

Robert E. Lee

A Morality for Moderns?—BY ROBERT CONQUEST

IT IS JUST OVER a century since Lee died. His last words, "Strike the tent", showed his customary reticence and lack of panache, contrasting markedly with Stonewall Jackson's famous "Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees." For the last five years of his life, Lee had been working peaceably and patiently as head of the small Washington College, in the Valley of Virginia. In 1865, when one of the most bitterly-fought wars in history had just smouldered to a close, and (except at the masthead of the raider *Shenandoah* far out in the Pacific) the Confederate battle flags were at last everywhere down, the paroled Commander-in-Chief, in his little house in burned and gutted Richmond, was already counselling and practising reconciliation.¹

Lee's life has often been recorded and judged. A recent book,² well produced and containing useful material on some aspects of the Civil War, is yet, even militarily, prone to curious lapses, as in an almost total omission of the very interesting Bristoe and Mine Run campaigns, and a misunderstanding or skimming of Early's invasion, of Petersburg, of Chantilly, and indeed of more important battles. However, when Lee is thus brought to our attention, it is not so much the chronicle of his campaigns which takes the mind as the extraordinary personality of the great Virginian. For the military record, an inadequate account sends one back to Douglas Southall Freeman, G. F. R. Henderson, Alfred H. Burne—all of them very good reading,

incidentally (not to mention Henry Steele Commager's incomparable documentary, *The Blue and the Gray*). But let us now consider, rather, the whole man.

THE CIVIL WAR still—even in this country— attracts enormous interest. Partly this must be due to the combination of political or military genius and attractive moral qualities to be found in a number of the leading American figures, and in particular in the outstanding men on the two sides—Lincoln and Lee. And one is seldom fascinated by characters from the past unless one feels that they are somehow still full of meaning for our own time. Lincoln's was the subtler and more complicated personality and it has been widely written of and variously interpreted. The case of Lee is simpler and clearer; and in certain respects, of which not much has so far been said, he seems particularly relevant to the present day.

He challenges flatly and unanswerably certain personal and public standards which have come to be accepted (or talked about as if they were accepted) in the last few years. He was a "gentleman" in every sense, including those now most reprobated—and yet no amateur but a supreme professional expert. He was heroically combative, fighting past the point of desperation with brilliant aggressiveness—and yet he was never bitter and always considerate. Above all, he was a man of power and command totally without personal ambition—democracy's answer to the conventional "great man." All this is repulsive, indeed unbelievable, to what we are told is the current "climate of opinion." We should not perhaps take this climate too seriously, but it is certainly noisy and pervasive. From entertainers, professional sages, publicity-minded students and cynical-sentimental journalists we get a set of contrary assumptions: that because laws are often objectionable the whole notion of Law in the public field is to be rejected; that because many moralists are hypocritical the notion of principled restraint in private behaviour is despicable; that men who are "good" in the sense of observing traditional standards are not intelligent; that genius must be unbalanced and antinomian.

¹ Lincoln, of course, and particularly in the few days remaining to him after Lee's surrender, also worked for such reconciliation. And it is good to note that the first black Senator, Hiram Revels of Mississippi, took the same stand against the fanatics and time-servers who eventually aborted that reconciliation. Senator Revels wrote to Grant that men of all colours had voted out the "incompetent and dishonest" radical régime in the first post-war free election, and added that the ill-feeling created by the war "would have long since been entirely obliterated, were it not for some unprincipled men who would keep alive the bitterness of the past, and inculcate a hatred between the races, in order that they may aggrandize themselves by office and its emoluments. . . ."

² *Robert E. Lee*. By PETER EARLE, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £2.95.

ACTON'S SAYING, which has served liberal-minded people for so long as a great central axiom on the issues of ethics and power, deserves a closer look: "Power," he says, "tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always wholly bad." On absolute power Acton is unconditional. But in the statement as a whole he is conceding that though there is always a tendency in power to corrupt it is not necessarily one that cannot be resisted; and that an occasional great man may not be wholly bad. It is apparent from his other writings that Acton did find some great men who could satisfy his strict criteria. Lee was one of them.

As late as 1881 Acton could write, of the noble and unpopular peace made that year with the Boers by the Liberal Government, that it gave him "heartier joy and a purer pride than I have been able to feel at any public event since I broke my heart over the surrender of Lee. . . ." As for "greatness", he described him as "the greatest general the world has ever seen, with the possible exception of Napoleon."

The possibility of breeding great men who, even on a highly rigorist view, are in no way corrupted by power, is clearly a matter of interest to the democracies and we should examine any authenticated case with some care.

Of Lee's generalship it is hardly necessary to say much. When he took command of the Army of Northern Virginia in the early summer of 1862 the enemy lay, in overwhelming strength, before the Southern capital.

