



North or South: Robert E. Lee's Fateful Decision

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

The American Civil War was a bloody conflict that pitted the nation against itself in a desperate fight for its identity. Countless numbers of tragic stories can be found of family members being forced to face each other on the field of battle. The causes of the war are debated, even today. The arguments over whether the southern states fought for the preservation of slavery alone, for state sovereignty, or a combination of both has filled countless thousands of pages.

What is harder to determine, however, is why the individual soldiers fought. When the call came for men in 1861, thousands of volunteers from across the nation flooded both Union and Confederate recruiting stations and pledged to fight for their own interpretation of the cause. Some sought adventure, some to end slavery, others to preserve the Union, and others to protect their rights and traditions.

The experience was the same for the leaders of both sides. Ulysses S. Grant was a former officer working at a leather shop when war broke out. He answered his country's call, raising a company of volunteers to defend the union. Another man, Lewis Armistead, was a United States officer in California when the war came. He promptly gave up his commission and returned to Virginia to fight for his state.

The decision for which side to fight on and why was not easy for these men. Many were guided by one principle alone: integrity. One of the most well-known of these men was General Robert E. Lee.

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Robert E. Lee was born in Virginia at Stratford Hall in 1807. He and his family were part of the upper crust of the Virginia planter culture. Lee's great grandfather, Henry Lee, had been one of the first to arrive and settle in the colony of Virginia. Robert's father, "Light Horse" Harry Lee, had been one of George Washington's most trusted cavalry officers during the Revolutionary War.

Robert E. Lee began his own military career in 1825. In the summer of that year, he enrolled in the United States Military Academy, West Point. At West Point, Lee studied to be an engineer. He would graduate with zero demerits and second in his class overall.

After graduating, Lee began to court a member of another well-known Virginia planter family, Mary Custis. Mary was the daughter of George Washington's adopted step-son, George Washington Parke Custis. The couple married in June of 1830 and moved to Lee's first post at Fort Monroe, Virginia.

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For the next several years, Lee worked in various engineering capacities. His talents would take him first to Washington D.C., then west to Michigan and Ohio, and then up and down the Mississippi River where he surveyed ports for cities like St. Louis, Missouri and Des Moines, Iowa.

Lee and his wife would eventually inherit Arlington House, a beautiful plantation home on the outskirts of Washington D.C. In time, this would become the family home to the Lees and their seven children. Though the home looked down upon the nation's capital, it was still firmly planted on Virginia soil.

Lee would finally get a chance to prove himself in the tumult of war in 1846 when the United States went to war with Mexico. Although only a brief conflict, the war would prove to be a significant proving ground for Lee. He fought in several of the major battles of the conflict, including at Cerro Gordo, Contreras, Churubusco, and Chapultepec. Lee distinguished himself in the conflict and learned a great deal about positioning troops and artillery in combat.

Lee was next sent back to West Point to act as superintendent. While there, he worked to improve the buildings and the courses to ensure the United States Military Academy was producing the best possible officers to serve the needs of the nation. Next, the military sent Lee to Texas, where he served with the Second Cavalry Regiment.

In 1859, Lee found himself in command of the federal troops sent to put down John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. Lee deftly handled the situation, attacking John Brown's men and subduing them in less than 5 minutes of fighting. Lee then returned to his cavalry regiment and was there when Texas seceded from the United States in February of 1861. Although other members of his unit resigned their commissions with the United States Army and immediately joined the Confederacy, Lee did not. Instead, he returned to his home at Arlington House in March of 1861.

Texas was the 7th state to secede from the United States. Secession did not necessarily mean war, but with the election of Abraham Lincoln in early 1861, tensions seemed like they were about to break. On April 12, 1861, Confederate batteries in Charleston harbor opened up on the Union Fort Sumter. By April 14, the fort surrendered to Confederate forces.

With the opening of violence, more states joined the Southern cause. Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina all had seceded by the end of May. Both Union and Confederate armies also began to prepare themselves for the coming conflict. In the North, Abraham Lincoln put out a mass call for volunteers. The commanding general of the Union Army, Winfield Scott, requested Robert E. Lee be named a general of this new army.

Lee now faced a grave choice. Would he remain loyal to the Union and command forces against his native state of Virginia, or would he rescind the oath he took to defend and protect the Constitution against all enemies and side with the Confederacy? From the outset of the rebellion, Lee did not support it. In several letters, he expressed his desire for a peaceful resolution between the North and South. In one letter, Lee stated, "I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union."

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However, these feelings were pitted against a love for his native state. Lee was a firmly ensconced member of the Virginia planter class. It was the world he had known his entire life, and the war gravely threatened its stability and very existence.

When an advisor to President Lincoln approached Lee about the possibility of taking command of the defense of Washington, Lee is noted to have replied, "I look upon secession as anarchy. If I owned the four millions of slaves in the South I would sacrifice them all to the Union; but how can I draw my sword upon Virginia, my native state?"

His loyalties were conflicted, but his devotion to his state was deep. Lee had to choose what he believed to be right and remained loyal to the obligation which he thought took precedence: Virginia. Lee resigned from the United States military on April 20, 1861. Soon, he was approached by the Confederate government and given command of all of Virginia's forces.

Lee would go on to become one of the most successful generals of the conflict. He was praised for leading outnumbered and outgunned Confederate forces to victory after victory. His bold moves, genius, and character in command won him admirers on both sides of the conflict. He served as a model of integrity and loyalty in the 19th century and continues to do so today.