the spring of 1862 McLean had moved to Appomattox to escape the war, but to no avail. The war in Virginia ended as it had begun: in McLean's parlor.

Ψ

It is well that war is so terrible—we should grow too fond of it!

Gen. Robert E. Lee