*Your pickets posted in front of the Chickahominy
Hear the churchbells of Richmond, ringing.
Listen well to those bells, they are very near tonight
But you will not hear from them again for three
harsh years.*

Those three years are Lee's military achievement.

Unlike any other victorious captain in history faced with a better-equipped and equally well-trained foe, Lee was never in superior or even

equal numbers on the battlefield. His greatest victory, Chancellorsville ("the tactical masterpiece of the nineteenth century"), was won against odds of well over two to one.

It is easy to forget the importance of numbers in the old wars. When fire-power was entirely in terms of the individual rifleman, even a small superiority made all the difference, so long as the armies were more or less comparable in training, experience, and tradition. Napier regards Wellington's decision to stand and receive Masséna's attack at Fuentes d'Onor with 32,000 infantry against 40,000 as "very audacious"—though the British artillery was the stronger, while in the U.S. Civil War the Union artillery was always immeasurably the more powerful. In 1862 General Whiting started proving how the Union superiority must win. "Stop, stop", said Lee, "if you go to cyphering we are whipped beforehand."

Yet, of all the Southern disadvantages, supply was by far the weakest point. The Army of Northern Virginia took most of its military equipment from the enemy. Even Lee's own headquarters had U.S. Army wagons. It was not until Fredericksburg that every man of the army had a rifle. At Seven Pines a thousand men had to be sent to the front without any weapons

whatever in the hope of their being used as replacements. The 155 cannon captured with a loss of eight in the campaign of 1862 supplied the main wants of the artillery. Similarly, there was a net gain of 70,000 small arms. Yet Henderson's comment, "the real daring [of the Seven Days] lay in the inferiority of the Confederate armament", remained true of the whole war. More extraordinary still was the fact that the army could be held together in spite of lack of boots, clothes, and food. In the winter of 1863 on the Rappahannock, several regiments reported hundreds of men without shoes. Their feet, in the bad conditions, froze on the ground. At Petersburg, at one time, the ration of some of the



Southern troops was one-sixth of what their opponents were getting. There is a well-known story of some important visitors to Lee's headquarters—the meal in the general's mess consisted of a large bowl of cabbage upon which lay a small piece of bacon, which all the guests were too polite to take. When Lee remembered this next day and asked the cook to produce it, he was told it had been borrowed for the occasion and returned to its owner.

The military problem was, in fact, a thoroughly intractable one, like many problems of present-day politics. Lee's solutions were remarkable.

"WE HAVE RECORD of few enterprises of greater daring than that which was then decided on"—Henderson on the Second Manassas—is typical enough of military comments on half a dozen of Lee's campaigns. The boldness and imaginativeness are evident to even the cursory reader of their histories. What is less apparent is the careful thought lying behind the choice of the daring course. Lee always preferred (as he put it) the risks of action to the certain loss of inaction. But if he was not one of those generals whose caution leads them into a dead end of timid defensiveness, nor was he a shallow-minded virtuoso, seeking always the brilliant risk for its own sake. As he said himself, "the disparity of force . . . rendered the risks unavoidable." His audacity was the result of a profound consideration of the chances. This ability to estimate the results of all the possible courses of action, without being shaken by the immediate and evident dangers of one or another of them, is a gift which seems desirable not only in generals. The capacity to make a truly objective judgment, uninfluenced by superficial aspects or by temperamental tendencies, would be of use to all our leaders, particularly in circumstances of danger.

If one looks at the summer campaign of 1862—that deep interlocking of manoeuvres, the Valley Campaign, the Seven Days and the Second Manassas—it appears a remarkably brilliant conception even regarded as a sort of chess game played with little black and white squares on a map. Yet the more it is reflected upon the more astonishing it appears. And when to the mere conception one adds Henderson's comment: "It is easy to conceive, it is difficult to execute"

³ As General Maurice puts it in his *Robert E. Lee the Soldier*, (London, 1931).

⁴ Col. G. F. R. Henderson, *Stonewall Jackson*, (Longmans Green, 1919), Vol. 2, p.391.

⁵ Lincoln, it will be remembered, was notorious for his ungainliness. Yet Whitman was not alone in seeing in him what he did: "He has a face like a Hoosier Michael Angelo, so awful ugly it becomes beautiful, with its strange mouth, deep cut, criss-cross lines, and its doughnut complexion."

and takes into account the actual difficulties of ground, shortage of armaments, the untrainedness of the armies, and the "almost uniformly unkind"³ fortune which attended all the accidents of the campaign, one may begin to form an opinion adequate to it. Henderson writes:

"The problems presented by a theatre of war, with their many factors, are not to be solved except by a vigorous and sustained intellectual effort. 'If', said Napoleon, 'I always appear prepared, it is because, before entering on an undertaking, I have meditated for long and have foreseen what may occur. It is not genius which reveals to me suddenly and secretly what I should do in circumstances unexpected by others; it is thought and meditation'."⁴

