

BIOGRAPHY



General Robert E. Lee



"Duty is the sublimest word in our language. Do your duty in all things. You cannot do more. You should never wish to do less." These words of Robert E. Lee are inscribed on his statue in the American Hall of Fame. They fittingly summarize his life and the beliefs that lay at its core.

As you read the profile below, think about why the start of the Civil War posed such a dilemma for Robert E. Lee.

Robert E. Lee seemed destined for a military career. He was born in Virginia in 1807, the son of the celebrated Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, a hero of the American Revolution and close friend of George Washington. In 1825, young Lee entered the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where the motto remains "Duty, honor, country." There, he achieved a record rarely equaled before or since—he was second in his class academically, he was adjutant of the corps, and he did not receive a single demerit. For the next 23 years, he pursued a military career, gaining an outstanding reputation as a commander during the Mexican War.

In 1852, Lee, now a colonel, was appointed Superintendent of West Point. With characteristic modesty, he regretted the assignment, fearing that the job required "more skill and experience than I command." With his superior abilities, however, he distinguished himself yet again. Lee then returned to the field, and in 1859, he was back in command of the militia that captured John Brown at Harpers Ferry.

The times had grown very difficult for Lee. He had no taste for the secessionist talk he heard in Virginia. He was devoted to the Union—the "country" of the West Point motto. But he was also

devoted to his beloved Virginia. In April 1861, when Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter, he had to make an agonizing decision. President Lincoln had authorized a friend of Lee's to "ascertain Lee's intentions and feelings." The President wanted to offer Lee command of the 75,000-man federal army. A troubled Lee replied, "If the Union is dissolved and the government disrupted, I shall return to my native state and share the miseries of my people and save in defence will draw my sword on none." The next day Virginia seceded, and Lee tendered his resignation from the Union army. Later his wife would write, "My husband has wept tears of blood over this terrible war, but as a man of honor and a Virginian, he must follow the destiny of his state."

When the Civil War ended four years later, Lee would write: "I have fought against the people of the North because I believed they were seeking to wrest from the South its dearest rights. But I have never cherished toward them bitter or vindictive feelings, and I have never seen the day when I did not pray for them." Lee spent the last years of his life as president of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University). He died in 1870.

Questions to Think About

1. How did Lee's ancestry help direct him toward a military career?
2. Why did Lee have an agonizing decision to make after the firing on Fort Sumter?
3. Distinguishing False from Accurate Images Do you believe that Lee's image as a symbol of the South and as an American hero is accurate or false? Explain your answer.

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Name _____

US History

Robert E. Lee

1. Explain how the quote next to his picture can be related to you and your actions at school.
2. How did his family's history help him towards a military career?
3. Lee first gained an outstanding reputation in what war?
4. How did Lee feel about being given the job as Superintendent of West Point?
5. Why was Lee against secession?
6. What did Lincoln offer Lee?
7. What was Lee's decision regarding this offer?
8. How did Lee view the North after the war?
9. Why did the start of the war pose such a dilemma for Robert E. Lee?