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Lee's leadership skills are not about the South versus the North. He served both armies honorably and to the best of his abilities, as such he won the admiration and respect of his superiors and his subordinates. The focus is on the charismatic, self-disciplined man, who chose to follow his conscience and not take a path to the temptations of power and glory.

After thirty-two years of meritorious military service in the United States Army he was tempted with power, glory, promotion, and reward. In 1861 he was the first choice of Lincoln for the number one position as the commander of all the Union armies to lead the Union forces in stopping the succession of Southern states and preserving the Union. Lee graciously declined the honor. He wanted no part in invading the Southern states. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

When Virginia succeeded from the Union it made Lee's choice to resign his U.S. Army commission most difficult as he did not believe in succession nor was he a supporter of the institution of slavery. However, his choice was most cavalier – devotion to his home state of Virginia, where less than ninety years earlier his father had fought along side George Washington and other famous Virginians for the independence of a new nation. His family ties were deep and strong, he could do no harm to his family and fellow Virginians. All he really ever wanted to be was a farmer. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

All of this changed when Jefferson Davis called upon Lee to serve in the new army of the Confederate States of America. Lee thought it his duty to protect and defend Virginia. He had been given the daunting task of building a cohesive fighting army from

a population of independent minded small time southern farmers. Lee went about the monumental task with the same tenacity that he used as an Army engineer to reroute part of the Mississippi River in St. Louis. Within eight weeks he had his Army of Northern Virginia. It took four long tumultuous years and a multitude of Union generals to finally wear down the determined Robert E. Lee and his loyal troops. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

The Life of Robert E. Lee

In the analysis of leadership the rhetorical question -‘is a leader born or made?’- will invariably be asked. If there were ever an instance where the response, ‘a leader is born’, was given, then the reference would have to be to Robert Edward Lee, third son of Henry ‘Light-Horse Harry’ Lee of Revolutionary War fame and Ann Carter Lee. Henry Lee’s leadership abilities are exemplified by service in the Second Continental Congress, as governor of Virginia, as commander of forces to put down the Whiskey Rebellion and then as a member of the U.S. Congress in 1799. And, the Lee-Carter family roots go even further back into English and Scottish royalty with sterling examples of leadership. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

Born he was in 1807, in Stratford, Virginia, the fifth of six children. His mother was sickly; neglected by her husband, but nonetheless stoic, never complaining. His father forever absent, constantly in debt and quickly losing favor with close friends of the likes of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. When Robert was five years old his father was nearly killed by an angry mob. Deep in debt ‘Light-Horse Harry’ exiled himself to the West Indies, leaving his ailing wife and family at the mercy and good will of relatives and friends. They soon moved to Arlington, where Robert began to identify

with George Washington as his father figure through his associations with George Washington Parke Custis, Washington's adopted son, and Mary Anne Custis, great-granddaughter of Martha Washington. By the age of 12 with his older brothers away at school and his father dead, Robert became the head of the Lee household. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

Robert hardly knew his father, yet he was to live in his father's shadow with the burden of being the man his father was not. Robert's mother was a devout Episcopalian and raised her son to be deeply religious. She did not want another soldier in the family, but faith would have it no other way. There was no money left to send Robert to college or even money to help him establish himself in farming, his real life's ambition. With the help of good family friends, John C. Calhoun and Andrew Jackson, Robert received an appointment to West Point Military Academy – a free education and guaranteed employment. Here Robert meticulously studied engineering and mathematics. He graduated second in his class with no demerits – a high honor. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineering. Shortly, thereafter he took a furlough to attend his dying mother. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

In 1831 his marriage to Mary Anne Custis tied him to the Washington name and fortune, but fame and fortune was not what Lee was seeking. (Note: at this point the last name is used to reference Robert E. Lee) Mary's father was a poor financial planner and it took much effort for Lee to make the home place profitable while paying off the many debts incurred by George Washington Parke Custis. After the war their beloved Arlington home would become the site of the Arlington National Cemetery. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

As an engineer, he excelled in building bridges, levees and even in rerouting the Mississippi River at Saint Louis. Hard work was not something that Lee would avoid; in fact, he seemed to thrive on difficult challenges. Later he participated in the Mexican War of 1846 under the leadership of General Winfield Scott. Lee's attention to detail in construction and especially in reconnaissance caught the General's attention. Scott became Lee's mentor and later friend and promoter. After the Mexican War, Robert served as Superintendent of West Point for three years. Shortly before the Southern states began to succeed, Lee was called upon to put down John Brown's insurrection at Harper's Ferry. This he did without firing a shot, because he did not want any of Brown's captives harmed, one of them being a cousin of George Washington. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