LEE'S NATURAL ADVANTAGES were so great that the fact that he fell into neither vanity nor humility on the grand scale is particularly remarkable. A cadet of one of the old families, married to a rich heiress of an equally distinguished line, recognised in the old army as its best officer, he was also a man of magnificent presence—as is not, on the whole, conveyed by the photographs. Almost every reference to him, by people as different as Stonewall Jackson and Garnet Wolsey, describes him as the handsomest man they had ever seen. And there is that best of all compliments, from the Northern girl defiantly waving a Union flag at the passing invaders: "I wish he was ours."⁵

But with this went absolutely no panache. Lee's expression, far from being stern, was "always placid and cheerful." He never made a speech, except a few words to his paroled army on the last day of the war. His written orders are occasionally a trifle florid, but in these cases we know that they were drafted by one or other of his staff officers. Papers he had more time to work on (as in his official reports and his letters) lack this entirely. They are almost Attleish in their understatement.

As sheer military epic Lee's campaigns are incomparable—"This is Virginia's *Iliad*." The military glory side of things did not affect him at all, any more than it did Ulysses S. Grant or Stonewall Jackson. But the legendary atmosphere with which the battles are now charged was not wholly absent at the time, even among educated and experienced officers. At Chancellorsville, as

... the tattered regiments drove
Under that dawn when Stuart's guns
Spoke from the Hazel Grove
And through the burning forest Lee
Rode like an antique Jove,

it is his chief-of-staff who unashamedly anticipates the constructions of heroic verse:

"General Lee, mounted on that horse which we all remember so well, rode to the front of his advancing

battalions. His presence was the signal for one of those uncontrollable outbursts of enthusiasm which none can appreciate who have not witnessed them . . . as I looked upon him in the complete fruition of the success which his genius, courage and confidence in his army had won, I thought that it must have been from some such scene as this that men in ancient days ascended to the dignity of gods."

His concern with those arts which he was to practice at Washington College after the war was most strikingly typified at the very moment described above when, during one of the most tremendous battle climaxes of the war, he started talking to a German military observer about the future education of the Southern people.

LEE'S FATHER WAS a cultivated and scholarly man, well read in the French and Greek classics and the author of admirable memoirs—later edited by his son. There were many virtues in the old Virginia society. Still, a characteristic fault is noted by the rather hostile Northerner, Olmsted: "honourable, hospitable and at the bottom of their hearts kind and charitable, they yet nursed a high overweening sense of their importance and dignity." It was precisely this that was totally lacking in Lee.

It would be a mistake to think of Virginia as an aristocratic polity. The great families had influence, but in politics the people of the state had full control. And it was not just a case of Foxes or Hollands condescending once every few years to a rowdy electorate. By the 1850s Governors and Senators were frequently of the newest blood. And in any case there had never been much of the closed circle in Virginia, even socially. The press, moreover, was free (even in the War) to an incredible extent. The Richmond papers thought nothing of attacking and criticising Lee and the other leading generals whenever they felt like it, and even printed military secrets in an extraordinarily slap-happy way. When Lee, though himself opposed to both secession and slavery, "went with his state" he was not faced with any complicated dilemma about the state's intentions. The people had expressed their views through the institutions which they had thought suitable. That was that. Jackson, a nobody from the backward mountains of West Virginia, was always on terms of complete equality with scions of the oldest planters' families. What is true is that those who rose automatically took on to some extent the old code. It was only after the Civil War that the hillbilly politician came up in the South and began to address himself to an audience not even assumed to be educated, intelligent, or ethical.

Nor was the Confederate Army a cap-touching, class-ridden force of grandee officers and peasant pressed men. Lee was always being approached by odd privates, once for a chew of tobacco, another time (during the march to Gettysburg) to borrow a handkerchief to wipe off sweat. He was so used to this that when a powder-blackened artillery private came up to him on the field of the Second Manassas he turned to him politely and said, "What can I do for you, my man?" It was his son Robert.

An officer close to Lee writes, "his theory, expressed upon many occasions, was that the private soldiers—men who fought without the stimulus of rank, emolument or individual renown—were the most meritorious class of the army, and that they deserved and should receive the utmost respect and consideration." Even with Jackson, it was only after his death that Lee applied to him "the superlatives he was wont to reserve for the men in the ranks alone."

