

The Wisdom of General Robert E. Lee

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No finer example of a Southern gentleman and leader exists whose positive impact was so great during and after the War. His superb character as a Christian gentleman stood out in his life as a man, husband, father, citizen, soldier, and a leader. These qualities greatly impressed such notable men as Winston Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt. Fortunately General Lee left a wealth of sayings and personal wisdom of which only a fraction is present here in this educational sheet.

LEE AS OTHERS SAW HIM:

President Theodore Roosevelt described General Robert E. Lee as "the very greatest of all the great captains that the English-speaking peoples have brought forth." \

Prime Minister Winston Churchill wrote of Lee: "His noble presence and gentle, kindly manner were sustained by religious faith and an exalted character." Of his army, Churchill observed: "It was even said that their line of march could be traced by the bloodstained footprints of unshod men. But the Army of Northern Virginia 'carried the Confederacy on its bayonets' and made a struggle unsurpassed in history."

War-era Georgia Senator Ben Hill eloquently expressed a lasting Lee tribute: "He possessed every virtue of other great commanders without their vices. He was a foe without hate; a friend without treachery; a victor without oppression, and a victim without murmuring. He was a public officer without vices; a private citizen without reproach; a Christian without hypocrisy and a man without guile. He was a Caesar without his ambition; Frederick without his tyranny; Napoleon without his selfishness, and Washington without his reward. He was obedient to authority as a servant, and loyal in authority as a true king. He was gentle as a woman in life; modest and pure as a virgin in thought; watchful as a Roman vital in duty; submissive to law as Socrates, and grand in battle as Achilles!"

LEE -HIS OWN WORDS & WISDOM

We can learn from the character of a man through his own words. General Robert E. Lee's wisdom and thoughts on various topics:

Character: As a general principle, you should not force young men to do their duty, but let them do it voluntarily and thereby develop their characters.

Choices: I think it better to do right, even if we suffer in so doing, than to incur the reproach of our consciences and posterity.

Conduct: We have only one rule here (at Washington College) to act like a gentleman at all times.

Defeat: We may be annihilated, but we cannot be conquered.

Determination: We had, I was satisfied, sacred principles to maintain and rights to defend, for which we were in duty bound to do our best, even if we perished in the endeavor.

Dreams: All I ever wanted was a Virginia farm, no end of cream and fresh butter and fried chicken-not one fried chicken, or two, but unlimited fried chicken.

Duty: Do your duty. That is all the pleasure, all the comfort, all the glory we can enjoy in this world.

Education: The education of a man or woman is never completed until they die.

Faith: I trust that a kind Providence will watch over us, and notwithstanding our weakness and sins will yet give us a name and place among the nations of the earth.

Farewells: After four years of arduous service marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude, the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources. With an unceasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country, and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration for myself, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

Forgiveness: Abandon your animosities, and make your sons Americans.

Honesty: The trite saying that honesty is the best policy has met with the just criticism that honesty is not policy. The real honest man is honest from conviction of what is right, not from policy.

Honor: A true man of honor feels humble himself when he cannot help humbling others.

Integrity: There is a true glory and a true honor: the glory of duty done-the honor of the integrity of principle.

Loyalty: If the Union is dissolved, the government disrupted, I shall return to my native state and share in the miseries of my people. Save in her defense, I will draw my sword no more.

Patriotism: These men are not an army-they are citizens defending their country.

Perseverance: We must expect reverses, even defeats. They are sent to teach us wisdom and prudence, to call forth greater energies, and to prevent our falling into greater disasters.

Promotion: What do you care about rank? I would serve under a corporal if necessary!

Purpose: I am glad to see no indication in your letter of an intention to leave the country. I think the South requires the aid of her sons now more than at any period in her history. As you ask my purpose, I will state that I have no thought of abandoning her unless compelled to do so.

Regrets: If I had taken General Longstreet' s advice on the eve of the second day of the battle of Gettysburg ...[then] the Confederates would today be a free people.

Union Atrocities: I have never witnessed on any previous occasion such entire disregard of the usage of civilized warfare and the dictates of humanity.

Vengeance: It must be remembered that we make war only upon armed men, and that we cannot take vengeance for the wrongs our people have suffered without lowering ourselves in the eyes of all whose abhorrence has been excited by the atrocities of our enemies.

Select Readings on Robert E. Lee: Douglas Southall Freeman, RE. Lee (1934) and A. L. Long, Memoirs of Robert E. Lee (1887)

The Sons of Confederate Veterans is an historical, patriotic, and educational organization, founded in 1896, dedicated to preserving the Confederate soldier's and sailor's memory, and presenting the motives for his sacrifice. Our official publication is Confederate Veteran magazine. For more information call 1-800-380-1896, visit our web page at www.scv.org. or write to us at P.O. Box 59, Columbia, TN 38402-0059.