Initially, Lee thought when the states began succession steps that at best the Union would be dissolved, nothing more. His desire was to return to Virginia to become a private citizen, wishing not for conflict. Regretfully, that did not happen. He was offered command of the Union forces to stop the succession; however he refused and after much consideration resigned his commission in the United States Army. Later, he was offered a commission in the Confederate Army to provide for the protection of his home state of Virginia. Feeling it was his duty he accepted. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

As the War Between the States progressed Lee provided examples of stamina, courage, compassion, surprise and fortitude. Against all odds he and the Army of Northern Virginia held at bay an army three times its size and with endless provisions for four long arduous years. However, Lee's army caused much grief with the commanders

of the Union forces – many of which were reassigned for their inability to neutralize their foe. Through it all Lee's men stayed with him battling not only the 'enemy', but the effects of disease, hunger and the lack of proper equipment. It was only a matter of time before attrition would force General Robert E. Lee to make the final decision to surrender to Ulysses S. Grant. Lee noted that he would rather die a thousand deaths than go through with the process. However, he knew his men had given their all and there was little left to ask of them. Lee could not let them or his homeland suffer any longer. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

After the war, Lee was offered many opportunities to use his fame to advance himself financially and politically. His nature would not allow that. At one point the Democratic Party tried to persuade him to run for president against U.S. Grant. He was so endorsed in an editorial in the New York Herald as the candidate of choice:

...nominate General R. E. Lee ... making no palaver or apology. He is a better soldier than any of those they have thought upon and a greater man. He is one in who the military genius of this nation finds its fullest development. Here the inequity will be in favor of the Democrats for this soldier, with a handful of men whom he moulded (sic) into an army, baffled our greater Northern armies for four years, and when opposed by Grant was only worn down by that solid strategy of stupidity that accomplishes its object by mere weight. (p. 167, Crocker, 1999)

Very strong support from a once hostile media, but Lee was that type of leader. In war and in peace he was respected for the person he was. And, being the person he was he declined the limelight of politics.

An offer did come from Washington College asking Lee to become its new president. This caught his attention and he humbly accepted only after informing the Board of his faults and obligations. Because of the war the college had suffered severe damage to its buildings. Lee approached the challenge of rebuilding the college the same way he looked at life – turning problems into advantages. With much perseverance he began an aggressive fund raising campaign to rebuild damaged buildings and construct new ones. He knew that the youth of the reconstruction period would need additional life skills, so he set about developing new curriculums. As he did with his troops he always made time to talk with his students. Lee stated his main goal for the students at Washington College as, “My only object is to endeavor to make them see their true interest, to teach them to labor diligently for their improvement, and to prepare themselves for the great work of life” (p. 146, Crocker).

The strains of war had been heavy upon Lee; in 1863 his health had begun to suffer from the long hours of fatigue and poor living conditions. He died on October 12, 1870 from the complications of a stroke and heart problems. He was eulogized in both the North and South as a great leader. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

Preparation for the Leadership

From a rather simplistic viewpoint, it would be rather obvious that time spent at West Point and the 32 years in the service of the United States Army prepared Robert E. Lee for this role as a general during the War Between the States. This, of course, would overlook his ancestral roots, the influence of Revolutionary War heroes, his love of country, his harmony with nature, and his mother’s strong spiritual influence.

As a young boy, Lee enjoyed being outdoors where he hunted wild game and outfoxing the fox hunters by reaching the kill before they did. At an early age he exhibited the ability to anticipate, understand his environment and the element of surprise. (Blount, 2003) These skills would later serve him well in his military career.

The belief of the Episcopal Church that “accepted the world as it was, that accepted the need for doing good and shunning evil while also recognizing that evil could never be abolished” (p.15, Crocker) had a profound influence on Lee. To Lee there could be no creation of heaven on earth, only reality. Mankind would usually fail. Lee understood this and accepted the challenges to succeed regardless. This acceptance of the Christian doctrine of Original Sin was the essence of Lee’s character (Crocker, 1999).