THE ARMY OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA, that "aristocracy armed with a forlorn hope", became very quickly not simply devoted to its commander, but informed with the completest confidence in him. Nor was this a blind confidence. The rank-and-file realised that errors occurred, but allowed for them. At the scene of the repulse on the third day of Gettysburg, amid the wreckage of the broken assault division, a group of rankers told a British observer: "We've not lost confidence in the old man: this day's work won't do him no harm. Uncle Robert will get us into Washington yet; you bet he will! . . ."⁶

This admiration and affection were felt for Lee by everybody, from men who knew him very well to those like Acton who had never met him, or the New England teacher who was shortly to name his son Robert Lee Frost. What is particularly notable is the ascendancy he established over men remarkable for their extreme independence and tough-mindedness. Acton himself was no enthusiast for the great. Whistler, the painter, whom Lee had expelled from West Point—for (according to Whistler's story at least) stating in an examination that silicon was a gas—remained his fervent admirer. The sharp-tongued "unreconstructable" Jubal Early, whom he relieved of command after his defeats in the Valley, would never hear anything against him. One of the most tough and independent characters in a generation of individualists was Henry A. Wise, a man as old as Lee who had been Governor of Virginia before the War. Wise served, "a grim old fighter", as a brigade commander in the Army of Northern Virginia (where he managed to rebuff a kindly-phrased attempt of Lee's to prevent him cursing visiting civilians, on the

⁶ Walter Lord (ed.), *The Fremantle Diary* (André Deutsch, 1956), p.126.

grounds that while Lee and Jackson were free to pray for the whole army he reserved the right to "do the cussin' for one small brigade"). It was Wise who during the last days had told Lee that for a year the Government had meant nothing to the men in the ranks, for whom Lee himself was "the country." After the War he was hotly rebuking an ex-officer for proposing to apply for a pardon from the Federal authorities, when the young man answered that Lee had approved. Wise immediately said that in that case it was all right; whatever Lee advised was bound to be correct.

Such immediate and unquestioning confidence might appear to be unpleasantly close to the sort of allegiance which goes to the wrong type of "great man." But there are important differences. Wise is not abdicating his own judgment, just expressing his confidence, from experience, that Lee's advice must be honourable. He is not unquestioning, in the sense that he would eventually expect to be told Lee's reasons. And if by any chance Lee had made an exception to his usual standards the follower's confidence would immediately have evaporated. In fact it might be read as a sort of solidarity appropriate to a democracy, yet no less effective than that of fanaticism.

Lee invariably treated his subordinates and others as if it could be assumed without question that their motives and standards of conduct were the same as his own, that the most courteously expressed suggestion would be attended to as conscientiously as a blunt ultimatum, and that all actions would be taken in accordance with a highly developed sense of duty. (It was once represented to him that one officer would not understand that way of talking. After some consideration, he exclaimed that it could not be helped, as he was unable to express himself otherwise.) In particular he was always careful, even in censure, to give as little offence as possible to anyone's *amour propre*.

IT SEEMS A CURIOUS WAY of commanding a great army. On the whole it worked very well. It may be doubted whether James Longstreet's temperament was fitted to this manner of command, and the only important military

⁷ Winston Churchill in his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* puts this remark into a rather false perspective (and slightly misquotes it). He has Lee say it while watching "a scene of carnage", and it thus seems to express a basic love of battle temporarily qualified by a feeling for its horror. In fact it was said as Lee was admiring a gallant (and not particularly bloody) counterstroke and so was the opposite—calling on a basic realisation of the horrors to qualify the moment's enthusiasm.

criticism made of Lee is that he was insufficiently firm with his subordinates—meaning almost always Longstreet, at the Second Manassas and later at Gettysburg. On the other hand, on the average, Lee's method seems to have produced better results than those of other commanders. His own explanation of his patience with the errors of subordinates, given after a brigadier's blunder at Spotsylvania, was this:

"These men are not an army, they are citizens defending their country. General Wright is not a soldier; he is a lawyer. I cannot do many things that I could do with a trained army. The soldiers know their duties better than the general officers do and they have fought magnificently. If you humiliated General Wright the people of Georgia would not understand. Besides, whom would you put in his place? You'll have to do what I do: when a man makes a mistake I call him to my tent and use the authority of my position to make him do the right thing next time."

This careful attitude to people's feelings was the essence of Lee's method of dealing with failings and inadequacies not in themselves reprehensible. He was indeed capable of anger at flagrant self-seeking—including self-preservation. (At least on the part of officers: at Antietam he asked a private why he was leaving the field. When the man answered: "I've been stung by a bung [i.e. bomb] and I'm what they called demoralised", Lee let him go.)

A character that had no components beyond this mildness, amenity and self-effacement would scarcely be effective on the battlefield. Lee was one of those generals who had no abstract love of war. In 1861 he hoped for peace at all costs and during the War, in ordinary moments, he thought of little else. (It is significant that his great biographer, Professor Douglas Southall Freeman, whose admiration for him is unstinted, yet speaks of "that criminal war.") In battle, however, an extremely combative nature showed itself, expressed, with typical balance, in his well-known phrase watching one of the Confederate counter-attacks at Fredericksburg, "It is well that war is so terrible or we should become too fond of it."⁷

At the beginning of the 1864 campaign when Grant had just been appointed and enormous Northern masses were concentrated on the Rappahannock, Lee (who had not been well) said to his military secretary: "Colonel, we have got to whip them; we must whip them, and it has already made me better to think of it." In the following days his combativeness was shown in the "General Lee to the Rear" episodes in the Battles of the Wilderness and of Spotsylvania. The first was his attempt to lead his favourite Texans in the great counter-attack on the second day, at the crisis of the battle, when the men finally refused to go forward unless he went to the rear. The same happened a fortnight later in

the attack that closed the gap at the Bloody Angle. The situation was even more desperate at the Battle of the Crater on the Petersburg front, for there were no available reserves whatever if the counter-attack failed. Here Lee ordered the Alabamans' commander that if they did not retake the Crater on the first assault he would re-form them and lead them in person. The thing had to be done. He was, Fitzhugh Lee says, "very sensitive about his lines being broken. It made him more than ever personally pugnacious." Another Southern general says, "of all things, General Lee most disliked to lose ground after taking his position for battle." Even during the defensive campaign of 1864, usually ranked with Napoleon's 1814 campaign in France, his defence was never passive. His constant cry was "we must strike him a blow" and right up to the last day of the War he almost always managed to get in the last attack.

One of the few things that made him heated was injury to the civilian population. At Fredericksburg he became annoyed when he saw shells falling on a woman's house: "I wish those people would let Mrs Stevens alone." The few Federal generals who aroused his anger were those like Hunter and Pope who behaved ruthlessly to the Virginian civilians under their occupation; during the Second Manassas campaign he often spoke of "suppressing" Pope.

On another occasion, when a Northern cavalry raid had dangerously depleted the stores of the already half-starved army, a subordinate said hotly that if he were in command he would tell Grant that in the circumstances he could no longer feed the prisoners. Lee replied: "The prisoners that we have here, General, are my prisoners; they are not General Grant's prisoners, and as long as I have any rations at all I shall divide them with my prisoners."

At Christmas 1863 he was talking to some of his aides about the plight of the poor families living in the devastated area of North Virginia, whose houses and crops has been burnt by the Northerners. The Austrian observer, Captain Ross, remarked that Arlington (the Lees' home near Washington) had been treated the same way. Lee interrupted him: "That I can easily understand and for that I don't care; but I do feel sorry

for the poor creatures I see here, starved and driven from their homes for no reason whatsoever."

A Southern officer once told Lee that he wished all the enemy were dead. "How can you say that, General?" Lee exclaimed. "Now, I wish that they were all at home attending to their own business and leaving us to do the same." Stonewall Jackson's view had been different: "Kill every man."

LEE'S ATTITUDE to the North was in many ways similar to Lincoln's to the South. Both are models of how views may be strongly held and stubbornly fought for without bitterness towards antagonists. Lee almost always referred to the enemy simply as "those people." His remark "the better rule is to judge our adversaries from their standpoint, not from ours", is very close to Lincoln's "with malice towards none."

But for Lee, any Northern military-political combination must have won the War in its early stages. But for Lincoln, the North could scarcely have held together under the effect of Lee's victories. The War often depended on single bullets—the one which killed A. S. Johnston while others were going harmlessly through Grant's uniform at Shiloh, the one that shattered Jackson's arm at Chancellorsville. Another of the hypothetical bullets might be that of Booth, transferred from 1865 to 1861. Who can imagine that Hannibal Hamlin would have succeeded in a task that even Lincoln found desperately difficult?⁸

The quality of Lee's intellect, judgment, audacity, decision is of a power seldom met with, or so one sometimes forms the impression, except in connection with dark daemonic drive. What is so extraordinary in Lee's case is that the whole combination remains Apollonian.

"*Duty's eldest sword.*" Such a description (by Stephen Vincent Benét) undoubtedly gives an impression of stuffy rectitude. The noisy sacrifice to duty so often made created the idea of it as an unpleasant eidolon. The stoic (even the Christian stoic like Addison) never seems an attractive character. There is the inescapable feeling that he is not practising his virtues for their own sake or simply to live up to his own standards. Partly, at least, there is always the impression of a man dramatising himself, seeing himself as noble. Even if it is a better pose than most, and even if he is not striking a noble attitude for an audience other than himself, his friends, or posterity, the whole thing is debased and vulgarised.

Lee did what he conceived to be his duty without any thought of there being other possi-

⁸ Although the noise and outward squalor of American politics was great enough to prevent Acton seeing it, at least at the time, the leader of the North too was a genius and a good man. Lincoln was not, indeed, lacking in ambition. And he was capable occasionally of attributing dubious motives to men of goodwill, as when he told Secretary Welles after Gettysburg, and only partly in jest, that there seemed to be a determination on the part of his generals to let Lee escape. But these were the rarest of lapses. And his situation was a much more difficult one than Lee's.

bilities. The question of making sacrifices to it hardly arose, since he was immune to ambition, exempt from the love of created things. Thus it was not to him a strong effort, or if a strong effort, one not to be fussed about.⁹

IN A WAY Lee scarcely appears as an example to others. For his actions and attitudes are always completely lacking in preaching. Kipling writes of treating "triumph and disaster" as the same. An enemy general wrote of Lee: "He was self-contained in victory but greatest in defeat." But, apart from anything else, there is no "if" about Lee's behaviour. It invariably has the air of no other course being conceivable. He seems not so much a lesson, as an encouragement to people who feel the same way anyhow. But perhaps that is not as insignificant as it sounds.