Lee’s Leadership Style

Lee’s understanding of human failure allowed him to make adjustments for mistakes his officers made; however, he would transfer the officer if they did not learn from their mistakes. He strived to always to do his duty to the best of his ability, expected others to do the same, but realized that people could fail. He never placed blame on others when things did not go his way; he took responsibility for the outcomes and looked for opportunities to turn the failures into successes. He conferred with his staff often and gave them the discretion to interpret his orders. By allowing his people to take responsibility to participate in the decision making he empowered them to excel.

(Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

Lee led his men in battle by example. He would often ride to the front lines on his horse, Traveller, to check on his men and encourage them to stand the line. He shared the same rations as his men and he slept in tents as they did. He always avoided making

himself look as if he were aloof. Accordingly, he never asked more of his men than he did of himself (Crocker, 1999).

Gardner (1990) observed that, “Leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual ... induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers” (p. 1). Though somewhat odd, Lee did not like to be confrontational and therefore, this could be construed as a weakness. However, Lee preferred to use persuasion as the best course of action, not force. He voiced his concern over the need for force to resolve the issues leading up to conflict. Later as an officer in the Confederate Army he used persuasion to influence Jefferson Davis to delegate more powers and not micromanage the war. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

Strengths and Weaknesses

Lee was great because of the way he lived and because of what he was. He had a strong sense of duty to those around him. He believed in doing what is right and accepting the responsibility for his actions. To Lee to lead was to serve, “as in the Gospels, the rule of leadership is that to whom much is given, much is expected, and a leader must do what he can for those less well placed than himself” (p. 178, Crocker).

Lee believed that one should have the freedom to pursue the dictates of conscience. He trusted in conscience and he trusted his people. Much of Lee’s strength came from his strong belief in asking a higher power for guidance. Religion gave Lee “a profoundly realist understanding of human nature” (p.15, Crocker). He was humble, noting that, “the most effective leaders come to serve” (p. 65, Crocker).

He was inspirational – even in the face of insurmountable odds he would ride his horse, Traveller, to the front lines weaponless, ready to lead his men. Lee always accepted responsibility himself, never placing blame on others – he blamed himself and only himself for the Confederate failure at Gettysburg. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

He was pragmatic, but openly optimistic even in the face of the most dire circumstances. To his son, Custis, he wrote, “All is bright if you will think it so. All is happy if you will make it so. ... Live in the world you inhabit” (p. 16, Crocker). He believed in simple pleasures, not unattainable fantasies.

Lee did not rely on force to gain respect. He thought the use of force for this purpose was a weakness. Lee’s strength was in the power of example. Though he was opposed to succession he conceded that “a Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets ... has no charm for me” (p. 24, Crocker). While he abhorred war, his loyalty to Virginia and the defense thereof put him a contentious state of contradiction.

The one major weakness that seemed to surface was that he was too focused on defending Virginia, while not providing the attention needed to other areas of the Confederacy. While this may seem as an overall weakness, it was clear from the beginning that Lee’s main focus was indeed Virginia. His objective was to drive ‘those people’ out of Virginia. (Crocker, 1999) Another weakness was pointed out by his nephew, who after the war noted that Lee hesitated to “oppose the wishes of others, or to order them to do anything that would be disagreeable and to which they would not consent” (p.128, Blount). This would seem contrary to what one would consider a strong leader, who normally is considered to be decisive and to the point, focused on getting the job done with minimal consideration for being popular. However, it was Lee’s nature to

not offend those with which he interacted. He preferred friendly persuasion over what he considered ungentlemanly behavior. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

Why was Lee a leader?

Lee's aide Colonel Marshall wrote, "Such was the love and veneration of the men for him that they came to look upon the cause as General Lee's cause, and they fought for it because they loved him. To them he represented cause, country, and all" (p. 146, Crocker). According to Bennis (1993), there are three elements that subordinates seek in a leader: "direction or vision, trustworthiness, optimism . . . , good leaders make people hopeful" (p. 1). Lee provided his men with hope and even on the day of the surrender at Appomattox his men looked to him to just "... Say the word and we'll go in and fight 'em yet" (p.158, Crocker). Even to the very end, these exhausted, dirty and hungry men would have fought on to their very annihilation. And why is this? The trust that Lee bestowed upon his men to do the right thing, in showing his troops compassion, never placing blame on others, never expecting them to do what he would not do himself – for this, they loved and respected him. He was for all practical purposes their patriarch. (Crocker, 1999)