The trouble about Lee has always been that, while never freezing into a grand stereotype of republican virtue (as even Washington does), and while always appearing friendly, unassuming, mildly humorous, he never admits the outsider and inquirer to any intimacy. And so, as Benét says, it is only too easy for him to degenerate into myth—"the blank verse statue." Benét, after pages of fascinated analysis, has to make do, as an expression of Lee's deepest available feelings, with his saying that he was "always wanting something." But the context of this was a reference to his little daughter being "like her father, always wanting something", which seems simply a light passing remark.

Much has been written in the past, especially in the last thirty or forty years, about "extreme situations." In one obvious sense Lee seems to show, though not uniquely, that the balanced personality which has not, as it were, tested itself to destruction, is as better suited to the extreme as it is to the ordinary. It is true, of course, that the extremes of war, "the intolerable lines of Petersburg", are not what existentialist philosophers and writers have in mind.

One can respect the heroism of those who have explored the ways in which a human being is or may become alienated, be faced with insecurity, the void. But this is not to accept the claim, often implied, that there is any superiority in the unstable. Moreover, as has often been noted, it is a common fault of the extremely introspective to imagine that non-outsiders have less insight into this than is really the case. And even among the explorers of the dark themselves one

may detect differences of character which are best judged against a non-introverted system of estimation. In Kafka, and to a large extent in Kierkegaard, one finds a good deal of the balance, humour, and absence of egoism that are apparent in "saner" men like Stendhal—or Lee. And one can see in Sartre, for instance, a posturing egocentricity not different from that of Acton's less reputable contender for the title of greatest general, Napoleon.

LEE'S SUPERIOR, the President, was one of the touchiest characters; so was his great subordinate, Jackson—a difficult position for any commander. But, just as his handling of Jefferson Davis was entirely successful, his relations with Jackson soon made them into a team unrivalled for harmony. The Army of Northern Virginia was not exempt from the passions and rivalries which beset all the armies in the Civil War on both sides (reaching their extreme when J. C. Davis, later a corps commander in Sherman's army, shot his colleague Nelson during the 1862 campaign in Kentucky). Friction between Jackson and A. P. Hill was continuous. It is a curious fact that the army entered the Antietam campaign with its two best divisional commanders under arrest. Lee was always able to patch up these quarrels, and (unlike the situation in other armies) he himself was never affected. Even Hill would accept a sharp rebuke from him, as he did on the North Anna. But usually Lee's adverse comments were mildly, though no less devastatingly phrased, as when after Hill's repulse at Bristoe Station Lee said to him, "Well, General, bury these poor men and let us say no more about it."

The one campaign in which Jackson proved a failure (largely owing to physical exhaustion) was the Seven Days. At Frayser's Farm in particular, Lee had the only opportunity which came to him in the whole war for a Cannae and Jackson's inactivity on the left flank was the main reason why the Army of the Potomac was not destroyed. Few commanders would have concealed their annoyance, or failed to place the blame in their reports. But Lee's control of his feelings in such matters and his calm assessment that Jackson had not exhausted his potentialities led to a report which merely said that "Huger not coming up and Jackson having been unable to force a passage at White Oak Swamp, Longstreet and Hill were without the expected support."

Just as with his strategy, Lee's conduct of official relationships was designed to give the best result possible in the circumstances. He has been accused of failing to be forceful enough with the administration, but it seems likely that any stronger pressure on Davis would have back-

⁹ All this sounds, in a way, like Kipling's "If." The actual ethical principles put forward in this poem are in fact similar to Lee's. He would doubtless have smiled at the crudity of the phrasing and the vulgar rewards for virtue at the end.

fired. The President did once write rather sharply to Lee in connection with a suggestion which he felt infringed the executive prerogative, on which he was extremely finicky.

This is, naturally, not to say that Lee's judgment was infallible in every particular, any more than it was in the field. It seems possible, for instance, that if he had put forward earlier his plan to assemble an "army in effigy" to threaten Washington from the south during the Gettysburg campaign, Davis might have done something about it, perhaps with decisive results. But the main count is in the failure of Lee, or anyone else, to get Davis to rid himself of the Commissary-General, Northrop, on whom more than any single man responsibility for the South's defeat rests. His despatches, Dr Freeman tells us, cannot even now be read without anger. Lee, like all the other generals in the field, complained continually to the Government about the supply situation. It seems fairly certain that Jackson, in his place, would have forced the issue at any cost, with what result is of course not clear. As it was the army fought well on starvation rations—it was only at the beginning of 1865 that physical breakdown began; and the greatest single cause of failure, the starvation of the cavalry and artillery horses, could not be compensated by morale.

Lee's relations with the Government were of a quasi-political nature, of the type which has led generals to believe themselves capable of entering politics. But B. H. Hill, the Confederate statesman, describes a conversation:

"If we establish our independence the people will make you Mr Davis's successor."

"Never, sir," he replied with that firm dignity that belonged only to Lee: "that I will never permit. Whatever talents I possess (and they are but limited) are military talents. My education and training are military. I think the military and civilian talents are distinct if not different, and full duty in either sphere is about as much as one man can qualify himself to perform. I shall not do the people the injustice to accept high civil office with whose questions it has not been my business to become familiar."

"Well, but, General, history does not sustain your view. Caesar, and Frederick of Prussia, and Buonaparte were great statesmen as well as great generals."

"And great tyrants," he promptly responded. "I speak of the proper rule in republics where, I think, we should have neither military statesmen nor political generals."

"But Washington was both, and yet not a tyrant."

With a beautiful smile he responded, "Washington was an exception to all rule, and there was none like him."¹⁰

Though Lee thus repudiated any expert know-

ledge of politics, the advantages of his type of character in the politics of a democracy are obvious enough. It is not only in a general that it would be splendid to secure the qualities which Marvell sanguinely thought he observed in Cromwell:

*Nor yet grown stiffer with command,
But still in the republic's hand—
How fit he is to sway,
That can so well obey!*

IT IS TRUE THAT Western democracies, or some of them, have worked out a form of public life which inhibits any great abuse of power. Even most of those who are personally untrustworthy on this point are so habituated to the idea that an obvious breach of these conventions will ruin them that it probably seldom enters their minds to make the attempt. But this is to substitute muscle for real trust, and as we know its results are unlikely to be so satisfactory.

Marx's major error was that he took it for granted that in a society in the "transitional" phase he described as the dictatorship of the proletariat the men who would rise to the top would, more or less automatically, be selfless and concerned only to serve the People. He did not see that in any political system ambition and the love of power are likely to be important motives, nor that this was particularly likely to be so in a system without any checks and balances. The whole of English history up to the last century was a struggle to establish a constitutional system, a set of traditions and an atmosphere which long made it impossible, or extremely difficult, for those in executive power to extend that power. No such checks, particularly not the checks of tradition, could exist in the newly-established Marxist republic. And Russia was soon in the same state, politically speaking, as the Rome of Domitian. So it cannot for a moment be argued that the system of restraints, penalties, and awards devised by the democracies is not very valuable indeed. Yet it will hardly be denied that the method rather favours mediocrity. Mediocrity is certainly preferable to tyranny, but surely it might be worth thinking of ways of eliminating it without adverse side-effects.

Lee's combination of profound thought, indomitable will and decision is one at least equally desirable in a political leadership in dangerous times. That it can be produced in the same person as humanity, loyalty, and a complete lack of ambition is a remarkable thing.

ONE OF THE RESULTS of the Civil War which is relevant nowadays is of course that the greatest and most prosperous power in the world, and the main defence of its political and other

¹⁰ A. L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee* (1886), p. 454.

principles, has had brought home to its indignation (as we in England have not) the meaning of defeat. The South directly and the North vicariously (through the most massive historical and fictional impact ever made upon a national mind) know the feeling of occupation, starvation, puppet government, and economic exploitation. And through the person of Lee they have learnt the great lesson for adults that virtue and merit, genius and determination, do not guarantee success.

The opening of the Civil War produced a crisis of conscience and divided loyalties among many Southern officers, including Lee. But on whichever side they finally felt that their duty lay there was never any doubt about their absolute loyalty and reliability. The Virginians Winfield Scott and George Thomas ("the Rock of Chickamauga") were towers of strength to the North, though Thomas, at least, was for long uncertain where his duty lay.¹¹ In this matter there was scarcely a case of dishonourable conduct. It is interesting to read the letters and articles of Marx and Engels at that time—they completely miss the point. They continually imply that failures by moderate-minded Northern generals were due to sympathy with the enemy. It so happened that Marx's politically suitable candidate for command was Hooker, whose defeat at Chancellorsville took place in spite of heavier odds in his favour even than those enjoyed by his predecessors.¹²

FOR US—or for the intelligent adults among us—after half a century, ideology has come and gone. After the catastrophe of the attempt to create an amoral humanism, Lee may appear to us

¹¹ And it is a curious fact that while Lee and Joseph Johnston, who commanded the South's last armies beyond the point of desperation, were both opposed to slavery, Thomas (the Union's most uniformly successful general), gave up his own slaves only with the greatest reluctance and at the last possible moment. But even the Northerners Grant and Sherman had had no strong feelings about the institution.