Conclusion

Lee learned the meaning of responsibility as a young boy, caring for his sickly mother and sisters. His father had placed the burden of manhood on him at a very young age. Because of this his mother was most influential in rearing Lee in the cavalier age of the Anglican-Episcopal Church. What Lee learned from the tenets of Christianity allowed him to embrace the challenges in a stoic, self-governing manner that would later become the enduring nature of his character. His religious convictions were his tenets for

duty and good manners. He developed self-reliance and self-confidence, not self-pity or self-indulgence. He accepted the fallibility of mankind, never placing blame on others, nor did he swear and very rarely did he lose his composure. While tolerant of others imbibing, he did not drink alcohol. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003) All through his life Lee maintained a positive attitude, no matter the consequences embracing the statement of Epictetus, “Wherever I go it will be well with me” (DISCOURSES 4.7.14).

Lee took the responsibility for his duty to his troops and his native state, Virginia, with the same serious vigor as when he cared for his ailing mother and later his sickly wife – he was in their service. It was the *noblesse oblige* of the Lee ancestry that pushed him. After the war, he spent the rest of his life working for the reconciliation of the nation, encouraging fellow Southerners and Northerners to embrace each other as fellow Americans. Probably one of the best examples of his humanity was an event in a Virginia church when the pastor called for communion. Only one person came forward and it was a black man. The congregation was silent and unmoving until Robert E. Lee arose and moved forward to kneel beside the man. At that point the whole congregation came forward. (Crocker, 1999; Blount, 2003)

In reviewing the ten leadership lessons from Goodwin (1998) it becomes apparent that Lee’s war experiences would provide even further support. *Timing is (almost) everything* – This was most critical in staging troops and planning attacks. Being off in one’s timing could change the course of the conflict. *Anything is possible if you share the glory* - Lee was always quick with a compliment and his humility prevented him from being self-advertising. *Trust once broken, is seldom restored* is an axiom that Lee always regretted in dealing with in his generals’ breaches, however, Lee accepted human

fallibility for others, but not for himself. *Leadership is about building connections* - Lee always surrounded himself with his troops, never failing to make them feel good about what they were doing. *Leaders learn from their mistakes*, this was invaluable to Lee as he constantly monitored battlefield tactics and discussed with his general what opportunities could be gained from their defeats. *Confidence – not just in oneself – counts* - Lee had confidence in his generals and in his men, particularly Stonewall Jackson, who he considered his right arm. *Effective partnerships require devotion to one's partners* - the Army of Northern Virginia was a tightly clad army, Lee not only had confidence in his generals and troops, but they also had confidence in his leadership. *Renewal comes from many sources* - Lee's outlets were communing with nature, being with his children and wife and at times being in the line of fire invigorated him. *Leaders must be talent brokers* - Lee worked with his generals giving them discretionary assignments to see who could meet the challenge. *Language is one's most powerful tool* - Lee was a pervasive writer, but someone who seldom expressed strong emotion. (p.7)

Bennis (1997) stated that, “behind every Great Man is a Great Group, an effective partnership” (p. 2) Lee had the great group – Stonewall Jackson, A. P. Hill, J.E.B. Stuart, and James Longstreet – that worked together in harmony to energize themselves and their troops. They *provided direction and meaning, generated and sustained trust, displayed a strong bias toward action, risk taking and curiosity and conveyed hope* (Bennis, 1997, p.4) amongst the cause. Research indicates that these men were strong-willed, focused on a common goal, were not deterred by obstacles, trusted their men with responsibility and were never put down by defeat. So strong were the ties between the leader and the group that when three of the group, save Lee and Longstreet, were cut down in the heat

of battle leading and encouraging their men to do their best that when Lee learned of each loss, he cried. So, too did he suffer at the loss of each of his troops. (Cutler, 1999; Blount, 2003)

While we may look upon General Robert E. Lee as a warrior, his remark during a rather intense battle sums up his attitude on war, “It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it”(p. 168, Blount). Lee was a reluctant warrior, but given his sense of duty no task given to and accepted by him could escape his tenacious desire to succeed graciously.

Endnote

There will always be the inevitable conundrum of issues relating to what Lee stood for and fought for in the War Between the States. The invariable answers must reflect the events leading up to the culmination of conflict. It is and will forever be remiss to affix the notions and values of the present ideology du jour on yesteryear’s actions. The context of such determinations which have formulated our present beliefs are rooted firmly in our unchangeable past. It is our Original Sin.

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