¹² See *The Civil War in the United States* (Lawrence and Wishart)—though it is pleasant to be able to record that even Engels, though ideologically orthodox in his anti-Southern views, could not forbear to cheer their military prowess and wrote privately to Marx, "They fight quite famously" (letter of July 30, 1862).

¹³ Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown's Body* (1928; ed. 1970), p.192.

with a new relevance. For he illustrates the contrasting splendours of "bourgeois morality", which (as Orwell pointed out) is merely a hostile translation of "common decency"—nor, of course, does "bourgeois" here have any meaning at all: the standards are common to all non-totalitarians. The solidarity of the Hungarian and later the Czechoslovak peoples was, in one aspect, a revolutionary unity of those whose moral views differed, perhaps even on a class basis, against those who had no moral views at all.

Nor, it now appears, is Stalinised pragmatism psychologically viable. Conscious intellectual conviction is one thing. But as we know, the ego is moralised, "socialised", in childhood at an unconscious level. Even in Lee's time Dostoevsky was showing some of the difficulties of the consciousness adopting standards unacceptable to deeper levels of the personality. No doubt over a period the psyche *can* be corrupted in depth, but it *is* a corruption and it has to be paid for (except in a sense by psychopaths, and psychopathocracy is not likely to be a stable society).

The idea of the tender-minded humanist reluctantly accepting the responsibility for massacre and torture, because logic has told him that such is the "only way" to peace and freedom, is a shallow one. A tyrant may enjoy the ancillary luxury of thinking of himself as a humanist, but the essential is that he likes tyranny. Stalin and his imitators, rulers of doubtful sanity creating a society in the image of their own delusions, are the natural end product of a fallacy. The social surgeon who offers to get to the root of our troubles with his expert knife turns out to be Jack the Ripper.

Sublimation has failed to take place. Something else is required.

*Proportion, not as something calm congealed
From lack of fire, but ruling such a fire
As only such proportion could contain . . .*¹³

is how the Northern poet sums up Lee: a character, in fact, which has defeated the simple mechanisms of hack psychology. To generalise that way out, so that intelligence and will-power on the one hand, and an unpharisaical morality on the other can be regularly produced in the same person—might not that be a research undertaking as important to free society as the billion-dollar investigations of the physicists?

NOTES & TOPICS

Towards a Corporate State?

London Commentary—By SAMUEL BRITTAN



THERE ARE AT least two different debates underlying the day-to-day arguments about our economic and social institutions.

The first is about the distribution of income and wealth and the associated status and power, among individuals and families. Or,

to put it in the vernacular: Who gets what?

The second is more difficult to describe concisely, but its main outlines are clear enough. It relates to the key decisions about what should be produced and by whom, and the determination of *pre-tax* incomes and profits, and the pattern of employment. On the one side are those who believe that these decisions should be made by citizens voting with their purses or their feet, subject to impersonal general rules laid down by Parliament. On the other side are those who believe that decisions should be made by the principal interest groups concerned, whether by agreement or with the aid of the state as referee.

Members of the latter school tend to favour incomes policies; "sensible" price controls; a symbiotic relationship between "industry", the unions and Whitehall; "export drives"; and purposive intervention to save energy, foreign exchange, or whatever happens to be the fear of the moment. They tend to call their opponents "old-fashioned classical economists", "19th-century Liberals", or other epithets which are more flattering than they intend. Their own model tends to be the internal organisation of a large corporation unit writ large on a national scale, and it justifies the label "*corporatist*." The other side take as their standard the external relations of firms to each other and the final

consumer in a competitive market place and the framework of law in which they operate: hence the terms "market" or "social market" economists. The division of opinion on this second set of issues cuts across party lines.

THE FIRST ARGUMENT about interpersonal distribution is one to which the terms "Left" and "Right" can be broadly applied; and it follows, of course, a highly partisan course. A "Shadow" spokesman in the House of Commons recently wrote that the two sides in the Finance Committee were separated by a gap far wider than the table which physically separated them. There is a perfectly honest difference of philosophical assumption between the two sides. On the Right, it is assumed that legally acquired income and property belong legitimately to their present owners; and that the onus of proof is on those who want to tax them away. On the Left it is assumed that those whose wealth is appreciably above the general average have to demonstrate why they should be allowed to keep the excess.

It simply is untrue that these are matters on which men can do more than agree to differ. Some American moral and political philosophers have shown that rational argument is possible on such matters without violating David Hume's dictum that an "*ought*" proposition cannot be derived from an "*is*." To do this they have had to dirty their hands with economic theory; while American economists have had to cross academic demarcation lines in a way that would not be considered decent in the U.K. The importance of these explorations cannot be judged by the absence of reference to them on the Washington cocktail party circuit.

BUT I CANNOT REPORT on these fascinating matters here. Let me just observe that whatever one's views on the distribution of income and wealth, there are more and less efficient ways of attempting to implement them. An inefficient